

# Prostitution Stigma and its Effect on the Working Conditions, Personal Lives and Health of Sex Workers



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**PEER HEALTH ADVOCATE PROGRAM  
JULY 19, 2018**

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VICTORIA, BC**



**University  
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Canadian Institute  
for Substance  
Use Research

Institut canadien  
de recherche sur  
l'usage de substances

# Opening Questions



- What is stigma and how does it operate in society?
- Is prostitution stigma a major determinant of health?
- How do sex workers manage stigma?
- What can we do in our own community to reduce stigma for sex workers?

# How stigma operates in everyday life

(Link & Phelan, 2014)

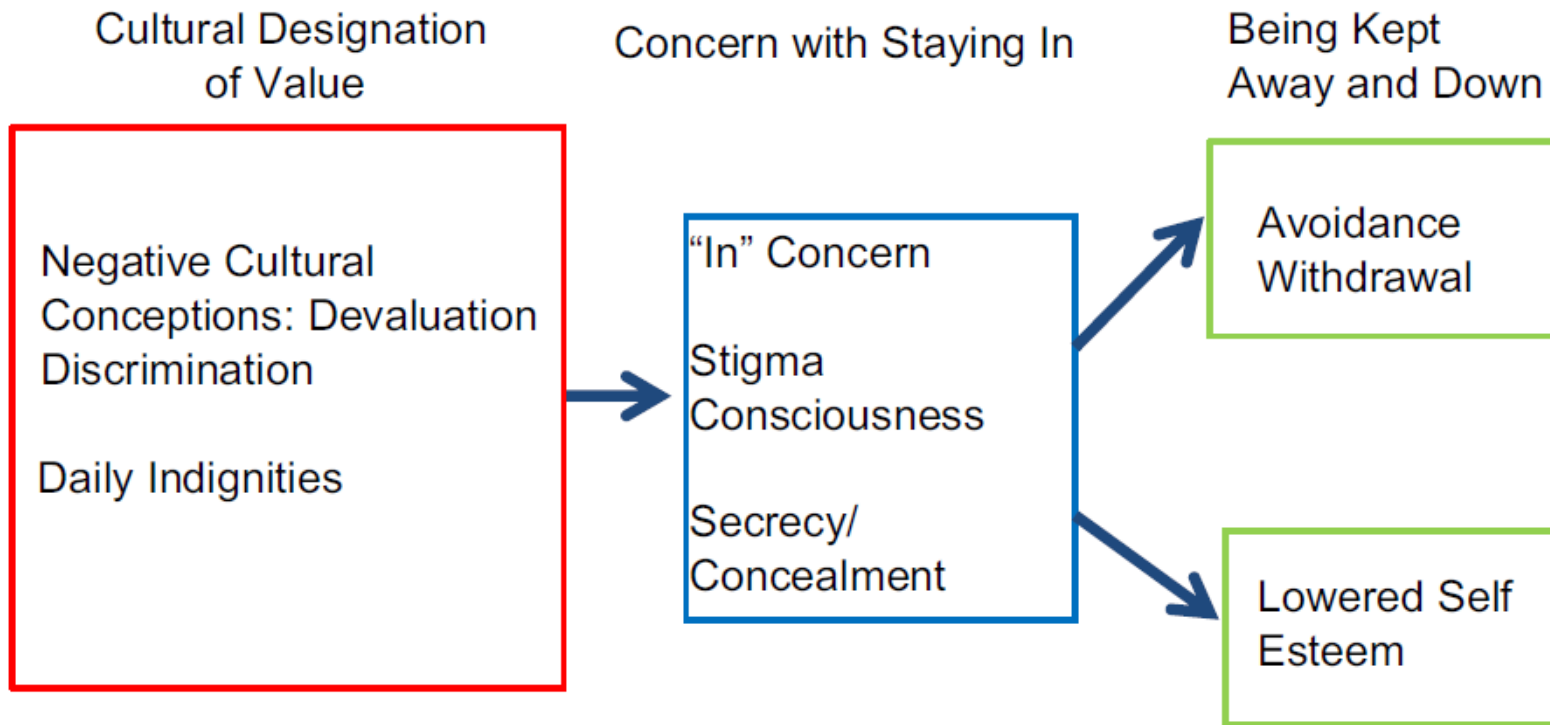


Fig. 1. The stigma-power process – concepts and operationalizations.

