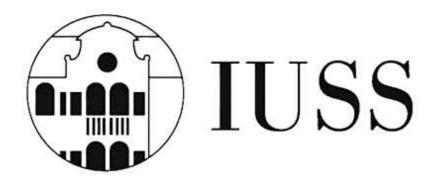**UNIVERSITY OF PAVIA – IUSS SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
PAVIA**

**Department of Brain and Behavioural Sciences (DBBS)**

**MSc in Psychology, Neuroscience and Human Sciences**

**TITLE: The Impact of Sex Industry and Sex Work Participation and Involvement on Self-Esteem: A Review of The Literature**

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**Academic year 2023/2024**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# INDEX

# 1. ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION**: The sex industry and sex work remain a complicated and heavily stigmatised industry, with implications for individuals' self-esteem across various dimensions. Understanding how different forms of sex industry participation and sex work influence self-esteem, is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems.

**AIMS**: The aim of this review is to synthesise existing literature to identify the relationship between sex industry participation and self-esteem and further, identify the different forms of sex industry and explore if there are differences in the self-esteem of individuals among the different categories of sex industry work as posited by the literature.

**METHODS**: A comprehensive search strategy using specific key words was employed across multiple electronic databases, including PsycINFO, PubMed, ProQuest and Scopus. Studies were included if they addressed and identified different types of work in the sex industry and if they examined the relationship between sex industry work and self-esteem. Studies from January 2014 to June 2024 were considered. Quality assessment was conducted meticulously to establish proper evaluation of the research and its relevance to the scope of this review.

**CONCLUSION**: This systematic review highlights the need for comprehensive understanding of the impact of sex industry work on self-esteem of sex workers and the factors influencing this relationship. The findings may have implications for the development of targeted interventions and support services tailored to the diverse needs of individuals involved in the sex industry, aiming to promote positive self-esteem and well-being within this population.

**The Impact of Sex Industry and Sex Work Participation and Involvement on Self-Esteem:**

**A Review of The Literature**

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 Sex Work

Sex work involves the exchange of sexual services or performances, for material compensation. It includes acts of direct physical contact (prostitution, lap dancing) as well as titillation (pornography, commercial stripping, erotic webcam shows, telephone sex, live sex shows) (Ruberg, 2016). Other authors define sex work as involving one or more services where sex is exchanged for money or goods (Weatherall and Priestly, 2001; Burnes, 2012). It is said that over the past two decades, there has been an increase in internet-facilitated sex work, while street prostitution has decreased in some locations and professional phone sex organisations have lost a significant portion of their income to webcamming.

Commercial sex is perceived by many as a deviant activity, despite its scale, expansion, and large number of participants. It is perceived as being run by dubious individuals and encouraging immoral or perverse behaviour (Doherty and Bowen, 2024). Sex work is assumed to have a negative effect on self-esteem, usually low self-worth, due to its social stigma and unacceptability and despite the diversity of persons, positions and roles within the sex industry (Benoit 2018). Recognising sex labour as work is inextricably linked to decriminalisation efforts. The desire for decriminalisation is due to the belief that sex workers, as people, and members of society, deserve the same civil and labour rights and social safeguards as any other worker, regardless of occupation which would contribute to boosting their self-esteem (Brookes-Gordon, Morris and Sanders, 2021; Benoit, 2018).

**2.2 Sex Industry**

The sex industry refers to the workers, managers, owners, agencies, clubs, trade associations, and marketing involved in sexual commerce, of both legal and illegal varieties. To call it an "industry" is a bit of a misnomer, as many of these enterprises are artisanal and disconnected from each other. However, viewed collectively, sex-for-sale is a business sector that is growing throughout the world (Weitzer, 2023). In many countries this is a multi-billion industry which accounts for a significant portion of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), whilst supporting many family members who are linked to the sex workers. Research from global organisations such as The International Labour Organisation (ILO), it is estimated that sex workers support between five and eight other people with their earnings. Sex workers also contribute to the economy. In four countries surveyed, ILO found that the sex industry provides between 2 and 14 percent of gross domestic product. In Thailand, for example, the sex industry generated about US$6.4 billion in 2015, a figure which accounted for 10 percent of Thailand's GDP. Thai sex workers send an annual average of US$300 million to family members who reside in more rural areas of Thailand. Additionally, while 65 percent of sex industry workers are sex workers, the industry also generates employment for auxiliary cleaning, security and driving services (International Labour Organisation, 1998)

Sex workers' employment and working arrangements vary. Sex workers might be self-employed or employed, doing sex work part-time or full-time. Sex work can be official, since some sex workers have an employer-employee connection with an establishment. However, where criminalisation excludes sex work from national labour laws, sex workers have no option but to accept what are often exploitative working conditions. Additionally, criminalisation of third parties makes the establishment of formal workplaces, including establishing any contracts or workplace

regulations, illegal. However, much of the sex industry is informal, with sex workers operating independently, individually or collectively with other sex workers (Pitcher, 2015).

## 2.3 Legalities of Sex Work

Sex workers, like others in the informal sector, often lack social safeguards and face insecure working conditions. Most countries around the globe have criminalised the sex industry. While this is the case some countries have varying laws regarding criminalisation of sex work in various states and cities. For example, in Australia, regulations differ by jurisdiction, and include partial criminalisation in WA, decriminalisation in New South Wales (NSW), and legalisation with licensing regulation in Victoria.

Exploitation and unsafe and unhealthy working conditions exist in many labour sectors. Work does not change in the presence of these conditions. Even when performed under exploitative, unsafe or unhealthy conditions, sex work is still work. Indeed, criminalisation, by perpetuating stigma, discrimination and social marginalisation and by alienating sex workers from formal labour protections, creates conditions in which violations of sex workers' rights, including their labour rights, can continue unchecked. Recognition that sex work is work is the starting point for addressing these conditions, to be able to organise and advocate for improved work environments for sex workers (Network of Sex Work Projects, Policy Brief: Sex Work as Work, 2017).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment (United Nations). These provisions are expanded and made legally binding in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which most countries have ratified. The ICESCR requires states to "recognise the right to work, which includes the right

of everyone to the opportunity to gain his living by work which he freely chooses or accepts and will take appropriate steps to safeguard this right" (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner).

