



# BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

**An Analysis of Indoor Sex  
Work in New York City**

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“I started when the father of my child decided to take off with another woman. I was living in the Bronx, couldn’t make rent, and [had to] take care of my two children. So, I moved in with my parents. But I couldn’t find a job and still have time for my kids. I knew that my boyfriend’s friends wanted to get up with me, wanted to sleep with me. I was flirting and said, ‘I’ll fuck you for \$100.’ They said, ‘Yeah,’ and then they asked if I wanted to meet their friends. It was easy money. I didn’t have to get up and go to work. I did it when I wanted, and I just had to buy nothing [to do it], no clothes, nothing. And since it was usually friends of people I knew, I felt pretty safe. So, I guess it was really because I had to take care of my kids and I really couldn’t pay my bills. When I made enough, I was able to move to the projects and get my own place . . . [I’d like to leave the work in a] few years, maybe 5 or 6 [more years] until I save money and can go back to school.”  
—Angie, age 29

## INTRODUCTION

Sex work is a term used to refer to all aspects of the lawful and unlawful sex industry. Sex workers live under the daily threat of arrest, deportation, and violence. These dangers are compounded by the stigma, isolation, and invisibility associated with their work. This report examines the quality of life issues that indoor sex workers face and the impact of law enforcement approaches on this population in New York City.

The title *Behind Closed Doors* refers to the hidden nature of the indoor sex industry (in which solicitation and the sexual exchange occur off the street), and the isolation felt by its sex workers. For the purposes of this study, indoor sex work was defined as any kind of sex work that goes on behind closed doors, as opposed to on the street. This definition includes prostitutes who work in brothels (official or makeshift), independently in their own homes, and as escorts; strippers and bar patrons who connect with prospective clients in these venues and make dates for later meetings; and dominatrices whose services may potentially be defined as “sexual conduct.”

The title of this report also refers to the pervasiveness of the indoor sex industry. Sex workers are woven into most neighborhoods in New York City, and are pivotal in the underground economy, with a large involvement by immigrants and others who are unable to earn a living wage in the mainstream economy.

This report focuses on indoor sex work primarily because, while these sex workers are largely invisible, they face many of the same problems as the more visible street-based prostitutes. The stereotypes of indoor sex workers encompass only extremes of either wealth and glamour or coercion and violence. The true picture reveals a more nuanced reality—the majority of indoor sex workers in this study live surprisingly precarious lives, and encounter a high level of exactly the same problems faced by street-based sex workers, including violence, constant fear of police interference, and a lack of substantive support services. In fact, some of these problems are exacerbated by the clandestine, and thus invisible, nature of indoor sex work. In addition, indoor sex workers also face many of the same problems as other populations among the working poor and recent immigrants, such as unstable housing and an inability to earn a living wage in the mainstream economy. Current law enforcement approaches are problematic because they drive sex workers further underground and alienate them from sources of support and from the mainstream of society. This problem is compounded by the fact that police rarely respond to the complaints of sex workers, even in cases of violence. Finding concrete and reality-based solutions to the needs of this invisible, vulnerable, and marginalized community is imperative to helping them create safe and stable lives.

## KEY FINDINGS

The sample of this study includes 52 indoor sex workers. Researchers met sex workers of all genders through direct outreach at a gang clubhouse, through law enforcement officials, at a nightclub, via the internet, through other sex workers and through cooperating organizations. While the sample is not large, it is extremely varied, and many of the experiences described by this highly varied group of sex workers are extremely similar. The emergence of significant common themes suggests that the data reflects systemic phenomena and is not merely

anecdotal. Additionally, service providers and advocates were able to corroborate much of the information we received and attest to the general reliability of the respondents.

In many ways, the indoor sex workers in this sample were much like many of the working poor. Specific problems faced by respondents included violence, which is often disregarded by police; fear of arrest and its consequences; lack of supportive services; and extreme isolation.

## Demographics

- 40% (21 of 52) of respondents were foreign-born, representing countries in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe.
- 27% (14 of 52) of respondents identified as Latino/a; 12% (6 of 52) identified as Asian; 15% (8 of 52) identified as Black; 44% (23 of 52) identified as European Descent; and 2% (1 of 52) identified as mixed race.
- With respect to gender identities, 73% of the participants identified as women (non-transgender); 12% (6 of 52) identified as transgender women; and 15% (8 of 52) identified as men. No transgender men were interviewed.
- The majority of participants were 20-39 years of age. Three respondents did not want to share their age. Four percent (2 of 49) of respondents were younger than 20 years (both were 19 at the time of the interview); 45% (22 of 49) were between 20-29 years; 43% (21 of 49) were between 30-39 years; 4% (2 of 49) were between 40-49 years; and 4% (2 of 49) were older than 50 years.

