



do you know what I mean?

the lived experiences of sex trade workers



purpose of the study

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and the United Way of Calgary and Area created a unique joint appointment partnership to address emerging and important social issues in Calgary.

Through this partnership, a community-based research (CBR) study was started to better understand the lived experiences of women involved in the sex trade. By engaging in the established research method of PhotoVoice, we created a process in which a group of five women (peer researchers) were able to give voice and images to their untold stories. The peer researchers worked closely with a collaborative team of researchers to bring forth their images and stories of their experiences of the sex trade.

The result is Do You Know What I Mean: The Lived Experiences of Sex Trade Workers. At its broadest and most important level, this study intends to change social consciousness and to create understanding of the complex issues of the sex trade. Ultimately, our hope is that by engaging in this research, we will have increased support for those involved in and attempting to exit the sex trade.

methodology

The approach is community-based research (CBR), drawing on the principles of participatory action research, and utilizing photo-voice. Five peer researchers documented their lived experience through photography and then used the photos to create digital stories. This enacts Paulo Freire's (1970) work in consciousness-raising through photographing images that depict the political and social realism in which the women live.

timing

Phase One of the study began in June 2007, and was completed in June 2008. Phase Two will focus on documenting the impact of this community-based research study.

major learnings

- . Experiences of being a mother and being a sex trade worker
- . Accepting being loved
- . Desire for anonymity
- . Rendered invisible within and by society and being 'Jane Does'
- . Construction of being female/gender performance
- . Tools of the trade – necessary for sex trade
- . Paradox of the trade: money and poverty; leaving with a debt
- . Support services that 'help you feel human'
- . Feelings and experiences of being fragmented and disembodied
- . It takes a lifetime to exit: triggers, and residue of the trade
- . Dichotomy of innocence (stolen) and experience
- . Tenaciousness and will of women to exit the sex trade
- . Desire for becoming ordinary

changes we hope to see

- . Change individual consciousness about people involved in sex trade
- . Increased support services for women during and after exiting
- . Increased services for women over the age of 30
- . Creation of affordable housing for women who are exiting, and their children
- . Establishing a safe house for sex trade workers with peer-based programming
- . Support programs for women leaving jail

highlights of next steps

- . A mobile exhibit was created to be shown at key locations throughout Calgary; the intent is to share the work as widely as possible and to hold educational sessions and workshops alongside the exhibit
- . Advocate for programmatic changes in Calgary and increase in support services
- . Training for professionals in social and health services



"When approached to be part of this project, I was apprehensive. I wasn't sure if I wanted to remember that part of my life. I know today that my experience needs a voice, and my story needs to be told. As one of the fortunate few to escape this lifestyle, I have a responsibility to do all that I can to raise awareness about the sex trade and the damage it does to a women's spirit and the community. My journey is just beginning..."

- Tammy, Peer Researcher