In most countries which have ratified the legally binding, international human rights treaties discussed above, sex work is criminalised. This contradiction potentially creates space for sex worker organisations to hold their governments accountable; recognition of sex work as work would oblige governments to acknowledge that international and national labour treaties, laws and policies also apply to sex work. By safeguarding the rights of sex workers, there would be movement in ensuring that they have access to and develop social and mental well-being and in turn, higher self-esteem as they would be recognised just like any other worker who also contributes to the countries' economy and also supports their families to give them livelihoods.

## 2.4 Self-Esteem

Self-esteem has been defined as a self-evaluation that manifests as a positive and negative view of oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). Rosenberg,1965 further stated that to be considered to have high self-esteem, a person must respect themselves and consider themselves worthy. Additionally, it has been posited that self-esteem refers to an individual's perception or subjective assessment of their self-worth, self-respect and self-confidence (Sedikides and Gress, 2003; Abdel-Khalek, 2016). It plays an important role in our relationships with ourselves and with others, as seen in the 'Looking Glass Self' theory that states that people view themselves from others' perspectives and then integrate those perceptions into existing self-concepts (Darney, Howcroft and Stroud,

2013). Therefore, how society and those close to us view us is important and can have great influence on how we feel about ourselves.

Early studies by Brown, Dutton and Cook, 2001, denoted that self-esteem could be used in 3 ways, being:

a) The global or trait self-esteem with reference to how people usually feel about themselves.

b) Self-evaluation which is reflective of how people evaluate their abilities and attributes.

c) Self-esteem with reference to momentary emotional states for example, someone might describe themselves as having high self-esteem after passing an important exam or describe themselves as having low self-esteem after being body shamed.

Other researchers advocated for the introduction of a view of self-esteem that was not based on it being a purely psychological trait and motivating force but more as a social construct of emotion that is based on mood (Hewitt, 2002). This ideology of self-esteem was borrowed from a definition of self-esteem by Smith-Lovin, 1995, that states it is a 'reflexive emotion that has developed over time in social processes of invention, that individuals learn to experience and to talk about, that arises in predictable social circumstances, and that is subject to social control' (Abdel-Khalek, 2016).

Self-esteem is known to be made up of many dimensions or components, such as referring to either overall feelings of the self or specific aspects instead, including feelings about their social status, employment, academic performance, racial identity, looks, and other skills. Theories have been posited that made distinctions of the different types of self-esteem such as, implicit or explicit, authentic or false, stable or unstable, global or domain specific and so on (Abdel-Khalek,

2016). Specifically, to dimensions of self-esteem some researchers suggested it as a unitary global trait, whilst others viewed it as a multidimensional trait with separate sub-components being performance, social and physical self-esteem (Heatherton and Wyland, 2003)

For the purposes of this research, the dimensions of self-esteem as researched by Stets and Burke, 2014 and further, Benoit et al, 2018 in the specific context of sex workers and the sex industry, will be the dimensions highlighted. These being self-worth, self-authenticity and self-efficacy, particularly because the research was conducted with specific population of interest for this current research in mind.

## 2.5 Self-Efficacy

Albert Bandura first proposed the concept of self-efficacy, in his own words, as a personal judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (Bandura, 1977). Self-Efficacy is an individual's set of beliefs that determine how well they can execute a plan of action in prospective situations (Bandura, 1977). Simply, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a particular situation.

Though self-efficacy has been examined by various researchers, Bandura is credited with popularising the concept. Kathy Kolbe (2009) asserts that a person's level of self-confidence can play a significant role in cognitive strength assessments. Since self-efficacy helps get past barriers that would prevent them from using their natural ability to accomplish goals, Kolbe suggests that self-efficacy also entails tenacity and endurance. These mental self-evaluations impact every aspect of the human experience, such as the objectives people pursue, the amount of effort they put out to reach those objectives, and the probability of achieving specific behavioural performance levels.

Research, clinical practice and education have all benefited greatly from the application of self-efficacy theory (SET). The concept of self-efficacy, has been used to describe a wide range of behaviours in the field of health psychology, including: Self-management of chronic disease, Smoking cessation, Alcohol use, Eating, Pain control, Exercise, etc. There are various contributing factors that can assist one to develop the self-efficacy dimension of self-esteem. It is informed by several main sources: personal experience, observation, persuasion, and emotion.

- Personal Experience /Performance Outcomes

The most influential source is the perceived outcome of one's previous performance or mastery experience. This refers to the experiences gained when one accepts and successfully completes a new challenge. One of the most effective ways to learn a new skill or improve one's effectiveness in a given activity is to practice consistently (Bandura, 1997).

- Observation / Vicarious Experiences

We also judge our own abilities by observing others. According to researchers, when we watch someone else achieve at an activity through hard work rather than innate aptitude, our self-efficacy increases. For example, if you have low self-efficacy for public speaking, observing a shy person acquire the skill may help you gain confidence. Bandura (1977) stated that "Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers" beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed."

- Social Persuasion

Other individuals may strive to boost our self-efficacy by providing support and encouragement. However, this sort of persuasion does not always have a significant impact on self-efficacy, especially when compared to the effect of personal experience. Receiving positive verbal

feedback while working on a complicated activity leads a person to assume that they have the skills and talents to achieve. Self-efficacy is influenced by encouragement and discouragement pertaining to an individual's performance or ability to perform (Redmond, 2010).

- Emotional and Physiological States

A person's emotional, bodily, and psychological well-being might have an impact on how they perceive their own abilities in a given situation. For example, if one is battling with depression or anxiety, they may find it difficult to achieve a healthy level of well-being. Is it impossible to build self-efficacy while suffering from some of these struggles but boosting self-efficacy is much easier when one feels healthy and well (Bandura, 1982).

**2.6 Self-Authenticity**

The concept of authenticity refers to a multitude of concepts such as sincerity, truthfulness, originality, and the feeling and practice of being true to oneself or others (Vannini and Franzese, 2008). The self refers to a collection of ideas we each have about who we are. This includes our various social roles and secondary traits like curious, generous, or ambitious. The majority of us characterise ourselves based on a variety of roles and attributes, all of which are real but which may not always line up (Toure-Tillery and Fishbach, 2018).

Erich Fromm (1941), proposed a very different definition of authenticity, where he considered behaviour of any kind, even when it aligns with societal norms, to be authentic if it results from personal understanding and approval of its drives and origins, rather than merely from conformity with the received wisdom of the society. Therefore, an authentic individual according to Fromm, may behave in alignment with cultural norms, if those norms appear, on consideration, to be appropriate, rather than simply in the interest of conforming with what society dictates.

