



# Sex Worker Health & Harm Reduction 101

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# Logistics: Group Agreements

- Make Space, Take Space
- Speak from the “I”
- No one knows everything, but together we know a lot
- SAY IT UGLY... We can't use perfect language all the time
- Be aware of jargon and acronyms
- Be curious
- ELMO (enough, let's move on)
- Take care of your needs, including stepping away

# Today's Objectives:

## Today we will walk away with:

- An overview of what sex work is and who participates in the sex trades
- Ideas on how to address anti-sex worker stigma in our practices
- Identified barriers to care for people who trade sex
- Places to look for more information

## We will *not* cover:

- A comprehensive or detailed discussion of medical or harm reduction needs for people who trade sex
- A working knowledge of trafficking in persons
- Legal or financial information for people who trade sex
- Youth who trade sex

# What Comes to Mind When You Hear...

Think about the words, narratives, images and details that come to mind when you hear the term...

Sex Work

Street Work

Prostitute

Trafficking Victim

Survivor



# Where do we get these narratives?

- Media (Fictional stories, News, Movies, Television, Social media)
- Colleagues and Organizations
- Politicians, Lawmakers and Advocacy Campaigns
- Church and Religious Institutions
- Friends, Family and Peers
- Lived Experience





**What This Male Sex Worker Wants You to Remember**  
**R.J. Thompson, aka Carlos Alexander, Lawyer and Sex Worker**  
from NowThis

# Why does it matter?

- Sex workers have unique medical needs that often go unmet
- Sex workers often do not disclose when seeking care because of stigma and discrimination, *two aspects we can change*
  - Sex workers face institutional barriers to care
  - Caring for sex workers has ripple effects to other communities
  - We serve people holistically and sex work is only one facet of a person's life



# Words, Definitions, & a bit of History

**What Effects are our words having?**





# Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite, and Sacred Sex Work (Prostitution) aka Priestess or Priest



**ISHTAR**, or **Inanna**: an ancient Mesopotamian goddess associated with love, beauty, sex, desire, fertility, war, justice, and political power.

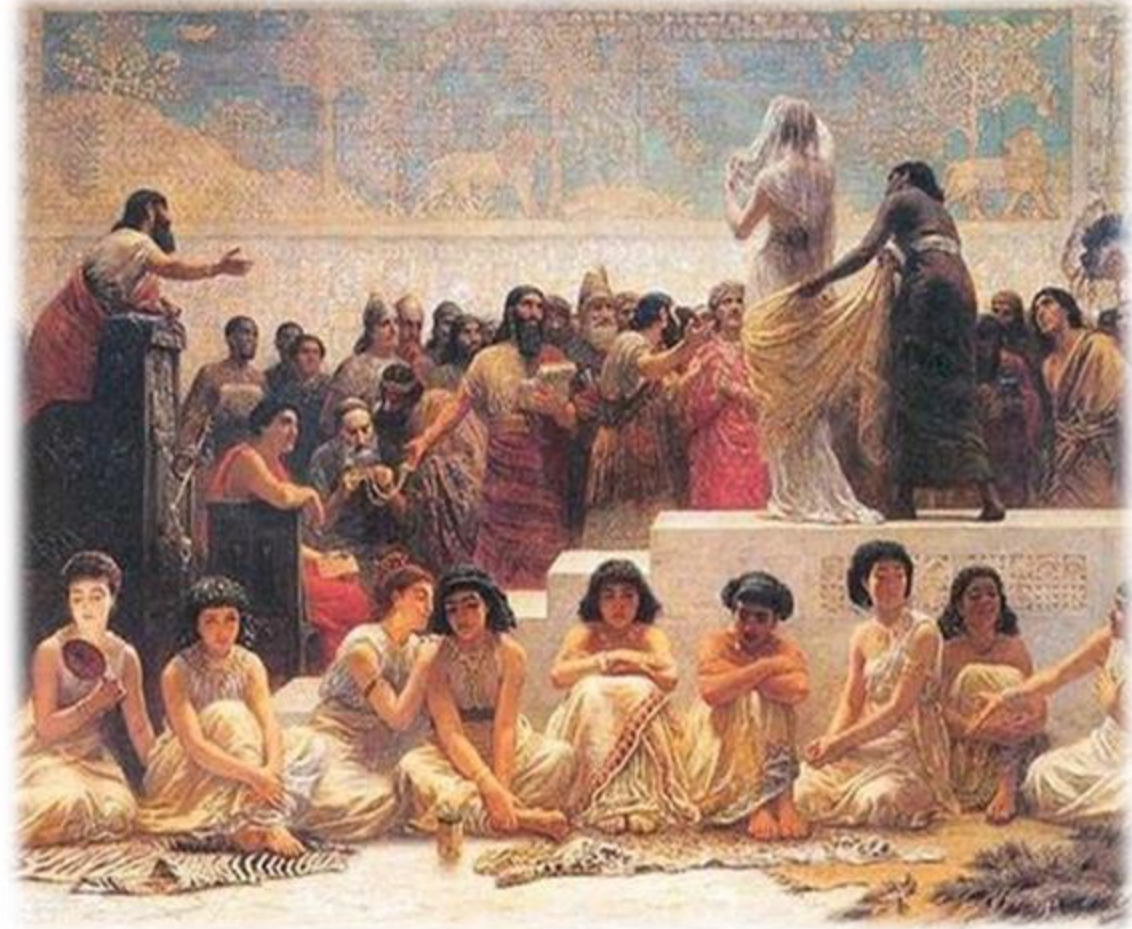
**QEDESHA**: one of a class of sacred prostitutes found throughout the ancient Middle East, especially in the worship of the fertility goddess Astarte (Ashtoreth). Prostitutes often played an important part in official temple worship.



