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CREATE CHANGE

Older women's experiences of sex work in Queensland pre- and post-COVID-19

Abstract Spotlight Session: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects (Live Q&A)

Noon – 1.30 pm

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Australasian HIV&AIDS and Sexual Health Conference: Virtual

Rachael Brennan, Linda Selvey, Lisa Fitzgerald, Judith Dean
School of Public Health



Context: women, work and ageing issues

Older women in the workforce in Australia

- Widespread age discrimination in the workforce
- Overrepresented in casual, part time and underemployed workforce
- Persistent earning disparities over the life course and substantially lower superannuation savings
- Systemic factors perpetuate age and gender disparities and inequities over the life course

Sex work in Australia

- Strong sex worker rights movement with public health successes
- Disparate legislative frameworks; criminally regulated licensing system in Queensland

(Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016; Wilkins, Laß, Butterworth, & Vera-Toscano, 2019)

Sex work ageing issues (international literature)

- Decreasing and uncertain earnings
- Exclusion from preferred sex work sectors
- Riskier work places and sexual practices
- Occupational and ageing stigma and sex work criminalisation negatively impact older sex workers' wellbeing

COVID-19 and sex work

- Systemic barriers to accessing COVID-19 welfare programs

(Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; Hao et al., 2014; McLaren & Wong, 2020; Pomales, 2016; Prostitution Information Center & SekswerkExpertise, 2020; Visano, 1991)



Research aim, methodology, methods

- Explore the impacts of COVID-19 on circumstances and work practices of cisgender women, 50 years and older, engaged in sex work in Queensland
- Sub-study within research exploring older women's experiences of ageing, sex work and wellbeing. (UQ ethics approval 2019000007)
- Qualitative, community based participatory research, insider/peer led, designed in collaboration with state-based sex worker organisation
- Semi-structured interviews (45 mins – 2 hours) with 10 participants
 - First interviews Jun-Nov 2019
 - Follow up interviews July-Aug 2020
- Qualitative thematic analysis of data (pseudonyms used herein)

(Baum, Macdougall, & Smith, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Jeffreys, 2010)



About the participants

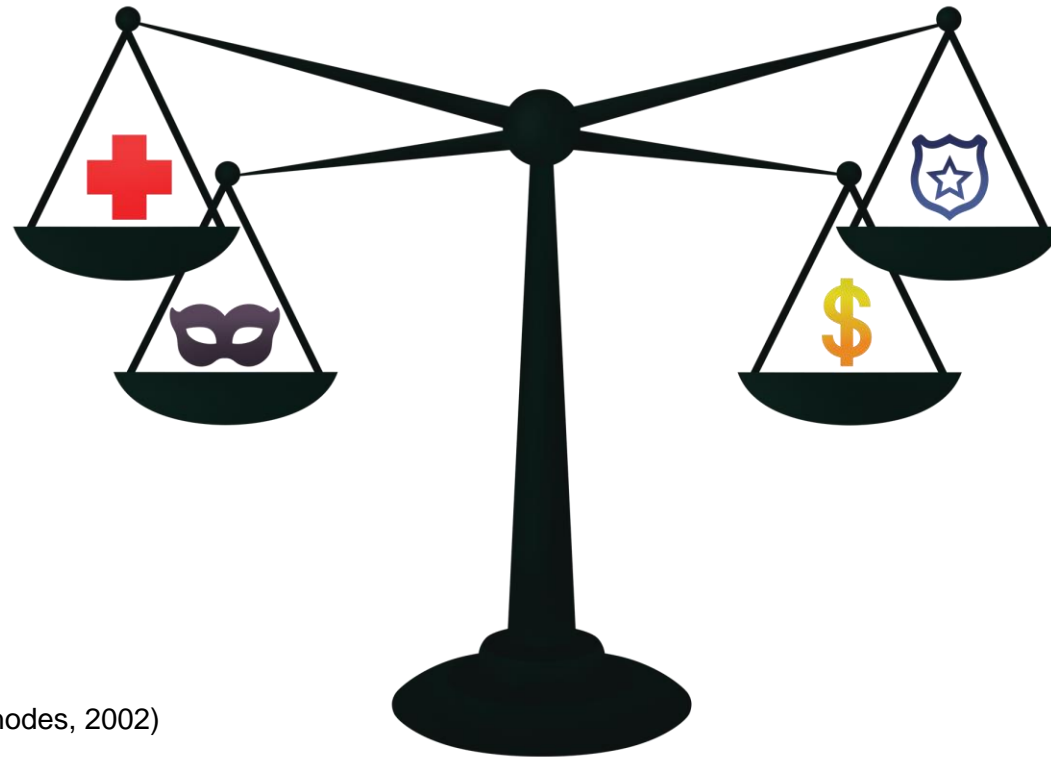
Age	Number
50-54	4
55-59	5
60-64	1
Education	
Up to year 10	4
TAFE/trade	1
University degree	5
Country of birth	
Australia	7
UK	2
Thailand	1

