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Revolutionizing Community Under the Red Umbrella: Intersectional Inquiry with Sex Workers on Protective Factors in Los Angeles, CA

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**Revolutionizing Community Under the Red Umbrella:  
Intersectional Inquiry with Sex Workers on Protective Factors in Los Angeles, CA**

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Dedicated to the bad ass comrades who refuse to let the police state dictate their lives. Your spirit of resistance and love light a fire that will always keep us warm. Thank you to the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies at UCLA for your generous contributions to the fulfillment of this project.

**Abstract**

The punitive foundation that social work is built on limits our ability to align affirming care to community members who engage in sex work. By engaging in a process of collective knowledge production, this participatory action research (PAR) contextualizes the ways in which intersecting systems of oppression are magnified within sex worker communities and explores the ways that criminalization complicates social mobility and networks of harm reduction.

Through using the qualitative methods of photo-elicitation and dialogue aligned with participatory principles, this community-driven study uplifts individual and collective protections that 13 sex workers utilize to protect and care for each other in Los Angeles, California. Drawing from the intersections of Black Feminist and Disability studies frameworks, this study's findings identify factors influencing a stratified social hierarchy amongst sex workers, the systems of collective care that they create, and the ways that they navigate and resist the structural oppressions that are complicated by operating within a criminalized profession. This paper explores the hindrances that social work navigates by its alignment to the state as an agent of social control and its potential for engagement with criminalized communities. The implications from this study advocate for future lines of inquiry that benefits sex worker organizers and service providers in strengthening systems of care for sex workers resisting state violence.

*Keywords:* sex work, resistance, criminalization, mutual aid, collective care, intersectionality, participatory action research

*“Our relationships of support, our solidarity with imprisoned comrades, our criminal intimacies, our squats, our syntheses of survival and attack are the materials from which our insurrectional practice springs forth.” - Ehn Nothing, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) Report.*

## **Introduction**

Systems of communal care and resistance as seen in the STAR network paved the path for queer liberation of street communities and those left behind by formal systemic supports. At the intersection of multiple systems of oppression and criminalization sex workers. This community is constantly fighting “systematic fragmentation,” the phenomenon of dismissal and disregarding of histories and lived experiences (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, pg. 20). For many, sex work may be the best option to stay afloat and defy worse financial outcomes. However, the criminal status of sex work (and for some, the criminalization of their identities) creates a state of fear and revictimization perpetuated by the state. Within the field of social welfare, sex workers are excluded from service provision by the very act of social workers not acknowledging them or integrating their community voices into service provision (Jolivette, 2015). Nonetheless, these communities have resisted marginalization by creating systems of care and support completely independent of the state.

This paper draws from a participatory action research (PAR) initiative and collective organizing with sex working individuals in Los Angeles. This PAR project focused specifically on exploring the impact of intersectional identities on the sex worker experience and identifying how sex workers protect each other and resist criminalization in efforts to inform and transform social welfare professionals’ practices in working with these communities. Photo elicitation and semi-structured dialogues were used to uplift the narratives of affected communities while avoiding essentializing the sex worker experience and creating space for a nuanced exploration of resistance. I explore the tension that the social work profession faces in their reckoning with their role in revictimization and state-sanctioned violence against sex workers. Furthermore, I

argue in the discussion for the recognition of sex worker's resistance strategies and the legitimization of sex worker's struggles as tied to both their personhood and work in efforts to mitigate harm for this community.

### **Framing the conversation**

Sex work is defined as “the consensual provision of sexual services or performances in exchange for money or other markers of economic value” (Sawicki et al., 2019, p. 2). The broad umbrella of sex work includes but is not limited to full-service sex workers, BDSM providers, fetish models, sugar babies, escorts, strippers, porn actors, sex phone operators, and webcam models. Sex work does not necessarily imply “full-service”, meaning full sexual penetration. Moreover, sex work can span a varying level of physical contact with clients, with some workers producing entirely online content and never meeting clients in person. Sex workers may choose to identify as their specific facet of work (i.e., stripper), under the umbrella term of “sex worker”, or even as a “prostitute”, among other terms. Sex workers may even engage in more than one forms of sex work as many of the research actors in this study did. While “prostitute” is the criminalized term for sex work and therefore will not be used in this paper, this term will be used when a participant uses it to describe themselves.

In order to understand sex workers' experiences, it is important to understand the context in which they exist, both within the wider society and within the sex workers' rights movement. The present research situates itself in Los Angeles, California, where sex work is criminalized and sex workers are banished from mainstream society into an underground economy. The two most prominent laws that criminalize sex work in California are Penal Code 647(b) which make it illegal to engage in or solicit prostitution and Penal Code 653.23(a)(1) PC which criminalizes supervising or aiding a prostitute as well as receiving money earned through a prostitution transaction (California Penal Code Section 647(b) PC: Prostitution & Solicitation; California

Penal Code Section 653.23(a)(1) PC: Supervising or Aiding a Prostitute). Under Penal Code 653.23(a)(1), even the act of sex workers keeping an eye out for each other if they are concerned for each other's safety can be punished by imprisonment, a \$1000 fine, or both.

Furthermore, it is of value to note other laws that often indirectly impact sex workers. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was passed in 2000 in response human trafficking but has implications for sex workers due to the conflation of sex work and sex trafficking. The TVPA defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act, 2000). A commercial sex act is loosely defined as “any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person” with no differentiation between whether the sex act is consensual or not thus conflating sex work with sex trafficking. This combined with a general erasure of consensual sex work has resulted in a confusion and inclusion of sex workers as trafficking victims or even traffickers themselves (Wijers, 2015; Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). This current carceral framework has created several pathways for sex workers to be criminalized and persecuted. In spite of these constant threats, sex workers nationwide have been banding together to create unions, form collectives, and sustain mutual aid funds as they have historically through more formal networks such as the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) led by trans sex workers, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (Braslow, 2019; Nothing, 2013; Rhee & Saunders, 2020).

### **Problematization of Social Work's Interventions**

For several decades, social work's interventions with individuals engaged in commercial sex work were based on the ideological orientation of the time. Social workers in the mid-1800s rejected the idea of sexual liberalism and viewed their obligation as evangelicals to protect the

virtue of women against masculine sexual aggression (Boyer, 1978). This stringent view on sexuality translated into a singular perspective that all sex workers were victims of sexual exploitation and popularized the idea of “white slavery”, the trope that white women were extremely vulnerable to being trafficked and needed protection from the male desire. By the late 1800s to early 1900s, Charity Organization Societies (COS) further leaned into the ongoing anti-prostitution crusade and surveilled the acts of women who were rendered as susceptible to immoral forces.

A shift occurred in the 1920s, where social workers rejected the notion that women were blameless in their victimhood, and sex workers became predatory disease-ridden “fallen women” who needed rehabilitation (Hobson, 1987). Caseworkers began using their clients who had been convicted of sexual deviancy as research subjects to pathologize the root of female criminality in a way that shifted the blame onto the individual (Freedman, 1981). This shift towards pathologizing sex workers brought with it the loose recognition that they possess the agency to choose their profession. This notion was contested in the mid to late 1900s through the exploration of systematic failures or economic inequalities as heavily influencing factors towards a sex worker’s decision to enter the trade. This created tension for sex workers that continued on into the late-1900s, where their perceived agency in choosing the work denied them the ability to be viewed as “victims” (Harding & Hamilton, 2009).

Despite the feminist wave of the 1970s bringing forth issues of class and gender politics, the social work profession continued interventions that fixated on individual weakness as the cause of engaging in sex work (Kemp, 1994). Public health interventions aimed towards sex workers continue to harp on the idea of the sex worker as a vessel for disease and moral smudge on a neighborhood as seen through targeted HIV/AIDS programs as well as correctional and criminal justice interventions (Sacks, 1996). Notably, some social service providers such as

domestic violence shelters or housing assistance centers have policies that are reminiscent of previous efforts to rescue fallen women by providing aid on the condition that sex workers leave their profession (Weiner, 1996). Such policies are exclusionary and a deterrent for sex workers who may need services but do not have the resources available to leave the profession or who may not have the option to engage in the formal economy due to being undocumented or having a disability.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics details the standards and practices that social workers should uphold to further the general welfare of society. Based on past and present actions from the social work profession in regards to sex workers, there seems to be a dissonance between ethics and practice. However, their emphasis on engaging in social and political action shows the initiative to improve social conditions for marginalized groups. In the language describing social work standards, it is important to note that the onus of advocacy and engagement in a political arena falls on social workers to do on behalf of exploited groups. This approach of advocating on behalf of a population can be contrary to centering the experiences and narratives of oppressed groups while further marginalizing sex workers and risks not fully representing sex workers' best interests. The duality of focusing efforts on exploited groups is dependent on being viewed as a victim of exploitation which serves to either force sex workers into a victim role or deny them services altogether. This disconnect between theory and action further serves to isolate sex workers and has contributed to their distrust in social services (Sloan & Wahab, 2000).

Educator and philosopher, Pablo Freire, urges that to become agents of social change instead of agents of social control, social workers must actively lessen the distance between discourse and action (Freire as quoted in Moch, 2009). We cannot place an emphasis on promoting a client's self-determination, yet at the same time take a paternalistic approach



towards rescuing sex workers. It is our duty to engage in our potential for social justice implications while identifying social work's own complicity as servants of the same state that has enforced violent policies on the populations it claims to serve. So long as sex work remains criminalized and the power structures of inequality remain present, social workers will only be able to programmatically assist sex workers who have the capacity to comply with their standards as opposed to meeting the client where they are. Despite the profession's shortcomings, this study views a potential for the profession to transform by separating itself from the source of its tension: its loyalty to the state. Research provides a key opportunity to acknowledge and counter this historical oppression. Through a care-based approach to dialoguing with sex workers, researchers would be better posited to identify structural relationships that shape ongoing efforts of wellbeing and resistance to oppressive systems that marginalize these workers. However, it is first necessary to understand the precedent set forth by research on sex workers.

### **Current Discourse Regarding Sex Workers**

Even before entering the sex work profession, sex workers are disproportionately marginalized (Clarke et al., 2012). Many sex workers are people of color, trans/queer-identified, and/or undocumented, and sex workers also make up a significant percentage of our unhoused population (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Weinberg et al., 1999). In addition to experiencing disproportionate rates of violence, sex workers lack access to a wide range of social services (Cohan et al., 2006; Hanekl et al., 2016) and experience stigma from service providers (Thrukal, 2003; Valera et al., 2001). Sex work can provide a reprieve from the economic stress individuals may experience and, in some cases, may be the only option for work due to discriminatory hiring practices (Cobbina & Oselin, 2011; Weitzer, 2009). However, when the very nature of a hyper-marginalized population's work is criminalized, a critical means of survival for this group

is interrupted, and risk is compounded for sex workers (Lutnick & Cohan, 2009; van der Meulen, 2010).

