

Sex Workers, Allies, and Friends (SWAF): Sex Work and Harm Reduction in Edmonton

Introduction

In a context of settler colonialism and its ongoing, every day, lived expressions of gendered and racialized violence, individuals participating in the sex trade employ a variety of survivance strategies. Operating within a matrix of marginalization, domination, and violence, sex worker voices are too often silenced when it comes to building knowledge about – and creating resources for – their lives and work. To adequately understand the various factors contributing to this matrix, and the wide ranging experiences of sex workers, it is essential that anti-violence strategies build on the knowledges of those engaged in trading sexual services.

This project explores body autonomy and resistance in the daily interactions of sex workers in Edmonton, with an emphasis on proactive de-escalation and anti-violence survival skills. Particular attention is paid to intersecting strategies in relation to addictions and harm reduction.

Research Team

A research working group comprised of community partners and academics was established to determine research focus and methodology. Members include:

- Community partners which are comprised of members from the populations of interest and/or work in a support capacity with those populations:
 - **PIECE Edmonton** - A sex worker collective with Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and transgender sex workers.
 - **Street Works** - A harm reduction agency providing health supports for people injecting drugs and/or working in the sex trade.
 - **Kindred House** - A harm reduction safe house and resource center for women and transgender individuals who are involved in street prostitution.
 - **Crossroads** – A harm reduction agency that provides support and harm reduction supplies to individuals involved in street-based sex work and survival sex [new partner as of fall 2017].
- Academic partners:
 - Dr. Julie Kaye, Assistant Professor, University of Saskatchewan
 - Laura Aylsworth, PhD Candidate, University of Alberta

Methods

- **Data collection:** Approximately 4-6 focus groups and 10-15 one-on-one qualitative interviews and opportunities for artistic submissions.
- **Participation criteria:** Open to anyone over the age of 18 who is currently or has previously been involved in street-level and/or indoor sex work. No exclusions will be made based on race, gender, or health status.

Research Working Group Meetings

Initial Meetings (1-3):

- Members met to discuss the core issues of concern, including:
 - What are the existing peer supports in Edmonton and what supports are missing?
 - What supports exist in other cities that we might learn from?
- Members prepared for a meeting with the Alberta Minister of Justice and Solicitor General. This meeting documented concerns regarding the implementation of the new federal prostitution legislation and expressed the need for future support of sex worker-led initiatives.
- As a result of these initial meetings, we applied for CRISM research funding

Two Key Objectives Emerged:

- A needs assessment to better understand how to reduce the harms experienced by sex workers in Edmonton and intersections with addiction.
- To implement sex worker-led peer supports in Edmonton.

Following these meetings, a substantial amount of time was devoted to securing ethical approval. The delay was largely attributed to the primary investigator changing academic institutions and the challenges of cross-institutional agreements. During this period, a variety of factors changed the course of the subsequent meetings, including a major decline in the Alberta economy, members of the group changing occupations, and a change in the policing of sex work in Edmonton.

Subsequent Meetings (4-5):

- Members reached consensus in narrowing the focus of potential research topics:
 - Approaches to de-escalating violence and harm reduction as it intersects with addictions.
 - Skill-based emphasis: How do you de-escalate situations when confronted with potential violence? What are your strategies?
 - Further explore what supports are available and how workers keep themselves safe.
 - Key consideration: Safety techniques and survival strategies in relation to addictions and intersecting factors of structural and material inequality.
 - Focus on proactivity. *A potential outcome of the project is the educational opportunities for those involved in sex work and harm reduction.*

Determined Research Focus :

- Body autonomy & resistance in daily interactions – skills for ensuring safety and de-escalation techniques.
- Autonomy & skills in indoor and street level sex work as well as addictions.

- With the focus determined, members discussed appropriate methodology:
 - Begin with focus groups due to the nature of the topic.
 - It is difficult to discuss daily resistance without input from others.
 - Conduct individual interviews after reviewing focus group data.
 - Artistic submissions – Participants will be invited to submit creative works (i.e. songs, paintings, poetry, etc.).
 - Further conversations planned for making cameras available for PhotoVoice.

Methodological Decisions:

- Focus groups with 6-8 participants per group (depending on interest)
- Individual Interviews
- Opportunities for artistic submissions

Knowledge Mobilization

The research working group also resulted in the formation of the umbrella group SWAF (Sex Workers, Allies, and Friends). The umbrella group can be mobilized to provide related supports, policy guidance, as well as provide a potential site for future educational and training opportunities.

The focus on body autonomy, resistance, and de-escalation highlights the skills used by individuals participating in the sex trade to enhance personal safety. This information is currently shared through informal mechanisms. Findings from this project will establish a toolbox of skills that can inform current programming for sex workers in Edmonton.

The centering of sex worker and harm reduction perspectives throughout this project will mobilize these expert knowledges towards anti-violence strategies while shedding important academic insights on the ongoing processes of settler colonialism and the resulting relations of structural inequalities and material manifestations of such inequalities on the day to day lives of individuals enacting varying forms of anti-violence strategies and resistances.

Funding

CIHR

Grant Title: Prairie CRISM Node Proposal

PI: T. Cam Wild

Start date: Dec 1, 2014; End date: Nov 30, 2019

Total amount: \$1.75 M

PIs: Aubry, Allan; Dell, Colleen Anne; Hodgins, David Carson; Wild, Cameron T

Co-Is: Acoose, Sharon Leslie; Agrey, Noreen; Aitchison, Katherine J; Bastien, Betty Jean; Bercov, Marni L; Bokitch, Allison; Bourassa, Carrie Ann; Brache, Kristina Rose; Butt, Peter; Chalmers, Darlene J; Christensen, Darren Robert; Currie, Cheryl L; Currie, Shawn Ronald; Dong, Kathryn Ann; Dursun, Serdar M.; El-Guebaly, Nady; Enns, Brett; Episkenew, Jo-Ann Margaret; Field, Andrew; Greenshaw, Andrew James; Henry, Robert; Kaye, Julie; Lee, Bonnie; Mackay, Marnie; Maina, Geoffrey Muriithi; Mykota, David; Novotna, Gabriela; Ogenchuk, Marcella; Ohinmaa, Arto E.; Rasmussen, Capri; Rittenbach, Kay; Salvalaggio, Ginetta Lara; Sherren, Nicole; Silverstone, Peter Harris; Stea, Jonathan Norman; Tait, Caroline L.; Ulan, Susan Ruth; Weber-Pillwax, Cora Kathleen; Willerth, Kathy Joy

CRISM Prairie Node Subgrant:

Kaye, Julie. (PI) and Laura Aylsworth. *Sex Work and Harm Reduction in Edmonton: Safe Spaces, Healthy Options, Secure Choices.*

Canadian Research Initiative in Substance Misuse – Prairie Node: \$15,000 (CAD).

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