

## The Relative Quality of Sex Work

Work, Employment and Society  
1–17

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0950017020936872

journals.sagepub.com/home/wes



**Cecilia Benoit**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Michaela Smith**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Mikael Jansson**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Priscilla Healey**

University of Victoria, Canada

**Douglas Magnuson**

University of Victoria, Canada

### Abstract

This article presents descriptive findings on sex workers' structural disadvantage and their evaluation of the quality of their work, relative to their other jobs. In-person interviews were conducted in 2013 with sex workers ( $n = 218$ ) from Canada. Participants reported they experience precarity (i.e. uncertainty and instability) in employment and other domains of their lives. Compared to the work quality of their other jobs, the majority said sex work was more satisfying and granted greater control and money. In a context of low income and instability in employment, participants make strategic choices to engage in sex work, even when contending with its low social status. The article concludes that sex work should be recognized as valuable work for Canadian sex workers, given the circumstances of their lives under contemporary capitalism. The findings indicate a need for macro-level changes to challenge precarity in the economy and other societal institutions.

### Keywords

Canada, precarity, sex work, structural disadvantage, work quality

---

### Corresponding author:

Cecilia Benoit, Canadian Institute of Substance Use Research, University of Victoria,  
2300 McKenzie Avenue, Victoria, BC V8N 5M8, Canada.

Email: cbenoit@uvic.ca

## **Introduction**

Researchers are increasingly calling for studies that move beyond viewing prostitution as an inherently unequal practice (Overall, 1992) and instead to considering it as an economic earning activity (Benoit et al., 2019b; Brents and Sanders, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2012). O'Connell Davidson (2014: 522) argues that sex workers need recognition of their 'fully commodifiable labor/services like other workers'. Pitcher (2015: 113) states that understanding sex work as commodified labour 'does not preclude considerations of exploitation or interrelated issues such as labour market segregation and relative power and disadvantage'.

Recent research on sex workers' working conditions is mixed. Some studies have found sex work to be satisfying for workers due to its flexibility, significant earnings and wide control over client relations, especially for those whose work is organized through digital technologies that aid in increasing workers' decision-making power (Abel, 2011; Sanders et al., 2016). Other studies have found unpredictable income and substandard working conditions (Orchiston, 2016; Phrasisombath et al., 2012), not unlike for other workers in jobs marked by precarity (Kalleberg, 2009). Some workers experience 'precarity' as a general social process, encountering poor housing, food uncertainty, reduced social welfare and weak social ties (Campbell and Price, 2016; Hallgrimsdottir and Benoit, 2007).

Yet even under current socioeconomic conditions marked by uncertainty and instability, workers are not without agency (Manky, 2018). Rather, they carefully weigh the pros and cons of their occupational options as they navigate the labour market for 'decent work' (Green, 2006: xv). As Alberti et al. (2018: 447) note, precarity involves 'objective conditions, as well as subjective and heterogeneous experiences and perceptions of insecure employment'. At the subjective level, Adriaenssens et al. (2016: 122) call for close attention to work quality or 'the extent work is able to give access to a fulfilling life, in the absence of adverse effects of the activity'. Work quality is measured along a number of dimensions, including earnings, training, discretion, autonomy, scheduling, worktime, promotion chances and status (Warren and Lyonette, 2018).

This article presents findings on the objective conditions of precarity in sex workers' lives and their subjective experiences of work quality in sex work, compared to other available jobs.

## **Precarious work and precarious workers**

Market globalization, technological innovation and neoliberal processes, such as a decline in unions and retraction of welfare state policies, have created a 'new economy' that has resulted in the growth of poorly paid insecure or precarious jobs (Sallaz, 2017). Many of these precarious jobs are worsened because they involve aspects of 'dirtiness':

It may be simply physically disgusting. It may be a symbol of degradation, something that wounds one's dignity. Finally, it may be dirty work in that it in some way goes counter to the more heroic of our moral conceptions. (Hughes, 1951: 319)

Many of these jobs are located at the bottom of the 'care economy' (Dwyer, 2013), where workers provide in-person services (e.g. hair styling/barbering, clothing and food

service, janitor work, garbage collection) and/or bodily care of others (e.g. child and elder care, care of people with disabilities). Such work requires few formal educational requirements for entry, is insecure, poorly compensated, holds low social value and may be stigmatized (Duffy, 2007; McCarthy et al., 2014).

Workers in precarious employment often experience uncertainty and instability in other parts of their lives. Campbell and Price (2016: 315) explain: 'precariousness in employment is seen as having a strong and pervasive impact, dispersing insecurity through the lives of the workers'. Individuals in precarious work across their careers have poorer psychological and physical health than workers in secure and stable employment (Benach and Muntaner, 2007; Warren and Lyonette, 2018) and are vulnerable to lifetime poverty and social exclusion (Campbell and Price, 2016; Sallaz, 2017).