## Entrance into Sex Work

- Most respondents entered the sex industry in times of financial vulnerability. The vast majority became involved in sex work because they were either unable to find other work or their other work did not pay a living wage. Often, a friend or an acquaintance with contacts in the business vouched that sex work would bring in more money. Respondents expressed a willingness at these points in their lives to do anything that might improve their economic situation. Others cited family pressures that coincided with economic pressures. A minority of participants got involved because of drug use or addiction.

## Prior Employment

- Many respondents had held or currently had other jobs. These jobs ranged from low-wage labor to well-paid career tracks. The low-wage end of the spectrum included such jobs as babysitting, cleaning, passing out fliers, and food service. Freelance work included graphic design and writing, as well as the arts. Respondents in middle-class careers included civil servants, construction and electrical workers. The most well-paid work included real estate and accounting.
- The respondents whose experience was largely in low-wage work were not able to earn a living wage in these jobs. For these respondents, it was clear that the economic gain of sex work was the driving factor behind their participation in the sex industry.
- 67% (35 of 52) of respondents reported not making enough money to survive in the jobs that they held prior to their involvement in sex work, which included waitressing, food service, retail work, and domestic work.

## Housing

- 57% (30 of 52) of respondents had stable housing, while the majority of those who did not stayed with friends or family or in a shelter.
- 43% (22 of 52) of respondents reported having moved three or more times in the past two years, a frequency that is indicative of unstable settlement conditions.

## Police Interactions

Researchers asked how often respondents had “run-ins” with police, meaning interactions that were not initiated by the respondent. Responses were placed on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 meant that the respondent had no non-initiated contacts with police, while 5 meant that the respondent had near-daily or daily non-initiated contacts with police.

- 63% (32 of 51) of respondents reported having experienced run-ins with police. For those who did experience run-ins, 63% (20 of 32) reported the level of interaction as a 2, meaning that they perceived their level of uninitiated contact with police as rare.

## Arrests

Despite the fact that they experience less police interference and a lower rate of arrest than street-based sex workers, indoor sex workers in this study were extremely concerned with and vigilant about the issue of criminal justice contacts. They were fearful of the consequences of arrest, such as having a criminal record, stigma, impact on housing and family members, and immigration consequences, such as possible removal from the country. Many indoor sex workers also found their treatment by police during the arrest process to be quite disrespectful and sometimes dangerous.

- 47% (24 of 51) of respondents had been arrested in relation to sex work, and 12% (6 of 51) said that they had been falsely arrested at least once.
- In the vast majority of cases where a respondent had been arrested, 88% (21 of 24) were offered no services/alternative sentencing by the criminal court. Of the three people who had been offered services, only one received any services that were remotely substantive. This respondent was supposed to receive job training—however, she found that the program was not helpful at all.
- Two women who had been trafficked into prostitution received services after having been arrested and held in immigration detention. These services were not offered through criminal court as a result of an arrest, but after the women were designated as trafficked persons.
- In addition to arrests, 29% (15 of 51) of respondents stated that they had at times been taken into police custody, but then released instead of being arrested. For some, this meant that they were issued a summons, and in some cases, they were completely free to go.

## Police Violence and Sexual Situations

- 14% (7 of 51) of respondents experienced incidents of police violence, and victims of such violence felt they had no recourse.
- 16% (8 of 51) of respondents have been involved in sexual situations with the police.

## Violence and Robbery From Customers

Respondents in this study experienced high rates of violence, which interviewers defined as being forced to do something that the respondent did not want to do; having been threatened or beaten because the respondent was a sex worker; and/or having been robbed by a client.

- 46% (24 of 52) of respondents have been forced by a client to do something he or she did not want to do.
- 42% (22 of 52) of respondents have been threatened or beaten for being a sex worker.
- 31% (16 of 52) of respondents have been robbed by a client.

