

Female sex workers' perspectives of front-line police officers' ability to ensure their safety in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

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Abstract

The influence of stigma and discrimination on sex workers' perceptions of safety is not well documented outside of Canada's three largest provinces—Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec. This preliminary qualitative study examines sex workers' perceptions of front-line police officers' ability to ensure their safety. The research draws on four semi-structured, in-depth interviews with female sex workers in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). Guided by an anti-oppressive social justice framework, our thematic analysis of the interviews identified three major findings: (a) the existence of police stigma as undermining sex worker safety on and off the job; (b) the importance of alternative means of safety outside of law enforcement; and (c) the implications of existing legislation and its impacts on safe working conditions. Findings suggest the need for ongoing research to understand the challenges and barriers to sex worker safety, so that these issues can be addressed through evidence-informed stigma reduction strategies.

Keywords: female sex worker, sex worker safety and protection, police and stigma, St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

1. Introduction

Sex workers have varied and volatile interactions with police, the challenges of which are well documented (Williamson et al., 2007; Boittin, 2013; Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Dewey and St. Germain, 2014; Armstrong, 2017). In Canada, sex workers' experiences with law enforcement are overwhelmingly negative: the violation of their rights, the dismissal of their reported abuses, and the abuse by law enforcement officials are all issues that emerge in the existing literature (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Benoit et al., 2016). Safety is a complex topic for sex workers and much of their ability to keep safe is not facilitated by police (Benoit et al., 2016); sometimes, sex workers feel that it is

the police from whom they need to be kept safe (Erasquin, Reed and Blankenship, 2011; Boittin, 2013; Odinkova et al., 2014).

While there are studies examining the interactions between sex workers and police officers (e.g. Beattie et al., 2010; Decker et al., 2013), as well sex workers' perceptions of safety (e.g. Krüsi, Kerr et al., 2016), these topics are underresearched in Canada. Existing literature focuses on Canada's three largest provinces—Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec. It suggests that sex workers have low levels of confidence in police and are highly stigmatized by law enforcement officials (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Benoit et al., 2016; Krüsi, Kerr et al., 2016). Because Canada is highly regionalized, there is a gap in knowledge about sex

workers' safety outside of the country's largest provinces (Sloan and Wahab, 2000; Benoit *et al.*, 2016).

The objective of this study was to examine female sex workers' perceptions of front-line police officers' ability to ensure their safety in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). St. John's is a medium-sized city; the Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of St. John's has a population of 203,305 (Statistics Canada, 2017). In 2016, White people constituted 92.4 per cent of the population, while visible minorities and Indigenous people made up 4.3 per cent and 3.3 per cent of the total population, respectively (Statistics Canada, 2017). These latter numbers are extremely low when compared to the rest of Canada.

In what follows, we provide a summary and analysis of relevant literature on the research topic. Next, we present a description of the theoretical framework used to understand and interpret our data. We then explain the methods for data collection, followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings.

2. Literature review

2.1 Comparing effects of international sex work laws on police-sex workers' interactions

Sex work is a global industry and the interactions sex workers have with the police vary depending on the legal models, political structures, and social norms operating within different countries. Internationally, sex workers experience substantial challenges when it comes to law enforcement and safety (Culhane, 2003; Chu and Glass, 2013; Odionokova *et al.*, 2014). In general, there are four different models of sex work legislation: criminalization, end-demand models, legalization, and decriminalization. Police interactions and interventions vary depending on the legislative approach.

In countries where sex work is fully criminalized (e.g. South Africa, Russia, and much of the United States), research indicates that police officers will leverage their structural power to abuse sex workers (Erausquin, Reed and Blankenship, 2011; Boittin, 2013; Odionokova *et al.*, 2014). In China, sex workers report police officers exerting their state power through bribes, excessive physical abuse, lack of protection from pimps, abusive language, and coerced confessions (Boittin, 2013). Police officers in Russia use their role as law-enforcement officials and the illegal nature of sex work to exploit sex workers—often sexually (Odionokova *et al.*, 2014).

In countries where sex work is partially criminalized (e.g. France, the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, and Canada),

abuse is still reported but on a smaller scale. End-demand laws, intended to reduce the availability of sex workers, have often been passed. This legislative approach creates a system of partial criminalization: it criminalizes those who purchase sexual services, but not those who sell those services. The approach has had many unexpected negative effects. After France, for example, implemented end-demand laws in 2016, sex workers did not see significant improvements in police protection (Giametta, Le Bail and Leicester, 2018). In Sweden, the relationship between sex workers and law enforcement worsened, and alternative legislation to punish sex workers for their work (deportation of noncitizens, child protection, and tenancy) also increased (Levy and Jakobsson, 2014).

