



# Let's Talk About Sex Work

Report of the REAL working group for  
Brantford, Brant, Haldimand, & Norfolk,  
Assessing the Needs of Sex Workers  
in Our Community

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We want to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we live and work is First Nations' territory. The city of Brantford and surrounding area lies on the lands of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee and the Neutral. This land acknowledgment, while symbolic, is not enough; it does not support Indigenous communities and struggles in real ways. As employees of the social service sector, as educators, and as individuals who benefit from the occupation of this land, we have a responsibility to continuously frame our work through a de-colonial lens, to constantly educate ourselves, and to build reciprocal relationships that are rooted in the values and histories of Indigenous communities. We are all treaty members, and thus must strive to act in Solidarity with Indigenous folks and center their voices.

First, and foremost, REAL wishes to thank the sex workers in Brantford, Brant, Haldimand, and Norfolk who responded to the research and took the time to share their stories and insights. It is our hope that your contributions to this research will help to begin a much-needed conversation in our community, to destigmatize sex work, and to improve the situation for others. We thank you so much for your participation – this research would not have been possible without you.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This needs assessment of sex workers in the Brantford, Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk region was conducted between June 2015 and May 2016. The research was funded by the Ontario Trillium Foundation and led by Dr. Stacey Hannem, Associate Professor of Criminology at Wilfrid Laurier University (Brantford campus), on behalf of REAL: Resources, Education, Advocacy for Local Sex Work (formerly STREET). REAL is a working group comprising representatives from local social and health services concerned with ensuring that services in our community are accessible to local sex workers and adequately and respectfully address their needs.

We conducted interviews with thirty individuals, female and male, previously or currently working in the local sex industry across various sectors — in-call/out-call escorting, street-based work, massage parlour, and erotic dancing. We also interviewed twelve local social and health service providers. The interviews were analysed to provide an overview of the local sex industry and to identify key themes which speak to sex workers' experiences and concerns.

The report begins by describing the methodology of the research, how the participants were recruited and the data collected and analysed. We then situate the research in the current socio-legal context and in existing academic work. The remainder of the report presents the findings of the research, with reference to similarities or differences in the academic literature, as applicable. The findings of this research highlight the voices of the participants — everyday sex workers living and working in our community — and attempts to do justice to the diversity of their experiences and perspectives. The major findings of the research are divided into four sections, as follows.

**Understanding the Individual and Structural Realities of Sex Work:** This section explores participants' entrances to the sex industry as a function of financial and structural pressures; we find that most of the sex workers in this research were not coerced into the industry but began working due to financial pressures, sometimes exacerbated by drug use. We examine the complex intersections of drug use and sex work and unpack the questionable assumption that drug use entails lack of agency. We look at how sex work may function as a social safety net for working-class and marginalized people who struggle to find mainstream employment and realize that the transition from sex work to other kinds of income generating activities is not always straightforward. We look at the stigma faced by sex working parents, and question the assumption that sex work necessarily poses a risk to workers' children. Finally we look at different trajectories in the sex industry, and consider the perspective of sex workers who take a small-business approach to their labour.

**Understanding Everyday Experiences in Sex Work:** Here we explore some of the labour challenges faced by sex workers and the implications of the laws for sex workers' everyday lives. First we look at the phenomenon of transient work or travel for sex work and its problematic conflation with human trafficking. Related to this we examine third-party involvement in the sex industry, the benefits and potential drawbacks, the diversity of third-party relationships and the overlap between sex workers and third parties. We also look at sex workers' experiences of violence and the safety measures that they employ. Finally, we consider the stigma and judgement that sex workers often encounter in the community and how this impacts their everyday experiences and relationships.

**Sex Workers' Experiences with Law and Law Enforcement:** This section looks at local sex workers' interactions with police and their perspectives on the law. We find that the majority of local sex workers are not aware of the changes to Canada's prostitution laws, which reduces any potential benefit of these laws. Sex workers report wariness of police, but most have not had specific negative experiences. They do expect and sense stigma from police, which makes sex workers less likely to ask police to come to their aid in times of crisis or victimization.

**Sex Workers' Experiences Accessing Services:** This final findings section considers sex workers' experiences in accessing social services and health services in our community. We discuss concerns about judgement and how this can affect disclosure of their labour. Sex workers are also highly concerned about confidentiality of services. Accessibility of services and health care can be an issue, particularly for workers who may have difficulty making and keeping appointments, suggesting that a walk-in model or extended care hours could be beneficial. We discuss sex workers' healthcare needs; dental care, vision care, prescription drug coverage and mental health care all emerged as areas of need.

**Conclusions and Recommendations:** We conclude our report by offering some insights into the effects of the new prostitution laws and recommendations to improve services for individuals doing sex work in our community. Changes in general practice to be inclusive, non-judgemental, and to acknowledge sex workers' perspectives on their labour should be accompanied by the development of specific peer support services.

## INTRODUCTION

REAL (Resources Education and Advocacy Locally for Sex Work) is the new name for the community collaborative that began in 2005 as STREET (Sex Trade Resources Education and Empowerment Team). The committee originally met to address service gaps that sex workers were experiencing in Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk, New Credit and Six Nations of the Grand River including health and safety concerns. STREET also provided education for the community, specialized training to individual agencies as requested, written materials for doctors, hospitals, police and social service agencies, and outreach to sex workers. In 2014 Sarah Stevens from Nova Vita Domestic Violence Prevention Services, successfully applied for an Ontario Trillium Foundation funded research grant, in collaboration with Wilfrid Laurier University and the Sexual Assault Centre of Brant. *Let's Talk About Sex Work: Report of the REAL working group for Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk, Assessing the Needs of Sex Workers in Our Community* identified areas in which the communities of Brantford, Brant, Haldimand and Norfolk, could do a better job of being inclusive and providing respectful and appropriate services to sex workers. It was also intended to raise awareness among local social and health service providers' concerns and perspectives. One recommendation that came forward was in reference to the name change as it was identified by participants that The STREET acronym was confusing and not inclusive as the committee advocates for all people doing sex work and not only for street-level sex workers.

REAL (formerly STREET) defines sex work as “a consensual act, distinct from sexual violence such as rape, sexual slavery, and human trafficking for the purposes of sex. REAL recognizes the diversity of experiences within sex work and the variety of types of sex work (formal, informal). REAL recognizes that some individuals may exchange sex for goods and services (rent, food) and do not consider themselves part of the sex industry. An individual's own terms of self-identification will be recognized and respected” (STREET Guiding Principles 2012).

The REAL committee (formerly STREET) undertook this research with the goal of better understanding the experiences of people doing sex work in Brantford and Brant, Haldimand, and Norfolk (BHN) counties. One of the purposes of the research was to identify areas in which, as a community, we can do a better job of being inclusive and providing respectful and appropriate services to sex workers. A second purpose was to raise awareness among local social and health service providers of sex workers' concerns and perspectives. This research is crucial to the committee's overall objectives of:

1. Increasing the safety of sex workers by providing information, education, advocacy, and resources;
2. Increasing general awareness and sensitivity of issues related to sex work through community education, written resources, and consultation;
3. Providing education and consultation to service providers to increase the availability of non-judgemental, supportive, and inclusive services;
4. Advocating for and advancing the human and labour rights of sex workers; and
5. Linking and referring individuals involved in sex work to appropriate services and resources (STREET guiding principles 2012).

In order to meet these objectives, the committee determined that more information about the current status of sex work in our community and sex workers' experiences with community services was required, to ensure that any and all recommendations and advocacy are based on evidence and concretely linked to the realities of local sex work.

Although this research is the first of its kind in our region, we are building on a long history of research on sex work in Canada that has engaged the input and collaboration of people working in the industry. Many talented and insightful scholars and activists have worked to create a better understanding of the dynamics of the sex industry and sex workers' lives in Canada. Sociologists (Benoit et al. 2014; Krüsi et al. 2014; van der Meulen, Durisin, and Love 2013; Jeffrey and MacDonald 2006; Lewis and Shaver 2006; Lewis et al. 2005; Benoit and Miller 2001), criminologists (Bruckert and Law 2013; Parent, Bruckert, Corriveau, Mensah, and Toupin 2013; Bruckert, Parent, and Poliot 2006; Lowman 2000; Maloney 2004; Bruckert, Parent, and Robataille 2003), lawyers (Pivot 2006, 2004, 2002), and sex worker rights' organizations (Sex Workers United Against Violence et al. 2014; Bruckert and Chabot 2010; Currie and Gillies 2006; Stella 2005; Cler-Cunningham 2001) have all provided valuable insights into the complexities of sex work in Canada. From their work we know that although there are many simplistic stereotypes of who sex workers are and how they work, the realities are often complex, variable, and considerably more nuanced than we might think at first glance. The insights of this research combine with previous knowledge to provide a snapshot of the sex industry in our region and to offer valuable direction for community service providers who wish to respond to the needs of local sex workers in ways that are respectful, helpful, and inclusive.

This report begins by setting out the methodology of the research, situating the research in our local context, and describing key demographic information about the participants. The second section positions this study within the broader framework of sex work research in Canada and provides a description of the current socio-legal context by outlining the current laws on prostitution in Canada.

The third section of this report begins to explain the findings of this research and explore their implications with respect to the structural realities of the sex industry and sex workers' individual experiences. First we present the findings on how local sex workers view their relationship to sex work, their experiences of entry, and the myriad individual and structural factors that affect the realities of the local sex industry. In section four we address sex workers' everyday lived realities including their experiences of violence, stigma, and the logistical challenges of doing sex work in a small community or rural area. Section five addresses sex workers' interactions with the law and police. Section six explores health concerns, health care needs, and interactions with local social services. Finally, section seven summarizes and offers constructive recommendations for the improvement of services to sex workers in Brantford, BHN.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was proposed and executed at a crucial moment in the history of sex work in Canada. As the proposal for funding was being prepared, members of Parliament were working overtime in the House of Commons to debate and pass bill C-36, *The Protection of Communities and Vulnerable Persons Act*. This legislative framework for responding to prostitution was the first to criminalize the purchase of sex itself in Canada, rather than just associated activities (e.g. communicating for the purposes of prostitution, or operating or being found in a bawdy house). The new laws came into effect on December 6, 2014, shortly after we received notification that this research had been approved for funding, making this one of the first research projects to investigate the early effects of the new laws.

This research is also unique in its focus on a largely rural and small city demographic. The only city in the Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk (BHN) region is Brantford, with a population of approximately 95,000. The surrounding counties are more sparsely populated, with a total population of approximately 144 000, according to the 2011 census data, spread over 3700 square kilometers. By contrast, the majority of Canadian and North American research on sex work has been conducted in large urban centres, with notable exceptions including Benoit et al.'s (2014) multi-site study, which included one small Canadian city (Fort McMurray, AB), and Jeffrey and MacDonald's (2006) study of sex work in the Maritimes. The findings of this research are specific to the experiences of sex workers in Brantford, BHN, and cannot be generalized to other places, or more urban settings. However, in comparison with previous research and existing knowledge on sex work in Canada, the data provides insight into some key differences between the experiences of rural and urban sex workers.

As described in the introduction, REAL (formerly STREET) is a community-based working group comprising social service and healthcare professionals in Brantford, BHN. Although the original terms of reference for the STREET committee allow for the inclusion of members who are active or former sex workers, the committee has had no representation from sex workers, although recently there has been some interest expressed – largely due to the increased profile of the research project. Given that this community group has no first-hand experience doing sex work in our region, it was very important that this research engage directly with sex workers and privilege<sup>1</sup> their voices and experiences, by paying close attention to how local sex workers view their own situations and concerns and avoiding the temptation to redefine or reinterpret the way that they see their lives. As such, the primary methodology for this research drew on feminist epistemologies utilizing semi-structured interviews to uncover sex workers' perspectives on key issues previously identified in the literature on sex work, and offering space for them to identify other areas of concern. In designing this research to better understand the contours of the local industry, we drew on insights from previous research to investigate how the context of sex work in Brantford BHN compares to the situation in other Canadian cities.

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<sup>1</sup> In feminist research and practice, we use the term “privilege” in this context to denote that we wish to suspend our own assumptions about the realities of others' experiences and to allow them the space and time to explain how they see the world. By privileging their voices, we commit to respecting and highlighting their stories and to avoid redefining or reinterpreting the way that they see the world through our own lens.

The interview guide drew heavily from POWER's (Bruckert & Chabot 2010) interview guide for their participatory action needs assessment conducted in the Ottawa-area and was divided into themes: basic demographics and information about their history in the sex industry; interactions with clients; interactions with law and police; violence and safety; interactions with health and social services; interactions with third parties (people they work with and for); societal and personal opinions about sex work; social life and support; basic and unmet needs. The POWER research was grounded in the sex work community in the Ottawa-Gatineau area and the grassroots input into that questionnaire was an important contribution because there is no organized sex working community in Brantford, BHN from which we could draw direction. We are grateful to POWER and their lead researcher, Chris Bruckert, for kind permission to use and adapt their interview guide for this research.

### ***Research Recruitment***

Since there is no organized sex worker-led community or group in Brantford, BHN to draw on, one of the primary challenges of this research was to reach out to local sex workers and to encourage them to participate and to share their stories. Gaining access to marginal and hidden populations is a known barrier to effective research and we engaged a variety of innovative approaches to raise awareness of this research in hopes of recruiting participants. Our research assistant, Alex Tigchelaar, designed a creative poster campaign with the slogan *Sex Work is Real Work* to attract the attention of local sex workers. Sex workers and allies from Toronto participated in the poster campaign by modeling as Hollywood depictions of sex workers. Each model appeared on a postcard with a brief synopsis of the movie s/he represented describing a fictional account of sex work, followed by the tagline "What's your REAL experience?" (see appendices). The postcard included information about the research and contact information for the researchers. A larger poster included all 5 Hollywood depictions – an ironic representation intended to capture attention. The information provided on the posters and postcards noted that individuals were offered a \$40 honorarium for their time to participate in an interview.

After receiving approval from the research ethics board at Wilfrid Laurier University, the posters were displayed in public spaces and distributed to community agencies. We launched a STREET FaceBook page and used social media to raise awareness about the research and invite participation. We promoted the research during local Pride festivities, and via public talks during Take Back the Night and at the Brant Sexual Assault Centre's annual meeting. In addition, we also organized two public performances of Alex Tigchelaar's *Les Demimondes* – a one woman play about sex worker rights - and public discussions at The Alexander bar on Market Street and on the campus of Wilfrid Laurier University. Both the Expositor and Brant news covered the research; several participants told us that they learned about the research through the newspaper articles. Due to unexpected concern from some social and health service providers about the poster campaign, we later designed a more non-descript poster without any images of sex workers (for more on the recruitment process and controversy over the posters see Hannem & Tigchelaar, forthcoming). We continued to distribute posters, and postcards and encouraged members of REAL to mention the research to their clients. Research assistants visited locations in Brantford and in the counties that were identified as places where street-based sex work was common – they distributed postcards and hung posters in public spaces. We also contacted local sex workers directly via their advertisements to invite their participation. In keeping with REAL's understanding of sex work, the research was

deliberately framed broadly to recruit individuals who saw sex work as a means of generating income.

Although we endeavoured to recruit workers from across the spectrum of the sex industry and those labouring in different sectors of the sex industry (i.e. in-call/out-call indoor work, street-based work, massage parlour, and erotic dancing), the resulting sample is unique and, in some ways, quite homogenous. The Brantford, BHN region is a largely working class region, and the sex industry in this community is a reflection of its broader economic and social realities. While there is a small travelling sector of workers in this area who have a more urban sensibility towards their work and are engaged in broader political conversations about sex work, and a small sector of highly marginalized street-based workers, the majority of the workers we encountered are everyday working-class people who happen(ed) to be involved in sexual labour. Their work neither defines them, nor fulfils them, but neither do they consider themselves victims. Their lives are complicated, and sometimes messy, but mirror the everyday realities of many working-class people in mainstream employment. In recruiting through social and health service agencies, we accessed a population of workers who have recognized that they have some needs and have made the effort to seek out services to assist themselves in addressing those needs. They do not have great privilege, and may face multiple challenges (e.g. financial, drugs, mental health), but neither are they the most marginalized, nor does their sex work make their lives unique from the lives of other working class people. The liminal realities of these everyday sex workers<sup>2</sup> (Sterling 2015) are often made invisible in bifurcated conversations about “happy hookers” and “exploited victims.” This research is very much focused on the experiences of everyday sex workers in a semi-rural, working-class community.

