

Vancouver study: Sex trade workers feel safest when working inside supported housing

BY SUSAN LAZARUK, THE PROVINCE MAY 9, 2012



A recent Vancouver survey of 39 former sex trade street workers has shown they feel safest when working indoors in safe supported housing. They felt they had more control over their sexual transactions, including the right to refuse an act, to negotiate condom use and to avoid violent predators.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PROVINCE Province

A key to reducing violence and HIV infection among sex trade workers is safe, supportive housing, says a Vancouver study.

Researchers interviewed 39 women who reside at the “low-threshold” housing for poor drug-using sex workers, where they have access to support staff and police.

The former street workers, who had seen clients in cars, alleys and the johns’ homes, reported that, when indoors, they felt they had more control over their sexual transactions. That included their right to refuse an act, their ability to negotiate condom use and to avoid violent predators, the study found.

The women-only buildings ensures that guests sign in and there are video cameras, staff on hand to call police if necessary and health and safety resources on site — including bad date sheets.

There are three rules at the housing operated by Atira Women’s Resource Society, said spokeswoman Janice Abbott: “No dealing drugs, no violence and no pressuring other women into doing something they don’t want to do.”

The residents aren't questioned about the people they entertain in their rooms but they do have to escort them in.

"These are for women who are doing survival sex work," said Abbott.

The study's senior author, Kate Shannon of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS, said the study shows working indoors reduces the risk to the health and safety of sex workers.

The research follows the Ontario court ruling this spring that is expected to eventually allow prostitutes to work in safer indoor spaces.

Shannon said the "harm-reduction" model should be expanded.

Abbott said ATIRA's housing program was designed to keep women safe.

"This is a public health debate rather than a prostitution debate," she said.

Abbott said she supports a public policy change on the sex trade and would like to see more marginalized sex trade workers with mental health and addiction issues working in safer environments.

But she said providing housing isn't part of the larger debate about decriminalization or legalization of prostitution, which would include all categories, such as escort services and brothels.

"I think there's a big difference between those things," she said.

Legalized prostitution in Amsterdam, where there are 142 licensed brothels and 500 window displays, hasn't rid its sex trade of violence against women or exploitation by pimps. The mayor had moved to close half of the windows because of suspected criminal gang activity in the sex trade.

A majority of the workers are from impoverished countries, including Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, according to a 2008 report by a former prostitute/city councillor.

The UN lists Amsterdam as the top destination for victims of human trafficking.

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