


SHORT REPORT

Dispelling Myths and Understanding Realities



Working Conditions,
Health Status, and Exiting
Experiences of Sex Workers

WRITTEN BY Cecilia Benoit and Alison Millar

SPONSORED BY Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS)

FUNDED BY BC Health Research Foundation*

Capital Health District

BC Centre of Excellence on Women's Health

*RECENTLY RENAMED THE MICHAEL SMITH FOUNDATION FOR HEALTH RESEARCH

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, we would like to thank the sex workers who participated in the interviews that inform this report. Without their voices, this project would not have been possible. In addition, a special thanks goes to our research assistants who devoted not only their time and energy to the project, but also a dedication to extend and deepen our understanding of sex workers' lives. The following people and organizations also deserve special mention:

Judy Adler

Munaza Chaudhry

Mikael Jansson

Barbara Taylor

Annie Weeks

AIDS Vancouver Island

BC Centre of Excellence on Women's Health Women's Health

BC Health Research Foundation

Capital Health Region

Sandy Merriman House

Victoria Needle Exchange

University of Victoria

The full report and research instrument are available on the following websites:

<http://web.uvic.ca/~cbenoit/papers/DispMyths.pdf>

<http://www.peers.bc.ca/>

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SHORT REPORT

DISPELLING MYTHS AND UNDERSTANDING REALITIES: WORKING CONDITIONS, HEALTH STATUS, AND EXITING EXPERIENCES OF SEX WORKERS

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October 2001

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vignettes of Sex Workers 1

Introduction 3

Methodology 5

Profile of Respondents 6

Key Findings 7

Conclusion 8

Summary of Recommendations 9

Further Research 11



VIGNETTES OF SEX WORKERS¹

Rosie

Rosie's father was an accountant and her mother a clerk typist. Dispelling a common myth that all sex workers have been physically and/or sexually abused, neither happened to Rosie. What she recalls is a childhood in which her father was largely absent, though he did take her from time to time on outings and camping. Rosie's mother gave more of herself in regard to time and emotional support to her daughter, but had little positive to say about Rosie's personal achievements, which included completion of high school and two years of post-secondary education. By the age of 23, Rosie was married and her first child was on the way. The following year she was pregnant again. A year later her partner had left her alone with an infant and toddler in tow. Rosie does not speak much about what happened next, except to say that social services came and took her first two children about the same time that she entered the sex trade. A stillbirth was later followed by the birth of her third child. Rosie reared her youngest on her own, by doing periodic "square" jobs (receptionist, sales attendant), combined with relatively steady employment in the sex trade. She says "while the majority of sex workers start the trade much younger, I started after I had my kids".

Sophie

Sophie doesn't say much about her childhood except that she was raised in a single parent family and never knew her father. Her mother worked hard to support the two of them, which left little time for Sophie. What she does remember is moving around a lot while growing up and feeling extremely isolated and never really belonging anywhere: "I felt like I never really fit in. In high school [I was] just different; that's why I quit school and went to work in the bars," she explains. She left home after dropping out of grade 11 and hasn't seen or talked to her mom since. Although Sophie, now age 33, has been out of the trade for 7 years, she still has difficulty talking about her past. In fact, her experience in the sex trade is something that she doesn't share with too many people: "Its something that I don't really share openly...my close friends [are aware] but my family members aren't," she admits. Despite spending several years in the trade, today Sophie has little contact with those still working in it, including the girls in the strip club and those in the escort agency. One reason for this, she explains, is the difficulty she has had with exiting and the constant temptation to go back. Before leaving permanently, Sophie had made five unsuccessful attempts to leave the sex industry.

¹ The report makes extensive use of sex workers' narratives. In order to protect the identity of the 201 respondents who gave so much of themselves to this research, pseudonyms are used throughout.