Decriminalization is widely viewed by sex workers and sex-worker organizations as the best legislative option for protecting sex workers' rights, safety, and security (Harrington, 2012; Abel, 2014; Armstrong, 2017; Sweetman, 2017). However, while some Australian regions have decriminalized sex work, there is only one country where this model has been fully adopted: New Zealand. It implemented decriminalization in 2003, effectively removing all legislative restrictions regulating selling and purchasing sex (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Krüsi, Pacey *et al.*, 2014; Armstrong, 2017). After decriminalization, sex workers reported improvements in their interactions with law enforcement officials (Harrington, 2012; Sweetman, 2017). Sex workers were once punished and arrested for possessing barrier methods for safer sex (i.e. condoms, spermicide, dental dams); decriminalization halted these police practices (Harrington, 2012). In addition, police harassment decreased, and sex workers say they feel more comfortable reporting abusive or exploitative clients and managers to police (Harrington, 2012; Armstrong, 2017).

2.2 Police-sex workers' interactions in a Canadian context

While research on the topic is still emerging, existing work suggests that Canadian sex workers do not feel protected by police (Brown *et al.*, 2006; Bruckert and Hannem, 2013). In one of the most recent and comprehensive studies in Canada, which drew on the experiences of 218 participants from six different CMAs (including St. John's), Benoit *et al.* (2016) found that 63 per cent of sex workers felt that the police did not ensure their safety. Moreover, few sex workers reported police violence to authorities because prosecutors frequently dismissed their claims (Benoit *et al.*, 2016). Within the existing literature examining police–sex worker interactions, several specific

issues often emerge. The following paragraphs will consider three of these: stigma, violence, and the intersection of race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status.

2.2.1 Stigma. Police–sex worker interactions exist within a cultural context of stigma and discrimination (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Ferris, 2015; Benoit *et al.*, 2016). As the legal arm of the state, the police reinforce the social taboo of sex work through their poor treatment of sex workers (Williamson *et al.*, 2007). Individuals working in the sex industry are a highly stigmatized group, perceived as transgressing sexual norms and threatening traditional family values (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). Stigma impacts the day-to-day lives of sex workers (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). In this way, the stigma experienced by sex workers exacerbates already elevated rates of violence against them, regardless of whether this violence is structural, physical, or symbolic (Krüsi, Pacey *et al.*, 2014; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016).

Police stigmatization and poor treatment of sex workers can occur in many ways: arbitrary detainment; forcible relocation from affluent neighbourhoods; and physical, verbal, and sexual abuse often enacted under the threat of arrest or detainment (Shannon *et al.*, 2008; Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016; Armstrong, 2017). In its most insidious form, the stigma and discrimination associated with the sex industry often discourages female sex workers from reporting the crimes perpetrated against them to the police (Dewey and St. Germain, 2014). These negative perceptions and interactions impact sex workers' basic citizenship rights within Canada (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Krüsi, Pacey *et al.*, 2014).

2.2.2 Violence. While not all work in the sex industry results in violence, negative and harmful experiences are well documented (Culhane, 2003; Dylan, Regehr and Alaggia, 2008; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). Stigma and discrimination both make sex work risky. Female sex workers experience high rates of direct violence at the hands of police (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Krüsi, Pacey *et al.*, 2014; Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). Indirect forms of violence include a passive police presence in areas where female sex workers are active, as well as ineffective policing strategies and negligence (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013). For example, police have chronically failed to investigate missing persons reports when the missing person was a female sex worker (Culhane, 2003; Dylan, Regehr and Alaggia, 2008; Sex Workers United Against Violence *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, they frequently fail to investigate general claims of violence made by sex workers (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Sex Workers United Against Violence *et al.*, 2014). As a result, sex workers are reluctant to approach the

police when they have experienced violence (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016).

