

# Applying an Occupational Health & Safety Lens in the Context of Criminalization

*Sexual health & psychosocial well-being among sex workers in Metro Vancouver*

The criminalization of sex work in Canada continues to undermine sex workers' access to occupational health and safety (OHS) best practices. OHS broadly refers to the factors that impact the safety and wellbeing of workers within the workplace.

Through interviews with 47 indoor sex workers and third party supports in Metro Vancouver, we explored sex workers' OHS, including psychosocial wellbeing and access to sexual health services.

We found that sex workers faced limited access to sexual health education, testing and workplace training as well as challenges in implementing OHS best practices.

## What did we find?

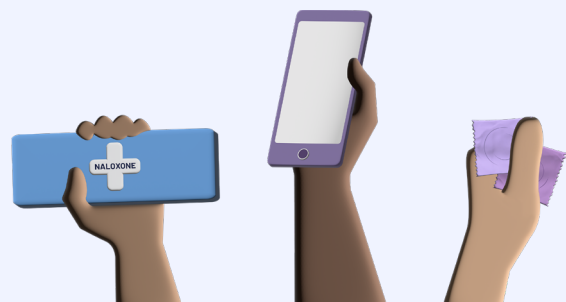
### Limited Access to Sexual Health Education, Testing & Workplace Training<sup>1,2</sup>

Due to criminalization and stigma, sex workers faced barriers to formal sexual health education, testing services, and safety training. In response, they cultivated informal peer-driven approaches.

However, gaps persisted in experientially based training, knowledge of evolving sex work laws, and comprehensive sexual health education. These gaps were particularly pronounced for sex worker who face racism, xenophobia, and language barriers.

“At the family doctor’s office, you might feel embarrassed. They might say ‘oh why are you doing this STI test?’, so you feel scared.”

- Massage parlour worker



“As [workplace] incidents come up, you might not know what to do... having access to somebody with that kind of lived experience, via third party, or older more experienced workers is critical to the safety of new workers.”

- Massage parlour worker

## Challenges in Implementing OHS Best Practices<sup>1,2</sup>

Participants stressed the importance of safety and security policies, including availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and the ability to report unsafe work conditions.

However, criminalization was linked to a reluctance to file workplace complaints, fear of reporting violence to police, and challenges in seeking legal recourse, especially for marginalized sex workers.

“You can’t be bullied if you work at the City. You can’t be bullied if you’re a police officer. You have recourse. I’m not saying those processes are perfect by any stretch. But we need those same kinds of protections...”

- Massage parlour worker

## What do we recommend?

- Decriminalize all aspects of sex work, including third-party support and im/migrant sex work, to allow for occupational and labour rights and improved OHS conditions for sex workers.
- Address unique challenges faced by marginalized sex workers, including racialized and im/migrant workers, such as risk of deportation and limitations on workplace advocacy.
- Centre the experiences and perspectives of sex workers in the development of sex work OHS guidelines and peer-led programs.



<sup>1</sup>Machat, S., McBride, B., Murphy, A., Mo, M., Goldenberg, SM., Krüsi, A. An Evaluation of Indoor Sex Workers' Psychosocial Occupational Health and Safety in Metro Vancouver, Canada. Occupational Health Science. 2023 December 8. DOI: 10.1007/s41542-023-00169-5

<sup>2</sup>Pearson J, Machat S, McDermid J, Goldenberg SM, Krüsi A. An Evaluation of Indoor Sex Workers' Sexual Health Access in Metro Vancouver: Applying an Occupational Health & Safety Lens in the Context of Criminalization. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2023; 20(3):1857. DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20031857