



POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AMONG SYDNEY STREET SEX WORKERS NEW STUDY

19 July, 2006

For release: 20 July, 2006

Conference delegates were told today that female street-based sex workers in Sydney widely report experiencing trauma, with the majority reporting multiple traumas that typically began in early childhood. Child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault and work-related violence were commonly reported.

These findings will be released today at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) 2006 Annual Symposium, being held at the Masonic Centre in Sydney.

Of the 72 women who were interviewed for this study, all but one of them reported experiencing trauma of some kind. Just under half of the women met DSM-IV criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and approximately one third reported current PTSD symptoms.

Three quarters of these women had ever experienced child sexual abuse (CSA), with the average age of the first CSA occurring at 7 years old. Just over a quarter of them (26%) reported the first incident occurring before 6 years of age. Eighty one per cent reported ever being raped, with the same percentage ever having experienced a physical assault. Almost three quarters of the sample (71%) had witnessed a serious injury or death.

Senior Research Officer at NDARC, Amanda Roxburgh, who is one of the study's authors and will be presenting the findings at today's conference says that given the complexities of these women's experiences, targeted interventions are required to adequately address the problems they are experiencing.

"It needs to be recognised that sex workers are an extremely diverse group, and the findings presented here only relate to street-based workers in Sydney."

“Many of these women come from very disadvantaged backgrounds, and as these results show they have experienced childhood abuse and multiple traumas in their lives,” said Ms Roxburgh. “As a result, there are high rates of mental health issues among this group (particularly PTSD), which is not surprising given their experiences.”

Depression and drug use were also prevalent. Just over half (54%) of the women reported current severe depressive symptoms, the majority (83%) had injected heroin in the past month and just under half (42%) reported injecting cocaine in the same period.

When asked about the relationship between drug use and their involvement in the sex industry, just over half of the women (53%) reported they used drugs to facilitate their sex work. The mechanism of drug use to facilitate sex work was generally described as ‘numbing’ so that the women ‘did not have to think ‘about what they were doing, and they didn’t ‘have to feel’ while working.

“Very few of these women are in contact with mental health professionals, yet are experiencing a range of serious problems that need addressing,” said Ms Roxburgh. “This is not to say that all of these women are ‘victims’. Many of them are extremely resilient and it is important to remember that two-thirds of the women who had experienced significant traumatic events in their life did not meet criteria for current PTSD.”

“However, for those women who do wish to seek help, we need to think about developing more accessible, meaningful and sustainable services in order to meet their needs.”

ends

Contact Details: Paul Dillon, tel. (02) 9385 0226 or 0419 402 099, email p.dillon@unsw.edu.au *Date Issued: July 19*

Jo Holden, Manager of the Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP), can be contacted on (02) 9319 4866 for further details on the services they provide to these women.