

***Behind Closed Doors: Summary of Findings
November 2008***

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Executive Summary

- The primary data compiled for this project was collected with individual semi-structured interviews (n=47). Additional feedback was collected during three focus groups (n=41).
- All participants were Canadian citizens working in licensed and independent escort businesses. The vast majority of participants were female and working as escorts.
- At the time of the interview, participants ranged in age from 21-55 years, with an average age of 32.
- Just over half (54%, n=22) of the participants indicated that they had not finished high school and just under half indicated that they had finished high school (46%, n=19).
- Among those who report having children, 31% (n=8) report that they are the primary care providers to the children.
- The age at which participants reported entering the sex industry ranged from 13 to 50 years of age. The average age of entry among all of the participants who answered this question was 25 years. Nine participants (22%) reported being involved in the sex industry before the age of majority.
- Most participants indicated that they were mainly happy with their work (57%, n=23), while a significant minority indicated they had mixed feelings (30%, n=12), and a smaller number indicated that they were mainly or very unhappy with their work (12%, n=5).
- Most clients are reported to be respectful and are viewed in a positive light. However, difficult clients are a significant source of stress for workers, and although incidents are reportedly rare, the potential of client violence is an ongoing stressor when working with non-regular clients. Indoor work is regarded as safer than outdoor work.
- The majority of participants (66%, n=18) had never worked in an outdoor environment.
- Participants were interested in services such as general counseling and support, education upgrading and scholarships, substance use counseling, parenting support, employment training, and health services. Participants also noted that workplace education opportunities relating to financial management and planning, safety and self defense training, general information regarding how to do well in escort work, and health information would be useful.

Objective and Methodology

The purpose of this project was to learn more about the elusive indoor sex industry in the Capital Region of British Columbia, specifically for the purposes of designing supportive programs and services. Even though they are estimated to make up the majority of the industry, indoor sex workers are underrepresented in the current scholarly literature, in large part because their work is less visible in the community, they have less contact with social welfare agencies, and they are assumed to have greater privacy concerns than many of their counterparts working more openly on the street (Alexander, 1987, Benoit and Millar, 2001, Dalla, 2002; Sanders, 2005).

A number of themes were present within the overall research objective, including learning more about the presence of sexually exploited youth and violence in indoor environments, including municipally licensed escort businesses. Alongside these concerns, there was also a general interest in finding out about the demographic characteristics, family life, and education of indoor workers. With respect to work, there was interest in knowing how, and at what age, workers began working in the sex industry. Additional questions about the work environment such as what workers find satisfying and dissatisfying about their work environments, whether they had ever worked in outdoor environments or for a coercive third party (pimp), and future employment plans were also included. The project leaders were also interested in the degree of drug and alcohol use among indoor workers as this is a significant service need among outdoor workers, and there is a current interest in developing drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs that meet the particular needs of those who are concurrently involved in sex work and living with substance addiction.

The primary data compiled for this project was collected with individual semi-structured interviews (n=47). Additional feedback was collected during three focus groups (n=41). The information collected during the focus groups was designed to augment the individual interview data and is reported on in conjunction with the interview data. As the interviews were semi-structured and varied slightly in their administration, not all participants answered each question with the same detail, and some questions were not posed to all participants. Thus, the findings below indicate how many responses were analyzed for each question, with the number of responses varying slightly across questions.

Some questions – such as age, marital status, education - were quite structured allowing for quantification of the results and a quick snapshot of the findings. Where quantification was less appropriate, the findings have been qualitatively analyzed with a specific interest in identifying the most prominent themes identified by the participants as well as themes related to the overall objectives of the project.

Where possible, the findings have been compared to the results of similar research in the extant literature in order to provide some measure of the reliability of the findings. This practice of comparing results to information found in the existing scholarship is especially important because research on hidden populations, such as persons working in the sex industry, is often conducted using convenience samples and unstandardized measures, leaving the reader unable to assess the generalizability of the findings to the population of interest, or compare findings across studies (Benoit and Shaver, 2006). This difficulty has long plagued scholarship on the sex industry, and has left research open to the critique that it does not represent the larger population of sex industry workers; however, given the mounting research available on the Canadian sex

industry as well as the sex industry in other high income countries, there is now greater opportunity to establish reliability based on the emergence of stable research trends.

Demographic Characteristics

Gender and Work Location of Participants

Participants who were involved in this study were almost exclusively female with the exception of one male driver (drives escorts to outcalls and plays security role) and one male-to-female transgendered escort. Thus, the findings are derived from female escort work in the Victoria CRD. While the sex industry is dominated by female workers, there is a significant minority of males working in the sex industry whose experiences are underrepresented in the literature and may differ from their female counterparts (Weinberg et. al., 1999).

