

Older women in the oldest profession: A qualitative retrospective life course analysis

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Background: Much research with sex workers continues to focus on communicable disease prevention, but rarely is sex work contextualised within career trajectories. Little is known about the work history or experiences of middle-aged and older women engaged in sex work, but such understanding is important in order to build on strengths and address challenges for this largely hidden population.

Methods: Using a participatory, peer-led methodology, we conducted semi-structured interviews at six urban and regional Queensland locations with 24 cisgender female sex workers aged between 50-70. Interviews were analysed thematically and using individual life grids that mapped career transitions and other life events.

Results: Older female sex workers have diverse career histories. Four patterns were identified: lifetime sex work; interrupted sex work; mid-career commencement and late-career commencement. Finances, work flexibility and becoming single often motivated starting sex work, while interruptions were often triggered by starting new relationships or stigma management. Participants' experiences of sex work after 50 were shaped by their career history and circumstances, with participants who commenced sex work in their late 40s and 50s more easily integrating sex work into their lives and retirement planning, while longer-term sex workers were more prone to isolation, sex work burnout, declining earnings, and fewer alternative work opportunities. Challenges were compounded by occupational stigma, discrimination and policing that affected dual careers, finances, relationships and social connections across their lives.

Conclusion: For health practitioners, meaningful engagement with sex workers may be strengthened by contextualising sex work within broader career pathways. Further policy development work still remains to address workforce participation inequities for women engaged in sex work.

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