### ***Data Collection***

The interviews took the form of a conversation between the interviewer and participant, with the interviewer ensuring that all themes were addressed and asking prompting questions to elicit more detailed or precise responses, as required. In keeping with Tri-Council Policies on Research with Human Subjects and according to the research ethics policies of Wilfrid Laurier University, all participants were provided with a consent letter describing the study and the safeguards for anonymity, which was reviewed orally by the interviewer. Written consent was required for participation and a \$40 honorarium was provided to thank each participant for their time. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours; the average interview lasted 90 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, anonymized to protect the identities of the participants. All participants were given pseudonyms – the names that appear in this report are not their real names. Participants were given the option to review their transcripts.

### ***Data Analysis***

NVivo qualitative analysis software was used to organize and manage the anonymized data. The data was subjected to line-by-line thematic coding; we used both a pre-determined thematic coding scheme derived directly from the interview guide, and also created emergent codes which stood out to the researcher as salient concepts or themes in the data. A second coding was used to ensure that

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<sup>2</sup> Sterling (2015) defines “everyday sex workers” as apolitical, not necessarily thinking of their work as feminist action, but oriented to their activities as labour and an income-generating activity, regardless of whether or not they enjoy sex work.

emergent themes were captured across the data set and to collapse and expand related categories. We also drew out basic descriptive statistics from the data in order to provide an overview of the participants and to capture the diversity of the sample. These basic descriptive numbers should be understood as not generalizable, based on the small, non-representative sample.

### ***Social and Health Service Interviews***

This research also draws on interviews with local social and health service providers. These interviews aimed to get a sense of the agencies' approaches to serving clients who are sex workers, and to better understand the challenges of serving this population from the perspective of the agencies and professionals. We conducted 12 interviews with representatives from local agencies – these were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An additional 3 questionnaires were filled out and submitted via email. The agency responses augment the data collected from sex workers, helping to provide some context for sex workers' accounts and giving valuable insight into the kinds of issues that are of concern to social and health service providers and those that may fall into a blind spot.

### ***The Participants***

As a result of our recruitment efforts, we interviewed 30 individuals about their participation in the sex industry in Brantford, Brant, Haldimand, Norfolk. Twenty-four were women and 6 were men (all were cisgender). All participants were living and/or had worked in the region; eighteen participants were actively doing sex work at the time of the interview; one was actively involved in management; 11 individuals were inactive in the sex industry or in the process of moving toward mainstream employment or other sources of income. The majority of these 11 inactive workers had experience doing sex work within the year prior to the interview; only one woman had been inactive for ten years (and thus did not have experience under the new laws). Four of the men were sex workers (one served male clients, and three served female clients) and two identified as managers for female escorts (one active and one former). Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 53, with an average age of 32 years. The participants identified that they had engaged in a variety of different types of sex work, including street-based prostitution (9), indoor (in-call/out-call) escorting (17), massage parlour attendant (3), erotic dancing (4), or management<sup>3</sup> (5).<sup>4</sup> (All experience in erotic dancing and in massage parlours was previous experience). The majority of the participants were white; 4 identified as aboriginal and 3 as black.

Experience in the sex industry varied widely from one year to more than twenty years with mean of 7.5 years. The age at which the participants began doing sex work ranged from 13 to 37, with an average age of 21.5 years. Six participants were under the age of 18 when they entered the sex industry. When asked, all except one of the active sex working participants described themselves as working independently at the time of the interview – although several discussed previous experiences working for massage parlours, escort agencies or with pimps. However, closer examination of their labour practices revealed that many did have connections to third parties who provided a range of services including security, driving, assistance with advertising, and booking or referrals. Some of these third parties were also themselves sex workers. Similarly, three of the sex

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<sup>3</sup> Two of the managers were men, the other three were women who were also doing sex work but had managed other workers.

<sup>4</sup> This number adds up to more than 30 because some participants had done more than one type of sex work.

worker participants described providing third party services to other workers including sharing/renting in-call space, assistance with advertising, booking appointments, or doing “dual” appointments.

The majority of the participants considered themselves to be full-time sex workers (when they were working), but many also used sex work to augment government support income (ODSP, Ontario Works)<sup>5</sup>. Two of the participants held other employment while doing sex work; six had also attended high school<sup>6</sup> or university, at the same time as doing sex work and three were working to obtain their GED at the time of the interview.

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<sup>5</sup> Although they described using sex work to augment government income, this did not preclude individuals from seeing themselves as “full-time” sex workers. Rather, from their perspective, sex work provided the bulk of their income and they often worked daily, making it a full-time job.

<sup>6</sup> All participants in this research were over the age of 19 at the time of their interviews – they discussed their early entrance to sex work in retrospect.

## POSITIONING THE RESEARCH

There is a long history of social science and socio-legal research on sex work in Canada and a large, established body of literature and knowledge on sex work both nationally and internationally. Sex work is a contested topic and there are several competing framings of the issue. Some radical feminists approach sex work as a form of sexual violence and exploitation of women in a patriarchal society, thereby defining all sex workers as victims in need of rescue from the industry (and from their male clients/abusers) (see, for example, Barry 1979, 1995; Carter 2004; Farley 2004; Jeffreys 2004). Social conservatives (and particularly conservative religious organizations) often view sex work as immoral, and may define sex workers as either “evil temptresses” to be punished or as “fallen women” to be saved<sup>7</sup> (see, for example, the factum of the Women’s Coalition in Canada v. Bedford 2013). Sex workers and their allies conversely understand sex work as work – an income-generating activity – devoid of overarching assumptions of moral or symbolic value (see Bruckert & Chabot 2010; Benoit & Millar 2001; Pivot 2004, 2006; Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network 2005). Given these highly divergent perspectives, and no clear middle ground, it is easy to see that truly “objective” research on sex work is incredibly difficult. Even the choice of language (“sex work” instead of “prostitution” or “prostituted women”) frames the research in a way that is not neutral to these issues. However, the language of “prostitution” and the victim framing can be felt as deeply inappropriate and offensive to sex workers who do not experience their engagement with the sex industry in this way.

Much of the research on sex work in Canada has adopted a labour frame, choosing to focus on the conditions in which sex workers work, the challenges to safety and health, and the myriad legal, structural, and individual constraints that they encounter in the course of their everyday lives (see Benoit & Millar 2001; Jeffrey & MacDonald 2006; Bruckert & Chabot 2010; Bruckert & Hannem 2013; Benoit et al. 2014; Krüsi et al. 2014; Jeffrey & Sullivan 2009; van der Meulen, Durisin & Love 2013). This research is no exception. The reasons for this are several; first, research which is aimed at changing policy or practice, like this project, requires an approach that lends itself to evidence-based policy, and one that is able to engage sex workers as contributors to the research.

Approaching the issue of the sex trade as one of violence against women is not a framing that resonates with many sex workers. While there are individuals in the sex trade who may be coerced, or who experience their involvement as victimizing, research suggests that these individuals are not a majority of sex workers. Framing sex work wholesale as victimization is alienating to many people who choose sex work and who absolutely do not view themselves as victims. This is not to say that victimization does not occur in the sex industry, but that they are not synonymous. Furthermore, policies which rely on this framing tend toward the use of criminal sanctions to target clients and third parties in the sex industry, in hopes of reducing demand for sexual services and eradicating the industry. Evidence shows us that this legal approach does not work to eliminate sex work or demand for sexual services, but does reproduce the harms of total criminalization (Krüsi et al. 2014; Sex Workers United Against Violence et al. 2014). Secondly, the moral condemnation of sex work is rooted in judgement and does not engender feelings of support among sex workers or instill confidence that their concerns will be addressed in a way that respects their autonomy, or even their basic humanity. An approach which looks at sex work as a societal evil is, at its core, disrespectful, underscoring patriarchal norms of control around women’s sexuality, and is ultimately unproductive

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<sup>7</sup> The penchant for the rescue narrative ironically often unites radical feminists and conservatives on the issue of sex work (see Hannem & Bruckert 2014).

for reducing harm or protecting sex workers' human rights. The Canadian experience with the criminalization of activities surrounding sex work demonstrates that this is not a helpful approach for sex workers. Indeed, the Supreme Court in Canada (Attorney General) *v.* Bedford (2013) ruled that the criminalization of activities surrounding sex work put sex workers in danger and made it impossible for them to work safely without contravening the law.

Third, and conversely, taking a labour framing constructively opens up the space to understand sex work as a form of marginal and precarious labour, to discuss how sex workers are excluded from the protection of labour laws, to destigmatize and position sex workers as workers who should be afforded respect and rights. Understanding sex work as labour does not conceptually require that the realities of those who experience victimization in the industry be buried or ignored. The potential or reality of sex trafficking or violence in sex work does not negate legitimate, consensual participation in sex work, any more than the potential or reality of young women trafficked to be nannies or housekeepers for slave wages delegitimizes childcare or housecleaning as an occupation, or the potential for violent assault delegitimizes work as a taxi driver. In many ways, the mundanity and risks of sex work have much in common with other marginal and precarious forms of labour. Setting aside our mores around sexuality opens up the possibility of a more productive conversation around harm reduction, safety, and human rights. For these reasons, and in keeping with the Guiding Principles of REAL, this report approaches the topic as one of labour and human rights, prioritizing strategies for harm reduction and safety for people working in the sex trade. In order to better understand the context in which sex workers are working and interacting with clients, third parties, law enforcement, and social services, we will explore the recent changes to the laws in Canada and discuss the implications of the laws for sex workers.

### ***Sex Work and the Law in Canada***

In 2007 three sex workers, Terri Jean Bedford, Amy Lebovitch, and Valerie Scott, launched a legal challenge to three provisions of the Criminal Code which were used to criminalize aspects of sex work in Canada: Section 210 (keeping or being found in a bawdy house), s. 212(1)(j) (living on the avails of prostitution), and s. 213(1)(c) (communicating in public for the purpose of prostitution). They argued that these three laws violated their section 7 Charter right to security of the person by making it very difficult to do sex work safely. Although the exchange of sexual services for money or other consideration was not illegal at the time, the criminalization of communication, the use of indoor locations for sex work, and third parties who might provide security, transportation or other services made it impossible for sex workers to legally work in safe conditions. Relying heavily on evidence from social science research and testimony from sex worker rights advocates, Ontario Superior Court justice Himel agreed with Bedford, Lebovitch, and Scott and in September 2010 overturned these three laws in Ontario. The judgement was suspended while the Government of Canada appealed the ruling. The ruling was partially upheld by the Ontario Court of Appeal in March 2012, and the fight continued to the Supreme Court of Canada. In December 2013 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the Himel judgement, effectively overturning these three laws. However, once again the judgement was suspended for one year, to give the Government the opportunity to revisit the laws surrounding prostitution in Canada. Sex worker rights groups in Canada immediately began lobbying for the decriminalization of sex work – while not perfect, New Zealand's *Prostitution Reform Act*, passed in 2003, was held up as a possible model for regulating sex work and providing legal and labour protections to people working in the sex industry. Activists argued for a “made in Canada New Zealand model” (POWER 2014, PIVOT 2014) which would build on existing best practices. Organizations such as Amnesty International and the World Health

Organization agree that decriminalization is the best policy to protect sex workers' health and safety. However, this was not the direction that the government ultimately opted to take.

Instead of decriminalizing sex work, Bill C-36, the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* criminalized the purchase of sex for the first time in Canada. Based on the Swedish legal model, sometimes referred to as asymmetrical criminalization, the law purports to criminalize and punish the purchasers of sex, rather than sex workers, in an attempt to reduce demand and thereby eradicate prostitution entirely. Third parties in the sex industry also remain criminalized in this approach. This kind of prohibitionist legislation is premised on the belief that prostitution is inherently exploitative and violence against women. In early public statements, the government asserted that the bill was intended to protect sex workers from violence, but relatively quickly the conversation shifted from the protection of sex workers to the eradication of prostitution, revealing the conservative moral undertones of the legislation. The changes to the law are described here in order to situate this research and the participants' accounts within the existing legal context.

Section 213 of the criminal code which previously prohibited “communicating for the purposes of obtaining sexual services for consideration” was revised to limit the applicability of the law to sex workers *only* in a public place that “is or is next to a school, playground, or park.” However, the new section 286.1 makes it illegal to communicate for the purpose of *purchasing* sexual services in *any place* (in public *or* in private) and it is also illegal to obtain sexual services for consideration. In practice, this means that the clients of sex workers – those purchasing services – can be charged for discussing the services they wish to purchase, or the cost of those services, and charged for paying or offering to pay for sex.

Section 212(1)(j), the “living on the avails” provisions designed to target third parties who profit from a sex workers' labour (e.g. drivers, managers, security, or booking agents) was also struck down by the Bedford decision. The complainants argued that this law precluded sex workers from hiring third parties or working for third parties who might provide assistance for their labour such as security services, driving or transportation, booking services, advertising, or provision of space. The “living on the avails” law was replaced by the new Criminal Code section 286.2, which criminalizes “material benefits from sexual services” and continues to criminalize those who benefit financially from someone else's sexual labour, unless they can prove that the “materially benefit” does not exceed the value of the service they provide (ie. that it is not an exploitative relationship between the sex worker and the third party). However, this exemption does not apply in cases of commercial enterprises. There is also an exemption for people to whom the sex worker is in a relationship that engenders a “duty of care” (presumably family members). Previously, case law had established that those to whom the worker owed a “moral obligation” of support (e.g. children, parents, partner) could not be convicted of living on the avails, so this exemption has encoded previous precedent. However, there is a reverse onus provision in this law which presumes that all persons who materially benefit from someone else's sexual labour are in a position of exploitation, *unless* they can prove otherwise. Thus, although on the surface the law has been altered in response to the Bedford decision, by including the exception for situations of non-exploitation, in practice the third parties with whom some sex workers work are still subject to criminalization, making it difficult for sex workers to work with security, drivers, or other third parties who assist to make the work safer.

Criminal Code section 286.4 is a new addition under Bill C-36 which criminalizes “everyone who knowingly advertises an offer to provide sexual services for consideration.” Although sex workers

are exempt from prosecution for advertising their own sexual services, in practice their ability to advertise is restricted as the owners/operators of newspapers or websites could be charged for permitting the ad.

Section 210 of the criminal code prohibited individuals from “keeping or being found in a bawdy house” – the definition of bawdy house was “a place that is kept or occupied, or resorted to by one or more persons, for the purpose of prostitution or the practice of acts of indecency.” This law could be, and often was, interpreted to mean that *any place*, including a hotel room, an individual’s home, a parking lot, or a vehicle could be defined as a common bawdy house and the individuals there could be charged. The Bedford decision resulted in prostitution being removed from the definition, making indoor sex work technically legal in Canada, for *sex workers* – but not for their clients.

In addition to these key changes to prostitution laws in Canada, the procuring law, section 286.3(1) is still in force. This law criminalizes any individual who “procures a person to offer or provide sexual services for consideration or...recruits, holds, conceals, or harbours a person who offers or provides sexual services, or exercises control or direction over the movements of that person.” Although it is intended to protect sex workers from exploitative or coercive situations and to prevent the recruitment of young people into the sex trade, this wide-ranging law can also be used to criminalize consensual third-party arrangements, as when agencies or booking agents direct a sex worker’s movements by hiring a cab or transportation to take her to an appointment.

Many legal experts and sex worker rights organizations have been highly critical of the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*. They suggest that these changes did not adhere to the spirit of the Bedford decision and that these laws may, in fact, still violate the section 7 right to security of the person in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, because sex workers still cannot legally work in ways that are safer. The Liberal government elected in late 2015 has promised to revisit these laws but, at the time of writing, they have not yet released any indication of changes to come.

On the sex worker rights activism front, there continues to be support for decriminalization, both among Canadian sex workers and allies, and internationally. The growing use of social media has enabled an international network of activists to support one another as they lobby for autonomy and decriminalization in countries around the globe. This international community celebrated as Amnesty International released its policy statement in support of the decriminalization of sex work in August 2015 (see the full policy statement at [www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/policy-on-state-obligations-to-respect-protect-and-fulfil-the-human-rights-of-sex-workers/)). However, often these kinds of high-level policy discussions can appear far from the everyday reality of people doing sex work. In the next section we turn to the findings of our interviews with local sex workers and begin to examine how their concerns fit into this socio-political context.

# UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL & STRUCTURAL REALITIES OF SEX WORK

## *Sex Work as Income-Generating Activity*

There is no standard narrative to explain why individuals begin working in the sex industry. Individuals come to sex work in diverse situations that defy easy categorization. Almost without exception, the participants in this study described their entrance to formal sex work as a response to financial need<sup>8</sup>, some of which was engendered by drug dependence. For example, Anna and Norah were both motivated by money, but in very different ways:

*...It was just to support my kids really. I had my first son and his dad and I split up. So, me being on Ontario Works and I'm in school every day, um, it's kind of hard to be on Ontario Works, go to school and meet the needs of your kids... So it was really about the money (Anna, 31, escort).*

*I used to own a business about 11 years ago, and I started smoking crack. And we lost the business. And then I started boosting [stealing] to support my habit, like movies, DVDs. And I got caught too many times, so I went to jail for the first time in my life ever; I was 32. So I decided I needed to find something else to support my habit so that's when I started hooking. Someone told me about it and I thought ok. And the first few times I thought, this is great. I can make money so fast and I didn't have any bad experiences back then, right, so at first it was great. (Norah, 43, former street-based worker)*

There is a common misconception that individuals would only become involved in the industry through coercion, recruitment, or because they have no other options. The reality is that although coercion may sometimes play a role, and an individual's viable options may indeed be very limited, individuals are rarely (if ever) in a position where they have *no* other options. There are many situations where individuals choose sex work because it appears more appealing than other types of low-paid and marginal labour or, as with Norah above, more reasonable than acquiring money through theft or other activities more vulnerable to criminalization — sex work appears as the *best* option for them, at that time. For example:

*Originally I was working. I had a nine to five. And I honestly didn't like cleaning bathrooms. It wasn't—like I don't like people telling me what to do. So, I took escorting a lot more serious. (Lucy, 23, escort).*

The rising cost of living and stagnation of wages in low-level service jobs poses a significant difficulty for many people trying to make ends meet. Understood from this perspective, the appeal of sex work is rational and pragmatic:

*Like, there's honestly, there's strippers out there that I know that make over a thousand dollars a day. Yet I'm sitting somewhere either behind a counter at a cashier making eleven bucks a fuckin' hour! That's extremely outrageous. Like and you expect me to try and not live at a poverty level when you're holding me there? Like I'm sorry, but eleven dollars an hour — with eleven dollars, I can't even get milk, bread and eggs! Like that's fucked, right? And the more they raise minimum wage, the more that everything else is going up... (Monica, 19, former street-based worker)*

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006, 2006b) also found that money was the primary motivator for their participants' involvement in sex work in the Maritimes.

In stark contrast to the widespread, albeit false, assertion that the *average* age of entry into the sex industry is 14 years<sup>9</sup>, as previously described in the methodology, the age at which participants began doing sex work ranged from 13 to 37, with an average age of 21.5 years. Six of the participants were under the age of 18 when they entered sex work; three of these underage individuals<sup>10</sup> began working independently and three described circumstances of direct or indirect coercion which resulted in (or can only be described as) sexual exploitation. Alyson and Elle were each sexually abused by relatives who subsequently introduced them to sex work. Alyson described that she was forced to do sex work by her uncle, while Elle recalled that at the time she thought that it was her choice to work for her cousin doing street-based work, but that her cousin would take all the money she earned. Phoebe ran away from home at the age of 16 and vividly described the exploitation that she experienced in her introduction to the sex industry:

*This guy was really, really nice to me and like, made me kinda like him. You know? And he was there for me when no one else was and helped me out and introduced me to crystal meth and stuff like that. Then he took me to a hotel and like, I had no idea. He was like, "All the stuff I do for you? I want my money back." So I couldn't leave. I was in that room for a week and he probably made about three thousand dollars off me by, you know, just sending people. And like, I didn't—I wasn't allowed to leave the room. There was somebody standing in the room all the time. I couldn't leave the room and there was just guys coming in. Like, not guy after guy but there was at least five to ten guys a day. And that was my first time ever and it—it really kinda scared me away from it for a while. Even though I grew up with it—I grew up looking at it as work. Like, I don't think there's anything wrong with it, you know what I mean? It's a job kinda? But it does take away a lot from a girl if you're not willing to do it. You know what I mean? (Phoebe, 25, escort)*

All three of these young women later returned to or continued in the industry as adults when they were free of their exploiter. As Elle, who was “pimped” by an older female cousin, described:

*I was actually introduced by a family member. I was under the age at the time; I was 14. I didn't know any better, got into it, stopped, then got back into it because when you need money and you need to survive, it's something that you just lean back onto. So I've worked real jobs, I've had a productive life, but when things don't go well, then I, I turn back to it and it's a mean of support. It's easy money. (Elle, 26, former escort and street-based worker)*

Sex work may also present itself as a means of solving a pressing financial problem. Several women who participated in this study disclosed that they began doing sex work as a means of paying legal bills for custody disputes or other, unrelated, criminal charges. Sometimes bureaucratic decisions, such as ineligibility for legal aid, have the unintended consequence of pushing individuals towards sex work:

*I couldn't afford my two bedroom apartment and therefore had no way to get my daughter back [from Family and Child Services]. So I got a job like a normal person. Just went out, quit school, got a job. But then Legal Aid for my lawyer cut me off because I had a job, even though I was making minimum wage. So at that point I had a relative who was escorting through BackPage and had just been telling me how much money she*

<sup>9</sup> See Lowman (2013) for an excellent analysis of the roots of this fabrication.

<sup>10</sup> All participants were over the age of 19 at the time of the interview.

*was making and this and that. And I'm like, well the money you made last night could pay for my lawyer for like, two months. So I got involved in escorting.* (Callie, 22, escort and former street-based worker).

Many of the participants used sex work to supplement other forms of income, particularly Ontario Works or ODSP. A few had partners who also worked or collected government support payments. Those who are in favour of a strong social welfare system have long pointed out that existing levels of support in Ontario are insufficient to provide individuals with adequate quality of life; the number of participants who cited their sex work as a means of augmenting government support certainly speaks to this reality. Participants in this research pointed out how difficult it was to subsist on government support; these financial struggles were often compounded by the cost of substance use.

### ***Intersections of Drug Use and Sex Work***

While it is certainly a myth that the majority or all sex workers are addicted to substances (Bruckert & Chabot 2010), the prevalence of current or former drug users in this research speaks to habitual drug use as a key issue in this region. Although some previous research has identified high levels of drug use among street based sex workers (see Krüsi et al. 2014; PIVOT), the sample in this research is distinct from other research in Canadian urban centres in that histories of what the participants described as addiction or heavy drug use are highly prevalent among indoor workers. Some participants explicitly described their drug use as directly connected to their sex work:

*You get caught up in it, you get trapped in it, because you start doing drugs because you're just so numb all the time, you don't feel anything [...] you just become numb after a while and you don't feel anything [...] So then, yeah, you do like, I was making money to just do drugs, my thing was ecstasy. So I used to basically have sex to go and get money to go and get high to then have, to just have sex.* (Chelsea, 26, escort and former street-based worker).

*The drugs made it easier to deal with. And then I had, like, periods of sobriety and it was just like, I hated myself. And ashamed and like, dirty and I still do feel that way.* (Alyson, 33, former escort)

Notably, while a few participants connected their initial drug use to the need to “numb” or cope with the emotional fallout of sex work, most felt that over time the drugs ceased to hold that function in their lives and work, becoming rather a habitual or even enjoyable practice, rather than a necessity for working.

While some participants began using drugs after they started doing sex work, many of the participants in this research were drug users first and reported that they began doing sex work to pay for or to obtain drugs:

*I got into it to support my crack habit, quite honestly. I started working about eight years ago and had never done it before, and had a really bad crack habit and had to support it somehow.* (Margaret, 40, former street-based worker)

In another case, Edwin (30) was seasonal construction worker who worked on the side as an escort exclusively to provide for his drug habit, trading sexual services for pharmaceutical drugs from his middle-aged female clients. Formal sex work to pay for drugs, or informally trading sex directly for drugs is a key feature of the industry in Branford, BHN.

Many individuals in the helping/service professions have difficulty reconciling the question of whether heavy drug use invalidates the idea that sex work is work – a form of labour. It is important to understand sex workers' drug use in its social context and to avoid blanket assumptions or stereotypes that would read over individuals' experiences of their own lives and situations. For the most part, participants in this research who used sex work to pay for their substance use were clear that they did not see themselves as victims, but that they viewed their sex work as a means of maintaining a pattern of drug use that they were either unable or unwilling to give up at that time. Some participants predicted that they would stop doing sex work if they were no longer using, but perhaps more telling were the cases of three individuals in this research who had made the effort to stop using substances but continued to do sex work. Their experiences raise questions about the assumption that ending a drug habit will (or should) lead to an exit from the sex industry.

*Drugs, yeah. I needed drug money and stuff like that. I'm sober now but so, the money still comes but it stays [...] Yeah, no, it's not about the drugs anymore. Chasing money and that's it. (Maggie, 35, escort and former street-based worker)*

Several of the participants lamented that they would be much better off, financially and personally, if they could stop using and spending the money they earned on drugs, but continue to do sex work to generate income.

*I don't know. It's just - I really like money. I wish I wasn't smoking [crack] and I wish I could just save my money because, I'm telling you, in one month I think I'd have fifteen thousand dollars. (Rose, 32, escort)*

*I think to run it successfully it's good to keep drugs out of it. Once you become an addict, it's really hard. But if you're not an addict, it can be run very well. You can be making money, you can really use that money and put it elsewhere. (Elle, 26, former escort and street-based worker)*

Individual experiences of the relationship between sex work and drugs vary, however, they need to be understood as reflective of broader societal experiences with substance use. The use of money earned via sex work to pay for drugs does not logically and automatically invalidate sex work as labour. There is a moral and classist judgement attached to our willingness to accept sex work when it is used to pay bills, or for food or rent, but not if it is used to pay for drugs; we would exercise control not only over how individuals earn money but over how they can legitimately spend it. No such questions are raised about individuals in middle or upper-class occupations who choose to spend their money on drugs or alcohol. Ironically, this judgement about "legitimate" sex work even filters into the narratives of some sex workers who have themselves internalized the moral judgements of what is appropriate (and inappropriate) to spend money on:

*I wish I was [using sex work to pay rent] because that would be more dignifying; but I'm not feeding my kids, I'm not paying my rent. I don't have kids. I commend people who do it to feed their kids or pay their rent or pay their mortgage or bills. I'm doing it just for dope which makes me feel like a piece of shit. But that's the life of an addict. (Wade, 30, escort)*

That being said, heavy drug use does affect the ways in which individuals are able to do sex work, potentially placing them at greater risk. Some participants were keenly aware of the risks of working while impaired by drugs or alcohol and consequently avoided substance use while working:

*I had known this guy for a few months and I thought he was in charge of the situation. I ended up drinking too much and he buggered off and left me there and left me stranded. So, you know, it wasn't the end of the world but it was a wake-up call to me saying, "Whoa, wait a minute, you need to be in control of these situations. You can't leave control to somebody else." It was enough of a wake-up call to me that no drugs, one or two drinks, that's it. I need to be able to keep control of the situation. So, that I was lucky. I got my wake-up call without any harm being done. (Brenda, 53, former informal worker)*

Consistent with previous research (e.g. Bruckert & Chabot 2010), our findings highlight several ways in which substance using/misusing sex workers are placed at a disadvantage in terms of safety and working conditions. First, individuals who engage in heavy drug use are limited in their options of income generating activities. Much as drug use may make it difficult for individuals to organize their lives to access appointment-based services (i.e. doctors, counsellors), frequent drug use may render individuals unable to hold down "straight work" if they cannot keep a schedule or show up on time for a shift. Callie had a minimum wage job at a fast food restaurant, but her drug use posed a significant difficulty to her ability to remain employed:

*I ended up losing the job I was using to pay for the apartment because of my drug use. Because it got to the point where I didn't—I barely knew who I was or what day it was and like, it would be like, halfway through the day and I'd be like, oh shit. I was supposed to be at work four hours ago and I'm just sitting here doing calls and getting high and yeah. It's like, "oh, I could go to work now but there's three hours left on my shift." And I ended up losing my job and losing the apartment and on and on and on. (Callie, 22, escort and former street-based worker)*

Similarly, choosing the relative safety and better working conditions of indoor work is often not an option for workers who engage in heavy drug use. Just as drug use can compromise the ability to maintain "straight" employment, it also makes it difficult to engage in the more organizational aspects of sex work, including booking appointments, keeping appointments, and offering the kind of service that clients are expecting. For example, Norah explained that she was unable to work for an escort agency when her drug use was at its peak, despite what she recognized as the obvious financial benefits:

*[With the agency] you got men that are willing to spend \$250.00 and not here trying to talk you down from \$40.00, right? Completely different, man. But I just couldn't keep myself together like that, you know? I just—cause when I had the business, like, my partner and I smoked \$200,000 worth of crack in about 12 weeks. And the thing about crack is the more you do, the more you need, right? So I was just, I was a write-off. So I couldn't keep myself together enough to book appointments or not be a mess on the calls, really. I was usually a mess on the street. (Norah, 43, former street-based worker)*

Like any mainstream business, agencies and massage parlours are unlikely to hire sex workers who engage in significant drug use because they are seen as unreliable and irresponsible employees who may not show up for work and it is more likely that customers will complain about poor service. Additionally, agencies do not wish to risk that an intoxicated sex worker will draw undue attention to their business and lead to legal investigation.

Secondly, sex workers who are engaged in heavy drug have less control of their working conditions than those who are sober and may be prone to work for significantly less money or to be cheated out of their pay. Heavy users who are entering withdrawal or coming down from a high may feel

compelled to obtain more drugs in order to avoid painful and undesirable withdrawal symptoms; this desire can compromise their decision-making abilities and result in a situation in which they will trade their services for the minimum required to obtain their drug of choice. Norah explained clearly how her addiction affected her decision-making on the street:

*If I was really sick, I got in and they said “well fuck, if you wanna do something for twenty bucks?” and if I was really pill sick, I would. But for the most part, I like to keep it forty [dollars] and up. Only if I was desperately pill sick. Because when you’re ready to die, and someone offers you the money for a pill, you’ll do it. You’ll do it, and that’s all there is to it. (Norah, 43, former street-based worker)*

This kind of vulnerability also compromises the worker’s ability to turn down clients and may place her in a position where she will give in to a client’s pressure to perform sexual services without a condom. Alyson described that being high gave her, “*bigger chances of getting something because you’re just like, well now my bare-back [no condom] price is the same as what using a condom would be before.*” As Callie discovered, even periodic lapses of vigilance can create vulnerability to STIs:

*I did agree to let someone pay me a hundred and fifty extra because I was jonesing and I owed money for the hotel room the next day. And so I told the guy that if he gave me two-hundred, whatever. And that’s the time I got chlamydia.*

Sex workers are well aware of the effects of heavy drug use on their lives. The majority of the participants identified their drug use as a key concern or challenge that they face in trying to maintain control over their own lives and remain safe and healthy. As a community, offering assistance to individuals who wish to reduce the harm of their substance use or to stop using should be a key priority for Brantford, BHN.

### ***Sex Work as a Social Safety Net***

The participants in this study had a range of feelings about their involvement in the sex industry and many of them expressed ambivalence about the work that they do. The majority of the participants (all but one) explicitly identified their involvement in the sex industry as a form of precarious or unrecognized work; they are aware that there is often social and moral judgement attached to the sex industry but they resist this judgement in favour of a more pragmatic lens:

*So I’m in it for the money. I don’t care what — and normally I don’t even know and nor do I care [what people think]. I’m doing it for business for money, so yeah. You do get a lot of negativity though. A lot. (Amanda, 33, escort)*

Viewing sex work as a form of labour does not mean that sex workers necessarily enjoy their job or see it as a particularly good job, although some do. For example, Nancy had this to say about street-based sex work:

*This is not something we like to do. I don’t think people get it. I think they think we enjoy it. We don’t. I know I didn’t. I don’t think everybody did. I know some girls kinda did. They liked it but that’s all they knew and that’s all they had going for them right? It’s not a great job but it - the money can be good. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

In many ways, the narrative of “it’s just a job” mirrors workers’ discussions of other kinds of unfulfilling or low-wage labour. For example, Hebson’s (2009) interviews with working-class women about their work bear remarkable similarities to many interviews with sex workers, including the ones in this study. Many Canadians have jobs, not careers, and do not necessarily see their work as self-actualizing or particularly important in terms of identity. In many ways, the idea that work *should* be personally rewarding or somehow connected to one’s sense of self, beyond the ability to provide for oneself financially, is a profoundly middle and upper-classed construction that does not necessarily resonate with the experiences of many working-class people.