## **Sex workers and precarity**

The same forces that have resulted in an increase in other precarious jobs have resulted in the growing recognition of sexual commerce (Abel, 2017; Brents, 2016). Sex work is thus 'not vastly different from other feminized workplaces where sexuality is capitalized on' (Sanders, 2005: 337). The over-representation of women in sex work is because it is one of the few occupations where women have an economic advantage over men due to the high market value placed on the female body (Mears and Connell, 2016). Bruckert (2002: 31) states:

stripping may not always be a 'nice' job, but neither are the alternatives. For some working-class women, stripping may be a viable strategy to realize the economic and social benefits afforded by participants in the paid labour force while also offering sufficient flexibility to accommodate their many other commitments.

Rosen and Venkatesh (2008: 417) argue that, in the context of persistent poverty and instability, sex work 'offers just enough money, stability, autonomy, and professional satisfaction' and 'provides a meaningful option in the quest for a job that provides autonomy and personal fulfilment'. Kotiswaran (2011) reported that many sex workers in India move in and out of sex work and other work (domestic workers and manual scavengers, etc.) in the 'unorganized sector' where the vast majority of the working population is located. From this perspective, sex work becomes a 'livelihood strategy' and, as with other personal service workers in precarious employment, 'sex workers want the same thing – to be able to earn a living without interference, discrimination, harassment or judgement' (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), 2017: 21).

Yet precarity is a key factor in the life of sex workers due to their low social status and the oppressive laws that govern sex work in most countries. Sex work is 'tainted' in multiple ways: it is associated with physical taint from the possibility of coming into contact with bodily fluids, social taint from being potentially associated with other stigmatized groups and moral taint from this work being perceived as 'somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 415). Such work can 'severely [threaten] the sense that one is in fact engaged in a valued and worthwhile activity' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014: 91). Vanwesenbeeck (2005) noted that such stigma-related factors were

significantly related to worker burnout, while characteristics of the work, including the number of hours worked and financial compensation, had little impact on worker burnout. Stigma associated with the act of selling sexual services is so ingrained in public institutions and in public interactions that it often goes unrecognized by stigmatizers (Benoit et al., 2019a). Criminalization of sex work intensifies prostitution stigma because it fabricates ‘commercial sex as immoral, illicit, and unlawful’ (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017: 2). Repression of prostitution has also been observed to negatively affect sex workers’ ability to enforce health and safety practices at work, including condom use by clients (Wurth et al., 2013).

This article presents descriptive findings on the objective conditions of precarity in sex workers’ lives, followed by their subjective assessment of work quality in sex work, compared to the other available jobs. The data were gathered through in-person interviews in 2013 with a diverse sample of sex workers from six urban areas of Canada at a time when the country’s prostitution laws had been successfully challenged and the new criminal code sanctions had not been enacted. Our findings show that participants are actors with agency within their structurally marginalized social context, as demonstrated by their tendency to prefer sex work over other precarious jobs.

## **Data and methods**

### *The study*

Individuals involved in selling sex services belong to what academics variously call sensitive, hard-to-reach or hidden populations (Watters and Biernacki, 1989); no sampling frames exist for these groups and the size of the population is unknown, often because membership in such a group involves being the object of stigmatization and sometimes workers fear prosecution and thus do whatever they can to avoid revealing their identities. Given these difficulties, researchers have begun teaming up with community organizations that have knowledge of, and are trusted by, sex workers. Close collaboration with these groups was instrumental in designing a research protocol with the greatest potential to collect reliable and valid data, including strategies to involve research participants with heterogeneous characteristics and experiences (Benoit et al., 2005, 2017b; Jansson et al., 2010). More than 30 community organizations in five provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland) were involved in the study design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the findings. This included people with sex work experience, representatives from sex worker-led organizations, outreach agencies and public health or human rights groups, in addition to academics.

Research participants in this study were adults, aged 19 or older, and were legally able to work in Canada to allow for comparison and contrast with other legal workers. The final inclusion criteria required participants to have received money in exchange for in-person sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in the 12 months preceding the interview. The research team chose these criteria to focus on the experience of sex workers who provided sexual services to clients in person on at least a part-time basis.

As noted above concerning other hidden populations, it is difficult to randomize the selection of potential participants from the population of sex workers. Weitzer (2010)

recommends sampling as many geographical regions as feasible and recruiting participants from as many different types of sex work as possible. Participants were recruited from six census metropolitan areas (CMAs) of Canada in 2012–13: Victoria, Montréal, St John's, Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge, Calgary and Wood Buffalo (Fort McMurray). Recruitment strategies included contacting workers online, newspaper and online advertisements, posters at social and health services, presentations at the beginning of collaborator programmes and participant peer recruitment. The final sample consisted of a diverse cross-section of sex workers regarding age, sex, Indigenous status, ethnicity and those who mentioned a diversity of work locations where they advertised and delivered services.

The development of the research instrument was a collaborative effort involving several revisions with community partners and input from the research team, and consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The closed-ended component included a range of questions that were taken from Canada's victimization and community health surveys, aiding comparison between the general population and study participants on demographic information and some other measures (e.g. mental and physical health, unmet health needs, perceived stigma, trust in the police, etc.). Perceived stigma was assessed using an adapted version of a validated scale developed for research on mental illness, the 12-item Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination scale (Link et al., 2001). The Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination scale contained items such as 'Most people would think less of a person who is working in the sex industry' and 'Most people in my community would treat a sex worker just as they would treat anyone'. The items were scored on a 6-point scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (Cronbach's alpha: 0.830,  $n = 217$ ). The National Occupational Classification (NOC), a system for describing the occupations of Canadians (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, 2011), was consulted to create a table list of common occupations which asked about the different types of work participants have had over their lifetime, starting with age 14 and ending with age 50, or the participant's current age if younger than age 50. Open-ended questions included reasons for beginning sex work, views on prostitution laws, experiences of stigma and discrimination at work and in their personal life, as well as current working conditions in sex work and other jobs held.

