

Older women's experiences of sex work in Queensland, pre- and post-COVID-19.

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Background: Australia's ageing population extends into the sex work workforce. International studies show ageing in sex work is associated with declining earnings, and precarity affecting wellbeing. Sex workers have been at the forefront of Australia's successes in combatting the HIV epidemic and infectious diseases by encouraging safer sex behaviour, but little is known about the experiences of older sex workers within a legally regulated Australian context nor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their circumstances and work practices.

Methods: This qualitative study explores the impacts of COVID-19 on the circumstances and work practices of eight cisgender women aged 50-64 years, working in regional, urban and suburban settings in Queensland. Participants were recruited and interviewed as part of a broader study in 2019, and follow-up interviews were conducted in July-August 2020. Thematic analysis of transcripts identified how COVID-19 impacted and changed their circumstances and work practices.

Results: Older women engage in sex work in diverse ways; work styles and practices are tailored to personal circumstances by weighing considerations in four domains: earnings/finances; health and safety; policing; and stigma. COVID-19, the consequential workplace and social restrictions, and government welfare programs introduced new considerations that impacted all four domains. Not all participants accessed support mechanisms and their responses included discontinuing sex work, interrupting and resuming sex work, or continuing to work throughout. The majority who continued work modified their work practices and undertook COVID Safe work training and a Queensland Sex Industry work plan developed in partnership with Respect Inc.

Conclusion: Ongoing consultation with sex workers and sex worker organisations about the diversity of sex worker experiences is important for ensuring equitable and industry-appropriate policies, and to provide opportunities for the skills of this workforce to be recognised and strengthened to address the COVID-19 pandemic.

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