



The experiences of trans sex workers in Vancouver: Negotiating violence, transphobia and criminalization

Background

Trans sex workers - those whose gender or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth - face high levels of violence, with large variations across social, legal, cultural and economic contexts. This study looked at the lived experiences of violence, and the social structural contexts shaping violence among trans sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The Question

How do social-structural contexts shape experiences of violence among trans sex workers in Vancouver, Canada?

The Study

The Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data collected through **qualitative interviews with 33 trans sex workers conducted between June 2012 and May 2013**. Two trans participants were hired by GSHI to help analyze the interview data. 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 an experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Transphobia and the criminalization of sex work were found to shape the violent experiences of trans sex workers in three ways.

Trans sex workers reported:

- 1) Experiencing violence from clients who were transphobic;
- 2) Having to negotiate gender within the context of dates to reduce the likelihood of violence (e.g., revealing gender identity upfront to potential clients);
- 3) Negative police responses to experiences of violence.

"I got beat up in a public washroom. I got this cheekbone cracked over ten dollars... We were in the cubical there and he wanted his ten dollars back 'cause he found out I was trans."

The Policy Implications

- Canadian sex work laws heighten trans sex workers' vulnerability to violence. For example, there is a need to quickly disclose one's gender to clients while negotiating the terms of the date.
- Trans-specific training of police and healthcare providers are needed to improve the health and economic security of trans sex workers, and to reduce transphobic violence.
- Culturally-based interventions tailored to the unique needs of trans sex workers are required.

Lyons T., Krüsi A., Pierre L. Kerr T., Small W, Shannon K. Negotiating violence in the context of transphobia and criminalization: The experiences of trans sex workers in Vancouver, Canada. *Qualitative Health Research*, 2015