Previous research has explored risk factors and rates of violence towards sex workers but has neglected to take an intersectional lens to understanding varying levels of risk and explore how these groups care for each other outside the confines of the state (Shannon & Csete, 2010; Quinet, 2011). Burnes et al. (2012) emphasize the need to investigate how “individuals transcend and/or cope with symptoms of trauma and criminalization” by utilizing social supports and interpersonal skills to facilitate survival in a potentially challenging environment (p. 141). The present study aims to build upon this question by exploring the possibility of an individual’s involvement in sex work acting not only as the process by which individuals survive in a capitalist, racist, and ableist environment but also sex work’s potential as a resistance strategy to criminalization in itself (Guo & Tsui, 2010). For the purposes of this paper, resistance refers to the individual’s autonomy to make their own choices in a society that “does not provide an open space for people to develop their own modes of life” (Guo & Tsui, 2010, p. 237). Given the plethora of oppressive social conditions that can exclude sex workers from formal society, researchers and social work practitioners need to understand sex worker resistance and also how we can act as co-conspirators to support their efforts (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001).

### **An Intersectional Approach to the Sex Worker Rights Movement**

Researchers have previously attempted to identify and classify the social location of sex workers through a hierarchical system for the purposes of identifying vulnerabilities and points of intervention. These studies classified workers through their work environments and where they found their clients (Exner et al., 1977) or through a worker’s proximity to “elevated levels of violence, including rape and assault” in which street-based sex workers constitute the bottom

rung of this hierarchy (Surratt et al., 2005, p. 25). These forms of classification closely intertwine safety with indoor work, that which is not done on the streets, and deem work that is regulated through organizational management or with access to elite high-paying clientele as the safest. However, the formation of these classifications has not been informed by sex workers, does not take into account situations where a sex worker does more than one type of sex work, or addressed the varying identity factors at play, namely race.

By analyzing the story of Belle Knox, a white cis-woman in college who received internet fame from sharing her story as a cam model, Robert Reece (2015) highlights the benefits that Knox received by being white and college-educated and concluding that there could never be a Black “Belle Knox” because of the systemic inequalities that prevent Black women from succeeding in an industry that preferences white women. To better understand the processes that facilitate wellbeing, it is essential to identify how sex workers’ experiences are shaped by their own intersecting identities. Some of these interlocking factors include age, race, class, gender, disability, type of sex work, and social capital that can be achieved through having a public presence as a sex worker.

Previous approaches to understanding sex worker experiences have primarily focused on the sex work experience of the cis-gender white women. A common critique within sex work communities has been that workers with historically marginalized identities such as trans/queer, Black, and brown workers’ concerns are inherently different than their white cishet counterparts (Wahab, 2002). This can be exemplified in the dissonance of the sex worker rights movement’s political push for decriminalization of sex work while Black sex workers urge that decriminalization alone is not a sufficient response to the criminalization of Black bodies, profiling, and mass incarceration that they face. In order to address all aspects of sex worker’s

multidimensional pursuits of justice, it is necessary to frame this study within a comprehensive framework that can allow an analysis of identity within the context of the state carceral system.

### **Theoretical Lens**

This study utilizes a Black feminist disability framework and the matrix of domination theory to examine how oppression and criminalization is defined by differing social classifications and to understand unique experiences within the sex worker community in a way that works against essentializing their experiences. Black feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins, argue that while there is value in unity for shared organizing, seen in the use of “sex work” as an umbrella term for the varying types of work and criminality within the sex trade, it is necessary to understand how race, gender, and class issues intertwine to form a matrix of domination (Collins, 2009, p. 227). Furthermore, a key tenet of this theory is the the dual acknowledgement of oppressive structures and a community’s agency that acts alongside and within these systems, a necessary outlook to honor the autonomy of the sex worker community. Bailey and Mobley (2018) provide an expansion of intersectionality that reconceptualizes the normative belief of what is “good”, specifically in regards to how we critically look at work for communities that carry multiply identities of marginalization with Black feminist disability theory. They suggest that we challenge the white cis body as the central normative body and examine the ways that our society creates stigmatized social identities while simultaneously refusing them access to spaces and services. The intersection of Black feminist thought and disability studies emphasizes the necessity for autonomy and belief that these bodies at the intersection of oppression deserve the agency to choose how they engage with it or resist these systems altogether. These two frameworks will provide the foundation for a more complex reconstruction of the sex worker heirarchy to better understand these varied experiences and responses under criminalization.

While some research has investigated the risk factors associated with sex work, it has primarily been through the lens of hypervisible forms of sex work (street-based sex work) and white cisgender women (Erickson et al., 2000). Through dissecting an exploratory portrait of sex work experiences, I will seek to understand how the type of sex work combined with a sex worker's position along different axis of oppression and domination shape access to protective factors against the impacts of criminalization and beyond that, exploring how sex work can be a tool for resistance.

### **Social Stigma and the need to combat exclusion and essentialism**

When exploring sex worker experiences, it is necessary to critically examine representation of sex workers in constructing these narratives. The way that sex workers have been portrayed both in academic literature and media representations has created a “fatalistic apathy” for the well-being of this marginalized population, a generalized impression that pain or violence is so deeply rooted and inherent with the work itself that there is little to be done against it (Bleiker & Kay, 2011, p. 7). This generalization can often fail the viewer by not creating space for instances where a community perseveres and even thrives. As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, “representation is important as a concept because it gives the impression of the truth” (p. 47). Current representation tells us that sex workers are mostly street-based and that they engage in survival work where they trade their bodies for drugs. Street workers are the most visible and most accessible to the media because they are the most heavily policed; however, evidence suggests that most sex work constitutes indoor work (Cunningham & Shah, 2018).

Ongoing discourse critiques the visual representation of marginalized populations and the danger of oversimplifying or misrepresenting a complex issue to elicit a stagnant pity (Bleiker, 2011). The image depicted creates a false assumption that violence, pain, and disease are

inherent risks of the trade. This prevailing narrative does not leave room for the complex relationships that individuals can have with sex work. The moralistic belief that there is no such thing as consensual sex work is ingrained and reproduced by visual representation to the point where a sex worker's attempts at voicing agency in their work is shut down by the idea that they are operating under a *false consciousness*, the idea that individuals cannot recognize their own exploitation due to their position within it (Tuhivai Smith, 1999). In the context of sex work, this view is patronizing and disempowering because it denies a sex worker's agency and is often used to argue that no form of sex work is consensual, thus furthering the victim narrative.

The harm that can come from stereotyping and stigmatization of sex workers is well documented. This is seen through the lack of empathy and increased victim-blaming that sexual assault survivors receive from medical providers when their sex worker status is revealed (Sprankle et al., 2018). Moreover, the gendered discourse of "prostitution" as a cisgender female occupation has erased the transgender and male sex worker perspectives as well as contributed to viewing sex workers in general as vectors of disease (Sawicki et al., 2019). Sex workers are cognizant of the current pluralized nature of their representation. The social stigma associated with sex work was identified as one of the key structural barriers that made social services inaccessible or caused workers to self-select out of these services (Surratt et al., 2005). To combat the prevailing narrative that their work is nonconsensual and traumatizing, sex workers may feel pressure to push themselves into dichotomized boxes to portray the "happy hooker" narrative that sex work is empowering and hesitate to admit to any risks and obstacles that they face for fear of being viewed as a victim otherwise (Mann, 2014). Both of these narratives leave no room for the complex experiences that lie in between choosing transactional sex because it

may be the best choice for someone, but also feeling harmed by the injustices they face due to criminalization and social inequalities.

There is a need to *rewrite* and *reright* sex workers' representations in a non-exploitative way without creating the veil of a universal sex worker experience (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). It is necessary to explore decolonial methodologies and engage with visual tropes and stigmatization of bodies in public space. When representation is done correctly, participants can assert their control over their own narrative and utilize the visual space as a medium for dissidence and authentic expression. Photo-elicitation can draw out what Debrix and Weber call a "ritual of pluralization," where an individual inscribes social meaning to their photography based on their positionality and relationship to their work without silencing the validity of other claims to truth (Bleiker, 2011, p. 151). By utilizing the art-based participatory method of photo-elicitation to facilitate discussion, this study will provide a pathway for this community to critically reflect on their experiences and reclaim their representation (Ritterbusch, 2016).

### **Current Study**

In line with a participatory framework, this study challenges the power dynamics that are typically held in traditional research methodologies through the integration of sex workers in the creation of the research instrument, using their own words and visuals to dissect their experiences, and ultimately deferring to the sex worker community to guide the dissemination of knowledge. By deploying intentional humanizing praxis that centers the knowledge of sex workers, social work can begin the process of connecting its values towards social justice implications and deconstructing academic hierarchies that further isolate community-based and university research actors.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the individual and community protections that sex workers utilize to achieve wellbeing in their criminalized profession? (1a) How do intersecting identities and positionalities impact access to the identified support networks? (2) How do sex workers describe their methods of combatting criminalization? (2a) How do individuals utilize sex work as a means to resist structural forces of oppression?

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

To answer the research questions mentioned above, this project utilized qualitative methods to collect data from October to November 2020 in Los Angeles, CA. The researcher conducted 13 semi-structured dialogues<sup>1</sup> with current sex workers. The qualitative data collection embraced a PAR framework and integrated the research actors<sup>2</sup> into the creation of the research tools and decision-making for research dissemination techniques.

Participatory action research, an activist research methodology, asks that individuals investigate and reconceptualize their understanding of a social issue or challenge from the inside-out (Torre & Fine, 2006). This framework serves to subvert typical research methodologies and engage in inquiry with research actors for the purpose of collective action. This researcher has been engaging in activist scholarship with the sex worker community that draws from the Black radical imagination of scholars like Robin Kelley, who propose that “the most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression” (Kelley, 2003, pg. 9). Here, activism

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<sup>1</sup> “Dialogue” is used instead of “interview” to reflect the two-way questioning, acknowledgement of power dynamics, and mutual knowledge creation that was honored during the dialogue sessions with the research actors. (Kvale, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Participants are referred to as “research actors” to challenge traditional research hierarchies (Ritterbusch, 2016).



and scholarship work in tandem for the liberation of communities while activism challenges the academy to co-produce knowledge and in the process, transform itself as well. While working closely with a sex worker rights movement group in a participatory nature, the university-based research actor was cautious of engaging in a way that gave the illusion of consensus and replicating previous essentialist ideas at the sake of representing insider experiences. Scholars have critiqued the accidental tendency to dedicate space for the speakers of a movement and not acknowledge the differential experiences that come with having the authority, and in this case, the privilege, of dedicating free labor to an organizing space and falsely speaking for the whole (Kothari, 2001).