Charlie

Charlie was born in a large east coast Canadian city 21 years ago and moved to Victoria when he was 12 years of age. He describes his sexual orientation as bisexual. He lived with both biological parents during his first years of life, but by age 5 his father had left and his mother had a new male partner. Charlie's memories of his childhood are mixed: he said that when he was 3 years old, his biological father sexually abused him and continued to do so until he left Charlie and his mother for good. He said that his stepfather never abused him sexually but used to hit him often - with shoes, belts, anything that was nearby when in a rage. On the other hand, Charlie's memories of his mother are positive and he still seeks out her companionship in adulthood. Unwilling to take the physical abuse from his step-dad anymore, before his 13th birthday Charlie had moved out and was fending for himself. He has been on his own ever since. Charlie's first years away from home involved movement from place to place. He continued to go to school for a while and managed to complete grade 9 before dropping out altogether... Charlie actually approached his first customer in a washroom. He said that he was seeking friendship and approval from his peers. His best friends were already in the sex trade. He had a pimp for a short while and was beaten up on more than one occasion. But that time has passed and today he said he feels privileged because he works independently, organizes his own work schedule and keeps all of the money he earns.

Brooke

Brooke looks older than her 21 years. She says that she has been through a "hell of a lot". She does not look back favourably on her childhood years in a small town on Vancouver Island. Brooke left home for good at age 14. She got a ride to Victoria and sought out older friends of one of her cousins. They were kind enough to give her a bed and to teach her the ropes of living in the city when you had few resources at hand. The downside was that Brooke's new roommates also introduced her to a smorgasbord of drugs. By the age of 16 she was addicted to heroin and forced to support her habit in whatever ways she could, including involvement in the sex trade. As Brooke put it, "I was getting into heroin and that's why I ended up getting into the sex trade." Although she's worked mainly in street prostitution, she says that when she could get herself "cleaned up", she would seek employment in an escort agency. Before long, however, her drug addiction would take over and she would find herself back on the street. Brooke has mixed feelings about the sex trade itself, saying that it is "not too bad" but that sometimes it makes her "really tired". She thinks that if she can get off heroin then she can also get out of the trade because "the two are one and the same for me." While Brooke remains hopeful about making a clean break one day soon, she also notes "my options are very slim. I don't have much of an education."

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INTRODUCTION

A lot of people look at the sex trade like it's really, really bad. The way I see it, it's not the greatest thing, but it's not the worse thing possible... I believe that the only way to consider it, so it's not so negative, [is to] open people's eyes a bit more often.

Annie, escort worker

Much of the research to date on the sex industry and its workforce has adopted a social problem orientation. Individual sex workers, almost always depicted as street walkers (those who are observable to the public and invariably the source of complaints by residents in neighbourhoods where the street trade is active) have been the main focus of analyses, with much attention given to background factors that lead them into the sex trade, risk behaviours while working in the trade, and the short and long-term physical, sexual and mental health outcomes of sex trade involvement.

A small body of literature, however, has taken the view that the sex trade/industry is far more complex than most believe, involving a number of sex occupations/venue locations other than street prostitution where it is estimated less than 20 percent of activity takes place. The sex trade is not unlike other types of service work that are found in high income countries such as Canada, involving a bundle of tasks done directly to please the recipient of the service (customer/ client), or indirectly to fulfill the expectations of a boss or manager overseeing the delivery of services. What these 'square jobs' have in common with the sex trade is that an exchange of services makes it possible for the worker to make a

living. The research reported here looks at the sex trade from a work perspective, arguing that there is an urgent need to *give voice* to sex workers located in indoor as well as outdoor venues as a first step in understanding the challenges they face.

The research team set out to answer the following questions associated with the sex trade in the Capital Regional District:

- What are the backgrounds of the respondents? Do they all share common key demographic and early childhood characteristics?
- What set of circumstances are associated with entry into the sex trade?
- Is sex work a temporary or a relatively permanent activity?
- Are respondents able to make a living wage from their work selling sex services?
- How are the working conditions of more visible venues of sex work (e.g., the street) different from less visible venues (escort agencies, bars and clubs, own homes, etc.)?
- What is the sexual, physical and mental health of respondents?
- What do respondents think of the health services that they use?
- How are personal and work characteristics related to length of time that respondents spend in the sex trade? How easy/difficult is it to exit from the sex trade?
- What are the 'pulls' and 'pushes' of staying in versus leaving the industry?
- How do current social policies meet the needs and concerns of those who perform/have performed sex services for a living?

As will become apparent below, respondents presented us with a complex picture of what it is like to be a sex worker.

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METHODOLOGY

Research Leader: What were your first impressions of the research project when you met [the project coordinator and myself]?