The in-person interviews ( $n = 218$ ) were carried out throughout 2013. The majority of interviews were conducted by two of the authors in a variety of locations, including participants' homes, coffee shops and other public spaces. Interviews in English and French were audio-recorded, transcribed and the latter translated to English. Interviews lasted an average of 90 minutes. All participants received an honorarium of CAN\$60. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria, Canada.

Previous publications have addressed some of these topics, including unmet health care needs (Benoit et al., 2016a; Orchard et al., 2020), confidence in the police (Benoit et al., 2016b), views on Canada's prostitution laws (Benoit et al., 2017a), self-esteem (Benoit et al., 2018), the impact of prostitution stigma at work and in personal lives (Benoit et al., 2019a, 2019c) and responses to prostitution stigma (Benoit et al., 2020). In another article based on a qualitative analysis of motivations for entering sex work, the authors found that participants identified three overlapping structural and agentic reasons for entry: critical life events, desire or need for money and personal appeal of the

work. Participants demonstrated constrained agency in their decision to initially enter sex work (Benoit et al., 2017b). This article shows this continues to be the case as they compared their sex work to the other jobs available to them.

### *Data analysis*

The descriptive data were analysed using the statistical software IBM SPSS Version 24. Qualitative analysis was conducted with transcribed answers to these sequential questions: (1) How does sex work compare to other jobs you have done/are doing? (2) What keeps you in sex work? (3) What are the things about sex work that you find good compared to other jobs you have had? (4) What are the bad things compared to other jobs you have had? Out of the 218 interviews, 207 were analysed. Eleven responses were missing due to participant refusal to answer a question, interviewer error or recording equipment errors.

Participants' transcribed answers were coded using NVivo 10 software (QSR International Pty Ltd), following Braun and Clarke's (2006) multi-step approach to thematic analysis where both 'bottom up' and 'top down' approaches to forming themes were utilized. One author read all the transcripts multiple times to gain familiarity with the data and 10 transcripts were randomly selected for the first three authors to independently code in an effort to reach consensus about the thematic interpretation of the data, which were then organized into master themes (i.e. job satisfaction, money, work control and job status) by one author. Theoretical insights from the sociology of work quality, precarity and dirty work were employed during our analysis of the participants' detailed responses to questions about how sex work compares to their other jobs. These verification techniques were employed to help increase rigour in the qualitative analysis and interpretation. Pseudonyms are used in the quotes below.

## **Results**

### *Descriptive findings*

Participants reported social inequities relating to social determinants, such as gender, Indigenous status, age and a high degree of precarity as a general condition of life. As shown in Table 1, participants were more likely to identify as women, Indigenous and were younger than other Canadian workers. They were also less likely to have finished high school, to own their own home and to be married or living common-law. In comparison to other Canadians, participants were not less structurally disadvantaged for their visible minority status and their annual personal income. Earlier studies by the authors found higher median incomes for sex workers compared to hairdressers and hospitality staff (Benoit et al., 2015b; McCarthy et al., 2014).

Regarding other comparative measures, participants were less likely than other Canadians to report a strong sense of belonging in their local community and their self-reported overall health and mental health followed a similar pattern: participants were significantly less likely to report good or excellent general health (53.8% vs 72.0%), as well as mental health (39.4% vs 77.0%). Finally, participants' unmet health needs were significantly higher than other Canadians (40.4% vs 14.9%) (Benoit et al., 2016a).

**Table 1.** Overview of sex workers' characteristics.

Characteristics	Adults in the sex industry ( <i>n</i> = 218)	Canadian population data <sup>a</sup> ( <i>n</i> = 29,312,160)
	%	%
Gender		
Women	76%	51%
Men	17%	49%
Trans	7%	–
Age (mean)	34 years	41 years
Ethnicity		
Visible minority	12%	22%
Indigenous	19%	5%
Other	69%	73%
Education		
High school	52%	82%
Married/common-law	30%	58%
Own home	11%	67%
Annual personal income (median)	\$39,500	\$34,204

Note: <sup>a</sup>Statistics Canada (2016).

Other characteristics where there is a lack of comparative data with other Canadians tell a similar story of structural disadvantage. The majority of participants identified as a non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Two-thirds said they were a recipient of income assistance and one-third said they currently had a long-term disability.

Most participants reported trying out different work locations/sex markets concurrently and over time. Binary categories such as outdoor/indoor or on street/off street were not used because they fail to illustrate the wide range of locations (home, hotels, motels, studios, bars, vehicles and parks) where participants negotiated and delivered sex work services. During the 12 months preceding the interview, one-third of participants had delivered sexual services in an outdoor location ('park/outdoors' or 'vehicle'), while almost everyone (99%) delivered services in an indoor location such as their own residence, a hotel room or an escort agency.