According to Fromm, authenticity is not a consequence of not living up to others' expectations, but rather a result of enlightened and informed motivation. Even while there are circumstances in which you must prioritise one component of yourself over another, being authentic is about recognising all of the aspects of who you are that are important to you and making sure that your actions are consistent with each of them.

Research suggests that authenticity is essential for finding meaning in life and maintaining optimum psychological functioning. It correlates with beneficial outcomes like self-actualisation, authentic expression, well-being, self-esteem, hope, and positive feeling (Sutton, 2020). Authenticity and personal experience provide purpose and meaning.

Authentic people:

- Are more resilient and do not need or seek the approval of others.

- Are more open and confident, and less defensive.

- Accept themselves and care less about self-criticism.

- Are less likely to conform to others.

- Know how to distance themselves from negative influences and people.

- Do not participate in comparison of themselves to others.

**2.7 Self-Worth**

This is described as the extent to which people feel positive about themselves; that they feel that they are good and valuable (Stets and Burke, 2014).

The study of self-esteem is essential as it has an important impact on the mental health and well-being of all individuals. Researchers have found that low self-esteem often is found in conjunction with psychiatric disorders and is often an etiological factor in many mental illnesses. Studies found that low self-esteem was there in patients with eating disorders, major depressive disorder and substance abuse, with a cyclical relationship existing between low self-esteem and the onset of psychiatric disorders (Silverstone and Salsali, 2003; Murphy et al, 2005). Research has implied that low self-esteem can lead to mental illness such as depression or vice versa in adolescents (Sowislo and Orth, 2013). Moreover, research has found that victims of bullying experience negative psychosocial adaptations and negative long-term effects on their self-esteem (Tsaousis, 2016).

Low self-worth is characterised by a negative self-image, critical self-evaluation, and a negative self-value. Individuals with low self-worth tend to criticise themselves and their talents, dismiss praises and positive attributes, and focus on mistakes, lack of accomplishments, and perceived shortcomings of others.

The following are examples of low self-worth:

- In personal relationships, may become upset or distressed by any criticism or disapproval.

- They may bend over backwards to please others.

- Avoid or withdraw from intimacy, vulnerability, or social contact.

- Less likely to stand up for themselves from being abused or neglected.

There are numerous strategies to boost your self-worth. Self-compassion is a useful way to boost self-worth and involves treating oneself with kindness. Reminding ourselves that faults and

imperfections are part of the human experience. These tools can help you understand your self-worth and improve it.

## 2.8 Assessment of Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be assessed through various measures including explicit and implicit, state and trait measures and uni- and multi-dimensional scales (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg 1979) is the most widely and frequently used measure of self-esteem as it covers global self-esteem, being people's overall feelings of acceptance and respect (Stets and Burke, 2014; Rosenberg et al, 1995).

## 2.9 High Self-Esteem

Since self-esteem is often viewed as a personality trait and is related to the concepts of self-conscience and self-image, like all personality traits, it can be viewed as existing on a continuum or bipolar dimension (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). Therefore, there exists individual differences at different levels or positions on the continuum. All people have the need to feel good about themselves and their actions thus having high self-esteem is an essential component to feeling happiness. Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs, 2003, conducted research that highlighted that self-esteem is essential to experiencing emotional well-being, with people with high self-esteem often experiencing higher levels of joy, motivation and happiness and more positive feelings than those with low self-esteem. Moreover, they generally experience fewer negative moods, depression and anxiety.

Further research showed that people with high self-esteem are likely to persevere in the face of hardship than those with low self-esteem (Baumeister, Campbell, Kreuger and Vohs, 2003). High

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self-esteem is closely linked to resilience when experiencing challenges. It also allows individuals to experience happiness freely, whilst also having the ability to handle difficult or unpleasant moments. People with high levels of self-esteem can also effectively cope with the challenges they experience as well as participate and engage in close relationships with others and improve their strengths (Abdel-Khalek, 2016). It has been found that those with high self-esteem are more likely to persist in the face of failure and appear to be more attuned to self-regulating goal directed behaviour (Di Paula and Campbell, 2002). Importantly, self-esteem is essential for self-regulation and having good quality of life. Schmidt and Padilla, 2003, in their research showed that self-esteem in an individual increases when they experience success, praise and love from others, further supporting that self-esteem is not solely dependent on how one perceives themselves but is also reliant on the perceptions of others. A healthy self-esteem thus contributes massively to positive social and personal adjustment (Abdel-Khalek, 2016).

Though having high self-esteem is usually positive, the negative aspects should not be underestimated or ignored. Stets and Burke, 2014 state that researchers have found that high self-esteem can associated with aggression (Baumeister, Smart and Boden, 1996) as well as narcissism (Campbell, Rudich and Sedikides, 2002).

**2.10 Low Self-Esteem**

Research by Mackinnon, 2015, showed that those with low self-esteem scores tend to have negative attitudes towards several things such as other people and their own personal circumstances. They tend to experience feelings of worthlessness, emotional instability and inferiority, which leads to being unhappy with life (Ha, 2006). When studied in adolescents, low self-esteem was linked to depression, aggression and decreased ability to overcome challenges and decreased well-being (Stavropoulos et al, 2015).

Further, Trzesniewski et al,2006, found that low self-esteem in adolescence poses as an increased risk factor for mental and physical health conditions, poor financial prospects and criminal conduct later in life. Ethier et al, 2006, also state that low self-esteem increases risks for early sex life debut, high risk sexual activity and high number of sexual partners. Stets and Burke, 2014, suggest that low self-esteem is at the root of the social and personal troubles that people experience.

As such, an individuals' self -esteem can be positive or negative, and is often affected by the expectations and opinions of society which in turn influence how an individual feels about themselves. With the sex-industry and sex work being heavily stigmatised and often criminalised components of society, there is bound to be an effect on how the individuals engaged in these activities view themselves. Thus, this research has the following aims and objectives:

**2.11 Aims**:

1. To explore the impact that participation in the sex industry has on a person's self-esteem, with focus on the three dimensions of self-esteem: self-worth, self-authenticity and self-efficacy.

   **Objectives:**

1. To review existing literature on self-esteem and its three dimensions as observed in the sex industry.

2. To identify key areas of impact that self-esteem and its three dimensions have on the individuals in the sex industry.

3. To discuss and analyse the key findings of the impact that self-esteem and its three dimensions have on the individuals in the sex industry.

4. To develop recommendations for interventions to improve the self-esteem and general psychological well-being of individuals in the sex-industry.

