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## LESSONS LEARNED, LESSONS SHARED

### Reflections on Doing Research in Collaboration with Sex Workers and Sex Worker-led Organizations

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#### Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak led to undue financial hardships for sex workers and their associates resulting from stay-at-home measures and the sudden closure of strip clubs, holistic spas, and massage parlours (Lewis, 2020; Rancic, 2020). These lost wages were compounded by increased caregiving responsibilities for children, elders, disabled community members, and those who have contracted COVID-19 (Fox et al., 2020). As early demands for demographic data insisted, workers already living in poverty, and those who are racialized, Indigenous, queer, trans\*, or disabled, are particularly vulnerable both to COVID-19 and to its effects (Bryant et al., 2020; Jean-Pierre & Collins, 2020; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2020; Public Health Ontario, 2020). Already working within grassroots sex worker organizations, we witnessed the economic devastation and institutional alienation faced by the community. We also saw the community's resilience and lateral support as mutual-aid strategies were swiftly rolled out (Butterfly, 2020). To produce data that is useful for both researchers and sex worker organizations, we developed a research study based on one of our respective organizations. Our successful application has enabled us to begin this critical research while facilitating a small redistribution of economic resources to sex workers.<sup>1</sup>

As white, queer, working-class, and middle class activist academics working from an intersectional, anti-oppressive framework, we are keen to use our access to institutional resources to support sex worker-led organizing (Shaver et al., 2011). Our attempts to capture the effects of COVID-19 on sex workers were stymied by a "lack of data" that has contributed to a broader silence in scholarship on sex work (Amnesty International Canada, 2020; Platt et al., 2020; UNAIDS, 2020). Our research contributes to sex work<sup>2</sup> studies in the social sciences and humanities in the Global North examining: sex work and feminism (McKenna,

2021, Forthcoming; Valverde, 2018); sex work and data (Conrad, Forthcoming); the criminalization of sex work (Belak & Bennett, 2016; Bruckert & Parent, 2018; Goodall, 2019; Lowman, 2004); the impact of criminalization on sex workers and their clients (Khan, 2015; Sterling & van der Meulen, 2018); the stigmatization of sex workers (Brock, 2009; Bruckert, 2002; Ferris, 2015; Lowman, 2000); sex work as a labour issue (Durisin et al., 2018; Logan, 2017; Parent et al., 2013; Smith & Mac, 2018); sex work and municipal governance (Anderson et al., 2015; Lam, 2016; Law, 2015; Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000); and sex worker-led community activism (Ferris & Lebovitch, 2020; Heying, 2018).

We explore how to ethically facilitate this research by reflecting on our engagement with sex worker organizing. While doing collaborative research with sex worker-led organizations and individuals who do sex work, we contribute to scholarship that may benefit academics and community workers (Huysamen & Sanders, 2021; Jeffreys, 2010). These recommendations emerge from our personal histories as activists, and from our partnership with Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate, Resist (POWER). Our collaboration with POWER examines the economic impact of COVID-19 on sex workers, in particular investigating how they negotiated state-sponsored income-replacement schemes, such as the novel Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), Employment Insurance (EI), as well as pre-existing welfare and disability support programmes.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we highlight the ethical and methodological challenges that underscore academic research with sex workers (Bruckert, 2014; Forgel, 2007; Liangputtong, 2007). To understand the unique ethical questions facing research on the sex industry, we provide a brief summary of the legal context of sex work in Canada. Second, we reflect on mutual-aid projects initiated by sex worker-led organizations that provided \$100.00 emergency grants to local sex workers at the beginning of the pandemic. We end by offering suggestions for others interested in doing research with sex work communities. We believe that these suggestions can support research with sex working communities by encouraging researchers to prioritize research outcomes that are useful to sex workers themselves (Maggie's, 2021).

