

# The hopelessness effect: Counsellors' perceptions of their female clients involved in sex work in Canada

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored how counsellors who work with women currently or formerly involved in sex work perceive these women's future. From May to July 2016, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 counsellors providing psychosocial services in Canadian agencies with recognized mandates to support such women. The interview protocol was based on the Possible Selves Mapping Interview, adapted to explore the counsellors' hopes and fears for these clients. We subjected the interview transcripts to an interpretive descriptive analysis. Our findings centred on three themes: the counsellors' hopes for their clients' future, in light of their personal and social resources; the counsellors' fears about the cumulative devastating effects that their clients' work environment might have on them; and the counsellors' fears that these women would lose hope for the future. This study clearly demonstrates the importance of addressing the safety and well-being of women involved in sex work and of recognizing the impacts of social inequalities and structural barriers on these women's life paths. The implications of these findings for policies and practices are discussed at the end of this paper.

## KEYWORDS

consequences, counsellors, fears, hopes, perceptions, sex work, women

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Past studies about sex work have focused mainly on the risk factors that can lead people to do it (Cusick, 2002; Wilson & Widom, 2009), the settings in which it is done, and the factors that can keep people involved in it (Benoit & Millar, 2001; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). A growing number of studies have documented the adversities associated with sex work and the impacts that they can have on sex workers' development and well-being. More specifically, studies have shown that sex workers experience problems with their physical, mental and sexual health (Love, 2015; Ottisova, Hemmings, Howard, Zimmerman, & Oram, 2016; Roe-Sepowitz, Gallagher, Hickie, Pérez Loubert, & Tutelman, 2014) and personal and social relationships (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010; Cimino, 2012; Lanctôt et al., 2018) and have negative self-concepts (Dodsworth, 2012; Lanctôt et al., 2018; Oselin, 2010).

Sex work is a complex issue. Though examining its impacts on female sex workers from their own perspective is relevant and indeed crucial, it may provide only a partial picture of the kinds of services that these women need (Duncan & DeHart, 2019). The risks of oversimplifying these impacts might be explained by the covert nature of sex work and the stigma surrounding it. Some women may protect their threatened sense of identity by normalizing their pathways into sex work, regarding it as "a means to an end that did not define them" (Dodsworth, 2012, p. 10) or attempting to minimize its negative consequences by emphasizing its "positive and empowering elements" (Benoit et al., 2019, p. 1). Women who are actively involved in sex work also may not necessarily recognize the risks and oppressiveness of their work environment and the harmful consequences that their work may be having (Hickie & Roe-Sepowitz, 2018; Lanctôt et al., 2018).

For a broader understanding of the multifaceted impacts of sex work on women's life paths and well-being, it can be worthwhile to explore the perceptions of people who provide services directly to

women involved in sex work (Anasti, 2018; Lanctôt et al., 2018). Over time, through their interactions with such clients, service providers can develop trusting relationships that let them learn more about these women's needs and refer them to resources that can help to meet them (Anasti, 2018). Counsellors are also uniquely positioned to directly observe the many individual and societal factors that may precipitate entry into sex work and impede exit from it. In a qualitative study of 13 service providers, Duncan and DeHart (2019) concluded that the problems that sex workers experience and the services that they need must be understood from a gender-sensitive perspective that reflects women's adverse pathways into and out of sex work. These pathways tend to be characterized not only by childhood victimization, adult revictimization and individual vulnerabilities resulting from these experiences of trauma, but also by women's limited social capital, including the limited resources available to support them and their limited economic alternatives for exiting sex work (Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009).

Although the views of people who provide services directly to women involved in sex work could thus clearly contribute to an understanding of the impacts that this work has on their life paths, these views have been largely neglected in the literature. Ma, Chan, and Loke (2018) conducted a systematic review of 49 studies on attitudes towards sex work among law-enforcement officers, health and social-service professionals, sex workers' clients and the general public. But only eight of these studies dealt with the attitudes of health and social-service professionals, and these eight studies focused chiefly on the professionals' perceptions of the health risk of sexually transmitted infections. Other studies conducted with counsellors have focused mainly on legal issues related to sex work (Anasti, 2018) or on treatment needs (Arnold, Stewart, & McNeece, 2000).