In summary, this systematic review aims to gather evidence on the impact that participating in the sex industry or sex work can have on the individual's self-esteem. To collate research that includes the concepts of self-worth, self-efficacy and self-authenticity as studies often use the terms synonymously or in conjunction with self-esteem, implying that it is an umbrella term with branches coming off it. In addition to this, there is an aim to highlight that because sex work is so heavily stigmatised, it involves human beings whose mental health is greatly impacted and are often vulnerable and exploited as a result. They are often left behind or excluded from psychosocial and economic support despite the vast need for it. Thus, there is need to contribute recommendations to inform inclusive policies, services and general practice.

## 3. BACKGROUND

There is a growing body of literature that recognises the importance of how and why participation in the sex industry has an impact on the self-esteem of the women that work in it. Self-esteem as a concept has been widely researched for years and was shown to be influenced by what other individuals think of us as well their assessments of the type of work we do (Hughes, 1951; Benoit et al, 2018). Further, it is highlighted that the value or statuses placed on different professions has significance in how workers judge themselves, with workers in service jobs being categorised as 'esteem unworthy' (Bernstein, 2007a). Research has also shown that workers such as garbage

collectors, do not have a 'status shield' where their perceived lower positioning in the employment hierarchy fails to protect them from the disapproval of others (Hochschild, 1983).

Moreover, it was shown that those working in more customer facing jobs such as nail technicians, beauticians and food services, often needing to perform emotional labour to consumers regularly experience poor treatment from superiors and customers who often expect extreme obedience and passivity (Benoit et al, 2018). Sometimes workers internalise the stigma and view their own occupations and being of low status, which alienates them from their inner selves and can often lead to 'felt stigma' (Scambler, 2004) and decreased self-esteem (Corrigan, 2004).

### 3.1 Sex work and self-esteem

Sex work is a heavily stigmatised profession, often leading those who participate in to either keep it a secret or being ostracised from society. There is usually shame attached to it as some come to it through unfavourable situations like low economic status and exploitation and in extreme examples, human and/or sex trafficking. Therefore, for the most part, sex work is held in low regard even in instances where it has been decriminalised (Foley, 2017; Lazarus et al, 2012). Sex workers are often 'othered' in general society, usually experiencing discrimination and being subject to being called derogatory terms such as prostitute and hooker that are often meant to hurt, insult and above all label and discredit them (Weitzer, 2012). Research has shown that sex workers, due to this, sometimes accept the denigration and adopt negative beliefs towards themselves and their work (Carrasco et al, 2017; Wong, Holroyd and Bingham 2011).

Studies have found sex workers in both indoor and outdoor locations reporting as having low self-esteem. For instance, Kramer's 2004 study, conducted predominantly on street-based sex

workers in America, found that above 75% of them reported decreased self-esteem following their involvement in sex work. Qualitative research conducted on people engaged in sex work has found feelings of being stereotyped (Koken, 2012) and other studies found that there was discourse and language use taking place that further exemplified that those involved in sex work were being ostracised (Gorry, Roen and Reilly 2010; Sallmann 2010). Some research has also shown that there are some who consistently implement ways to separate their lives as sex workers from their personal lives as a form of preserving and protecting their self-image from stigma (Nasir et al. 2010). This, however, can have detrimental psychological and social effects due to the secrecy (Kamise, 2013). In addition, some aspects that present themselves when engaged in sex work such as substance use, abuse, disempowerment, lack of control and exploitation also impede sex worker's abilities to experience positive self-esteem (Dodsworth 2012; Gorry, Roen and Reilly 2010; Smith and Marshall 2007).

On the other, there is research that suggests that sex work can sometimes have not much of an effect on sex workers' self-esteem. In the United States of America research by Downs, James and Cowan, 2006, comparing exotic dancers to college going women did not find significant differences in the two group's self-esteem scores. In New Zealand, in a study by Romans et al, 2001, on sex workers who were mainly based indoors, they reported 90% of their participants as feeling as good or better about themselves than most people (Benoit et al, 2018). In some instances, research has shown that being engaged in sex work has a positive impact on self-esteem, with majority of these findings occurring in studies that had indoor based participants. These participants were located in brothels and escort agencies (Bellhouse et al, 2015; Romans et al, 2001), freelance (Bellhouse et al, 2015; Koken, 2012; Lucas, 2005), strip clubs (Bouclin, 2006; Downs, James and Cowan, 2006; Scull 2015) and bars (Askew, 1999, Kamise 2013). A

study by Sweet and Tewksbury, 2000, found that exotic dancers had suffered from 'ugly duckling syndrome' when they were younger and had found stripping as a way to gain personal validation and proof that they had indeed grown into sexy and beautiful women (Benoit et al, 2018). Some research comparing men in the general population to male porn actors found the actors as having 'higher levels of self-esteem and quality of life especially in areas of sexual satisfaction, body image and physical safety' (Griffith et al, 2012).

Research into self-esteem of individuals within the sex industry can get be non-cohesive and scattered as researchers view and define it differently. Some research views it as being synonymous with self-worth (Rosenberg, 1995), whereas others view the combination of positive self-esteem and self-efficacy as working together to build positive self-concept (Dodsworth, 2012). Further, Berstein, 2007a, highlights self-authenticity as being an important cornerstone for middle class sex workers who want to view their profession as proper and esteem worthy (Leigh, 2004). There is an implication by Berstein, 2007a, that the more higher class and therefore privileged a sex worker is, the more they viewed their work as having 'authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal connection to their clients' (Benoit et al, 2018).

## 4. METHODOLOGY

Ethical approval was not required for this research.

### 4.1 Inclusion Criteria

The studies included had to meet certain criteria. It included qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research published in English and included data specific to the sex industry, sex workers and their self-esteem. Studies that included qualitative and quantitative associations or relationships between the sex industry/sex work and self-esteem, self-concept, self-worth, self-

authenticity and self-efficacy as well as commentary of these domains in the methods and results were included. Articles containing unambiguous professions and behaviours in the sex industry such as street walking, escorting, exotic dancing, porn acting, and transactional sex were included. Sex workers were considered sex workers regardless of gender identity, therefore studies including men, women and transgender individuals engaged in sex work were included. Further only studies with participants over the age of 18 were included. Studies were excluded if they were completely unrelated to the topic of interest, were review papers themselves or were non-peer reviewed publications. Conference abstracts were also excluded.

**4.2 Search Strategy**

The searches were conducted in the PsycINFO, PubMed, ProQuest, and Scopus electronic databases, for per reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024. The search strategy included Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and specific keywords involving the sex industry or sex work and self-esteem and its' domains. The search terms used are outlined in the table below.

