

Indoor sex work is safer than the streets: report

BY NEAL HALL, POSTMEDIA NEWS MAY 9, 2012



Sex workers enjoy far safer working conditions when they move their work to a controlled indoor environment, a new report states.

VANCOUVER — Indoor sex workers enjoy potentially life-saving benefits, including less violence, reduced exposure to HIV and improved relationships with police, says a new study.

Published Thursday in the *American Journal of Public Health*, the study was done by the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the University of British Columbia.

Researchers interviewed 39 women who previously worked on the street and are now living in two Downtown Eastside housing programs in Vancouver operated by Atira Women's Resource Society and RainCity Housing and Support Society.

They are women-only buildings (residents and staff) that offer supportive guest policies that require clients to sign-in at front desk, have 24-hour staff available to call police in case there is violence and on-site security cameras. The buildings also offer health and safety resources, including bad date sheets and condoms. Bad date sheets include licence plates and descriptions of violent customers.

The study shows that indoor sex work is much safer for women than working on the street and negotiating through car windows.

"This is a really innovative model where sex workers are being able to operate in the confines of their own rooms and have supportive policies allowing them to do that," said Dr. Kate Shannon, the senior author of the study and assistant professor of medicine at UBC.

The new study follows the landmark decision by the Ontario Court of Appeal that allows sex workers to work legally in safer indoor spaces starting next year.

The court concluded that laws preventing sex workers from working together under one roof or hiring security staff fail to protect sex workers and exacerbate harms. While the decision is not currently binding outside of Ontario, the case is expected to be ruled on by the Supreme Court of Canada.

The study is also timely since violence against vulnerable street sex workers is an issue being probed by the Missing Women inquiry, said Shannon, who earlier testified at the proceedings.

The inquiry is investigating the circumstances surrounding serial killer Robert Pickton's murder of vulnerable women from the Downtown Eastside.

Previous research showed that the lack of safe indoor options for street sex workers is directly associated with elevated rates of violence, HIV risk and displacement, Shannon added.

The new study found that the supportive housing programs increased the women's control over negotiating sex work transactions, including the capacity to refuse unwanted services, negotiate condom use and avoid violent predators.

That contrasts dramatically with the risks taken by women who negotiate sex work in clients' cars, dark alleys and industrial areas, Shannon said.

"The evidence is clear: We need to scale up access to safer sex work spaces and remove legal barriers to their formal implementation and evaluation," she said.

Shannon pointed out that the previous experience of women who work the streets was that they lived in single-room occupancy hotels dominated by men at the front desk, who charged women to bring in guests or refused to allow guests.

"Now the sex workers are working in their own spaces," Shannon said, adding managers and support staff in the Atira and RainCity buildings don't see money changing hands and so cannot be charged with living off the avails of prostitution.

The woman using their own rooms for sex work still have to solicit customers in bars or on the street, but are facing greatly reduced incidents of violence and HIV infection, she said.

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