Age (N=45)

At the time of the interview, participants ranged in age from 21-55 years, with an average age of 32. This finding is very similar to the existing literature where it has been found that the average age of persons working in the sex industry ranges from the late twenties to mid thirties (Benoit and Millar, 2001, Dalla, 2002, Sanders, 2004 Vanwesenbeeck, 1994). This finding further suggests that sex industry work represents a more than transient option for earning a living among mature women, who in many cases, as will be show below, have dependents to care for.

Education (N=44)

Just over half (54%, n=22) of the participants who answered this question indicated that they had not finished high school, and just under half indicated that they had finished high school (46%, n=19). Three participants did not clearly indicate their status with respect to high school education, but commented on other aspects of their education. The high school completion rate

among this sample of indoor workers is slightly higher than has been previously found – perhaps because other samples have included both indoor and outdoor workers who are commonly perceived as more marginalized - but still lower than the rate of completion among the population in the CRD (Benoit and Millar, 2001, Statistics Canada, 2001a). A significant minority of participants (23%, n=10) also reported having some university education, while several participants also reported having vocational training and/or being currently involved in upgrading their education. Several participants expressed regret at having not completed their high school education citing reasons such as pregnancy, many moves, and social and economic problems, which made schooling difficult.

Not surprisingly, participants repeatedly identified education support as a service need among indoor workers. The specific type of education support highlighted by the participants is reported on below.

Place of Origin (N=38)

This topic was addressed in passing by most participants when talking about their upbringing or their current living situation. With the exception of one person, who was born in England to Canadian parents living overseas, all participants were born in Canada. Just over 60% (n=23) of participants who answered this question were from British Columbia with the remaining representing other Canadian provinces. This finding supports other research suggesting that persons working in the sex industry are predominantly local residents as opposed to migrant or trafficked workers (Benoit and Miller, 2001; Sanders, 2005).

Marital Status (N=43)

The majority of participants reported being single (58%, n=21), and a further (19%, n=8) reported being divorced. Of the remaining participants, (9%, n=4) reported being married and

(14%, n=6) reported living in common-law relationships. In the CRD, 59% of adults report being married or living common-law, suggesting that persons working in indoor sex work environments are more likely to be single compared to the general adult population (Statistics Canada, 2001b). One likely reason for lower rates of marital partnership among persons working in the sex industry is that the stigma surrounding the sex industry contributes to social isolation and places strain on romantic relationships (Jackson et. al, in press). Previous research indicates the persons working in the sex industry face considerable pressure to develop a work and private self, which can place strain on romantic relationships (Phillips and Benoit, 2005). The maintenance of romantic relationships in the context of prostitution stigmas is one of many topics requiring further research.

Current Living Situation (N=43)

Participants provided information in response to the question about their current living situation, including the amount of rent paid, whether their abode was owned or rented, individuals they lived with, how long they had been there and where the home was located. Two overarching themes emerged. The first was that the vast majority of participants indicated they were in what might be categorized as stable living arrangements; that is, they rent a home or apartment, and did not indicate that there was imminent change in their housing. Participants made comments such as *“I just got married and I live with my husband, and a roommate”*, *“I live with my son, he's three and a half, in a one bedroom apartment”*, and *“I live alone with two cats”*. A small number of participants indicated they were without stable living arrangements, usually because they were in transition, having recently moved residences. The general finding that the vast majority of participants live in stable living arrangements sets them apart from their counterparts on the street, who more frequently cite transition homes, shelters and staying with

friends as their sources of housing (Benoit and Millar, 2001). A second overarching finding was that very few people indicated owning their homes, and several made comments suggesting that adequate, quality housing was unaffordable. This is not surprising as housing costs in the CRD are among the highest in the country and previous research indicates that home ownership is lower among person working in the sex industry when compared to the adult population at large (Benoit and Millar, 2006, Statistics Canada, 2001c). There are several potential reasons for this including lower levels of income among many persons working in the sex industry and difficulty qualifying for mortgages when earnings are not reported to the Canada Revenue Agency.

Children (N=46)

Over half of the participants (57%, n=26) reported having had birth or step children (birth children in the vast majority of cases), with the remaining (43%, n=20) reporting never having had children. Among those who report having children, 15% (n=4) report that children are grown and living independently, 31% (n=8) report that they are the primary care providers to the children, 11% (n=3) percent report that they are the primary care providers to some of their children, 31% (n=8) reported that their children live with others, and 11% (n=3) percent did not clearly indicate where their children live. Among those who reported that one or more of their children did not live with them, in most cases the children were living with their grandparent(s), with the remaining few being cared for by the other parents. On the one hand, these data support the vulnerability of children of female escorts if you consider the number children living with grandparents as an indicator of parent-child difficulty. On the other hand, many participants also reported being the primary caregiver to children, echoing other research that suggests that persons working in indoor environments often have children to care for (see Benoit and Millar, 2001, Sanders, 2005)

That many participants were caring for or involved in the care of dependents was echoed in other areas of the interview by participants who noted that escort work was compatible with their need for childcare and helped to provide an adequate income for caring for children. Given this, services designed for indoor workers must take into account that a significant minority of workers are currently caring for dependent children and a smaller minority have dependent children living with others.

