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Womxn, Work and Home

**Experiences of Homelessness for
Forest Lawn Survival Sex Workers**

Sean Bristowe (they/them)
Masters of Science Student
Department of Community Health Sciences and Disability

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Learning Objectives & Outline

- Why Womxn and the difference between sex work and trafficking
- Describe my thesis project with survival sex workers in Forest Lawn, Calgary, Alberta
- What does home mean for Womxn who work in the survival sex industry?
- The intersections of being trans, homeless and a sex worker
- Conclusions and implications



Why Womxn?

- Womxn used to include cis-and-trans women and women of colour
 - Cisgender women identify with the gender they were assigned at birth, where as transgender women do not
 - Racialized experiences of womxnhood differ greatly
 - Womxn includes intersectional approach
 - “x” allows for inclusion of non-binary and gender nonconforming individuals
 - Defined as a spectrum of gender identities that are not exclusively feminine or masculine
- Why is this important?
 - Trans-women experience high rates of violence in the sex industry
 - They are sometimes (un)intentionally excluded from women’s shelters and programs due to transphobia and transmisogyny
 - They are an important sub-population of the sex industry that require further inclusion in research

Language Matters

- Sex work and the sex industry includes buyers (clients) and the adults who exchange sexual services for money or other goods
 - Escorts
 - Exotic dancers
 - Pornography actors
 - Erotic masseurs
 - Survival sex work
- Sex trafficking is human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation
 - Not all sex workers are trafficked or exploited

(Peers Victoria, 2019; Stella Montreal, 2013)



Situated Knowledge: Why Did I Choose this Work?

- Prior to designing thesis project, I had over 3 years of experience working with people who use drugs (PWUD) and street-affected people (homeless)
 - Volunteered and worked with SHIFT – HIV Community Link support service for sex workers in Calgary
 - Developed and maintained stakeholder and community relationships
- Entry into Masters with interest in observing and describing the lived realities of sex workers in Forest Lawn, Calgary
 - Critical ethnographic research design with sex worker involvement
 - Partnered with SHIFT and attended outreach walks in evenings

Why Survival Sex Workers in Forest Lawn

- Survival sex workers experiences in Canada highly researched
 - Benoit et al. and Shannon et al. describe health and social outcomes for survival sex workers across several Canadian cities (including Calgary)
 - But no specific inclusion of Forest Lawn “stroll”
- Survival sex work research includes cis-and-trans women
 - But few studies include the experiences and inclusion criteria of gender diverse individuals (non-binary, gender nonconforming)

Research Design

- Critical ethnography focusing on engagement with community of survival sex workers in Forest Lawn
 - Establish relationships prior to forming questions and entering setting
 - Create research protocol and questions in line with Critical Theory
- Data collection and recruitment over 5 month period from October to March during outreach walks on Forest Lawn stroll
- Data includes 8 formal interviews, notes on interactions with sex workers and observations from outreach walks
 - 5 gender diverse and current sex workers
 - 3 provider interviews

The Setting

- Forest Lawn SE is an under-served neighbourhood in Calgary, AB
 - Historically lower SES
 - Limited access to health and social services
- High rates of opiate overdose, drug use and historic presence of sex industry
 - "the stroll" spans ~12 blocks & is situated in the middle of a residential neighbourhood





**“Why should we take
care of you, you’re just a
street person.”**

- Kelly

A photograph of a church at night. The church has a steeple and a sign that says "Eastside Outreach". The ground is covered in snow. In the foreground, there is a sign that reads "LIFE... THE TIME GOD GIVES YOU TO DETERMINE HOW YOU SPEND ETERNITY! SUNDAY SERVICE 11:00 AM". A car is parked on the street, covered in snow. A large evergreen tree is in the middle ground.

What Does Home Mean for Womxn Who Work in the Survival Sex Industry?

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- Safety
 - (In)security
 - Survival
 - Choice

Themes and Findings

Safety

- Fleeing violence on the stroll by retreating home
- Keeping home separate from work to ensure safety – do not invite clients home with you

(In)security

- Working in the survival sex industry so they can afford a home means that home can be both an insecure and secure experience as they are continuously at risk of homelessness

Themes and Findings

Survival

- Engagement in sex work is an act of surviving systemic and structural violence
- Sex work meets basic needs, which includes housing

Choice

- Home is on their terms: where they say, with whom, when they want
- Choices between shelters, sleeping rough, cars, couch surfing



Experiences of Homelessness as a Trans Sex Worker

- Trans womxn experience exorbitant amounts of structural violence in the form of:
 - School and/or work place harassment
 - Discrimination in accessing employment, housing, health care
 - Poor economic conditions and increased likelihood of homelessness
 - Barriers to accessing gender-affirming health care
 - Decreased life expectancy from anti-trans violence and suicide
- Trans sex workers experience significantly higher rates of:
 - Violence from clients (more than cisgender sex workers)
 - Stigma and increased likelihood of blood-borne infectious diseases

(Lyons et al., 2016 & 2017; Pyne, 2011)



Sherry's Experience:

- “So I go to the [shelter] and they say I have to stay with the guys and [there’s] no guarantee of my safety, I go to the [other shelter] and they say I gotta stay with the guys, no guarantee of my safety. ... whatever happens, happens. So I’m stuck living in my van.”
- “But, but no usually if I’m with a guy and it turns bad and I get hurt and that, usually I just, if I’m hurt too bad then I just go home.”
- “She found me a place to live, she got my back on [social assistance]. Yeah like, like I would probably be dead if it wasn't for her.”
- “I do what I do so that I can continue to live, like you know because I, I'm on disability and I don't get very much money.”

Policy Implications and Community Capacity Building

- There should be increased access to health and social services in Forest Lawn
 - Building emergency shelters that include trans positive policies
 - Late night emergency services to help womxn experiencing violence
- Creating more community spaces and programs that are sex work and trans positive
 - Currently in Forest Lawn the only service designed for sex workers is the HER Victory Outreach program
 - Focusing on exit based strategies and religious values
 - Safeworks and SHIFT are the only services currently visiting Forest Lawn that directly benefit sex workers
 - SHIFT has weekly outreach walks and Safeworks visits nightly in their van

Conclusions

- Forest Lawn, the “stroll” and the surrounding community are an important and often unaccounted part of Calgary’s history
 - Homelessness, extreme poverty and violence exist outside of Calgary’s downtown core
 - Sex workers’ experiences are unique and should be considered when developing strategies to address housing and access to services
- Trans and gender diverse folks thrive and survive in Calgary’s sex worker community
 - They should ALWAYS be considered when developing housing strategies, increasing access to services like supervised consumption and creating community spaces



“I've never been able to walk around holding my head up high, ... but if I had their respect, the people, I could.”

-Sherry



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Thank you for attending!

For more information or should you wish to contact me after the conference, I would be happy to chat.

Sean Bristowe

meagan.Bristowe@ucalgary.ca

twitter: @meagatronn