

Congress of Older People's Voices from the Margins

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Older (cisgender) women in the oldest profession, by Rachael Brennan

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There's raised eyebrows when I mention my research with cisgender sex working women over 50 years of age. Concealing ourselves can be necessary in a hostile world. But invisibility also means that many social and systemic inequities persist and our important work is unrecognised.

Sex work is 'legalised' in Queensland, but unfortunately remains police regulated. At licensed brothels, sex workers are deemed to be independent contractors without employee rights – and older workers are rarely welcomed. We can work privately, but it's illegal to work in partnerships or cooperatives; we can't share premises, split costs, hire a receptionist or work together in any way.

Despite participants' pride in their work there were many types of discrimination they faced in their careers. Barbara* told me how the police wouldn't help her once they discovered her occupation. Kitty had her all her bank accounts closed when she declared her (legal) occupation. Kathy found that declaring her occupation on tax returns meant she couldn't get a loan, buy a car, or rent a home. And courts have ruled that accommodation discrimination is permitted against sex workers in Queensland – leaving older sex workers particularly vulnerable.

Participants' work styles changed as they aged; for many, work opportunities and earnings decreased. Older, regular, and long-term clients often became a more significant part of their work. At 64 herself, Princess kept seeing one client after he moved into aged care, providing not just a physical service, but intimacy, companionship and anticipation of a monthly date so meaningful to him.

As they aged, sex work remained a good – or sometimes only – work option as some participants found themselves managing disability or excluded from non-sex work jobs. But ageism, poverty, isolation, stigma, discrimination, and society's failure to embrace ageing sexuality make sex work harder, and some long-term sex workers experienced burnout and despair in their isolated work settings.

Decriminalisation is a critical first step towards workplace health and safety, and labour rights. We also need to strengthen anti-discrimination protections. And ensure the sexual and intimacy rights of older people are recognised as human rights, embedded in all aged care settings, both for sex workers and their clients.

* All names are pseudonyms