Early Family Life

Growing Up (N=47)

Participants described a wide array of early family experiences ranging from largely positive to highly neglectful and abusive. Descriptions of family life were grouped into three categories, mainly positive (persons who described a mainly happy upbringing with no major negative experiences), both positive and negative (persons who described both significant positive and negative experiences) and mainly negative (persons who described an unhappy childhood with one or more significant negative experiences). Looking at the data in this manner, it appears that 18% (n=8) persons had a mainly positive family upbringing, 34% (n=16) had a mix of positive and negative experiences and 48% (n=23) had a mainly negative upbringing.

Participants described a vast array of both positive and negative factors impacting their early upbringings. The most commonly cited negative factors included lack of emotional or other forms of support, parental substance use, sexual abuse, and a poor relationship with one's father. The most commonly cited positive factors included vacations and holidays, opportunities for

recreation, having a close, supportive relationship with at least one parent, extended family support, and family pets.

Interest in the early lives of persons working in the sex industry developed in conjunction with the relatively contemporary position that working in the sex industry is the enactment of a life course of victimization. While research does support the view that persons working in the sex industry are on average structurally marginalized – that is, they disproportionately represent statuses such as lower education, lower income, aboriginal status, history of government care, and are primarily female etc. – it is not clear that their involvement in the sex industry is the extension of trauma experienced in their family life, and there is little, if any, comparative data to support the idea that persons involved in the sex industry come from exceptionally poor family backgrounds compared to their socio-economic counterparts outside the sex industry.

As will be discussed in more detail, persons involved in the sex industry most commonly view their involvement as a financial decision (Benoit and Millar, 2001). Not surprisingly then, the majority of participants (56%, 22/39) who addressed the issue of whether their family life led to their involvement in the sex industry felt that it had not, with the remaining 44% stating that it had led to their involvement in either a small or major way. A typical comment was that early family life was naturally a factor in present day activities: “It [has made] me the person I am today. I consider myself a very strong person”. Another typical comment was that poor resources in early life had led to involvement in the sex industry.

“Definitely I think it has. Not in that, like my parents totally didn’t approve of such a thing and wouldn’t encourage it. But I think the fact that I was still really depressed and dealt with my problems by using drugs and hanging out with tough crowds on the street. If I had grown up in a rich family and had everything provided for me, I don’t think I would have gotten into this sort of thing.”

Some participants also viewed the connection between family life and involvement in the sex industry positively:

“She [mother] has given me strength, when I’ve decided to make my own decision and be independent because I’m so strong I think that, that’s something that helps me have my head on my shoulders while I’m working.”

These findings support the view connections between involvement in the sex industry and early family life are more complex than has been suggested by proponents of the view that involvement in the sex industry is part of a life course of victimization.

Beginning to Work in the Indoor Sex Industry

Age first began in sex industry (N=41)

The age at which participants reported entering the sex industry ranged from 13 to 50 years of age. The average age of entry among all of the participants who answered this question was 25 years, which is similar to other research suggesting that the majority of persons entering the sex industry do so as adults (Benoit and Millar, 2001; Sanders, 2005). This data from this project also supports previous research suggesting that persons working in indoor environments are, on average, older when they begin sex work than their counterparts working in outdoor environments (Benoit and Miller, 2001; Dalla, 2002; Sanders, 2005). It is also noteworthy that almost a third (29%, n=12) of participants reported beginning to work in the sex industry after the age of thirty.

Although the average age at beginning sex work is that of a young adult, a significant minority of participants (22%, N=9) in this study and in previous research report entering as legal minors (<19years of age), making them sexually exploited youth (Benoit and Millar, 2001). It is noteworthy in the context of the research objectives of this study that no one reported working in an indoor escort environment as a youth and the common perception was that

licensed agencies in the Victoria CRD were careful to check identification during the hiring process. However, a few participants in the focus group noted working in agencies in the past where identification was not checked and therefore it is possible that older youth may have been employed.

The majority of persons who reported sexual exploitation in their childhood indicated that they were one or more of street involved, in government care, suffering from poverty, or came across commercial sex exchange through their personal network. The following excerpts are typical circumstances reported by those who described sexual exploitation as youth.

