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Reimagining Worker Safety in a Criminalized Environment: Uplifting Sex Worker Methods of Collective Care and Harm Reduction

Kimberly Fuentes, MSW • 2021

Issue

Sex work is an exchange of a sexual service for money or other benefits like housing, transportation, food, medicine, or other survival needs. For many, it may be the best option to defy detrimental financial outcomes. However, the criminal status of sex work (and the criminalization of their identities) creates a state of fear and revictimization perpetuated by the state, which leads to lack of access to a wide range of social services and stigma from service providers.

The punitive foundation of sex work limits the ability of service providers to align affirming care. Further, the fear of being punished for their line of work creates a tense environment that bars criminalized communities from disclosing the full extent of their work to service providers. Research on sex workers has focused on risk factors and rates of violence experienced by sex workers. While high rates of violence raise concern, this community has frequently been studied as a monolith and only perceived through the experiences of cisgender white women. There is a timely need to implement an intersectional study of how sex workers utilize their networks of care to gain autonomy on the material constraints of their lives.

Study Methods

With the collaboration and input from the Sex Worker Outreach Project - Los Angeles, the researcher conducted individual dialogues and art-based photo-elicitation with 13 sex workers in Los Angeles County. This study intentionally recruited sex workers with diverse work experiences (e.g., stripper, BDSM provider, escort), race, gender, and class attributes, specifically reaching out to transgender women

and people of color. The main themes of inquiry revolved around how individuals' identities shaped the sex worker experience, overcoming barriers related to or mitigated by their work, and identifying individual and group supports that have contributed to their well-being in a criminalized profession.

Main Findings

As a self-protective measure, sex workers have created strong informal community and information-sharing networks to provide basic needs and harm reduction.

While this provides protection from criminalization, it further insulates their community. Angel describes how even as an independent worker, she requires a sex worker network to offset the risks of working alone:

You have such autonomy [in your work] to the point that not even the government is there to help you if you get in trouble. So it's really important to have a built community around you that you can reach out to if you're in trouble.
(Angel, semi-structured dialogue, 16 October, 2020)

The implications of criminalization created a culture of silence where the fear of criminal consequences was pervasive, especially if they spoke out in other non-sex worker spaces about their work. This internal and external policing creates uncertainty amongst sex workers regarding who they can trust, contributing to the marginalized nature of their work, as described by one research actor:

I pick and choose because I work in the club and somebody having that information could get me in trouble. Also, even though they're my close friends [club coworkers], I don't want to burden them with that information. Now my friends who don't dance, I'll talk about it with them... so as

much as I'd like to be open, I have to be careful, not 'cause of shame, it's just 'cause those are the situations. (Talia, semi-structured dialogue, 27 October 2020)

A sex worker-coined concept — “whorearchy” — is used to describe the intersectional differences that sex workers face.

The implications of this system create and reinforce stigma that negatively impacts hyper-marginalized workers, especially Black and brown transgender women, distancing them from social networks:

Even in work, it was a really interesting experience to see people come in to start working who were, bi, gay, trans, white, non-white, racially ambiguous, middle-class, low-income, wealthy, sober, addicted, recovering. It's like all these different things that would play into a part. And there was this algorithm where [a sex worker] could come in and you could be like, “I know how they're going to do”. They could be a really amazing person who gives an awesome session, but they are not going to advertise well. (Victoria, semi-structured dialogue, 27 October, 2020)

Sex workers in this study exercised their agency and resisted victimization as portrayed through markers of personal well-being and their community’s ability to care for itself.

Here a research actor illustrated her newfound agency in deregulated spaces:
How many times have I been in the bank where somebody actually touched my fucking booty as a bank teller and I couldn't say something but at least at fucking [the strip club] I could get them kicked out without doing a whole bunch of paperwork for sexual harassment, cause that takes a toll on you too...I don't have to tolerate shit. (Olive, semi-structured dialogue, 26 October 2020)

Recommendations

» Our systems of social welfare currently operate under a carceral framework that is hostile to sex workers. The best way to provide services for sex workers is to do it in the communities that they already trust. This can look like social workers offering to train sex workers to facilitate their own peer support groups or creating grants within a social service agency to target resources that address the intersecting issues that sex workers face.

- » Funding should be allocated to sex worker organizations for the formation of sex worker support services, legal supports, and other services that sex workers deem valuable for their well-being. On a larger level, social workers and policy makers should actively work toward creating spaces where sex workers feel prioritized by integrating them into decision-making processes.
- » Sex workers have persevered and resisted criminalization due to the protective factors that they've built for themselves but they still deserve the basic rights that are currently denied to them. To decrease the number of barriers that sex workers face, we must decriminalize sex work and grant sex workers the basic protection that any other workforce is granted. By providing this community with legitimacy, we can begin to distinguish the ways that sex work and trafficking vary and how criminalization exacerbates baseline conditions for both groups.

About the Author

Kimberly Fuentes is a recent graduate of the UCLA Master of Social Welfare Program and an incoming Ph.D. student of social welfare at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

For More Information

Fuentes, K. (2021). Revolutionizing Community Under the Red Umbrella: Intersectional Inquiry with Sex Workers on Protective Factors in Los Angeles, CA (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/33r972sb>