

# The impact of sex work on women's personal romantic relationships and the mental separation of their work and personal lives: A mixed-methods study.

Clare Bellhouse<sup>1, 2, §</sup>, Susan Crebbin<sup>2,3</sup>, Christopher K Fairley<sup>1,4</sup>, Jade E Bilardi<sup>1,4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Alfred Health, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. <sup>2</sup>School of Health Science and Psychology, Federation University, Ballarat, Victoria, Australia <sup>3</sup>Nexus Primary Health, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia <sup>4</sup>Central Clinical School, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, <sup>5</sup>Melbourne School of Global and Population Health, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

## Background:

Very limited research has been undertaken on sex workers' personal romantic relationships and the impact the nature of their work has on their relationships. The aim of this study was to explore the impact sex work has on women's personal romantic relationships and the use of mental separation as a coping mechanism to balance the two aspects of their lives.



## Methods:

Fifty-five women working in the indoor sex industry in Melbourne, Australia, were recruited to complete a self-report questionnaire about various aspects of their work, including the impact of sex work on their personal relationships. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and included both closed and open-ended questions. A further six women were interviewed to 'member check' the accuracy of the questionnaire findings.

## Results:

Most women (78%) reported that overall, sex work affected their personal romantic relationships in predominantly negative ways, mainly relating to issues stemming from lying, trust, guilt and jealousy. A small number of women reported positive impacts from sex work including improved sexual self-esteem and confidence. Just under half of women were in a relationship at the time of the study and of these, 51% reported their partner was aware of the nature of their work. Seventy-seven percent of single women chose to remain single due to the nature of their work. Many women used mental separation as a coping mechanism to manage the tensions between sex work and their personal relationships. Member checking validated the accuracy of the questionnaire data.

## Conclusion:

Further research is needed to explore, on a larger and broader scale, the impact of sex work on women's personal romantic relationships. The findings of this study have implications for intervention programs aimed at assisting sex workers to manage the tensions between their work and personal lives and to target the stigma associated with sex work.

## QUOTES

### Negative Impacts

- Most males couldn't or wouldn't cope with the situation. The sex industry is still overly stigmatised (Participant 25).
- My relationship before this, the guy found it very hard to deal with. Would call while at work so I wouldn't do intros (sic), tried to accept but was hard, caused many fights. He didn't see it as just a job (Participant 12).
- Even if your partner said he was ok with it, I don't think he would be or should be, you would always be thinking in the back of your head 'why he is ok with it?' (Participant 54).
- It affects trust, it affects how you see and feel about sex, it affects your whole personality/life if you let it (Participant 37).

### Mental Separation as a Coping Mechanism

- If problems occur at work, it may be hard to hide them in your personal life. It's hard to always keep the lie up. It's difficult to answer the question, 'how was your day' (Participant 6).
- I have 2 personas who (sic) live comfortably side by side (Participant 23).
- Sometimes making love feels like being with a client (Participant 11).
- I find it isolating and stressful to not be able to discuss work at home or with friends (Participant 44).

### Positive Impacts

- We are closer because I need to be more honest about my sexual energy and needs. It has also proven he is not a possessive or sexist man which is important to me. And I'm more assertive and confident sexually (Participant 8).
- I met my current partner through work, he was a client. That in some ways has made it easier to negotiate being a sex worker because he knows what I do (Participant 40).

## contact - more info

Clare Bellhouse  
Research Assistant

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Alfred Health  
580 Swanston St, Carlton  
Email: cbellhouse@mshc.org.au