**Table 1 outline of key search terms and the search strategy**

**Databases Searched**

| PsycINFO, ProQuest, PubMed and Scopus |
| --- |
|  |

**Search Strategy for PsycINFO**

| # | Searches |
| --- | --- |

| # | Searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | "sex indust*" OR "sex work*" OR "female sex work*"OR "male sex work*" OR "trans sex work*" OR "prostitut*" OR "female prostitut*" OR "sex trad*" OR "transact* sex" OR "FSW*" OR "MSW*" OR "TSW*" OR "commercial sex" OR "sex-trade worker*" OR "adult service provider" OR "ASP" |
| 2 | "self-esteem" OR "self-worth" OR "self-efficacy" OR "self-authenticity" |
| 3 | 1 AND 2 |

## Search Strategy for ProQuest

| # | Searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | "sex indust*" OR "sex work*" OR "female sex work*"OR "male sex work*" OR "trans sex work*" OR "prostitut*" OR "female prostitut*" OR "sex trad*" OR "transact* sex" OR "FSW*" OR "MSW*" OR "TSW*" OR "commercial sex" OR "sex-trade worker*" OR "adult service provider" OR "ASP" <br> *DocType=All document types; peer reviewed Language=English;* |
| 2 | "self-esteem" OR "self-worth" OR "self-efficacy" OR "self-authenticity" <br> *DocType=All document types; peer reviewed Language=English;* |
| 3 | #2 AND #1 <br> *DocType=All document types; Language=English* |

## Search Strategy for PubMed

| # | Searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | Sex industry OR sex trade OR sex worker OR prostitution OR female sex worker OR male sex worker OR trans sex worker OR commercial sex OR adult service provider OR ("Sex Work/ethnology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/psychology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/statistics and numerical data"[Mesh] ) |
| 2 | Self-esteem OR Self-worth OR self-efficacy OR self-authenticity OR "Self-Concept"[Mesh] OR "Self-Efficacy"[Mesh] |
| 3 | #1 AND #2 |

## Search Strategy for Scopus

| # | Searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | Sex industry OR sex trade OR sex worker OR prostitution OR female sex worker OR male sex worker OR trans sex worker OR commercial sex OR adult service provider |

| | |
|---|---|
| | OR ("Sex Work/ethnology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/psychology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/statistics and numerical data"[Mesh] ) |
| 2 | Self-esteem OR Self-worth OR self-efficacy OR self-authenticity OR "Self-Concept"[Mesh] OR "Self-Efficacy"[Mesh] |
| 3 | #1 AND #2 |

**4.3 Study Selection Process**

The results of the search strategies for each database were uploaded into the Rayyan website, an intelligent systematic review tool. During the initial screening phase, I screened the titles and abstracts of all the results, then screened the full texts of the studies that passed the initial phase. Studies were included if they met the inclusion criteria and excluded when they did not.

**4.4 Data Extraction**

For each study I extracted the following data, year of publication, authors, study design, the aims of the study, sample demographics and size, key findings as well as the strengths and limitations. This is summarised and presented in table 2, Appendix B.

**5. RESULTS**

From the literature search, 16, 669 articles were identified. Thereafter, 490 duplicates were removed, leaving 16, 179 articles to be screened by title and abstract. After a full text screening,16 articles met the inclusion criteria and were selected. Reasons for exclusion are outlined in the PRISMA flow chart below, Figure 1.

**5.1 Study Characteristics**

Studies from Ethiopia, Canada, Greece and the USA were included. They included a variety of sex workers from different areas of the sex industry such as escorting, amateur porn and street-based sex work. The studies are further and more clearly summarised in Table 2, Appendix B.

**Fig 1. Flow chart of included studies**

**5.2 Summary of Findings**

**5.2.1 Self-Esteem**

Benoit et al, found that the relationship between sex work and self-esteem was complex and that involvement in sex work had both positive and negative impacts on self-esteem and its domains. In their interviews with FSW's, Bellhouse et al, 2015 explored a theme of the positive impact that sex work had on the participants' relationships and more specifically themselves, with some participants stating that there had been a positive impact on their self-esteem, and they had confidence and pride in the work they did. These positive reports came from participants who viewed sex work as a part of their lives and their identity. They were less inclined to separate the home and work lives which in turn had positive outcomes in their lives and relationships. Kalemi et al, 2017 utilised the Rosenberg self-esteem scale on their participants and found that 22% (6/27) of the women presented low self-esteem, 74% (20/27) of them presented normal self-esteem and a 3,7% (1/27) presented high self-esteem.

Zaretsky and Baumgartner, 2020 found that their participants, who had left sex work, had good self-esteem due to earning "honest money", implying that they had low self-esteem when in sex work as they did view it as honest or legitimate work. The women felt empowered because the money they earned helped them look after themselves and in some cases their families. The pride they felt from doing lawful work also contributed positively to their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth. Kim and Peterson, 2020 carried out comparisons on incarcerated women who were split into three categories; those who had engaged in regular sex work, those who only did service work or care work (for example elderly care, childcare, housekeeping, waitressing,

cooking etc) and those who had done both. They assessed all the women with the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and found that women in care/service work had a lower level of self-esteem (mean = 26.6) compared with women in sex work (mean = 28.0) and women engaged in both (mean = 27.6).

Research by McCabe et al, 2014 involving psychocultural comparisons between male prostitutes in Dublin and San Francisco, assessed their self-esteem using the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and found that there were no statistically significant differences in self-esteem between them. Similarly, Pedersen et al, 2015, compared female university students and exotic dancers and had them assessed on global self-esteem using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, finding no significant differences in self-esteem. Exotic dancers did, however, report higher, body consciousness. Gonzalez et al, 2021 found that there was an inverse relationship between self-esteem and loneliness implying that self-esteem can play a protective role in female sex worker's health behaviours and health status.

A study by Turcotte and Lanctot, 2021, focused on ex-sex workers, exploring their qualitative narratives of whether or not they had maintained their sense of self whilst engaged in sex work. The participants explained that despite their efforts, their sense of self was impacted to some degree by sex work. Emphasis was on the fact that they had failed to maintain their boundaries throughout their involvement in sex work, where at times, they overlooked their own rules and limits in exchange for money. They became less vigilant about the impact of sex work on their self-esteem and self-concept and failed to realise that their transgressions of their own boundaries were whittling away their self-esteem. On the other hand, Yaakobovitch, Bensimon and Idisis, 2024, researched the implications of participation in amateur pornography on a group of male participants' self-esteem and found that some of them reported positive. Some participants stated

that their self-esteem had improved due to their increased sense of desirability and positive reactions audiences. On the other hand, the negative outcomes experienced included social stigma as family and friends treated participants outcasts, and feelings of guilt amongst participants as relationships had broken down.