<https://kingoflimericks.com/metaphysical-erotica-ode-to-ishtar/>

## *The Babylonian Marriage Market*

by Edwin Long, 1875



<https://ishtargates.tumblr.com/post/112682635944/sacred-prostitution-in-the-ancient-near-east>

Sex Workers helped to 'settle' the American West



# Some of the 'Full Service Sex Workers you may know of:

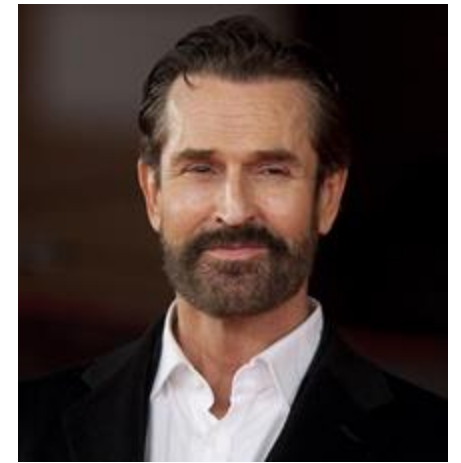
**Maya Angelou**, Poet, Activist, Author

**Rupert Everett**, English actor, novelist and one-time New Wave singer

**Kathleen Hanna** is widely known as the frontwoman for Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin

**Amanda Palmer** musician and hugely polarizing internet personality, first became known as half of Boston-based duo The Dresden Dolls.

**Dee Dee Ramone** Bassist and co-founder of the legendary punk band The Ramones,





# What is Harm Reduction

Harm Reduction resources and services aim to reduce suffering and death among people using drugs, engaging in sex work, and experiencing housing instability.

- Harm reduction is a **philosophy** and a **social justice movement** which centers and empowers people with experience of marginalization and criminalization.
- Harm reduction is **one intervention** and approach within public health models.

## What is **Sex Work**

The exchange of a sexual or erotic service or performance in exchange for material resources.

- Some sex work is criminalized, some is legalized, and some is unregulated.
- Some sex work is in person with intimate contact (ie. escorts) while some is remote and has no physical contact (ie. camming, or video streaming a live performance).

## What is **Sex Work**

Sex work can include different forms of physical, emotional and intimate labor that range in terms of contact and physical demand.