2.2.3 The intersection of race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status. The intersection of race, gender, ability, and socioeconomic status further influence how female sex workers are perceived and treated by the police. Krüsi, Kerr, Taylor *et al.* (2016) note that Indigenous sex workers experience elevated rates of violence relative to other sex workers. In Canada, Indigenous women are overrepresented in survival or “low-track” sex work (Culhane, 2003). More Indigenous sex workers are missing or have been murdered than non-Indigenous sex workers and Indigenous women experience higher rates of violence perpetrated against them while working (Dylan, Regehr and Alaggia, 2008; Ferris, 2015). Further, there is an increased risk of HIV acquisition among Indigenous women, as well as a higher prevalence of intergenerational sex work, where daughters of sex workers also become sex workers (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Bingham *et al.*, 2014). Indigenous sex workers experience increased vulnerabilities and cite a concerning lack of confidence in law enforcement (Dylan, Regehr and Alaggia, 2008; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). These individuals are at a higher risk for abuse, violence, health disparities, displacement and drug use while having fewer supports (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016).

Gender non-conforming sex workers and those with a disability experience similar entrenched discrimination (Miller, 2002; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). Transphobia permeates many transgender sex workers' experiences with strangers, clients, and police officers (Miller, 2002; Lyons *et al.*, 2017). Transgender sex workers experience extensive and embedded transphobia in their interactions with the police (Lyons *et al.*, 2017). Disability also impacts the experiences of sex workers and the levels of violence that they face (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016). Sex workers are often portrayed as hypersexual, while individuals with a disability are perceived as asexual (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016). While much of the research on disability and sex work focuses on clientele with disabilities and their sexual expression, the intersection of disability and gender may lead to increased violence from law enforcement (Fritsch *et al.*, 2016).

Likewise, racialized sex workers, such as Black women, experience elevated levels of risk in the sex industry (Hankel, Dewey and Martinez, 2016). African American sex workers are overrepresented in street-based sex work and are more likely to enter the sex industry at a younger age than their White counterparts (Hankel, Dewey and Martinez, 2016). These workers encounter sexual abuse and violence from law enforcement—many have reported being arrested by police

officers, who then used their position of authority to coerce sexual acts (Decker et al., 2013). The intersection of race and sex lead racialized sex workers to work in isolated areas and environments, in order to avoid police scrutiny, paradoxically increasing their vulnerability to police abuse (Hankel, Dewey and Martinez, 2016).

3. Theoretical framework

An anti-oppressive social justice theory guided this study (Williamson et al., 2007; Krüsi, Pacey et al., 2014). This theory addresses the social and structural oppression faced by female sex workers, capturing the power differential existing between female sex workers and police officers that often contribute to the oppressive nature of police–sex worker interactions (Williamson et al., 2007). Key concepts of anti-oppressive social justice theory include: (a) structural forces within society produce inequality; (b) everyday experiences are shaped by multiple oppressions and resistance; (c) the personal is political; and (d) micro and macro level social relations generate oppression (Baines, 2016). Structural violence and social arrangements create conditions for violence to occur (Krüsi, Kerr et al., 2016). Analyzing the structural barriers and larger oppressive forces affecting sex workers while also considering the key tenets of anti-oppressive social justice theory has proved effective in understanding sex workers' perceptions of front-line police officers' ability to ensure (or to not ensure) their safety.

4. Methods

As exploratory research, we conducted a qualitative study into female sex workers' perceptions of police officers' ability to ensure their safety. The Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP), the only sex worker advocacy group in St. John's, assisted in recruiting participants by promoting the research at community events and during regular outreach with female sex workers. Research questions were designed in collaboration with SHOP, targeting issues identified as important by sex workers, as well as to limit any preconceived ideas or moral judgements. Sex workers who expressed interest in the research were informed about the study's objectives before giving their consent to participate. They were eligible to participate if they were actively working in the sex industry and identified as female. No restrictions were placed on the location of the work. Four individuals who expressed interest met eligibility criteria and were interviewed; the interview questions were provided in advance. The semistructured interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, lasted between 14 and 38 minutes (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006; Jamshed,

2014). Three of the four participants were only able to meet for a limited amount of time, due to prior commitments or unspecified personal reasons. As a course-based research project with minimal risk to participants, the study followed ethical conduct for research involving humans, including the submission of an ethics proposal with academic justification for the research. It was supervised by the course instructor and last author, Dr. Giwa, and received clearance from the departmental ethics review committee.

One of the participants identified as transgender and female. All indicated their race/ethnicity as White and ranged in age from 31 to 41 years. Three of them worked indoors, in a private residence or massage parlour. One participant worked primarily as a street worker but had also worked indoors in the past. The research was conducted, without funding, by the first four authors, all Bachelor of Social Work students. Nevertheless, compensation of \$20 plus a thank-you card was provided to each participant in recognition of their time and contribution to the study (Gelinas et al., 2018). While the coercive potential of compensation is hotly debated (Grady, 2005; Williams and Walter, 2015), the research team consulted with SHOP and decided that compensation for the time rendered was essential. Although the amount was not substantial, the gesture was an important recognition that the time of each study participant was valuable.

