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Bridging Gaps: Peer Recommendations for Better Services

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Introduction

Looking across all sites in our research, it has become apparent that many of our participants have been denied—however unintentionally—what they needed, from a myriad of services, in the aftermath

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of their experience of rape, sexual assault, and/or unwanted contact. Some were told that 'that's just the way the system is', while others were more openly discriminated against because they were a sex worker. Against this backdrop, this chapter will pull together nine key recommendations for implementing and delivering sex-worker-knowledgeable support services, which we have identified in association with the sex workers from this study.

As well as discussing challenges they faced, through the surveys and interviews that have informed this book, participants (from Aotearoa New Zealand (ANZ), Nevada in the USA, and the UK) were also asked to tell us what they would change or improve—including their hopes for violence prevention, service improvements, and legal changes. These recommendations were then coded, collated, and arranged into key themes using NVivo software. We used the James Lind Priority Setting Method (Staley et al., 2020) to iteratively discuss and prioritise the recommendations in workshops and to remain aware of our own biases. Although some recommendations may be more relevant to specific organisations—such as health, NGOs, the criminal justice service, or sex-work organisations—it is best practice for all services to learn from one another. The recommendations in this chapter, therefore, are cross-service and have been grouped into the following core themes: developing trauma-informed services; working with and for sex workers; and improving safety through lobbying for decriminalisation and supporting the improvement of working conditions.

The aim of outlining these recommendations is to help counter the invalidation, stigma (Sweeney et al., 2018), and attitudinal barriers that many sex workers and survivors have faced during their journey through services, by valuing and highlighting the importance of their views; sex workers are the experts in identifying what they need. In sharing the recommendations from participants and further disseminating them to relevant services, we hope that readers and allies will use them to improve experiences and outcomes in the future.

Cross-Service Recommendations

Trauma-Informed Services

Trauma-informed working offers a culture in which a professional can meet a person to address their needs in a non-stigmatising fashion (SAMHSA, 2014). A trauma-informed professional must understand that sex work is not inherently traumatising or violent (Sanders, 2016), but that trauma can be recreated inadvertently by stigma (discussed further later in this chapter). Asking what has happened to a person and what they need, not who they are, is the first step to providing adequate support. Operationalising a trauma-informed approach involves recognising and embedding key principles of empowerment, voice and choice; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; and safety (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles also map onto the recommendations discussed in this chapter.

Recommendation 1. Allow Survivors Choice Through Processes, Including Accessing Healthcare and Through the Criminal Justice System

All survivors of sexual violence (in some shape or form) have had choice and control taken away from them and need services to assist them in a way that is appropriate to their needs. Sharing decision-making with patients is shown to improve affective-cognitive outcomes—that is, how patients feel, longer term, after their experience of healthcare (Shay & Lafata, 2015). For example, after a rape, Alice was taken to the sexual assault clinic in an ambulance, but, "I felt like, 'Why do I need an ambulance? I can just go in a car, you know' and they go, 'No, no, you have to. It's just, like, the way it is'" (Alice, ANZ, various). A first responder explaining what was going to happen to Alice, and why, could have made a difference to her feelings of control and dignity. Talia, another sex worker also raped in Aotearoa New Zealand, explains why this kind of approach is important: "I wanted to drive myself because, I don't know, I just wanted to have some control still" (Talia, ANZ, brothel).

This choice, where possible, should also extend to the criminal justice system. For instance, survivors should be allowed to choose the gender of the police officer handling their report following a crime. For example, Sheryl was left crying in the police station for over an hour by a front-desk policeman before being referred to a female sexual assault specialist: "… the support that I got, which is probably my main support, was the detective that was working on my case, to be honest. She was lovely. She went up and over and beyond to help me" (Sheryl, ANZ, independent). Talia similarly argued for specialist police: "… the detectives that are in the Adult Sexual Harm thing. They were just so onto it the whole way through, and it's just this lack of education with the new guys in the front of the building [police at the front desk of the police station]" (Talia, ANZ, brothel). Sex workers who experience violence should be able to report to a specialist detective in sexual assault and have a consistent, trained, police liaison contact, and victims should be provided with clear victim-support information about every step of the process.

