

Sex, services, resources, and relationships: a mixed method analysis of barriers experienced by sex trade workers in Nanaimo, BC

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Introduction

This study is part of an ongoing project studying barriers associated with access to resources and services for women who are or were involved in the sex trade in the Nanaimo area. Preliminary results are presented here with the goal of examining one of the themes that emerged from the results.

We examine the complex associations women who are or were involved in the sex trade have with each other and with law enforcement. We will show how these can positively and negatively affect their ability to access community resources. This study fills a research gap on the sex trade in smaller-population urban centers, such as Nanaimo, with the analyzed data resulting from a mixed-method approach.



Methodology

Data were gathered between May and August of 2013 using a 2 stage mixed methods approach. Women who were participants of the Stepping Out Program (a program put on by the Nanaimo Women's Resources Society and Haven Society) were asked to participate in the study.

Stage 1 included a questionnaire focusing on access to services by women who are or were involved in the sex trade. Of the 23 women who were approached, 22 completed the questionnaire.

Stage 2 consisted of interviews designed to identify and examine the barriers women in the sex trade face when attempting to access programs and resources in the Nanaimo area. Of the 22 women who completed the questionnaire, 14 agreed to participate in the interviews.

Results presented here focus on one of the themes from the analysis of the interviews: issues related to relationships with other women, with the community and with the RCMP.

Results



Peers

"We still hear of bad things happening out there [on the streets] and it circulates through the family, the street family. Everybody lets everybody know what's going on...if there's something wrong or [to] be careful, [or to] stay away from this person" – Respondent 5.

Respondent 5 describes how informal street community lines of communication provide a level of security around safety issues. This dissemination of information, including actual incidents and warnings about volatile or dangerous individuals, is facilitated by relationships built on shared experience. Information passed through this 'underground' community provides an opportunity to reduce scenarios where street entrenched women may be placed at risk.

The Stepping Out Program, then, has facilitated an environment in which women active or previously engaged in the sex trade can build relationships with one another. The connections made through Stepping Out extend into the community, as information regarding resources geared towards the needs of women is passed more fluidly with the expansion of social networks. Respondent 2 describes the importance of social ties to the increased access and awareness of community resources: **"it's good to get to know other people...to have a range of people you know because then you can get so much more help..."**

Similarly, Respondent 13 describes the enhanced social relationships as giving her a boost in confidence. **"A lot of people recognize my face and will say hi to me even out and about...it makes me feel a little more confident I guess"**



Community

An issue faced by those with current or past connections to the sex trade is the feeling of ostracization imposed on them by the greater community. Fear of judgment and poor treatment was reported by the women to hamper their ability to access community resources and services. Conversely, the Stepping Out Program meets women 'where they are', using a harm reduction model of support.

Respondent 4 describes her experience with the Stepping Out Program: **"I like that they treat you more like a human being than an object like most places, you know how like some people just push you aside and say well just go here or here or here... they'll accept you ...it doesn't matter what state or whatever problems you're having"**.

How does Stepping Out help women connect with the community?

Stepping Out provides women with a greater opportunity for community involvement. Through group outings, picnics, and activities, a sense of social inclusion, "normalcy", and stability are introduced into an often tumultuous lifestyle. **"It gave me, you know, that time of normal... that's about the best way I can describe it, like Oh ok this is normal life...having hope seeing...a way to integrate into society"**. Here Respondent 9 describes how positive community activities provided an opportunity to imagine her life in a new way. Participation in events that do not need to be concealed and are performed in community space engenders feelings of togetherness and lessens the isolation of stigmatized women. **"...It's not just like one community it's like everybody...there were a lot of faces that I recognized that, you know, I wouldn't expect to be there...even people from my neighbourhood...I was like Wow!"** – Respondent 13



RCMP

Relationships with those involved in the sex trade and law enforcement are understandably complex, with ramifications extending beyond mere interaction. These relationships can enhance or decrease the likelihood that sex trade-affiliated women will access community services and resources: **"I made friends with a lady cop, a community cop...so I was pointed out to other people around...they considered me a rat because I was trying to get myself better."** As Respondent 5 suggests, her friendship with a community police officer drew attention to her from within her own cohort, the 'street community', and created friction with her peers. Respondent 5 indicates that despite being labelled a snitch, her police association provided access to resources she might not otherwise have and an opportunity to separate herself from negative relationships. She states, **"...and so I told them that I couldn't see them no more, and the cops would get together sometimes and when I didn't have food they would go spend hundreds of dollars getting me food, blankets, pillows...and try to make me better"**.

On the other hand, this ostracization from the 'underground' community and lack of means for transitioning into mainstream society make some women less likely to make positive affiliations with police officers. **"When the RCMP are involved they're scared so they're not going to talk"** - Respondent 5.

Not only does this decrease the flow of information about community resources and support, it also prevents them from benefiting directly from police intervention and protection. This pushes women deeper into the street lifestyle and increases their risk of harm.

Conclusion

Relationships with peers, the community, and the RCMP carry the possibility of positively impacting street-entrenched women's ability to access resources and support. With the breaking down of barriers between mainstream society and the street community comes the expansion of social networks and with it the potential for healthier, happier lives. The Stepping Out Program has been instrumental in the development of stronger bonds between women previously or currently involved in the sex trade, the community, and the RCMP. This ultimately increases their access to services and programs. Our results show how the provision of a healthy and accepting environment is beneficial to feelings of belonging and self-worth for women involved in the sex trade. It can provide some of the means required to overcome stigmatization and, perhaps, a way to integrate into larger society.

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