



Negotiating Safety & Sexual Risk in Safer Indoor Sex Work Spaces

Background

Street-based sex workers in BC, particularly Aboriginal women, face higher rates of physical violence than any other women in the world. Violence against sex workers increases their risk of HIV/STI transmission, as women are less able to negotiate safer sex practices. Despite this, there is little research on prevention programs specifically for women in sex work.

The Question

How do low-barrier, supportive housing programs for women being used as unsanctioned indoor sex work spaces impact risk negotiation with clients?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **39 in-depth interviews and 6 focus groups with women living in low-barrier, supportive housing for marginalized sex workers with substance use issues in Vancouver, BC from July 2009 - March 2010**. This project is part of an ongoing study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

The women interviewed reported that these low-barrier, supportive housing programs gave them greater control when negotiating sex work transactions, including the ability to:

- Refuse unwanted services;
- Negotiate condom use; and
- Avoid violent perpetrators.

"All I have to do is yell for help, and I'd have help there within seconds. My neighbours, you know? It makes a big difference!"
- Participant 28

Despite the lack of legal and policy support for such spaces, the environmental-structural supports they offer, like surveillance cameras, 'bad date' reports and support from staff and police, were linked to improved relationships with police and informal peer-safety mechanisms, like sharing information, self-defense strategies, and calling each other for help.

The Policy Implications

- There is an urgent need to further look at indoor sex work spaces as potential venues for public health and violence prevention programs that allow sex workers' to better negotiate safety and risk reduction with clients.
- This study shows the importance of decriminalization of sex work to remove the barriers that prevent such spaces and programs from being developed.

Krusi A, Chettier J, Ridgway A, Abbott J, Strathdee S, Shannon K. Negotiating Safety and Sexual Risk Reduction with Clients in Unsanctioned Safer Indoor Sex Work Environments: A Qualitative Study. *Am J Public Health*. 2012; 102: 1154-1159.