



Community Empowerment and Social Cohesion Reduce Risk of HIV for Sex Workers

Background

Sex workers have been heavily affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and face high levels of HIV-related risks and harms. Criminalization of sex work have been linked to poor health, violence and vulnerability to HIV, but we know little about how community empowerment and the ability of sex workers to work together might buffer against HIV risks.

The Question

How do community empowerment and social cohesion impact client condom refusal among sex workers in Vancouver?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **in-depth interviews with 654 women in sex work that took place between 2010-2013**. 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

Social cohesion and community empowerment were found to **increase sex worker's ability to control their risks for HIV/STI transmission**, such as negotiating condom use with clients.

Social cohesion includes things like being able to rely on each other for money, advice, or a place to stay; support when visiting a doctor; help finding clients; help dealing with difficult/violence clients; level of community integration; and a sense that workers get along well with each other.

Community empowerment approaches for sex workers are:

- **Community-led,**
- **Committed to ensuring health and human rights,**
- **Driven by the needs and priorities of sex workers themselves, and**
- **Recognize sex work as work.**

The Policy Implications

- In settings where sex work is criminalized, sex workers are less able to negotiate safer sex transactions with clients and are at a higher risk for violence and HIV/STIs.
- Criminalization, stigma and lack of funding make large-scale implementation of community empowerment efforts among sex workers in Canada very difficult.
- The ability of sex workers to work together and create community networks is critical to help reduce their risk of HIV/STIs and related harms.

Argento E, Duff P, Bingham B, Chapman J, Nguyen P, Strathdee SA, Shannon K. Social Cohesion among Sex Workers and Client Condom Refusal in a Canadian Setting: Implications for Structural and Community-Led Interventions. *AIDS & Behaviour*, October 2015.