



Enhancing the Ethical Conduct of HIV Research with Migrant Sex Workers

Background

Migrant sex workers often experience marginalization and health and social inequities, including high rates of HIV, STIs, and human rights violations. Given increasing research involving migrant sex workers, it is important that ethical and non-exploitative research practices be developed based upon evidence from migrant sex workers' perspectives about how best to protect their rights and welfare within such research.

The Study

In partnership with EDUCAVIDA, a local HIV prevention NGO, the research team conducted **focus groups and in-depth interviews with 33 women in sex work at the Guatemala-Mexico border between June 2013 and February 2014, as part of a larger program of research focused on migrant sex workers' health and safety.** A Community Advisory Board of sex work, health, HIV, and women's organizations provided input on the research, including data collection procedures, development of research tools, interpretation of findings, and dissemination.

The Results

Mistrust, social isolation, and fear among recent/new arrivals

- While meaningful relationships between participants and research staff are critical for ethical community-based research, migrants reported that as recent arrivals to the community, they faced significant social isolation and a lack of familiarity with research teams and health/social services. This often resulted in high levels of researcher mistrust and fear of engagement in research and health services.

Intersecting concerns of immigration status, criminalization, and sex work regulations

- The threat of persecution, extortion, abuse of power, and physical/sexual violence by authorities due to sex work and/or migrant status were ongoing stressors in migrants' lives. Ongoing raids, criminalization, and immigration fears represented key barriers to engaging in research and HIV-related health services.
- The potential for researchers to be associated with immigration authorities or to disclose sensitive information (e.g. sex work, immigration status) with authorities was a substantial concern, particularly for new arrivals.

Migration-related benefits and risks of HIV/STI testing

- While migrant sex workers felt that access to HIV/STI testing and prevention were important benefits of research engagement, they also feared the potentially negative consequences of receiving a positive test (e.g., deportation to one's home country, enhanced stigma related to perceptions of migrants as 'vectors' of disease).

The Policy Implications

Researchers should develop migrant-specific procedures to address fears related to immigration and criminalization, and to reinforce positive, non-stigmatizing relationships with migrant sex workers. Community-led efforts to reduce stigma and foster community organization among migrant sex workers are recommended, alongside policy efforts to shift away from punitive models towards decriminalization and improved working conditions for sex workers.

Goldenberg SM, Brouwer KC, Rocha Jimenez TR, Morales Miranda S, Rivera Mindt M. Enhancing the Ethical Conduct of HIV Research with Migrant Sex Workers: Human Rights, Policy, and Social Contextual Influences. *PLoS One*, 2016.