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Most sex workers satisfied with their jobs and don't see themselves as victims, survey finds



STEPHEN MAHER, POSTMEDIA NEWS | September 23, 2014 7:41 PM ET
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Although a survey found that most sex workers are satisfied with their line of work, they report significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than police, firefighters, nurses and even photojournalists who have worked in disaster zones. Steve Bosch/Postmedia News/Files

Most sex workers in Canada are comfortable in their work, according to a national survey of prostitutes, their partners, clients and managers.

The study, funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and based on hundreds of interviews in six communities, found that 70% of sex workers are satisfied with their jobs. Eighty-two per cent feel they are appropriately paid and 68% feel they have good job security.

“They don’t see themselves as victims in the sense that they’ve been portrayed in the current [prostitution criminalization] bill,” said lead researcher Cecilia Benoit. “They’re actually a lot like you and I. They just haven’t had quite so many advantages in some cases.”

During debate over the Conservative government’s new prostitution law, Bill C-36, which seeks to abolish the industry by criminalizing it, the bill’s supporters have portrayed sex work as intrinsically exploitative.

The Conservatives brought in C-36 after the Supreme Court struck down the old law. It is expected to become law this winter.

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The bill is being studied in the Senate, where witnesses have given starkly different views of the profession, with backers of the legislation insisting that sex workers — who they claim are often trafficked women and children — are victims.

The researchers — in Ottawa on Monday and Tuesday to present preliminary findings from the ongoing study — say that's not what most sex workers say.

“They talk to us about the amount of control they have over their work situation,” said researcher Mikael Jansson. “They have a lot more control over the timing of their work, the pace of their work than journalists.”

Sex workers reported a median annual income of \$39,500.

“They say it gives them independence, given their life situation, and it gives them income,” said Ms. Benoit.

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Eighty-one per cent of sex workers and 83% of clients surveyed agreed that the providers set the terms of the transactions.

“What we've found from the data is when it comes to workers, clients and their interaction, sex workers set the terms and conditions of the service,” said Chris Atchison, of the University of Victoria. “Clients come to them and say ‘Here's what I'm looking for.’ A sex worker then says ‘I'm either willing or unwilling to provide that.’”

Mr. Atchison, who has been interviewing sex workers and clients for 20 years, says that the more comfortable that transaction, the better.

“The longer the exchange goes on the less likely that we're going to see conflict and the more likely we're going to see increased sexual safety between the partners,” he said.

Sex workers report higher rates of freedom at work than people in other industries and lower levels of workplace stress than some

professions, but high levels of stress from their lives outside work, higher levels of drug and alcohol use and three times the average level of depression.

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Sex workers report significantly higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than police, firefighters, nurses and even photojournalists who have worked in disaster zones. They also report higher levels of childhood trauma than most Canadians.

"Things that happen early on in life matter later," said Ms. Benoit.

The researchers interviewed 218 sex workers in six communities: St. John's, N.L., Montreal, Waterloo, Ont., Fort McMurray, Alta., Calgary and Victoria.

They tried to ensure the sample was representative, but included no workers in Canada illegally and no children.

Most sex workers are of age and not trafficked, the researchers say.

"Seventy per cent of people started after age 19," said Ms. Benoit. "When we do further analysis I think we'll see that their situation is much better than for people who start earlier on. And most of the focus, including in Parliament, is on people who are entering at age 13."

Although they interviewed high-end escorts and low-paid street workers, they likely didn't get full reports from the industry's extremes, says Ms. Benoit.

"If you think of the sex industry as a continuum, there are people over here who have a lot of control and make a lot of money, and you have people over here who are forced," she said. "Our study probably got people in the middle and towards the ends, but not at the extremes. Those people are very hard to capture."

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