Thirty-five percent of participants said they were currently employed outside of sex work. Out of the 13 categories for occupational history asked in the study, most were insecure part-time or part-year jobs with no formal educational requirements. These include serving (45%), preparing food (41%), cashier (33%), retail salesperson (28%), light-duty cleaner (23%), reception (18%) and home childcare (16%). While legal, most of these jobs involve one or more dimensions of 'dirty work' and have weak status shields to protect them from being 'tainted' or stigmatized (e.g. washing dirty dishes, handling garbage, changing soiled diapers) (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014).

For sex work, participants' mean score on the Perceived Devaluation-Discrimination scale was 4.8 (SD = 0.67) on a six-point scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of perceived stigma. This is a comparatively high level of perceived stigma

**Table 2.** Themes reported by participants.

	<i>n</i> = 218 <sup>a</sup>	%
Job satisfaction	164	79%
Money	139	67%
Work control	102	49%
Social status	71	34%

Note: <sup>a</sup>Total of each theme does not equal total number as participants could be coded under more than one theme.

compared to previous studies of other marginalized populations, including people with mental health conditions (4.2) (Link, 1987). Perceived occupational stigma scores did not differ in any notable way across gender or work locations.

### *Thematic analysis*

Participants' accounts included four themes related to work quality when comparing sex work with the other jobs they had done or were currently doing: job satisfaction, money, work control and job status. The frequency of each theme is detailed in Table 2; four participants' accounts could not be distinguished as belonging to any of the four work quality themes. Most participants accounted for more than one theme: 37% were coded under two themes, 32% under three themes and 9% addressed all four themes.

*Job satisfaction.* Job satisfaction was the most common component of work quality mentioned by participants. The majority said that they provide a valuable service to clients, which, in turn, bolstered their own feelings of self-worth and personal reward in their work. As Carleigh explained: 'I feel that I'm helping somebody'. Maci described her sex work as 'alternative sexual therapy' and stated: 'I'm very proud of my work'. Vaughn said that 'if you have a good person and you make them feel better, it's a good feeling inside'. Adeline spoke about satisfaction this way:

I like one-on-one personal reactions. [ . . . ] I like the psychological aspects of sex work, I like the therapy aspects. I have several clients I know I've saved their life and I know I've changed their lives. And so, that's really valuable from a psychology/therapy point of view.

For Krystal, sex work is 'the best work experience I've had. Because it's my own business [ . . . ] It taught me to be independent and take care of my needs.'

Some participants described satisfaction with sex work by stating it was less stressful and strenuous and the quality of the interpersonal relations with clients was much higher than in their other personal service jobs. Josie put it this way: 'Well, it's not like gruelling labour; you don't have to be on your feet for eight hours a day. You're in and out in an hour.' Other participants found that their physical and mental health improved when they started in sex work. Jady said it is 'so much easier on your body, and your stress level. [ . . . ] I'd say it's just a lot less stressful and much more rewarding.' For Joy, sex work brought more respect from clients:



I worked in a clothing store. It's just [that] people are disrespectful to sales people. They think they're above them or something. That's how I felt. You're almost treated like a slave. [W]here, you know here [escort agency], I think the guys actually respect you. I feel they do.

Gillian concurred: 'I am respected on a level that I never imagined possible, just little old me. I'm no one and you're picking me out of thousands, and you're writing a great review of me.'

Sex work was not personally satisfying for everyone. A minority of participants expressed there were things about sex work that were dissatisfying. Naomi explained: '[With] other work, I feel good when I go home at the end of the day. I [. . .] feel rewarded right. Whereas when I do sex acts, I just can't wait for it to be over, can't wait to get away.' Janie found sex work 'emotionally taxing', while Kianna found it dissatisfying to serve people she did not want to: 'Sometimes you have to fuck people you don't want to fuck'. Similarly, Celeste found it difficult to engage in sexual acts with clients with whom she felt no intimacy: 'I just have to get over the fact that, you know, they might be attracted to me but I'm not to them in most cases. And by most, I mean 99%.' Leilani was also displeased with the 'emotional intimacy' requested by some clients: 'I don't even mind the actual sex act . . . But when they're like looking into my eyes and like stroking my face and passionately kissing me, it's really hard to forge that kind of level of like emotional intimacy with strangers.'

**Money.** Two-thirds of participants said that the money earned was a critical work quality benefit of engaging in sex work compared to the other jobs within their reach. Most of them described their earnings from sex work as comparatively ample, fast and easy. Lillian put it this way: 'The benefits right, are, well, you make a lot of money and very easily . . . [a]nd quickly'. Callie likewise related: 'I just think it's easier to make 300 bucks in an hour than it is to work a week for, you know, two weeks for 300 bucks'. For Addison, sex work provided her money for less labour:

I can post on . . . any Friday night throughout the month, make my rent money, grocery money, any money I need for bills to pay off. All within like two days. And then I don't have to do it again for the rest of the month, right?

Kimberly said that: 'I can leave and say, at five thirty, come back at seven o'clock with 500 bucks. You're not going to be able to do that unless you're a doctor.'