To analyze the data, the authors performed thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes that emerged throughout the qualitative interviews (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). We followed six steps:

- We familiarized ourselves with the data by reading and rereading the transcripts before coding.
- We generated initial codes from the data, with like and variant codes grouped together.
- We sorted all coded data extracts into themes, to reveal recurrent and discrepant experiences.
- The identified themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they did not overlap and that they formed a coherent pattern.
- We considered the overall narrative and how the different themes fit into this narrative. We then assigned names that expressed the essence of those themes.
- We wrote up the findings from our study (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5. Findings

Our analysis of the data revealed three themes: (a) police stigma as undermining sex-worker safety on and off the job; (b) alternative means of safety needed, outside of law

enforcement; and (c) impacts of legal implications on safe working conditions. Each is discussed below, supported with verbatim quotes from participants. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants.

5.1 Police stigma undermining sex worker safety on and off the job

A common theme across all interviews was the stigma that female sex workers experienced, which had safety implications for their interactions with police. The participants felt less credible to police than non-sex workers and this impacted their ability to confide in and contact the police for assistance:

I call them [police] and if I do report, I think as soon as the information comes out about what you do or your situation, I think then innuendos come in. It's like drug addiction, . . . on the street you're this and you're that, [and] you're being trafficked...It's all these types of things. And it seems like if I run into a problem with sex work, I don't think I would actually call the police... My credibility would be shot with the police. (Jess)

Sex workers like Jess must make decisions about which issues they can bring to the police. Often, matters related to sex work are not an option, since sex workers feel that the police are not inclined to take their concerns seriously. Police who hold stigmatizing views may perceive sex workers as not credible and act in line with this view. Consequently, legitimate safety issues that require police intervention may go unreported, making sex workers more vulnerable to victimization.

Even when a report to police does not connect to an incident at work, the nature of the industry defined whether the women were seen as credible or deserving of police protection. During a discussion of a violent physical assault by an intimate partner, one sex worker described the incident and police response as follows:

[H]e literally was trying to rip my jaw off and it's not an exaggeration, I'm not joking. He had his hand in my mouth and he was going for all he was worth because he was going to rip my jaw off because he didn't want me out sucking cock anymore because he loved me. And then that's what the police said, that you're not a reliable witness because you're a sex worker. (Katie)

Katie's account of physical violence at the hands of her intimate partner illustrates how police reluctance to take the

concerns of female sex workers seriously places them in grave danger. Her identity as a sex worker made it unlikely that the police would believe her (or other sex workers) after being physically or sexually assaulted.

The stigma of being a sex worker described by the participants was reinforced by repeated examples of police using dehumanizing language and behaviour. Examples of this language included 'shoo', 'go away', and 'fuck off' (Katie). Calling the police to request assistance or report a crime, as another participant stated, was fraught with the risk of additional name calling: 'So, what? Are they [sex workers] going to call them [police] and they're [going to say] shut up whore, you know?' (Vanessa).

For these participants, police behaviours did not rise to their expectation of professionalism or their need for safety and protection, resulting in the continuation and reinforcement of negative police interactions.

5.2 Alternative means of safety outside of law enforcement

Participants expressed concern that, at their most vulnerable time, they could not count on the police. The seriousness of their complaints was either minimized or downplayed, putting them at heightened risk for revictimization. The women expressed their resolve to take matters into their own hands as an alternative means of keeping safe. If these safety measures were compromised, they would not have any protection at all; there would be no safety net. One participant said: 'Really, my safety is up to myself' (Jess).

Most of the participants indicated, however, that their primary source of protection was other sex workers. In this collaborative approach, one sex worker would call another in case of an unsafe situation:

If you're someone who does independent work you need to have someone that you trust to at least be like, 'hey, this is where I'm going, I'm going to text you at 8 o'clock. If I don't call you, please call.' That's what I do for safety. (Sam)

The women relied on each other, even if the level of intervention was on a small scale. Their camaraderie reinforced the view that they were not alone and that they mattered to each other. They had the sense that having someone they trusted checking in on them was the difference between being safe and unsafe.

Participants reported that they required protection from the police. They said they did not feel safe being in the same space as police and sought to avoid them at all costs.