“When I was on the streets as a teenager, I worked on and off. It was really sporadic. Just when I was really desperate for money.”

“I got involved in the sex trade when I was 15 years old in [city in BC] because my parents put me in a group home, and then from there they wouldn't take me, they signed me over to the Ministry for Children and Family. I was kind of left on the street with nowhere to go.”

“Survival. Foster care plus I was living out on the streets and I needed money and stuff like that. And it was the easiest way, it's better than pan handling. I had more people that said I wouldn't have to have sex with them but they would get me a hotel room, alcohol, and that was basically it. And then give me extra money, my friends would [have sex with them] and I got paid.”

“It was through my friend and she had met these Asian guys and invited me out and it was basically, you go to the restaurant, you drink with them, [] you go back, you get paid more. So it was just kind of easy. I was sort of promiscuous when I was younger so you know when you drink everything gets easier and it's like well, why not, and at first it was kind of hard and then, you know, it was sort of easy and then it was fun.”

Focus group participants echoed that neglected and highly marginalized youth are the most at risk for sexual exploitation but felt that youth sexual exploitation was largely a diffuse, informal activity facilitated by internet dating and people encountered in personal networks. While street involved or otherwise highly marginalized youth are more likely to be sexually

exploited, research on street youth in the CRD indicates that sexually exploitation is not a prevalent experience even among this population¹.

Reasons for beginning to work in the Sex Industry (n=42)

By far, the most common reason participants report being drawn to escort work was the earning potential combined with financial need, which is not surprising as that is the most practical reason for taking up any labour-economic exchange. Comments such as the following were typical:

“Moved [from city], no job, no nothing, left my husband and had to get back on my feet myself.”

“There was nothing really, like there wasn’t anyone forcing me to do it, or...I needed the cash very badly and I just...I enjoy it.”

Participants also noted that they would be unlikely to earn similar earnings in mainstream work, and that the hours of escort work suited them, or were compatible with caring for their children.

“...like my kids are in school, they have a nice house to live in and this is the only way that I am going to be able to provide that for them.”

A small number of participants also report that they were primarily drawn to the work because they believed that it was a needed service that they were uniquely capable of fulfilling.

“It progressively felt like a gift that I could show this and be in service”

A couple of participants noted that health issues including substance addiction compelled them to work in the sex industry as they would be unable to maintain other types of employment.

“I got into it initially in [city] because I was addicted to heroin”.

Having someone in your personal network that is either involved in or otherwise familiar with sex work was also a common theme that facilitated involvement sex industry work.

¹ Contact: Mikael Jansson mjansson@uvic.ca regarding Risky Business: Experiences of Children and Youth in the Sex Trade," Funded by CIHR, CAHR program, *Healthy Youth in a Healthy Society*.

Quality of the Work Environment and Other Workplace Concerns

Best and Worst Aspects of the Working (N=45)

Participants were asked if they were happy in their line of work and to comment on what they liked and disliked about their work. Forty participants clearly indicated their level of happiness in escort work. These responses were grouped into three categories: mainly happy, both happy and unhappy and mainly unhappy. Most participants indicated that they were mainly happy (57%, n=23), a significant minority indicated they had mixed feelings (30%, n=12), and a minority indicated that they were mainly or very unhappy with their work (12%, n=5). For example, one respondent who described being happy with her work stated:

“Yes [I’m happy]. I get to schedule myself. It’s a safe environment, it’s a clean environment, and it’s a pretty respectful fair kind of deal, you know? I don’t feel like I am being taken advantage of by my boss. Mostly they’re great people.”

Another respondent who reported mixed feeling about the work had this to say:

“There [are] pluses and minuses to it. I am trying to discover ways to do it so that it serves me in a way that I don’t feel disempowered or that my safety is being put at risk....There is a way of doing it that I believe to be empowering and safe on both ends. For the person that is purchasing and for the person that is providing the sex service. And, it is just finding those ways and implementing them into my life.”

Another respondent who was not happy in her work described the following:

“No [I’m not happy]. I love [my boss] and everyone like that but sometimes I feel like I’m going to puke. I can’t even date. I wonder how long it will take for me to be able to do that again. I have seen the worst side of men.”

The above range of findings reflects other research suggesting that for some, sex work is a very negative experience that is only pursued for the income, while for others it is more or less positive labour experience (Vanwesenbeeck, 1994; Weinberg et. al. 1999).

Participants described an array of things that they liked and disliked about their work. The most common positive aspects of the work were good relationships with coworkers and bosses, deriving enjoyment from the social, interactive nature of the work, working in a safe, clean environment, the earnings, and the independence afforded by the work in terms of setting one's own schedule and choosing clients. One respondent commented:

"...the people I work with are great. All the girls are and [the boss] is amazing. It is a positive environment. You're not forced to do anything you don't want to do."