# Sources of stigma

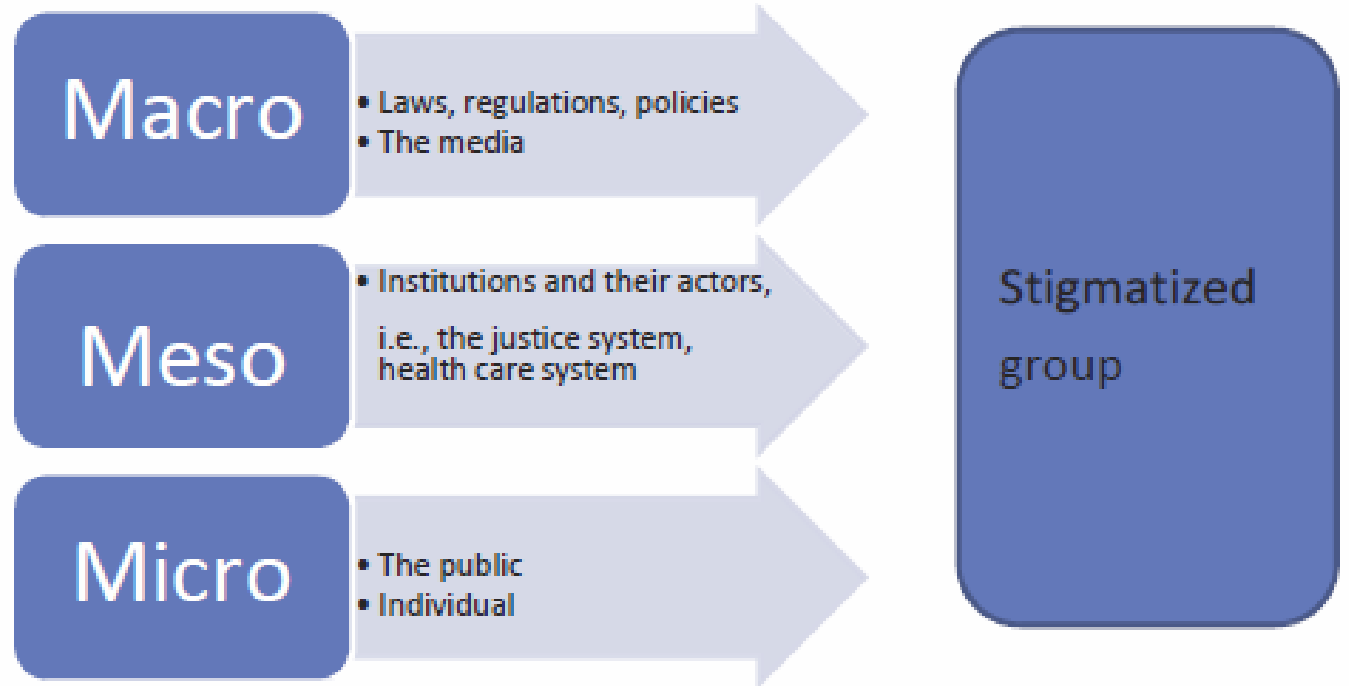
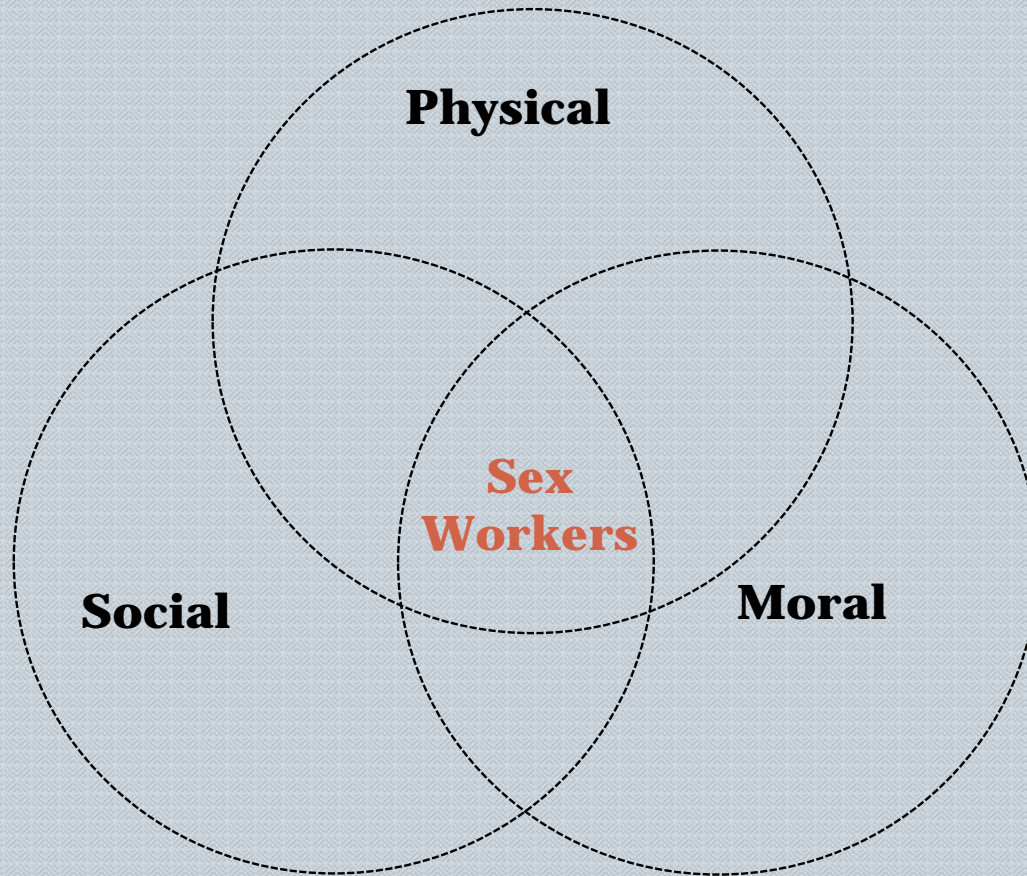


