



SEX WORKERS AND FAMILY, DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Summary

- Criminalisation of sex work, along with stigma and discrimination, can increase sex workers' vulnerabilities to violence.¹ These factors also make it less likely that sex workers will report or disclose incidents of sexual violence.²
- Sex worker victim-survivors are often disbelieved, perceived as undeserving of support or justice, and blamed or told to expect violence as a consequence of sex work.²⁻⁴
- Experiences of violence and lack of access to services and justice are compounded for sex workers experiencing multiple marginalisation - such as those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, migrant or culturally and linguistically diverse,⁵ or living with a disability.⁶
- Currently, no national strategy exists to address how stigma affects sex workers' access to family, domestic, and sexual violence (FDSV) services and justice pathways.
- Sex worker organisations and projects are almost exclusively funded for sexually transmissible infection and blood borne virus prevention, yet are frequently the first and only point of contact for sex workers experiencing violence.

Background

The emergence of women's anti-violence work and refuges in Australia during the 1970s was significantly influenced by second wave feminists who conceptualised sex work and pornography as both drivers and instances of violence against women.^{7,8} This legacy has ongoing impacts on contemporary anti-violence organisations, with a number of leaders and researchers holding the view that sex work and pornography are incompatible with gender equality, and an enabler of violence against women. This perspective is reflected in policy and media discussions focussed on the impacts of pornography on FDSV.⁹

Recommendations

- Decriminalise sex work in all states and territories and introduce anti-discrimination and anti-villification protections to ensure sex workers enjoy full and equal protection under the law.
- Fund peer sex worker organisations and projects at the state and territory level to deliver culturally appropriate support to victim-survivors of violence and strengthen community empowerment.
- Support community legal centres to provide tailored legal assistance for sex workers seeking remedies and navigating justice processes.
- Resource national sex worker engagement to inform FDSV policy reform, and address systemic stigma and access barriers.
- Tackle the structural drivers of violence—including economic inequality, gender stereotyping, and denial of rights—through intersectional and rights-based strategies to address marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination experienced by sex workers.

Experiences of violence and access to services

Sex workers' experiences of violence take place within a context of stigma from health services,¹⁰ the criminal justice system¹¹ and the wider community. Research shows that criminalisation, licensing, policing and stigma creates risks for sex workers at both interpersonal and systemic levels. These factors also impose significant barriers to reporting, accessing services and receiving justice for sex worker victim-survivors.^{5,11} Studies have also noted a correlation between anti-sex work rhetoric and an increase in violence against workers,^{12,13} supporting the contention that this rhetoric creates a culture of permissiveness for violence.¹⁴

Sex worker organisations report that, when attempting to access specialist FDSV services, sex workers are often denied recognition as victims and are instead subject to a higher level of scrutiny and questioning. Sex worker victim-survivors are seen as having been responsible for their own experiences of violence, deemed not as deserving as non-sex workers, or viewed as untrustworthy or as not fitting within the service's client criteria.

Sex worker organisations are first responders and provide ongoing support

Sex worker organisations provide peer education and support, including in responses to incidents of violence.

These responses to violence include:

- Attending the scene, transport to hospital and referral for emergency accommodation.
- Peer support, brokerage services, and referrals to tailored health care, legal assistance, and community legal centres.
- Support in navigating the justice system by assisting with police reporting, court support, and related procedures.
- Workshops and education on consent laws and domestic violence protections.
- Training and facilitation for self-collection of early forensic samples.

Some organisations have been able to employ peer counsellors and have recently received funding for small-scale FDSV projects. However, these projects are sporadic, susceptible to funding changes, and limited in scope. Evidence suggests that community empowerment strategies that enable sex workers to act collectively can prevent violence.^{15,16} Overall, sex worker organisations are uniquely trusted and placed to provide scaled-up and comprehensive responses to gendered violence.

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