

The global public health burden of sex work: a call for research



An understanding of the global health burden of sex work, including sex trafficking and transactional sex, is urgently needed to direct resources to very large and vulnerable populations. Estimation of this burden will be a challenge, but similar efforts have been undertaken in other populations and for other complex issues that are difficult to measure, such as female genital mutilation.¹

Although thousands of studies on sex work have been undertaken and substantial data collected on the health problems of sex workers, including HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, alcohol and drug use, mental health problems, and violence, we do not know the global health burden of sex work.²⁻³ By contrast, the health burden of other issues that profoundly affect millions of people globally, such as HIV and violence against women, have been estimated.^{4,5}

Estimations of the health burden of sex work should consider morbidity, long-term disabilities, and mortality in male, female, and transgender sex workers. Data are needed not only for acute and present health problems of sex workers, but also for permanent and chronic disabilities and mortality. 30 years into the HIV epidemic, we do not know how many people with HIV have been sex workers, a population with some of the highest HIV rates in the world.

Unrecognised health issues should be considered. For example, studies show that a large percentage of sex workers become pregnant, have unsafe abortions, and are mothers, yet we have few data for maternal morbidity and mortality in sex workers, including for postnatal depression.⁶

The health burden of sex work includes the effect on other populations, most obviously clients of sex workers but also the partners and children of clients.⁷ Perhaps the population most affected by sex work is children of sex workers. Although few studies have investigated the millions of children of sex workers, many are at high risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, congenital syphilis, fetal alcohol syndrome, and neonatal abstinence syndrome.^{8,9} Furthermore, many daughters of sex workers are trafficked, are at risk of pregnancy, and have unsafe abortions or complications

during pregnancy and childbirth. We need research to understand the burden of sex work on infants born to sex workers and their older children.

Existing studies on sex work might be inadequate to provide an exact estimate of the global burden, but provide a sufficient starting point and can be supplemented with further research.

Now is a crucial time to understand the health burden of sex work because global climate change and resulting food insecurity¹⁰ could force more people into sex work. The results of research may further contribute to efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals 1–6.¹¹

Global health is more than numbers, it is about human rights and dignity. In *The Lancet Global Health*, I issue a call to form a workgroup that will not only estimate the global public health burden of sex work, but also promote the rights and dignity of millions of people.

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