



“We need clean and safe places to work,” say trans sex workers displaced by Vancouver gentrification

New research demonstrates how construction, gentrification and ongoing criminalization increase risks of violence and harassment of trans sex workers

Vancouver, BC [January 11, 2017]—[Newly published peer review research](#) shows how gentrification and construction in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, as well as ongoing criminalization, displaced trans sex workers to unsafe and isolated spaces. These factors increased trans sex workers’ risks of violence and harassment, according to research published by the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) in *Sexualities*.

The study, focused on the Downtown Eastside, is among the first aiming to better understand how rapid gentrification and construction may impact the health, safety and working conditions of trans sex workers. Given that most research, policy and media discussions on the sex industry in Canada focus on women, a team of BC-CfE’s GSHI researchers and partners set out to document the lived experiences of trans sex workers—inclusive of transgender, transsexual, two-spirit and gender diverse participants.

Between 2012 and 2015, 33 trans and two-spirit sex workers were interviewed in Metro Vancouver. The study also included photo-ethnography with trans sex workers, who worked with BC-CfE/GSHI Research Scientist Dr. Tara Lyons to capture changes in their work environments through photographs. The in-depth surveys were done as part of a long-term community-based research project known as *An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access (AESHA)*, led by the BC-CfE’s GSHI in partnership with a range of community partners.

“The construction activity taking place in the Downtown Eastside, coupled with current federal legislation criminalizing sex work, made working conditions more unsafe and contributed to the displacement of trans sex workers,” said Dr. Lyons, first author of the paper. “Some sex workers had to work in isolated fenced-in areas, and had cut holes in surrounding fences as an escape route in the event of an unsafe interaction with a client.”

Through interviews and ethnography, trans sex workers described three ways in which gentrification and construction increased risks of harassment and violence by:

- Disrupting client traffic and forcing trans sex workers to see clients in more isolated and unsafe spaces, such as railway tracks and abandoned lots, where they were vulnerable to violence;
- Increasing private security guards’ presence and harassment of trans sex workers, as well as tickets issued by police (for offences such as loitering or trespassing); and
- Increasing verbal harassment and calls to police by residents and local businesses.

“This study shows how important it is to include trans sex workers, particularly those who work outdoors and Indigenous sex workers, in discussions about sex work laws and developments like housing and construction. These changes have real and sometimes devastating consequences for trans sex workers—greatly affecting where and how they work,” said Leslie Pierre, a trans woman and former staff member at Prostitution Alternatives Counseling and Education (PACE) Society, and co-author of the research.



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“This research raises significant concerns about how the criminalization of sex work continues to isolate the most marginalized sex workers, thereby increasing risks for violence and harassment,” said Dr. Kate Shannon, senior author of the study, Director of the BC-CfE’s GSHI and Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia (UBC). “Three years ago, in a landmark decision, the Supreme Court of Canada clearly recognized the rights of sex workers to have safe working conditions. An urgent need remains to repeal the harmful criminalized approach to sex work in this country.”

About the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE—<http://cfenet.ubc.ca>) is Canada’s largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility and is internationally recognized as an innovative world leader in combating HIV/AIDS and related diseases. BC-CfE is based at St. Paul’s Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE works in close collaboration with key provincial stakeholders, including government, health authorities, health care providers, academics from other institutions, and the community to decrease the health burden of HIV and AIDS. By developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related illnesses, the BC-CfE helps improve the health of British Columbians.

About the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative

The Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI, www.gshi.cfenet.ubc.ca) is part of the BC-CfE with the overall mission to ensure research of the highest scientific and ethical standard informs evidence-based policy and practice in gender, sexual health and HIV/AIDS, and reduces health and social inequities among marginalized populations in Canada and globally. The AESHA Project is a community-based research project that was launched in 2009 in partnership with sex work and women’s health and support services, and aims to document how social and policy factors shape the health, safety and working conditions of women and trans persons in the street and off-street sex industry in Metro Vancouver.

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