



REVIEWING THE OCCUPATIONAL RISKS OF SEX WORKERS IN COMPARISON TO OTHER 'RISKY' PROFESSIONS. JULY 2017

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The Use of Sex Worker Homicide Statistics in Campaigning

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Sex workers across the world are extremely vulnerable to all forms of violence, including homicide. Studies estimate that sex workers have a much greater risk of being murdered compared to the general population and compared to any other job (Potterat et al 2004).

Abolitionist use of homicide statistics

Statistics on homicide in sex work are increasingly being used to advocate for the criminalization of clients as part of feminist abolitionist campaigns. For example, in an article on Feminist Current, activist Penny White writes about the murder rates of sex working women in different countries across the world and uses these to argue for and against the success of particular legal models (White 2015). The UK based campaigning group Nordic Model Now also presents murder statistics from various countries and in justifying its call for the introduction of laws criminalizing clients, like those in Sweden, maintains that 'the Swedish murder statistics provide proof that this approach works. Dead bodies don't lie.'¹

White's article notes that since Sweden, in 1999, criminalized the purchase of sex (the so-called Nordic model) that "not a single prostituted woman has been murdered by a john". That assertion appears correct as,

¹ See <https://nordicmodelnow.org/facts-about-prostitution/fact-prostitution-is-inherently-violent/>

² <https://www.thelocal.se/20130717/49120>

³ White's primary data source appears to be the website www.sexindustry-kills.de. This website lists sex worker homicides across the world but fails to contextualise any of them as being work related or not.

to our knowledge, there has been one incident of a murdered sex worker in Sweden, Petite Jasmine, who was murdered by her ex-partner during a supervised custody visit to see her son².

The lack of occupational sex worker homicide in Sweden is contrasted by abolitionist activists to the situation in other countries including New Zealand, which decriminalized sex work in 2003 (White 2015).

According to White seven women have been murdered in New Zealand since 2003 who were involved in sex work. What White, and others, fail to do, however, is contextualise these homicides based on the circumstances of the murder³. We would argue that the issues presented by a sex worker killed in the course of working, by a client or someone pretending to be a client, are different from the issues presented by a sex worker killed in non-work related circumstances like domestic violence⁴. We classify a sex worker homicide as work-related if the sex worker was killed by a client, killed in a sex working workplace or last seen alive in a known sex work area. According to our criteria, there have been four work-related sex worker homicides in New Zealand since decriminalisation. The other three victims were killed by current or former partners/boyfriends.

Why using homicide statistics in this way is flawed

There is no disputing that there are clear differences in the number of sex worker homicides across different jurisdictions even taking account of the difficulties in gathering full and accurate information on sex worker homicide. That does not mean, however, that these raw numbers can be used in isolation, to draw causal links between different legal models and homicide risk. To draw any effective comparison on the prevalence of sex worker murders across the world it would be necessary to calculate, as far as possible, the homicide mortality

⁴ It is important to acknowledge that sex work stigma may still be a factor in domestic violence related murders, including the murder of Swedish sex worker, Petite Jasmine. This level of knowledge on motive is, however, extremely difficult to obtain without access to case files.



rate for sex workers in these different countries. This would require an estimate (as robust as possible) of the total number of sex workers working in the country as well as an accurate record of all sex worker murders. Comparing the raw number of murders across vastly different countries is meaningless.

Furthermore, to be able to draw any causal link between legal models and the murder rate of sex workers it would also be essential to compare murder rates both prior to, and after, legal change to draw any firm conclusion that the change was in some way causally linked to the law reform. If, for example, it turns out that sex workers were not being murdered in Sweden prior to the criminalization of clients then the claim that this legal change has stopped the murder of sex workers is no longer evident. Also, if research shows that the murder rate for sex workers in New Zealand was higher prior to decriminalisation than it has been in the years since the law change then that may suggest that decriminalisation was, at least partly, responsible for this change. Without these detailed comparisons no firm conclusions can be drawn.

The murder rates of sex workers also have to be set against the context of the general homicide trends in any particular country. If there are differences in the rate at which sex workers are murdered this could be reflective of wider trends in murder across different countries. For example, in a comparative piece of research on homicide rates across Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands key differences were identified with the researchers concluding that it was 'hard to find any common pattern' in the homicide trends of these three countries (Ganpat, Granath, Hagstedt and Kivivuori 2011: 21). It was noted, for example, that the percentage of murders committed in outdoor places in the Netherlands (38%) was much higher than in Sweden (19%) and Finland (16%) (Ibid: 47). The Netherlands was also shown to have a 30 times higher annual homicide rate than Sweden (Ibid: 40) and this difference was made up 'entirely by crimes connected to street violence' (Ibid: 48). We cannot know without sophisticated comparator studies whether

differences in the general trends around homicide, like those discussed above, would necessarily impact on the rate at which sex workers were murdered but it is certainly a possibility.

Finally, the assertions made by abolitionist campaign groups like Nordic Model Now that sex worker homicides do not take place when clients are criminalized is easily challenged by looking at countries like France and Canada, which have significantly bigger sex industries than Sweden and much higher rates of sex worker homicide. Since Canada criminalized clients in November 2014, at least two sex workers have been murdered by clients⁵ and since April 2016 when the same laws were introduced in France at least one sex worker⁶ has been killed.

Conclusion

Without more robust and detailed studies on sex worker homicide across jurisdictions it is impossible to draw any clear causal links between legal situations and sex worker homicide. That does not mean that sex worker homicide should be ignored in campaigning efforts. Individual case studies of sex worker homicide can be used to highlight the dangers inherent in existing laws and policy approaches to sex work. Caution must be exercised, however, in using the existing statistics on sex worker homicide to make blanket assertions about the success or failure of different sex work laws.

References

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⁵ Tammy Le and Annie Li

⁶ Niurkeli Carguaitongo