The practice of acting in a way that is not informed or led by the community it directly impacts continues in the academic community. When we as researchers engage in research *on* communities, we inevitably impose our own bias and limit our potential for change by practicing within the limits of systems that have harmed the communities we intend to serve. The study engaged in the art-based community participatory method of photo-elicitation to explore the intersectional compounding effects of criminalization and resistance strategies of the sex workers who are impacted by it. Photo-elicitation is a qualitative method used in research that entails research actors photographing some aspect of their lives, community, or environment (Ritterbusch, 2016). This method challenges hegemonic representations and fixed ideologies while supporting autonomy and agency that figuratively and literally shifts the lens and places it in the hands of the research actor to express what they feel is most pertinent to them. Research actors were given themes for their photo-documentation revolving around how sex work interacts with community, wellbeing, and agency that overlapped with the main themes of the dialogue to enrich the conversation. The themes for photovoice were informed by previous

dialogues with sex workers in organizing spaces. A larger prompt titled “When They See Us”, asked the research actors to depict how clients, friends, family, health, and service providers view and engage them as sex workers. Using these approaches, the research actors captured the protective factors that they leverage based on the intersecting structural factors that shape their experiences.

### **Sample**

For this study, criterion and snowball sampling were used to recruit 13 sex workers to share their knowledge, nine of which participated in the reflective photo-elicitation portion of the study (Table 1) (Ruth & Babbie, 2011). Eligibility criteria asked that they be current or former sex workers aged 18 years or older who provide services in Los Angeles County. Exclusion criteria include being a sex worker outside of Los Angeles County or not having consented to the work, in which case this would be considered sex trafficking. Further exclusion criteria applied to non-English speaking sex workers due to the researcher's lack of capacity to provide adequate translation and transcription for non-English speaking workers. The university researcher conducted snowball sampling by utilizing a community-driven recruitment strategy and worked with the leadership team of the Sex Worker Outreach Project of Los Angeles (SWOP LA) to outreach to workers. Through this community partnership, the study flyer (Appendix A) was shared on SWOP LA's social media accounts and on email listservs of community organizations that are known to work with sex workers. To ensure a descriptive breadth of sex worker perspectives, the university researcher conducted intentional criterion sampling of diverse work field, race, gender, and class attributes, specifically reaching out to transwoman and people of color that did a variety of sex work types (e.g., camming, pro-domming, escorting). Snowball

sampling was coupled with criterion sampling techniques to avoid oversampling workers that overlap in social circles and to ensure occupational and demographic representation.

**Recruitment and Consent of Research Actors**

While complying with the research university’s IRB policies, this study hoped to push beyond acknowledging liability and not harming the community. Due to the aforementioned history of exploitative practices with criminalized populations, this study advocated for a care-ethics practice that employed the PAR framework of centering marginalized voices and experiences (Cahill, 2007b). This practice began by centering the community’s needs and collaborating *with* instead of studying *on* a group (Lykes, 2001; Freire, 1997).

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Table 1.  
*Sex Worker Dialogue Research Actor Demographics (n =13)*

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<b>Gender</b>	
Transgender Woman	3
Cisgender Woman	8
Cisgender Male	1
Nonbinary/ Gender nonconforming	1
<b>Race</b>	
Black	2
Latinx	5
Asian	2
White	3
Mixed Race	1
<b>Age</b>	
20s	6
30s	5
40s	2
<b>Sex Work Experience*</b>	
Stripper/dancer	4
Professional cuddler	1
Fetish model	3
BDSM provider	2

Escort/ hooker	5
Webcam model	3
Phone sex operator	2
Sugar Baby	2
Content Creator	6
Sensual Massage	1
<b>Photo-elicitation participant</b>	
Yes	9
No	4

\*Note: Sex work experience is greater than 13 because many research actors simultaneously or at separate points in their life did more than one type of sex work.

Potential research actors were instructed to email, text, or call the researcher if they were interested in the study to review eligibility requirements. Research actors were emailed a consent form to review and return to the university researcher. Due to the sensitive nature of the population’s criminalized work and the potential stigma of being identified as a sex worker, a waiver of signed consent was granted for the study. A written information sheet was used where, instead of a signature, the sheet included checkboxes where research actors noted their consent to the study, being audio recorded, and consent to share their photos with the university researcher for the purpose of the study. To ensure that the study was respectful of the research actor’s autonomy, a continuous consent process was practiced for the study where they were regularly asked if they consented to various aspects of the study. Each research actor was given \$50 in the form of a Target gift card for their time and emotional labor after their dialogue with the university researcher. The funding for this research was provided by the UCLA Lewis Center for Policy Research, Center for the Study of Women, and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. Social Justice Award at the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

**Protection of sensitive data**

The university researcher engaged in two main virtual meetings with each research actor. The first meeting to discuss the consent form and the parameters of the study and the second to discuss the photos and engage in the hour and a half dialogue with the research actors. The university researcher protected the confidentiality of the data by using participant codes and de-identifying the interviews and photographs. The university researcher obtained IRB approval and maintained confidentiality in data collection and storage throughout the study. At the end of the study, all data files were de-identified and the key to the code was destroyed.

### **Procedures**

The university researcher held thirty-minute individual photo-elicitation training over the phone or through Zoom to discuss the overall study, the photo-elicitation method, care and ethics of taking photos, and the research timeline. Research actors were sent a document via email that summarized the instructions, themes, and restrictions of the photo-elicitation portion of the study (Appendix B). Research actors were advised against submitting photography that divulged identifying information about them or others and were allotted a two-week time period for their photo-documentation.

The university researcher followed up with research actors to schedule a time for the individual dialogue after the two-week period for photo-documentation. There was an hour and a half time period allotted to a semi-structured dialogue on topics such as community, positionality, safety nets, and resistance in relation to their identity as a self-identified sex worker. Each of the research actors self-selected or were randomly assigned a pseudonym that is presented throughout the data. If the research actor opted into the photo-elicitation portion of the study, throughout the semi-structured dialogue, time was allotted to discuss the contents and

meaning attached to the photos they submitted as well throughout. Research actors had the option to opt-out of the photo-elicitation portion and only engage in the individual dialogue.

## **Research Instruments**

### ***Semi-Structured Interview Instrument***

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized as the primary instrument for data collection (Appendix C). The main guiding themes of the research instrument were how individuals' identities shaped the sex worker experience, overcoming barriers related to or mitigated by their work, and supports that have contributed to their wellbeing in a criminalized profession. This semi-structured instrument was informed from conversations with the community and allowed for research actors to reflect on their own positionality while integrating pieces of their story that were relevant to the themes of inquiry but may not be formally touched on through the questions themselves.

### ***Arts-Based Participatory Approach to Photo-Elicitation Interviewing***

This study utilized the use of participatory photo-elicitation. The photos themselves were meant to enrich and guide the conversation especially for the research actors who may find it easier to express themselves through photography. The research actors were instructed to send their slide deck of photos to the university researcher before the dialogue session. Research actors were prompted to take or collect photos that spoke to themes of community, autonomy/agency, wellbeing, as well as engage with the topic of how different people see them, such as clients, friends, family, service providers, and others. Research actors had the option of touching on several themes or focusing on only one and were instructed to send anywhere from 1-20 photographs. Research actors sent a range of three to twenty photos in advance and all of the photos were discussed to some extent during the dialogue.

**Analysis Plan**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, wherein a coding schema emerges through a thematic investigation of the dialogue transcripts (Braun & Clark, 2006). Due to the sensitive nature of the interview content, the university researcher transcribed the qualitative data using Temi, an encrypted transcription software and used Dedoose to code and analyze the data. The university researcher compiled an initial list of codes that emerged from the dialogues through coding larger segments of text and double- or triple- coding using in-vivo, descriptive, and concept coding (Saldaña, 2013). During this time, the researcher engaged in the participatory data analysis methodology of “member checking”, consulting with the research actors during the analysis as a means to clarify emergent ideas and validating findings (Saldaña, 2013, p. 35). After developing a codebook, the university researcher used axial coding to pull apart main themes from the participant’s voices and experiences. Following the creation of consultation codes, codes were moved to categories which were then combined to generate four themes: (1) sex worker spaces as nodes of collective care and harm reduction, (2) individual protective factors of disclosure, erasure, and compartmentalization, (3) the whorearchy, and (4) sex work as resistance to structural oppressions. When applicable, photos from the photo-elicitation were coded into the varying themes.

**Positionality/ Reflexivity Statement**

At the beginning of January 2020, I joined SWOP LA as a means to engage in sex worker rights organizing. I was quickly embraced and attended several community potlucks, helped organize harm-reduction resource drop-offs at “strolls”, stretches of land where street-based sex workers gather to be solicited, and later became their Sex Worker Peer Support Group facilitator. I currently serve on SWOP LA’s leadership team as their Director of Outreach and Service

Provision where I oversee and organize their support groups and resource drop-offs for street-based workers. As an outsider due to my academic association and an insider of the organization, I had conflicting feelings about proceeding with this study as the primary university-based researcher. There is a repelling force that is attached to a researcher's identity from the sex worker community. The tension that the academic community has created with this community is precisely what this study hopes to shift. As a counteracting measure, my continued and deepening involvement in SWOP has allowed me to continually engage with the sex worker community in genuine ways that have strengthened my relationships and vetted my intentions by the community.

As an activist-scholar, my commitment to serving marginalized communities is my priority and community-based research is the vessel with which I pursue this hefty task. In the meantime, I have been recording reflection journal entries. Listening to these reflections has been crucial in ensuring that my own alignments with the community do not bias my questioning or omit a question in the dialogues because it may be known to me. Moreover, the research actors' familiarity with me has created a comfortable space for the research actor where there is a level of common understanding on basic sex work concepts due to the university-based researcher's previous experience with the community. This has facilitated extensive conversation focused more on the analysis of their experiences as opposed to them explaining their work.

### **Results**

In terms of overall trends from the dialogues with the research actors, four major themes emerged that centered around sex worker's relationship to their criminalized work, how they navigate their autonomy, and how their social location impacts this. These four themes: (1) sex worker spaces as nodes of collective care and harm reduction, (2) disclosure, erasure, and



compartmentalization (3) the whorearchy, and (4) sex work as resistance to structural oppressions. The following sections explore the factors impacting the criminalized worker experience in more detail.