Another respondent commented:

"I like the lifestyle a lot. Obviously, the money is attractive. I like the way that every day is different. I may work early in the day one day and late in the evening another day. I may do a bit of both. I may have many hours or days to goof off."

The most common negative aspects of the work noted by participants included the pay structure of the agency, including fines and fees, negative interactions with coworkers, poor clients (rude, unattractive) and the emotional labour involved in interacting with them, concerns regarding safety and health, and the hours of the work. For example, one respondent commented:

"The price being so bad, and them having a special and only charging \$100... And then when you go into the phone room and give them half of it, first 10\$ for cover charge, and then you're only walking out with \$45. That really gets me."

Another respondent had this to say:

"I really don't like talking to the clients anymore. They just irritate me. That's probably the only thing I don't like. They can be rude."

Another respondent commented:

"There are always a couple of people [coworkers] that rub you the wrong way like you are kind of just forced to have to sit there with."

In addition, the focus group data reiterated that the quality of the work environment varies considerably. Many of the participants in this project came from agencies that they felt provided a positive working environment, but recalled other employment situations which were not as positive. Independent escorts benefit from being able to keep all of their earnings, a more regular clientele (in many cases) and the general autonomy associated with self-employment, but they can be more isolated in their work and therefore many have greater concerns for their safety (Sanders, 2004)

Workplace Earnings and Hours (N=39)

The earnings and hours reported by participants varied quite considerably. Of those that clearly articulated their schedule, most reported working part time, during the evening or the day time. Some participants reported a full-time work schedule, primarily because they are on call at all times, even though they may not be seeing clients during much of that time. This finding fits with existing research suggesting that many persons in the sex industry work on a part-time basis (Benoit and Millar, 2001)

Earnings reported by participants also varied considerably. A total of 33 participants responded directly to the question regarding their weekly earnings. Many noted that their income fluctuated from week to week, and several noted that they did not strictly tally their income. Reported earnings were grouped as follows: less than \$500 per week, \$501 to \$1000 per week, \$1001 to \$2000, and more than \$2000 per week. The following table indicates how many participants were in each category.

| Number of Participants (N=33) | Earning Category |
|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 6 | < \$500 |
| 9 | \$501-\$1000 |

| | |
|----|---------------|
| 13 | \$1001-\$2000 |
| 5 | >\$2000 |

These findings suggest that many persons working in the licensed escort agencies or as independent escorts in the Victoria CMA are able to generate a substantial income from escort work. Workers in this study appear to have reported higher average earnings than has been found in previous research on persons working in a wider variety of sex work venues (Benoit and Millar, 2001). However, more structured, multiple measures are typically used to measure income so these findings must be viewed somewhat cautiously.

Substance Use at Work (N=44)

While a significant minority of participants describe current or previous substance addiction, the vast majority of participants note that substances are not openly used in the workplace, that agency rules typically prohibit substance use, but that substance use does still occur. Forty two participants responded directly either yes or no regarding whether substances were used in the workplace, with half of the participants stating that substances were used (n=21) and half stating that they were not (n=21). For example, one respondent noted:

“I know a large number of girls in the industry do use drugs and alcohol, and working in the agency we are not allowed to have them here. It’s sort of like, if you use drugs on your own time it’s your own business but don’t do it at work.”

Others made comments such as

“A lot of girls do go get high with their guys. I’ve been offered”, or “it wasn’t really blatant, but it definitely happened”.

Several workers noted that being impaired at work was potentially detrimental to their safety and ability to interact with clients, and was therefore an area in which they exercised discretion.

Clients (N=41)

A number of themes were repeated when participants were asked about what their clients were like. Clients range in age and race, but middle-to-late middle aged men and Caucasians appear as the majority in many of the descriptions. Participants also describe customers who work in the trades as well as businessmen and professionals, with the later perhaps being the most common, and often the preferred, clientele. Married, middle aged men, with professional careers are described as the best customers and are more likely to seek services in the daytime.

Comments such as the following were typical:

“I would say they’re typically a businessman who is either local or travelling. Often somebody who is self employed. They’re probably anywhere from about... the majority are between 40 and 60 years of age. They are, they can be either married or unmarried. I think that they have the opportunity to see other women and use services so they do. I think it is usually just a regular part of how they relax or entertain themselves.”

“I only work in the day time so my customers are most middle aged white men, business men and married men. Of course, there’s a lot of exceptions to that, but that is the main. Middle aged, maybe they have more money, and a lot of them are married so they feel safer coming here rather than picking somebody up at the bar where they might be seen. Most of them are nice normal guys actually.”