Figure 1. Sources of prostitution stigma at macro, meso, and micro levels.



# Prostitution stigma: 3 types of 'taint'



# Physical taint linked to public health



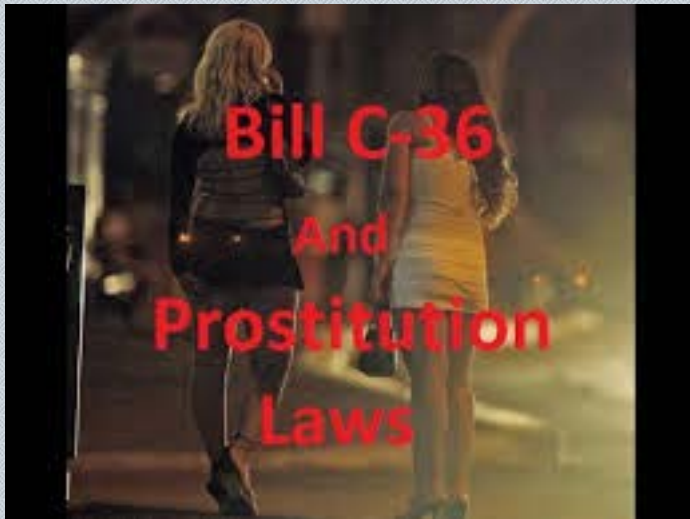
# Social taint from link with tainted others