## Violence and Coercion From Traffickers or Pimps

- 8% (4 of 52) of respondents were trafficked into the country for prostitution. Two of the trafficked women thought that they would be involved in other types of work and did not know that they were going to be involved in prostitution. The other two had worked as prostitutes in their native countries and knew that they were to continue as sex workers in the U.S. However, they did not realize that they would be beaten or threatened, and have their money taken from them. For the women who did not know that they were going to be prostitutes, the act of engaging in prostitution itself was a violent one because they were being forced into having sex with customers against their will.
- Whereas non-trafficked respondents were very concerned about violence from customers, the violent experiences that affected the trafficked women more deeply were the threats and assaults from the traffickers themselves. The women told of being threatened, beaten, raped, and having their money withheld by the traffickers as a means of keeping them in line.

- Some respondents who worked in a gang clubhouse were also involved in violent situations where the gang leader beat them. Additionally, one of these women was working in the clubhouse to pay off a debt for drugs.
- Other respondents mentioned that while they were not subject to violence or coercion from the people for whom they worked, they did experience the type of worker exploitation that a worker in another industry may experience, such as not getting paid the amount they were owed or were told that they would receive.

### **Safety Precautions**

- The vast majority of respondents, 92% (48 of 52), had a standard set of safety precautions that they utilized when working. Common safety precautions included: trusting his or her gut/instinct; screening customers; being aware of surroundings; ensuring that a friend or co-worker knows of their location; seeing only regulars; keeping a weapon or mace on hand; relying on the house or agency to maintain safety.
- For 79% (41 of 52) of respondents, the safety precautions included more than trusting their instinct.
- 21% (11 of 52) of respondents specifically mentioned using condoms as a safety precaution.

### **Reporting Violent Incidents to the Police**

- 16% (8 of 51) of respondents had gone to the police for help, as a sex worker, and found the police to be helpful.
- 43% percent (22 of 51) of respondents stated that they were open to the idea of asking police for assistance. However, many of these same respondents also expressed strong reservations about how helpful police might be, and despite their openness to the idea of asking for help, they ultimately thought of the police as unhelpful and untrustworthy.

### **Good Police Interactions**

- Despite their apprehensions regarding the police, a few participants did have positive experiences with the police, and these experiences can guide police in creating best practices when assisting sex workers who come to them for help. It is clear that when police view sex workers as legitimate members of society, they are more likely to offer the same level of assistance that they would offer another complainant and follow-through on appropriate procedures. Unfortunately, this willingness to view a sex worker as a human being who may be a crime victim appears to be the result of enlightenment or understanding on the part of individual officers, as opposed to the result of training and best practices issued by the police department.

### **Sex Workers and Migration**

- 60% (31 of 52) of respondents were born in the U.S. and its territories. This number includes one participant who was born in the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico.
- 40% (21 of 52) of respondents were born outside the U.S. and its territories. Participants who were born outside the U.S. and its territories came from a wide variety of countries, including Brazil, Canada, Jamaica, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Taiwan and Thailand.

### **Immigration Status of Foreign-Born Respondents at the Time of Interview**

- Of those respondents who were born outside the U.S. and Puerto Rico, 62% (13 of 21) had some form of legal immigration status at the time of the interview, although not all were authorized to work in the country. Thirty-eight percent (8 of 21) were completely undocumented and had no legal status.

### **Reasons for Moving to the United States**

- When asked why they came to the U.S., some respondents referred to the “American dream,” while others referred to sexual freedom and other cultural forces in the U.S. Respondents indicated that the “American dream” is inextricably linked to jobs and financial opportunities.

## Immigrants' Involvement in Sex Work

- It is clear that the decision to enter the sex trade was not always an easy one for the immigrants in the sample. For respondents who did not have legal immigration status or proper documentation, the ability to settle, find housing, and support themselves was compounded by fear of deportation and a lack of employment authorization. This led some participants to look at sex work as their best economically viable option. Respondents in this situation discussed the fact that they could work out of their apartments independently without involving an employer. In addition, many escort agencies and brothels do not check for legal immigration status.

## Desire for Permanent Legal Status in the U.S.

- All (14 of 14) of the respondents who were not U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents reported that they wanted permanent legal status to remain and work in the U.S. Respondents mentioned a desire to stay here and earn more money, but also stated that permanent legal status would allow them to travel freely between the U.S. and their native countries.

