



Women Sex Workers' Struggle to Find Safe, Secure Housing in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Background

In Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, 16,000 people have unstable housing, over 6000 of whom live in single room occupancy (SRO) hotels. Homelessness and inadequate housing are common and are linked to poor health, including HIV, and an increased risk of violence and death. Little research has focused on how transitional and low-income housing environments affect women in sex work.

The Question

What are the impacts of transitional and low-income housing on the ability of women in sex work to negotiate safety and reduce sexual risk?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team held **12 group discussions/interviews with 73 women in sex work from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside who lived in low-income housing** including homeless shelters, transitional housing, and co-ed and women-only SROs. 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 is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Analyses of the narratives of women interviewed showed:

Physical environment: Uninhabitable SROs, with bedbugs and rats, led women to more transitional housing like shelters and couch surfing, where their economic exploitation and sexual risk were increased.

Structural environment: Restrictive curfews and guest policies forced women to rush, accept riskier clients, or work outdoors where their ability to negotiate safety and condom use are limited. Flexible curfews and being able to bring clients home promoted women's agency and improved their ability to reduce risks in sex work.

Social environment: Co-ed SROs led to repeated violence by male residents and discrimination by male staff due to participation in sex work. Women-only shelters and SRO's were 'enabling environments' where women had support systems that resulted in safer work practices..

The Policy Implications

This study suggests an urgent need to ensure low-income and transitional housing meet minimum basic standards, and to develop long-term, safe and non-exploitative housing with and for women in sex work, to ensure spaces that promote their health, safety and freedom.

Lazarus L, Chettiar J, Deering , Nabess R, Shannon K. Risky health environments: Women sex workers' struggles to find safe, secure and non-exploitative housing in Canada's poorest postal code. Soc Sci Med. 2011 Dec; 73(11): 1600-7.