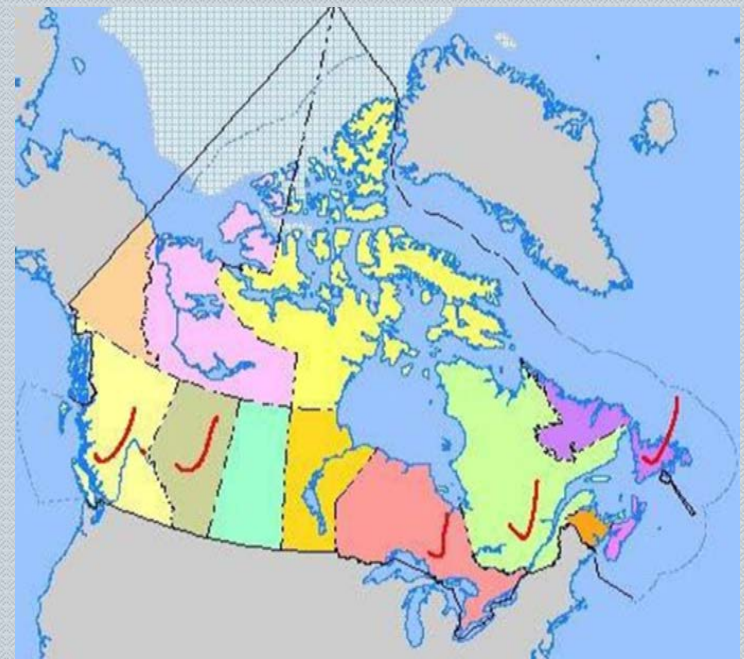
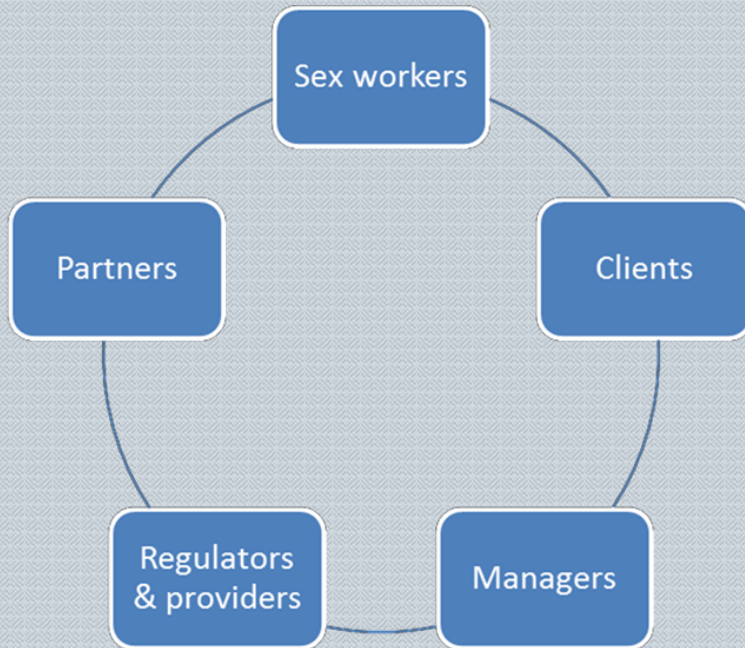
# Moral taint linked to conservative values



- Canada's new prostitution law will go “after the perpetrators, the perverts, those who are consumers of this degrading practice.”