## Legal Context of Sex Work

Sex work is currently regulated under the Canadian Criminal Code, reflecting an ongoing history of de-facto criminalization (Durisin et al., 2018). In 2014, the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA)* (2014) updated the language on sex work and affiliated crimes to expand the reach of the criminal law (Belak & Bennett, 2016). While the act of selling sex is not illegal, communicating for the purpose of selling sex in public is illegal (s. 213 1.1), as is referring a sex worker to a client (s. 286.3). For the first time in Canada, *PCEPA* determined that clients can be criminally charged with purchasing sex (s. 286.1), third parties could be charged with advertising a sex worker's services (s. 286.4), and with obtaining a "material benefit" from a sex worker (s. 286.2). It is within this legal context that

sex workers perform their labour, navigating confusing and contradictory legislation around sex workers' rights to labour protections, workplace health and safety, and employment benefits. Since the onslaught of COVID-19, the precarity and illegitimacy of sex work have once again been urgently highlighted.

Consensual sex work is a legitimate form of labour that has been deemed illegitimate by a confluence of state, legal, and civil actors. We distinguish sex work from human trafficking, and particularly from feminist arguments that conflate the two (Belles, 2015; Bindle, 2017; Bourgeois, 2018). We acknowledge the abuses involved in the involuntary movement of people across locations, worksites, and borders for the purposes of non-consensual labour (Kaye, 2017; Kempadoo, 2005; Maynard, 2015). We remain critical of the discourse of sex trafficking, in particular the privileging of police reporting over that of victims (Lepp, 2017; Zhang, 2009). While all sex workers are vulnerable to criminalization, violence, and stigma, systemic racism and colonialism impact how Black, Indigenous, and racialized sex workers negotiate the sex industry, criminal justice, and attendant resources (Brooks, 2020; Hunt, 2013; Maynard, 2017).

### **COVID-19, Canadian Emergency Income Support, and Sex Workers**

Canada's federal government scrambled to address the massive unemployment engendered by the pandemic lockdown through the creation of the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and the expansion of Employment Insurance (EI) (Government of Canada, 2020). CERB was rolled out as a temporary income relief plan, enabling workers whose income was reduced to under \$1,000 to receive up to \$2,000 in monthly support (Petit & Tedds, 2020). Individuals who earned less than \$5,000 in the previous year were ineligible to apply, which excluded the poorest category of workers from the benefit. While between 9 and 13% of Canadians suffered a major economic hit, approximately 10% of workers in the lowest and highest income levels received CERB (Achou et al., 2020; Zajacova et al., 2020).

Sex worker and civil society organizations ranging from Women's Shelter Canada, the Canadian Labour Congress, and the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform circulated a letter calling on the federal government to clarify sex workers' inclusion in CERB and provincial income assistance plans (Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, 2020). Specifically, these organizations pointed to the requirement of workers having filed income tax in 2019 (Government of Canada, 2020). As precarious, stigmatized, and criminalized labourers in an informal sector of the economy, filing taxes can pose a problem for sex workers (Benoit et al., 2016; Bruckert & Hannem, 2013). Some sex workers were faced with a cost-benefit analysis between the potential advantages of applying for the CERB and a future reduction in provincial income assistance as a penalty. The "trust but verify later" strategy of CERB has jeopardized access to government income supports (Pettinicchio et al., 2021; Robson, 2020).

The exclusion of some sex workers from CERB prompted grassroots sex worker-led organizations to create mutual aid emergency funds for sex workers. As a member of POWER, Ryan worked with the board to raise and distribute \$12,000 directly to sex workers in the capital region. Emma was a board member of Sex Workers Action Project (SWAP) of Hamilton, where the board collectively fund-raised and allocated \$4,720.00 to sex workers in the area. In both cases, emergency grants were advertised via social media and local networks of workers and allies. SWAP's mandate for receiving an emergency grant was simply to email a request to the Executive Director, providing an eligible email address for the e-transfer. POWER's case was more complicated, as it involved multiple organizations in the distribution of funds. POWER setup a low-barrier online application form that was advertised on their website and social media to distribute money directly to sex workers while also transferring sizable funds directly to two other sex worker-focused organizations in the city (Willow's Drop-In and Ottawa Independent Companions) so that they could distribute funds directly to service users and members respectively. Both SWAP and POWER fundraised in the same way, receiving non-charitable donations from community members. These local emergency grants were part of global efforts, yet another example of the creativity and determination of the international sex workers' rights movement (Lam, 2020).

