“I Look in the Mirror and That’s All I See”

Underage Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Natalie Thorburn
PhD(Cand), MSW(hons), RSW, MANZASW
University of Auckland
Disclosure

Cycle of emotions

Escape behaviour

Accessing services

Panic, shame, and coping
Outline of Webinar

• Perspectives on underage sex work
• Previous research
• Why research it?
• The study
• Findings
  – Gendered norms and experiences
  – Mental health and self-concept
  – Access to services
Perspectives

- Commercial sexual exploitation of children
- Juvenile delinquency
- Autonomy and economic agency

- What’s your position?
Previous Research

• Early caregiving environments
• Physical, sexual, behavioural, relational, and psychological effects
• PTSD
• Paucity of NZ research
• 200 known to social services
• Helpers’ responses
Why Research Underage Sex Work?

- Domestic and international obligations
  - Sections 21, 22, and 23 of the Prostitution Reform Act
  - Crimes Act 1961
  - Convention 182 of the International Labour Conference

- Media and moralising

- Access to social services
The Study

• Aims
• Personal journey of understanding
• Ethics approval
• Access, Recruitment, and Consent
• Qualitative data analysis
Findings – Gendered norms and expectations

- Re-creating the first conversation about sexual experiences
- Sexual abuse and violence
- Physical abuse and violence
- Differences in considering ‘consent’
Findings – Mental health and self-concept

• Vulnerability of adolescence
• Early childhood abuse and trauma
  – Suicide
  – Depression
  – Substance abuse
  – Trauma symptoms
• Stress responses
• Caregiver influence of emotional stress
• Peers as surrogate attachment figures
Findings: Access to Services

• Overall experiences
• ‘Power with’ instead of ‘power over’
• Negative appraisals of services
• Generalizing Appraisals
• Self-concealment
Participants’ Voices

“I felt like I’d just test her out, you know, see if she could handle me telling her stuff. So I told her a little bit and then watched her and we had a bit of a staring competition. She wasn’t shocked though. I told her a bit more and she seemed to really get it, so I kept going”
“The psychologist guy who insisted on talking to me before I went home didn’t listen at all. He like asked some questions and you could tell he didn’t want you to say anything bad, I tried to tell him anyway though... he just said oh you can’t tell me that, that’s not my job. Just um tell me whether you’re suicidal, basically. So I just felt even more ashamed, it must like just be something about me”
Disengagement Factors

- Judging/shaming
- Discouraging disclosure
- Formal/rigid methods
- Single focus/priority

Practitioner
Engagement Factors

- Empathy & Approachability
- Trauma-informed practice
- Informal/flexible methods
- Multiple goals/modalities

Practitioner
Trauma and the Brain

- Stress-hormone responses
- Prolonged activation
- Disconnection and crisis
Working with Trauma - PTSD

- Memories
- Reminders
- Avoidance
- Relationships

• Restoring power
• Using their definitions
• Meaning-making
Managing Teen Sex Workers’ Symptoms

• Dissociation
  – Survival mechanism
  – ‘Splitting’ of the mind
• Flashbacks
  – Signs that memories have not been processed
• Panic attacks
• Hyper-arousal
• Shame
Conclusion