Sex workers' perspectives missing from laws that affect them, study shows

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Sociology PhD student Laura Aylsworth interviewed female sex workers in Edmonton, and found a significant gap between how society and the legal system regard the profession and what the lives of sex workers actually look like. Credit: Richard Siemens

First-hand accounts by female sex workers in Edmonton suggest policies meant to protect them from exploitation may be having opposite effect.

Canadian sex trade policies reflect a less than adequate understanding of

the lives of prostitutes, according to a new University of Alberta study of female sex workers in Edmonton.

Laura Aylsworth, a doctoral student in sociology, interviewed 25 women with experience in Edmonton's street-level sex trade and found a significant gap between societal and legal understandings of the profession and what the lives of sex workers actually look like.

"People have this idea that (sex workers are) out there 24/7, that it's the entirety of their lives and the only way they're supporting themselves," said Aylsworth. "For a lot of them, sex work involvement is a very small part of their day or even month—it's an additional way to secure their needs."

Some participants in Aylsworth's study were critical of the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act of 2014, introduced after the Supreme Court struck down Canada's prostitution laws in 2013.

It offers incentives to exit the trade, she said, such as financial assistance and skills training, but makes support conditional on making a clean break with the life.

"The sex workers I talked to want that support unconditionally, even those who are still involved, because their definition of involvement is much more fluid" than the legislation assumes, she said, with a wide range of working conditions, time commitments and transaction arrangements.

"They would like support without a contract or promise—no strings attached," she said, adding they would also welcome more accessible housing, safe places and shelters.

Aylsworth added that while exploitation and abuse are certainly a reality

for many sex workers, the picture does not apply to all. In fact, none of the women she interviewed for her study discussed involvement in the sex trade as comprising the bulk of their lives in any stable or fixed way.

Challenging victim narratives

Aylsworth's findings support a national study in 2015 funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research—the largest and most comprehensive study of the sex industry undertaken in Canada—called Understanding Sex Work.

It showed that although a minority in the sex industry "feel exploited and experience violence, many appreciated the autonomy and income their work provides and are generally satisfied with their job."

It also concluded that the "violence and poor health currently experienced by some sex workers are not inherent to the work—they are the products of punitive laws and inadequate social conditions."

Most in Aylsworth's study viewed "involvement" in the trade as dependent upon whether they had control over the terms of their business, including selection of clients and a degree of financial independence. They also rejected the commonly held misconception of "survival sex" as always defined by exploitation and victimhood.

Those who saw themselves as less involved in sex work "were defining themselves against these dominant victim narratives," said Aylsworth.

"Although pimps can be a reality for some, nobody I spoke with worked under a third party, or pimp, so they were able to have more control…. And none referenced their victimization as specifically tied to, nor the result of, their involvement in the sex trade.

"Instead, their involvement denotes their efforts to navigate and respond to wider structural inequalities and power relations—colonialism and racism, capitalism and poverty, patriarchy and gender inequality, and so on—that exist independent of the sex trade," she said.

When asked whether sex workers supported legalized indoor venues, "Many didn't want to move to an indoor location like a brothel, because they were aware they'd be working for someone else," said Aylsworth.

She said in recent years the practice of street-level solicitation has fallen sharply in Edmonton, mainly because sex workers use cellphones and the internet to talk to clients and potential clients.

Missing voices

Aylsworth decided to pursue her research project in 2010, after moving to Edmonton from Ottawa to continue graduate work. She noticed billboards around the city proclaiming, "This community does not tolerate prostitution."

"That really sparked my interest," she said. "I noticed the voices of the sex workers themselves were lacking in all this. No one was speaking to them."

She said much of the existing research on sex work focuses on the experiences of abuse that lead women into the trade, reinforcing the victim narrative.

"I was trying to find something different, asking them what is important for us to know," she said.

Aylsworth contacted sex work advocacy groups, putting out a call to those interested in sharing their experiences. The response was

surprising, she said, as many came forward, eager to correct dominant misconceptions.

She spent about five months on call, ready to conduct interviews at any time of day.

"I would meet them at a central location downtown—private nooks in public places—as a way to avoid setting up barriers," she said. "I wanted them to feel as free as possible. It was very loosely structured—I just let them talk.

"What was really surprising to me was this recurring statement: 'I don't do that anymore, I'm no longer involved,' when at the same time they would describe what from the outside would seem to be still participating."

Many also felt the 2014 legislation, while aiming to make sex work safer, ended up doing the opposite. By targeting those who purchase sex rather than those who sell it, the law reduced their clientele, exposing sex workers to more dangerous strangers, as opposed to safer regular clients.

"It is often the good clients, the ones who have something to lose, who stop using the services of sex workers," said Aylsworth.

Some of those interviewed also pointed to the often unacknowledged emotional and community benefits that derive from relationships with regular clients.

"What really came out was a sense of belonging or acceptance that being a part of the community brought, that perhaps challenged a childhood characterized by lack of acceptance … or being shuffled around foster homes."

Aylsworth said there is a dearth of research asking sex workers for their views on designing social policy. She said she hopes her study, which she plans to finish later this year, will have some impact on future decisions.

"This points out why research that seeks to privilege voices of those we talk about is so important, because they're able to point us in directions we don't even think to look."

Provided by University of Alberta