



## Sex Work Environments & HIV Prevention: A Qualitative Review & Meta-Synthesis

### Background

Sex workers experience disproportionately high rates of HIV, impacted by intersecting factors at the structural, interpersonal, and individual levels. Research shows that social, policy and physical features of sex work environments play a critical role in increasing or decreasing HIV risks for sex workers.

### The Question

From a review of qualitative studies published between 2008 and 2014, what nuanced and intersecting ways do physical, social, and policy features of work environments shape sex workers' lived experiences and capacity to mitigate HIV risks?

### The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team **reviewed 1514 peer-reviewed qualitative publications from 2008-2014** pertaining to the influence of sex work venues on HIV vulnerability and risk mitigation among sex workers and **used a meta-synthesis approach to integrate the results of 24 articles**. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing 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 meta-synthesis found:

- 1) **Occupational health and safety standards** - Where followed, these can promote condom negotiation, HIV prevention, and safety mechanisms.
- 2) **Third parties, such as managers** - If protective of sex workers' rights and supportive of condom use, can support HIV prevention and reduce violence.
- 3) **Access to sex worker peer support** - If management practices allow, peer support (e.g., working together with other sex workers) and sex worker-led outreach can foster a supportive environment for HIV prevention, sexual health education and increased safety in the workplace.
- 4) **Interactions with police** - Police harassment, abuse, and fear of arrest are barriers to sexual health and safety, and increase sex workers' vulnerability to HIV. Working in decriminalized settings can promote sex workers' access to work venues with occupational standards that promote health and safety, supportive management practices, and peer support.

### The Policy Implications

These findings support calls for a scale up of models of occupational health and safety for sex workers where their **human and labour rights are promoted**; support for community empowerment and peer outreach; and interventions that engage third parties (e.g., managers) in non-coercive, supportive HIV prevention practices. They also support a move away from punitive legal approaches to sex work, namely towards the **decriminalization of sex work**.

Goldenberg SM, Duff P, Krüsi A. Work environments and HIV prevention: A qualitative review and meta-synthesis of sex worker narratives. *BMC Public Health*, 2015; 15(1):1241.