### 5.2.2 Self-Efficacy

In the study by Asefa et al, 2022, researched the participant's self-efficacy in the context of their ability to organise and execute HIV prevention behaviours. Specifically, the participants' abilities and personal expectations with regards to whether or not prevention behaviours would be initiated, how much effort they would put in and how long they would maintain the behaviours should they find themselves facing barriers and unfavourable experiences. They found that, self-efficacy was significantly and positively correlated with HIV prevention behaviour ($r = -0.097$, $p = <0.05$). Self-efficacy and other variables were found to have statistical associations with HIV prevention behaviours amongst female sex workers older than 25 as compared to those younger.

Benoit et al, 2018 found that, in contrast to concepts such as self-worth and authenticity, which focus on identity and self-conception, efficacy-based esteem emphasises the potential of individuals to enact change in their circumstances (Stets and Burke, 2014). In their study, 67 participants (33% of the total valid transcripts) referenced self-efficacy, with 36 individuals (54%) expressing positive sentiments, while 27 participants (40%) articulated negative views, and 4 participants exhibited ambivalence. Notably, those who engaged in socially stigmatised drug use were less inclined to report positive self-efficacy (10% compared to 25%, $p < 0.05$), and individuals perceiving higher stigma were more prone to describe their self-efficacy negatively (p

< 0.05). Furthermore, participants who first engaged in sex work before the age of 19 (23% of the sample) were significantly more likely to recount negative self-efficacy experiences (p < 0.05), as were street-based workers in comparison to their indoor counterparts (p < 0.05), along with those exhibiting lower resilience scores (p < 0.05).

Positive self-efficacy was identified as a crucial factor enabling participants to assert control over various dimensions of their lives, including financial, social, and emotional aspects. They articulated how their involvement in sex work fostered a sense of independence and entrepreneurial spirit. Others felt good about having control over their bodies and what they did with them. Financial autonomy further contributed to self-efficacy.

Conversely, negative self-efficacy emerged as a theme characterised by a perceived lack of agency in engaging with sex work and a diminished belief in the ability to exit the profession. A minority of participants recounted experiences of coercion into sex work during their youth, especially after becoming involved with exploitative individuals.

Bird et al, 2016, their findings on self-efficacy for sex trade workers were that for most of the questions, most participants gave responses that implied high self-efficacy. Participants demonstrated a greater than 50% chance of agreement with the questions which focused on their ability to refuse or distance themselves from harmful examples. Cimino. A, 2019, researched efficacy beliefs with reference to exiting prostitution and found that the two still active sex workers lacked resilient self-efficacy, which is, they did not believe they deserved anything else other than what they had despite taking the necessary steps to change their situation. Those who had been able to exit sex work had shown some resilient self-efficacy, with their responses showing that regardless of how difficult leaving was, they wanted better for themselves and

going back or staying in sex work would not do that for them. Further, research by Deer,

Zaretsky and Baumgartner, 2020.

Rogers et al, 2015, researched self-efficacy for safe sexual practices amongst sex trade workers

using 7 sexual health–related items from an HIV risk behaviour self-efficacy scale. The scale

asked participants to indicate their confidence to perform certain tasks (with 0 being not at all

confident and 100 being completely confident. A depressed mood was linked to diminished self-

efficacy regarding safe sexual health behaviours among sex trade workers (STWs) in the study.

This finding is significant, as self-efficacy theory posits that individuals with lower self-efficacy

are at greater risk for experiencing depression. Additionally, elevated self-efficacy concerning

condom use has been correlated with higher rates of condom utilisation among STWs.

Consequently, effectively addressing and alleviating depressive symptoms may enhance safe

sexual health practices, thereby decreasing the likelihood of HIV transmission.

### 5.2.3 Self-Authenticity

With regards to self-authenticity, Benoit et al, 2018 found participants in the study expressed

their capacity to embody authenticity, both in relation to themselves and their interactions with

others. Authenticity is characterised as an alignment with one's internal or personal standards

regarding one's true identity (Stets and Burke, 2014). Conversely, inauthenticity in the context of

one's professional role is described as a disconnect between the expected persona in a work

environment and an individual's genuine self (Wharton, 2009). Among the 137 participants, 68%

provided accounts related to authenticity. The impact of sex work on authenticity was perceived

positively by 39 participants (28%) and negatively by 66 participants (48%), while the remaining

32 participants (23%) reported ambivalent feelings. Notably, the relationship between sex work and authenticity was more pronounced among indoor sex workers compared to their street-based counterparts, with a higher percentage of indoor sex workers articulating both positive (40% vs. 17%, p = .006) and negative (55% vs. 24%, p < 0.001) experiences. Additionally, those who articulated negative experiences of authenticity reported higher levels of perceived stigma (4.9 vs. 4.7 on a 6-point scale, p < 0.05).

The concept of enhanced authenticity, which entails self-discovery and the expression of one's true self, emerged. Participants articulated that sex work enabled them to explore sexual dimensions they would not have otherwise encountered, thereby enhancing their self-perception as a sexual being. Similarly, others reflected on their pre-engagement assessment of their skills, affirming their natural aptitude for sex work, a belief that was subsequently validated through experience. Other participants indicated that their authentic selves coexisted with their work and others highlighted the integral role of authenticity in their life context, asserting that sex work constituted merely a small aspect of their overall existence.

In contrast, inauthenticity was frequently discussed in terms of the necessity to conceal one's professional identity. Participants reported that the pressure to hide, misrepresent, or manage their work identity hindered their ability to engage authentically with others, resulting in identity discordance and feelings of inauthenticity. To mitigate the risk of being devalued, many participants exercised caution in disclosing their sex work status, which, while protective, limited their capacity to form genuine relationships.

**5.2.4 Self-Worth**

Research by Benoit et al, 2018, 146 participants, representing 73% of the 201 usable transcripts, discussions regarding self-worth revealed that this perception is often shaped by social feedback from others (Stets and Burke, 2014). Among those who addressed self-worth, a significant majority (n = 84, 58%) indicated that their engagement in sex work positively enhanced their self-worth. Conversely, a smaller segment reported predominantly negative impacts (21%) or a combination of both positive and negative effects (21%). Notably, 63% of indoor sex workers reported experiences of positive self-worth, in contrast to only 34% of street-based sex workers ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, a higher prevalence of negative self-worth was observed among outdoor workers ($p < 0.001$).