The stories that the workers told about how they began doing sex work point to important intersections of marginalities. Many sex workers may be negotiating poverty, criminalization or legal troubles, substance use or dependencies, and/or lack of education or employment training. Combined with a socio-structural situation where good-paying jobs are relatively scarce and difficult to obtain, and the cost of living is rising, the market for sexual services is a pragmatic choice that allows individuals to feel that they have some control or a “fall back” in the event that they are in need of money. Having the option of sex work provides some individuals with a feeling of control and independence in a world and economy where people on the margins often feel powerless. Furthermore, many workers who have left the industry leave open the potential that they may return to selling sex or do sex work part-time if they are unable to make ends meet with “straight” work or on government assistance (Law 2013). Donna, a former erotic dancer, explained:

*It [erotic dancing] gives me more control over my life I feel, like. Cuz I know at any moment, I don’t need an interview; I don’t need a resume. I don’t need anything. As long as I don’t break my leg, I’m good to go.* (Donna, 29, former erotic dancer)

Another indoor worker who stopped escorting after a violent assault was also cautious in her discussion of her future plans:

*I don’t think, like I really think I’m done but I can’t make a hundred percent promise. You know, it’s easy—not easy money—but its money and it got me drugs. It got me things I wanted. So, it was just kinda—like I can’t promise that I’ll never go back but right now I’m done.* (Alyson, 33, former escort)

### **Sex Workers as Parents**

Seventeen of the sex workers interviewed were parents (16 mothers and one father), and one was pregnant with her first child at the time of the interview; 11 had children under the age of 18. Children and obtaining custody were repeatedly mentioned as a motivating factor for exiting the industry, however, sex workers most often reported drug use or other criminal charges, not their work, as the primary factor for loss or surrender of custody. Only two of the active sex workers with children under the age of 18 had primary custody of their child(ren) at the time of the interview; five had informal arrangements with family members who cared for their children, and four had lost custody of their children to Family and Child Services (FACS). Although sex work was not explicitly mentioned as a factor for loss of custody, those women who had children in the custody of FACS or in kinship placements were often very concerned that their work would be used against them to deny return of custody or could possibly place custody in jeopardy. Callie, who was doing sex work to pay her lawyer’s bill for her custody hearings was unequivocal in her determination to leave escorting as soon as she had regained custody:

*I would stop [escorting] on the spot cause my family would help me out. And plus like, when you do have a child in your care, Ontario Works gives you a bit more. So I'd be able to just do what I was doing before. Go back to school, take care of my daughter. I'd have enough money to give her a proper apartment. [...] And I'd never do it with my child in my care. There's too much risk. Not just to me myself but to like, just losing her again. Like I can't risk that if that happens So it's like, once I have her back it all stops 'cause it's all for her anyway. (Callie, 22, escort and former street-based worker)*

Maggie, similarly planned to leave sex work to care for her youngest son who was in foster care at the time of the interview. Her other children lived part-time with her and part-time with her mother.

*I'm gonna quit as soon as I get my baby back. If I get him back it'll be over for me. So I'll hook my clients up with somebody else maybe and I don't know. But I'll have to quit 'cause I'd rather have my babies than do that. I have had a lot of running with it. Like I was sixteen and I'm thirty-five now so, been a long time. (Maggie, 35, escort and former street-based worker)*

Jade was concerned that her ex-partner was attempting to use her history of sex work in a custody dispute to discredit her and to fight her application for shared custody. She seemed optimistic that it would not be held against her by the judge and by FACS, but was frustrated by the leverage it created. After she had stopped escorting, he also used her history of sex work to trade access to her children for sexual services:

*He said, 'well I'll let you see the girls. I'll let you come over and hang out with the girls tomorrow.' We actually took them for the whole, entire day on July first and did the fireworks thing and all that. But I had to sleep with him to do that. Prostitution is prostitution. Doesn't matter what it's for, but the only reason I had participated in that one was to see my kids because I really didn't care what it took. You know? (Jade, 28, former escort)*

Anna, who was a single mother with sole custody of her children, was comparatively unconcerned and was successfully navigating her work and parenting responsibilities with assistance from family:

*As long as I keep everything away from my kids and that's one thing. My kids will never ever be affected by it. [...] Normally my mom or my sister will watch the kids [while I work]. It's what I do with my own personal life and if my children aren't around there's no reason [for FACS] to be involved. (Anna, 31, escort)*

Recently, academic researchers and activists have become more interested in the intersections of sex work and motherhood. Bromwich and DeJong's (2015) anthology provides an in-depth analysis of the stigma and challenges that face sex working mothers. As a job, sex work is not inherently incompatible with parenthood and may even provide many benefits, such as a flexible, self-directed work schedule that can be adjusted to allow for time with children or time off in the event of illness or special events. Community service agencies who work with sex working parents should be attentive to the fact that no particular type of employment, including sex work, is an automatic risk factor for children and that all cases involving child custody must be considered on an individual basis. A local professional in the field of sexual health also reiterated this message:

“So our program, and I’ve been challenged on this many times, is not an automatic call to Family and Children’s Services just because there are children. [...] We look at the fact that children need to be at risk and we look at the fact that children need to have been exposed to something. Are they being put in harm’s way? Is there anything we need to do to help protect the child? And the way that I look at it and the way the program looks at it is just because someone is a street worker doesn’t necessarily go back to the fact that her children are at risk. But I think it is an individual practitioner’s decision and that might be from past experience, frightening for the patient.”

As this health care professional indicated, it can be frightening for sex workers who fear that disclosure of their occupation will lead to FACS involvement, and this fear can prevent some workers from disclosing and from being able to access appropriate assistance. While some sex workers may decide to stop working in order to care for their children, we should be certain that leaving sex work does not become an imperative for individuals who wish to parent and that children are not removed from their parents without an appropriate assessment of their actual risk.

### ***Seeking Alternative Income***

Of the 19 individuals who were currently active in the sex industry at the time of their interview<sup>11</sup>, 8 expressed that they hoped to stop working or move into the mainstream labour market in the near future. Several indicated that they hoped to go to school and find another job, while others intended to stop using drugs in order to ‘make do’ on government income assistance. The process of leaving sex work is wrought with challenges — not the least of which is finding a new means of providing for one’s financial needs. As described above, Maggie (35) discussed her plans to stop escorting when she obtained custody of her child; but she went on to confess that she was uncertain of her ability to find an alternative means of obtaining sufficient income to support herself and her children:

Interviewer: *What will you do when you quit?*

*I don’t know. I’ve never had a real job so I don’t know. I’m on ODSP right now. Hopefully it’ll just work out. I don’t know. [...] I’m just getting tired of it. The money’s good though so every time I say I quit you know, I think about the money. Then you go back to it, so, yeah. It’s hard to quit.*

Amy was escorting at the time of her interview, but was making plans to stop working. However, she was very practical and blunt in her assessment of her ability to find other means of supporting herself:

*So as soon as I get my grade twelve I’ll look for [other] work, but right now I have to do only one thing at a time or I’m going to over load myself and have like, a break again. So that’s the only thing I am going to do right now like, I’m not going to looking for a job right now I’m just hoping for assistance and then for a couple months I can just live off welfare and I don’t need a lot right? What they give you on assistance will be enough for just me to live off of that until I get a job. And it sounds like a great plan and like I could be successful but like, things happen right? So it’s like, preparing for that too. So I know if she says like no you’re not eligible for welfare that I’m going to have to like, do the work I know how to do because that’s the only thing I know how to do to make money. [...] I know I can eventually learn to do more than have sex or*

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<sup>11</sup> At least one of the women who had stopped working at the time of the interview had returned to sex work by the time of writing. Several others could not be contacted.

*whatever but at this point it's all I know how to do that's worth money. So yeah, that's my only job skill currently. (Amy, 21, escort)*

In Brantford, BHN there are no sex work-specific services and often more general services lack the understanding to prioritise the kinds of assistance that sex workers might need. Sex workers often have many transferable skill sets such as customer service, entrepreneurialism, or creativity, but these skills are not generally recognized in applications for mainstream employment – listing sex work on a resumé is unlikely to help one to be successful in obtaining a mainstream job. As we see in the next section, if we think about what sex work entails beyond the provision of interpersonal and sexual services, which may include advertising, maintaining an incall establishment, corresponding with clients, negotiating services and fees, etc., it becomes evident that many sex workers possess transferable business, interpersonal, marketing, and administrative skills that are not recognized. A creative employment counsellor, for example, might encourage sex workers to identify their transferable skills and not to dismiss previous experiences as irrelevant. However, even if one can make a case for a transferable skill set, a criminal record can also be a barrier to obtaining other kinds of employment.

*A lot of girls have a criminal record. You know what I mean, like I have gun charges now. Like that's pretty severe. And the smallest things can result in a lifelong consequence of criminal—being in the courts. And I think something that helps you pardon your record, like when looking for actual work, 'cause you don't want to like go to a job and they like run a fucking criminal check on you and they're like 'oh, you've been arrested thirty times for prostitution - we're not going to hire you.' It's like if there was a way to kinda like make it so we could get a job it would be good too for sure. (Amy, 21, escort)*

Those services that are targeted specifically at sex workers are not always appropriate or helpful for many people. Alyson decided to stop doing sex work in the aftermath of a violent assault – she was directed to a transitional housing program located outside of the BHN region that was focused on assisting sex workers to leave the industry, but she was quite unhappy with the salvation approach taken by the religious organization:

*Ok, their idea of help and therapy and stuff is prayer and although I agree that prayer can help, I don't think it's the be all and end all of treatment. Like, eight hours to nine hours of church a week. That's just at the safe-house, but once you go into treatment it's three hours a day of healing rooms, prayer rooms and then go home and journal about it. But you'll love it because it's a beautiful, pretty house. And it's like, I don't give a shit about how pretty it is. I'm booking it. I'm not going back. I'm like, figure out how to get my shit and come home. It's just not me. [...] The program was described different to me and I was under the impression that there would be like, mentorship, life skills. Um, learning how to like, budget and stay within your means and not—but like, but there's none of that. So like, basically it's that you get to sit in a pretty house on a lot of land. But there's no—there's nothing like, trauma-focused or like, specific to like, what it's like coming out. (Alyson, 33, former escort).*

Many individuals are looking for meaningful, concrete assistance to provide more options for their lives and livelihoods. Unfortunately, a program like the one described above, with its focus on rescuing “fallen women” through prayer and spirituality provides little in the way of meaningful choices. It may also, unintentionally, create or reinforce stigma and negative self-esteem by portraying involvement in sex work as an inherently degrading or shameful experience. A better, non-judgemental, approach would give emphasis to transferable skills and avoid framing

involvement in sex work as a personal failure that must be remedied in order to preserve self-worth. As we have seen, many sex workers move in and out of the industry, depending on their circumstances at the time, and may wish to retain the option to return to sex work at a later date or to do sex work part time as they move into mainstream work. Services which are contingent on exiting the industry and which frame this transition as “recovery” are inherently alienating to those who do not see themselves as “ill.” Six of the participants in this study expressed that they would like to be able to access assistive services to help them with the challenges of moving into other income-generating activities (and many of the former sex workers stated that such services would have been helpful to them), however, it was very clear that they were seeking non-judgemental, practical services that would address their individual challenges. Money management, job training or job search assistance, stable housing, educational assistance, drug rehabilitation, mentorship, and a safe space to go with a listening ear were some of the most commonly desired services by participants. While some of these services are available in our region, they are general services and do not always have staff who understand the dynamics of the sex industry. Later in this report we will discuss sex workers’ interactions with social service providers and examine some of the reasons why specialized services for sex workers, or more specific training for service providers might be needed in our community.

For those who decide to stop doing sex work, establishing a new, “non-sex worker” identity can be difficult, particularly in a small city or town where there is very little anonymity. A long-time street worker who had decided to leave the industry described that she found it difficult to walk in downtown Brantford because she would be approached or called out to by former clients.

*When I got off the drugs I decided I didn't want to go back out there. I guess I just don't, I don't want to live that lifestyle. I don't want to be in jail anymore. I'm kind of done with that whole thing. So, as I slowed down, started getting out of it, like I—there's still clients that I'll see when I'm walking and they'll say, "Hey Nancy!" Or, you know. And I'm just like, "Oh..." And they're like, "we haven't seen you for X amount of months or years..." You know what I mean? And it's like shit. I just, you know what I mean? I can't be involved with that scenario anymore but if I was to go back in it without the drugs now, now I could make money. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

Not all sex workers have difficulty deciding to quit sex work. Although Margaret (40) had continued to work after she stopped using crack cocaine, she had recently come to a “turning point” in her life and decided to stop working on the street. She explained her concerns for her health and safety:

*I have a friend that just died a couple weeks ago. She was nineteen. She had HIV and she was a working girl and the cops told her half a dozen times if you don't quit working we're gonna charge you with attempted murder 'cause she didn't tell the guys she had HIV, you know? And she wasn't using protection. And she was one of the reasons I stopped working because I started seeing the guys I was seeing with her and it was like, are you kidding me? Like, I know you're not using anything. Like, I don't want to get it from you. [...]. I've stopped using crack anyways, which was my problem drug. And I found somewhere to live. I signed a lease. I buy groceries now. I've bought a phone and I, you know, I see my dad - which is different for me.*

Margaret had only stopped working two weeks prior to participating in this research. When we contacted her to follow up just prior to this writing, she reported that she was still not using drugs and had not done any sex work since November. Ultimately, by leaving the industry, Margaret felt that she had autonomy and was in control of her own life, and this is a key factor for individual well-

being (whether we are sex workers or not). However, there are many sex workers who exercise control and autonomy in the industry and who do not intend to seek other options in the near future.

### ***Sex Work as a Business Venture***

The sex industry is diverse and approaches to the industry are almost as varied as the people who do sex work. Some of the participants in this research were incredibly clear about their choice to enter sex work and to treat their work as a business, complete with all of the paperwork, planning, and organization that small businesses bring. While these women were a minority in this research<sup>12</sup>, it is important to recognize their experiences because they defy common stereotypes and unambiguously remind us that painting sex work with broad brush-strokes as disempowering or as violence against women simply does not reflect the autonomy and creativity of many sex workers.

Sandy (25) was a travelling escort who sometimes worked in Brantford. She was based in the GTA on a “sugar baby” arrangement at the time of the interview; she had a post-secondary education in business and although she had previously been a drug dealer, she only used marijuana occasionally. She was proud of her business acumen and her ability to earn and save money. She was optimistic in her ability to use sex work to set herself up financially for the future:

*I think it's kind of degrading 'cause I'm having sex with people for money. But I make so much money and like, I think before I'm thirty years old, I'm definitely gonna own a few houses and I'm definitely gonna be retired. Like definitely. I have a business. I'm registered with the Government as an adult entertainer. So there's like, we have our own little number and that. Like, we file our taxes and stuff under. This year just past I claimed ninety thousand dollars. And after I saved all my receipts and stuff for everything from condoms to hair extensions, and after I saved all those receipts—and my clients buy me clothes and stuff, so I keep those receipts too. So what I do is I take the amount of each receipt and that comes off the amount that you pay [in taxes]. So basically I don't really pay anything in but I have a big income because I have a lot of expenses. (Sandy, 25, escort)*

Lucy, with her partner Gerald, similarly took an entrepreneurial approach to her escorting and saw it as a means of growing capital for further business ventures. She was also a travelling escort, based in the GTA, and she had plans to launch an online magazine. She also discussed the possibility of expanding her sex work business if she could do so legally:

*It's my business. It's like my sole proprietorship. My little baby in my hand. Like, I gotta nurture it because if one day I get a protégé I would like to know my protégé not only has a clientele behind her because of the clientele that I booked for myself, but at least for them to understand like, she's part of the team now. [...later in the interview] If ever I had the money, I would invest in a brothel. (Lucy, 23, escort)*

Sandy and Lucy exemplify an investment in their respective businesses that is perhaps more reflective of a larger, urban market. However, even among sex workers who lived and worked exclusively in Brantford we can find this bounded, focused approach to sex work as business.

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<sup>12</sup> As discussed in the methodology on page 5, the participants in this research were largely working class and did not necessarily take this kind of focused, organized approach to their work. In larger urban centres, this approach to sex work is statistically more common.

