

“IT’S STIGMA THAT MAKES MY WORK DANGEROUS”: EXPERIENCES AND CONSEQUENCES OF DISCLOSURE, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION AMONG SEX WORKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Background:

Stigma is a determinant of health inequality for sex workers, however, there remains limited research concerning the experiences of stigma among Australian sex workers. This paper examines the Western Australian sex workers experiences of how the law reinforces stigma and discrimination.

Methods:

This paper draws on stigma and discrimination-specific results from open-ended survey responses (n=354) and semi-structured qualitative interviews with sex workers (n=17) collected from a larger cross-sectional mixed-methods study, the Law and Sex worker Health (LASH) 2.0 study.

Results:

Data were collected from a cross-section of sex workers, diverse in gender, ethnicity, and sex industry experience. Accounts of stigma and discrimination were commonplace. Some participants described not being taken seriously by police resulting in hesitation in reporting abuse or harassment by clients. Similarly, participants cited concealing their profession from healthcare professionals due to negative past experiences (e.g. broken confidentiality, negative treatment, manipulation for sexual services, inappropriate questioning), fear of judgement, and believing that their work was not relevant to their healthcare requirements. Consequentially, some sex workers reported actively avoiding medical treatment, or specifically seeking sex worker-friendly health clinics. Western Australia’s regulatory framework was described as permitting and excusing systemic discrimination against sex workers and reinforcing stigma.

Conclusion:

We found that sex workers minimise their experiences of stigma and discrimination by concealing their profession to friends and family as well as to some service providers. There is a critical need for policy change and support to shift society’s perception of sex work to that of a legitimate occupation to decrease sex workers’ experiences of stigma and discrimination, and improve their access to and utilisation of health care and protective services. These findings also highlight the need for targeted training programs for police and healthcare workers to reduce stigma and discrimination experienced by sex workers in these settings.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.