Current work sector	Number
Private sex work	9
Massage parlour	1
Length of sex work experience	
0-9 years	2
10-19 years	4
20-29 years	2
30+ years	2
Work location	
Metropolitan Qld	7
Non-metropolitan Qld	3

All participant names are pseudonyms

Risk environment – weighing risks and opportunities

- Older sex workers work within a complex risk environment and COVID-19 further impacted health and safety, finances, and sex work stigma and policing risks



(Abel & Fitzgerald, 2012; Brown, 2020; Rhodes, 2002)



COVID lockdown response – ‘to stop or not to stop’

All participants weighed financial needs and circumstances to decide whether to stop or continue

- **Five participants stopped sex work during lockdown**

- Four accessed JobSeeker, and each withdrew \$10,000 - \$20,000 from superannuation savings
- One stopped but did not access benefits
- JobSeeker preferred because of delays in JobKeeper announcement and payments

- **Five participants continued sex work through lockdown**

- None accessed JobSeeker, JobKeeper or superannuation savings
 - not eligible due to partner's income, or other work, or disability benefits
 - not living at registered address, mistrust about whether payments would need to be repaid
 - benefits available inadequate to meet financial needs
 - limited or no superannuation savings

*I'd rather work
than I have debts
and I worry.*

-- Helen, 55 years



Experiences of stopping work during lockdown

- Participants who accessed JobSeeker and superannuation savings found it a positive experience

*... it gave me the opportunity to
really start my life over again ...
it was the best thing that's
happened to me in years.
-- Heather, 56 years*

*Woo hoo! After ten and a half years in
the industry, I've got a three-month
long service leave on half pay.
Kathy, 55 years*

*I start to accept that women, after 50,
you don't expect too much.
-- Anong, 52 years*



Assessing risks and screening clients

- Participants adapted environmental and client screening processes during and after lockdown

... if we had of had active cases here, um, I definitely wouldn't have worked, no definitely. But yeah, no, I just kept it to regular clientele.

-- Mary, 53 years

I had always said I don't do clients under 25. ... I upped that to 30. ... And in the last week I've upped it to 35. Because, you know, I can't put my older clients at risk. My regulars.

-- Kathy, 55 years



Adapting services to reduce risks

- Participants modified the services they provided in a wide range of ways

Oh, some guys didn't want to come in. Some wanted to do – you know, I promoted video things a bit more. And sending pictures. Pay for pictures. Video, like facetime, whatever. I did a few of those where I never normally done that.

-- Helen, 55 years

*It's made it more fun.
Change creates change.
-- Dawn, 50 years*



Older sex worker strengths – ‘boundary setters’

- Ageing provided authority for older sex workers to set health and safety boundaries

As you get older, that level of acceptance, when you do assert yourself is, ‘Oh, okay, no problem.’ You know, whereas when you’re 30 and you try to assert yourself, they go, ‘Oh, you fucking bitch’.

-- Kathy, 55 years

I went over to his house ... and then when I told him I wasn’t kissing, he said, ‘Oh, oh, no, I can’t come – I can’t come unless I’m kissing.’

And I said, ‘Mate, like it’s fucking COVID’. ... so anyway, he’d already given me the money, so I kept \$50 as cancellation fee, and just left.

-- Judy, 58 years



Managing sex work stigma

- Clients expected sex workers to protect them from being identified for COVID-19 contact tracing

The only thing he said to me was, 'If either of us get COVID, please – I won't put you on the contact trace, like the contact screen. Please don't put me on it either.' Which I wouldn't have anyway.

-- Heather, 56 years

Well, we're supposed to take a picture of their license or let them sign a book, ... and none of them want to do it. ... But I did say to them, look, 'cause, you know, if something does happen, I will let you know, personally. ... So and, that's what they, um, they said they'd expect that of me anyway.

-- Princess, 64 years



Important role of sex worker organisations

- Sex worker organisations provided trusted, timely, industry appropriate information and training

I get my information, you know, from Respect. Haven't been in there yet, but they've been sending stuff out to workers about what to put on your ads, and, like what's illegal to put on the ads. ... Which is, you know, even though we -- I've been doing, um, you know, contact work, you are only allowed to advertise certain things -- that you weren't doing contact work.
-- Judy, 58 years

I have to ring Respect this week and get on to all the points of what I have to do to go back into work. ... I mean, I can't afford a \$3,000 fine and I certainly don't want people to be unsafe.
-- Denise, 54 years



Research limitations

- Limited participant diversity in:
 - citizenship status (all citizens or permanent residents)
 - cultural background (predominantly Australian/UK born)
 - length of sex work experience (all participants > 2 years' experience)
 - connection with Respect Inc (6 participants recruited through Respect Inc)
 - geographical location (7 participants from South East Queensland)



Recommendations

- Decriminalisation and elimination of sex work stigma are critical to protect sex worker rights and safety, remove barriers to participating in contact tracing programs and accessing welfare.
- Sex worker organisations are essential for distribution of up-to-date and industry-relevant information, and their expertise should guide policy interventions affecting sex workers.
- Further research is needed to understand the strengths and challenges of older sex workers .



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Thank you



r.brennan@uq.edu.au



@rachaelbrennan



rachael-brennan