“They average between the age of 35 and 65. Married mostly, I’d say 60% married, 40% out of the relationship. Clean cut, fairly clean, 90% are all well groomed, often business owners or construction workers.”

Nighttime customers may include younger men and men who have been consuming drugs and/or alcohol. Thus, while nighttime work is busier, it is also more unpredictable with regards to encountering problematic clients.

“Nighttime customers? I work grave yard so it's the guys who are, you know, strung out on drugs, cracked out, partying, couldn't get laid in the bar, so they're horny and want to come in. Generally, I would say 80-90% of the clientele are good.”

“Most of them here... usually in the day time, they’re sort of in and out. It’s just sort of small chat. You ask them what they want; give them what they want,

within boundaries. At night time, it's a lot different. I find they can be very selfish, aggressive, ignorant, rude."

Participants note that regular clients are valued due to their dependability and most participants spoke positively about their clients.

"Basically, they're pretty decent. They're good to us. You get to know a lot of them, you know, on a first name basis, you know because they call pretty well regularly. So most of them are really nice."

Thus, in the main, clients are reported to be respectful and are viewed in a positive light. However, difficult clients are a significant source of stress for workers, and although incidents are reportedly rare, the potential of client violence is an ongoing stressor when working with non-regular clients.

Outdoor Work (N=27)

A significant minority of participants (33%, n=9) reported having worked outdoors during their sex industry career, with several noting that they had only tried it once or a few times. Outdoor work was consistently regarded less safe than indoor work, with a few participants noting that the benefits of street work, such as lack of overhead costs and potential earnings, did not outweigh the safety concerns. The majority of participants (66%, n=18) had never worked in an outdoor environment, which is supported by other research on indoor escort work (Sanders, 2004). Nevertheless, mobility within and across venues is reported to be high in the sex industry (Benoit and Millar, 2001). Many participants supported this idea when talking about the various locations they had worked during the span of their career.

Violence (N=N/A)

A question concerning violence was not systematically posed to the participants. However, this subject was addressed by participants throughout the course of the interview. As noted earlier, participants largely regard working indoors as a safer environment compared to

working in outdoor environments, and mainly reported that their current employers were supportive of workers' safety and right to refuse service. As one respondent noted:

"Definitely the safety factor. I feel way safer. When I was on the streets as a teenager, I worked on and off. It was really sporadic. Just when I was really desperate for money That made me feel really dirty, and I hated doing it. Here, I feel positive and empowered and I'm making my own living. And if I don't want to see someone, or they're being abusive then I don't have to see them. I think it's way safer."

Drivers or security were an essential asset in the work environment that contributed to participants' sense of security.

"You're safe working in the house for sure. Cause you've got the drivers, the phone [girl], and the other girls here, so you always have help."

"Every time I've ever had a problem or gotten scared or whatever the driver is at the door to get me. So I do feel very protected here".

Those working independently also had screening strategies to help weed out potentially violent or abusive customers, although they often felt vulnerable due to the isolated nature of their work. While the potential for violence was a widespread concern among participants, only a select few reported having experienced "bad dates". These experiences occurred in both in-call and out-call indoor environments, but out-call environments were considered more risky by participants .

"I did my first outcall recently and I was scared shitless that it'd end up okay."

"Once I was assaulted by a big guy...I felt so weak, I didn't know how to get out ... I tried, [but], I don't want to be screaming for help because then the cop comes and the neighbors are like "what's going on?"

Another respondent similarly described an occasion where a client had given her Gamma-Hydroxybutyric Acid (GHB) during an in-call and how she was supported by the staff

of the agency that were able to intervene after she realized something was wrong. Several participants felt that they had organized their work environments to adequately minimize risk and one noted that the risk of violence in sexual exchange occurs for all women, and similar precautions need to be taken within and outside sex industry work.

Participants mentioned a number of things that they thought would help to reduce concerns of violence on the job, including greater communication among workers/agencies regarding bad customers, proximate security throughout the entirety of the service (as opposed to drop off and pick up), a means to communicate with support in the event it is needed, and a support line that independent workers could call into, both before and after a call, to assure that someone else was aware of their whereabouts and other pertinent details. As noted below, participants also felt that persons working in the sex industry should have access to safety education and self defense training tailored to their occupational context.

It is also noteworthy that only a select few participants (n=3) noted ever having worked for a “pimp”, echoing other research that persons working in the sex industry typically do so independently and that public stereotypes concerning the presence of pimps in the sex industry are likely overstated, even though they continue to be promulgated in popular culture (Dalla, 2002; Hallgrimsdottir et. al., 2006). However, as others have suggested, persons working for abusive or controlling third parties are assumed to be less likely to participate in research, so it is difficult to get a clear picture of the true extent of this phenomenon in Canada (Benoit and Millar, 2001).