Some studies have examined how professionals who provide services to women involved in sex work view its impact on their lives. For example, Gorry, Roen, and Reilly (2010) explored the psychological impact of street sex work as perceived both by female street sex workers and health professionals involved in supporting them, while Hom and Woods (2013) explored stories of trauma and its aftermath for commercially sexually exploited women, as told by front-line service providers. These two studies have involved very small groups of practitioners (five in Gorry et al., 2010 and six in Hom & Woods, 2013) and so must be considered highly preliminary. The present study used a larger sample to get a better understanding of how counsellors who work with women currently or formerly involved in sex work perceive the impacts that sex work has on these women's life paths. More specifically, this study attempted to document the ways that these counsellors perceive what the future holds for these women.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Study design

The present study was part of a broader one whose overall goal was to document the impacts of sex work on female sex workers' life

#### What is known about this topic

- Because of the covert, stigmatizing nature of sex work, studies based solely on interviews with women involved in it may provide a partial picture of its consequences.
- Past studies have neglected the ways that counsellors who work directly with sex workers perceive the consequences of sex work.
- These studies have focused on health risks, legal issues and how services should be provided.

#### What this paper adds

- Findings revealed that the counsellors' fears that sex workers might die prematurely and violently - illustrating the devastating effects that sex work might have on women's safety and well-being.
- The counsellors were concerned that women's growing problems would discourage them so much that they lost hope for the future.

paths and well-being (Lanctôt et al., 2018). In this specific component of the broader study, the authors examined these impacts by interviewing counsellors to obtain their perspective. In their interviews, these counsellors expressed some hopes for these women's future, pointing to personal strengths that might hold them to recover from these impacts. But the counsellors' hopes were considerably outweighed by the fears that they expressed for these women's future. Hence, this paper devotes more attention in exploring these fears.

### 2.2 | Procedure

From May to July 2016, we identified agencies with a recognized mandate to support women currently or formerly involved in sex work in various cities in the Canadian province of Quebec. We invited counsellors working at such agencies to participate in this study. Some of these counsellors worked exclusively with women currently or formerly involved in sex work, while others also worked with a wide range of other people in vulnerable situations, such as people who used drugs, were homeless, had sexually transmitted infections or had been sexually assaulted. The agencies where these counsellors worked had a variety of missions, such as helping to break down social isolation, providing food support, reducing risks of violence, supporting the process of exiting the sex trade and supporting women's recovery. The counsellors used a variety of intervention approaches in their practices.

To be eligible for this study, the counsellors had to have been employed by their agencies for at least the past six months. Of the 23 counsellors whom we initially contacted, two had scheduling conflicts and could not participate in this study. The remaining 21 (91.3%) did participate. All participants were asked to read and

sign a consent form in advance, and participation was voluntary. Participants were interviewed individually at the agencies where they worked, in closed rooms where their confidentiality was ensured. The research procedures were approved by the Institutional Ethics Board of the University of Sherbrooke.

## 2.3 | Interview protocol

For the present study, the authors adapted the Possible Selves Mapping Interview (Shepard & Marshall, 1999), a semi-structured-interview protocol that is based on Possible Selves theory as developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) and on subsequent theoretical work by Erikson (2007) and Oyserman (2015). Possible selves are selves that individuals believe that they may become in future, and include both positive selves that they hope to become and negative selves that they fear they may become (Marshall & Guenette, 2008). For this study, however, we adapted the Possible Selves Mapping Interview to capture the *counsellors'* hopes and fears regarding the future of the female sex workers who are their clients. We were thus able to obtain a broader picture of the context in which the counsellors developed these visions of the sex workers' future selves.