Speaking about why not being around police was desirable, one participant said: 'I'm protecting myself from the police in many ways and I want to be absent when they're present because I fear for my safety, for my freedom, and for my rights when I'm around them' (Jess).

For these participants, the police were not figures of safety. They were a negative force in the lives of sex workers, who had to protect themselves by ensuring that they actively avoided coming into contact with the police. Participants had the sense that, because they were sex workers, they lived in a precarious state, without the assurance of safety, freedom, and rights guaranteed to other Canadians. The fear that their safety, freedom, and rights could be taken away led them to maintain a state of hypervigilance—to spot the police, and then retreat from them. Not an evasive action taken strictly out of fear, participants' decision to avoid police was a deliberate manifestation of their personal and collective agency.

5.3 The impact of legal implications on safe working conditions

The participants were unequivocal that their safety and relations with police were impacted by the legislation governing sex work in Canada. In a discussion about how to address issues of stigma and ineffective legislation, participants alluded to the importance of political will on the part of elected officials. These individuals could—through their individual and collective actions in destigmatizing sex work—foster an environment that promoted recognition of and respect for the human dignity of sex workers. For one participant, the potential for meaningful change started with legislation:

Stigma is circular. And where it can be stopped is the people who are supposed to be our leaders, in other words, the people we elect...They can cut the circle. You can have people who feel this way about sex workers but you can also have our leaders in Congress or whatever saying, or in the city, saying sex work is work. Sex workers are human beings. We can make this, we can get rid of this law, or make it legal, or whatever that takes, and then people will come around. That's how stigma works. One of the main reasons it sticks is because it's still illegal. (Vanessa)

According to Vanessa, a lot of power is concentrated in the hands of elected public officials and political leaders—power that can be used to improve the lives of everyone, including sex workers. Privately, such officials might hold questionable views about sex work and sex workers but, in

public and in the conduct of their work, they should bracket their personal views and not let them influence their policy-making decisions. Policymakers can be important agents of social change when they implement laws that uphold the human dignity of people who work in the sex trade.

Current legislation criminalizes the sex industry and perpetuates stigma, making it difficult for sex workers to engage in their work safely. Participants were hopeful that if the legislation were to shift, the perceptions held by police and the public would also change: 'That's the simple thing and once that machine, that very, very slow machine, very rusty machine, once that starts going, it'll be okay' (Jess).

Jess was not alone in thinking this way; in fact, all interviewees connected many of the issues they experienced in their work as front-line sex workers to current legislation and consistently said that legal change was vital and necessary. Issues of stigma (both from the general public and from law enforcement), they believed, could be addressed with sweeping changes to federal legislation.

6. Discussion

This exploratory study highlights the complex intersection of stigmatization and experiences of safety for female sex workers in St. John's, NL. Canadian research on police–sex worker interactions in this part of the country is sparse. Nonetheless, this study builds on existing evidence indicating that stigma impacts female sex workers' interactions with police (Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). The adoption of an anti-oppressive social justice framework (Baines, 2016) in the current study permitted an understanding of the structural power imbalances that often contribute to the oppressive nature of police–sex worker interactions. Working from a bottom-up perspective allowed us to focus on the unique experiences of female sex workers in St. John's, which have not received much research attention.

These findings make explicit the negative impact that police stigma has on the lives of female sex workers (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Ferris, 2015; Benoit *et al.*, 2016). The police may not investigate crimes perpetrated against sex workers; they may not see these women as reliable witnesses; and they may not be able to separate the crimes of sexual and physical assault from the crime of purchasing sex (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). Such stigmatizing attitudes prevent the sex workers in this study from seeking support or assistance from police. The lives of sex workers do not appear to be given equal value to non-sex workers, and as a result police may not afford them equal protection (Benoit *et al.*, 2016).

An unexpected finding in the current study was participants' discussion of stigma in the context of how existing legislation had impacted their safety and well-being. Their accounts made clear that the legal model under which police perform their duties affects their interactions with female sex workers. The current Canadian federal legislation—outlined in Bill C-36—follows an end-demand, or Nordic, model. Since its implementation in 2014, it is illegal to buy, advertise, and profit from the sale of sex (Supreme Court of Canada, 2013; Department of Justice Canada, 2014). This model was initially implemented in an effort to eliminate the sex industry by criminalizing buyers and shielding sex workers from criminal liability. Ultimately, this approach has failed to reduce the number of individuals entering the industry and has exacerbated existing stigma and safety concerns (Giametta, Le Bail and Leicester, 2018; Argento *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, recent research into the impacts of Canada's end-demand model suggests that it is ineffective; changes are required to improve the working conditions of Canadian sex workers (Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016; Argento *et al.*, 2020). Until Canada adopts a decriminalization model, there is no incentive for police officers to change their behaviour. Safety and police interactions will remain problematic until this broader legal issue is addressed (Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016).

