

# **SEX WORKERS AS PEER RESEARCHERS – A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

## **Authors:**

Lobo R<sup>1</sup>, Selvey L<sup>2</sup>, McCausland K<sup>1</sup>, Bates J<sup>3</sup>, Hallett J<sup>1</sup>, Donovan B<sup>4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Collaboration for Evidence, Research and Impact in Public Health, School of Public Health, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia, Australia, <sup>2</sup> School of Public Health, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, <sup>3</sup> Urban Realists Planning & Health Consultants, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, <sup>4</sup> The Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, <sup>5</sup> Sydney Sexual Health Centre, Sydney Hospital, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

## **Background:**

Best practice in sex work research advocates for a ‘nothing about us without us’ methodology. This paper reflects on the research design of the Law and Sex Worker Health (LASH) 2.0 study, shares insights about the motivations and challenges experienced by sex workers who participated in the research, and offers lessons learned for optimising the experience of peer researchers.

## **Methods:**

The LASH 2.0 study employed sex workers as peer researchers to assist in evaluating the sexual health outcomes and well-being of sex workers in Western Australia. At the conclusion of the study, seven peer researchers participated in individual semi-structured interviews to discuss their experiences as peer researchers.

## **Results:**

Giving sex workers a voice and the opportunity to facilitate change for their peers was the primary driver for participation. Some peer researchers from English speaking backgrounds experienced challenges engaging and communicating with study participants for whom English was not their first language. Others experienced role conflicts on hearing viewpoints contrary to their own beliefs. Access to support from the project team and other peer researchers was a key enabler for undertaking the peer researcher role. The majority of peer researchers were motivated to participate in the research by the possibility of future changes to sex work-related legislation and support for sex workers.

## **Conclusion:**

Overall, insider research enhances the research process, if limitations related to access, preunderstanding, role duality and political issues are managed carefully. We strongly support other advocates for sex worker-driven research and recommend that sex work research should involve sex workers in meaningful roles beyond facilitating access to their communities. Sex worker-driven research requires funding to employ sex workers continuously throughout the research process, including opportunities for co-authorship of subsequent publications. Opportunities for leadership roles and collaboration in research translation activities can increase research impact.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.