### **Introducing Our Collaborative Research Project**

This project is grounded in community-based research with a hidden population in which the research team is positioned as both insiders and outsiders (Benoit et al., 2016). Our positionality reflects much sex work research, where individuals with fluid experience in sex work, sex work organizing, and sex work research share a common asset-informed agenda (Lowthers et al., 2017). We recruited Chris Bruckert—Emma's postdoctoral supervisor and a founding member of POWER. The POWER board spearheaded our search for a Research Assistant (RA), internally recruiting a student who serves on POWER's board. As the only paid employee on the project, the RA is the conduit through which the research team and the POWER board communicate. Our varied positionalities are an asset to this project, providing us individual and collective opportunities for reflection, growth, and solidarity (Fenge et al., 2019).

Following approval by the Research Ethics Office at the University of Ottawa, our research project was launched on June 1, 2021. The research team developed a digital quantitative survey composed of 54 research questions. The objectives of the quantitative study are to understand how diverse sex workers negotiated COVID-19, in particular, their loss of income and whether they were able to access government income support and assistance programmes. Establishing quantitative data on sex workers' access to recent emergency income replacement programmes will address this gap in knowledge (Kelly et al., 1992; Reinhartz, 1993). The qualitative aspect of our study includes interviews with key informants involved in disseminating emergency mutual-aid funds from Ottawa-Gatineau sex worker-led organizations. As activist academic Elene Lam has

observed, sex worker organizations have been at the forefront of mutual-aid support for sex workers during the first year of the pandemic (Lam, 2020; Spade, 2020). This project joins this vital dialogue on sex workers' financial negotiation of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada.

## Discussion: Ten Questions to Consider When Researching Sex Work/ers

As researchers embedded in various marginalized communities, we know the importance of approaching community-based research with respect, care, and caution (Olshansky & Zender, 2016; Sanders, 2006). There is very little scholarship on how to ethically engage with sex workers (Jeffreys, 2010). Given the legal context of sex work, it is important that researchers are not only advocates of sex workers' rights and dignity in the study design and implementation, but are also aware of the danger their research could pose to sex workers if their information is mishandled (Israel & Hay, 2012; Paly & Lowman, 2014). For these reasons, we have developed a tool for scholars thinking about conducting qualitative research on sex work, or in collaboration with sex workers and sex worker-led organizations (See Table 2.1).

**TABLE 2.1** Ten Questions to Consider When Researching Sex Work/ers

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1. ***What is your relationship to commercial sex industries?***  
Before jumping into a research project ask, why me? What are my relations with people from this community? Am I the right person to do this research? Am I a member of this community? Am I an ally? Am I an outsider? What am I willing to offer this community in return? If you are a current or former sex worker in the academy, how will you manage your evolving relationship to the community? How much will you disclose, to whom, when, and how?
  2. ***Has the research already been done?***  
Sex workers are an over-researched group who often have to repeat themselves time and time again. Before reaching out to a sex worker or an organization, ensure that your research questions have not already been answered by other scholars by first carrying out a thorough literature review.
  3. ***Who benefits most from the research?***  
If sex workers do not benefit from the research in clear and tangible ways, a research project involving sex workers should be reassessed. A graded practicum, thesis, scholarly article, book chapter or book should not be the sole outcome of the project.
  4. ***Do you really need to bother sex workers to do useful research?***  
Consider consulting the work sex workers and sex work organizations have already done. Social media is a useful public platform for hearing from sex workers in their own words. If you don't follow any sex workers, start there, and before asking any questions, listen to what they are already saying! Furthermore, instead of turning the gaze on sex workers, why not focus your research towards critically examining the police, politicians, and moralists who terrorize sex workers and undermine their safety?
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TABLE 2.1 (Continued)

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5. ***What role do sex workers have in shaping the research project?***

Is your research accountable to sex workers in the planning, implementation, data collection, data analysis, and outcomes? While not all research includes sex workers at every stage of research, you should consider what kind of relationship you will have to sex workers throughout your whole research process.

