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Online sex industry provides critical safety and health protections for men sex workers:

New research raises significant concerns about the impact of criminalized PCEPA laws targeting third party advertising

Vancouver, B.C. [July 7th, 2016]—Newly published peer review research shows how the loss of ‘Boystown’—the main sex work stroll for men in Vancouver—over the last decade, has led to loss of community and social solidarity; key protective strategies for sex workers. At the same time, the shift to online sex work for men has provided critical safety and health protections for sex workers in screening prospective clients and negotiating terms of transactions.

As part of a new community-based research project, led by the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) and HUSTLE (a sex worker-led outreach program) of Health Initiative for Men (HIM), in-depth interviews were conducted with 43 self-identified men sex workers and buyers in Metro Vancouver. Given the vast majority of research, policy and media discussions currently focus on women in the sex industry in Canada, the team aimed to learn about the lived experiences of men and trans sex workers. Interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2013, prior to the enactment of the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA) by the former Conservative government that further criminalized aspects of sex work (including the third party advertisement and purchase of sexual services).

Sex workers described how gentrification, urban planning and policing over the last decade led to the loss of the tightknit and supportive community, ‘Boystown’, the main street-based sex work stroll for self-identified men. At the same time, the shift of sex work from street to online led to increased control for sex workers over their working conditions, including protections from violence and reduced stigma.

“Our knowledge of the working environment of men in the sex industry is limited,” said Dr. Andrea Krüsi, GSHI Research Associate. “This study is critical as it shares the voices of men and trans sex workers and their clients, which are rarely included in policy discussions in Canada.”

Self-identified men sex workers interviewed in the study said the move from street-based sex work to the Internet reduced stigma and increased their control over their working conditions by:

- Facilitating the screening of prospective clients, through the use of webcams, for example;
- Enabling advance negotiations about the terms of transactions, including price, location, services and condom use; and
- Reducing police harassment and displacement.

“This research shows the critical role of men and trans sex workers in policy discussion and the safety and health protections afforded to men by working online,” said Matthew Taylor, Community Lead and Program Manager with HUSTLE/HIM. “This evidence demonstrates the need to repeal the PCEPA that further criminalizes the sex industry and reduces screening protections for workers”

“The PCEPA’s focus on criminalizing third-party advertising threatens to remove critical safety mechanisms for sex workers in screening clients, preventing violence and ensuring safer working conditions,” said Dr. Kate Shannon, senior author of the study, Director of GSHI and Associate Professor of Medicine at UBC. “This research provides critical findings we hope will contribute to policy discussions with the new Liberal government on the repeal of the PCEPA enacted by the previous Conservative government”

One male sex worker quoted in the study said: “It’s [online] way safer, like I say you can read the profiles of your clients before you even meet them, you know? And then everything’s arranged before you even meet them so when you meet them it’s all good, right? You either say nay or yay. . . . Totally different from like having to get into a car and then if you don’t wanna do it and the guy gets violent with you in the car you’re fucked, you know? And you can say no online and not worry about bringing retribution of violence right, so.”

Related materials:

- A summary and the *American Journal of Men’s Health* publication is available here: www.gshi.cfenet.ubc.ca/CHAPSONline

About the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE, www.cfenet.ubc.ca) is Canada’s largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility and is internationally recognized as an innovative world leader in combating HIV/AIDS and related diseases. BC-CfE is based at St. Paul’s Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE works in close collaboration with key provincial stakeholders, including government, health authorities, health care providers, academics from other institutions, and the community to decrease the health burden of HIV and AIDS. By developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related illnesses, the BC-CfE helps improve the health of British Columbians.

About the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative

The Gender and Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI, www.gshi.cfenet.ubc.ca) is a core program of the BC-CfE with the overall mission to ensure research of the highest scientific and ethical standard informs evidence-based policy and practice in gender, sexual health and HIV/AIDS and reduces health and social inequities among marginalized populations in Canada and globally. The CHAPS Project (Community Health Assessment of Men Who Purchase and Sell Sex) was launched in 2012 with HUSTLE/HIM, and in collaboration with Boys R Us and others in an effort to better understand the sexual health and HIV risk environment of men in the sex industry.

About Hustle/Health Initiative for Men

HUSTLE is an outreach and support program for self-identified men in the sex industry created and run by experienced individuals. HUSTLE is operated by Health Initiative for Men (HIM) in Vancouver, British Columbia, an organization that aims to strengthen gay men’s health and well-being through trusted, tailored, targeted research-based health promotion services and by engaging the community. www.checkhimout.ca

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