### **Sex Worker Spaces as Nodes of Harm Reduction and Collective Care**

In response to the research question on how the research actors achieved safety and wellbeing in their profession, all of the research actors identified spaces where sex workers congregated (both in person and online) and their engagement with other workers as a main space of education for harm reduction and a refuge for collective care. Although seven of the research actors worked independently and not in a formal sex work venue where they had coworkers (such as a strip club or BDSM dungeon), all of the research actors described the value of finding and being a part of sex worker spaces. These spaces varied from online social media forums, sex worker's rights organizing, formal work spaces, and through the platforms they may use for soliciting and performing their services. The two main benefits of these spaces identified as subthemes were (1) safety and harm reduction and (2) collective care and mutual aid. These spaces facilitated key information sharing that helped them implement safer and more effective working practices and created safety nets where workers were enveloped in a network of protection by their sex worker community against flawed systems that deny them access to aid and services especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### ***Safety and Harm Reduction***

For 8 out of 13 research actors, the lack of formality and independent nature of the job was apparent when they first entered their field. In any line of work, a lack of instruction on how to perform a job can lead to error or safety risks and that holds true in sex work where clientele prey on "new" workers to push boundaries that are more strongly enforced with seasoned

workers. Many specifically noted that the absence of an employee training or “worker’s manual” to teach them the ropes encouraged them to branch out to other workers. 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)

In response, sex workers have created vast online forums and in person whisper networks (informal pathways of information shared privately amongst workers) to share information that in turn acts as harm reduction.

Grace shared that when she first started working as a professional cuddler, she was unsure of how to enforce her boundaries or even how much to charge for her services. She immediately began searching for community by reaching out to other workers on the app’s website and going to local meetings for a sex worker community organization. This sentiment was echoed by others who mentioned the importance of doing online research through forums such as Reddit, Backpage, Facebook, or specific websites and the plethora of information they were able to find from “veterans” who created content for beginner sex workers so that they could safeguard themselves and understand the full scope of sex work before they entered.

Research actors described the experience of wanting to branch out into other forms of sex work and the safety that sex worker spaces facilitated in these transitions. Delilah, a worker who primarily does online content creation, identified that the biggest barrier to transitioning into work such as escorting is the lack of community she has found around escorts where she would be able to ask questions and how she addressed that:

I think I was just curious to see what it was like, and I wanted to know a little bit more... So I researched it. I went on social media. I went on Reddit. I found a lot of communities online to see what the work was like. I asked questions and I just made sure I knew what I was doing and how to keep myself safe. (Delilah, semi-structured dialogue, 15 October, 2020)

Two other research actors noted that they were able to transition into other forms of sex work due to a mutual friend who was already more established in the field and this served the dual purpose of having someone you already trust manage the client screening process and not entering an unknown situation alone. This warm hand-off into a new type of sex work is instrumental in building their client base, introducing them to the preferred client vetting methods, and overall improving their craft. Networking with other workers provides them the platform to gauge how they are earning in comparison with other workers, ask for advice, refer vetted customers to each other, and share stories about which clients to avoid. Being able to hear about customers or a different type of sex work through someone who has personal experiences can protect someone from a potentially harmful experience where inexperience or a lack of information can lead to their boundaries being crossed, especially in this field where there is no formal job training.

### ***Collective Care and Mutual Aid***

All of the research actors described how being a part of sex worker spaces has included them into networks of mutual care and that they have utilized and contributed to. Research actors explained that the profession's stigma and lack of recognition as actual work had created barriers to navigating formal public benefit systems such as SSI, Medi-Cal, and unemployment. Due to this study's concurrent timing with the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers noted that their place of work had been temporarily shut down or they had chosen to stop accepting clients at the time until the number of positive COVID-19 cases had decreased. During this time, they had

been out of work but not without income. Four research actors recalled how their community of strippers had engineered high-tech virtual strip shows that advertised to their regular clientele and created work until the clubs reopened. Many of these virtual shows uplifted their most marginalized coworkers by creating shows that consisted of Black femmes or donating a portion (and sometimes all) of their profits to organizations benefitting Black, trans, or queer sex workers. When she was out of work due to the pandemic, Olive recalled how her coworkers at her club took her under their wing:

I wasn't working at all. When I first got removed from [name of club], [my friend] was another one that was like helping me to look for work, you know, taking [pole dance classes] from me. And I had a slew of other people just personally come to my aid. I had some people like just giving me donations for [pole dance classes]. And they'll just say, 'I'm not taking the privates, just take the money'. I tend to not ask for anything, just people kind of give. (Olive, semi-structured dialogue, 26 October 2020)

A core component shared amongst all of the dialogues was the stronghold that the community provided for them in their hour of need. All of the research actors could describe instances when they helped other sex workers and vice versa. There was a unified understanding that formal systems of support have never been accessible to them, but by banding together they could keep each other afloat and succeed in this informal economy.

Organizing efforts had substantially increased in moments of high need during the pandemic when many sex workers already did not have access to traditional relief funds or government assistance. Some research actors shared how they had personally been a part of organizing mutual aid funds for emergency relief during the pandemic that was prioritized for queer and trans sex workers of color, especially Black and/or indigenous trans sex workers, with a portion of direct cash relief being distributed to street-based full-service sex workers. The sex worker community has mobilized successfully by relying on their collective efforts to

redistribute wealth and peer support. Rachel describes the dependable and validating nature of sex worker community:

Even if it's nothing to do with sex work, it could just be whatever random thing. Like if your friends pass out from a drug overdose, if there are cops pulling up, because somebody is on top of the roof next door but your shit is still in the parking garage. Whatever it is, sex workers are not surprised. They will have their own personal, emotional reaction, which will be relatively appropriate and then, we'll be able to help without just being thrown off by the sheer bizarreness factor, you know? (Rachel, semi-structured dialogue, 15 November, 2020)

Similarly, other research actors described the variety of ways that sex workers supported them before the pandemic through providing stable housing, a sheltered place to meet their clients, emotional support, and even funding for hormone therapy at the start of their transition.

In a world where this hyper-marginalized population faces extreme need and criminalization that makes them wary and sometimes unable to navigate the welfare system, community poses a life-saving connection to resources through mutual aid. While there is power in this mutual aid, the structural problems of banishing criminalized populations to the outskirts still remains. Communal care carries a heavy load in these communities by providing emotional support, safety, and creating networks that fulfill basic needs. These efforts persist in spite of the continued threat of carceral consequences and state-surveillance. Nonetheless, research actors like Jenna emphasize that while community support does not solve all her problems, it can be a life-saving difference:

I would not have been able to get my medications for about nine months before I got Medi-Cal, because I didn't know how any of that worked. I didn't know how to get state insurance. I had nobody guiding me, nobody helping me. I then had a couple of friends who one was a social worker who has a history in sex work. And another friend who was a porn star who guided me and helped push me to get proper doctor treatment, proper care, all the different things, but even so, I didn't have Medi-Cal for like nine months and had to pay for medications out of pocket. Without them, I would be dead right now. I don't even have to think about it. (Jenna, semi-structured dialogue, 9 October, 2020)



Figure 1. Image 9, Jenna, photo-elicitation exercise, 9 October, 2020

Jenna described how her disability requires her to take several medications and inject herself with low-grade chemotherapy treatment to survive, but her sex worker community was what saved her life (Figure 1). A concept that many research actors resonated with was the limitations of collective care. As seen in Jenna's story, these systems of collective care are essential, but they do not solve the inequities within healthcare, housing, and government support that actively threaten their existence.

The tension surrounding when collective care and harm reduction has reached its bounds is best illustrated by Grace, who showcases how having stability and networks of emotional support does not equate to safety within client sessions. In Figure 2, Grace describes the moment right before going to meet a new client:

It's like you're jumping into a pool of cold water. It's just that moment where you have all this uncertainty and it's like, you don't have any choice but to keep going forward and you don't know what's going to happen, whether you're going to be put in a hard situation, unsafe situation or anything... You just don't know what to expect and you're already here and it's like, it's going to move forward no matter what, and you can't turn back. (Grace, semi-structured dialogue, 20 October, 2020)



Figure 2. “The Moment”, Grace, photo-elicitation exercise, 20 October, 2020

The value of the networks that sex workers created carries on after “the moment.” Like in all work environments, supports are not constantly available which makes formal reliable safety all the more necessary. For sex workers, these nets are crucial both before and after their sessions whether they text their sex worker friends their location in case they need help or if they need to vent after a stressful client. A key aspect of sex work that arose in the dialogues was the way that sex workers could support each other like no other civilian could. In the following section, we see the causation for and impact of having a finite group that can empathize with their experiences.

### **Disclosure, Erasure, and Compartmentalization**

The acts of disclosure, erasure, and compartmentalization arose in all of the dialogues in relation to how the research actors responded to being a part of a stigmatized social identity and how they combatted criminalization by regaining control of their narrative through expressions of autonomy. Due to criminalization, sex workers practice the juggling of different personas for safety purposes to protect their identity. Different personas are created through the use of aliases, changing their appearance, and even through subtle distinctions like having “work” glasses.

While external pressures may be what necessitates this practice, the act of disclosure, or confiding in others about their work, is a choice that they each navigate differently. For example, Summer leans on the profession's ambiguity:

I mostly tell people that I do BDSM, that I'm a dominatrix, because I feel like that's more socially acceptable because people are kind of scared to ask, 'so what does that actually mean?' and 'what does that include?' You know, they don't know if that includes plus services... There's such a gray area with BDSM and there are legal dominatrices, so I just go with that. It's true. But it's also not all the way true. (Summer, semi-structured dialogue, 19 October, 2020)

Being able to selectively disclose the type of work they do with people they feel they can trust fulfills the emotional need of not shouldering the weight of their work by themselves within the bounds of their own comfort thus creating a space for them to exercise their agency. Practicing disclosure and having transparency around their sex worker status creates pathways for them to find more community and safety in a profession that can be very isolating. Many research actors recalled horror stories of sex workers they knew getting shunned, arrested, or thrown out by their families after being outed. The fear of criminalization and being outed to their civilian friends poses a constant threat not only to the workers themselves but also to their social ties. For this reason, the full extent of the work is given on a need-to-know basis, 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. I just think it's a conflict of interest in that world. Now my friends who don't dance, I'll talk about it with them. I'm not planning on telling my parents but that's just cause that's what we gotta deal with. It's still such a stigma and it's illegal. 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)

Talia's hesitation in disclosing that she is a full-service provider to her coworkers in a club that is strictly a bikini bar is central to understanding the way that sex workers navigate engaging in



multiple forms of sex work in varying settings of criminalization. Other research actors who were parents and were open about their work in other situations were particularly careful in not disclosing to parents or their child's school due to ostracization and fear of being deemed as an unfit parent. The articulation of Talia's reasons impacting her selective disclosure presents a conceptualization of the value that can be had in having community that exists outside of sex worker spaces.