6. ***How are you compensating sex workers for their time?***

If your research project includes speaking with or surveying sex workers and/or staff at a sex worker-led organization, how will you compensate them for their time? Endeavour to write a research budget that acknowledges the time staff will contribute to your project, and ensure that honorariums for research participation are commensurate with the amount of work you're asking of sex workers. Avoid gift cards and raffles and simply pay people for their time.

7. ***How will you protect your research participants?***

Sex workers are made vulnerable by a web of laws designed explicitly to control their lives. While most formal scholarly research requires Ethic Review Board approval, working with members of this community often require higher levels of care regarding the safety and well-being of participants.

8. ***Who owns the research outputs?***

Publications, whether scholarly or community-based, are often the primary outputs of research. Whose names will be on these publications? Who will receive credit? Who will appear in the acknowledgements? Will you share your results with the participants, before, during, or after publication? How will you respond to criticism?

9. ***How generalizable will your findings be?***

Researchers must reflect on the specificity of their research and how generalizable the findings are. Sex workers are a diverse group of people with various backgrounds and life experiences. Be sure not to make large claims about the nature of sex work beyond the scope of your study. Women or men, cis or trans\*, working poor or middle class, street-based or indoor, independent or working for a third party, citizen or migrant, Indigenous and racialized or white—there are so many axes of difference that limit how much we can generalize. It's best to remain specific about the part(s) of the sex working community you've been working with.

10. ***How will your research be mobilized beyond academia?***

An article in a scholarly publication behind a pay wall that hardly anyone will read is not particularly helpful to sex workers or sex worker-led organizations. If a scholarly publication is necessary output, how might you mobilize the research findings in other ways as well? An educational tool-kit for your class, workplace, or community group? A community-based report co-authored with a sex worker organization? A press event? What about donating any proceeds from your publication to a sex worker-led organization?

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These ten questions have structured our own research process with POWER, and we offer our responses to them as a model for other researchers. To be of utmost use to sex worker, activist, and academic communities, a shareable list of questions follows our reflections below.

### ***What Is Your Relationship to Commercial Sex Industries?***

Our project comes directly out of our connections to sex worker-led organizations (SWAP and POWER). We are both postdoctoral researchers with expertise in sexuality and sex work, and vocal advocates for the decriminalization of sex work. One of us has over a decade of experience as a part-time sex worker while the other has been in close proximity to underground economies, but not as a sex worker. Emma joined SWAP Hamilton in July 2019, and served as an elected board member from September 2019 to June 2020. Ryan was instrumental in helping relaunch POWER in 2019, and he volunteers with MAX Ottawa and sits on their Male Sex Workers Outreach Project Advisory Board.

### ***Has the Research Already Been Done?***

Sex work scholarship should be useful to the community. Since the core focus of our project relates to the COVID-19 pandemic, our research is urgent. The collaborative report generated from our project will be the first mixed methods study in Canada to examine sex worker mutual aid strategies during this crisis (Butterfly et al., 2020; Lam, 2020; Spade, 2020). While it is important to note that COVID-19 is a health crisis, our project does not primarily examine research on sex workers' health (e.g., Hoefinger et al., 2020; Lazarus et al., 2012).

### ***Who Benefits Most from the Research?***

Research on the sex industry should be of benefit to sex workers themselves. Our primary goal is to provide usable data for sex workers and their organizations, which will lend statistical evidence to anecdotal reporting on the difficulty of accessing state support and filing income taxes. While this is critical given COVID-19 and Canada's emergency relief funding (e.g., CERB), this study will provide longitudinal evidence that existing policy—e.g., EI, social assistance, and disability programmes—discriminate against sex workers. We seek to share our findings with the communities most affected by the research through a public report written in collaboration with POWER. This report will support future activism around sex workers' full inclusion in civil society, including social benefit programmes geared towards precarious and gig workers. It will be written in accessible language, without jargon, will be bilingual (English and French), and contain visualizations of our data. The report will be an open-access document hosted on POWER's website and shared by our partner organization via list-serve and social media.

