

Who Are Sex Workers?

“Sex worker” is a term used to refer to adults (19 years and older) who exchange sexual services for money which necessarily, but not exclusively, includes direct physical sexual contact with clients. Thus, sex workers are adults who earn at least part of their income through the sale of direct sexual contact. Included in this term are those who engage in outdoor street-level sex work, as well as those who work indoors in their homes, clients’ homes, or in commercial venues. The latter includes escorts, erotic masseurs, exotic dancers, BDSM practitioners – this term is an acronym that stands for bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism or sadism and masochism. It refers to a continuum of practices and expressions, both erotic and non-erotic, involving restraint, sensory stimulation, role-playing, and a variety of interpersonal dynamics – and the like^{10,96}.

You might wonder why many people working in the sex industry prefer the term “sex worker” over “prostitute”. For many sex workers, as well as advocacy groups working on their behalf, prostitute is a stigmatizing term because it has specific legal associations/implications. Conversely, the term sex *worker* emphasizes the work relations of the individuals involved. As such, they should be entitled to the same rights and responsibility as all other workers in Canada, including fair and equal treatment by managers and clients, health and safety at work, employment benefits, and legal protections²⁴. The term sex worker also encourages us to envision individuals engaged in this kind of economic activity as complex people whose worker status is just one aspect of their self-identity. Having said this, not everyone in the industry identifies with this term, and some may prefer to call themselves something else⁶¹.

Some of what we know about sex workers:

1. The people involved in the sex industry in Canada and most other high-income countries come from diverse backgrounds encompassing a range of ages, sexual orientations, gender expressions, education and income levels, as well as racial and ethnic backgrounds^{24,61,67}.
2. There are no accurate estimates of the gender breakdown of sex workers. Most research indicates the sex industry is highly gendered, with the overwhelming majority of sex workers identifying as women (including both cisgendered and trans women). However, men and trans men also work in the industry^{14,18,58}.
3. Although people often assume sex workers work predominantly on the street, recent studies suggest that in Canada, Australia, and the UK the majority of sex work takes place in private venues, including escort agencies, massage parlours, hotels and motels, clients’ residences, and sex workers’ homes. Though the information available is limited, some research suggests that certain sectors of the sex industry in Canada are highly racialized, with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit people of Canada (hereafter referred to as Indigenous people) disproportionately represented in street-level sex work^{9,56,83}.
4. Some of the reasons why racial/ethnic minorities are over-represented in the Canadian sex industry are because of our colonial history. For example, part of the ongoing reality of colonization in Canada is that many Indigenous people have been socially and economically marginalized. These circumstances, coupled with prevalent

racist images of Indigenous people as inherently violable, work to limit the economic options of all Indigenous people (but especially women). This can sometimes leave street-level survival sex work as the only option. A number of studies show that in certain regions across Canada, Indigenous women are vastly overrepresented in street sex work. According to one estimate, “50 percent of adult sex workers in Winnipeg are of Aboriginal descent. These estimates are staggering, given that Aboriginal peoples only make up approximately 10 percent of the Winnipeg population”⁸³.

5. People enter the sex industry for a wide array of reasons. Although periods of financial need or outright poverty are often key drivers, these are not the only ones. Many choose this work for the autonomy and flexibility it affords – that is, the ability to choose when and where to work, who they work with, and how much money they earn each week^{61,81}. Still others see the sex industry as an opportunity to explore their sexuality, to validate their desirability, and to be a part of something that defies social-sexual norms and values^{5,61,71,81}.

Where many stereotypes originate

Many of the assumptions about sex workers originate in media portrayals of sex workers, street-level sex workers in particular. Some of the more common myths are that all sex workers are victims, all sex workers are drug addicts, all sex workers are survivors of sexual abuse, and sex work is inherently violent. The problem with these kinds of assumptions is that: 1) they do not recognize the diversity of the sex worker population; 2) while street-level workers tend to be comparatively disadvantaged, some prefer the “flexibility, autonomy, and unstructured nature of this sector” of the industry; and 3) while street-level work is the most visible aspect of the sex industry, research suggests the majority of workers do not work on the street⁶¹.

Having said all this, some sex workers, especially those in street based environments, experience great disadvantage in their lives, leading to poor health and lack of safety. They tend to be disadvantaged for the following reasons:

1. Sex workers who solicit on the street are more visible to the police, which can result in their being charged with breaking prostitution laws, holding a criminal record and/or spending time in jail. The stigma and disadvantage associated with having these kinds of interactions with the Canadian legal system can make it difficult to earn enough money in sex work for food and accommodation, or find alternative sources of income.
2. Working on the street can also carry serious health and safety concerns for some sex workers, especially those who work on “strolls,” that is stretches of road where sex workers regularly solicit clients, which are located in impoverished areas of cities or towns. These areas often lack access to clean water and sanitary toilets, well-lit areas that can protect workers from assault, areas where workers can find warm and dry shelter, and access to outreach services such as health clinics, shelters, and needle exchanges^{20,49,73}.
3. Many people who work on the street do not have stable housing or safe places to conduct transactions with clients.

Because of these less than ideal conditions, it is not surprising then that the people most likely to work outdoors and on the streets are individuals who are already stigmatized and marginalized for other reasons. As already discussed above, this includes:

- Visible minorities;
- Indigenous women;
- Trans people;
- The extremely poor;
- Those with serious mental or physical health concerns;
- Those with substance use problems⁹¹.

While there are a great many problems associated with street-level sex work, it is important to note that similar to everyone else working in the sex industry, street-level workers have diverse personal histories and reasons for selling sex^{61,95}. What's more, similar to other kinds of service provision, there is considerable mobility within the sex industry. People move in and out of it, and move to different venues within it, to suit particular circumstances^{10,24,96,98}.