Service Needs

Current Health

The majority of participants describe very or fairly good physical and mental health. A significant number of persons describe mental health concerns, most notably depression, which is not surprising as previous research indicates that mental health concerns such as depression are prevalent among persons working in the sex industry, in part due to the strains associated with a highly stigmatized, and in some respects, demanding/stressful, work environment (Phillips and Benoit, 2005). However, other research indicates that health does not always improve among those who report having retired from sex work, suggesting that the links between working in the sex industry and health require further research (Benoit and Millar, 2005).

Substance Use (N=47)

Substance addiction treatment is popularly conceived to be a significant service need among persons working in the sex industry. Although research indicates that substance use and working in the sex industry do not necessarily go hand in hand, persons working in social service agencies targeting the sex industry find that most of their clients are concurrently involved in the sex industry and experiencing substance addiction. In addition, substance addiction appears common among persons working in outdoor sex work in many Canadian urban centers,. There is less knowledge however regarding the prevalence of substance addiction among persons working in indoor environments, but previous research indicates that it may affect a minority of workers (Sanders, 2004).

The findings from this study support the idea that substance use is prevalent among persons working in indoor environments and substance addiction treatment is a potential service need for a some, though not the majority, of workers. Specifically, a minority of participants

(13%, n=7) describe active substance addiction. Participants made comments such as: “*Yes. I am a crack head*” and “*I use heroin. I use it in the mornings so I am not sick during the day*”. A further 19% (n=9) reported a historical problem with substance abuse or addiction. For example one respondent noted:

“Not currently. When I first started in the business I was using, but I don’t do anything now. I smoke and I drink occasionally but that’s about it.”

The remaining majority described current recreational/non-problematic substance use (47%, n=22) or no substance use (21%, n=10). For example, participants grouped in these categories made comments such as:

“I am drinking wine right now. After a long day... I maybe have a glass. Two cocktails a week maybe. Just martinis with the girls, to get out.”

“Marijuana right now. But I have tried almost everything. Yes [it is recreational use]”

An additional two persons indicated that they frequently used substances (specifically marijuana), but were not sure if they if it was problematic or an addiction.

Among those who described current or past substance addiction, only a few clearly reported that they had been to some form of drug and alcohol treatment, further underscoring that drug and alcohol treatment could be an unmet service need among this population.

Social Support for Sex Work (N=38)

(Are you open with family and friends about your work?)

Participants noted that some family and friends were aware of their involvement in the sex industry, however, in many cases, participants had very few or no persons in their personal life who were aware of their work. Participants noted being unable to disclose their work due to extreme discrimination and misunderstanding among the public and not wanting to hurt or upset loved ones. Most participants felt that public perception regarding the sex industry was

misinformed and unjustified, though a few participants noted that they could understand the stereotypes.

Responses to this question were grouped into three categories: those who were mainly open with family and friends, those who were open with a select number of family and friends, and those who were mainly not open with their family and friends about their involvement in escort work. Approximately one third of the participants were in each category, with 34% (n=13) reporting being mainly open, 32% (n=12) reporting being open to a select few family and friends, and an additional 34% (n=13) reporting being mainly not open about their involvement.

Participants made comments such as:

“Oh, everybody knows what I do.”

“In the first 2-3 years, maybe even a little longer, I judged myself, other people’s judgments of me. At a certain point, I started feeling proud of myself and good about the work that I do.”

“My mom and my sister know. And my dad knows. Pretty much everybody, except for my grandparents, and my uncles and my aunts [knows].... I told my mom and she knows. She’s either going to love me or hate me, right. She’s going to pick one. She’d rather love me than hate me, I think.”

“Some of my friends know but I don’t really trust most of my friends... I can’t tell my Mom because I’ve asked her opinion on this sort of industry and she had a very negative opinion on it.”

These findings echo other research which suggests that persons working in the sex industry receive very limited social support for their work and are isolated by having to hide their involvement from loved ones and that they must grapple with feeling judged, or otherwise stigmatized, by their work (Benoit and Millar, 2001, Hallgrimmsdottir et. al. 2006, Phillips and Benoit, 2005, Jackson, in press). Yet, the number of participants who indicated that they are open about their involvement in escort work is of interest and presents an opportunity for further research as the experiences of these individuals might be helpful to those who are more

negatively impacted by stigma. It is noteworthy that participants in this research and in previous studies generally regard the stigma surrounding the sex industry as unduly negative, misinformed and hypocritical.