Comparatively attractive earnings were especially valuable to those with limited formal education and training. '[Sex work] is a job that pays. With the education I have, and the work experience, I could not get a job that pays as much anywhere else, that's for sure' (Isaac). Because of this, some participants describe sex work as less economically exploitative than other work. Elsie stated that she felt better compensated in sex work than as a low-wage labourer: 'I'm in a better mood because I'm not constantly feeling like I'm being taken advantage of and being paid below my worth'.

While larger comparative earnings placed sex work at a considerable advantage over other jobs, some participants explained that the cash they earned was neither dependable nor secure. Isaac put it this way: 'Sex work [i]s a job that if you don't work, you don't

make money. You have zero security.’ Laura compared the money earned from sex work to her former office job: ‘Obviously, the health care job, like my doctor’s office, the income is stable. You know what your pay cheque is going to be. Sex work, you have no idea if you’re going to get an appointment.’

Selma noted the unpredictability of sex work earnings sometimes meant she could not pay her bills, including rent: ‘Sometimes you can hit a week or two weeks where the phone doesn’t ring and I start to get worried, like how am I going to pay the rent?’

*Work control.* Half of all participants mentioned work control/work discretion when comparing the quality of sex work to other jobs they currently hold or held in the past. Most described an appreciation for greater freedom to schedule their work, choose their clients and the services offered. One of the greatest benefits of sex work for many participants, especially those who booked their clients online and delivered services independently, was the ability to decline work when, where, how and with whom they did not want to provide personal services. Autumn described her sex work as ‘managing your own business’. Mollie described her work control as higher than in any of her other jobs:

I have way more control in my escort job than I have ever had in any other job. I’m my own boss and I love that. I set my own hours; I see who I want to see, so there’s a tremendous amount of control.

Julianna agreed: ‘I can say “I don’t want to work today” and I don’t have to’.

Control in sex work also included choice in the service offered to clients, as Laurel explained: ‘If I got a client come to me saying, “Oh, hey baby, I want you to do this and do that” and I’m not into that, I can easily just say “Nope, go find somebody else”’. Grace described greater control over how she is able to interact with and is treated by her sex work clients compared to customers she served in her retail job:

I would take a lot more from customers at [pharmacy/retail store] than I would working for the [escort] agency. I am not about to put up with things, like the way that a man treats me. Whereas at [retail store] I get paid 14 dollars an hour, and you know what, you’re the customer, you’re always right.

Although the control allowed by sex work was a key benefit to the work for many participants and positively affected their work quality or fulfilment with doing sex work, too much control over working conditions was seen by some as presenting challenges. Maureen stated that ‘regular’ work ‘keeps you organized, your head’s level, it’s like it’s not scattered’, whereas in sex work ‘I feel so scattered’. This was echoed by Lillian who felt that other types of work provided a routine that was not present in sex work:

I think once you’re a [service provider] there’s not a lot of routine, there’s not a lot of stability. Especially for girls that just do it full time. They don’t have a set schedule. Like some of them don’t even know what day of the week it is.

*Job status.* The low status of sex work, brought up by one-third of participants, was mentioned as its major downside. No other jobs described by participants carried with them such a heavy emotional and psychological burden. Zachary put it this way:

You definitely do feel like there's an attitude out there – and I really notice it too, like, on TV and stuff. Like, it's kind of the worst thing you could possibly do. Like, you could murder someone or rob a bank or whatever, and that's all kind of like . . . but if you're a whore, like 'uughh' – that's the bottom.

Wyatt compared his feelings about his 'legitimate' day job to the judgement he felt in sex work: 'When I am working my regular stiff job, you know, it's a respectable profession, right? But certainly, you might be subjected to that judgement, um, for doing sex work.' The stigma linked to sex work was internalized by some participants, including Michelle: '[A]t least with a regular job, you might not make as much money but you can be proud of what you do. [ . . . ] You know, doing sex work is nothing to be proud of. It's not anything to brag about.'

Aurora felt that 'sex work is a work that is degenerative [ . . . ] It's like if there was a part of yourself that made you feel different. As if you didn't belong in the normal world.' For Zoey, this feeling was a sense of being both different from and beneath others: 'I feel shameful [ . . . ] I feel inferior to other people, even with the public, I hang my head more, I don't feel I can come out. I don't feel as confident about myself as what I used to feel.' Dakota said that sex work ' . . . just takes away your respect, your dignity, everything'. Vicki commented that: 'You just always feel kind of a little dirty'.

Constantly concealing one's occupation to avoid being 'outed' in social interactions was also a heavy burden to bear for some participants. Lexi, a single mother, replied: 'My family would hate me if I didn't lie to them. My ex would probably call social services on me if he found out.' For Audrey, 'the lying really wears you down after a while. Keeps you from making . . . connections with people I think. Like real connections.' Isaac noted that due to the lack of societal support, sex work ' . . . is something you do a bit underground and alone, isolated'. It follows that participants such as Angeline believed it was 'the stigma surrounding [sex work] that makes it [sex work] problematic'.