Eight research actors self-identified as activists, organizers, and advocate for sex worker's rights in the spaces they inhabited. However, they also felt limited and silenced by the veil of protection that they themselves had established through choosing not to integrate their sex worker identity into their everyday life. They described feelings of erasure when voicing their opinions around sex worker regulation and sex trafficking policy because the dominant discourse did not reflect the lived-experiences of sex workers but rather lobbyists or government officials who may hold more conservative values. In Figure 3, Victoria recalls the tortuous experience of working as an intern at the State Capitol but having to remain behind the scenes while policy decisions were made without the input of sex workers like her.



Figure 3. Image 25, Victoria - photo-elicitation exercise, 27 October, 2020

Naturally, this continuous exclusion can cause a yearning for authenticity, as described further by Victoria:

I battle every day with feeling like I want to be out now...I'm just going to like, write about this and I'm going to do my PhD and I'm gonna talk about this and I'm going to do that. I just feel like I have so much experience and I have so much to say. I just have so much to share about myself and I don't want to be on my deathbed being like, wow, I didn't even live my full, authentic self in my life, for what? (Victoria, semi-structured dialogue, 27 October 2020)

Victoria's emphasis on the constant battle that she faces navigating work that has become an integral part of who she is emphasizes the compounding erasure that criminalization has on the lives of sex workers. Across several dialogues, research actors expressed a rallying call for inclusion in the decision-making processes that impact their lives.

Many research actors expressed having to compartmentalize their identities with varying levels of disclosure creating several fragmented one-on-one relationships made up of half-truths with different friends, family, and civilian acquaintances. While this separation of two lives serves a safety purpose to evade criminalization, it carries a stark emotional cost that can create a disjointed existence. One research actor described her experience with compartmentalization:

I really yearned for the simplicity of just having one identity. It would be so simple to say, 'Hi, I'm Summer, I do sex work and make art and do activism. And yeah, I've fucked someone in the ass with a strapon and yes that is me in that video and here's me with my little brothers and you know just have it all together. But I asked myself, this fear that I feel about actually integrating things, how real is this? Cause I just don't know. Are there jobs that I could be passed over for, scholarships or fellowships, because of what I do? What is it costing me to keep it separated and not even that well separately? (Summer, semi-structured dialogue, 19 October, 2020)

This acknowledgement that a fuller integration of identities carries its own positives and unknowns illuminates the deeply complex reality that sex workers navigate to keep themselves safe and well in a criminalized profession.



Figure 4. “The veil separating two identities“, Summer - photo-elicitation exercise, 19 October 2020

For the research actors in this field, autonomy and control manifested as the choice in being completely hidden about their work to everyone in their lives or being fully transparent. Summer has been able to facilitate some cohesion through physically combining her personal and work life, demonstrated in Figure 4, by installing a dungeon in her basement but making clients take the back entrance. These responses to criminalization and stigma that translate to internal and external changes in the way sex workers live and share themselves with the world. Their ability to choose how clients, family, friends, and strangers see them is both a necessary part of the work that allows them the peace of living under the radar and a constant stressor that will loom as long as sex work remains criminalized.

### **The Whorearchy**

In efforts to understand the intricacies of their criminalized experiences and the intersectional impact of their positionality on access to support networks, 8 of 13 research actors

described the sex worker-defined concept of the “whorearchy.” The whorearchy is similarly arranged to the hierarchy described earlier in terms of proximity to full-service contact that workers have with clients while integrating an intersectional framing. Another key element of the whorearchy is its basis around “whorephobia”, the fear and hate of sex workers. The whorearchy in itself is whorephobic due to its classist system that stratifies workers by privilege and compounds the internal and external stigma that they face. A quality of the whorearchy is its inclination towards rewarding cisgender women and proximity to the institutions of whiteness. The implications of this system play out amongst sex workers and is reinforced economically by their clientele and the general public as explained by Luna:

I have a friend who is half Black and often *chooses* to hide her Blackness, to make more money, which is really sad that that is a thing that she has seen results from. But because she is privileged enough to have ambiguity of her appearance when she is able to, she presents as not Black and she makes more money than when she does not present as Black. And then I have sex worker friends who do not have the luxury of presenting as non-Black. How we present literally determines what we charge and what we're offered and what guys say to us. (Luna, semi-structured dialogue, 5 November, 2020)

Within the whorearchy, systems of oppression that are present throughout everyday life are magnified and ageism, racism, ableism, classism, and the type of work that a research actor is engaged in defines their sex worker experience. Where the umbrella of sex work may serve to unify some workers, it is also prone to its own forms of stratification that one research actor describes below:

Even in work, it was a really interesting experience to see people come in to start working [at a BDSM dungeon], 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 someone 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)

In this description of the whorearchy in action, Victoria points out a key aspect that the whorearchy does not take into account how good someone is at their job. For those who may start out with minimal social capital, not having a car or living with their families can create barriers to expanding a client list or creating social networks with sex workers. One research actor recalled being taught that the key to creating successful online ads that draw customers who are willing to pay higher rates is that she needed to wear expensive lingerie. Many others resonated with the frustration that the economic barriers that led them to sex work were the same ones limiting their progression in the field. In the following sections, the impact of the whorearchy, the social positioning of sex workers based on the intersection of their type of sex work, race, class, gender, age, and ability, will be dissected further in regards to how it impacts their relationships. This theme of “whorearchy” was further specified into sub themes of its impact on “relationships with clients” and “intrapersonal relationships.” It is important to note that while the whorearchy itself did not arise in all of the dialogues that other closely related codes such as “stigma/stereotypes”, “assumptions of other sex workers”, and “power dynamics” appeared in all of the dialogues. For the purposes of this study, the whorearchy and its subthemes best synthesized the way that larger structural dynamics impacted the research actor’s access to care and to each other.

### ***Relationships with Clients***

When it came to navigating client relationships, many research actors agreed with the common saying in sex worker circles, “you will always be *someone’s* type.” However, they noted that the closer their appearance and personal qualities aligned with standards of “whiteness” and eurocentric beauty standards, the more successful they would be. Victoria explained the detrimental impacts that these preferences can have on earning potential:

The girls who were Black just had such a harder time because their ads didn't do well. And like, I'd have doubles with them. They were fricking amazing, like just slamming bodies, gorgeous. But they're across the board just treated differently by clients. (Victoria, semi-structured dialogue, 27 October, 2020)

This is reinforced through discriminatory hiring practices at locations like strip clubs and fetish dungeons where they may have a quota of how many non-white employees they hire but do not uphold a similar quota for white employees. Luna described how as a racially ambiguous but white-presenting worker, she is constantly shaping herself to what she believes the client desires by changing her accent or lying about her ethnic background. Other workers like Olive, a Black sex worker, are not afforded the ability to present herself differently and expressed how she is constantly having to fight stereotypes about her race and age that limit the places that she can work. This policing of spaces further marginalizes and limits the space that hyper-marginalized workers have access to.

Furthermore, the whorearchy also impacts the ways that clients treat sex workers. As a trans provider, Rachel reflects on her experience feeling the impacts of criminalization through being visibly trans and how this has defined her experience as a hooker:

Similar to my law resume being received differently because I'm trans, I do feel like being a trans woman without major porn exposure, I don't really have the market power to advertise as an escort or to screen clients thoroughly. They're kind of related too. I don't really have access to that kind of clientele and I think the clients that don't want to screen are the same clients that want to know exactly what they're getting beforehand, so you've got these *picky* clients. I end up doing work that is legally considered prostitution and really having to say I'm a whore if I'm trying to have an honest discussion. (Rachel, semi-structured dialogue, 15 November, 2020)

Rachel's lack of access to high-end clients puts her in positions where she has to regularly interact with clients who don't feel the need to adhere to screening precautions with her that may include identity verification and disclosing sexual health statuses. Not being deemed as worthy for these precautions can pose safety risks and a greater association with a type of sex work that

carries more stigma and falls lower on the whorearchy than an escort, colloquially known as a high-end prostitute. The troubling biases that clientele have against workers who are not cis-white able-bodied women go unchecked in the sex work field and serve to further disparities for already marginalized workers. Similar to how race is a social construct with real-life implications, the whorearchy is a societally constructed paradigm that, when reinforced by clients, has an impact on research actors' working conditions.

### *Intrapersonal relationships*

Within the whorearchy, the fear of criminalization and a disdain for sex workers combine to create a phenomena that research actors described as whorephobia. Whorephobia serves as a repelling force that promotes the dissociation and distancing from criminalized forms of sex work such as street-based sex work. This need to separate oneself from the profession whilst simultaneously being in it is a strategy rooted in not wanting to be associated with criminalized work to escape state surveillance. Being identified as a prostitute carried negative connotations such as being perceived as “cheap” from clientele and thus not being able to charge more for services, having less interaction with clients to discuss services or to vet them for safety purposes, and having increased exposure to law enforcement due to visibility of where they perform their services. In the dialogues, there was an interchangeable connection between “prostitute” and “whore” that was not specific to a type of sex work but generally alluded to criminalized forms of sex work. For research actors who primarily worked as strippers, there was a sentiment that to be perceived as a “whore” would affect your success in the club:

It is good for your money to appear less whore-y than the other girls. So whatever the other girls are doing, you want to be slutty, but not whore-y because you want [the clients] to feel like they're buying something exclusive. You want to be Nordstrom's not Forever 21. Cause that's why Nordstrom's charges what they charge and Forever 21 is like, 'We have deals!' That's why some people offer street services with street prices (Luna, semi-structured dialogue, 5 November, 2020)

Aligned with Luna's observation, other research actors explained that they achieve distancing by avoiding the visual tropes that clients typically associate with sex workers (e.g. red lipstick, high heels, cheetah print).

Within sex worker spaces, there were common feelings of compare and despair, competition, and barriers to connecting with others in sex worker spaces where the job they were performing was legal but they were engaging in criminalized work in other spaces due to the fear caught or outed by other workers. Grace describes how, holding multiple criminalized identities creates barriers to trust:

Doxxing isn't limited to client to provider. It's also provider to provider as well. So I think me telling people I'm trans [is] a liability. If someone wanted to do me harm, they can use that knowledge to do harm to me. I've had clients do that and I could piss off some other provider, we can get into a fight or whatever and they can go do that to me if they wanted to. You know? So it's hard to trust people and just hard to trust other workers. (Grace, semi-structured dialogue, 20 October, 2020)

This fear of being outed as a sex worker often disrupted networks of safety information sharing because of the way that trafficking policy has further criminalized any form of information sharing as possible trafficking efforts. One research actor expanded on how she navigated giving advice to her community while avoiding further criminalization by keeping her exchanges within the veil of legality as much as possible:

When I give advice, I try to just make it like the gray area of you wanna date rich dudes. Cause there's nothing illegal about that. And I think that's why seeking arrangement persists as opposed to other sites is because rich men have a very vested interest in implying that wealth without sharing, just the wealth itself is attractive. (Luna, semi-structured dialogue, 5 November 2020)

Likewise, when she was working at the strip club, a post on social media that vaguely showed support for sex workers' rights served as a catalyst that got her fired due to the association that the club manager perceived between sex work and performing criminal acts. Luna's reflection on



the tension that comes with associating with and distancing from sex work illustrates the larger consequences that workers face. Even if an individual may not identify as a sex worker or they engage in legal types of work within the sex trade, a blanket criminality will naturally apply and impact the way community members are treated by their clients and each other.

