



Pregnancy & Contraception: A Look at the Reproductive Health Needs of Sex Workers

Background

Research on the sexual and reproductive health needs of women in sex work has focused on their vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), particularly HIV. They may also be at high risk of pregnancy, as many are of reproductive age and have unprotected sex.

The Question

What are the experiences of women in street-based sex work who use drugs, with pregnancy and contraception?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team interviewed **211 women in street-based sex work aged 25-39 who use illicit drugs in Vancouver, BC about pregnancy and contraceptive usage**. This project is part of an ongoing 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. The project serves as a qualitative arm of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) that has ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

High levels of unwanted pregnancy:

- 176 (84%) reported at least one lifetime pregnancy. (Mean number of lifetime pregnancies 4; Median 3).

Limited use of contraceptives:

- 14% reported they use condoms;
- 1% each reported use of birth control pills or intrauterine devices (IUDs);
- Tubal ligation (16.6%) and hysterectomy (7.1%) strongly tied to high number of lifetime pregnancy.

Pregnancy outcomes

The women reported:

- 36% - at least one abortion;
- 37% - at least one miscarriage;
- 32% - one or more children apprehended by protective services;
- 20% - one or more children living with them;
- 28% - one or more children being raised by a family member.

The Policy Implications

- This study shows a need for better access and use of reproductive health services for women in street-based sex work, particularly access to woman-controlled contraceptives (e.g. injectable hormones) as issues of adherence arise with oral contraceptives due to the instability of homelessness and substance use.
- Pregnant women in sex work and/or who use drugs often have limited access to prenatal care due to stigma and fear of child apprehension, and require appropriate, non-judgmental services (contraceptives, prenatal care, mothering support).

Duff P, Shoveller J, Zhang R, Alexson D, Montaner JS, Shannon K. High lifetime pregnancy and low contraceptive usage among sex workers who use drugs – an unmet reproductive health need. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth*. 2011 Aug 18:11:61.