

**The experiences of female  
sex workers with state  
institutions in relation to  
motherhood.**

**PRESENTATION**  
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# Introduction

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The collaborative project with the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (**SWEAT**) was facilitated by the **UCT Knowledge Co-op**.

In South Africa, the buying and selling of sex is criminalized.

- Female sex workers' lives in South Africa are characterized by a constant struggle, where stigma and unequal power relations are predominant (Richter, 2013).
- These unequal power relations leave female sex workers in extremely vulnerable positions, specifically, when it comes to the police, health care systems, other state institutions and the general public. (Blankenship et al. 2010)

Main purpose:

- To explore the experiences of sex workers with these state institutions in relation to issues around motherhood, sexual violence and police abuse.
- Explore their own understandings on their experiences and the challenges they face in their every day lives.

# Literature review

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- The literature pays a lot more attention to the relationship between sex work and HIV/AIDS and/or STI related matters, overlooking the actual experiences and challenges of sex workers when it comes to issues around motherhood, sexual violence and police abuse.

## Three main themes:

- Sex work and stigma -Shame and victimhood are predominant in both official and unofficial discourses that depict the sex work industry.
- Sexual violence (i.e. rape) and police abuse- violence is a predominant factor in their lives, from clients, managers, the general public and the police.
- Public health services and sex work- judgmental and stigmatized treatment from medical health providers.

# Methodological framework

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## **Feminist qualitative analytical study**

- Problematizes knowledges about oppressive situations.
- Acknowledge the existence of power relations, analysing their impact in the individual.
- Lives characterized by stigma and imbalanced power relations. Feminist qualitative research is needed to problematize these, specifically, with regards to state institutions.

## **Why qualitative research?**

As the objective of the study is to explore these women's experiences, a qualitative approach was more suitable.

- A more detailed and in-depth understanding of what each participant experienced.
- This method gave me space to deal with unexplored discourses around sex work and challenges they face in relation to state representatives, along with the violence they encounter in their day-to-day lives.

## **Data collection/Sample**

- Four in depth interviews.
- Semi-structured one-to-one interviews because special attention was to be given to the individuals' responses through observation and direct analysis.
- A focus group with six women.
- Group of female sex workers who are members of the group "mothers to future" at SWEAT.

## Findings and data analysis

- Thematic analysis.

### Sexual violence and sex work (i.e. rape)

- A third to half of all sex workers experienced violence in their workplaces in the last year.
- Sex work is considered a crime, it is therefore assumed that they deserve to suffer from violence.
- The majority of sex workers do not report rape due to their reluctance to face the police- this therefore has consequences on their medical assistance.
- *“You know, we as sex workers provide sexual services to men that we don’t know. We just follow our instincts. But if I am raped, then other people think, how can a prostitute be raped if she has sex with strangers all the time. They ask for it”* (Participant four, 2014).
- Abuse towards the children of sex workers also remains unreported.

## **Sex work and police abuse**

- About 70% of sex workers have been abused by the police
- They routinely beat them, pepper spray them and then sexually assault them.
- Sex workers, who are already vulnerable amongst clients and managers, become even more vulnerable with this police treatment.
- The abuse that sex workers suffer from the police is directly related to their criminalized status in South Africa.
- These cases end up unreported, while sex workers continue being abused and assaulted.
- Such creates conditions within which police corruption and abuses are not only possible, but almost inevitable
- This in turn often prevents sex workers from accessing services such as health care, social and legal services

## **Stigma by association and the children of sex workers**

- This is definitely one of the biggest concerns of sex workers who are mothers, as most of them claim that their biggest reason to enter the sex work industry is to be able to provide an education and a future for their children.
- Stigma by association- the stigmatization of individuals who are related to a stigmatized person/group
- While the bulk of studies focus on those who suffer stigma directly, the stigmatization of those who are closely associated with them is overlooked
- Their children are often ostracized and stigmatized by other children, in school and in the community due to the work of their mothers.
- Their social interaction is limited, threatening their education and acquisition of health care provision in specific circumstance.

## **Sex work and health care**

- Contrariwise to what the literature argues, the participant of the study did not show an urgent concern towards medical provision.
- Not all health care providers are judgemental towards sex workers.
- Some prefer to not disclose their occupation for the fear of being stigmatized
- SWEAT provides both psychological and physical (i.e. medical) care to sex workers, which can contribute in the lack of urgency
- That is, sex workers who are not enrolled with SWEAT might have different experiences with health care provision, than those who are enrolled.

## **Sex work, alcohol and drugs (i.e. Foetal alcohol syndrome)**

- When pregnant, a number of women who work in the sex work industry might consume alcohol and drugs either occasionally or regularly.
- Sex workers may be at an increased risk of exposure to these substances.
- Consequences on their children such as: foetal alcohol syndrome
- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome is a birth defect caused by heavy alcohol consumption (usually in a binge pattern) during pregnancy.
- This should be a cause of concern to programme planners and policy makers.

## **Motherhood and sex work**

- One of the main reasons why these women entered the sex work industry was the fact that they were mothers
- The challenges of being a sex worker and a mother simultaneously.
- Providing for their children-single mothers.
- The safety of their children.
- They would rather spend more time with their children, especially while they were growing up.
- They request better support for their children.

## **Conclusion and reflexivity**

- The project advocates for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa.
- The criminalization of sex work in South Africa only furthers the marginalization and stigmatization that characterizes the life of individuals who work in the sex work industry
- The project highlights for further research in this area of study.
- As long as sex workers are considered criminals, their ability to negotiate basic human rights will always be compromised.
- The probability of violence and abuse (from the police and other third parties) will be a characteristic of their day-to-day lives, often remaining unreported due to the lack of assistance from state institutions