Recommendation 2. Support Sex Workers to Be Empowered, and Build Trust Through Developing Relationships

Through discussion with participants, we became aware of a case where an 11-year sentence was handed to a man who secretly filmed his encounters with 14 sex workers. A positive news article about the conviction, in the *New Zealand Herald*, quoted one of the sex workers involved, whose statement in court read, "I feel empowered by reporting. … I want him to learn from this that you respect women the same way you respect men …" (Osborne, 2022). Justice for our participants has been a rare occurrence, particularly in the USA, and media reporting of sex work is usually highly problematic in criminalised and partially criminalised settings. Therefore, sex-worker-led organisations feel that positive reporting of those cases where sex workers have achieved justice—including when this has involved the support of sex-worker-led organisations—might help improve trust and confidence for other sex workers in the future.

Trauma-informed services can help to reduce stigma and ensure dignified, safe access for sex workers, through empowerment and trust. This is particularly important for mental health services, where a therapeutic alliance for positive outcomes cannot be achieved in the face of stigma and preconceived views. As one practitioner explained to us:

> Yeah, there's a lot of support required in terms of trust-building for sex workers because it's not always easy to access sex-working-knowledgeable practitioners in our field. So, the kind of support that I provide, in developing a relationship with the people I'm doing therapy with, looks quite different to what I would usually do with folks … I'm sex-worker friendly and I'm going to be there to support them rather than save them or change them or try and move them into different industries. (Practitioner, ANZ)

Working with and for Sex Workers

To address the trauma-informed principles of peer support, collaboration, and mutuality, services must work with and for sex workers—that is, engage in collaboration in order to be culturally competent and sex-worker-informed.

Recommendation 3. Mainstream Services Should Partner with Sex Workers and Sex-Work-Specialist Organisations

In this study, 39% of survey respondents who had experienced unwanted contact told another sex worker about what had happened to them, while 12% told a sex-worker organisation (see Chapter 5). As the first point of contact, then, such peer support can provide a crucial link to the trusted services that a sex worker needs. Where convictions and good health outcomes were achieved for participants, there was usually a sex-worker-led organisation advocating alongside and navigating barriers with them through difficult systems. Mainstream services can also partner with specialist, user-led organisations, to better support clients who have not traditionally accessed their services. For example, in San Francisco, the

St James Infirmary—the first occupational safety and health clinic for sex workers, run by sex workers, in the USA—provides sex-worker-led medical and social health services for sex workers of all genders and their families.

One of the critical ways that police officers and their services can become more trusted by sex workers is to work with sex-worker-led organisations. As one therapist explained, "… listening to sex workers and sex worker organisations is going to empower those systems to provide a much, much better service and one that's more reflective of the rights of sex workers" (Practitioner, ANZ). However, sex-worker-led organisations are rarely adequately funded (see Grenfell et al., 2016), and so funding is an area in which public bodies, commissioners, and communities can powerfully ally with sex workers and specialist organisations.

Recommendation 4. Services Can and Should Engage Sex Workers in Delivering Education Programmes

Many of our sex-worker respondents showed expert knowledge of the different elements of consent, which could be of great value to non-sex-working populations for staying safe in relationships and perhaps in reducing sexual violence. Sex workers like these participants could take a leading role in educational campaigns and training, to improve public understanding of these issues, which, in turn, could help to prevent sexual violence, harassment, and unwanted contact in the future. As Linda and Emily explain:

> It's all about awareness, isn't it, really? You know, like people never used to wear a seatbelt until it was aware. People never knew not to smoke on buses until it was aware. It's about making things aware to people and then maybe things will change. (Linda, UK, street-based)
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> They just need people like us ... [to] get in the police station and talk to these officers. … they need those specially trained just for sexual assaults and working women, dedicated to them … give them a whole list of things to do and what not to say as well, because when they talk they don't realise how offensive they are. (Emily, UK, various)

Educational training in Aotearoa New Zealand is relatively common and made possible given that sex work is decriminalised. However, there is a limited ability for this in the UK and practically none in the USA outside of the Nevada brothels.