Finally, this study builds on existing research indicating that female sex workers do not perceive police officers as capable of protecting them (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Sex Workers United Against Violence *et al.*, 2014; Benoit *et al.*, 2016; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). In fact, when asked about how they kept themselves safe, interviewees described personal safety plans, community support (e.g. bad-date lists), and the support and solidarity of other sex workers (safety check-ins and timed phone calls) as their primary means of personal safety.

6.1 Implications for policy and research

This research demonstrates the need for change in how police interact with female sex workers in the course of their work. There must be a shift in legislation to ensure that sex workers feel safe and protected in their chosen industry. Federal policy (Bill C-36) currently operates as an end-demand model. Sex-worker-run organizations overwhelmingly advocate a legislative model of decriminalization, believing that that would help to reduce the stigma of sex work, and improve police–sex worker interactions, good sex worker health outcomes, and sex worker agency (Harrington, 2012; Abel, 2014; Armstrong, 2017; Sweetman, 2017).

Sex workers are also impacted by municipal regulations, which can impede their ability to work safely. For example, in St. John's, a four-year (2015–2019) ban on massage parlours was only recently lifted (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019). Massage parlours are a key component of safe indoor sex work, and placing a moratorium on these businesses limits a sex worker's choice about where they work and what conditions they work in. While lifting this moratorium represents meaningful progress after extensive grass-roots advocacy, these types of municipal bans demonstrate just how harmful local policies can be.

Several observed gaps in the existing literature should direct future research efforts. In the developing scholarship on sex work in Canada, issues such as sex workers' confidence in police is an area for ongoing research. Studies examining this issue are emerging in other locations across Canada (e.g. Bruckert and Hannem, 2013; Krüsi, Kerr *et al.*, 2016). However, outside of this current study, there is no existing scholarship looking at female sex workers' perceptions of police in St. John's. The authors noted a distinct lack of quantitative research in the provincial, Canadian, and international context. Sex workers are a marginalized group. Accessing them is difficult, and often depends on relationships of trust built between sex workers, sex-positive community organizations, and researchers.

More focused studies are needed on marginalized groups within the sex industry, such as transgender, Indigenous, racialized, and male-identifying sex workers.¹ The limited data that exists show that these marginalized groups experience higher rates of violence and stigmatization (Williamson *et al.*, 2007; Krüsi, Pacey *et al.*, 2014), reinforcing the urgent need to capture these experiences. There is also a significant lack of research that focuses on rural areas. The experiences of rural sex workers will differ from those currently described in the literature and future work should seek to capture the voices of these workers.

7. Limitations

Some limitations in this study suggest caution in the interpretation of our findings. First, we were limited in our sample size of female sex workers. Also, the study was conducted within the limited time frame of an academic research course. Lack of funding restricted our geographic reach, with data collected in one city centre. Future research could explore the experiences of female sex workers in other

¹ This study intentionally focused on female sex workers, since research indicated that male-identifying sex workers' experience in this industry diverges substantially from that of female sex workers (Morrison and Whitehead, 2007).

parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, including smaller, rural communities. Finally, our sample was limited in terms of diversity, possibly reflecting the general demographic makeup of the province in which the study was conducted. All participants identified as White. The study did not include the experiences of Indigenous, racialized, or female sex workers with a disability; it also did not consider the experiences of those who had exited the sex industry. An additional limitation was the lack of police perspective. Future studies must include the perspectives of police—specifically, police perceptions of their ability to protect sex workers' safety. These limitations notwithstanding, the study's findings fill some important gaps in knowledge regarding sex workers' perceptions of police ability to ensure their safety in St. John's, and present a starting point to promote further research in this area.

8. Conclusion

Stigma and the actions of police intersect to compromise the safety of female sex workers in St. John's, NL. The legal framework governing sex work, at both the municipal and federal levels, contributes to the proliferation of social and structural stigma. This stigma inevitably informs the actions of law enforcement officers. The safety of sex workers in St. John's was tenuous at best, which was evident in the prevalence of sex workers' negative perceptions of police. This study underscores the need for further research into this marginalized population and reveals the urgent need for legislative changes in the sex work industry, as a way to improve police interactions with female sex workers.

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