

Policing, Violence & Outdoor Sex Work: Barriers to Condom Use Negotiation

Background

Women in street-based sex work experience alarming rates of violence, victimization and increased health risks, including HIV infection. While a significant amount of research and HIV prevention efforts have focused on individual-level factors that impact condom use, little research has focused on the role of prostitution policies and work environment on sexual HIV risk in street-based sex work.

The Question

What is the relationship between environmental-structural factors and condom-use negotiation with clients among women in sex work in Vancouver, BC?

The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) drew upon **data collected from 205 women in sex work in 2006, and mapped 'hot spots' where more women reported being pressured into unprotected sex by a client** to assess HIV risk. 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 barriers that significantly increase women's sexual HIV risk through being pressured by a client into unprotected sex, including:

- Having an individual zone restriction;
- Working away from main streets because of policing;
- Borrowing a used crack pipe;
- Client-perpetrated violence;
- Servicing clients in cars or in public spaces.

The Implications

- Through mapping, this study highlights how work conditions shape women's sexual HIV risk.
- Given the high rates of violence, murder and adverse health risk among women in street-based sex work in Canada, and global calls to address the failing of sex work criminalization on the health and safety of sex workers, this study suggests that **the current sex work laws and enforcement-based policies may directly increase women's sexual HIV risk.**
- There is an urgent need to move beyond an individual-level HIV prevention approach, such as condom distribution, to structural-environmental HIV prevention that facilitates women's ability to negotiate their risk environment in safer sex work settings.

Shannon K, Strathdee SA, Rusch M, Shoveller J, Kerr T, Tyndall MW. Structural and environmental barriers to condom negotiation with clients among female sex workers: Implications for HIV prevention strategies and policy. AJPH: 2009; 99(4): 659-65.