# Our recent Canadian research



# Research features



- ✓ **Clear operational definitions** (e.g., sex worker, client, intimate partner/spouse, etc.)
- ✓ **Standardized questions** allowing comparison to other populations
- ✓ **360 degree look** using common variables and questions allowing intra-industry comparisons
- ✓ **Multi-city** research sites allowing contextual comparisons
- ✓ **Diverse research team** of sex worker and other community organizations, academic partners & trainees engaged throughout

# Who participated?



- ✓ **Sex work:** Exchange of sexual services for money which necessarily, but not exclusively, includes *direct physical sexual contact*
- ✓ **Inclusion criteria:** 19 years or older, be legally able to work in Canada, and have received money in exchange for sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in the previous 12 months
- ✓ **Data:**
  - ✓ 218 sex workers interviewed
  - ✓ Recently completed 60 follow-up interviews post 2014 prostitution law

# Key findings

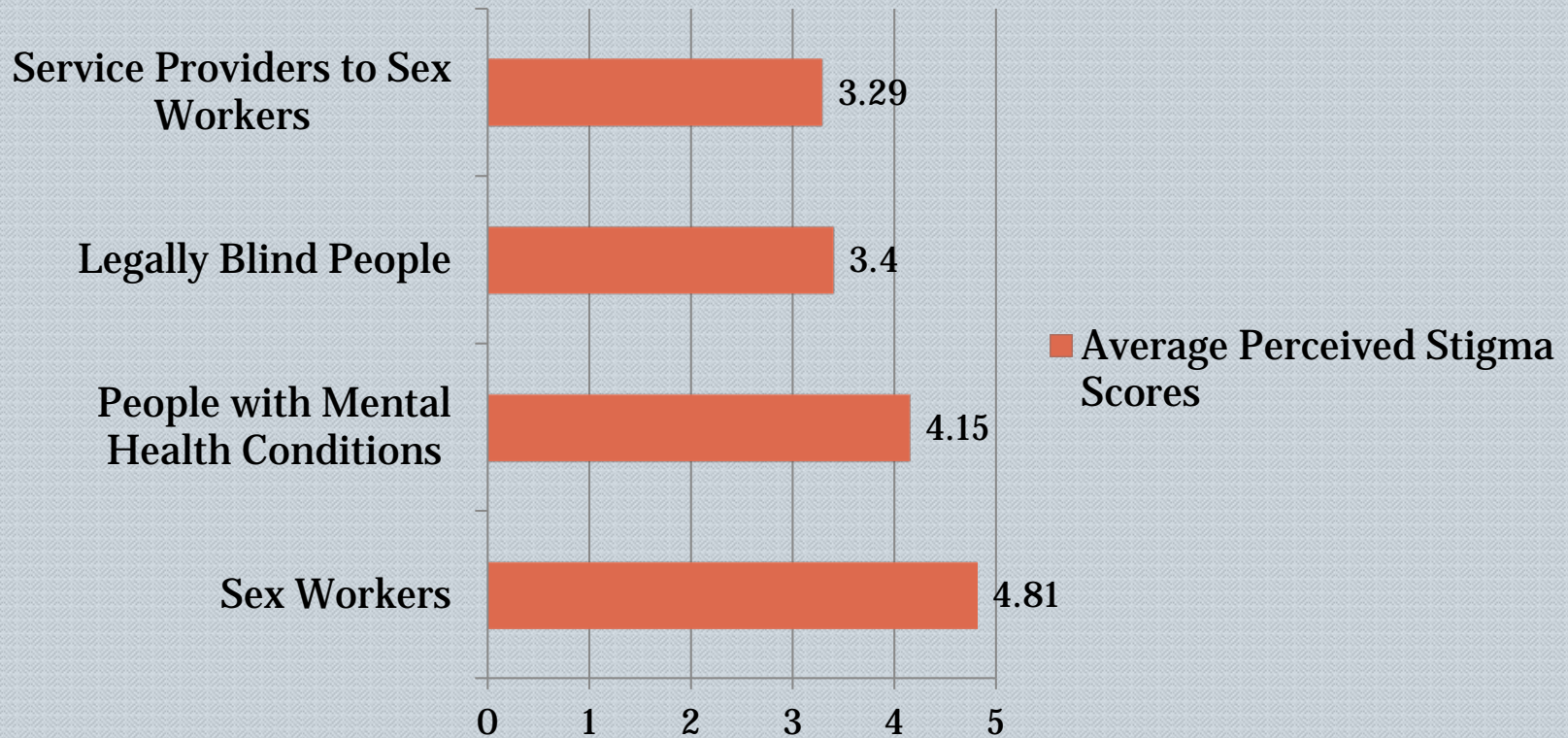


- ✓ **Diversity** – backgrounds & circumstances
- ✓ **Marginalization** on most social determinants of health
- ✓ But **higher personal income** than comparable populations
- ✓ **Work context matters** – greater power in negotiations with clients (e.g., services, condom use) = increased safety
- ✓ **Municipal context matters** – confidence in police varied
- ✓ Sex workers report high levels of **perceived stigma**

# Perceived stigma of sex work compared to other stigmatized groups



## Average Perceived Stigma Scores



# Our research shows that prostitution stigma:



- ❖ Intertwines with other stigmas (eg., racism, transphobia, homophobia)
- ❖
- ❖ Increases violence and victimization
- ❖ Worsens mental health
- ❖ Become internalized and accepted

