



Negotiating Safety & Sexual Risk Reduction with Clients in Safer Indoor Sex Work Spaces

Background

Street-based sex workers in BC, particularly Aboriginal women, face significantly higher rates of physical violence than any other population of women in the world. Violence against sex workers increases the odds of HIV/STI transmission, as women are less able to negotiate safer sex practices. Despite this, there is little research on gender-focused violence prevention programs for sex workers.

The Question

How do low-barrier, supportive housing programs for women, functioning as unsanctioned indoor sex work spaces, impact risk negotiation with clients?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **39 in-depth interviews and 6 focus groups with women living in low-barrier, supportive housing for marginalized sex workers with substance use issues in Vancouver, BC from July 2009 - March 2010**. This project is part of 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 with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

The women interviewed reported that unsanctioned indoor sex work spaces promoted increased control over negotiating sex work transactions, including the ability to:

- Refuse unwanted services;
- Negotiate condom use; and
- Avoid violent perpetrators.

Unsanctioned Safer Sex Work Environment Model:

- *A minimal-barrier, high-tolerance environment;*
- *A woman-centered empowerment and harm reduction/health promotion philosophy.*

Despite the lack of formal legal and policy support for such spaces, the environmental-structural supports they offer, like surveillance cameras, 'bad date' reports and support from staff and police, were linked to improved police relationships and informal peer-safety mechanisms, like sharing information, self-defense strategies, and calling each other for help.

The Policy Implications

- There is an urgent need to further evaluate safer indoor sex work spaces for their potential role as venues for public health and violence prevention interventions that facilitate sex workers' capacity to negotiate safety and risk reduction with clients.
- This study shows the critical importance of removing the socio-legal barriers preventing such spaces and programs from being developed.

Krusi A, Chettier J, Ridgway A, Abbott J, Strathdee S, Shannon K. Negotiating Safety and Sexual Risk Reduction with Clients in Unsanctioned Safer Indoor Sex Work Environments: A Qualitative Study. *Am J Public Health*. 2012; 102: 1154-1159.