Anna (31) had been an escort for more than 6 years and used sex work to support her children while she was in school full time. Specializing in providing what is referred to in the sex industry as the “girlfriend experience<sup>13</sup>” or GFE, she selected her clients carefully through referrals. Unlike many other escorts in this research, she did not advertise on BackPage and considered her services to be “exclusive”. She had a small number of regular clients and would only accept new clients who were referred by existing clients or friends. Because of this careful approach to her work, she reported that she had never experienced any violence and was content with her choice to do sex work. She did not consider her work to be an identity and kept clear boundaries between her sex work and her personal life. She was very clear that she saw her way of working as distinct from other local sex workers:

*I know a lot of people that work and like, I know a lot of the girls? But they're all drug addicts. So, my clients versus their clients you know, they stand on the corner and I am not. I couldn't do that. I pick and choose who I go with, because you don't know what she has. You don't know, you know what I mean? I do it differently. It's safer. [...] It's about the money. Yeah. But there's actually sometimes it's fun too. You just have that person to talk to or you know, sit back and enjoy yourself for a change. (Anna, 31, escort)*

Clearly, sex workers' experiences can be widely varied, ranging from street-based work in situations of very few options to carefully calculated business decisions. Despite the diversity, there are some shared concerns that transcend class and sectors in the sex industry. In the next section, we will examine the daily realities of sex work and the challenges faced by individuals in the local industry.

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<sup>13</sup> While six of the workers in this research described a type of “girlfriend experience” (GFE) as part of their service, this is actually a very common type of service in the Canadian sex industry in the urban markets.

## UNDERSTANDING EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES OF SEX WORK

In this section we will explore some of the everyday realities of sex work that the participants discussed. Some of the narratives will be very familiar, and some will challenge our current rhetoric and media-fueled concerns about sex work. Particularly we will look at sex workers' interactions with other individuals (clients, third parties, community members) to better understand how these interactions colour their experience of the work.

### *Transient Work / Travel for Work*

A key feature of sex work in rural areas and smaller cities is travel for the purposes of work. In some cases (as with Sandy and Lucy above), this entails escorts who are based out of larger cities and travel into the Brantford, BHN region to work. As travelling escorts they are able to capitalize on the commodity of “newness” and will attract clients who seek out variety in sexual services, advertising their services as available for a “limited time only”. This is a significant market in Brantford. In other cases, local sex workers in Brantford, BHN will travel into larger cities to work in order to access a larger pool of potential clients. They also note that the market in larger cities will allow them to charge higher prices for their services.

*Like, I can go to Niagara or Hamilton or Toronto and get a room for the weekend and just make way more than I could here. And I can charge more too – like, here I can make one-twenty for an hour, and I hope I get them off in 15 minutes. But in the city I can charge two hundred... or even more if I can splurge on a nice hotel. I put up an ad on BackPage and I'm the new girl in town, and I'll just get tons of calls. So if business is slow and I need the money, sometimes I just go. (Molly, 25, escort)*

Sometimes, and somewhat unique to the rural/small-town context, sex workers' travel is connected less to market demands and more to the desire to separate private and professional worlds in order to preserve some anonymity. For example, Maggie regularly travelled out of town on weekends to work, at least once a month. Although she also did in-calls from her home, she explained that the bulk of her business was done out of town so that she would not be outed as a sex worker to her neighbours:

*I have a friend who is a guy and he'll take me up there [to the city]. He'll rent the place for me. He gets a motel for me. He rents that. And then the calls keep coming and coming and he'll put an ad in the paper. Probably it's six thousand dollars' worth in just a weekend, so it's pretty good out there.*

Interviewer: Ok, does he get a cut?

*Yeah, yeah. It's like, fifty-fifty.*

Interviewer: Ok. How do you feel about that?

*It sucks. [Laughs] But, it's easy to get away from here. You know what I mean? So, I don't let too many guys know [that I work] here though. Because I got neighbours. I don't want people to get that impression. But when I go out of town with him, it's fine.*

Anna was blunt when she was asked about whether she ever felt any judgement in the community due to her work: “No, because nobody knows nobody else. That's why you do out of town clients.” (Anna, 31, escort)

Brenda considered herself primarily an informal sex worker and she usually bartered sex for things that she needed or wanted. However, she described that she sometimes used sex work to fund her leisure travel.

*One of the other things that I also did was a girlfriend and myself would—she lived in Windsor so we would travel the 401 quite often back and forth visiting each other. So, quite often, every once in a while we would stop at some of the truck stops. And, yeah, I guess that was for cash. You know, we would make our gas money to travel back and forth. (Brenda, 53, former informal sex worker)*

A complicating factor in understanding the dynamics of transient work is the fact that, like Maggie's story above, many of the workers relied on third parties to assist with their work travel. In most cases they explained this as an entirely pragmatic choice – they did not have their own means of transportation or did not have a credit card to rent hotel rooms. For example, Amanda (33) often did out-calls to rural areas in the county and she did not have a license to drive. She explained: “My husband drives so, yeah, he'll take me there. What I need goes so, it's basically—last night I pulled him out of bed at one o'clock in the morning and then he had to be up at six am to go to work. He wasn't too happy! [laughs]”

Jade explained that her friend's boyfriend would take them travelling from their small town in the county:

*Like, you pay the rooms out of your own money so they're just renting them for you because they have the Visa cards and all that stuff you need, right? So anyways, we went from Brantford to Niagara Falls [...] I think I was only paying like, thirty percent so um, a half an hour was a hundred dollars a half an hour. So I would give them like, forty bucks or thirty bucks out of the hundred. (Jade, 28, escort)*

Given current heightened societal concerns and discussion in the media about the possibility of sex trafficking, it is important to carefully look at the differences between consensual and contractual third party involvement and coercive third parties. The key difference between transient work and human trafficking, in terms of law, is that human trafficking requires that the worker is being controlled, coerced, or forced to provide sexual services and has no control over her own movements. Merely moving from place to place to work does not constitute trafficking. Bearing in mind that the offence prohibiting “material benefits from sexual services” (Criminal Code section 286.2) contains a reverse onus provision, it remains the responsibility of third parties and the sex workers who work with them to clearly prove that any third party involvement is not coerced and is proportionally beneficial to the sex worker, in order to avoid conviction. Many of the participants in this research had been involved with third parties, but their experiences varied widely from clearly mutual partnerships, to employee/employer arrangements, to outright coercion and abuse. In the next section we will look more carefully at sex workers' interactions with third parties to examine the benefits and drawbacks of such arrangements and to understand the possible vulnerabilities.

### ***Third Party Involvement in the Sex Industry***

When discussing third party involvement in the sex industry there is a temptation to reduce all third party involvement to “pimping” and exploitation. While both of these certainly occur, the reality of third party interactions is often considerably more complex and sex workers and third parties themselves report a range of relationships and services (Bruckert & Law 2013; Hannem & Bruckert 2016, see also Gillies 2013). Many of these services are very beneficial to workers. For example, the

sex workers who participated in this research described that third parties may provide them with security, acting as a deterrent or safeguard against violence from clients or other people:

*I have a friend of the family who literally hides in the washroom. Will climb through there while I'm doing calls and it's really awkward 'cause I know he's there but they don't know he's there. And it's just like if anything goes wrong, he's there, right? (Callie, 22, escort)*

Amy described that she preferred to work for someone else who could protect her. Ironically, she also credited the man who sold her drugs and managed her work with keeping her drug use in check – a perspective that challenges many stereotypes about drug-dealing “pimps” who use drugs as a means of control over sex workers:

*Everyone I've worked for has ironically has been a coke dealer or crack dealer. And like, I'm just kind of like, one of their products. Like, they own it, but they will sell it out. But at the end of the day that's their shit. So like, that's how I consider myself right? 'Cause I'm like, for sale and while I'm for sale it's their job to take care of me. Like, I don't have to take care of myself. If some guy rips me off it is their responsibility to go get that money. You know what I mean? It's like even at the Motel I had the room on one side and the guy had a room watching that and he had the key. So it's like, if it takes longer or something goes wrong like, he's going to be able to come and stop it. I definitely do prefer to work for someone else because like the guy I worked for? He only took twenty dollars a client. That was it. Like, that's like nothing, 'cause I charge one-twenty a half hour so it's like, here's twenty bucks then right? And I don't know. I just definitely preferred it 'cause I felt safe. I didn't have to have this worry in the back of my head like, 'oh if this goes wrong what could happen?' Like no, it wasn't like that. It was just—and I also do have a drug problem for sure. Like I don't really necessarily go and seek it but when it's there I do it with no limits. Like I don't even know how I haven't overdosed yet and I—when I work for people they don't want the people that are working for them like, all fucked up and messing up their name. So like they keep me in check drug-wise too and that's really much needed when you're making a lot of money. So yeah, I prefer to work for people. (Amy, 21, escort)*

When sex workers talk about their boyfriends or intimate partners, we often see a tendency to assume that any such relationship is necessarily an exploitative one; the women's framing of her relationship is implicitly questioned by reference to the “so-called boyfriend” and the insinuation is that he is really acting as a pimp. While this may sometimes be true, sometimes a boyfriend is just a boyfriend and they may provide assistance with security or other logistics such as driving, as we saw with Amanda and her husband (above). Jennifer described that her fiancée provided security to ensure her safety when she was doing in-calls:

*Just in case something happened, or some guy's getting aggressive, he's always there. He's my bodyguard. Everybody knows that he's my fiancée, and he's there to protect me. You know, if you're gonna act stupid then he's gonna show you the door. And he's not joking. (Jennifer, 28, escort)*

Jennifer did not pay her fiancée in cash for his security services, but the money that she earned became part of their joint income to pay their living expenses, along with their ODSP income. Sometimes sex workers partner with a friend or intimate partner to pull a “hustle,” like the one Nancy described:

*Well my boyfriend at that time too. He would, um, we'd be involved in robbery—well, I don't know if you'd say it's robberies but this is what we did—what I would do is get a customer and he would hide in the*

*bushes. Kind of like a pimp, ok? So I would be working the streets and getting a customer. So often times I would tell my customers "it's cash up front" before I would—because a lot of times I wouldn't get money. Not saying they were all this way 'cause not all of them were, but because of me getting burned I'd always ask for money up front. Some were comfortable with that and some weren't. So what would happen is I would get the money up front and I'd just run. So if they came after me, he would kinda, you know, jump in the way. Like, you know what I mean? "Hey, buddy" kind of thing. Or he would say, you know, "if you don't want me to call the cops you're gonna give me money." So they'd pay me, then they would pay him just to not get the cops involved. That was our way of our story of getting more money. So we were doing that for quite a while. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

While these kinds of partnerships are not uncommon, many third party relationships are more formal in nature. Six of the workers in this research had worked in erotic massage parlours or for escort agencies, and four had been erotic dancers. All of these employment arrangements necessitated working for and with the third parties who owned, managed, or performed other functions for the various businesses. There can be both benefits and drawbacks to these kinds of employment arrangements; some of the participants felt that they had benefitted from working for third party agencies, and others had negative experiences. Phoebe described a very positive experience working for an escort agency in Alberta, but had not been so fortunate in her attempt to work with a local Brantford agency owner:

*Angel—the boss from the agency [in Alberta] - She actually owns all three agencies that I worked at. She was amazing. She was like, 'if you don't want to do this you don't have to do it.' She was like, 'don't think you're obligated to work because of me because I make'—she works too right? She's like, 'I make quite a bit like, enough money on my own.' She's like, 'I just want to help you and make sure that you're ok.' She's like, 'you don't even have to work. You can answer my phone and set up calls for the girls. You'll get sixty dollars for each call.' I've done that for a while too and then I was like, honestly I don't want to do it. So I started doing that and like, I was making three to five hundred dollars an hour. Anywhere from fifteen hundred to two grand a day. And every time I'd do an out-call there's always a driver there. And the driver always picked me up and the driver waited. Like, he'd drop me off and he'd wait like, the next street over where he could see and if I wasn't out exactly the like, whatever it was, a half hour to an hour. And if I wasn't out exactly at that time, he'd be right there, for real. Like, going in to get me out. And these weren't small guys. Like, these are big um, big tough guys or whatever. Like, strong guys that don't like, mess around with anyone or no one would mess around with them kind of thing. (Phoebe, 25, escort)*

After moving to Ontario to avoid a warrant for charges (unrelated to sex work) in Alberta, Phoebe attempted to work with another local third party:

*I met a girl. We were staying at her place when we first got here from Alberta. She did heroin also and she's like, 'well do you want to make money?' Like, 'cause I didn't know where to start here, right? She's like, come to Brantford. She's like, 'you come with me and I got a room paid for there. I'll help you with your ads on Back Page. I'll help you get dates and stuff like that and make money, and I'll make sure you're not sick and going through withdrawals. I'll have lots of stuff there.' And so we get here and she never done anything she says she was gonna do. She did have a room at [a motel] for a couple days and um, she didn't help me with my ad. Like, I didn't even know how to get my ad posted up at that time cause it like—BackPage changed so much. Like, now I need bit coins and stuff like that [...] I needed her to help me and I needed other pictures done and she just wouldn't help me. She's—and she wasn't even working that much either.*

*Like, she'd make money for herself and then she'd go get high [...] at the end of the night she ended up taking the only sixty dollars I had left to my name.*

As demonstrated by Phoebe's two very different accounts of third party interactions, these kinds of relationships have the potential to be mutually beneficial for both parties if they are well managed and well-intentioned, but to go very quickly off the rails if they are not. Some sex workers are very clear that they do not see a benefit of working with a third party and are not willing to even entertain the possibility:

*I get texts from different people: 'Oh I got this connection, I can do this. Get you money.' —I'm like, yeah, I don't want a pimp, so sorry. Not into it. I'm independent. I don't give my money to no one. They say, 'Come work for me. You'll make way more money than you're making.' Yeah? So what, you can take half my money? That's why I'm like, no. That ain't happening. No one's taking my money. (Rose, 32, escort)*

Other sex workers may experiment in working with a third party, but decide that it is not for them if they are unhappy with the situation. Maggie worked for an erotic massage parlour before she became an escort; although she was not coerced and was not unhappy with the working conditions, she was very discontented with the pay scheme and ultimately decided to work independently:

*It sucked because they [the clients] would pay a hundred and twenty and eighty to get in [to the massage parlour] and we wouldn't get that money. We only worked off tips. So the customers would have to ask for something ["extras"] for us to even get paid or we'd have to get a tip. And it sucked. It was not worth it at all. It was eighty dollars for a half hour, and one-twenty for an hour. And yeah, I would get none of that. (Maggie, 35, escort, former massage parlour attendant and street-based worker)*

Erotic dancers are obliged to work with third parties and navigate a range of various relationships from club owners/management, to bartenders, to DJs, to security guards, and other dancers. Vicky (29) and Donna (29), former erotic dancers, spent some time talking about the interactions they had with the people with whom they worked at different clubs. Some relationships were positive:

*Vicky: We had a good relationship with the people who owned the bar. Um, they were, they were nice to us.*

*Donna: I loved them.*

*Vicky: Yeah.*

*Donna: I do, honestly. I mean like, they didn't fully have their stuff together, sure. But they were great people. The old lady came in, baking us fresh doughnuts and like, you know what I mean?*

However, even at the same bar, other employees can cause negative working conditions and abuse positions of power. Donna recalled a situation when dancing on stage would result in her being 'outed' as an erotic dancer and she received no leeway from the club DJ:

*Donna: Like, I remember I begged the DJ. I was like, "I can't go up there man. Like, that guy knows me. That guy knows me and his brother knows my brother." I was like, "I'm not doing it. I'm not going up." But he was like, "You gotta go up." And I was like, what do you say? Yeah, she [Vicky] was gonna dance for me and he wouldn't let her.*

As with other kinds of third-party arrangements, sometimes dancers feel that the amount they are required to pay to the bar as a “floor fee” or cut from private dances is unfair. There may be pressures on dancers to perform additional types of sexual services in order to earn more money:

*Donna: [At one bar] you pay fifty dollars [to the house] for your first time [dancing], and then twenty or thirty your next time because you pay a one-time extra fee for your little, mini licence or something? I don't know. You don't get a picture done or anything like that. I don't know if it's a quick scam. At [another bar] you have to pay twenty dollars to the bar, and then every time...*

*Vicky: Then five dollars every time you go back to the back [for a private dance].*

*Donna: Even if it's one guy that gets one dance, you have to pay five of that twenty dollars to the bar. He says, “Ok. Let's go out.” We drink our drink and back in for another dance, another five dollars. And I was like, “This is the biggest rip off.”*

*Vicky: Yeah, and when she said that, [the floor manager] was like, “You girls make a lot of money back there.” Not if we're not fucking them! Right? Like, we're back there for two, three songs. We're not back there for ten.*

While some third-party arrangements are experienced as unfair or as less beneficial than others, in these cases the workers still retain the autonomy to exit the situation. In many ways, this echoes the experiences of individuals in other types of employment in which wages or working conditions are less than ideal and appear financially exploitative. Sometimes, sex work is just another bad job with a bad boss.

There are other situations, however, in which third party involvement is clearly coercive and exploitative and violates the law. Three participants in this research were financially and sexually exploited at a young age. In these situations, there was no autonomy, and no easy way to exit the third-party relationship<sup>14</sup>. Both Alyson and Elle described having been pimped by family members as teenagers.

