

Supportive housing keeps sex workers safe, Vancouver study shows

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Low-barrier housing programs run by two Vancouver nonprofits have produced safe indoor spaces for sex workers within Canada's legal environment, which criminalizes most activities associated with prostitution.

The success of this model in providing various supports for women so they can conduct their trade within the safety of their own room is documented in a study by the B.C. Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS.

"Negotiating Safety and Sexual Risk Reduction With Clients in Unsanctioned Safer Indoor Sex Work Environments: A Qualitative Study" looks at the supportive-housing programs of Atira Women's Resource Society, and RainCity Housing and Support Society.

"The evidence is very clear that we need to scale up access to safer indoor workspaces," coauthor Kate Shannon told the *Straight* in a phone interview. "And that would include removing legal barriers to their formal implementation."

Shannon is the director of the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative at the centre and an assistant professor of medicine at UBC. She noted that the results of the study support the [landmark decision](#) rendered on March 26 by the Ontario Court of Appeal on the constitutionality of the three provisions in the Criminal Code relating to prostitution.

The Ontario court struck down two of these provisions—regarding bawdy houses or brothels, and living off the avails of prostitution. It upheld the prohibition on communicating for the purpose of selling sexual services.

"I think, should that decision be upheld by the Supreme Court of Canada, those legal barriers would be removed," Shannon said. "And we would hope that would include the communicating provision, which really focuses on criminalizing street-based sex work."

The study shows that women are protected from violence and health risks through "environmental-structural supports" available through the housing programs. These include "'bad-date' reports, access to condoms and other harm reduction supplies, surveillance cameras, and support from staff or police in removing violent clients".

The programs also have "informal safety strategies". These include "sharing of information about violent clients, calling for help from other residents, and having enhanced opportunity for self-defense in case of violence or refused payment by clients".

"Having a safer indoor place to live and work also contributed to women feeling more dignified," the study states. "Many women felt that being able to bring clients to their own place facilitated negotiating the terms of their sex work transactions, including condom negotiation, because they believed that clients viewed them with more respect."

RainCity associate director Leslie Remund explained that sex work is just one aspect in the lives of the women that are among the hard-to-house people her organization helps.

“The basic premise is that it’s a harm-reduction model,” Remund told the *Straight* of the support sex workers get from RainCity. “We don’t ask women to stop or do something different than they were before. We know that would put them back out into the streets or keep them outside.”

The study is being published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

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