## Legal and Other Needs

Many respondents were low-income women and men who were part of the working poor, and were unable to find work that paid them a living wage, or that allowed them to maintain a balance between work and family. Transgender sex workers faced additional problems due to discrimination and insensitivity to their gender identity. Immigrant sex workers, especially those who did not have legal status or did not speak English, also faced additional hurdles in trying to find mainstream employment that paid a living wage.

Respondents mentioned numerous areas in which they had needs. These included:

- Health Care (Comprehensive);
- Counseling (“Someone to talk to”);
- Finding Stable Housing;
- Peer Support (How to be safe and protected in the business);
- Legal Assistance (Criminal, Immigration, Housing, Domestic Violence, Family Law, Child Welfare issues);
- Immigration Assistance;
- Mentoring in Alternative Employment (If they want to leave the work, it is difficult to learn about viable alternatives);
- Advice on How to Manage Money (Comes in fast and goes out fast);
- Translating Skills to Straight Jobs;
- Language Classes; and
- Accessing Education.

## Leaving the Sex Industry

- 69% (36 of 52) of respondents said that they would like to leave sex work eventually. Many respondents voiced ambivalence about their continuing involvement with the sex industry. However, some explained that they like the work itself. The difficulties of leaving the sex industry are compounded for transgender women and people with arrest records. For those who are working in conditions that are coercive and the sex workers' safety is threatened, leaving is problematic and potentially dangerous.

## Future Plans and Attaining Goals

- Many participants used their income from the sex industry to finance goals outside the sex industry, such as education, start-up businesses, and involvement in the arts. Most respondents had goals for the future and sex work was a part of their plan to reach these goals. Many respondents had begun other careers, while others planned on careers in sex work.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that indoor sex workers in New York City experience a number of severe problems, including but not limited to:

- Violence at the hands of customers, abusive employers, traffickers and police;
- Fear of arrest and its consequences, including stigma;
- Lack of intensive supportive services which could assist them in finding stable housing and alternative employment that pays a living wage; and
- Extreme social isolation from friends and family, neighbors, other sex workers, service providers, and certain mainstream institutions such as banks.

Not everyone would agree that this population represents a priority among those in greatest need. However, the City administration, police, and residents in some neighborhoods continue to target the control of sex work. Unfortunately, the chosen methods consume police, court and other resources but fail to create any appropriate long-term resolution. This report calls for a reasoned, fact-based, and informed debate regarding sex work in New York City.

Sex workers experience a great deal of violence, from customers, traffickers and pimps, and even police. The criminal justice system has a direct impact on the ability of indoor sex workers to avoid violence and create stability for themselves and their families.

The unlawful nature of most sex work often results in extreme isolation and invisibility. One of the most significant findings of this study is that there is unquantifiable value for indoor sex workers in simply knowing others who are in this work. There is a clear need for peer support.

These problems are even more severe for immigrants and for trafficked sex workers, most of whom fear deportation and already find it difficult to obtain mainstream employment that pays a living wage due to a lack of proper work authorization, and in some cases, a lack of language skills.

The failure to address problems faced by this population is an obstacle to finding long-term and viable ways to assist low-income and middle-income people who feel pressure to turn to sex work in order to create some kind of stability for themselves and their families. Current policy and law enforcement efforts are not effective, as indicated by the fact that many prostitutes who exit sex work return to the trade when they find themselves at vulnerable or frightening points in their lives. There exists a critical need for targeted and substantial programs and support systems that will help indoor sex workers who want to leave the life now, or at some point in the future, reach economic self-sufficiency and stability. This is especially true when one considers the high frequency of an expressed desire to exit the trade found in this sample. Often, these individuals desire a new life, with greater opportunities. Because of this, they should be considered prime targets for service delivery as they are a population ready and willing to receive such assistance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on findings derived from this research and include recommendations suggested to the researchers by the respondents themselves. They provide ways that stability and economic security may be achieved among indoor sex workers in New York City, specifically touching upon the ways in which public discussion, criminal justice practices, and programs and services can contribute to this stability.

### *Public Discussion*

- Based on these findings, which include the needs and concerns of sex workers, this report recommends an informed and fact-based public discussion and further inquiry to erase the idea that prostitution is merely a criminal justice issue; to focus on the real economic needs of many indoor sex workers, who are part of the working poor; and to find ways for police to be productive in ensuring the safety of sex workers.

### *Violence and Coercion Against Sex Workers*

- Whatever one's feelings about sex work, no one should be willing to condone incidents of violence against sex workers, or coercion into sex work. In no other occupation does society regularly blame the victims of violence for acts committed against them in the way that it does for sex workers. It is imperative that



the police department adopt best practices for dealing with violence against prostitutes and that police officers be properly trained.