Recommendation 5. Services Should Understand the Specific Requirements of Sex Workers, and How These Differ from Other Survivors

It is the responsibility of every practitioner who is in a position of power and privilege in working with survivors and sex workers, particularly after rape or sexual assault, to be knowledgeable and culturally competent in providing an equal service to marginalised communities and in acting with empathy for the person in front of them. Each person's unique experience matters and sex workers typically face more barriers than do other patients (Lazarus et al., 2012). The value of health allies working with sex-worker-led organisations to ensure access to services cannot be underestimated. As we were able to interview practitioners who were very experienced in working with the sex-work community, it became clear that being 'sex-worker friendly' was only the start, and that much more could be done by practitioners to enhance their position of understanding. One practitioner explained:

> … [being] sex-worker knowledgeable goes beyond that and is fully allied with the sex worker industry and has understanding around what's actually happening for them, in depth. So, I would say, in my time working there, I've moved from being sex-worker friendly to sex—worker knowledgeable. (Practitioner, ANZ)

Sex-worker-led organisations, crucially, do not give up on sex workers in difficult situations and they have a non-judgemental approach. With many other services rationing appointments, due to tight parameters over who their service users should be, and limiting the length of time that someone can access their services, having the right attitude is crucial. Several sex-worker-led organisations may provide support for sex workers to transition to legalised sex work (for example, in brothels) and offer

educational and career training opportunities for sex workers who want to pursue other careers, but taking up these opportunities is not a prerequisite for engaging with their services. Ensuring consistency across services in terms of how sex workers are responded to, in line with being 'sex-worker knowledgeable', may require training of professionals:

> And I think, you know, police departments get all this training and all these other different topics. There should be some training about sex work and about how to deal with vulnerable populations. And I think there should be some kind of … some kind of competency training for how to deal with these situations. (Chrissie, USA, various)

Improving Safety: Decriminalisation and Improved Working Conditions

To address the trauma-informed principle of safety, services and practitioners should support a change in legislation for the decriminalisation of sex work, and, in turn, support the process of improving and standardising of working conditions for sex workers that comes with this legislative change.

> Just because you think what I do is wrong, doesn't make my safety and life worth less. And that's really what it comes down to: just because you don't agree with it, doesn't mean I shouldn't have a safe place to work, the same as anybody else. (Abbey, USA, independent)

Recommendation 6. Sex-Worker Organisations Should Continue to Educate and Help Lobby for Changes and Improvements in Law to Move to Full Decriminalisation

Sex-worker organisations have a powerful voice through which to lobby for changes and improvements in laws and working conditions. These should include allowing sex workers to work together (in the UK and USA) for greater safety, as recommended by sex workers in all of the sites (see Chapter 3). This is already legal in Aotearoa New Zealand and

Nevada brothels. One Nevada brothel worker also explained how the regulated environment helped her feel respected as a sex worker:

> I feel like a lot more people have respect for it, and it's not as looked down upon. … You're working with staff that are house-keepers and chefs, and security and cashiers — which I consider normal jobs — and they're working all with us. And they treat us all with the same respect. We're treated just as everybody else. (Jessica, USA, various)

Bella (originally from the USA but who had worked in ANZ, independent) explained that "working under decrim, I felt safe for the first time in my life. A game changer, because now I can tell on you and you can't threaten me". Not only was this seen as a way of improving feelings of safety, but also a way to empower sex workers: "to decriminalise sex work would then put more power in the women's hands" (Abigail, USA, Nevada legal brothel).

Recommendation 7. Services and Organisations Should Support the Consistent Application of Regulation

This research has demonstrated, to a large extent, that the decriminalisation of sex work in ANZ and, in more limited ways, the legalisation of sex work in Nevada helps sex workers in their negotiation for health and safety. However, consistency of regulation could improve this situation even further. One important recommendation for regulated establishments in ANZ and Nevada is for sex-worker-led organisations to work closely with, or even form part of, inspection regulatory teams—for example, WorkSpace New Zealand. Several sex-worker participants told us that standards in different establishments varied considerably and that this has a direct relationship to safety:

> So, basically, if a woman was getting assaulted in her room during a party, what we were always told to do was, the whole house is going to rush in there and gang up on this one guy. And a lot of brothels are like that, because the owners are cheap. They don't want to hire extra staff to be security guards … I think if clients don't see those security guards walking

> around, they're going to think 'Maybe I can get away with a little bit more', right … (Roxanne, USA, Nevada legal brothel)

Improving safety, again, goes hand-in-hand with sex-worker empowerment, through providing information on their rights. Although standards are generally higher in ANZ than are typical elsewhere, there are still improvements to be made in different brothels, as Jane explained: "The previous place … didn't really take it upon themselves to give the ladies as much information as they could" (Jane, ANZ, brothel). Importantly, improving safety and rights knowledge does not have to be costly: "We do have the [Prostitution] Reform Act printed out where we work, so we can just, like, see it and have a good read, which is awesome" (Chanelle, ANZ, various).

