

# Population Size Estimates → CASE STUDY ←

## The Transitions Project: Estimating female sex workers' early HIV risk and the implications for HIV epidemic control

### Background

In regions of the world where HIV epidemics have disproportionately affected female sex workers (FSW), programs addressing their reproductive and sexual health needs and structural factors that increase their vulnerability to HIV are important for ensuring the overall well-being of this population. However, many programs are only accessed by women who self-identify as FSW, and are unable to reach those who are in the informal sector of sex work.

### Purpose

Transitions aims to understand the behavioral, biological and structural factors contributing to the HIV risk experienced by young FSW and young women engaged in transactional sex (where sex is exchanged for money, goods and other resources outside formal sex work).

### Study Setting

Transitions was implemented in two study sites: Mombasa, Kenya and Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. The organization of sex work in Mombasa is less structured than that in Dnipropetrovsk. In Mombasa, the majority of FSW operate as free agents and move between various locations to seek clients. There is also a high degree of intermingling between FSW and women seeking casual and transactional sex partners in these locations. In contrast, FSW in Dnipropetrovsk mostly work within a formal organizational structure and are often managed (by the owner of a brothel, for example). Movement of Ukrainian FSW is more limited.

### Approach

It is known that some women who engage in transactional sex seek partners in the same places as FSW. Working with local service programs and FSW, mapping was used to locate all the places in Mombasa and Dnipropetrovsk where FSW congregate and to estimate the population size of FSW as well as women who engaged in transactional sex.

### Implications of Mapping Findings

Mapping findings provide information about the total number of FSW in Mombasa and Dnipropetrovsk with which local reproductive health and HIV prevention programs can use to plan and evaluate their services, and locations where women who engage in informal sex work could be reached for services. In addition, mapping findings provide a sampling frame for an in-depth survey to examine the behavioral, biological and structural factors affecting the HIV risk faced by young FSW and young women in these regions.

### Relevance to the Canadian setting

In Canada, it is generally believed that women who engage in survival sex work (described as transactional sex in the Transitions study) may face a higher risk of acquiring HIV than women who engage in sex work as a profession. Anecdotally, a proportion of women who engage in survival sex work also require resources and services to assist with addiction issues that they might be dealing with. Mapping, thoughtfully adapted to the Canadian context, has the potential to provide information about how the pattern and level of risk vary across the vast landscape of sex work and locations where hard-to-reach populations could be reached for services.