



Gender-Based Violence Against Women in Street-Based Sex Work: Structural Factors

Background

Gender-based violence has been recognized as a global health and human rights issue with dire consequences for women and society. Despite evidence of serious adverse health outcomes associated with gender-based violence, including increased risk of HIV infection, research has largely focused on partner violence, and not on women in sex work or structural inequities that could promote gender-based violence.

The Question

What is the prevalence of and structural factors relating to gender-based violence against women in sex work in an environment of criminalized sex work?

The Study

Maka Project and Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) researchers conducted an **18-month study (2006-2008) among a sample of 237 women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC, involving a baseline questionnaire and at least one follow-up interview.** This study is part of what is now 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 participant's narratives identified several **structural factors related to violence against women in sex work**, including:

- Homelessness;
- Inability to access drug treatment;
- Servicing clients in cars or public spaces;
- Prior assault by police;
- Confiscation of drug supplies by police without arrest;
- Displacement from main streets due to policing.

There is an alarming prevalence of gender-based violence against women in sex work:

57% of participants reported experiencing violence at least once during the 18-month study.

This study shows how structural factors of criminalization, homelessness and lack of drug treatment relate to gender-based violence against women in street-based sex work.

Policy Recommendations

- This study supports a need for socio-legal policy reforms and **an evidence-based public health approach that includes the decriminalization of sex work.**
- Improved access to housing and drug treatment, a scale-up of violence prevention efforts, including improving police-sex worker relations, are crucial to stem violence against sex workers.

Shannon K, Kerr T, Strathdee SA, Shoveller J, Montaner JS, Tyndall MW. Prevalence and structural correlates of gender based violence among a prospective cohort of female sex workers. *BMJ* 2009; 339:b2939