

Study finds sex work can be an occupational choice for some in industry

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A sex trade worker is pictured in Vancouver, B.C., Wednesday, June 3, 2014. A recent study out of the University of Victoria contradicts public perceptions of why sex workers end up in the industry in finding that sex work is often an occupational choice. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Jonathan Hayward

VANCOUVER — Some sex workers are choosing the industry because it can be more lucrative and rewarding than low-paying service industry jobs, says a recent study by a researcher at the University of Victoria.

Prof. Cecilia Benoit, a scientist at the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C., said she's heard a variety of reasons why sex workers get into the business through past studies, reasons that not only contradict the public perception of being coerced or exploited but also questions the efficacy of prostitution laws that are based on the notion all sex workers are victims.

Benoit decided to quantify and analyze the comments she had previously heard and began a study after receiving funds from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

Her research team surveyed more than 200 female, male and transgender sex workers in six communities across Canada.

While a third of sex workers who were surveyed entered the industry due to "critical life events," such as abuse or neglect, Benoit said it was more surprising to find that a quarter found the work appealing.

"They like working in this line of activity and they feel they are discovering themselves," Benoit said in an interview.

A Vancouver sex worker said he got into the industry three years ago while he was a student in part to make money, but also to explore his sexuality and curiosity about the business. He asked that his name not be used because of fears of being stigmatized and harassed.

Prior to his involvement in sex work, he identified as being gay, but came to realize he is transgendered.

After discussions with his doctor about living with gender dysphoria, he said he decided that transitioning to a woman was not an option for him, at least in the near future.

But he decided to remain involved in sex work, seeing mostly men but also women and couples.

"My life is unconventional due to the gender dysphoria, so it allows me to express certain needs that I have through work," he said.

His situation is not uncommon. While research into male sex workers is limited, a study by the University of British Columbia published last year found that the exploration of sexual and gender identity was a theme among male sex workers, with more than 70 per cent of study participants identifying as a gender or sexual minority.

The sex worker said he also found the work to be empowering.

"It gives me a boost in self-esteem and it makes me feel accomplished and happy because I'm providing a service," he said.

Sex workers in Benoit's study reported similar benefits, including a Victoria-based woman who said she could support herself by naming her own price and working short hours.

"We all make choices within the limits in our lives," Benoit said.

Her study surveyed sex workers between the ages of 19 and 61. Seventy per cent of them had a high school education.

Employment options for most of them were in "low-prestige" jobs where they would work long hours for little pay or job security.

"People we were interviewing are weighing the pros and cons of different opportunities they have in front of them and I think the sex industry comes up looking OK for some of them compared to the other kinds of work they have available," Benoit said.

Some were involved in sex work in addition to other jobs. The median income of those surveyed was slightly above the \$32,020 for Canada's general population in 2013.

"Many of them are entrepreneurs, they're looking for the best they can do given their situation," she said.

Benoit said recognizing the diverse and complex reasons why people get into sex work helps inform laws on prostitution.

"Blunt instruments" like the Criminal Code are not helping anyone, she said, especially if the prevailing attitude is that all sex workers are victims.

She said for people who are in the industry out of desperation but want to get out, policies that increase social assistance or skills training would be more effective than criminalizing the industry.

For those who choose sex work, Benoit said policies should approach it from an occupational health and safety standpoint.

Public attitudes that perceive sex work as dirty and immoral also need to change, Benoit said.

"One of the real drivers of isolation and difficulties that sex workers face is the stigma," she said.

Benoit plans to repeat the survey to determine whether Canada's new prostitution laws implemented in 2014 have affected the choices of sex workers.

The study was published last month in the British journal *Work, Employment and Society*.

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