These semi-structured interviews let us focus on how the counsellors' imagined the futures of their female clients involved in sex work. First we asked the counsellors what their hopes and fears were for these women's futures. Then we asked the counsellors to elaborate on what these hopes and fears meant to them. Through this questioning we were able to understand how counsellors who interact with these women every day perceived their future in light not only of their personal resources, but also of their social and structural resources.

## 2.4 | Analytical strategy

The interviews lasted an average of 88 min each. With the interviewees' consent, each of these interviews was recorded. The recordings were then transcribed (a pseudonym was assigned to each transcript to protect the interviewee's anonymity and confidentiality). We then subjected each transcript to an interpretive descriptive analysis—an inductive approach that takes the complexity of human phenomena into account and places a premium on subjectivity (Gallagher, 2014, p. 6).

We divided this analysis into two parts. First, we reduced the data so as to identify the main themes that emerged from the interviews. To do so, we first identified the themes in a sample of the transcripts, then defined and described each of these themes, constructed an analytical grid from them, and used this grid to identify and code the themes in the remaining transcripts. Second, to further organize the data and extract meaning from them (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), we identified relationships among the various themes (Gallagher, 2014). To structure our method and make it easier to combine these themes into groups, we developed a table describing the themes and illustrating them with excerpts from the interviews.

To ensure that our analysis met the rigorous evaluation criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), we used a variety of methods. To ensure credibility, reliability, transferability and consistency, we applied the principles of consensual qualitative analysis (Hill et al., 2005) in the form of the following rules: (a) at least two members of the research team were involved throughout the data analysis, so that more than one point of view was always considered; (b) members had to agree on how to code the themes; and (c) members had to reach consensus on the meaning of the data. To generate reports for all of the codes, we used the Dedoose qualitative analysis application.

## 3 | FINDINGS

### 3.1 | Characteristics of the sample

The sample was composed of 21 counsellors (all women) who provide psychosocial support to women currently or formerly involved in sex work. These counsellors work in 16 different agencies in six different cities in the Canadian province of Quebec (eight of the 21 work in Montreal, Quebec's largest city). Most of the counsellors (18) were born in Canada; 27% had junior-college diplomas and 71.4% had university degrees. On average, these counsellors had 7.6 years of experience in working with women involved in sex work ( $SD = 4.8$ ). The first language of all of these counsellors was French (the majority language in Quebec), all of the interviews were conducted in French, and all of the interview excerpts presented in this paper have been professionally translated into English.

In their interviews, the counsellors discussed some positive changes that they might hope to see not only in the personal well-being of the women with whom they worked but also in the society in which they live. But the counsellors also expressed serious fears about these women's futures. These fears related to the devastating, cumulative effects of the oppressive, risky environment in which female sex workers do their work, and in particular to the possibility that they may lose hope about their own futures. These hopes and fears are documented in detail below.

### 3.2 | Hoping for the best for sex workers, but expecting the worst from society

The counsellors showed themselves to be highly sensitive to the experiences of their female clients involved in sex work. Many of the counsellors expressed the hope that these women could some day become self-actualized, accomplish their goals and achieve personal growth. However, almost all of the counsellors also underscored the need for changes in social structures and in society as a whole in order for these women to enjoy respect, dignity and security in their lives. These counsellors strongly criticized the harsh judgments, negative attitudes, scathing comments and contemptuous glances to which society subjects such women. For example, Bianca said that

such judgments tend to further stigmatize women involved in sex work:

*[...] When you hate sex workers and make judgments about sex work, when you say "It's stupid, it's dirty, it's disgusting", well, you're not saying that just about sex work, you're saying it about the women themselves [...] you're slapping them with a label that no one wants to wear.*