Current Service Use and Potential PEERS Services

The vast majority of participants clearly indicated that they were rarely currently accessing any community based services. This finding suggests both that there is an opportunity to provide support service to persons working in the indoor sex industry, but that they may be a difficult population to reach.

A number of important themes emerged when asked about potential services that PEERS-Victoria could offer to persons working as indoor escorts. First, it was noted by a few participants that PEERS -Victoria was reputed to be mainly concerned with helping people to leave the sex industry, and was thus of little interest to those planning to remain in escort work. A number of participants also did not envision themselves accessing a community based social service agency for marginalized persons, or were not sure that they were in need of services. However, the majority of participants were able to identify at least one service needs among indoor escort workers contributing to a wide range of suggestions, including most notably, counseling (as a general support to offset workplace stress and problems), education upgrading support including scholarships and support for a range of postsecondary and adult education interests, substance use counseling, parenting support, employment training, and health services (on site nurses and triaged access to sexual health services). Participants also noted that workplace education opportunities relating to financial management and planning, safety and self defense training, general information regarding how to do well in escort work, and health information would be useful.

Participants were in many cases happy to access discreet services outside their work environments, but many agreed that on-site services would be beneficial. Furthermore, given the finding that very few participants currently access community based services, services at the work site seem a more promising avenue for reaching indoor escort workers. Participants described a range of service hours that would be convenient, including both business hours and evening hours, generally underscoring the need for a flexible, varied service delivery schedule.

Future Career and Work Plans (N=44)

Most participants described sex work as a limited career, something they did not expect to do throughout their working lifespan and a career where younger women are favoured. Nevertheless, only a small number of participants described a desire to leave escort work in the near future, with the remaining describing substantial short term - “maybe another year” or “until I am thirty” - plans to remain in the sex industry, or long term plans - “another 10 years” or “as long as I can” .

Participants described a wide variety of other work interests. One recurring theme among a minority of participants was a desire to get involved in work that involved caring for others or working in an office. However, the remaining participants described quite disparate career interests. Participants most notably described education/training, inability to match income outside the sex industry, financial planning, and business planning as the main impediments to doing other work. Many participants did not see any barriers to doing other work and expected that they would do so in the future, and others were happy to continue doing escort for a short or long while

Conclusion

This research suggests indoor escort work in the Victoria CRD is performed by mature adult women who enter this line of work at various ages, but often during young adulthood. A minority of persons reported sexual exploitation as youth and none worked in indoor escort environments as youth. A significant minority of women have reported caring for dependents and the majority of participants report being single.

Escort work provides a good living for many workers with many benefits including flexible schedules and positive social interaction. For escorts working in a privately owned agency, the manager or owner plays a significant role in determining the quality of the work environment by setting fee/commission structures, and by supporting workers' rights to safety and respect. Participants view their clients as mainly respectful and their work as predominantly safe, but the possibility of violence in the workplace is a significant, ongoing concern. Participants reported many practical ways that their safety can be supported in both agency and independent environments.

Although most respondents described significant short or long term plans for remaining in escort work, it is also regarded by most as a time-limited career. Thus, respondents noted that education support and employment training opportunities were an important service need, as transitioning to similarly rewarding mainstream employment is difficult for many due to limited education and skills. Participants also noted that escort workers had specific workplace education and support needs that could be met by interested advocacy and support organizations such as PEERS Victoria.

Workers were aware that there is little social support for escort work in broader mainstream society and regarded popular views as mainly unjustified and misinformed.

Nevertheless, many workers found it difficult to attempt to dispel or ignore the stigma surrounding the sex industry and thus opted to keep this aspect of their lives from family and friends, thereby lowering their access to social support and increasing social isolation.

Given that participants regard escort work as a more or less rewarding, but certainly viable and enduring, option for earning an income, the policy implications of this research favour a harm reduction approach. Within such an approach, escort workers should receive government and community support for workplace rights and protections, and agency owners should be encouraged, if not required, to adhere to basic workplace standards in support of workplace well-being. Escort workers are best equipped to provide the details regarding how to support them in their work environments. Many participants in this research reported that they already worked for supportive employers, but it was apparent that they did not regard police or other public services as supportive of their work, thus setting them apart from workers in the formal economy who often take such basic rights for granted. In this regard, persons working in the indoor sex industry are similarly disadvantaged to other marginalized workers who work in the absence of formal workplace regulations inside private residences providing care giving and other services.

The research sample size accessed in this study was considerable and the findings make a significant contribution to the existing empirical literature on the indoor sex industry. Additional analyses targeting specific aspects of the data should be pursued in order to more fully explore the nuances contained within this rich dataset. Nonetheless, this research contributes greatly to recent Canadian literature that has been developed in response to finding out more about the real-life experiences among this highly hidden and under-studied population.

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