Participants expressing negative self-worth also exhibited elevated levels of perceived stigma compared to those who did not report such feelings (5.0 versus 4.7 on a 6-point scale, $p < 0.05$), and demonstrated lower resilience scores (5.0 vs 5.5, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, the accounts of negative self-worth varied among those who had recently used socially stigmatised substances, with 41% of participants reporting negative self-worth having used such drugs in the past month, compared to 59% who did not report negative feelings ($p < 0.05$). Gender differences were evident in the reports of positive self-worth, with 71% of women, 62% of transgender workers, and only 31% of men expressing a sense of positive self-worth ($p < 0.05$). However, no significant gender differences were found concerning negative self-worth.

Positive self-worth was often characterised by a confident self-assessment. Many participants attributed their enhanced self-worth to the skills they developed, which contributed to both their personal and professional identities. For one noted that sex work had enriched her life, fostering greater self-awareness regarding her limits and pleasures. Similarly, another expressed pride in her therapeutic role within the industry. Personal validation from clients emerged as a crucial

aspect of this enhancement. Some sex workers reflected on how their clients positively influenced their self-image with others emphasising that they felt valued beyond the physical services they provided, highlighting the importance of personal connection in their work. In contrast, negative self-worth was frequently associated with feelings of shame and unworthiness, reported by 31% of participants. Some articulated the internalisation of societal stigma, expressing feelings of dirtiness and low self-esteem. Others described a decline in self-esteem following their transition from conventional employment to sex work.

Tsang, 2021, researched the performance of femininity and its relationship to sex work amongst trans sex workers (TSW) (male to female) and found that through bodily experiences as TSWs the participants had developed self-worth and identity. They recognised their self-worth and the way the world and society marginalised and discriminated against them.

## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic review illuminate that the relationship between participation in the sex industry and self-esteem is a complex one, with both positive and negative self-esteem outcomes. The literature indicates that self-esteem among individuals involved in sex work is significantly influenced by societal stigma and subjective experiences within the industry. Studies reviewed demonstrate that sex workers often internalise societal judgments, leading to feelings of worthlessness and diminished self-esteem. For instance, Kramer (2004) found that over 75% of street-based sex workers reported decreased self-esteem, which aligns with the notion that stigma plays a crucial role in shaping self-perception.

On the other hand, some research suggests that certain groups of sex workers, particularly those in controlled environments such as brothels or escort services, report higher levels of self-esteem. Studies by Bellhouse et al. (2015) and Romans et al. (2001) indicate that these individuals often feel empowered and may experience an enhancement in self-worth and self-efficacy. This dichotomy suggests that the context of sex work; whether it is stigmatised or socially accepted; can significantly impact self-esteem outcomes. Research by Kim and Peterson, 2020, found that women engaged in sex work had higher self-esteem than those working service or care jobs that usually paid well below their needs. These findings were supported by previous research that found that women actively seek out alternative work such as sex work, as a choice, to overcome economic struggles (Rosen and Venkatesh, 2008). The act of choosing alternative and better paying work highlights their agency and can contribute to the feeling and sense of control (Kim and Peterson, 2020). The findings underscore the need for a clear understanding of self-esteem as it relates to sex work.

Theories of self-esteem, particularly those that emphasise social constructs and external validation, are particularly relevant here. The "Looking Glass Self", Charles Cooley, 1902, theory suggests that individuals form their self-concepts based on how they believe others perceive them (Darney, Howcroft and Stroud, 2013). In the context of sex work, this theory suggests that societal perceptions can profoundly affect the self-esteem of sex workers, often leading to a cycle of stigma and low self-worth. Further explorations of how self-esteem affects sex workers in various stages of their professional lives and how the nature of the profession, societal attitudes, and personal experiences shape their sense of self are highlighted;

**1. Self-Esteem and Entry into Sex Work**

One of the most debated aspects regarding self-esteem and sex work is the question of why individuals enter this profession. Popular stereotypes often suggest that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to become sex workers due to feelings of unworthiness or a lack of better options (Farley, 2004). However, research and personal accounts from sex workers present a more complex reality. Many sex workers, particularly those in more empowered and voluntary sectors of the industry, assert that they entered the profession due to financial necessity, flexibility, or the desire for autonomy, rather than out of desperation or low self-worth (Phoenix, 1999). Some have a strong sense of confidence in their bodies and sexual autonomy, viewing their work as a way to capitalise on these assets (van der Meulen, 2011). For these individuals, self-esteem may not be a determinant of entry but rather something they navigate and manage throughout their careers. However, for others, low self-esteem may contribute to choosing sex work, especially when alternative employment opportunities seem limited due to economic, educational, or social circumstances (Dalla, 2002). In such cases, sex work may appear as a viable option, not because it is aligned with an individual's self-image but because external factors have created limited alternatives. Vulnerability to exploitation may be heightened for those whose self-esteem has been undermined by trauma, social marginalisation, or other personal challenges (Farley, 2004).

## 2. Self-Esteem and Navigating the Profession

Once in the profession, a sex worker's self-esteem is shaped by a combination of personal, interpersonal, and societal factors. The attitudes of clients, coworkers, support networks, and broader society all have the potential to affect how sex workers feel about themselves and their work (Weitzer, 2009).

### a) Client Interactions

The quality of interactions with clients can have a significant impact on a sex worker's self-esteem. Positive, respectful client relationships may affirm a worker's value and professional identity, while demeaning or abusive encounters can diminish their self-worth (Koken, 2012). In a profession where physical appearance and sexual performance are often commodified, sex workers may experience fluctuations in self-esteem based on how clients perceive and treat them (Sanders, 2016). Validation from clients, particularly if it aligns with a worker's sense of control and autonomy, can reinforce positive self-esteem. Conversely, the depersonalisation and objectification inherent in many sex work settings can harm self-perception, especially when compounded by the imbalance of power between worker and client (Phoenix, 1999).

**b) Colleague and Peer Support**

For many sex workers, peer support networks are a crucial source of affirmation. These communities can provide understanding and validation that is often missing from mainstream society (van der Meulen, 2011). In environments where sex work is decriminalised and there are organized labour movements or unions, workers may find that their self-esteem is bolstered by the recognition of their rights, the ability to advocate for better working conditions, and a sense of solidarity with others in the profession (Koken, 2012). However, in highly stigmatised or criminalised environments, sex workers may struggle with self-esteem due to the isolation that comes from societal judgment and legal pressures (Farley, 2004). Workers who are forced to operate in secretive or dangerous conditions may internalise societal stigma, leading to feelings of shame and worthlessness (Sanders, 2016).

