



Can the Decriminalization of Sex Work Assist HIV Prevention? Female Sex Workers in San Francisco, California Give Their Opinions

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Background:

Debates exist about whether sex work should be criminalized, legalized, or decriminalized. This study interviewed female sex workers (FSWs) in San Francisco, CA to explore their experiences, preferences and beliefs.

Description:

Between October 2006 and December 2007, the Sex Worker Environmental Assessment Team (SWEAT) Project, a cross-sectional study of FSWs, recruited FSWs using respondent-driven sampling. Eligibility criteria were exchange of sex (vaginal, anal, oral, manual) for payment in the last 3 months and age ≥18. Structured, quantitative interviews were conducted by former/current sex workers. Screening for HIV, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and hepatitis A/B/C was conducted at time of interview.

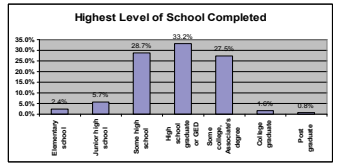
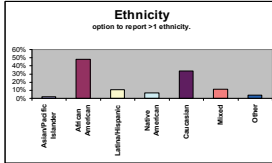
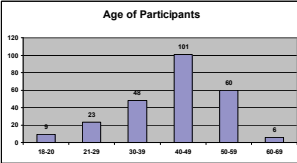
Lessons Learned:

247 FSWs were recruited. 84.6% reported prior arrests. Overall, 71.1% prefer to eliminate laws that make sex work illegal. 91.5% felt that if they were arrested they should be offered social services as opposed to incarceration. The majority of FSWs felt that they should be allowed to trade sex in strip clubs/massage parlors (68.3%), on the streets (77.2%), as well as in escort agencies/brothels (87.4%). 81.7% preferred street-based sex work to happen in commercial areas/red light districts. 30.0% had been sexually assaulted while working. 78.9% preferred to determine their own working conditions without being taxed or regulated by the government. Further, if a FSW were to be HIV positive, 47.6% believed that person should not be allowed to trade sex, whereas 37.8% believed that the person should be allowed to trade sex as long as they wore a condom. 74.4% stated that pimping should be illegal.

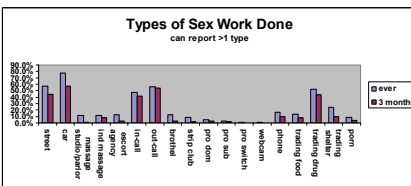
Next Steps:

Few studies have evaluated sex workers' attitudes about various legal approaches to sex work. The majority of women in this sample want to manage their own working experiences without being regulated by the government. The removal of laws criminalizing sex work would potentially allow FSWs to advocate for their legal rights and to seek help when they are victims of violence and other crimes. Given the link between sexual violence and HIV, addressing the legal barriers to sex workers controlling their work environment may have a substantial impact on STI and HIV risk.

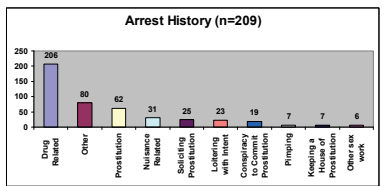
Demographics:



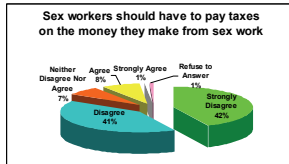
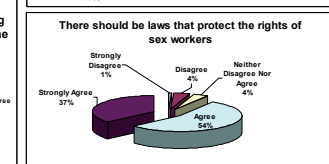
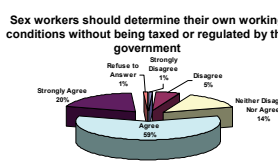
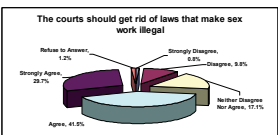
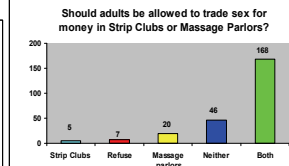
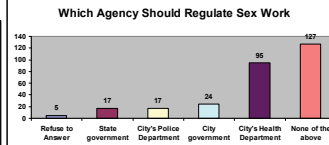
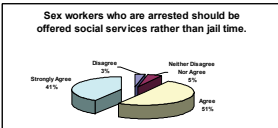
Sex Work:



Legal History:



Perspectives on the Law:



This project would not have been possible without the remarkable participants and peer-led staff of the study whose commitment to addressing the needs of their own community is unprecedented.

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