## Discussion

The findings presented above fill in a research gap on the objective conditions of precarity in sex workers' lives and their experiences of work quality compared to other employment options. Canadian sex workers choose among several competing alternatives when navigating the employment opportunities available to them, moving into and out of a variety of personal service jobs. The majority of our participants choose sex work because it gave them more personal satisfaction, greater control over their working conditions and higher earnings. The main challenge of sex work compared to other work is occupational stigma.

One of the major advantages of conceptualizing prostitution as sex work is that it allows sociologists to draw upon key concepts currently used to understand the changing world of work and the plight of disadvantaged workers (Adriaenssens et al., 2016). Market globalization, technological innovation and neoliberal processes have created

a tier of part-time and part-year personal service jobs that are low pay, offer no job security and have poor work quality (Alberti et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2009; Sengupta et al., 2009). Many of these workers are involved in precarious employment across their working lives and some experience precarity in other domains, including housing, social welfare and social support (Campbell and Price, 2016). Such workers have 'life-worlds that are inflected with uncertainty and instability' (Waite, 2009: 416). These findings show that Canadian sex workers have precarious lives. Participants reported a high prevalence of sociodemographic characteristics related to structural disadvantage, reflecting the social inequities along lines of gender, race and class that mark Canadian society (Benoit et al., 2009).

As found in earlier work on entering sex work (Benoit et al., 2017b), decisions to continue sex work as a career choice involve a complex interplay of these structural factors creating precarity in personal life and individual agency. These findings show that the majority of participants have thought deeply about work quality and derived some personal satisfaction and fulfilment from sex work. Many participants related that providing bounded emotional intimacy (Bernstein, 2007) to clients was a source of pride, similar to what Abel (2011) observed among sex workers in New Zealand and Sanders et al. (2016) found to be the case for internet-based sex work in England. Nevertheless, some participants found the task of providing this kind of intimacy to clients as a source of dissatisfaction. This type of strain in personal service jobs that require a high level of emotional intelligence and intimacy is not limited to those in sex work, as was reported by Hochschild (1983) when examining flight attendants.

Another reason participants said they preferred sex work was the money. These findings echo those of other studies emphasizing the centrality of financial benefits to workers' decisions to engage in sex work (Benoit et al., 2017a; Huppertz, 2009; Phrasisombath et al., 2012). Financial motivations were central to participants' decisions to carry out sex work in addition to or instead of other jobs available to them. Nevertheless, the financial benefits reported by many participants were occasionally tempered by the unpredictability and instability of earnings, because they could not be assured of a steady income. This illustrates the vulnerability that can characterize work in the sex industry, much like other forms of part-time labour or self-employment where work hours are not guaranteed and thus financial stability and planning are difficult to maintain (Pitcher, 2015; Warren and Lyonette, 2018).

Control over the work process is also often mentioned as a key indicator of job quality (Sengupta et al., 2009; Warren and Lyonette, 2018). The majority of sex workers in this study reported a comparatively high level of control, stating they felt very much in charge of their work scheduling and the flexibility this provided made them feel empowered. This finding was particularly significant among internet-based independent escorts, who ran their own businesses without the oversight of a supervisor or management. Unlike many other low-wage personal service jobs available to them (Huppertz, 2009; Sallaz, 2017), many of the sex workers in this study enjoyed greater freedom deciding when, where and with whom they would provide services. For some, however, there was too much control, leaving them to desire more structure in their day and helping them to separate their personal lives from work activities.

Work status is a well-documented feature of jobs in contemporary society; low status is a structural constraint to work quality, especially for those engaging in 'tainted' or

'dirty' work (Hughes, 1951). In regard to employment, most participants had experience in other personal service jobs marked by insecurity, including food preparation/service, sales work and domestic services that lack status shields and have some aspects of 'dirtiness' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014). Sex work includes all three types of taint and is routinely excluded from occupational prestige scales due to its intense stigmatization (Benoit et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2019a, 2020; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). One-third of sex workers reported that occupational stigma embedded in society's laws and social policies had a negative impact not only on their work quality but also their job safety (Benoit et al., 2016b, 2017a). Sex work in Canada operates in a context in which protecting health and safety is often up to the individual worker (Deering et al., 2014). It is unlikely that the harm from sex work's low social status could be eliminated without altering the social context in which sex work takes place to make it a healthier and safer occupation for all involved, such as what has been done in New Zealand following their decision to decriminalize and regulate the industry (Abel, 2017; Benoit et al., 2019b).

## Conclusion

This article shows that sex work is a form of labour where multiple forms of social inequality (including class, gender and race) intersect in neoliberal capitalist societies. Canadian sex workers contend with gender, race and socioeconomic inequalities that render sex work their best option in an environment of constrained agency and weak social welfare supports. Their lives are marked by precarity as a general social condition and they find themselves in jobs that keep them on the edge of poverty. Similar to others restricted to precarious employment in capitalist markets and lacking a social security net, sex workers need access to redistributive social policies, including comprehensive education, secure employment, quality health care and protected social welfare programmes that have the greatest impact on overall social inequality, and societal-level interventions to combat occupational stigma that is worsened by punitive laws, such as those currently in place in Canada.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the sex worker organizations and allied agencies that helped at all stages of the research. We are also grateful to our participants: without their generous input, this work would not have been possible. Finally, we express gratitude to our anonymous reviewers.

## Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: this research was funded by a grant (#115614) from the Institute of Gender and Health at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

## References

- Abel G (2011) Different stage, different performance: the protective strategy of role play on emotional health in sex work. *Social Science & Medicine* 72: 1177–1184.
- Abel G (2017) In search of a fair and free society: the regulation of sex work in New Zealand. In: Ward E and Wylie G (eds) *Feminism, Prostitution and the State: The Politics of Neo-abolitionism*. New York: Routledge, 140–154.

- Adriaenssens S, Geymonat GG and Oso L (2016) Quality of work in prostitution and sex work. Introduction to the special section. *Sociological Research Online* 21(4): 121–132.
- Alberti G, Bessa I, Hardy K, et al. (2018) Against and beyond precarity: work in insecure times. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(3): 447–457.
- Ashforth B and Kreiner G (1999) ‘How can you do it?’: dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *The Academy of Management Review* 24(3): 413–434.
- Ashforth B and Kreiner G (2014) Dirty work and dirtier work: differences in countering physical, social, and moral stigma. *Management and Organization Review* 10(1): 81–108.
- Benach J and Muntaner C (2007) Precarious employment and health: developing a research agenda. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 61(4): 276–277.
- Benoit C, Jansson M, Millar A, et al. (2005) Community-academic research on hard-to-reach populations: benefits and challenges. *Qualitative Health Research* 15(2): 263–282.
- Benoit C, Jansson M, Smith M, et al. (2017a) ‘Well, it should be changed for one, because it’s our bodies’: workers’ views on Canada’s punitive approach towards sex work. *Social Sciences* 6(2): 52–69.
- Benoit C, Jansson M, Smith M, et al. (2019a) Prostitution stigma and its effect on the working conditions, personal lives and health of sex workers. *Journal of Sex Research* 55(4–5): 457–471.
- Benoit C, McCarthy B and Jansson M (2015a) Occupational stigma and mental health: discrimination and depression among front-line service workers. *Canadian Public Policy* 41(2): S61–69.
- Benoit C, McCarthy B and Jansson M (2015b) Stigma, sex work, and substance use: a comparative analysis. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 37(3): 437–451.
- Benoit C, Maurice R, Abel G, et al. (2020) ‘I dodged the stigma bullet’: Canadian sex workers’ situated responses to occupational stigma. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 22(1): 81–95.
- Benoit C, Ouellet N and Jansson M (2016a) Unmet health care needs among sex workers in five census metropolitan areas of Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 107(3): e266–e271.
- Benoit C, Ouellet N, Jansson M, et al. (2017b) ‘Would you think about doing sex for money?’ Structure and agency in deciding to sell sex in Canada. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(5): 731–747.
- Benoit C, Shumka L, Vallance K, et al. (2009) Explaining the health gap experienced by girls and women in Canada: a social determinants of health perspective. *Sociological Research Online* 14(5): 1–13.
- Benoit C, Smith M, Jansson M, et al. (2019b) ‘The prostitution problem’: claims, evidence, and policy outcomes. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48(7): 1905–1923.
- Benoit C, Smith M, Jansson M, et al. (2018) Sex work and three dimensions of self-esteem: self-worth, authenticity, and self-efficacy. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 20(1): 69–83.
- Benoit C, Smith M, Jansson M, et al. (2019c) Canadian sex workers weigh the costs and benefits of disclosing their occupational status to health providers. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 16(3): 329–341.
- Benoit C, Smith M, Jansson M, et al. (2016b) Lack of confidence in police creates a ‘blue’ ceiling for sex workers’ safety. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques* 42(4): 456–468.
- Bernstein E (2007) *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Braun V and Clarke C (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Brents B (2016) Neoliberalism’s market morality and heteroflexibility: protectionist and free market discourses in debates for legal prostitution. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 13(4): 402–416.