# Challenging stigma: A multi-level process



## Micro

- The public
- Individual actors

## Meso

- Institutions and their actors,
- i.e. the justice system, health care system

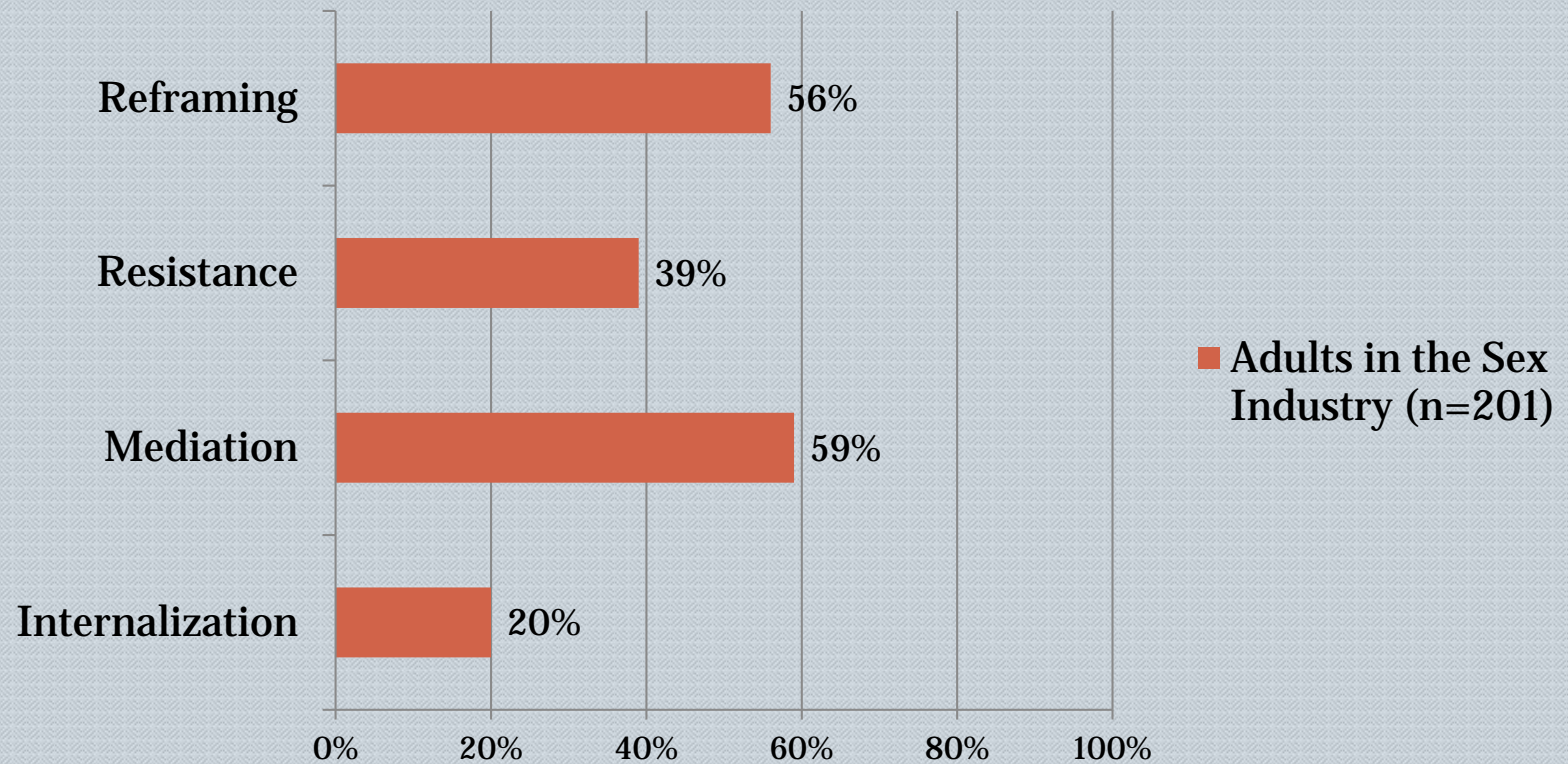
## Macro

- Laws, regulations, policies
- The media

# Micro strategies



## Defensive Tactics Against Stigma



\*Participants could utilize more than one tactic

# Meso strategies



- Community-led interventions for sex workers and their families
- Sex worker support organizations
- Anti-stigma training for police & other providers



# Macro strategies



In 2003, New Zealand passed the Prostitution Reform Act, decriminalizing sex work and the operation of brothels.

Under this act, sex workers have the same rights as regular workers, with precautions to protect them against violence, abuse, and sexually-transmitted diseases.

Since then, the country has not seen a significant increase in its sex industry, nor has there been an increase in STDs, especially HIV/AIDS.

