



# HIV Prevention & Harm Reduction by Women in Sex Work: Structural & Environmental Factors

## Background

Women in street-based sex work face alarmingly high rates of assault, victimization and murder. With discussions at the local, federal and international levels focusing on environmental and legal approaches to addressing the harms faced by sex workers, it is important to ensure the 'lived experiences' of sex workers inform renewed HIV prevention and policy strategies with this population.

## The Question

How do social and structural violence and power relations shape the HIV risk environment and prevention practices of women in street-based sex work?

## The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) conducted a **participatory-action research project holding a series of focus group discussions co-facilitated by sex workers, community and research partners with 46 women in sex work in 2006**. GSHI now carries on this research as part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a longitudinal ethnographic and qualitative 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. AESHA includes ongoing outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

## The Results

Analyses of the narratives of sex workers identified several **key factors seen to both directly and indirectly impact women's agency, access to resources, and ability to practice HIV prevention and harm reduction**, including:

- Boyfriends as pimps and the 'everyday violence' of bad dates;
- A lack of safe spaces to take dates;
- Adverse impacts of local policing;
- 'Dopesickness'; and
- the need to sell sex for drugs.

*"It just seems that once you're taken away in a car, your power and control are gone."*

*- Excerpt from narrative of a street-based sex worker in Vancouver, BC.*

## The Policy Implications

This study highlights the urgent need for a renewed HIV prevention strategy that moves beyond the individual-level focus on needle exchange, condom distribution and HIV testing, to interventions at the structural and environmental levels that facilitate 'enabling environments' for HIV prevention, including sex worker networks, safer sex work environments, adequate housing and drug treatment services, and the decriminalization of sex work.

Shannon K, Kerr T, Allinott S, Chettiar J, Shoveller J, Tyndall MW. Social and structural violence and power relations in mitigating HIV risk of drug-using women in survival sex work. *Social Science & Medicine*, 2008; 66(4): 911-21.