- Brents B and Sanders T (2010) The mainstreaming of the sex industry: economic inclusion and social ambivalence. *Journal of Law and Society* 37(1): 40–60.
- Bruckert C (2002) *Taking It Off, Putting It on: Women in the Strip Trade*. Toronto, ON: Women's Press.
- Campbell I and Price R (2016) Precarious work and precarious workers: towards an improved conceptualisation. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 27(3): 314–332.
- Deering KN, Amin A, Shoveller J, et al. (2014) A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers. *American Journal of Public Health* 104(5): e42–e54.
- Duffy M (2007) Doing the dirty work: gender, race, and reproductive labor in historical perspective. *Gender and Society* 21: 313–336.
- Dwyer R (2013) The care economy? Gender, economic restructuring, and job polarization in the U.S. labor market. *American Sociological Review* 78(3): 390–416.
- Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) (2017) Sex workers organising for change: self-representation, community mobilisation, and working conditions. Available at: <http://www.gaatw.org/resources/publications/941-sex-workers-organising-for-change> (accessed 15 November 2018).
- Green F (2006) *Demanding Work: The Paradox of Job Quality in the Affluent Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hallgrimsdottir H and Benoit C (2007) From wage slaves to wage workers: cultural opportunity structures and the evolution of the wage demands of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, 1880–1900. *Social Forces* 85(3): 1393–1412.
- Hochschild A (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hughes E (1951) Work and the self. In: Rohrer JH and Sherif M (eds) *Social Psychology at the Crossroads*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 313–323.
- Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2011) *National Occupational Classification (NOC) 2011*. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Available at: <http://www12.hrsdc.gc.ca> (accessed 30 September 2018).
- Huppatz KE (2009) Class and career choice: motivations, aspirations, identity and mobility for women in paid caring work. *Journal of Sociology* 46(2): 115–132.
- Jansson M, Benoit C, Casey L, et al. (2010) In for the long haul: knowledge translation between academic and non-profit organizations. *Qualitative Health Research* 20: 131–143.
- Kalleberg AL (2009) Precarious work, insecure workers: employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review* 74: 1–22.
- Kotiswaran P (2011) *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor: Sex Work and the Law in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Link B (1987) Understanding labeling effects in the area of mental disorders: an assessment of the effects of expectations of rejection. *American Sociological Review* 52(1): 96–112.
- Link B, Struening E, Neese-Todd S, et al. (2001) The consequences of stigma for the self-esteem of people with mental illness. *Psychiatric Services* 52(12): 1621–1626.
- McCarthy B, Benoit C and Jansson M (2012) Regulating sex work: heterogeneity in legal strategies. *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 8: 255–271.
- McCarthy B, Benoit C and Jansson M (2014) Sex work: a comparative study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43: 1379–1390.
- Manky O (2018) Resource mobilization and precarious workers' organizations: an analysis of the Chilean subcontracted mineworkers' unions. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(3): 581–598.
- Mears A and Connell C (2016) The paradoxical value of deviant cases: toward a gendered theory of display work. *Sigms* 41(2): 333–359.

- O'Connell Davidson J (2014) Let's go outside: bodies, prostitutes, slaves and worker citizens. *Citizenship Studies* 18(5): 516–532.
- Orchard T, Bunch M, Salter K, et al. (2020) Balance, capacity and the contingencies of everyday life: narrative etiologies of health among women in street-based sex work. *Qualitative Health Research* 30(4): 518–529.
- Orchiston A (2016) Precarious or protected? Evaluating work quality in the legal sex industry. *Sociological Research Online* 21(4): 173–187.
- Overall C (1992) What's wrong with prostitution? Evaluating sex work. *Signs* 17(4): 705–724.
- Phrasisombath K, Faxelid E, Sychareun V, et al. (2012) Risks, benefits and survival strategies – views from female sex workers in Savannakhet, Laos. *BMC Public Health* 12: 1–12.
- Pitcher J (2015) Sex work and modes of self-employment in the informal economy: diverse business practices and constraints to effective working. *Social Policy & Society* 14(1): 113–123.
- Rosen E and Venkatesh SA (2008) A 'perversion' of choice: sex work offers just enough in Chicago's urban ghetto. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37(4): 417–441.
- Sallaz JJ (2017) Exit tales: how precarious workers navigate bad jobs. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 46(5): 573–599.
- Sanders T (2005) 'It's just acting': sex workers' strategies for capitalizing on sexuality. *Gender, Work and Organization* 12(4): 319–342.
- Sanders T, Connelly L and Jarvis King L (2016) On our own terms: the working conditions of internet-based sex workers in the UK. *Sociological Research Online* 21(4): 133–146.
- Sengupta S, Edwards P and Tsai C (2009) The good, the bad and the ordinary: work identities in 'good' and 'bad' jobs in the United Kingdom. *Work and Occupations* 36(1): 26–55.
- Statistics Canada (2016) Individuals by total income level, by province and territory (Canada). Available at: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=&Code2=&Data=Count&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=01> (accessed 5 October 2018).
- Vanwesenbeeck I (2005) Burnout among female indoor sex workers. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 34(6): 627–639.
- Vanwesenbeeck I (2017) Sex work criminalization is barking up the wrong tree. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46(6): 1–10.
- Waite L (2009) A place and space for a critical geography of precarity? *Geography Compass* 3(1): 412–433.
- Warren T and Lyonette C (2018) Good, bad and very bad part-time jobs for women? Re-examining the importance of occupational class for job quality since the 'Great Recession' in Britain. *Work, Employment and Society* 32(4): 747–767.
- Watters J and Biernacki P (1989) Targetted sampling: options for the study of hidden populations. *Social Problems* 36(4): 416–430.
- Weitzer R (2010) The mythology of prostitution: advocacy research and public policy. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 7(1): 15–29.
- Wurth M, Schleifer R, McLemore M, et al. (2013) Condoms as evidence of prostitution in the United States and the acriminalization of sex work. *Journal of the International AIDS Society* 16(1): 18626.

Cecilia Benoit, PhD, is a scientist at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research and professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Michaela Smith, BA (Hons), is a research coordinator at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research at the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC and an undergraduate student in the Department of Midwifery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC.



Mikael Jansson, PhD, is a scientist at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research and adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Priscilla Healey, MA, is a research assistant at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research and a doctoral student at the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

Douglas Magnuson is a researcher at the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research and a professor at the School of Child and Youth Care, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC.

**Date submitted** January 2019

**Date accepted** May 2020