

# SCIENCE FACT OR SCIENCE FICTION: ARE ALL SEX WORKERS VICTIMIZED?

Throughout much of the world, sex work is often regarded as a dangerous and exploitive profession. While sex workers are more likely to experience violence and poor health than the general population, is it accurate to depict all sex workers as victims? Are violence and poor health inherent to the nature of such work, or are they the products of punitive laws and inadequate social conditions? What do we really know about the experiences of sex workers in Canada?

## VIOLENCE AND VICTIMIZATION IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

Physical and sexual violence against sex workers is widely reported in the research literature.<sup>1,2</sup> A recent review examining the prevalence of violence against female and transgender sex workers reported rates of nearly 100% in one study to as few as 3% in another study. Why such discrepancy in findings?<sup>3</sup>



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Much of the literature on the prevalence of victimization excludes sex workers in off-street locations (by far the largest group of sex workers) and does not compare sex workers to other occupational groups. This failure to reflect the complexity of the sex industry and the diversity of sex workers' experiences may contribute to the discrepancies reported and lead to inaccurate generalizations. For example, researchers at the University of Victoria analyzed a decade of sex-work-themed articles appearing in the city's most widely read daily newspaper. They found that the general depiction of sex workers as trapped and victimized did not reflect

how a large sample of Victoria sex workers actually viewed themselves.<sup>4</sup> These media portrayals present an imbalanced account of local sex workers' experiences and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

## UNDERSTANDING SEX WORK

Not all sex workers in Canada experience violence. New research from the *Understanding Sex Work* project, led by Professor Cecilia Benoit at the University of Victoria, is challenging stereotypes that represent sex workers and their clients in a simplistic fashion. In the largest and most comprehensive study of the sex industry undertaken in Canada, 24% of sex workers reported that they have been attacked and 19% reported that someone had forced or attempted to force them into any unwanted sexual activity. While a minority of sex workers participating in the study reported being victims of violence in the past year, the likelihood of overall workplace victimization is higher in a number of other occupations.<sup>5</sup> In fact, sex workers reported a much lower rate of violence than emergency room nurses.<sup>6</sup>

The *Understanding Sex Work* project uncovered how sex workers take precautions to protect themselves and consider it very important to screen prospective clients and have access to help nearby if needed. Unfortunately, punitive laws and attitudes make it difficult for them to do so, therefore increasing the risk of unsafe encounters.<sup>2,3,7,8</sup> Buyers reported how the fear of being shamed or arrested deterred them from reporting the victimization of a sex worker to police. Similarly, sex workers reported believing that police are unlikely to treat sex workers fairly. All of this suggests that when victimization does occur, it's less likely to be reported to police.

Sex workers were also found to have more control in their work and job satisfaction than is generally assumed. Only 12% of workers believed their clients have more power during a transaction. Nearly half of the clients also

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– Professor Cecilia Benoit

reported that sex workers were in a position of power, and most managers in the industry reported cases where sex workers ended transactions after disagreeing with a client.<sup>6</sup> Most sex workers reported being satisfied with their work and felt appropriately compensated. They also reported lower levels of work-related stress than workers in some other industries. Money, independence and flexibility were cited as the main motivations for working in the industry.

Although sex workers were found to experience poorer health than the average Canadian, this seemed to be related to factors other than their occupation, including having a disadvantaged childhood and a reluctance to seek health and social services. Reinforcing what other studies have found, many sex workers who were interviewed had avoided seeking necessary healthcare due to concerns about being discriminated against or arrested. Healthcare and social service workers as well as police reported that stigma made it difficult to reach some sex workers who needed help.<sup>6</sup>

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## CONCLUSION

Many common beliefs about sex workers' health and well-being reflect stereotypes based on the experiences of a small group of sex workers who are in crisis. This group, while important, does not accurately represent the experiences of most sex workers. Some Canadians in the sex industry feel exploited and experience violence, but many appreciate the autonomy and income their work provides and are generally satisfied with their job. “Sex workers in Canada are not weird, unusual people,” says Benoit. “Like other Canadians, they do the best they can with the opportunities they have.”<sup>9</sup> The violence and poor health currently experienced by some sex workers are not inherent to the work — they are the products of punitive laws and inadequate social conditions.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the conditions that lead to unsafe work environments will improve the lives and experiences of sex workers.

## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Professor Cecilia Benoit is the Principal Investigator for the 2011-2016 Team Grant *Understanding Sex Work*, funded by the CIHR Institute of Gender and Health. In the fall of 2014, the team presented findings from the study in a [working paper](#) presented at the Ottawa conference *Building on the Evidence: An International Symposium on the Sex Industry in Canada*. The report is based on the preliminary findings from hundreds of interviews conducted across Canada.