

HIV/AIDS STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION: SEX WORKERS



Sex workers are marginalised and stigmatised because of their work and the fact that prostitution is still criminalised. Many sex workers are further marginalised because of their race or their sexuality, drug taking behaviour and poverty.

All these factors increase stigmatisation experienced by sex workers and make them extremely vulnerable to HIV infection.

SEX WORKERS: A DIVERSE GROUP

Sex workers are not a homogeneous group, but the public identify sex workers with people (presumably women) working on the street. Sex work is diverse and consists of women, men and transsexuals who do not always work on the street. The public also tends to assume that sex work is a life choice. The reality is often different. An unemployed woman with children may have no other choice but to sell sex. Transsexuals who experience stigma and discrimination because of their sexuality may also be pushed to sex work.

Drug addiction and the lack of adequate support services and access to rehabilitation programs may also lead people to sex work as a means of paying for drugs.

It's worth noting however, that for some people, sex work is a choice, and that sex work advocacy organisations are supporting sex workers to be empowered and in control of their working lives. Sex workers working in a supportive environment can often be the best HIV educators.

SEX WORK, DISCRIMINATION & HIV INFECTION

Discrimination experienced by sex workers has been increased by the HIV epidemic, which has exposed sex workers to further discriminatory attitudes. Sex workers are widely and popularly assumed to be HIV positive, and have been characterised as "vectors" or "reservoirs" of HIV infection.

Those assumptions ignore the fact that many sex workers use condoms and will refuse to have sex if the client does not want to use one, potentially exposing them to physical and sexual violence. **Sex workers are often more concerned with safe sex than their clients, whose responsibility in HIV transmission is rarely, if ever, considered.**

The stigmatisation faced by sex workers can drive them away from social and health services because of the fear of being judged, humiliated or discriminated against. Service providers may refuse to provide sex workers with assistance, advice or medical treatment.

The illegal status of sex workers' activity can prevent them from prosecuting abusive clients and pimps. The law can also hinder the efforts of sex workers at protecting themselves from HIV infection. They are also likely to be stigmatised and harassed by the police if they seek their help.

ORGANISATIONS:

English Collective of Prostitutes

This organisation advocates for women sex workers' issues
Tel: 020 7482 2496

Streetwise Youth Project

Male sex workers' project, which provides advice, information, support, assistance and prevention.
Tel: 020 7370 0406
www.swy.org.uk

Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)

Tel: +27 21 448 2883
www.nswp.org

EUROPAP - European Network for HIV/STD Prevention in Prostitution

Tel: + 44 195 2416031

TAMPEP (Transnational AIDS/STD Prevention among Migrant Prostitutes in Europe Project)

Tel: +31 20 624 7149

The European Project on AIDS & Mobility

Tel: +31 348 437636
www.aidsmobility.org

ARE YOU HIV PREJUDICED?