*I was pimped out by my Uncle, when I was young, to his friends. And then I started working the truck-stop. And then, yeah. I was thirteen. [...] I got some perks. Like, “Oh, we're gonna go to Niagara Falls today and we'll go to this restaurant.” Or whatever. But I wasn't getting a kickback or whatever. I wasn't getting money in my hands [...] I didn't have a choice. (Alyson, 33, former escort)*

*When I was working under my cousin, um, at the time I guess I thought I had a choice, but I really didn't. Um, I'd then, you know, as soon as I'd get the money, in a nice way, she'd be like “Well, I need the money”. So I wasn't making anything, but – ‘Cause if I look at my cousin, she took my whole profit and that was just, um, that was like pimping (Elle, 26, former escort).*

Sex worker rights advocates are very clear – if there is no consent, what is being described is not sex work, it is sexual assault; we rightly have generic laws, not specific to sex work, which prohibit and criminalize this kind of exploitation.

There is widespread recognition in the industry that abusive situations exist, however, this does not entail an assumption that *all* third party relationships are inherently exploitative. Some of the sex

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that all under-aged sex work is coerced. Several other participants in this research began doing sex work as minors but were not controlled or coerced into the industry.

workers who participated in this study had also been involved with other workers as third parties – sometimes for profit, and sometimes third party involvement is also understood as a means of assisting other workers. Sandy was outraged that laws against “materially benefiting” meant that she was not permitted to assist other workers who she believed were in bad situations.

*I've helped other girls leave their pimps. So I've had other girls work for me. [...] So at one point the police were telling me, "You can't have this many rooms in your name. You can't have girls working in your rooms. You gotta stop this shit. If not we're gonna arrest you." That's what they told me. So ok. Now I know. Like, I was selling my coochie too! Like, what the heck? They're like, "It doesn't matter. You can't do it because how do we know you're actually working? You could be just posting. You could be taking these girls' money." Try and help them leave their pimps. Like what the fuck? (Sandy, 25, escort).*

Third party involvement in sex work can provide significant benefits to sex workers in the form of security and assistance, but can also pose a risk. We know from existing research that sex workers, and particularly street-based workers, can be vulnerable to violence; this vulnerability is compounded when they are not able to work in safe spaces. In the next section we discuss sex workers' experiences of violence and victimization, and the means by which they attempt to increase safety.

### ***Experiences of Violence & Safety***

As we have seen, some sex workers may choose to work with third parties as a means of protection from the possibility of “bad dates,” predators, or other violence. Most of the participants in this research had experienced some form of violence in the course of their work. Much of the violence they experience is at the hands of individuals who present themselves as clients. This ranges from violations of sexual boundaries (i.e. attempting to engage in sexual acts that the worker has not consented to) to serious physical and sexual assaults. Consistent with previous research, street-based workers are more vulnerable to violence than indoor workers. Of the nine participants who had done street-based work, only two reported having never been physically assaulted in the context of their work. Callie, who had done both street and indoor work, stated: “*only in street-work have I ever had anyone actually get violent with me.*” However, several of the participants in this research stated that experiences of violence were relatively less common than the stereotypes would lead us to believe; they emphasised that their experiences of assault were in the minority of their interactions with clients:

*I think with my clients I have some—I was lucky. There were a few that did hit me and beat me yes, but like, and I was hurt pretty good. For the most part of it I had some nice ones—I try to stick with the older men because they were usually nicer. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

Margaret (40) was a street-based worker in Brantford for eight years and although she carried a knife as a means of protecting herself, she reported that she had only been physically assaulted once:

*Margaret: I used to carry a knife for a while. Just a little pocket knife but I mean, something that I could jab into somebody if I had to.*

*Interviewer: Did you ever have to use it?*

*Margaret: No, I never really—like I said, I only got hurt that one time.*

Of the seventeen individuals who had done indoor escorting, eleven had never experienced violence in the context of their work. They credited their safety with the control that they exercised over selecting and screening their clients, whereas street-based workers have very little time to assess the possibility that a potential client will be violent.

*Interviewer: Did you ever experience any violence at all?*

*Brenda: Nope. Because, again, this was just all the being in control and being careful at who I met and where I met them. (Brenda, 53, former informal worker)*

The three male workers who served female clients reported that they had never experienced violence in the course of their work and did not fear at all for their safety. When Edwin (30), who trades sex for drugs, was asked if he ever felt unsafe, he laughed: “No! They’re normally housewives, right?” However Wade (30), a male-for-male escort, described two incidents of clients who threatened to kill him but did not ultimately harm him physically. No participants reported any violent assaults in the context of erotic dancing or massage parlour work, however dancers report that clients will sometimes become aggressive or attempt to violate the worker’s boundaries if additional sexual services are not on offer.

In addition to the possibility of violence from clients or individuals posing as clients, street-based sex workers also report violence from members of the community. Norah recalled that she had been subject to violence while standing on a street corner waiting for clients:

*Did you know people drive by and throw things at you? Eggs really hurt when they hit you, fast. Don’t they? Have you been hit? They bruise, yeah! I’ve been--I’ve had them like, draw blood! Chocolate milk, coffee, fuckin brutal man! And that’s usually, a lot of young guys do that, eh? (Norah, 43, former street-based worker)*

Many people have difficulty understanding why anyone would do this kind of work, given the risk of harm. However, as discussed in Bruckert & Chabot (2010), there are many occupations in which people are vulnerable to harm that do not raise the same kinds of questions. For example, nurses and other health care professionals, including social service providers, are vulnerable to situational violence at the hands of aggressive clients, or those suffering from mental illness or dementia, for example (Wykes 1994; Shields & Wilkins 2009). Taxi drivers are vulnerable to opportunistic violence; Stennings (1996) found that eighty-five percent of the taxi drivers surveyed in three major Canadian cities had experienced criminal victimization (other than fare-jumping) at least once; sixty percent had been victimized in the previous year. Any number of other occupations pose significant physical dangers unrelated to the deliberate behaviour of others, including mining, construction, factory work, farming, commercial fishing, professional sports, and military service. Only sex work as an income-generating activity elicits the kind of paternalistic evaluation that would encourage women (in particular) to leave their job rather than risk harm.

Sex workers do take safety precautions when they are able – sometimes this involves the participation of others (which of course means those individuals risk criminal charges for procuring or materially benefiting). Margaret described a violent assault by a man who robbed her following a street-based service and we had the following exchange:

*Interviewer: And so when something like that happens and you are violently assaulted um...[hesitates]*

*Margaret: Why don't you stop?*

*Interviewer: Well that's—yeah, I was gonna ask if you take any safety precautions? But that's a good question, yeah*

*Margaret: 'Cause you still need the money.*

*Interviewer: Right, ok.*

*Margaret: And it scared me. It did scare me, but not enough to stop. And I've had other bad things happen. After that happened my husband started coming out with me and I would walk on one side of the street and he would walk on the other side of Market Street. (Margaret, 40, former street-based worker)*

In other cases, workers take their safety into their own hands. Amanda explained:

*When I'm going on out-call I usually carry a knife or something just in case. I hope to God I never, ever have to use it. I've had to use my pepper spray once on one guy but uh, other than that I haven't had to use anything but my clients pretty much know not to fuck with me because I have hidden stuff on me or in around me that if I have to grab I will fucking grab in a heartbeat. Don't even—you know? I don't want to go there but if I have to, to save my life, damn right. (Amanda, 33, escort)*

The question of work location is one that is key for worker safety. While indoor workers appear less vulnerable than street-based workers on average, there are risks in bringing clients to one's home. Maggie changed her working location after a client returned to her home and robbed her:

*Like a couple months ago I was robbed. Like they came here to my house—that's why I don't do it from here anymore. I do it in a motel downtown or whatever. (Maggie, 35, escort)*

There are advantages for workers who are able to work in motels or other locations that are not their primary residence. Alyson, who had been violently assaulted by a client and was in the process of leaving sex work at the time of the interview, was struggling to obtain new housing because her regular clients, and her attacker, knew where she lived and would come to her home expecting her to work. She felt unsafe telling her former clients that she was no longer working and feared that she would be assaulted once again. Because she was housed, and the attack was not in the category of domestic violence, she was not considered a priority client for emergency assisted housing and was placed on a wait list that was months long. She feared for her own safety and was uncomfortable remaining in her home where the attack took place, but her only option was to wait since she did not have the money to rent another apartment. There are no emergency housing or support services available in Brantford, BHN for women like Alyson who are victims of violence that is not domestic violence.

Relationship with police is a complicating factor for sex workers who are dealing with the aftermath of violence. Many of the participants in this research had not reported their assaults due to a belief that the police would not help them, or out of fear that they would be criminally charged for prostitution or possession of drugs. In the next section of this report we will discuss the issues surrounding the laws and law enforcement in more detail. However, stigma and fear of judgement are key barriers which may prevent sex workers from accessing the support that they need and affect their inclusion in our communities.

## ***Stigma & Judgement***

Underlying many of the difficulties that sex workers experience in their interactions with others in the community is an awareness that they belong to a highly stigmatized and devalued group. This sense of stigma and judgement affects sex workers in myriad ways that often keep them isolated and disconnected from the community. Sex workers are often very hesitant to disclose their work or to get close to people because they cannot be sure of how others will react:

*It's like people, when they find out they treat you different or they're either really, really nice and really cool and like whatever. They still like you for you or they're like 'ugh! Dirt!' So, I don't really have an in between. You're either okay and non-judgemental or —there's no like, oh well I don't really approve of what you're doing but I can't really do anything about it. (Alyson, 33, former escort)*

Vicky (29) and Donna (29) felt that when people found out they were erotic dancers, it opened them to unwanted sexual attention in non-work situations:

*Vicky: The stigma. I find that really, really something. It doesn't get to me as much now, but my partner at the time told his family and friends, and then all of a sudden—and my other friends, they started telling people and it was like all of a sudden my life was no longer private and because I was naked in front of people, then I no longer had that ability or ownership*

*Donna: Like, I bet you're naked under those clothes, you fucking slut. [...] It's like because you're naked in front of people, you have no privacy, right?*

Stigma may rear its head in unexpected moments. One struggle that sex workers often face is the inability to account for their source of income in order to obtain credit cards, bank accounts, or other financial products. Even though erotic dancing is legal work Donna experienced negative treatment in attempting to work with a bank to obtain a mortgage.

*Yeah, well even with the bank, like, I was questioning her like, 'ok, so say I make tax-free money, and I want to claim—I want to get a house. I wanna show people that I make stuff.' And I mean she was just rolling her eyes like, "Well, you have to do this." And, you know what I mean? And really just like—and all of a sudden would not look me in the face. It was like, "Get out of my office." Ok, well then never-mind. (Donna, 29, former erotic dancer)*

While bartenders and restaurant servers may have similar difficulties in documenting their income, it is hard to imagine that they would be treated this way or dismissed so rudely. The moral taint attached to sex work permeates our societal judgements, perpetuating marginality for workers. Street-based workers are particularly vulnerable to being identified while working and subject to negative treatment. While Norah described outright violence from community members (above), Nancy was subject to harassment while working on the street.

*People would start knowing [me] from the street. Like people just driving by. Or just people having a normal day. So, if I was working on Market, there's bars and stuff there too. So they would kind of see the same girls walking around, which is fine. But then they would start calling us whores and sluts and pigs and all sorts of different names. And uh, "do you want to give my boyfriend a blowjob for five dollars?" So a lot of people just driving by that kinda knew what you did just by kinda what you were wearing maybe or they just had an idea that's what you did. There was comments always coming out of vehicles or from other people. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

While indoor workers are less vulnerable to such public shaming, they are no less concerned about protecting their identity. The lack of anonymity in small communities means that local sex workers are potentially always at risk of public outing, whether they are working or just out in the community. Although Maggie attempted to keep her work very discreet and even did the majority of her work out of town, she was still subject to stigma.

*I'll hear people say "look at that fuckin' whore over there," or something. You know what I mean? And then you're like, yeah. If I'm sitting in a bar or something like that. You know? And you hear things and you're just like whatever. (Maggie, 35, escort)*

Discretion is used not only to protect sex workers from outing, but also to ensure that clients are not put in a position where they have to explain how they know the worker. As Thomas, a male escort whose clients were women explained:

*You're getting paid for your service, man. You're being paid to do your business [...] You gotta be discreet as fuck and you can't be like, bumping into people and saying hi even when you think you know them. It's like fuck—it's like walking—it's like another life you have to look out for them. It's like we're living a double life. (Thomas, 25, escort)*

There are few safe spaces in our community where local sex workers can be open about their occupation and be confident that they will not encounter stigma. Many sex workers do not disclose even to their own family for fear of the judgement or rejection that they may experience. Donna, who was underage and living at home with her family when she began working as an erotic dancer, hid her work from her parents.

*My mom found Beanie Babies just jacked with money [in my room]. It was all like, American, Canadian bills just all rolled up in a pile and then crammed up, like pinned back together and then placed perfectly on the shelf. My mom's a snoopy, snoopy woman. I mean, I don't know how she didn't figure out, I don't know like, I just told her I sold weed! I thought of like, something shitty... You know what I mean? Like, my parents are avid smokers, right? So that I knew like, that was like, ok that's not so bad to them. I went with the drug dealer instead of a stripper! (Laughs) (Donna, 29, former erotic dancer)*

The level of stigma and judgement attached to sex work is telling when selling drugs is viewed as a preferable (and acceptable) cover story. While this is perhaps a particular example, the inability to discuss one's work with family can be isolating and removes the possibility of accessing support from them. Some sex workers feel that they are protecting their family from the truth, in addition to hiding their own identity.

*No one knew what I was doing. I just didn't think that it was appropriate for my mom to know that I was doing that on the streets. Since she'd wanna hear what her daughter's doing. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

Those who felt comfortable to be "out" as sex workers with friends, family, and acquaintances were better able to access support and seemed to encounter fewer negative judgements than many expected. They were also selective about the kinds of people they would allow themselves to get close to:

*Norah: I guess everyone who really knows me knows.*

*Interviewer: And do you feel that that affects the way that they treat you?*

*Norah: No. I really, really work hard at eliminating negativity. So if someone's gonna treat you bad because of it, then I just have nothing more to do with them.* (Norah, 43, former street-based and indoor worker)

Fear of judgement and concern about being outed makes sex workers wary of disclosure and also affects sex workers' interactions with police and health and social service providers. In the final two sections of this report we will address sex workers' interactions with police and with health and social service providers.

## SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCES WITH LAW AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

This is one of the first research studies on sex work in Canada to take place in the context of the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act*<sup>15</sup> (also referred to as Bill C-36), which came into effect on December 6, 2014. As previously discussed, this act criminalized the purchase of sexual services for the first time in Canada, while purporting to decriminalize the activities of those who sell sexual services. The activities of those who “materially benefit” from the sale of someone else’s sexual services, those who “procure” individuals for the purposes of purchasing sexual services, and those who advertise another person’s sexual services are also criminalized under the new law. Sometimes referred to as *asymmetrical criminalization*, this legal framework attempts to shift criminal responsibility to those who purchase sex, and to those who are presumed to be exploiting sex workers, in an attempt to severely curtail, and ultimately eliminate, the market. Of course, sex workers themselves are not actually entirely decriminalized. Under section 213 of the criminal code they can still be charged with communicating for the purposes of offering sexual services for consideration in a “public place that is or is next to a school, playground, or park.”

Although sex workers’ indoor activities have been decriminalized (in favour of criminalizing their clients and third parties), a notable finding from this research was that many sex workers in Brant-Haldimand-Norfolk are not aware of the laws, nor of the details of the most recent changes. Very few of the workers interviewed knew that they could not be charged for selling sex — some referred to old laws of “soliciting” (which was re-written as “communicating” in 1985), or referenced American-style criminalization, hinging on the exchange of money, which has never existed in Canada. It appears that many sex workers’ perceptions of the laws draw on fictional or American media representations that are not reflective of actual practices.

Some participants were more concerned about criminalization for activities not related to sex work (e.g. drug use), or if they feared being outed as sex workers or drug users to Child and Family Services.