The counsellors expressed the hope that society would provide better living conditions for women involved in sex work. The counsellors wanted to see societal changes that would give these women greater social and economic opportunities. The central concern that the counsellors expressed was about the highly precarious situations in which these women live, which keep them constantly in survival mode. Many of the counsellors said that it was important for society to offer alternatives to sex work so that these women would no longer need to do it to survive. As Lisa put it:

*Ideally, I'd like society to offer them a better world than the one they have now. Too often, these women think that sex work is the only thing that they can do or have learned to do. In my own world, I think that there are other opportunities, but maybe they haven't been offered to these women.*

When asked how realistic it was to expect the hopes that they had expressed for these women's futures to be realized, many of the counsellors let out long sighs. They said that although they believed in these women's potential for change, they had much less hope about society's potential for change. According to these counsellors, systemic barriers and social inequities seriously impede these women's efforts to exit sex work.

### 3.3 | Fears about the devastating effects of the environment in which sex work is done

When asked about their fears for their clients' future, almost all of the counsellors alluded to the violent, oppressive conditions under which women engage in sex work, and these conditions were the greatest source of the fears that the counsellors expressed. Many of them feared that sex workers would be seriously victimized, not only by their clients but possibly also by the justice system, in the course of their work. The counsellors were extremely fearful for these women's physical and emotional safety. One of Michelle's main fears was that these women would experience continuing suffering and violence in their lives:

*Because that's what happens, if women continue to let themselves be [sexually] exploited, they'll get beaten, humiliated, raped ... drugged and experience various forms*

*of physical and psychological violence, so ... we know... it's not a very pretty life they're going to lead.*

For several of the counsellors, it was precisely the way that female sex workers' physical, emotional, social and relationship problems tend to "pile up", "escalate" or "snowball" that makes them so devastating. The counsellors feared that these women's problems would become so large and devastating as to be uncontrollable. Vanessa put it this way:

*I'm afraid that they'll become ten times worse. If a girl doesn't get the right support when she's trying to exit sex work, she'll just sink even deeper into it, she'll be even worse [...] I'm afraid that they're going to become even more disturbed than they already are.*

Other counsellors feared that the harmful effects of sex work would invade other spheres of these women's lives. Stephanie feared that these women would eventually develop such a distrust of the friends, family members and agencies trying to help them that they would become trapped in their situations. Vanessa feared that these women would "sink even deeper" and end up hospitalized because of the many harmful consequences of sex work, such as drug addiction and sexually transmitted infections. Rachel expressed her fear that these women's problems would become worse and ever more deeply entrenched in their lives:

*When someone keeps doing sex work, the consequences keep growing. For example, drug addiction, or the kind of dissociation [that we were discussing earlier]. These consequences can become more and more invasive until they sort of crystallize permanently.*

Most of the counsellors expressed serious fears about the high risk of premature death among women involved in sex work. Those counsellors whose female clients not only did sex work but also used drugs shared the fear that they would die from overdoses. Some of the counsellors said that they were afraid that these women would be subjected to so much violence at the hands of their domestic partners, their pimps or their clients that they would end up dead. In this regard, Erika reported just how ever-present this fear of death was in her daily dealings with women involved in sex work:

*It's disturbing when you work in that environment, because you want the best for these women [...] If she's with us every day, and then at night she goes back to see clients, she's putting herself in danger every time. It's troubling because, I mean, the violence can escalate, and sometimes ... there have been some homicides too, so it's always a concern at the back of your mind.*

The counsellors also feared that these women's deaths would go unnoticed, because of society's lack of concern for them. Jessica said

that if society continues not really caring about the fate of women involved in sex work, too many of them will end up dying. As Maude explained, no women deserve to die under such conditions or to disappear “down some alleyway, nameless”, with no one to care about them. These findings suggest that the counsellors experience genuine feelings of sadness and powerlessness when contemplating the future of these women with whom they work.

