



Gaps and Barriers to HIV Treatment for Sex Workers

Background

Sex workers continue to face barriers to starting and staying on ART (described as 'access and retention'), despite efforts that have been successful for the general population. Unequal access and retention in antiretroviral therapy (ART) for people living with HIV is an extremely important public health and human rights issue.

The Question

To what extent to sex workers living with HIV face gaps in HIV treatment? What are the barriers that impact sex workers' access and ability to stay on treatment?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires with 646 women in sex work between 2010 and 2012**, and linked pharmacy records on HIV treatment. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), 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

Of 646 women interviewed, 74 were included in this analysis. Of these 74 women in sex work living with HIV, **almost 40% experienced gaps in HIV treatment use** during the 2.5-year study.

Participants reported **barriers to staying on treatment** including:

- Difficulties taking medication daily
- Side effects
- Housing instability
- Distance and transportation issues

Factors related to gaps in HIV treatment use over time:

- *Younger age*
- *Recent migration/mobility*
- *Incarceration*
- *Non-injection drug use*

The Policy Implications

- This study shows that sex workers living with HIV face serious gaps in accessing and staying on treatment, largely due to structural factors such as criminalization and migration.
- Recommendations include interventions addressing the barriers women in sex work face, including outreach to younger women, addressing women's migration/mobility patterns and contact with the criminal justice system, and providing social supports such as housing.
- Community and peer-based interventions tailored for sex workers should be further explored as the best means to support health and human rights of sex workers and women living with HIV.

Goldenberg SM, Montaner J, Duff P, Nguyen P, Dobrer S, Guillemi S, Shannon K. Structural Barriers to Antiretroviral Therapy Among Sex Workers Living with HIV: Findings of a Longitudinal Study in Vancouver, Canada. *AIDS and Behaviour*, July 2015.