For example...

- A **dancer's** work may be physically demanding but have limited intimate contact with a client.
- An **escort** can have a range of physicality and may offer everything from kissing to penetrative sex.
- A **cam performer** has limited physical requirements and no intimate contact with clients.

## Who are **Sex Workers**

Adults who exchange of a sexual or erotic service or performance in exchange for material resources.

- People of all genders, races, ethnicities, ages, sexual identities and backgrounds engage in sex work
- Structural inequity does not affect all genders, races, ethnicities, ages and backgrounds equally

## Who are **Sex Workers**

Adult sex workers trade sex while navigating a range of different experiences.

- Some people trade sex by **choice**, where they have multiple options to make ends meet, and the sex trade is the best options.
- Many people trade sex because of **circumstance**, where they have limited options and sex work is the one that meets their needs. *Some folks may refer to their experience as “survival sex”.*
- Some people trade sex because of **coercion**, where they are forced by another person to trade sex, and fear retribution if they refuse. *These folks may be eligible for trafficking services.*
- Many people will have more than one of these experiences and all are valid.



Serving  
**Sex Workers**  
means serving...

- Criminalized people *who may feel unsafe disclosing*
- People across the gender spectrum, including trans and non-binary folks
- Different racial and ethnic groups, through practices of cultural humility
- Parents, pregnant people and caregivers
- People in precarious economic, housing and life circumstances



# Break!

**Please Return at ((TIME))**

# Barriers to Care



Sex Workers Speak Out:  
Bongekile, Eswatini

Global Network of Sex  
Worker Projects



# Sex Workers Identify Barriers to Care

## Institutional

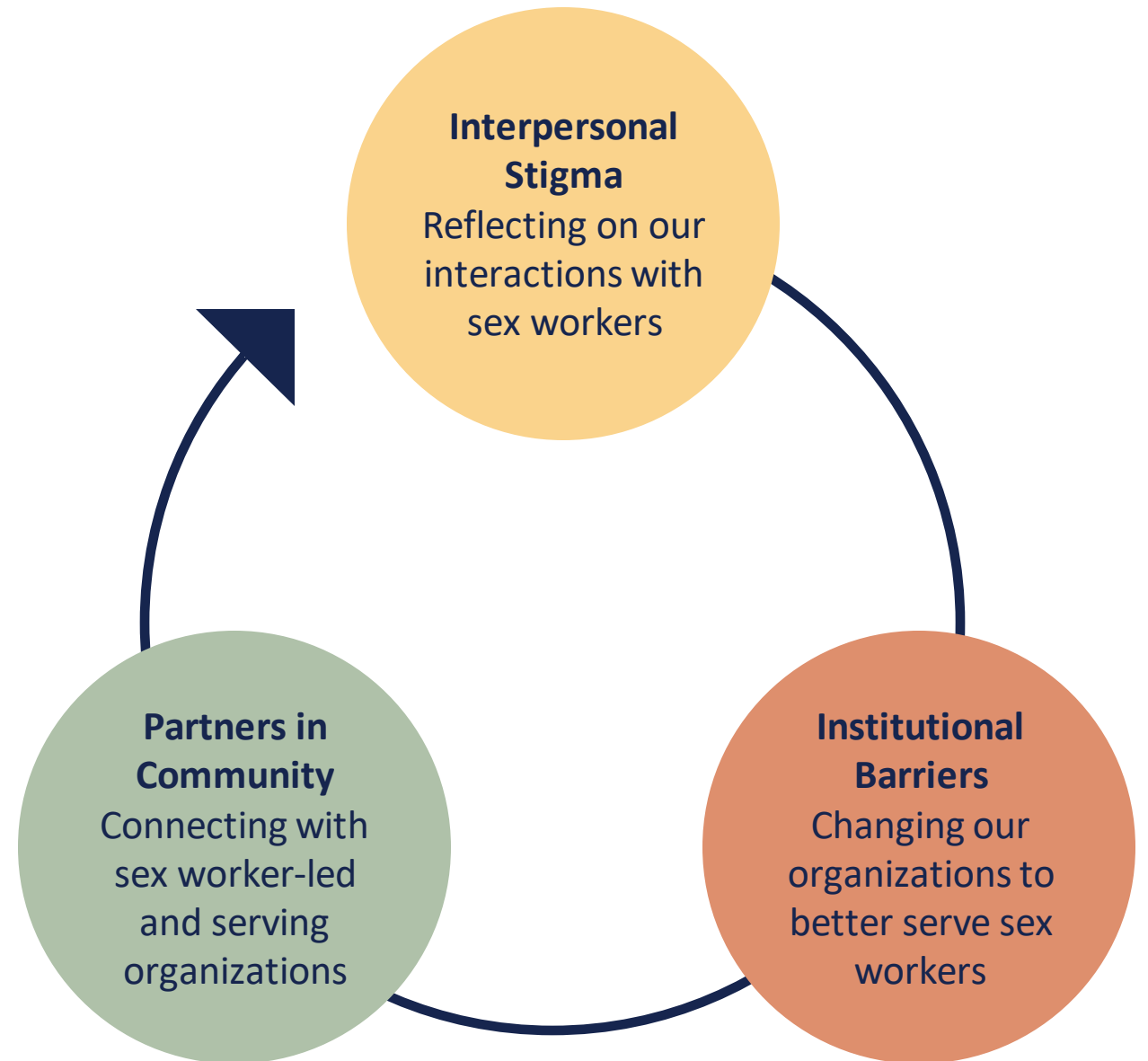
- Financial barriers - Cost, Insurance
- Location Accessibility of services (public transit, ID requirements, hours of operation)
- Requirements for other system involvement, mandatory reporting

