

“It’s stigma that makes my work dangerous”: Experiences and consequences of disclosure, stigma and discrimination among sex workers in Western Australia

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Background

- Sex work is decriminalised in NSW and NT, other states and territories either regulate part of the industry through licensing and/or criminally sanction some aspects of sex work.¹
- Sex workers frequently experience stigma of group identity² and discrimination due to the nature of their chosen profession.^{3,4}
- In WA, the act of prostitution itself is not illegal. However, street-based sex work is illegal, as is engaging in an act of prostitution without using a condom or profiting from the earnings of sex workers, including managing a brothel.⁵

1 Donovan, B., et al. 2012. The Sex Industry in New South Wales: A Report to the NSW Ministry of Health. Sydney: Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales.

2 Goffman, E. 1968. Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

3 Selvey, L., et al. 2018. Challenges Facing Asian Sex Workers in Western Australia: Implications for Health Promotion and Support Services. *Frontiers in Public Health* 6 (171) 1-8. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2018.00171.

4 Wolf, A. 2019. Stigma in the Sex Trades. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy* 34 (3): 290-308. doi: 10.1080/14681994.2019.1573979.

5 Scarlet Alliance. Laws - Western Australia. <http://www.scarletalliance.org.au/laws/wa/>

Methods

- Open-ended survey responses and interview data.
- 2007 Law and Sex Worker Health (LASH) study – female brothel based sex workers in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne.¹
- 2017 LASH 2.0 study – wider sex industry, throughout Western Australia.²
- Eight sex workers were employed as peer researchers.³
- Recruitment: internet, print media, text message, visits to sexual services premises and word of mouth.
- The survey instrument was adapted and translated into Korean, Thai and Chinese.
- Interviews conducted with an interpreter.

1 Donovan, B., et al. 2010. The Sex Industry in Western Australia: A Report to the Western Australian Government. Sydney: National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, University of New South Wales.

2 Selvey, L., et al. 2017. Western Australian Law and Sex Worker Health (LASH) Study. A Summary Report to the Western Australian Department of Health. Perth: School of Public Health, Curtin University.

3 Lobo, R., et al. 2020. Sex workers as Peer Researchers – a Qualitative Investigation of the Benefits and Challenges. Culture, Health & Sexuality 1-16. doi: 10.1080/13691058.2020.1787520.

Demographics

Survey participants:

- 354 sex workers, 60% (n=213) responded online.
- 80% were cis-women (n=256).
- 52% aged 30 years or younger (n=183).
- 61% (n=197) were born outside of Australia; including 15% (n=53) who were born in either China, Hong Kong or Taiwan.
- 46% (n=157) had been working in the sex industry for <2 years
- 55% reported engaging in private sex work (n=196), 35% (n=119) at massage shops, 23% (n=83) parlours or brothels and 18% (n=64) for escort agencies.
- Very few respondents reported engaging in street-based sex work (n=24, 7%).

Interview participants:

- 17 semi-structured interviews were conducted.
- 12 participants were cis-women, 2 were trans-women and 3 were cis-men.
- Participants' experience in the sex industry ranged from 6 months to >20+ years.
- 14 participants were currently engaged in sex work, 2 were no longer working in the industry, and 1 was seeking other employment.

Results

Key themes:

- *Anticipated (felt) stigma and discrimination*
- *Disclosure*
- *Experiences of (enacted) stigma and discrimination*
- *The justice system*
- *The healthcare system*
- *Internalised stigma and shame*
- *Impact of Western Australia's regulatory framework*

Anticipated (felt) stigma and discrimination

“I would never disclose to any of these people [healthcare, justice and service providers], and I don't interact with any services besides Magenta [Western Australian sex worker support project] to avoid discrimination.” (Anastasia, survey)

“Any laws that criminalise or punish sex workers mean that I am very unlikely to report violent crimes to police. Violence against me is heightened because of WA's [Western Australia's] unfavourable laws.” (Ethan, survey)

Disclosure

“She's a good doctor so I just like seeing her but it depends. I'm not embarrassed I'm just-- she doesn't need to know. There's no need for extra stigma or extra screening or extra judgement ...”

(Hannah, interview)

Experiences of (enacted) stigma and discrimination

“People generally think quite low of you if you are a sex worker and they generally think quite low of you if you are a drug user. So if you combine those two things you are just utter scum. ... And you actually get rejected from both communities because sex workers will be like ‘ew junkie’ and drug users will be like ‘ew hooker’. So you end up quite ostracised from even both of these two quite marginalised groups.” (Lydia, interview)

The justice system

*“I was advised by a police officer once not to even bother trying [to make a complaint]. It was my own fault that something had happened to me [because I was a sex worker]. ... I knew it was going to happen. Or ‘well, you're a f*****g hooker. Like, what did you think was going to happen to you?’ Or ‘how stupid could you be? How could you not have realised?’ ‘Well, it's not like you don't f**k ten times a day. So what's one extra one if you didn't want it?’ ... I'd prefer not to go too much into it, if that's okay. Very negative experiences around the police.” (Natalia, interview)*

The healthcare system

“In most situations sex workers do not disclose their occupation honestly. I will get better treatment telling a GP [general practitioner] I want a sexual health test because I sleep around and had unprotected sex than if I told them honestly that I am a sex worker with a 100% rate of using condoms for intercourse. Mostly I am subjected to patronising and offensive questions ... and offensive jokes.” (Melody, survey)

Internalised stigma and shame

“... sometimes when I'm feeling quite down I think, I get stuck in this mentality and sometimes I think ‘oh you know like I've done this, I can never undo it’. And all of the like stereotypes. I know it's just irrational but it does go through my head, but I don't regret it.”
(Isabel, interview)

Impact of Western Australia's regulatory framework

“I have worked under all the different regulatory models ... Only decriminalisation gives us the on-going support that we need to be able to have long term positive benefits for anyone who works as a sex worker ... Working in an environment where you are illegal and have no rights leaves us open against threats, intimidation, stand over tactics and harassment. It is a low level fear that is with you constantly, like a dark shadow. ... The law as it stands in WA [Western Australia] indicates to society that we are not equal citizens and gives people permission to treat us differently and with contempt.”
(Gemma, survey)

Conclusion

- Experiences of enacted, felt and internalised stigma and discrimination across all facets of daily life, resulting in feelings of distress, anxiety and isolation.
- The criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work acts as a major barrier to accessing health care and protective services.
- Tailored training for police and healthcare professionals is required.
- **Critical need for decriminalisation and anti-discrimination protections.**

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