Research Assistant: Well, I didn't know who you were. I didn't know if you wanted very much contact with us sex workers [or] if you were just coming in and doing your job and leaving, right? I think I was worried about how open-minded or accepting you would be with sex trade people; how much we might have to fight you or something! [But] when you guys came to the meetings, I learned that this was PEERS' project, this was our thing that we were doing for our community. We were getting support from the university and from women who believe in doing research and helping women. My whole idea of the research project changed after that.

Following the methodology used in an earlier study investigating the sexual exploitation of children and youth in the CRD (Sexually Exploited Youth Committee, 1997), this current study trained ex-sex workers as research assistants who became involved in activities ranging from recruiting respondents, interviewing them, inputting questionnaire data into the computer program, and transcribing the tape-recorded interviews. This strategy and others reported below helped to make the project genuine community-academic collaboration. A non-random sample of currently active and exited² adult female (n=160), male (n=36) and transgendered (n=5) sex workers residing in Victoria, BC and the surrounding 13 municipalities that make up the Capital Regional District were asked about

² Exited or ex-sex worker, for the purposes of this report, is defined as someone who has retired from the sex trade for a minimum of two years at the time of interview. It is believed that those who had been out of the trade for two years would have been able to leave behind most aspects of the identity of and activities involved in being a sex worker.

whether they experienced their sex trade activity as a job or not, the degree of control they experienced in their current venue, their health status, and their access to health and related services in the metropolitan area.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth and I believed that it would carry on for the rest of my life, that you needed something and it would be there, everything would be done for you. [However when] I was twenty-one the silver spoon was taken away.

Gordana, agency worker

Here are some of main characteristics of respondents that can be found in the full report:

- Reflecting the gendered nature of sex work, the majority of those interviewed identified themselves as female, with those identifying as male comprising 18%.
- The mean age of respondents was 32 years at the time of interview, which does not fit the dominant media image of sex workers as being mainly sexually-exploited children and youth.
- Aboriginal people were over-represented among respondents, but members of visible minority groups were under-represented.
- The median level of education of respondents was grade 10, and the majority had not graduated from high school.
- The median annual income from sex activities performed for pay by respondents active in the trade was \$18,000, placing the majority of them in an income bracket not unlike other low-paid frontline service workers.
- Male respondents were worse off economically than their female colleagues.
- Nearly 25% of respondents were without stable housing at the time of interview, and this was more likely to be the case for those working on the street.

- Respondents' median age of entry into the sex trade, at 18 years, was older than most previous research indicates. Economic duress and enticement were the two most common reasons for initial entry.

KEY FINDINGS

The research informing this report captures how sex workers view their work, health status, access to services and exiting experiences. Its aim is to understand the challenges they face and offer policy suggestions to help improve workers' situations, inside as well as outside the sex trade. Here are some of the key findings that can be found in the full report:

- The majority of respondents had worked in the sex trade for five years or more.
- The sex trade does not have a recognizable career ladder, with workers beginning on the street and subsequently moving to off-street locations, such as strip bars or escort agencies. Rather, respondents work in a variety of venues, sometimes two at the same time.
- Venues differed in regard to sex workers' control over their earnings, pace of work, clientele, sex activities performed, and health and safety. Compared to the other venues, however, sex workers operating independently out of their own homes are in the best relative position to determine their own cost of labour, net earnings, pace of work, clientele and sex activities performed while working.
- At a more general level the criminal nature of the sex trade in Canada has a dramatic impact on workers' rights and safety and leaves all respondents at risk.
- The majority of respondents said that they had at some point received treatment for a physical injury incurred while working in the sex trade. Clients ("johns") were the most common reported perpetrator of abuse against sex workers.
- The vast majority of respondents had tried to exit the sex trade, some of them many times. Most went back to the industry, reporting economic necessity as their primary reason for doing so.

- In regard to health, virtually all respondents reported practising safe sex at work.
- Contrary to popular belief, only a minority of respondents escape from their situations through the use of illicit addictive substances, with use slightly higher for those currently working as sex workers than those who have exited.
- The majority of the respondents reported poor mental health, which they linked in part to the stigma and discrimination they face on a daily basis.
- Even those respondents who have exited the trade for 2 or more years continue to struggle post-retirement with mental health and related problems that do not end simply by their leaving the sex trade life behind.
- Street nurses and outreach workers, rather than doctors, provide the bulk of the respondents' health care. Some of the needed services, however, are either inaccessible, unavailable or ineffective in addressing sex workers' health needs.

