Food Insecurity Increases HIV/STI Risk for Young Sex Workers.

Background
Food insecurity is increasingly being seen as a critical determinant of health globally. Research has shown that unmet basic needs, including access to nutritious food, can increase vulnerability to HIV/STIs, but there has been little research focused on youth sex workers (YSWs) in countries like Canada.

The Question
What is the impact of food insecurity on sexual HIV/STI risk with clients among youth sex workers aged 14-29 years in Metro Vancouver?

The Study
The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from interviews with 220 youth sex workers between aged 14 and 29 conducted between January 2010 and August 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 members).

The Results
Of 220 YSWs who participated:
- 45% self-identified as a gender/sexual minority;
- 44% reported Indigenous ancestry.

Over the study period, January 2010 to August 2013:
- 67% reported struggling with money for food;
- 72% were worried about food running out; and
- 14% had exchanged sex directly for food.

35% of YSWs reported experiencing client condom refusal (being pressured to not use a condom) at some point during the study period. In this study the prevalence of food insecurity for YSWs was more than 9 times the national average of 8.3%. YSWs who struggled with money for food had 2 times the odds of client condom refusal, demonstrating the relationship between food insecurity and vulnerability to HIV/STIs for YSWs.

The Policy Implications
- HIV/STI programming should be youth-centered, address food insecurity, sexual health education, and focus on gender/sexual minority and Indigenous youth.
- Public policies for food support should be pursued as a form of harm reduction.
- The decriminalization of sex work would support sex workers’ human rights, agency, safety, and the ability to access health services and food.