There are also many practical steps that can be taken by organisations. For instance, establishments should have alarms regularly tested, and ensure new sex workers understand how to use the security system: "We do have panic buttons in every room that we can activate discreetly in case we need [to]" (Dace, USA, Nevada legal brothel). In addition, organisations can support sex workers in sharing information with one another. In the UK, National Ugly Mugs provides a regularly updated blacklist that sex workers and their organisations can use free of charge. This is invaluable, particularly in criminalised and partially criminalised settings, as one sex worker explained: "But I think the only safety issue we have is being able to communicate with each other and being able to share information with each other on platforms … We'll use Ugly Mugs to record" (Queen, UK, various). In ANZ and Nevada, there are several 'bad date' lists, and many brothels keep their own lists, but these are not always shared, allowing perpetrators to move around establishments.

Recommendation 8. Ensure Better Welfare and Health Support for Sex Workers

Several of our respondents advocated for greater welfare and health support for sex workers. Services working with sex workers to remove barriers to equity were found to be particularly effective in improving health outcomes, in a systematic review of healthcare interventions

for sex workers (Johnson et al., 2023). Trauma-informed services can help to reduce stigma and ensure dignified, safe access for sex workers, across physical, sexual, and mental health services, where a therapeutic alliance for positive outcomes cannot be otherwise achieved in the face of stigma and preconceived views. One independent sex worker in the USA reflected:

> … if you can give out free condoms at schools, why can't you do it at a sex club? You could provide resources like that very easily. You could provide more testing; you could provide free testing … Even just set up a sex workers' fund for day care. (Abbey, USA, independent)

Basic health and safety provisions can assist sex workers in ways that are expected in other workplaces:

> So, it's not just that he disregarded my safety and my boundaries and the rules I set in that room. It's that he disregarded a legal regulation of the industry I work in. So, it would be the same [as] if you didn't wear a hard hat at a construction site ... (Talia, ANZ, brothel)

To provide an example of good practice, NZPC, Aotearoa New Zealand Sex Workers' Collective, a sex-worker-led organisation, receives core funding from the Ministry of Health, and they are contracted to provide advocacy, as well as health promotion in sexual and reproductive health. This is an evidence-based model; peer outreach has, elsewhere, been shown to lead to sex workers being more likely to access clinics at an earlier point in a crisis (Krishnamurthy et al., 2016).

Recommendation 9. Challenge and Dismantle the Stigma Against Sex Work and Sex Workers

> End the stigma around it, because that's just like rape culture and everything else — you've got to end the stigma around it in order to fix anything. (Roxanne, USA, Nevada legal brothel)

Many of these recommendations may seem surprisingly minor to people who are not sex workers, victim-survivors of violence, or both. At the heart of these recommendations, though, is the need to address the stigma of sex workers in mainstream services and communities. The stigma against sex workers—particularly as described by participants in criminalised and partially criminalised sites—can be entrenched, even in the most necessary of crisis services, and has produced perverse and damaging results. The externally facing stances of organisations can be incredibly important with regard to how accessible they appear to sex workers. As one third-sector advocate told us, if an organisation has a position suggesting that sex work equates with sexual violence, "that's definitely a huge barrier in terms of accessing, like, sexual violence support, I think" (Practitioner, UK).

Stigma entrenched in policy is also (even when unintentional) a barrier to services for sex workers. In tackling institutional barriers, co-producing with and involving sex workers in training, conducting audits, and working as expert partners is a powerful approach based in relationship, which can have invaluable benefits for mainstream organisations. Equality Impact Assessments are a statutory requirement in the UK, designed to remove barriers to publicly funded services; but best practice can go further by including sex workers as a minority group in these activities. Training and co-production with and by sex workers can help to remove stigma and barriers to equity (Bowen & Bungay, 2016).

Through this project, we have been heartened and impressed by the visible impact of best practices on the attitudes, safety, and justice for sex workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. This approach has been hard-won and has been demonstrated as working after 20 years of decriminalisation, although we recognise there is still more to do, even there. ANZ has shown that if there are improvements in services for sex workers, who experience persistent stigma and discrimination (a particularly crucial point in criminalised jurisdictions), positive changes for other minoritised groups and most service users will likely be made.

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