



HIV Prevention Among Women in Sex Work in Africa

Background

In Africa, sex work takes many forms and is an important source of income for many women, but the reproductive health needs of sex workers are largely unmet. The criminalization of sex work; community and service provider stigma; violence; substance abuse and limited access to health services and prevention tools contribute to high rates of HIV among women in sex work in Africa.

The Question

What are the current opportunities, barriers and suggestions to improve HIV prevention policy and programming for women in sex work in Africa?

The Study

Following UNAIDS' three pillar approach to HIV prevention and sex work, researchers with the Gender, Violence and HIV Team conducted an overview of current opportunities, barriers and suggestions to improve HIV prevention policy and programming for sex work in Africa. The Gender, Violence and HIV Team is an interdisciplinary team of researchers, representing many different sectors and knowledge users, including researchers from the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI), focusing on building collaborative and comparative research on structural violence and structuration of HIV risk among vulnerable populations both in Canada and globally. GSHI is a program of the BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners.

The Results

UNAIDS three pillar approach to HIV prevention and sex work recommends:

- 1) **Universal access to a comprehensive package of HIV services**, which includes reproductive health commodities; voluntary and anonymous HIV counseling and testing; treatment of sexually transmitted infections, HIV and opportunistic infections; harm reduction for substance use and psychosocial support services.
- 2) **A sex-worker supportive environment**, which requires inclusion of sex worker programmes in national HIV strategic planning; sex worker-led community mobilization and the establishment of sex work community networks to enable programme implementation.
- 3) **The reduction of sex worker vulnerability and addressing structural issues**, which involves decriminalization of sex work; development of supportive policy; gender equality and economic development.

The Policy Implications

- There is a need for a strong response by governments, accountability by funders, policy reforms and support for sex-worker-led initiatives, and interventions to engage with clients around HIV.
- The UNAIDS framework provides pillars upon which to implement effective HIV responses, and evidence supports the effectiveness of interventions, including African ones.
- **Evidence supports public health and human rights-based approaches to sex work that need to be implemented by governments and supported by donors.**

Scheibe A, Drame FM, Shannon K. HIV prevention among female sex workers in Africa. SAHARA J, 2012; 9(3): 167-72.