*Because what I do is illegal and I’m already connected to enough like, big bad people — I’m paranoid. I still just don’t want them [the police] watching me and figuring out what I’m doing and like, somehow it getting back to Children’s Aid or me being charged with solicitation - which I know is a very big possibility<sup>16</sup>.  
(Callie, 22, indoor escort).*

Innovations such as the Crisis Table in Brantford, which promote information sharing among agencies and are considered cutting edge in managing “high risk” clients, are undoubtedly perceived as a threat by many sex workers who, although they may wish to access services, do not wish for their status as sex workers to be shared among agencies; nor may their sex work actually be an area of concern *for them*. Sex workers may use multiple aliases to access services in order to protect their

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<sup>15</sup> Krüsi et al. 2014 and Sex Workers United Against Violence et al. 2014 conducted research with street-based sex workers in Vancouver, BC; the Vancouver Police Department implemented an official policy of criminalizing clients, but not sex workers, in January, 2013. Thus, their research was conducted in a legal context that was very similar to our current situation.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, the solicitation law has not been in force for more than thirty years – it was not possible for Callie to be charged with a criminal offence for her sex work, but she did not know this.

identity and to ensure privacy. Coding a group of people as risky or at risk, based on a stereotypical identity and without consideration for personal characteristics or situation is a structural stigma that can legitimize many intrusive (and often unwanted or unnecessary) interventions (Hannem 2012; Bruckert & Hannem 2013b). The application of structural stigma to sex workers is often experienced as disregard for their agency, and for their personal strengths and resilience. Individuals will not be open to assistance if they are being told that some area of their life is problematic and they do not experience it that way. We would caution against blanket analyses of risk and intervention based on the single characteristic of doing sex work.

In addition to fear of criminalization or targeting, some local sex workers also explain that they fear stigma or unkind behaviour from police. While none of the participants in this study reported any violence from police, they did express concern that police see them as “less valuable” or “not important”, as compared to other citizens. This felt stigma<sup>17</sup> reduces the likelihood that sex workers will approach police for assistance in the event that they are victimized. Nancy disclosed that she did not call the police when she was assaulted:

*I didn't call the police because they don't seem to care. I find they don't really—they're thinking we're just—we're addicts, we're you know, prostitutes so we're no good. So, more or less we deserve what we get by doing what we do. That's how, I found, a lot of females found that the police were not helpful. So knowing that the police would probably do nothing and at that point I was getting in trouble with the law quite a bit and getting incarcerated into jails. So the police just weren't an option for any female out there to call even if we had got beat up, which a lot of us did several times... or taken out and dragged out of town for halfway out of Brantford and left out there and beaten and kind of, you know, have to find our own way back to Brantford. [...] I was well known to the police, so I just figured when I really needed help, like when I really needed help they just didn't believe me so it was impossible to say, “Hey, this guy just beat me up and look at me” and I just figured they wouldn't care; they just wouldn't believe me anyways so, I never went to the police. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

Amanda was harassed by an ex-boyfriend, unrelated to her work, but still did not feel that she could count on the police to help her:

*I don't know. I feel like me and other girls in this profession don't feel like we can just go and do that [report to the police]. Like, like you could. If you were in trouble you'd go right down to the police station. Well we're kind of reluctant to do that. I don't know. It's hard to explain. (Amanda, 33, escort)*

Sometimes distrust of police is even intergenerational; the fear may not be rooted in the sex worker's own experience, but in family history and experiences:

*I was kinda raised like, around this stuff. Like, prostitution and drugs and stuff like that and I know better than to—not know better but, kinda I was raised not to—like, I don't trust cops. To call them like, even for my own safety I don't, 'cause I've heard so many stories and I've seen actually so many things like, crooked cops and stuff. Like, I—I know there are good cops out there and I know they do it because they want to help people and stuff like that but I'm not—I'm not gonna take my chances and I don't trust cops at*

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<sup>17</sup> “Felt stigma” is a term used to denote the expectation or perception of possible stigma, as distinct from “enacted stigma” which is made visible in discriminatory or negative interactions (Jacoby 1994).

*all. I'd never call the cops and that's just, I don't know. Something I guess—I guess it comes from like, I get it from my dad or whatever but, I can't trust them. (Phoebe, 25, escort)*

However, sometimes failure to report a sexual assault is less about being a sex worker, or distrust of police specifically, and has more to do with the same kinds of fears that many victims of sexual assault express - of the criminal justice system's insensitivity to their victimization, fears of secondary victimization through the court process, and the very real perception that the outcome would be unsatisfactory or not worth the effort of going through the system:

*It was the police, and I didn't wanna go through the court. I didn't wanna see him again. And this is not the first time, like his record's bad – it's all domestics, rapes, all that kind of record, you know what I mean? He'd go to jail for 6 months, do 3 months, he's out, and do it all over again. So I never reported it, and I started going to the Sexual Assault Centre for counselling. (Jennifer, 28, escort)*

This is not to say that police are always unresponsive or actually live up to sex workers' expectations of stigma when they do report situations of violence or reach out for assistance. Margaret did report to local police when she was assaulted on the street and was happy with the police response:

*So two days later I called the cops and told them what happened and the Detective was really nice. He didn't put me down. I told him what I was doing. He didn't put me down for it. He didn't treat me any different. I did three photo lineups and couldn't pick the guy out. To this day I can't picture the guy. I blocked it out completely. I don't know what the guy looked like. But afterwards, a few months later the Detective called me and said "I don't think you have to worry about it. I think we put the guy away." (Margaret, 40, former street-based worker)*

Similarly, although Alyson did not initially want to report her assault, she was eventually talked into it by a counsellor and had no issues with the way the police responded to her. Across the data, sex workers who actually had interactions with local police did not seem to have many problems; some reported that local police were "pretty nice" (Anna). This finding is significantly different and more positive than earlier research on police interactions with sex workers in larger urban communities (see Hannem & Bruckert 2013, for example). Wade, however, had a run-in with a client who may have been suffering from mental illness and threatened to kill him with a knife. When he ran out of the motel to call the police he felt that the police who responded did not take his case seriously because he had been using drugs:

*And the cops came and they were jerks about it. They were like, "you're just having drug psychosis. He's not trying to kill you. You're just paranoid." I'm like, "go check his fucking profile. Like, he just got out of the Pen yesterday. Probably for murdering someone. Like, and go look at his—go look at the room." They went and looked in the room, came back and said, "yeah all we see is a bunch of needles and dope, so walk home." (Wade, 30, escort)*

Although Wade was not happy with the police response, he also was not charged with a drug offence when he called for assistance, which is a common fear that many drug using sex workers have, so this is a credit to the police responders. Many of the participants in this research had histories of interaction with police, or criminal charges or convictions for offences, but most of these were not related to prostitution (drug offences and minor assaults were most common). These

kinds of criminal records can make individuals justifiably very nervous to encounter the police for fear of being charged.

Police hold a great deal of power and have leverage over sex workers that can sometimes verge on abuse, particularly if the workers are not aware of their rights under the law. Hope discussed her interactions with police as “clients”:

*You just learn that you don't say no again. Like that's the only thing that—don't say no to cops. It's just fear. Like, honestly like, cause the law—like, the fear was always getting arrested so like, if a cop calls you up after you find out they're a cop you never say no. Like, you will skip other clients just to be with them. Because you don't want to get on their bad side 'cause they can fuck you up. Like, you just don't say no to them. (Molly, 25, escort)*

Several of the participants spoke of having police as clients; they explained that they traded sexual services for police leniency – a phenomenon that is certainly not unique to our community.

*You know, they're only doing their job, right? But, I—half of them are doing—getting sex trade—what I mean was they're getting what they want out of a girl and keeping their mouth shut probably cause they're getting something out of it. There's a few cops downtown that are like that. And you don't—they don't get paid for it. They only pay that they get is not arrested so, there's a few. (Maggie, 35, escort and former street-based worker)*

This type of abuse of power is a concern. Ensuring that sex workers know their rights and are not operating under the misapprehension that their work is illegal might have some deterrent effect, but the reality of intersecting marginalities and other types of criminalizable behaviours (e.g. drug use) leaves sex workers vulnerable to these kinds of abuses.

One of the stated purposes of the new laws was to ensure that sex workers are able to access assistance and to report incidents of assault or violence without fear of criminalization. The fact that many sex workers are unaware of the laws and still assume that they can be charged complicates any evaluation of the effectiveness of this law for increasing reporting. However, given information about the laws, some participants expressed that they would be more willing to contact police and report incidents of violence.

*Like if I was doing [sex] work through a motel and someone assaulted me—like if I knew it was illegal I would be like no, no, I would keep that to myself. But like, knowing it is legal I would for sure call the police because that's not ok. Like that person is going to go do that to another girl—you know what I mean? (Amy, 21, indoor escort)*

In the wake of the new law, it does appear that some sex workers who are aware that they can no longer be charged with communicating or being found in a bawdy house are also willing to use the law to their advantage, particularly when they feel that they are being cheated or threatened by clients who attempt to use the threat of the police to control them. Two participants in this research described pre-emptively calling the police on a client who refused to pay or to leave their premises. Neither sex worker was charged, but the clients were also not charged. Rose (indoor escort) had a client who wanted services that she would not offer and he refused to leave her home:

*Had to call the police. So I told the police straight up. He wanted this, that, and that and I wouldn't do it so? He won't leave. And he wouldn't even tell the cops. He was like oh, he came there and he couldn't find his wallet. That's what he told the cops. So I told the cops to put myself out there: 'I'm an escort.' And then the cops asked him—the guys like 'well, what did she tell you?' The cop's like, 'don't worry about what she told us. What happened?' And then he's like, 'well I came over to visit and I can't find my wallet.' So I was like, fuck. There I go putting myself out there. I thought he was gonna say that 'oh, this girl tried to give me money for sex,' so I got all scared so I was like, I called the police. You didn't even call. He's like I'll call the Police. I said oh, you're gonna call the police? I'll call the police. This is my house. I got right on it. Like, right away and called them. He didn't get charged. (Rose, 32, escort)*

While the participants in this research, overall, reported relatively good interactions with local police, there is still room for improvement, particularly where perceptions of police attitudes toward sex workers are concerned. Changing the law does very little to change the relationship between officers and sex workers in the community. This is an ongoing matter and any abuse of power, or negative interactions between sex workers and police have an impact on the level of trust that is being established. Building trust and community requires vigilance and sensitivity:

*And the one thing is the police, the police can't always act like it's a routine call or "Oh this happened again." No. You gotta be a police officer and protect us. It doesn't matter if we're a working girl or if we work in a career; just do your job and not put those blinders on. (Jennifer, 28, escort)*

In the final findings section of this report we look at sex workers' interactions with local health and social service providers.

## SEX WORKERS' EXPERIENCES ACCESSING SERVICES

*I think a lot of our problems is that no one knows what it's like. They've never done it. So we're talking to someone that's, you know, grew up—has this, has that. We have nothing. And these women are trying to tell us “well, we know how you feel...” but no, you don't know, cuz you're not there. Right? So we have a hard time to let out how we're feeling, cuz why? Like, it's not going to make anything better. Right, cause they haven't been in that spot or whatever. They don't have the proper training or whatever, something, right? We'd like to at least know someone's got some experience behind this. They've read about it or are learning about it, then they have some idea what we're going through, right? Because a lot of people just don't know what our needs are and our wants are. (Nancy, 43, former street-based worker)*

### ***Judgement and Disclosure***

While there are many excellent social and health services in Brantford, BHN, there are currently no sex work-specific services. The data collection for this research took place over approximately 11 months and it is notable that the participants' discussions of the services they were accessing seemed to improve over the course of that timeframe. However, we still find that social and health service providers often lack the understanding of sex work that is needed to effectively prioritise the kinds of assistance that sex workers might need. In particular, what came out most loudly and clearly in this data is that sex workers are looking for safe spaces and professionals who do not judge them. Due to anticipation of stigma and judgement, disclosure of sex work is difficult and anxiety provoking for many individuals; most participants indicated that they would only disclose the nature of their work if they felt it was absolutely necessary, or if they felt that they would be received without judgement.

*So I have a new doctor. And I don't intend on telling him this either. I don't want to tell him I'm a drug addict. Like, but I will. I don't want to but I will. He probably needs to know to help me. I mean, I'm not really bashful like, I guess I could tell him the trade I'm in but I'm just so used to people treating me like shit and looking down on me that it's really hard to divulge that information because you never know what reaction you're gonna get and sometimes it can be very, very belittling and degrading. (Wade, 30, escort)*

One social service provider described her experience with disclosure around sex work:

“I think the client—as they get more comfortable they'll tell you little tidbits. I think they wait for you to (Gasp) react. If you don't, then they tell you more, you know what I mean? If you don't judge them.”

Individuals working in social and health services should be aware that their clients may notice disapproval or judgement, even if it is not expressed explicitly. Alyson gave an example from her experiences:

*She ran a group that I attended. And she was like always like, really bubbly and happy and then she really closed off when we were trying to figure out budgeting and stuff. And she was asking where I got my money and stuff. So, she got really, really closed off and like kinda like this. (adjusts her body and folds arms, closing in) Like very, I don't know. It just felt wrong. It was like, what are you thinking? You know what I mean? Like, she never called me a dirty whore or anything, but it was just kinda like, I don't know. (Alyson, 33, former escort)*

Beyond words, body language and facial expressions can eloquently convey disapproval, disappointment, or disgust which may damage the ability to work with that individual. Similarly, individuals will pick up on an open and non-judgemental attitude and may decide that it is worth the risk to share. Callie went to the hospital for treatment in the aftermath of a sexual assault; the nurse who treated her clearly created a safe and empowering environment:

*She told me everything I said there was anonymous and I didn't have to contact the police, 'cause that's the thing. Like, she offered to help me and take pictures of me if I wanted to contact the police but she said she didn't have to. She just seemed like a really straight-up like, nice lady. And I think I was honestly really emotional at that point 'cause I was in withdrawal and like, all that stuff and I just needed someone to talk to and 'cause she just seemed straight-up and I like that in a person. I burst out crying and pretty much told her everything. 'Cause I was so frustrated and overwhelmed and I was scared I had AIDS and all this stuff so I just like, broke down pretty much. And like, after all that and I calmed down she like, told me about the study and she's like oh, we can help other people in your situation and I'm like, "ok." (Callie, 22, escort and former street-based worker)*

By reassuring Callie that she could be anonymous and did not have to call the police, this health care provider gave her autonomy and choices following a situation in which her power and choice had been over-ridden by her assailant. In reinforcing that Callie was now able to be in control of her own situation, the nurse communicated that her needs were most important and would be respected.

Conversely, judgement or scolding by professionals can set up a situation in which sex workers will not feel comfortable to disclose their concerns. Unsolicited comments or opinions about choices that are perceived as carrying health risks can immediately shut down the conversation as the individual will anticipate even greater judgement in response to their work.

*I had a doctor that I dropped almost immediately cause she started giving me grief about my tattoos and stuff. I imagine the other stuff would go over super well! I mean like, it's like ok. You give me hell for smoking, I'm not even going to tell you what else I smoke. (Donna, 29, former erotic dancer)*

Whether they are health or social service providers, professionals are best able to work with their clients if the client feels comfortable enough to be open and to share their concerns. It is important to remember that the key concerns that bring individuals to seek assistance from social or health services may not be directly related to sex work at all. Suspending judgement requires professionals to attend to the concern that is pressing for the client – to help them with what they want help with, and not to make assumptions about what they *should* be addressing.

### ***Health Concerns and Confidentiality***

Sex workers have different ways of managing their concerns about confidentiality when it comes to their sexual health and whether or not they will disclose their occupation. Some have confidence in their regular GP and prefer to disclose their situation fully in order to access the most thorough care, rather than to take chances with drop-in clinics and multiple doctors.

*I feel sometimes when I use a clinic, like there's no confidentiality there? Because you can see anybody, you can pass anybody. The doctor won't really understand what I'm there for and it's kinda like explaining my story to another doctor for the gazillionth time. So when I go to my doctor, my doctor's already had me for like,*

*almost eight years now. So my doctor already knows my past history. Two years ago, my doctor found out I was going into the escort business and I wanted to do it but I didn't fully explain to him until about a year ago. I had to tell him [...] So I explained to him like, I'm an escort so—he actually has a few other patients that are escorts. So I explained to him and he goes “ok, now that you've explained this to me I'm able to better help you with whatever you really need now.” So, that's usually why we do the whole full check-up every three months which is all the testings. The HIV, everything. So I feel when I go to a clinic the doctor is not—I don't have the doctor's undivided attention. The doctor is either “oh, she is just here for a pregnancy test, or she's just here for this or that.” When I go to my doctor, my doctor knows. I'm here for this and I'm here for that and I need these results as soon as possible. So that's kinda why I go to my doctor. (Lucy, 23, escort)*

In other cases, sex workers prefer to remain anonymous and to access sexual health services separately from their general health care:

*I myself, I always got tested every three months when I was working. Always, always. So I mean like, with me it's a ritual right? And I went to the Health Unit. I didn't want to see my doctor. I didn't want my doctor to know about any of this stuff; so I went to the Health Unit 'cause you can get everything done anonymously there. You can give them a fake name or you can use your name and initial or they can use a number for you, right? And it's great. (Margaret, 40, former street-based worker)*

The key takeaway message in both of these quotes is that confidentiality matters. While we know that confidentiality and privacy of health care matters is governed by legislation and professional codes of conduct, it can be an important and helpful reminder to reinforce with clients. Taking a short amount of time to reiterate at the beginning of an appointment that whatever the client tells you is confidential can go a long way toward building confidence and creating a safe space for disclosure.