### ***Do You Really Need to Bother Sex Workers to Do Useful Research?***

While our research project was undergoing rigorous ethics review, a student journalist contacted POWER with an online survey on sex workers and COVID-19. The survey did not contain a consent form, it had no guarantee of confidentiality, and the questions were invasive. Our research team and the broader activist community swiftly responded, and the survey was taken down. Responding to such inquiries is an exhausting task for sex worker organizations.

Yet, establishing data on diverse sex workers' access to the CERB, EI, disability, and welfare in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is urgent. Sex workers have the lived experience to explain the barriers they encounter when approaching state support. Their personal reflections on navigating the CERB, EI, disability, and welfare are critical to making these systems more accessible to sex workers. Sex workers can best assess how the Canadian state uses the threat of stigma, criminalization, or violence in bureaucratic processes. We have developed a low barrier, bilingual, short, remunerated online survey for 200 sex workers in the Ottawa-Gatineau area. We will also engage in one-on-one key informant interviews with the handful of activists in the capital region who distributed POWER's emergency funds. Our goal is to gather data in the least invasive way possible; critically, both members of POWER and sex workers are involved in every stage of this research, including the drafting of our research questions and questionnaire.

### ***What Role Do Sex Workers Have in Shaping the Research Project?***

Participants must have a stake in the outcomes of the research process (Bloom & Sawin, 2009). Members of our research team have experience doing sex work. Others have been involved in the sex worker rights movement for years, have experienced poverty, and have navigated judicial and state support systems. Beyond the research team, the structuring of this research project allows for regular and ongoing feedback with POWER's board.

### ***How Are You Compensating Sex Workers for Their Time?***

Trying to figure out how to get money into the hands of sex workers during the pandemic considering their exclusion from EI and the CERB sparked this research project. We see our research project as a small resource redistribution mechanism with over 65% of our total budget going towards paying sex workers directly for their time. Participants taking the questionnaire were not required to answer any questions beyond an eligibility question and providing consent. To receive an honorarium, they were directed to a secondary survey in which to input an email address. Our interview participants will also receive their honorarium in advance and may cancel, pause, or stop the interview at any time. We insist that direct payments are a better compensation for marginalized people contributing their time to our research. Much of our remaining budget is used to pay our Research Assistants—one of whom ensures our questionnaire and reports are bilingual. Our remaining funds support the publication costs of the bilingual report. The budget also ensures



that any publication outputs, digital launch events, or workshops that come out of the research are paid for by the research grant and require no additional financial inputs from POWER. And finally, the researchers did not receive financial compensation for their work.

### ***How Will You Protect Your Research Participants' Privacy?***

Research participants' privacy is key to this project (Wiles et al., 2008). Naming someone as a sex worker without their consent can have deleterious effects on their lives, and may affect their employment, tenancy, childcare or custody arrangements, and access to health care. For these reasons, our questionnaire will not collect any identifying information. Participants' email addresses (collected for the purpose of providing honoraria) are kept separate from the rest of the survey data online and destroyed upon the closure of the survey. For the qualitative interviews, we cannot guarantee anonymity. We do our best to protect our participants' privacy, but given the small research sample, there is always a risk of exposure. Emma and Ryan have sole access to the names of the key informant interviews, which are coded using gender-neutral pseudonyms. No identifying or demographic information will be requested from the interviewees, and we will not name the organizations participants volunteer with as a further step of confidentiality.

The online questionnaire seeks demographic information like age, race, gender identity, disability, and citizenship/migration status, to provide a more sophisticated and disaggregated analysis of our data. We follow an intersectional feminist approach that establishes these axes of difference as key variables in an individual's experiences and perceptions (May, 2015). We understand that collecting this type of data may inadvertently expose sex workers from more marginal groups to scrutiny, and we will exercise caution when performing data analysis along these axes of difference. Our research report will work to dispel stereotypes about sex workers while drawing attention to the intersectional oppressions sex workers navigate.