### 3.4 | Fears that women involved in sex work will lose hope

Another fear expressed by many counsellors was that women involved in sex work would become more and more weighed down by their problems and so discouraged that they lose hope for the future. Many counsellors feared that these women would become trapped in their situations and never get out. The counsellors cited various hazards in these women's lives, such as highly precarious living conditions, lack of resources and support, loss of confidence in “the system”, and resulting feelings of abandonment. Counsellors saw the combination of all these hazards as a “mountain too big to climb” and feared that women would end up simply accepting whatever happened to them and get so discouraged that they never recovered. Also, almost all of the counsellors were afraid that women involved in sex work would lose all belief in their own value. According to these counsellors, many of these women tend to think that they're “not worth anything else” and find it hard to “believe that they deserve anything better”. Gabrielle underscored that these very demeaning self-perceptions leave these women with very little room for change:

*What it comes down to is that they get caught up in this life, and wind up telling themselves that it's OK, it's not so bad, it's what they deserve. That they have no other prospects, and that this is the way it has always been for them [...] Once they see things this way, they really have no hope of changin.*

Several counsellors feared that women involved in sex work would become so hopeless that they would give up on themselves entirely—let themselves go, stop taking care of themselves, abandon their dreams and motivations, stop having any plans and accept a life that was “killing them slowly”. As Catherine explained, when a woman has been “destroyed”, it can be especially hard for her to take care of herself, believe in her own ability to change things and start taking charge of her life.

Counsellors also worried that this overwhelming lack of hope and self-esteem would lead these women to end their suffering by taking their own lives. The counsellors alluded to this fear in very striking terms. Some counsellors described these women as “dead inside” or “just waiting to die”. Regarding this risk of suicide, the counsellors shared not only intense fears but also intense sadness, as expressed here by Bianca:

*We often see [women] who, when they face a tough situation, give up and let things go until it kills them. I've lost a lot of people in my practice, a lot of them have died [...] They lost hope, and one fine morning you wake up and learn that a woman you knew has overdosed.*

## 4 | DISCUSSION

This study explored how counsellors working with women currently or formerly involved in sex work perceive these women's futures. The counsellors whom we interviewed showed that they were highly sensitive to the experiences of these clients and wanted only the best for them in future. But the counsellors were also well aware of the harmful consequences of sex work for the women involved, the precarious, oppressive settings in which these women live and work, and the lack of sensitivity in society's responses to them.

One of the themes that recurred most often in our interviews with the counsellors was how the problems resulting from sex work tend to proliferate. The counsellors whom we interviewed feared that the oppression and violence associated with life in the sex trade would cause their clients' problems to multiply beyond their control. This finding is consistent with the consequences of sex work as reported by women involved in it (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Lanctôt et al., 2018; Love, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014) and in particular with the “downward spirals into high-risk life pathways” described by Dodsworth (2014, p. 194). Our findings also support the idea that being involved in sex work can make women lose hope. The counsellors were very concerned that women's growing problems would discourage them so much that they gave up on themselves and lost all hope for the future. Again, Dodsworth (2012, p. 14) describes this effect vividly, referring to a group of female sex workers who had “spiralled down into a vicious circle of despair and hopelessness”.

Our findings also open a window on a subject rarely discussed in such detail in studies of this population: counsellors' perceptions that the threats to female sex workers' physical and emotional safety are so severe that they might easily result in premature death. This finding provides additional support to studies showing the pervasive, devastating effects that sex work can have on women's day-to-day safety, well-being and functioning (Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, & Bilardi, 2015; Dodsworth, 2012; Jackson, Bennett, & Sowinski, 2007; Maticka-Tyndale, Lewis, Clark, Zubick, & Young, 2000; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Sallmann, 2010). Our findings add to this knowledge by suggesting that these consequences of sex work may also seriously damage women's futures.