However, professionals who are not careful about confidentiality and who do not suspend judgment can have a negative effect on a client's willingness to trust other health and social service providers. When clients experience stigmatizing behaviour or humiliation from healthcare or other professionals, it can even foster a reluctance to access other services. When Wade was asked about testing for STIs, he admitted to the interviewer that it had been eleven months since his last test. He was abashed and acknowledged that he felt this was too long, but that he was reluctant to open himself up to the possibility of humiliation by going to a clinic. Wade described a terrible experience when a routine trip to the dentist turned into a shaming ritual:

*I went through that once and it was horrid and I don't want to do it again. I went to the dentist and they did a routine cleaning and then I was walking out to the reception and then they must have seen my arms because I forgot to wear a long sleeve shirt. I always wear long sleeve shirts or a coat and I forgot to and this was back a while ago so my arms were a lot worse than that. Like, really bad. Or I rolled up my sleeve and they got a glimpse or something. They knew I was an IV user. So as soon as I was done getting my teeth cleaned I went up to the desk to book an appointment or whatever and all the girls in the back were saying throw everything we just used on him. Toss it and the girl goes “what about the two thousand dollar machine?” She goes, “toss it out and we'll tell the boss it broke.” In front of all the patients. I was not even out the door yet. Like, I felt so fucking belittled it was—and I can't—like, I see their side too. I do, I do. But at least wait till I'm gone. Or don't yell it. I try to see both sides of the coin. Like, I know that they're probably thinking well, he's a user. He could have AIDS or—but like, I'm thinking to myself that lady in the stiletto heels and the nice skirt and nice dress shirt could have AIDS too. Are you gonna throw out all her shit too? It just pisses me*

*off that they just judge on appearance but everyone does so I'm getting too deep. Everyone does judge on appearance but it just was really belittling so that's why the whole bloodwork thing is hard for me. Because I don't want to go through that again.* (Wade, 30, escort)

This kind of shaming and stigma can have the unintended consequence creating more risks to public health by deterring individuals from accessing services. As a community, if we want to encourage individuals to look after their sexual and physical health, to get tested regularly, and to access community health services, then we need to make all services as welcoming and non-judgemental as possible for all citizens. Wade was not the only participant to experience negative treatment by healthcare professionals due to stereotypes and stigma surrounding drug use and sex work. Norah compared her treatment by hospital staff to her experiences prior to becoming a drug user and sex worker:

*If I ever had to go to the hospital, a lot of the staff at the hospital treats you, as soon as they find out you're a junkie, you're fucked. They just treat you like shit. They treat you a lot different than they do the others—and that's most of them. Some of them don't, but most of them do. You're a second-rate citizen. Kinda how I would treat people before.[...] They would just be snippy and snarpy and you know, ignore you or just talk to you differently. Right? Because I've been to a hospital plenty of times, and before I was never treated like that, you know? You can just feel the difference. Yeah, like you're just a piece of shit and you can just wait. Right?* (Norah, 43, former street-based worker)

When individuals have experiences like this, one can understand why they might be reluctant to seek help in the event of a sexual or physical assault, or may avoid accessing health care services on a regular basis. Fortunately some participants did speak highly of the health services they received – the Grand River Community Health Centre and the Sexual Health Clinic at the Brant County Health Unit were highly regarded by participants who had accessed services there.

### ***Accessibility***

Health services should also be made as accessible as possible so that clients do not face barriers when they are ready to access services. In addition to the standard concerns about location and physical accessibility, accessibility for marginalized people may require later business hours, or ensuring that phones are monitored on a continuous basis. Wade attempted to access STI testing at a health clinic but reported, “*every time I go there though there's no one at the desk and no one ever answers the phone.*”

In this age of increasing connectivity, we often assume that everyone has access to their own phone or computer, can leave a message and receive a call back. This is not the case for many participants on limited income who may only have cell phones that access wifi to receive and send text messages or may use “pay-as-you-go” phones that quickly run out of minutes and do not have voicemail services. The ability to contact clinic staff directly, rather than having to leave a message, is an important part of increasing accessibility. This was emphasised by the process of this research itself; several additional people attempted to contact the researcher to take part – they left messages on the office voicemail but did not have a number where they could be reliably reached. Several did not call back and could not be contacted and so we missed having those voices in this study. It is a much more serious matter if individuals cannot access healthcare or sexual health services because of these kinds of complications.

### **Healthcare Needs**

In more general discussions of health and healthcare concerns, most of the participants mentioned that they were vigilant about safer sex. Sex workers are generally quite cognizant of the risks to their sexual health and most are regular users of condoms. This is not to say that clients don't pressure them to do "bareback" services, or that sex workers are using condoms 100% of the time, but that risk of STIs is a well-known issue. Veteran sex workers generally do not appreciate "lectures" about safer sex from healthcare providers and may even find that approach paternalistic and infantilizing. As with the issue of autonomy, a better approach is to ask the client if they would like to discuss sexual health issues, and to take direction from the client on matters of concern. Don't assume that sex work or sexual health is even their primary health concern. When we asked one participant if there were health services that were not available to her that she would like to be able to access, her answer was immediate and unequivocal:

*Dental. And I'm not just saying sex trade workers alone should get dental. I was on welfare once and I'm not ashamed to admit it, and where I was there they had free dental care. But as soon as you move out of that city, go somewhere else, you can't use your drug benefit card, your dental card. There, any dentist would accept you once you have that dental card from Ontario Works. I think dental is one of the main things among people—I'm not saying just like, cleaning or regular check-ups. I'm talking like, somebody has a root canal, somebody needs an extraction, dental should be covered anywhere. (Lucy, 23, escort)*

General improvement of the social safety net and universal access to healthcare, dental care, and prescription medication should be priority areas for all of Ontario.

Similarly, many of the participants in this research had concurrent mental health concerns; some had chronic diagnoses of bi-polar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, or other mental illness, while others suffered from situational or acute depression. Drug use was often linked to mental health struggles, and many participants discussed difficulties in accessing drug rehabilitation treatment – and particularly in-patient rehab programs. In general, more widespread investment in these kinds of assistive services would be beneficial not only for the participants in this research, but also for other citizens.

### **Accessing Social Services**

A positive finding from this research is that the local sex workers we spoke with generally feel quite connected to community resources and they do access services from many different agencies. This is reflected in our interviews with local health and social service providers who do acknowledge that they have clients who do sex work. It is likely, however, that some clients do not disclose their work due to concerns about stigma and judgement, as discussed above. Repeatedly, the participants in this research emphasized that the best professionals approached their work in a holistic and non-judgemental way; some participants felt that peer support could be particularly helpful:

*It's gotta be, I think the word is anti-oppressive? Where you know, you're working with them. You know, just cause we're doing it, don't be like "oh, you know, you're bad and I'll give you this condom stuff or whatever but you're still—I still look down on you." And so if you had previous sex workers do that. (Vicky, 29, former erotic dancer)*

Given the intersections of challenges that many of our participants experienced, it was not uncommon for them to be accessing services with many different agencies and workers. They might

have more than one counsellor for different issues (e.g. addictions, sexual assault), a mental health professional, a case worker for Ontario Works, a case worker for Family and Child Services, be taking classes for a GED, accessing methadone maintenance, and other health services. The sheer number of professionals they work with opens up increasing possibilities for negative experiences or judgement. But the participants noticed when their workers were able to suspend stereotypes, think out of the box, and to meet them where they were in their journey:

*Well, my worker, he's always like, 'be good with your money you can be rich. Start saving your money.' He said, 'even if you're on welfare just go get a safety deposit box. Go get a safety deposit box and put your money in there.' I'm not supposed to put money in there, because I'm on welfare, but just put the money in there. He's like, 'get a trustee.' Oh yeah. He's like, 'fuck man, you can be rich. He's like, 'I should be making some money off this.' He's a good guy though, yeah. (Rose, 32, escort)*

As unorthodox as it may seem, this individual's straight-forward and non-judgemental approach to financial advice made Rose feel able to approach him with her concerns and created a positive working relationship. He clearly understood the challenges she faced as a sex-working single mother trying to create financial stability for her family in a system which penalizes women and labels them "scammers" when they attempt to augment their government income support and to build savings for security. Rose (as described earlier) was planning to leave sex work in order to regain and keep custody of her youngest child – a savings nest egg from her sex work income would give her more options and better enable her to care for her children. This worker also does not automatically assume that Rose is intending to leave sex work, which gives her the option of being more forthright about her feelings about sex work. As one community service professional eloquently expressed, opening conversations about sex work with the assumption that the individual wants to "get out" comes loaded with judgement and does not create space for the client to perhaps express an alternative viewpoint. This also has the effect of making some sex workers feel as though they have to pretend to want to quit doing sex work in order to continue accessing services and will shape the way that they talk about their activities:

"If somebody's had a bad date and they've been beaten and raped in that context, the automatic assumption is that they don't want to work anymore, which is the case for a lot of women. I would say we probably have a skewed sample because we are an agency that deals with sexual violence and a very high proportion of the people we see that are in sex work are at least considering making a change in their life. But I think that's a general problem for service providers is just the automatic assumption that if somebody's in sex work your job is to help them leave. And to an extent I think that narrative is being contributed to by the client out of necessity to secure the treatment and um, our agency work is to suspend judgement."

In suspending judgement, effective professionals acknowledge their client's agency and respect their autonomy to openly define their own situation. These professionals are better able to assess their clients' needs for support, information, and safety planning. For example, if a social service provider spend time making a safety plan for a client who agrees that she wants to leave sex work, but in reality the client is just too afraid of judgement to tell her counsellor that she wants to continue to work, then the services provided are inappropriate and not useful to the client. The client may also decide that the professional is unable to provide the support they are seeking.

*So, I went to see a counsellor a while back. I just really wanted someone to talk to about my mom, and whatever. And I told her I was an escort and it was like – you could just see that she thought, I dunno, that I was really stupid for doing this. She said “are you sure that’s a good idea?” And I was just, ugh – so demeaning. And so I played along for a while. I just said, “yeah, you know, I’ll think about looking for another job”- and then she wanted to talk about that, and nothing that I wanted to talk about. So I never went back to her. There’s no point. (Molly, 25, escort)*

It is clear that sex workers in this region are looking for safe, non-judgemental, and well-informed services. Operating in a manner that is respectful of clients’ autonomy, emphasizing confidentiality and options, without making assumptions about what sex workers need is the best way to ensure that services are inclusive and appropriate. Social and health service providers should take the time to educate themselves about the dynamics of sex work in our area and in Canada more generally. Rather than relying on news articles or information from other service organizations, professionals should consider accessing information collected and provided by sex worker-led organizations to develop an informed and nuanced perspective on the issues. Community service providers should also educate themselves on the laws surrounding sex work in Canada so that they can better direct and inform their clients – many of whom do not have accurate knowledge about the laws.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report provides only a brief snap-shot of sex work in the Brantford, BHN region. Based on the research we find several key issues that should be addressed going forward to ensure that our community is providing inclusive and non-judgemental support.

Of particular significance is the number of participants who were not aware of the laws around sex work and, consequently, did not know their own rights or were afraid of criminalization in situations where they were not at all at risk. This lack of education around the laws diminishes what efficacy they might have in improving sex workers' confidence in police and in encouraging them to report violence or victimization.

Although the laws contain several key changes, purportedly designed to decriminalize and improve safety for sex workers, it is not at all clear that these changes have resulted in positive effects. While selling sexual services is not subject to prosecution, the criminalization of clients still requires that sex workers manage their work in such a way as to avoid detection by police, assuming that they do not want their clients charged. In the original charter challenge, the complainants argued that the criminalization of communication compromised the ability of street-based sex workers to work safely because they could not take time to clearly delineate the terms of their service to clients and to ensure that the clients agreed to those terms. They also worked alone and in areas that may be less populated or out of sight. The criminalization of clients does not remove the need to work in ways that avoid police detection and, in fact, replicates the same dangerous situation for street-based workers. Further, the prohibition against materially benefitting rests on the assumption that sex workers and third parties are bifurcated categories, when in fact we often see overlap and sex workers working with one another or providing services to one another. The criminalization of third parties also criminalizes workers, and prevents them from legally working together to improve their safety.

The inability to effectively advertise one's services also makes safer indoor sex work more difficult. As POWER and PIVOT have argued: "working indoors is futile if a service provider cannot advise potential clients about their services." Online advertising is increasingly more common in the sex industry. In 2015 the popular website backpage.com was barred from collecting advertising fees via Visa and Mastercard, because an American sheriff lobbied around his concerns that the website might carry advertisements for victims of trafficking. Many sex workers used prepaid credit cards to post their ads and the censorship by Visa and Mastercard has made it increasingly difficult for sex workers to post their online ads; Bitcoin became the default currency on backpage.com. Several sex workers in this research pointed out that these changes had made it very difficult for them to advertise online – in some cases they resorted to street work in order to obtain clients. Although this turn of events was not directly related to the Canadian criminalization of third party advertisers, it does illustrate the difficulties that accrue to people working in the sex trade when they are effectively barred from advertising.

The laws themselves create ongoing difficulties for sex workers and pose a barrier to confidence in police and willingness to report violence. The matter of the laws falls within the purview of the federal government – at the local level we can only work to ensure that law enforcement are acting with integrity, not targeting sex workers for criminalization, and are responding sensitively and with

respect to workers who do require police assistance. However, there are a number of recommendations coming out of this research that can be implemented at the level of individual service providers and agencies, or through community initiative.

### ***Recommendations***

1. Community social service and healthcare providers should respect individual's terms of self-identification; do not label clients involved in sex work as victims, or make assumptions of coercion or exploitation where the individual does not experience it.
2. Be open to individuals' realities; listen carefully to sex workers' descriptions of their needs or concerns; do not assume that sex work is the primary issue for which they need assistance.
3. Services must never be contingent on an expectation of leaving the industry; offer choices and services in a non-judgemental way that respects individuals' right to choose to do sex work. Do not assume that leaving sex work is or should be the individual's goal in seeking assistance.
4. Share accurate and up-to-date information about sex workers' legal rights, whenever possible. This requires that service providers themselves are educated about the laws and have access to plain-language descriptions of the laws. An excellent resource is freely available from Stella (Montreal) at: <http://chezstella.org/en/infosheets-laws-around-sex-work/>
5. The City of Brantford, and the town of Simcoe, with REAL, should work towards the development of drop-in centres for sex workers and street-involved women. These centres should be easily accessible, located in a safe space that would not make women vulnerable to identification (and stigmatization), welcoming and free of judgement with respect to sex work and sex workers. The centres should offer practical assistance, a safe space to go, and non-judgemental peer-based support. Alternatively, a mobile camper van unit could be utilized to offer the same services in the counties on a rotating basis. Any services should operate during hours that are convenient for sex workers, which may be unconventional business hours.
6. Both in-patient and out-patient drug rehabilitation services should be more widely available in our region. Sex workers should be able to access addictions counsellors who understand the dynamics of the sex industry's intersections with drugs and who do not stereotype or stigmatize sex workers who are users.
7. Sex work should not be constructed as an automatic risk factor in child protection and custody cases. The literature demonstrates that many sex workers are effective parents; custody decisions should be made on the basis of actual danger, rather than stereotypes of risk.
8. As a matter of standard practice, police should not lay charges for drugs or other offences on individuals who call for assistance or to report a sexual or physical assault.
9. Increase the accessibility of sexual health services and other community services through longer operating hours and telephone coverage and drop-in availability. Do not assume that all clients can or will leave messages and can be called back.
10. Agencies should ensure that the confidentiality of all social and health services is reiterated to clients as a matter of standard practice, and respected (within the legal limits of confidentiality).
11. Work towards the universal availability of extended healthcare services in BHN, including dental and vision care, and prescription drug coverage.

REAL is developing resources and training for community service providers and these resources are available to all local agencies who wish to increase awareness of sex workers' concerns and improve their agency response to these issues. For further resources or to schedule a training, please contact REAL (Resources, Education, Advocacy for Local sex work).

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