### **Sex work as Resistance to Structural Oppressions**

Despite finding themselves at the intersection of several axes of oppression, throughout the dialogues all of research actors described the positive net influence that sex work has had on their lives by providing them opportunities that were previously denied to them. Many of them, in response to questions regarding their relationship with sex work, responded with some version of how sex work has improved their quality of life. Victoria illustrates this equalizing force:

I was able to keep my GPA up, like really high, because I didn't have to work... I worked through college but I was able to just work on like some couple nights here and there, like just the weekends and really dedicate my time to studying and taking care of my health issues and being there for my family. So I don't know if I could ever just do the nine to five. My job has always been the one thing I think of when I think of my stability, my autonomy, my freedom to be myself in the world. (Victoria, semi-structured dialogue, 27 October, 2020)

In order to critically understand manifestations of resistance and the value that sex work plays as a protective factor, it must first be seen as a response to the different manifestations of violence that these research actors faced before entering sex work. This violence caused by capitalism and white supremacy can be seen as social and financial safety nets disappearing when a research actor began her transition as a transwoman, experiencing housing instability, or experiencing discrimination for being visibly disabled or Black. When several entities abandoned or willfully discriminated against these research actors, sex work was the only thing they could count on to continuously provide for them. One member speaks to the feelings of autonomy in the work:

I don't regret it overall just because it's been a really important tool to lift me out of low points in my life. Sex work was usually something that was helping me, not causing the

low point. So it might've been a complication, you know, as one of life's many complications, but income is so important and having some autonomy with your income when you don't have other ways to get it, it can lift you out of what's fucking up your situation to begin with. (Ty, semi-structured dialogue, 16 October, 2020)

One of the most cited benefits of sex work was the facilitation of healthy boundaries. For research actors who expressed that their life before sex work consisted of relationships dependent on family or partners that negatively impacted their emotional wellbeing, sex work motivated a shift to expect more of their community and gave them the choice to not be exposed to environments that were not healing for them. By removing the financial power imbalance, research actors who were once financially reliant on their families have been able to craft their interactions on their own terms. Similarly, what may be seen as a lack of regulation in the workplace can create opportunities for freedom in enforcing their own boundaries. 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...I don't have to tolerate shit. (Olive, semi-structured dialogue, 26 October 2020)

The acknowledgement that harm should not occur but nevertheless does happen in the workplace returns control over how to proceed in the hands of the individual who was harmed and is central to understanding the strengths of this labor force.

A common sentiment amongst research actors was that “civilian” work alone could not provide for their basic needs, an idea that was further stressed if the individual had medical needs or was a primary caretaker. The flexible nature of sex work promotes the ability to care for oneself on an individual level and of those around them. When faced with a lack of control over material conditions, mental health, and job opportunities, being put in a position where one can rely on themselves to provide and control how they do it can be freeing. One research actor

described how by actively rejecting state intervention in her pursuit of wellbeing, she created her own definition of success:

If the government especially is not going to recognize sex work as legitimate work all the way around, they can fuck off. I convert everything to crypto, keep it under the table and I finally, for the first time in my life have some play money where I can literally just be like, 'I'm going to go get a salad'. I've never in my life had that. Maybe not multiple times a week. Maybe not the same as somebody working a normal nine to five, that's working a good job that they worked for many years, but for being disabled, pretty good. (Jenna, semi-structured dialogue, 9 October, 2020)

In this quote, Jenna articulates another manifestation of the everyday praxis of resistance that sex workers engage in. Finding and creating moments of wellbeing in a society where marginalized communities are destined for struggle is a way that the research actors resisted the pressures to concede to structural oppressions even if they did still weigh on them. Talia shared an example of how she and her friends continue to find joy in expressions of creativity and humor in *Stripper Operations* (Figure 5). This adapted version of the childhood game, *Operation*, was made by Talia's close friend and acts as a light-hearted reminder of the way that joy from criminalized populations triumphs and resists the pressure of being muffled by forces of structural oppression.

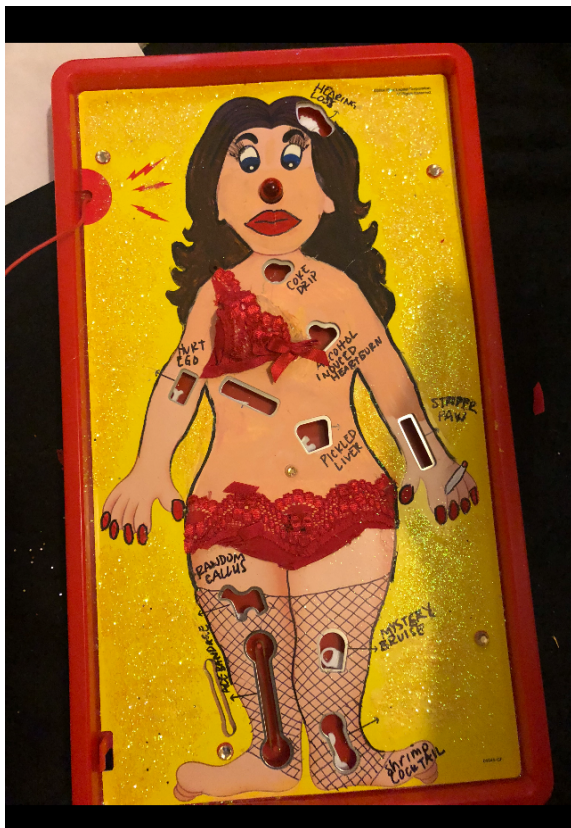


Figure 5. Image 41, Talia, photo-elicitation exercise, 27 October, 2020

Another way that resistance manifests itself for the research actors in this workforce is through reclaiming autonomy and feeling liberated from prescribed ways of living in a capitalist society. In the dialogues, autonomy and liberation manifested as improved material conditions and also through regaining control of their sense of personhood. When asked about her relationship with sex work and her own gender identity as a transwoman, Grace noted that sex work would not have been something she entered pre-transition but that instead, sex work facilitated a headfirst dive into transitioning into who she always was. Sex work allowed her to explore her identity and provided her the financial means to transition.



Figure 6. “Butterfly Earrings at the Newark”, Grace, photo-elicitation exercise, 20 October, 2020

The freedom of choosing how one presents themselves translates to a delicate yet freeing becoming process in a society where trans people are constantly targeted and questioned. Grace embodies this metamorphosis in her image of “Butterfly Earrings at Newark Airport” (Figure 6),

which symbolized her self-reliance after planning her first solo-working trip to New York and the precarious path that she navigates as a trans woman who provides for herself. She described how she knew she could travel anywhere in the world with no money and through sex work, she would be able to culminate her trip with a positive net balance. For several research actors, the freedom to travel, thrive as a single parent, access higher education, and provide for more than just their basic needs was not a feasible option to them before sex work. As members of marginalized communities, engaging in sex work allows them to resist their own previously constrained realities and exist in spaces that were not built for them.

### **Discussion**

This study found that sex work provided access to social mobility and served as a means of resistance for sex workers against the structural oppressions impacting their lives while simultaneously acting as a space where these oppressions were magnified. The process of starting sex work itself may have led to vulnerabilities but it also lent workers access to systems of communal care and mutual aid that were exclusively available to this community. While sex work may have few barriers to entry, sex workers experienced multiple barriers towards success and access to supports based on social location within a social stratification model. This is played out through the whorearchy, a system impacted by intersectional forces rooted in the criminalization of this workforce and the subsequent furthering from criminalized identities such as that of Black and Trans women. These findings inform future research by highlighting the individual and collective strategies for wellbeing that sex workers use to resist structural oppressions and the ways that practitioners, researchers, and organizers can uplift them.

The discourse of these 13 research actors has opened a window into their deeply criminalized world about the potential for liberation that sex work poses. On an individual level,

sex work created opportunities for research actors to live the lives they imagined for themselves. On a community level, the safety and mutual aid networks that they provided for each other created alternative systems of care that evaded collaboration with the state, a mutually agreed upon oppressor. Previous literature details sex worker's lives as "characterized by precarious housing or homelessness, addiction, and related mental and physical health problems" that make it harder to leave the industry (Hankel et al., 2016 pg. 42). This study complicates this discourse's focus on sex work desistance and exiting the industry by exploring sex work's potential for improving an individual's life and honoring their autonomy in assessing what is best for them regardless of its legality or our own moral opinions on the matter.

From a Black feminist disability framework, it must be noted that autonomy plays out differently based on the societal constraints defining the individual's experience. Within the capitalist constraints of economic mobility, those at a lower socio-economic standing face greater barriers towards achieving their goals and the pursuit of a job in an informal criminalized economy provides them the liberty to move with more ease. The social model of disability suggests that our society is what creates barriers to access and maintains them through social pressures (Bailey & Mobley, 2018). Wahab (2002) writes that social work approaches to sex workers have been largely influenced by anti-prostitution voices arguing that sex workers have no agency in their labor, consistent with "historical social work perspectives that regarded prostitutes as victims and/or deviants in need of rescue and/or reform" (pg. 52). By listening to the voices of sex workers through this critical lens and acknowledging the liberation that sex work can provide, scholars and social workers have the responsibility to reframe their approaches. We must understand sex work as a response and resistance to society refusing

workforce and wellbeing access to hyper-marginalized groups as opposed to a character defect as the profession has previously framed it.

Another finding in this study is the value of collective care and mutual aid networks for individual and community wellbeing. Previous work on harm reduction for sex workers has focused on identifying program-based initiatives to decrease drug use, disease, violence, and criminalization and framed it in a way that frames sex work as inherently harmful (Rekart, 2006). Data in this study reveals that much of the harm experienced by sex workers comes from larger structural oppressions such as racism and transphobia which are then compounded by criminalization whereas community provides reprieve and safety. As a self protective measure, sex workers have created strong informal community and information sharing networks to provide basic needs and harm reduction. The narratives from the research actors stand to revolutionize the role of community as more than just a system of support but also as a model for welfare that exists outside of the state. Purposeful or not, sex workers have shown that they are agentic subjects and protect each other from and without state intervention (Fritsch et al., 2016).