In fact, the country has been hailed by the United Nations as an example for other countries to follow in order to avert the spread of STDs, including HIV/AIDS.

**New Zealand is libertarian on prostitution. Why can't we?**

<http://blamethe1st.blogspot.com/>



**Amnesty International votes YES in  
Support of Decriminalization  
Human Rights for Sex Workers**

# Challenging prostitution stigma in Victoria



Benoit et al. *International Journal for Equity in Health* (2017) 16:160  
DOI 10.1186/s12939-017-0655-2

International Journal for  
Equity in Health

RESEARCH

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Sex workers as peer health advocates:  
community empowerment and  
transformative learning through a Canadian  
pilot program

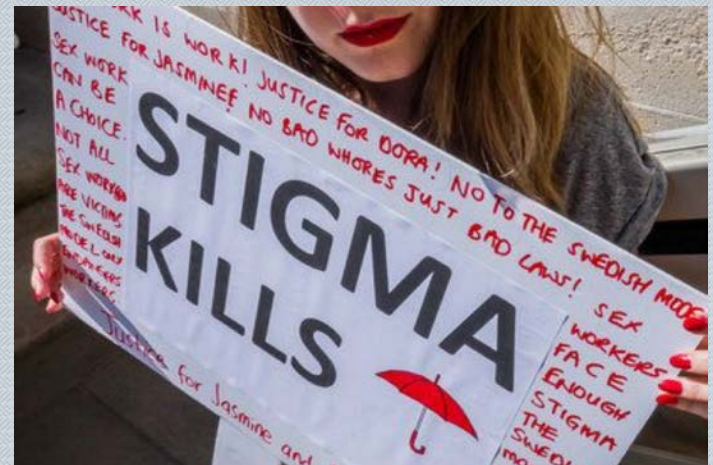
# Project was championed by Peers Victoria



# Take Away Messages



- Prostitution stigma is tenacious but mutable, dependent upon national laws, social policies and local practices
- Challenging stigma is part of sex workers' struggle for dignity and social inclusion in Canadian society



# Thank you!



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