- Complaints by sex workers should be met with the same respect and regard that would be given to any other crime victim, and complaints must be addressed and investigated by law enforcement agencies without penalty to these victims of violence, even when they were subjected to violence or attempted violence while committing prostitution or other illegal acts. It is critical that police assure prostitutes that they will not be investigated or arrested for illegal behavior if they come forward to report a crime of violence.
- Police who commit violence or other crimes against prostitutes must be held accountable for their acts. These acts include sexual assault or abuse, sexual harassment, theft, and extortion of sexual services in exchange for not being arrested. Police leadership must make it known that they take such exploitation seriously. Police and the courts must aggressively investigate and punish police officers who engage in sexual harassment or violence of any kind against sex workers.

### ***Police Interaction with Sex Workers***

- Policymakers should carefully consider the extent to which they make prostitution a criminal justice priority. It is important to bear in mind that many in this population are engaging in prostitution in order to support themselves and their families, and could benefit from substantive services and assistance rather than arrest.
- Where a person has not engaged in a violation of the law, police should not initiate contact.
- Arrest statistics are useful tools for government, community members, and advocates, as they inform all invested parties about significant problems and changes in criminal justice trends. Currently, arrest data is disaggregated by age, race/ethnicity, gender, and borough. We recommend that arrest data be further disaggregated by age and race/ethnicity; race/ethnicity and gender; age and gender; and gender and gender identity. Furthermore, arrests are often reported as “prostitution-related offenses” or “loitering” and are not disaggregated by individual offense. NYPD should keep these records of individual offenses and make them available to the public, and report them to the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services.

### ***Trafficked Sex Workers***

- Police must be trained and willing to identify trafficked and other sex workers who are in coercive or violent situations, and to refer them to agencies that can assist them. Sex workers must be made to feel that they can step forward, that there will be a proper response to their victimization, and that they can seek justice on their own behalf.
- Trafficked sex workers should not be arrested or held in detention. Instead, they should be directly referred to safe housing, service providers, and attorneys who can assist them.
- Trafficked persons should not be compelled to cooperate with law enforcement in order to access services and legal immigration status. Many trafficked persons are willing to cooperate in investigations and prosecutions. However, they should not be expected to do so until they are emotionally and financially stable, physically well, and safe. Even those trafficked persons who never feel able to cooperate with law enforcement deserve necessary services and legal protections.
- Funding streams for anti-trafficking efforts should not restrict recipients’ advocacy on behalf of people in the sex industry. Sex workers and other personalities should be recognized as potential allies in the ongoing struggle against trafficking in persons. Workers and clients in the sex industry have assisted trafficked sex workers in escaping coercive situations, and some trafficked persons return to the sex industry for economic reasons. Therefore, organizations should be able to continue to assist them.
- Create transitional shelters that are similar to domestic violence shelters, but which specifically serve trafficked persons.

### ***Programs and Services***

- Create funding for peer support networks for indoor sex workers. Such programs will allow those who engage in sex work during vulnerable times in their lives to reach out to others who have more experience and understanding of the risks involved. Such networks would reduce isolation and the fear of

stigma, allow for information sharing among sex workers, reduce the likelihood that sex workers will be ill- or misinformed about the law, and also create an environment that is rich for outreach workers to offer assistance.

- Create and expand desperately needed seamless services for indoor sex workers. Necessary services include mental health and counseling/support; appropriate job training; language classes; financial management; and comprehensive healthcare.
- Programs that serve sex workers must maintain realistic and flexible hours that reflect the schedules of the target population.
- Service providers must train their program staff to be sensitive and open to sex workers. Furthermore, staff must be trained to understand the stigma and discrimination to which this population is exposed, and their consequent fear of seeking help. Service providers must treat sex workers with respect, and serve or refer them to necessary programs as appropriate so that they do not fall through cracks in the system.
- Create steady federal, state, and local government funding streams for these service programs for indoor sex workers, redirecting money from funds for arrest and incarceration as appropriate. While sex workers may be eligible for service programs focused on other populations, such as the homeless, substance abusers, or those with psychiatric disabilities, the specific nature of the problems that they face, including the stigma attached to their occupation and the isolation that it creates and reproduces, means that their needs require additional, special attention.