



International Migration & HIV/STI Risk Among Sex Workers in Vancouver, Canada

Background

A recent systematic review among female sex workers showed that while all migrant women in sex work were found to experience an increased risk of HIV/STIs, only those in lower-income countries experienced an elevated risk. However, research on the health and working conditions of migrants in high-income settings like North America, where migrants are more likely to be from Asia, is lacking.

The Question

What factors are associated with international migration and HIV/STI risk among women in sex work in Vancouver, Canada?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from 650 in-depth interviews with sex workers in Vancouver, Canada between January 2010 and August 2012. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a longitudinal ethnographic and quantitative 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

Of the 650 women interviewed, 163 (25%) were international migrants born outside of Canada. Most were Chinese and were working in formal, indoor sex work venues. Researchers examined individual, interpersonal and behavioural, and social and structural factors.

International migration was positively associated with:

- Finishing high school
- Supporting dependent family members
- Paying a manager in a formal, indoor sex work venue

International migration was negatively associated with:

- Testing positive for HIV
- Using injection drugs
- Inconsistent condom use

Only 5% of migrant women in sex work were found to be living with HIV & STIs, versus 25% of Canadian-born women in sex work. However, migrants faced very high levels of HIV/STIs, client violence (19%), and police harassment (17%) compared to the general population.

The Policy Implications

- This study suggests that the health impacts of migration depend on the social and structural context surrounding sex work. More research, in collaboration with sex work and migrant communities, needs to be done on how these factors impact HIV/STI risk and risk mitigation.
- This study identifies a need for HIV/STI prevention initiatives for migrants that are both culturally appropriate and evidence-based.

Goldenberg SM, Liu V, Nguyen P, Chettiar J, Shannon K. International migration from non-endemic settings as a protective factor for HIV/STI risk among female sex workers in Vancouver, Canada. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 2014.