A main intersection of Black feminist thought and disability studies is its critique of achieving personal independence as the benchmark for health and wellbeing since many communities successfully operate on systems of communal care (Bailey & Mobley, 2018; Schalk & Kim, 2020). This framework acknowledges the inherent value of systems like mutual aid and communal protective factors in the collective wellbeing of the individual and the community. Furthermore, this framework emphasizes the necessity for autonomy and belief that these bodies at the intersection of oppression deserve the agency to choose how they engage with systemic norms or resist them altogether (Bailey & Mobley, 2018; Schalk & Kim, 2020). A Black feminist disability framework uproots the capitalist norms of a five-day work week and counters the idea

that we must each individually work to survive and deserve aid. Similarly, many of the research actors shared experiences where their needs were met primarily through their community partnerships even in situations where they were out of work themselves, as seen in examples from research actors who benefited from sex worker mutual aid shows. This reconceptualization of work and labor critiques the assumption that everyone can work, are given the opportunities to work (which is untrue due to discriminatory hiring practices), and uproots the labor expectation that people should continue to take unfair work for minimal pay (Bailey & Mobley, 2018).

Unfortunately, this study reaffirms previous work that identified criminalization as a major disrupter of peer networks and harm reduction (Baratosy & Wendt, 2017; O'Doherty, 2011; Platt et al., 2018). This study helped to further our understanding of how criminalization differently impacts workers by exploring the stratification within sex worker communities. Previous literature expresses a vague understanding of who sex workers are (often conflating them with survivors of sex trafficking) and calls for a contextualized understanding of the different marginalizations impacting sex workers (Sawicki et al., 2019). This study expands upon a sex worker defined concept of the whorearchy that helps to understand internal and external pressures of stratification on the sex worker community and the complexities of their experiences. The whorearchy itself has been loosely acknowledged in previous research with a focus on stigma but the whorearchy's impact on accessing collective care has yet to be analyzed in depth (Aylsworth, 2020; Hester & Stardust, 2020; Sawicki et al., 2019). Within online sex worker forums, the term itself can encompass several subjective definitions (Knox, 2014; Witt, 2020). This study has conceptualized the whorearchy from the narratives of these research actors and furthers the collective analysis of this social hierarchy. While it's debatable who ultimately sits at the top of the whorearchy, this study shines a light on the way that structural oppressions



intertwine throughout the whorearchy and ultimately hurt the entire collective's potential for coalition building. Of key emphasis are the ways that criminalization hurts all members of the whorearchy, even if their work is considered legal, while further harming workers whose identities carry inherent criminality such as Black, Trans, and undocumented workers.

This internal and external policing creates uncertainty amongst sex workers regarding who they can trust, contributing to the marginalized nature of their work. While there are benefits to remaining aloof, research actors identified the fear of facing criminal consequences as key influencers to compartmentalizing their work persona. Previous studies have highlighted the defining factor that stigma and discrimination has on a worker's decision to disclose sex work involvement to health practioners (Dourado et al., 2019; Underhill et al., 2015). The data presented in this study reinforces the structural need for secrecy on the basis of criminalization. It should be noted that one of the most jarring consequences of this theme was the inherent silencing of potential organizers, researchers, and sex worker practitioners in their respective fields because they felt they could not live their dual identities at once. This finding reaffirms studies that call for the decriminalization of sex work as not only a way to decrease sex worker's experiences of erasure and discrimination but as a necessary step forward to creating sex worker-informed policy and practice (McCausland, 2020; Weitzer, 2017).

Currently, social workers and community organizations that receive government grants cannot provide services to sex workers in a way that affirms their choice to continue working. The way that carcerality limits how sex workers interact with their communities is further exemplified with the TVPA. Carceral legislation further promotes the victim-narrative and leaves no room for other avenues besides advocating for exiting sex work (Abrams & Curran, 2000; Wahab, 2002). The research actors in this study resisted the victim narrative in multiple ways.

Research actors exercised their agency and resisted victimization as portrayed through markers of personal wellbeing and their community's ability to care for itself. Findings implicate the need for the decriminalization of sex work and acknowledgement of sex work as work as social welfare's first steps in repairing and building a working relationship with this community.

There are several reparations to be made. While social welfare may not be directly responsible for the laws that criminalize sex work, the silence and inaction in speaking out against these injustices or even worse, speaking *for* sex workers without their consideration and assuming victimhood has furthered the state violence that they face. Robin Kelley distinguishes that the fight for reparations centers around "social justice, reconciliation, reconstructing... and eliminating institutional racism" that creates a community where collective needs are fulfilled (Kelley, 2003, pg. 114). A reparations movement for sex workers should focus on the true roots of exploitation and contributors to inequality rather than creating more barriers to accessing services that further alienates this community.

### **Social Welfare Implications**

The negative impacts of criminalization permeated themselves through 11 of the 13 dialogues and shaped each of the main themes. The implications of criminalization created a culture of silence where the research actors worried about what would happen to their families if they were outed as a sex worker or what criminal consequences they would face if they spoke out in other non-sex worker spaces about their involvement in sex work. This study highlights the power that information sharing networks hold in creating safety within this informal criminalized workforce. However, when laws and policies such as the TVPA criminalize this information sharing due to its conflation of sex trafficking and sex work, vital information sharing networks are silenced and sex workers are harmed in the process (Burns, 2015). The

need to distance themselves from criminalized tropes of workers that lie lower on the whorearchy is a consequence of the criminalization that they know they all might face if they are perceived as criminals which only serves to further alienate workers from each other. These findings jointly support the need for a collective investment from sex workers to acknowledge intersectional differences in their organizing for sex worker's rights that increases access to informal networks of support for their hyper-marginalized community members. However, critical feminist and disability scholars caution communities who pursue rights-based platforms to avoid positioning the nation-state as a provider of protections subsequently erasing their more marginalized members who are more likely to experience state violence (Spade, 2015).

If the ultimate goal is to improve the structural conditions that make sex work unsafe, it is critical to address criminalization, racism, and the other structural systems that oppress workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). One way to counteract these negative consequences is to decriminalize sex work and to clarify the language around who constitutes sex workers. 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. Specifically, sex work needs to be granted the same protection that any other workforce is granted "not based on the dignity of work, but on the unconditional value of [their] lives" (O'Brien, 2019). 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 (Huang, 2015).

Furthermore, the way that criminalization furthered stratification amongst workers in regards to the whorearchy highlights criminalization's role in upholding white supremacy. We must question the underlying assumptions as to why sex work is criminalized in the first place

and what we view so unlawful about hyper-marginalized communities reclaiming their rights to work within their own boundaries. So long as sex work remains criminalized, the oppression and silencing of this population will continue to happen, and communities will continue to be revictimized by the criminal (in)justice system. To truly attack the root of why sex workers may be exposed to violence, we must look towards the systems that uphold barriers to safe labor and reporting violence. People should not be criminalized for their resistance to conformity because what may be the legal route may also be one filled with struggles and barriers that substantially hurts their quality of life (Bernard, 2012). This struggle implores the need to dream beyond a system that criminalizes an individual's response to basic needs such as childcare, education, or health care.

As social work practitioners, we must grapple with our own ties to the violence and criminalization that sex workers face. The research actors worked tirelessly to evade state surveillance and criminalization and in many instances, social welfare is closely tied to policing and even partners with law enforcement in enacting state sanctioned violence through “the expansion of the carceral and punitive arms of the state alongside the retraction of welfare” (Schalk & Kim, 2020, pg. 43). Sex work communities may already be weary of seeking out the help of social welfare professionals due to the threat of family separation as highlighted by one research actor. This caution is understandable considering the profession's history of punishing marginalized communities on the premise of protection of children and not only viewing Black women as unfit parents, but also “seen as sexually deviant compared to white women and thus deserving of their exploitation” (Brooks, 2021, pg. 517). Combining this with the fear of being punished for their line of work creates a fearful environment that bars criminalized communities from coming to us for assistance. If we want to create an environment where all community

members feel comfortable disclosing to us the full extent of their work and how we can be of service, then we must be willing to cut our ties with our current carceral framework.

A radical social work praxis offers several pathways for joining the sex worker community in solidarity for their organizing goals. Radical social workers (RSW) combating the criminal (in)justice system need to engage in education and conversation with sex workers and engage with these communities to develop resources and strengthen mutual aid efforts (Cox & Augustine, 2018). To maximize efforts, RSW should simultaneously be engaging in the struggle by supporting political efforts of decriminalization and working to help meet the daily needs of sex workers either through existing social welfare systems or through uplifting alternate streams of care. 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 for them that address the intersecting issues that sex workers face (Brooks, 2021). On a larger level RSW should actively combat the carceral system and explore ways to remove policing and punishment from their social service agencies to create a space where sex workers feel prioritized. All of these efforts require that we learn from their ways that sex workers have revolutionized community and be willing to provide rights and resources, not criminalization.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations of the study centered around the data collection constraints at the time. Due to COVID-19 protocols, this study was not able to conduct direct street outreach to street-based sex workers. All interactions were over the phone or through Zoom, a video call platform. However, the rapport that the researcher had with community members before and during the study levelled feelings of discomfort and unfamiliarity that may have been more pronounced had a researcher had no experience working and organizing with this community.

Another key reflection is on the way that the nuances of PAR shaped this study. The study utilized snowball sampling that stemmed from research actors who for the most part were ingrained community members that were connected to community-based sex worker organizations in the Los Angeles area. This method produced a group where the majority of the research actors had already, for the most part, been connected to services and supports through their networks. As a part of the PAR framework, the study sought to center voices that have historically been silenced and in doing so, elevated the voices of these specific research actors. This served to enhance quality of discussions surrounding community support networks, and future research should target the experiences of sex workers who are less connected to sex worker community networks.

### **Future Directions**

Throughout the dialogues, research actors desired for sex work affirming practitioners but the interview guide itself did not delve into the specificities of what this looked like. Future research directions could inquire about what sex workers need from social work practitioners and work with sex workers to create sex worker-affirming trainings that can be provided by the community. Research actors highlighted how subpopulations of sex workers faced distinct challenges across public welfare systems, and one population that may be of interest for social work practitioners would be sex working parents and their interactions and possible tensions with schools, child welfare systems, and receiving support from social services.

The fight for sex worker's rights continues, signaling a failure of social policy, researchers, and social welfare practitioners. As previously highlighted, any future direction and interactions with the sex worker community must be informed and guided by the community. Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) reminds us that next steps involve intervening in a way where the

“community itself invites the project in and sets out its parameters (pg. 147).” Similarly, further activist-scholarship should be directed at challenging the institutions that work with sex workers rather than asking the community to change or leave their work to fit these structures. Ideally, sex worker researchers will be spearheading these efforts. However, in order for these voices to be elevated and supported, academic institutions must act on their complicity in silencing these voices and work to create grants and institutions where these researchers are valued.

