



Poor Reproductive & Sexual Health among Sex Workers in Tijuana, Mexico: Childhood & Adolescent Experiences

Background

Research suggests that female sex workers in Tijuana experience high rates of HIV/STIs, reproductive health inequities, and gender-based violence, and that increased vulnerabilities are associated with adolescent sex work involvement, but little is known about how early (childhood/adolescent) exposures to factors such as violence and barriers to care, shape long-term reproductive health.

The Question

How do early experiences influence reproductive and sexual health among female sex workers, who entered sex work before age 18, in Tijuana, Mexico??

The Study

The research team, including the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative's (GSHI) Dr. Shira Goldenberg qualitatively analyzed data collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2010 and July 2011 with 25 female sex workers. Eligible participants were over age 18, reported sex work entry prior to age 18, traded sex in the past month, reported lifetime drug use, had a male intimate partner, and lived in Tijuana. Participants were found through a larger mixed-methods study among female sex workers and their non-commercial partner in Tijuana and Cd. Juarez, Mexico.

The Results

Analysis of the narratives of sex workers revealed **4 themes** that influenced reproductive and sexual health experiences:

- 1) Early (childhood/adolescent) sexual abuse,
- 2) Early (adolescent) drug use,
- 3) Ongoing violence, and
- 4) Limited reproductive and sexual health care.

These interrelated social, structural, and individual factors shaped vulnerability to unintended teenage pregnancy, miscarriage/stillbirth, and untreated STI's over these women's lives.

Other early social and structural factors, including poverty, gender inequities, violence, unsafe living conditions, stigma, and marginalization perpetuated reproductive and sexual health disparities.

"Among women with a history of adolescent sex work in Tijuana, early abuse, early drug use, ongoing violence, and limited access to care had profound impacts on reproductive and sexual health."

The Policy Implications

- Programs and policies that address social, structural, and individual vulnerabilities during adolescence and adulthood are needed to promote reproductive and sexual health.
- Participants suggested possible solutions to improve the health and wellbeing of young women and female sex workers in Tijuana, including opportunities to exit the sex industry, effective drug treatment programs, shelters, and psychological support for survivors of violence.

Oza KK, Silverman JG, Bojorquez I, Strathdee SA, Goldenberg SM. Understanding childhood and adolescent experiences contributing to poor reproductive and sexual health among female sex workers in Tijuana, Mexico. *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, 2014.