CONCLUSION

For the majority of respondents in the study, selling sex services is their primary source of income and their options to do otherwise are severely limited. This report has sought to capture respondents' own views on their work, health status, access to services, and exiting experiences with the aim of understanding the challenges they face and offering policy suggestions to help improve their situation, inside as well as outside the sex trade. In addition to highly variable working conditions, sex workers must continually deal with how the sex industry is viewed and treated in Canada.

Compared to other service workers, sex workers are burdened with a stigma merely because they are involved in the commercial sex trade. The impact of this stigma is amplified by the tendency of Canadians to view the

sex trade as a social problem that needs to be solved through criminal sanctions. Although prostitution per se is not illegal according to federal law, most of the activities associated with it are illegal. The law often leaves sex workers with no choice but to do their work in hidden locations where they have little control over their personal safety. Further, they often must provide the service in a different location every time, thereby limiting their ability to establish a safe place to provide services. Sex workers are left vulnerable to abuse by those more powerful than themselves and are at the same time in danger of breaking the law while trying to make a living.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

As shown in the full report, all respondents experienced marginalization in the sense that they are unable to access many of the rights and protections other Canadian citizens enjoy. Because of this situation, we suggest some general recommendations, followed by more specific recommendations depending on the sub-group of sex workers.

General Recommendations:

- Educate the public about the reality of sex workers' lives;
- Campaign for changes in policy and legislation to make sex work safer;
- Make available better education and training for police and other criminal justice personnel to encourage them to be more sensitive and understanding of the dynamics of sex work across all venues;
- Provide ready access to safe, stable, and affordable housing;
- Provide ready access to appropriate and sensitive health and social service providers who are knowledgeable about the needs and

concerns of sex workers;

- Make available a continuum of services so that sex workers receive the care they need when they need it;
- Provide economic and political support for experience-based advocacy organizations.

Recommendations for Those Currently Working in the Sex Trade:

- Educate sex workers about what is legal and illegal about the sex trade;
- Institute formal job contracts for sex workers when employed by others (such as in strip bars or clubs);
- Institute formal work agreements for sex workers when working with third-parties (such as in escort agencies or massage parlours);
- Provide services that are specific to the needs and schedules of sex workers, including child care for dependent children and outreach services around-the-clock, seven days a week.

Recommendations for Survivors Wanting to Leave and Those Who Have Exited:

- Make available more outreach workers to assist sex workers wanting to exit the trade;
- Provide ready access to second-stage supportive housing;
- Provide access to appropriate mental health services for exited sex workers dealing with low self-esteem and other psychological problems stemming from the stigma attached to their former work life;
- Provide access to academic education, including the means to complete high school;
- Provide access to vocational training that is affordable and meaningful;
- Provide access to employment opportunities that match their skills and interests;
- Provide access to exiting programs specifically targeting adults.

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FURTHER RESEARCH

The current study found a relationship between adult respondents' background characteristics, working conditions, health status and exiting experiences. However, the cross-sectional nature of the research (we interviewed respondents only one point in time) makes it difficult to arrive at firm statements about whether the problems associated with the sex trade that were reported by a sizable portion of our respondents are unique to sex workers or are also shared by workers in other "square jobs" not subject to particular criminal sanctions.

The preliminary evidence from this study suggests that the current way that the sex trade is viewed in Canada is linked to the significant danger found in the occupation and the poor mental health of a large number of workers making a living from selling sex services. On the other hand, it may well be that the sex trade attracts a different type of worker, influencing job satisfaction, health and well-being. For example, while childhood victimization is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for entering the sex trade, the exact relationship between the two is unknown. Similarly, the direction of the causal link between sex trade work and adult health status (including work-related injuries, STDs and Hep-C, addiction to hard drugs, and a variety of mental health problems) remains unclear. Research that attempts to answer these questions would help to better inform health policy by distinguishing the health concerns unique to sex workers and the root causes of these health concerns.