### **Conclusion**

Through employing a PAR framework, this researcher has affirmed that social worker practitioners have much to learn from sex workers. For decades, sex workers have been providing for themselves and caring for each other without carceral interventions as evident here in Los Angeles’ sex worker communities. Decriminalization of sex work may only attack one of the many structural oppressions that this community fights against, but it is a necessary step forward before larger structural issues can be tackled. There is a need for social welfare service providers, practitioners, and policymakers to invest in the knowledge and expertise of sex workers to support the development of sex worker-led and -informed interventions. As we continue from a muddled past, we must work to earn the right to be trusted as a sex worker-friendly resource and thought partner. As a community they have been protecting themselves from all angles and we have the potential to help lighten their load by acting as an accomplice rather than as an accomplice of state violence.

**Appendix A: Study Flyer****UCLA STUDY ON SEX WORKERS' INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE FACTORS**

**Purpose:** To distinguish experiences within the sex worker hierarchy with an emphasis on the experiences of queer and trans Black, Indigenous, sex workers of color; help inform social service provision to engage the sex worker community; counter pathologizing narratives to explore reparations both inside and outside the sex worker rights movement

**Who May Be Eligible:** 18+ current or former sex workers who provide services in the LA County Area

**Participation entails:**

- one hour dialogue
- optional photo-documentation portion for visual campaign against stigma
- \$50 compensation

**Please contact Kimberly Fuentes at [swerstudy2020@protonmail.com](mailto:swerstudy2020@protonmail.com) or (562) 726-2156 for more details!**



## Appendix B: Photovoice Instructions

Photovoice is a qualitative method used in research that entails participants photographing some aspect of their lives, community, or environment. The photographs that you take as a part of this study will be used to supplement and guide our discussion on sex worker resilience and community protective factors that will follow. These photos will not be shared with anyone besides the Primary Investigator, Kimberly Fuentes, and the Faculty Advisor, Amy Ritterbusch. If you give your permission, individual photos may be included in the final published study or be used in presentation materials or community gatherings. You will have an opportunity to review the photos again before making a final decision about their use.

**Instructions:** Take two weeks to think about the themes and take pictures of the objects, places, and environments that you feel are representative of your experiences in relation to these themes. You can focus on one theme or touch on all of them since they are interrelated but please send over approximately 20 photos. You can also share memorable photos that you have already taken. Once you finish your photo-documentation please email the photos to [swerstudy2020@protonmail.com](mailto:swerstudy2020@protonmail.com) and the researcher will contact you to schedule a one-hour dialogue. After this project is complete, your emails and identifying information will be deleted from the email.

### Prompts/themes for photovoice:

- Sex work and Community
- Sex work and Freedom
- Sex work and autonomy/agency
- Sex work and wellbeing
- “When they see me” - How do different people in your life see you and how does this differ from how you see yourself?
  - Clients
  - Friends
  - Family
  - Health and service providers

### Photovoice guidelines:

1. Photography can be of places, locations, things, and yourself (if you consent to this)
2. This project only asks for photos, no videos please
3. Do not take direct pictures of people. If images of faces are captured in the background of a picture, the faces will be blurred or blacked out by the researcher for the research files.
  - a. Avoid photographing people and identifying features of people non-identifying features like the back of someone’s head is okay
  - b. Avoid photographing minors (anyone under the age of 18)

### Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

**Intro paragraph:** “Thank you so much for agreeing to contribute to this project. I first want to address that I consider myself a sex worker rights activist while at the same time pursuing a Master of Social Welfare. I want to be transparent and address that at times these are conflicting identities and that Social Workers/academics have historically aided in oppressing sex workers through policy and stigma. My intention for this project is to create a level of understanding about sex worker experiences to create services that better meet the communities’ needs. For the sake of this interview, we have used the word sex worker to describe the act of “consensually providing sexual services or performances in exchange for money or other markers of economic value” but language matters and I want to use whichever terminology you prefer to go by. Is there a term that you would prefer to use to describe what you do? [pause] While we will be focusing on the impact of being a sex worker on your well-being and sex worker individual and community resistance strategies I also want to acknowledge that being a sex worker may not be your most prominent identity. Some of the questions directly address this but I encourage you to think about how your identities impact your sex worker experience for all of these questions. Finally, if at any point in time, if you do not feel comfortable answering the question or you are feeling overwhelmed, please let me know and we will take the appropriate steps together.”

**Is it okay that I audio record this session? \*recording starts now\***

**Icebreaker:** In order to get to know each other better I want to start off with a short activity. I have provided you with a personal identity wheel to fill out beforehand. Can you tell me a little bit about your identities? I will also share mine with you.

**Main themes: Identity, Community, Resistance, Positionality, Improving sex worker specific services**

1. Type of sex work
  - a. How did you come to choose the form(s) of sex work that you engage in?
  - b. Where do you primarily find your clients?
  - c. How is your experience as a sex worker shaped by whether you do sex work full time or to supplement other forms of income?
2. Identifying as a sex worker
  - a. Do you identify as a sex worker? Why or why not?
  - b. How has this form of sex work impacted other aspects of your life?
  - c. How would you describe your relationship with sex work?
  - d. How do you decide whether you disclose to someone that you are a sex worker?
3. Identities
  - a. Which prominent individual identities do you think take dominance in your daily life?

- b. Can you describe situations where your other identities take precedent to your identity as a sex worker? And vice versa.
    - c. Do you identify or participate in sex worker activism? Do you believe that they are representing your/advocating for your struggles?
  4. Barriers and risks
    - a. Can you describe the economic, societal, and structural barriers that you faced before starting sex work?
    - b. How were these amplified or mitigated by sex work?
    - c. What are the greatest risks that sex workers face? What would you attribute them to?
    - d. Do risks vary with different forms of sex work?
  5. Agency
    - a. How do you exercise agency in your line of work?
    - b. In the day to day?
    - c. For your physical health?
    - d. For your mental health?
  6. Wellbeing
    - a. What interpersonal skills have you gained from sex work that you wouldn't have gained otherwise? How do you apply these skills to other facets of your life?
    - b. Would you say that sex work has contributed to your wellbeing or improved your quality of life?
  7. Social support
    - a. Describe a time when you leaned on your community for support or when you provided support for another sex worker.
    - b. What were the outcomes of this interaction?
    - c. Would you have felt comfortable reaching out to someone who wasn't a peer or vice versa?
    - d. What forms of social support do you rely on that have facilitated your continuation of sex work?
    - e. How would the availability of social support differ with different forms of sex work?
  8. Wellbeing and individual protective factors
    - a. If you don't rely on social support, what other factors have contributed to your resilience?
    - b. What has contributed to your individual well-being since starting sex work?
    - c. What qualities about yourself would you say contribute to your resilience?
    - d. What gives you strength?
  9. Sex worker inclusive and exclusive spaces
    - a. Can you give examples of sex worker inclusive or exclusive spaces you are a part of? What are your perceived benefits from these spaces?

- b. What characteristics make up these spaces?
  - c. How do you communicate/ commune with your community?
  - d. If not, what have been barriers to finding sex worker exclusive/inclusive spaces?
10. Sex work and service providers
- a. What would you like service providers to know about sex worker's needs? How does this vary with different kinds of sex work?
  - b. How does this vary with different service providers? (mental health, medical services, housing)
  - c. How can service providers promote your wellbeing?
11. Service provider delivery
- a. How would you know that a service is sex worker inclusive?
  - b. How does information about trusted providers reach other sex workers?
  - c. How can it reach sex workers who may not have social supports?
12. Photovoice picture review (if applicable)
- a. Tell me about this image, which theme does this picture speak to?
  - b. If you had to title this what would it be and why?
  - c. Does this connect back to anything that we spoke about previously?
13. Closing thoughts:
- a. If you could give any tips to your younger self what would you say?
  - b. Do you regret your involvement in sex work?
  - c. How was the process of choosing these photos for you?

## Codebook

### Community

#### *Sex Worker Earned Skills*

Referring to skills (general, interpersonal, etc.) that the participant gained from sex work that they would not have gained otherwise

#### *Harm reduction*

Referring to the tools and practices that individuals and communities use to offset potential harms of the work and keep each other safe

#### *Safety nets*

Referring to self-identified protective factors in a research actor's life that made sex work safer

#### *Support Systems*

Referring to people in the research actor's life who have provided support (monetary, emotional, practical, etc.) that has helped them in a time of need

#### *Community/ Mutuality*

Describing a sense of comfort and understanding with other sex workers

#### *Engagement with SW community*

Referring to and awareness of and engagement with other sex workers, sex worker organizations, or community organizations that are sex worker-friendly

#### *SWer spaces*

Refers to community spaces where sex workers or their allies gather either informally (such as through online forums) or formally through a place of work

#### *Helping other SWers*

Describes instances when the research actor helped other sex workers or vice versa

### Disclosure

#### *Disclosure*

Describing factors that impact someone's decision to disclose their sex worker status

#### *SW as an integral part of you*

Describing the feeling of carrying sex work as a major part of your identity or a major part of your life

*Transparency around SWer status*

Referring to instances of being open about being a sex worker

*Vanilla jobs as "cover"*

Referring to “square jobs” or non-sex work that is used to “cover your ass” in case anyone asks about what type of work you do

*Representation*

Referring to instances where a sex worker feels represented in a space

*Erasure*

Describing feeling of being misrepresented or silenced in a space

**Oppression and Domination**

*Stigma/ Stereotypes*

Referring to instances where the research actor experienced stigma or was stereotyped for their work and how they responded to it

*Assumptions of SWers*

Referring to perceptions of sex workers; who they are, what they look like, what they do

*Identity*

Referring to the identities of the research actor and how its impacted their life

*Intersectionality*

Describing the experiences of what multiple identities and how it impacts their relationship with sex work

*Risks and obstacles*

Describing sources of struggle and danger that impede their ability to stay safe and well; May or may not be derived from their sex work involvement

*Whorearchy*

Describing the varying levels of experiences that can be had through sex work depending on the type of work, their identities, and other privileges or barriers

*Power dynamics*

Referring to an unbalanced power dynamic from clients or other sex workers

*Privilege/ Assets*

Describing what participants identify as assets to their work

**Autonomy***Wellbeing*

Describing a feeling of comfort, safety, or peace within a time of their lives deriving from their sex work involvement

*Autonomy*

Describing feelings of independence and freedom from what may have been barriers to their wellbeing before

*Financial security*

Referring to feelings of security and a lack of financial stress due to involvement in sex work

*SW allowing time to pursue other things*

Describing times when they have the time to do other things besides work (i.e. leisure, activism, travel, family time) because sex work has freed up their time

*SWer advocacy/ activism*

Referring to a sex worker's involvement with organization, community circles, or their workplace where they raise awareness and take action around sex worker issues

*Impact of Criminalization*

Referring to overt and discreet ways that criminalization seeps into the everyday lives of sex workers

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