Another, preliminary finding from this study was the sense of discouragement that seemed to pervade the counsellors' interview responses. The counsellors seemed overwhelmed by and despondent about the negative impacts of sex work on the women involved. Where counsellors hoped for better opportunities for these women, they instead saw continuing multiple forms of adversity. The counsellors stressed that most of these women had experienced ongoing victimization in their lives and had endured stigma and oppression as



a result of their involvement in the sex trade. As Salisbury and Van Voorhis (2009) report, women must often deal with limited support options, lack of resources and lack of economic alternatives. Such systemic barriers may contribute to a vicious circle in which women involved in sex work end up with so few services and so little support available to them that trying to move forward feels overwhelming (Gorry et al., 2010, p. 497).

This study has some limitations that should be noted. First, some of the counsellors interviewed worked at agencies where their clients included not only women involved in sex work but also other vulnerable people, such as people who are homeless or who use drugs. These counsellors may therefore have had a more limited understanding of the problems of female sex workers than the counsellors who worked solely with this clientele. To avoid confounding any preconceived notions that these counsellors may have had about sex work with their genuine fears for the female sex workers whom they actually counseled, we asked additional questions that encouraged them to explain their expressed hopes and fears on the basis of their actual professional experience.

A second limitation is that the counsellors whom we interviewed were working with women who had decided to seek help and support from community agencies. Such women may be experiencing more severe problems than other women who are involved in sex work but with whom the counsellors have not come into contact.

Third and finally, most of the counsellors whom we interviewed in this study had university degrees and were Canadian-born. Counsellors from more varied, less privileged backgrounds might have had different perspectives and expressed different hopes and fears for the future of their female clients involved in sex work.

Regarding implications for practice, this study showed how substantial and daunting the consequences of sex work can seem from the counsellors' perspective and how essential it therefore is for them to be sensitive to these women's lived experiences and attentive to their multiple needs. To be effective, interventions must seek to rebuild women's hope and confidence and thus help them achieve more fulfilling lives (Munsey, Miller, & Rugg, 2018). Such positive approaches contrast sharply with approaches that focus solely on minimizing risk or reducing harm.

Our findings also provide further evidence that a more holistic intervention approach is required—one that recognizes the impacts of social inequities and structural barriers on women's life paths (Hom & Woods, 2013). Shepp, O'Callaghan, Kirkner, Lorenz, and Ullman (2019) underscore the importance of creating an equitable environment that supports these women in their healing process. Some initial steps towards this goal would be to recognize these women's rights and their unique needs, facilitate their social acceptance and help reduce stigmatizing attitudes towards them (Ma et al., 2018). But as suggested by Shdaimah and Wiechelt (2017, p. 364), to promote such significant changes in society's response to sex work, policy makers must first and foremost provide "real pathways for opportunity and choice" to women involved in it.

Our analysis of the counsellors' interviews also showed the importance of paying close attention to the psychological health of


professionals who deal with women involved in sex work. To hear repeatedly about these women's difficult and sometimes extremely traumatizing experiences can have serious consequences for these counsellors, including compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma (Figley, 2002; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). Employers of practitioners who directly serve women involved in sex work must be sensitive to the practitioners' own well-being and accordingly provide them with a positive work climate (Bell, Hopkin, & Forrester, 2019), clinical supervision (Bell et al., 2019; Choi, 2017; Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; West, 2015) and professional training to reduce or prevent such consequences (Cuartero & Campos-Vidal, 2019; Thomas, 2013).

With the limitations noted, this study has shed new light on how counsellors perceive the future of women currently or formerly involved in sex work. Very few past studies had examined the perspective of the professionals who work with such women. But these professionals are first-hand witnesses to what these women experience. These professionals work with a wide range of women with different backgrounds and experiences, and thus can help to provide a more well-rounded picture of how these women see the world. Our findings show what pervasive consequences sex work can have for these women and how important it is to consider the psychological problems that the counsellors who work with them may experience. The existing literature on sex work has helped to provide an understanding of the many complex needs of the women involved in it. But further research is now needed on how best to respond to these needs so as to better support these women and the counsellors who work with them.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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