### ***Who Owns the Research Outputs?***

We are clear that academic outputs have limited value to sex working communities, and understand the inaccessibility posed by paywalls required to engage with academic texts. Our community-based report of our findings seeks to engage sex workers and sex worker advocates. The research team will draft the report, solicit input from both POWER's board and our key informant interviewees, and release a final report based on that feedback. The bilingual report will join a digital collection of POWER's previous publications and its Research Repository.

### ***How Generalizable Will Your Findings Be?***

Generalizability has been a central preoccupation throughout our research design process. Due to social distancing, curfews, stay-at-home orders, and various

levels of lockdown, we require all our research participants to have access to the internet and online banking to be remunerated for their time. We are aware that our research findings will be limited to indoor workers as well as people with a legal status that allows for them to open a Canadian bank account (citizens, permanent residents, international students, and some temporary foreign workers). This means our data set will not likely include many responses from migrant workers and sex workers who are working from street-based economies. This is a limitation of our study.

We also know that street-based sex workers, who are estimated to make up 5–20% of the sex working community, are over-represented in both the media and Canadian scholarship on sex workers (Government of Canada, 2006). We believe co-factors like poverty, being chronically unhoused, substance use disorders, and a lack of compassionate and comprehensive mental health care services for many street-based sex workers take precedence over concerns about tax law and the minutia of EI regulations. In short, indoor-based sex workers will have more to gain from the results of the collaborative report than street-based workers who have their own specific needs.

### ***How Will Your Research Be Mobilized beyond Academia?***

The community report will be written in non-academic language and will include graphics to help illustrate key findings. We will also print and mail out 50 reports to key stakeholders across the country. Upon the release of the community report in Fall 2021, our research team will collaborate with POWER's board to organize a press event to share our key findings. We anticipate other events instigated by the findings in our community report, for instance, a tax and accounting workshop explicitly geared towards independent sex workers. Our report may also include consultations between public policy makers and sex worker activists. We are working on these documents with an eye towards leveraging future actions that support sex workers' dignity, integrity, and rights to work free from surveillance, violence, and criminalization.

### **Conclusion**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of government financial aid for sex workers once again shed light on the marginalization of sex workers from social rights. Yet, the pandemic also revealed the strength, resilience, and compassion of sex worker communities, who rallied together to support those hit by pandemic restrictions. State-sanctioned violence and criminalization of sex workers combined with sensational representations in the media and news cycle has contributed to a near-constant gaze on the sex industry. We believe that it is an ethical imperative for researchers, students, and advocates, interested in sex work to ground their work in a commitment to social change. This includes developing research agendas that reflect the needs of sex workers and including

sex workers in the research design. In turn, if sex workers are not the primary beneficiaries of new knowledge about sex work, then the research is not community-based. We have demonstrated how as activist academics we have sought to be liaisons between funding institutions, the academy, and sex workers with the primary purpose to share resources whilst developing data to support urgent policy change. When the next pandemic hits, sex workers must not be forgotten. We hope this chapter will guide future allies, advocates, and academics engaged in the struggle for sex workers' rights.

## Notes

- 1 Our funding was granted by the federally funded Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. Funding is competitive and available to researchers from graduate school onwards.
- 2 We use the term “sex work” to delimit the labour performed in the sex industry, including, but not limited to, escorting, erotic masseuse, stripping, camming, and pornographic acting and modelling. Our use of sex work follows the politicization of the term between 1979–80 by sex worker activist Carol Leigh, insisting on sex work not as sexual exploitation, but as sexual labour (Mac & Smith, 2018; Grant, 2014; Leigh, 1998).
- 3 The Canadian Emergency Response Benefit was announced on March 15, 2020, and closed on December 2, 2020. It provided up to \$2,000 every 4 weeks for up to 4 months to individual's whose incomes were impacted by COVID-19.

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## Legislation

Bill C-36, Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (S.C. 2014, c. 25)