## Interpersonal

- Stigma, discrimination & isolation
- Fear of outing to others
- Fear of law enforcement, child welfare systems

How do we dismantle  
these barriers?

# Dismantling Barriers



# Interpersonal Barriers

- Engage with sex worker community and serving organizations directly
- Seek out sex worker-made media and listen to a diversity of stories and experiences
- Think about rights, not rescue
- Nothing about us without us  
*“Nothing about us without us” is a phrase borrowed from the disability justice movement*





# Sex Workers in Health Department Programming

- To what extent are sex workers' health needs and experiences represented in your health department's infectious disease and/or harm reduction activities? Is their inclusion implicit or explicit?
- Do HD staff and stakeholders feel comfortable sharing past and/or current experiences with sex work to help inform activities? If no, what is needed to create that kind of safety?
- Does the health department collect or track any data that represent or pertain specifically to people trading sex? If so, how is the data used? If not, what kind of information would be helpful and actionable?
- Which partners or organizations do you talk to if you have questions about sex worker health and experiences in your jurisdiction(s)?



# Collaboration with Sex Worker-Serving Organizations

- Name *People Who Trade Sex* as a priority population in funding and other capacity building opportunities; provide application guidance and/or info sessions for eligible programs and assess barriers to applying.
- Expand allowable harm reduction supply purchases to include items that contribute to sex workers' health and safety.
- Dedicate funding to community-led organizations, including programs led by people with experience doing sex work and offer institutional support around challenges like finding a fiscal sponsor.
- Work with (and compensate!) sex worker-led and -serving organizations and subject matter experts on educational opportunities (including training for HD staff), community events, and health department priority setting/strategic planning.



# Resources

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- NASTAD Sex Worker Health & Harm Reduction Call and Listserv
- Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP-USA, SWOP chapters)
- St James Infirmary's Occupational Health and Safety Guide
- Reframe Health and Justice: Quick and Dirty Harm Reduction Guides
- Implementing Comprehensive HIV/STI Programmes With Sex Workers: Practical Approaches From Collaborative Interventions (World Health Organization)

# CLOSING QUESTIONS

What is one thing that you learned today?

What is one take-away that you will personally integrate into your practice tomorrow?



# Thank you!

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