



# Sex Workers Face Barriers to Pregnancy and Parenting Services and Support

## Background

Public health research among sex workers has mainly focused on HIV/STI prevention. Little is known about sex workers as mothers or the challenges they face as pregnant/parenting women, despite research showing high rates of pregnancy and motherhood. There have been very few epidemiological studies that have examined pregnancy and motherhood among sex workers.

## The Question

What barriers do sex workers in Vancouver, BC face while pregnant and/or parenting?

## The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 510 women in sex work in Vancouver, BC from 2010 to the present**. 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 510 participants, 399 reported a history of pregnancy.

**Over one third reported barriers to health and social support services while pregnant/parenting, including:**

- Lack of financial support
- Fear of partner violence
- Lack of social support from family members
- Avoidance of services for fear of child apprehension
- Fear of stigma related to sex work or drug use

*The most common barrier reported by pregnant/parenting women in sex work was poverty, or a lack of financial support.*

Some barriers were **social**, (stigma, lack of support, homelessness, education) while other barriers were **structural** (poverty, child protection services, policing, lack of support services).

## The Policy Implications

- This study suggests a need for targeted and non-judgmental supports and services for pregnant and mothering sex workers that integrate drug treatment, and also address structural barriers including poverty and homelessness.
- The decriminalization of sex work would likely reduce stigma, violence by police, clients and partners, while improving peer support networks and access to necessary services and supports.

Duff P, Shoveller J, Chettiar J, Feng C, Nicoletti R, Shannon K. Sex work and motherhood: Social and structural barriers to health and social services for pregnant and parenting street and off-street sex workers. *Health Care for Women International*. 2014.