



A Structural Determinants Framework for Women in Sex Work and HIV

Background

Over three decades into the HIV epidemic, women in sex work continue to bear a heavy HIV burden globally. There is growing recognition that behavioural interventions and biological mechanisms are insufficient, leading to increased interest in structural determinants of HIV transmission.

The Purpose

To review the current epidemiological literature on sex work and HIV and offer a conceptual framework for structural determinants to guide future research in this area.

The Review

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon sociological and epidemiological literature on women in sex work that characterizes the increasing shift to incorporate a structural determinants approach within HIV epidemiology over the last 18 months (2012-2013). The goal was to offer a conceptual framework to guide future research on structural determinants of HIV among sex workers in both concentrated and high prevalence settings.

A Conceptual Framework

A structural determinants framework for women in sex work and HIV looks at:

- *Macro-structural factors* (social, economic & health policies, the law, mobility and migration, geography and social-political transitions, and stigma);
- *Meso-level community organization* (community empowerment and sex work collectivization);
- *Micro-work environment*, made up of physical, social, economic and policy features (violence, venue-based characteristics, managerial practices, and local policing).

These factors promote or reduce *interpersonal risks*, such as condom negotiation, and interact with *individual factors* including *individual behaviours*, like drug use, *biological factors*, like age and ethnicity, and *host genotypic factors*, like HIV characteristics and STI co-infection, to shape HIV acquisition and transmission at the individual level, and epidemic trajectories at the population level.

Implications for Future Research

- More attention is needed to develop measures that “unpack” the interactions of multi-layered structural determinants, partner-level risks and internal factors in HIV transmission among sex workers, their clients, and their intimate partners.
- Innovative methodological approaches that integrate epidemiological and social sciences perspectives and multi-level models are needed to guide future research and interventions.
- **Future research should be guided by a structural HIV determinants framework** to better disentangle the effects of structural, community organization, work environment factors in HIV transmission pathways among women in sex work, their clients, and their partners.

Shannon K, Goldenberg SM, Deering KN, Strathdee SA. HIV Infections among Female Sex Workers in Concentrated and High Prevalence Epidemics: Why a Structural Determinants Framework is Needed. 2014. Current Opinions in HIV/AIDS: Special Issue on Sex Work and HIV.