



# Sex Workers as Peer Researchers – A Qualitative Investigation of the Benefits and Challenges

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## BACKGROUND

Best practice in sex work research advocates for a 'nothing about us without us' methodology. This poster reflects on the research design of the Law and Sex worker Health (LASH) 2.0 study,<sup>1</sup> shares insights about the motivations and challenges experienced by sex workers who participated in the research as peer researchers, and offers lessons learned for optimising the experience of peer researchers. LASH 2.0 examined the impact of the law on sex workers of all genders living in urban and regional areas of Western Australia; their health and safety; and the intersections between sex workers, service providers and police.

## METHODS

The study employed eight sex workers as peer researchers to assist in evaluating the sexual health outcomes and well-being of sex workers in Western Australia. At the conclusion of the study, seven peer researchers participated in individual semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences as peer researchers. See reference for more information.<sup>2</sup>

## RESULTS

### Reasons for becoming a peer researcher

- Viewed the role as an opportunity to assist sex worker research and to demonstrate the capability of sex workers as researchers.
- Findings of the research may result in changes that would benefit the health and safety of their community.

### Enablers to undertake the peer researcher role

- Believed their experience as sex workers, and knowledge of the sex industry enabled them to recruit survey participants for the study, as a result of existing relationships and trust within the community.
- There was no consensus as to whether the research and fieldwork training provided was sufficient or not due to the diversity of their experiences.
- Peers felt well supported by the research team to undertake their role and how to access help when needed.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Selvey, L., J. Hallett, R. Lobo, K. McCausland, J. Bates, and B. Donovan. 2017. Western Australian Law and Sex Worker Health (LASH) Study. A Summary Report to the Western Australian Department of Health. Perth, Western Australia: School of Public Health, Curtin University.
- 2 Lobo, R., K. McCausland, J. Bates, J. Hallett, B. Donovan, and L. A. Selvey. 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.

### Aspects of the peer research role most enjoyed

- Connecting and working with the sex worker community.
- Camaraderie and positive environment established by the project team.

### Aspects of the role peer researchers disliked

- Division among team members due to the separation of roles and skills.

### Aspects of the role found most challenging

- Accessing marginalised groups within the sex industry.
- Communicating with non-English speaking sex workers.
- Hearing views that were inconsistent with their own perspectives, or those of sex worker organisations.
- Role duality – sex worker and researcher.
- Creating rosters which ensured all peer researchers had the same opportunities to collect surveys.
- Access to transport and the internet.
- Limited budget and opportunities for additional activities undertaken by peers (e.g. analysis, report writing).

### Outcomes of a consequence of being a peer researcher

- Experience gained was helpful in securing employment.
- Sense of accomplishment and feelings of pride.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, insider research enhances the research process, if limitations related to access, preunderstanding, role duality and political issues are managed carefully. We strongly support other advocates for sex worker-driven research and recommend that sex work research should involve sex workers in meaningful roles beyond facilitating access to their communities. Sex worker-driven research requires funding to employ sex workers continuously throughout the research process, including opportunities for co-authorship of subsequent publications. Opportunities for leadership roles and collaboration in research translation activities can increase research impact.

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