



Curtin University

# SEXUAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND WELLBEING OF SEX WORKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THE LASH 2.0 STUDY

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# STUDY AIMS, RESEARCH TEAM & FUNDING

**Aim:** To investigate the impact of the law on WA sex workers; their health and safety; and the intersections between WA sex workers, service providers and police.

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- **Dr Roanna Lobo:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Dr Jonathan Hallett:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Ms Kahlia McCausland:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Professor Basil Donovan:** Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales
- **Ms Julie Bates:** Principal of Urban Realists

Funded by: Sexual Health Blood-Borne Virus Program, Department of Health WA



# METHODS

1. Environmental scan
  - Perth, Bunbury & Kalgoorlie
  - challenges
2. Sex worker survey – 354 participants, 52 men
  - peer researchers
  - survey translation
3. In-depth interviews
  - key advisors
  - sex workers – 17 participants
4. STI/BBV prevalence study
  - retrospective data
  - prospective data
5. Venue audit
  - OH&S
6. Police charges and court outcomes
  - DotAG

## ROLE OF PEERS

- Peer member of the research team
- Nine peer researchers employed
  - One male
  - Three western females
  - Five Asian women (2 Thai, 1 Korean, 2 Chinese)
- Peers' roles:
  - Study recruitment
  - Identification of and visits to parlours/brothels
  - Visits to areas where street-based sex workers work.

# DEMOGRAPHICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Characteristic (number responding to this question)	Number	Percent
<b>Sex assigned at birth (354)</b>		
Male	68	19.2
Female	286	80.8
<b>Gender identity (351)</b>		
Male	52	14.8
Female	283	80.6
Genderqueer	11	3.1
<b>Age group (349)</b>		
18-30 years	183	52.5
31-50 years	148	42.8
<b>Country of birth (353)</b>		
Australia/New Zealand	139	39.3
China/Hong Kong/Taiwan	53	15.0
Thailand	29	8.2
Korea	15	4.3
Malaysia	14	4.0
Other	73	21.0

# DEMOGRAPHICS CONTINUES

- 46% have worked in the sex industry for 2 years or less

## Work settings

- 55% do at least some private work
- 34% work in a massage shop (at least some of the time)
- 24 respondents (7%) did at least some street-based work

## Income

- Sex work was the main source of income for 66% of respondents

## English language skills

- 52% reported having good English language skills

# KEY FINDINGS – WELL BEING

## Confidence

*“...and I don’t know when it started I started appreciating my body a lot more, which was really interesting” (ID03, female)*

## Connection

*“I really enjoy the connection I have with people, and being able to take them on adventures” (ID05, female)*

## Financial

*“...like being, for the first time ever being the breadwinner of the house” (ID06 female)*

## Freedom

*“I like being my own boss” (ID17 female)*

Well being	N (%)
Enhance	99 (40)
Hinder	51 (21)
Both enhance/hinder	49 (20)
Neither enhance/hinder	46 (19)

Table: Reported impact of sex work on well being

33% Asian workers reported that sex work hindered their well being compared to 16% of non-Asian workers (p=0.005)

## KEY FINDINGS – CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY

### Increase in private work vs brothel/parlour

- Use of internet to promote services
- Potential increase in vulnerability for new workers
- More difficult for outreach and support

### Increase in workers from Asian countries

- Language challenges
- Racism

### Decrease in demand for services due to economic downturn

- Increased stress for workers
- Potential increase in risk taking (condomless sex, choice of clients)



## KEY FINDINGS – STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

- 27% experienced stigma, discrimination or negative treatment from Police officers at least once
- 18% experienced stigma from General Practitioners at least once
- Stigma and discrimination major impact on SW's lives
  - Disclosure
  - Relationships
  - Isolation, particularly Chinese workers

## KEY FINDINGS – IMPACT OF THE LAW

### Overall negative impact

- Outreach difficult – particularly small private brothels
- Some clients' perception of illegality gave a license to treat SW badly
- Street-based sex work more underground and less opportunities for safety
- Distrust of police even when work is legal

### Less policing in WA

- May reflect increase in private sex work
- Police generally 'disinterested' in policing sex work
- BUT, many have had bad experiences with the police

# KEY FINDINGS – HEALTH AND SAFETY

## Drugs and alcohol

<b>Current drug use</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Smoking	155 (44)
Binge drinking daily/weekly	110 (34)
Marijuana	40 (11)
Methamphetamines	30 (9)

Current use of marijuana and ecstasy more common in males than females

## Threats and assaults

<b>From clients at least once in the last 12 months</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Threat	173 (35)
Assault	71 (22)
Pressure to do something they didn't want to do	153 (47)

49% reported being uncomfortable about going to the police if robbed, assaulted or threatened

## KEY FINDINGS – CONDOMLESS SEX

- High proportion SW reported requests for condomless sex
  - 42% respondents reported all or most clients requested condomless oral
  - Fewer for condomless vaginal (21%) or anal (13%) sex
- 67% reported condomless oral sex at least sometimes
  - 47% some or no clients use condoms, higher in men (63% vs 18% women)
  - No difference between men and women in condomless anal sex
- 13% reported using condoms during anal sex, 4% during vaginal sex with some or no clients
- Female brothel workers were more likely to report that all clients used condoms for vaginal (80%), anal (71%) and oral (55%) compared to those who don't work in brothels (vaginal 64%, anal 47%, oral 28%)

## KEY FINDINGS – CONDOMLESS SEX

- *“Like before they'd sort of have to shop around if they wanted to find someone [to provide natural services], but now they sort of don't.” (ID14, female)*
- *“It's got to the point now where they expect that they can pay extra for it.... They never even used to ask about that.” (ID10, female)*
- *“And now I do natural oral for shit now because now I just like give up. There's no f\*\*\*ing way to beat the system on that one.” (ID6, female)*
- *“But probably the sad thing that I found myself in this year as I've gotten older and I've had to like drop my price and I've been way more desperate for money, is that there has been a few times that I have done it and I just like went and got all tests and I'm OK, but I will never do that again. But in this last year I have done it a few times with people that I had the instinct that they were safe and I didn't have any condoms..... But yeah it is something that has happened and something I have always avoided apart from just this year.” (ID02, male)*

# CONCLUSIONS

- Sex work can be beneficial for some workers
- Current legal framework is harmful
- 'Nordic model' would potentially reduce demand with harmful effects
- Changes in industry has challenges for health and outreach services
- Stigma and discrimination and the current legal framework are major barriers to access support, police, health care

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sex work should be decriminalised in Western Australia
- Initiate programs to reduce stigma and discrimination against sex workers in health care settings
- Work with the police to reduce stigma and discrimination
- Increase outreach of peer-based services to private sex workers and those from CaLD backgrounds, particularly in rural areas
- Initiate a peer-based smoking cessation program targeting sex workers
- Develop drug and alcohol programs specifically targeting male sex workers
- Continue funding and support for peer-based services targeting sex workers