



## Community-Based HIV Prevention Research: The Maka Project Partnership

### Background

Women who use drugs and exchange sex for money, drugs or shelter as a means of basic survival (survival sex work) have remained largely at the edges of HIV and harm reduction policies and services in Canada despite evidence that of high rates of violence, poverty, and vulnerability to HIV.

### The Project: Design & Methodology

From 2004-2006, researchers with the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and Women's Information Safe Haven (WISH) Drop-In Centre Society collaborated on a participatory-action research project to examine HIV risk, barriers to accessing care, and the impact of current prevention and harm reduction strategies among women in survival sex. The project was designed to have a research arm, and a service arm that focused on peer outreach, resource development and capacity-building among a team of women in survival sex work, supported by an open Community Advisory Board (CAB) that informed all stages of the project. Community members representing sex work, Aboriginal, and youth service organizations served as co-investigators. In keeping with community-based research principles, the project used multiple research methodologies including ongoing qualitative focus group discussions, social mapping, and a prospective cohort who underwent HIV screening and completed interview questionnaires every 6 months for 3 years. Potential participants were identified through time-space sampling; the peer outreach team visited identified sex work stalls at varied times of day. A total of 205 women were invited and agreed to participate in the cohort, all whom were 14 years of age or older, had used illicit substances (excluding marijuana) within the last month, and were actively engaged in street-level sex work. The women were asked about current and past experiences of sex work, violence and trauma, health and addiction service access, working conditions, and sexual and drug-related harms and received \$25 compensation at baseline and at each follow-up visit.

### Strengths, Challenges & Ethical Considerations

Challenges identified in previous studies of sex workers include not knowing how many sex workers there are, concerns of privacy and confidentiality due to stigma and criminalization, and dichotomies of sex work and victimization. Due to a history of oppressive research of sex work and HIV, the involvement of sex workers and community partner organizations in all aspects of the Maka Project was important to ensure accountability. Two ethical issues arose during the project continue to be explored: 1) HIV reportability and disclosure in survival sex work; and 2) the legislative duty to report any disclosure of violence among those less than 18 years of age. Balancing the interests of sex workers, service organizations and academic researchers was a challenge of the participatory-action research process. Extensive training, weekly project staff meetings, and debriefing sessions helped ensure a positive experience all partners.

### The Policy Implications

There is a lack of policy and interventions aimed at promoting the health and safety of women in survival sex work who use drugs. This community-based HIV prevention research partnership aimed to inform evidence-based prevention and policy reforms responsive to the needs of this population, and to offer insight into the strengths, challenges and ethical consideration of such research.

Shannon K, Bright V, Allinott S, Alexson D, Gibson K, Tyndall MW. Community-based HIV prevention research with substance-using women in survival sex work: The Maka Project. *Harm Reduction Journal*. 2007; 4:20.