



Here and We've Always Been Here:

Sex Workers as Foundational to Harm Reduction

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How do sex workers fit into harm reduction?

Qué es la posición de los trabajadores de sexo en la reducción de daños?

How do we ensure a future for sex workers within the harm reduction movement work both locally and globally?

Cómo aseguramos un futuro para los trabajadores de sexo en el movimiento de reducción de daño en la escala local y global?

Methods

Mixed method research conducted in 2021 about sex worker access to healthcare

- ★ Surveyed 100 in-person sex workers, 50 question quantitative survey
- ★ Completed 35 semi-structured interviews on topics surrounding health in which participants were selected via stratified random sampling.
 - Survey participants were stratified along the lines of race, housing status, drug use, gender, and type of sex work to allow for random stratified sampling in which over 50% of participants in interview were BIPOC sex workers and there was additional diversity regarding type of sex worker, housing, and gender.

Autoethnography

- ★ Since data collection and analysis we have returned to this work again and again both because of the depth of knowledge shared and our own continuing work as sex workers and healthcare / harm reduction workers.
- ★ Through this process autoethnography has become an additional analytical tool; our ongoing experiences initiate dialogue with the data set that allows for continued growth and reflexivity in this work

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1. Shared Experiences & Siloing Sex Workers

There's a look that they give you. It's like, a disgust look, I don't know. I can't describe that obviously, but normally they come in the room and they look over your papers and look up at you and then they look at your papers and then they look back up at you. I know right then and there that they're going to start being rude and ask me why I do the things that I do or why I don't take care of myself. And I'm just like, Ugh, here we go. - Mariah

Sex workers exist at the nexus of variant marginalized experiences and identities. While sex workers become siloed within the “key population” framework within public health interventions, the reality is that sex workers exist at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression that inevitably shape experiences within the sex trade

Sex workers are often isolated from social and legal support structures but are very much not alone in experiences of criminalization and stigma

2. Assigning Value to Survival

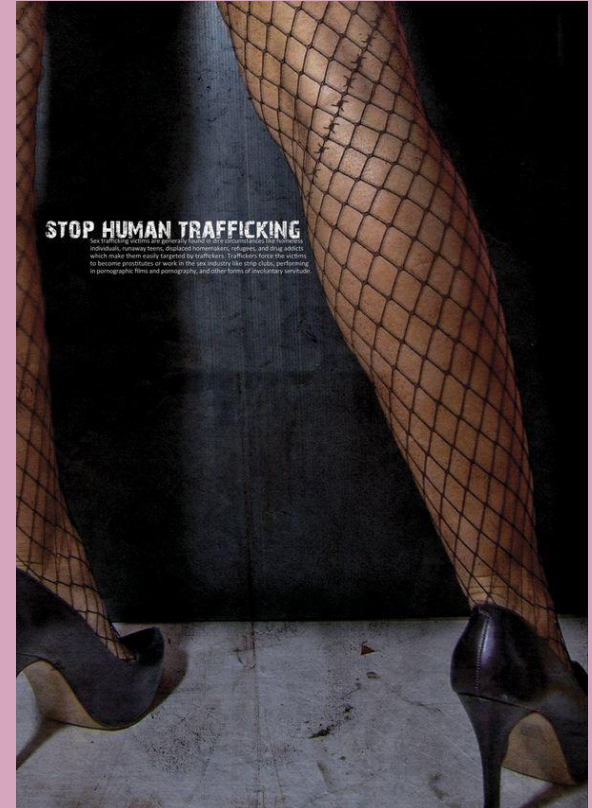
You know, when doctors ask dumb questions that's what gets me. You're making me question myself. You're making me question the way I think and what I'm going through in my life. Let me talk to you. Let me tell you, why are you telling me all about it? ...I don't want to feel like a victim. Don't make me feel like a victim. Cause I'm not. -

Marcos

Moralism has shaped all of our introductions to sex work

Sex work as inherently bad comes through in myriad ways in/out of harm reduction: a sin, a social failing, vector of disease, metric of non-success / regression / pathology within a lot of substance use & broader medical research

Assigning an inherent negative value to sex work also comes through via the disembodied female anti trafficking ads to create a prescriptive and limited perspective of engagement in sex work and justify policing and criminalization



2. Assigning Value to Survival

A lot of people can say that sex work is empowering, but to some, it isn't, it's just a job. And like, I don't know...I feel guilty and shameful that I just can't be open about this part of my life. And then it definitely helped like being with other girls who were in the same situation helps me process that and be like, oh, okay, I'm not the only one. And you're here and you're doing the same thing. It just, I don't know, it feels less isolating. - Lisette

In fighting stigma and promoting sex workers' right to safety sex work is sometimes also framed as inherently good: empowering, virtuous, necessary

Approaching sex work as neutral allows for support in movement in/out of/through the sex industry in a way that centers sex workers and our own experiences and perspectives without imposing morality. This neutrality allows for solidarity within a broader harm reduction movement

3. Meaningful Inclusion

I feel like no matter what, I'm just labeled as this one thing and nobody is hearing anything else from me but that. - Sophia

While engaging in sex work undeniably informs many aspects of life, seeing sex workers as nothing but that prevents thoughtful ongoing inclusion and furthers the isolation created by criminalization and stigma.

Supporting sex workers means allowing sex workers to maintain dimensionality and self determination in naming the ways our work does and does not impact variant aspects of life.

3. Meaningful Inclusion

There's a lot of things out here that happen to us. You know, guys pick us up, try to run us over, hurt us... You know, then there's girls who might have abscesses and stuff like that. Or things that they don't know that they have access to. And even though I might not like some of them, I still don't want to see them get hurt or not have access to something that they can. - Marissa

Meaningful inclusion requires sex workers to be understood as complex people that exist in all harm reduction spaces. While it is an undeniable piece of who we are and how we exist and as a way we build community, seeing sex workers as nothing but sex workers prevents thoughtful, ongoing inclusion

We cannot rely on tokenism and identity reductionism to translate into safety and support. A better future for sex workers is not limited to one where sex workers are separate and isolated from larger harm reduction efforts. It is a future where the isolation we face as sex workers is named and broken down and sex workers are safer and better able to take care of ourselves and loved ones.

A better future is not one where sex work is always in the tag line, its one where sex workers are safer and better able to take care of themselves and their loved ones.

Conclusion: Creating Futurity for Sex Workers

There will be some days where I feel really low and then I go into work and I talk to a lot of the girls there, and I realize that I'm not alone in this...it brings a sense of community where I could talk to them about the funny stuff, it helps knowing other sex workers to make light of the terrible things that happen. -Lisette

- ★ How do sex workers fit into harm reduction?
- ★ How do we ensure a future for sex workers within the harm reduction movement work both locally and globally? How do we shape where we put our energy as a broader harm reduction movement?



Thank you!

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