



**Australian
Sex Workers
Association**

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Public Consultation on the Draft National Stigma and Discrimination Reduction Strategy

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft national stigma and discrimination reduction strategy. Our submission responds to the consultation question: **“Anything missing: Are there any critical issues or actions to address stigma and discrimination that are not referenced or sufficiently prioritised in the Draft Strategy?”**

Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Workers Association is the national peak body representing a membership of individual sex workers and sex worker organisations, networks, groups, projects and collectives from around Australia since 1989. We are a peer-only organisation and are 100% sex worker led at all levels. Scarlet Alliance and our membership have the highest level of engagement with sex workers of any other agency, organisation or group in Australia. Through our objectives, policies and programs, Scarlet Alliance aims to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for past and present workers in the sex industry. We represent and advocate for sex workers, providing expert advice including through a number of government and non-government committees and advisory mechanisms.

Scarlet Alliance commends the strategy for its focus on ‘structural stigma’, its commitment to lived experience leadership, and for taking an intersectional approach. In our submission we highlight the intersection of mental health and sex work stigma. We explain how laws that criminalise sex workers contribute to the structural, public and personal stigma experienced by sex workers, which creates barriers to achieving positive mental health and wellbeing.

We ask that the strategy address the issues raised in this submission by:

- Including sex workers in the list of ‘Multiple and compounding experiences of stigma and discrimination’;
- Promoting the removal of laws that criminalise sex workers; and
- Addressing sex work stigma in mental health settings.

Yours sincerely,

Mish Pony
Chief Executive Officer
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Intersection of mental health and sex work stigma

Recent research conducted by the Centre for Social Research in Health (CSRH) and Scarlet Alliance found that the “sheer weight and incessancy of stigma associated with sex work had a significant impact on mental health.”¹ Stigma increases stress, impedes self-esteem, and limits access to social support for sex workers. It has been associated with depression in sex workers and poses barriers to sex workers achieving mental health and wellbeing.²

The intersection of mental health and sex worker stigma results in sex workers receiving poor treatment from mental health professionals who either see sex work as the universal cause of all the sex worker’s issues, or who take on a punitive law enforcement role.³

As a result of these experiences, sex workers are constantly engaging in risk mitigation strategies such as selective disclosure and/or hypervigilance about their privacy in order to stay safe and/or avoid stigma, even when seeking mental health support. The emotional toll of fearing, avoiding or deflecting stigma has a significant impact on sex workers’ mental health.⁴

Criminalisation and sex work stigma

Across Australia, licensing, criminalisation and over-regulation of sex workers contribute to and are informed by the stigma that is levied against sex workers. Criminalisation and over-regulation are examples, reflections, and reinforcers of stigma and discrimination against sex workers. They contribute to reduced social status and poorer health and well-being of workers and facilitate discriminatory treatment by police, immigration, government departments and other regulatory bodies.⁵ As victims of crime, these laws result in sex workers not being taken seriously, or being treated as criminals and/or disposable, limiting sex workers' access to legal redress.⁶

This structural stigma impacts how sex workers are viewed in society, and how sex workers experiencing mental ill health are treated. There is a need for policy change to shift society’s perception of sex work to that of a legitimate occupation. This would decrease sex workers’ experiences of stigma and improve access to and utilisation of mental health care.⁷

Sex work stigma and access to quality mental health support

Stigma and stereotypes about sex workers influence the attitudes of health professionals and other service providers, and impacts the quality and relevance of the services that sex workers receive. Research into stigma conducted by CSRH found that 31% of health workers self reported that they would behave negatively toward other people because of their sex work.⁸

¹ C Treloar, Z Stardust, E Cama, & J Kim, ‘Rethinking the relationship between sex work, mental health and stigma: a qualitative study of sex workers in Australia.’ in *Social Science & Medicine*, 268, 2021, 113468.

² J Rayson and B Alba, ‘Experiences of stigma and discrimination as predictors of mental health help-seeking among sex workers.’ in *Sexual & Relationship Therapy*, 34, 2019, 277–289.

³ Scarlet Alliance and Centre for Social Research and Health, UNSW, ‘Stigma indicators monitoring project: sex workers.’ <https://scarletalliance.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Stigma_Indicators.pdf>, [accessed 1 February 2022].

⁴ C Treloar et al, above at n1.

⁵ J Rayson and B Alba, above at n2.

⁶ Scarlet Alliance and Centre for Social Research and Health, above at n3.

⁷ K McCausland, R Lobo, M Lazarou, J Hallett, J Bates, B Donovan, et al, “‘It is stigma that makes my work dangerous’: experiences and consequences of disclosure, stigma and discrimination among sex workers in Western Australia.’ in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 24, 2022, 180–195, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2020.1825813>> [accessed 20 April 2022].

⁸ Scarlet Alliance and Centre for Social Research and Health, above at n3.

When sex work is disclosed in mental health settings, sex workers report that the “stigma associated with both mental health and sex work become entangled,”⁹ and typically result in negative experiences. Mental health professionals often pathologise sex workers and focus disproportionately on sex work during therapy, suggest that sex work is the reason for mental health difficulties, and use sex work as evidence of self-harming behaviour.¹⁰

Sex workers who are experiencing mental ill health experience a concerning level of stigma and discrimination. These experiences significantly detract from mental health outcomes and impact on sex workers’ willingness to seek mental health support.¹¹

Experiences of ‘Public Stigma’ and ‘Self Stigma’

In recent research into stigma, 64% of participants from the general public reported that they would behave negatively toward other people because of their sex work.¹²

Sex workers reported that stigma manifests in multiple ways, including as internalised, anticipated and perceived stigma. Stigma can present in abusive relationships, and isolation from family and friends.¹³ Some sex workers associate the stigma they experience with feelings of shame, while for others the high degree of vigilance around disclosure contributes to weariness and stress. Experiences and fear of stigma also lead some sex workers to distance themselves from people and avoid certain social situations, leading to isolation and a sense of loneliness.¹⁴

Other intersecting experiences

The impacts of the stigma described are heightened for sex workers who are further marginalised, including LGBTIQ+ sex workers, sex workers with disabilities, migrant sex workers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sex workers. Experiences of racism, incarceration, criminalisation, and a lack of access to culturally-appropriate services impact on, and are impacted by both sex work and mental health stigma. When asked about ending sex work stigma, sex workers overwhelmingly emphasised the need to take an intersectional approach to eliminate compounding oppressions that shape sex worker experiences. For example, many participants spoke to the need to end racism.¹⁵

Conclusion

While structural sex work stigma persists unabated, sex workers must constantly assess the risks associated with accessing mental health support. Stigma against sex workers who experience mental ill health requires a systematic response that necessitates the decriminalisation of sex work, increased access to peer support, and peer lead advocacy targeting mental health professionals.¹⁶

⁹ C Treloar et al, above at n1.

¹⁰ J Rayson and B Alba, above at n2.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Scarlet Alliance and Centre for Social Research and Health, above at n3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ J Rayson and B Alba, above at n2.

¹⁵ Z Stardust, C Treloar, E Cama, & J Kim, “‘I Wouldn’t Call the Cops if I was Being Bashed to Death:’ Sex Work, Whore Stigma and the Criminal Legal System”.in *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 10, 2021, 142–157, <<https://www.crimejusticejournal.com/article/view>> [accessed 24 March 2022].

¹⁶ Ibid.