**c) Public and Media Representation**

The broader social stigma attached to sex work is one of the most significant factors affecting a worker's self-esteem. Sex work is often viewed through a lens of moral judgment, with sex workers stereotyped as victims, immoral, or deviant (Weitzer, 2009). This external condemnation can have a deeply negative impact on workers' self-esteem, especially when these narratives are internalised (Dalla, 2002). Media portrayals frequently focus on sensationalised or tragic depictions of sex work, further entrenching stereotypes that frame workers as lacking agency or value (Phoenix, 1999). However, recent years have seen a shift in how sex work is discussed in some progressive spaces, with more emphasis placed on autonomy, empowerment, and labour rights (Koken, 2012). This reframing can help sex workers to view their profession with pride and see themselves as empowered, competent individuals rather than passive victims.

## 3. Long-Term Impact on Self-Esteem

The long-term impact of sex work on an individual's self-esteem depends on various factors, including the duration of their involvement in the industry, the conditions under which they worked, and their experiences upon leaving the profession (Sanders, 2016).

### a) Exit Strategies and Reintegration

For those who choose to leave sex work, self-esteem can be influenced by how successfully they transition into other forms of employment or social roles (Dalla, 2002). Workers who are able to leave on their own terms, perhaps having saved money or gained skills that allow them to transition smoothly, may feel a strong sense of self-worth and accomplishment (Koken, 2012). However, those who leave due to burnout, trauma, or external pressure may struggle with feelings of failure or inadequacy, especially if they encounter barriers to reintegration into mainstream employment (Farley, 2004). In many cases, societal attitudes towards former sex

workers also play a significant role. The stigma of having been a sex worker can continue to affect a person's self-esteem long after they leave the industry (van der Meulen, 2011), especially if they face discrimination or social ostracism based on their past profession.

**b) Mental Health and Coping Mechanisms**

Mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and trauma, are prevalent among sex workers, especially in sectors of the industry where exploitation or violence is more common (Dalla, 2002). These conditions often intertwine with self-esteem, creating a cycle in which poor mental health exacerbates feelings of worthlessness, and low self-esteem fuels further mental health struggles (Farley, 2004). However, some workers develop robust coping mechanisms and resilience, especially when supported by strong peer networks, mental health services, or advocacy groups (van der Meulen, 2011).

For implementation in practice, these insights have significant implications for the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving the well-being, mental health and self-esteem of individuals involved in the sex industry. Programs that focus on destigmatisation, empowerment, and social support could be beneficial. Additionally, mental health services tailored to the unique experiences of sex workers, led or supported by their peers, could help mitigate the negative impacts of stigma and enhance self-esteem.

**6.1 Strengths**

Some of the studies utilised qualitative research which allowed for detailed analysis of the subject matter. Participants were free to explain themselves and expand on their responses which allowed

for collection of richer data. Further, there were contributions made to areas of research that catered to underrepresented populations and highlighted valuable contributions to the literature.

**6.2 Limitations**

This review has provided valuable insights into the impact of sex work and sex industry involvement on self-esteem, one limitation is that there is a lot of variability in how self-esteem is defined and measured across the different studies, which complicates the ability to compare findings. In most of the research, self-esteem and its domains made up only a small part of the research scope. Very little literature was available that had the specific interests of this review at the forefront. Thus, this review was disproportionately reliant on the research by Benoit et al, 2018, for data as it was the most relevant with regards to the interests of the current research. Moreover, majority of the studies relied on the participants' self-disclosure and self-reporting for their data which may introduce social desirability bias and collection of inaccurate information. This occurring because the subject matter of the research was usually highly sensitive and stigmatised topics such as sex work and HIV/AIDS. In addition to this, a lot of the studies had small sample sizes, which may not be representative of the wider population. Further, some studies relied on convenience sampling which means that the data collected can only be generalised to the specific populations of sex workers, however in this instance, that may be a benefit. Importantly, the little amount of research available makes generalising the findings of the few studies available, difficult.


**6.3 Implications for future research and practice**

Therefore, future research could aim for a more standardised approach to defining and measuring self-esteem in the context of the sex industry and sex work to allow for clearer comparisons and conclusions to be made. Future research can be conducted to increase the wealth of information

available on this area to promote greater understanding and contribute to what is available to inform policies and interventions. Moreover, exploration of the longitudinal effects of sex work on self-esteem should take place as experiences may change over time and different contexts. Research should also be conducted that offers comparisons between the impacts of the different forms of sex work and the different locations. For instance, sex workers active in resource rich countries of the "west" such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom might have different or similar experiences to those in the global south. Availability of this kind of information would allow international non-governmental organisations to help more individuals widely if their experiences are similar or to tailor existing interventions to specific needs. The unique experiences and locations of different sex workers, intersect with their other identities, such as race, their socio-economic background and status and gender identity which leads to different individuals experiencing the effects of the same occupation differently. Research into this intersectionality might provide more comprehensive understanding of self-esteem. Further research into the strategies of how those involved in the sex industry as a collective cope with the multitudes of issues they face that may impact their self-esteem and further, their mental health.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This study sought to collate the existing literature on the impact that involvement in the sex industry and/or sex work has on self-esteem and its domains of self-worth, self-efficacy and self-authenticity. It highlighted that the relationship between involvement in sex work or the sex industry with self-esteem is a complex one that is not entirely negative or entirely positive. The relationship between sex work and self-esteem is shown to be multifaceted and influenced by a many varied factors. The individual experiences of sex workers and the reactions of their society,

families and friends have a significant impact as well. There requires nuance to understand and a distinct lack judgement and bias from researchers. Not much exists in the way of research on these areas specifically but there is a wealth of research on stigma. Future research could emphasise the relationship between stigma and self-esteem and thus collect, collate and highlight literature on the impact of the stigma experienced from engaging in sex work on self-esteem. Further, research can look at the effectiveness of relevant interventions such as peer to peer counselling, the implementation of proper societal and structural support systems and education.

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# 9. Appendix

## 9.1 Appendix A

### Table 1 outline of key search terms and the search strategy

**Databases Searched**

| |
|---|
| PsycINFO, ProQuest, PubMed and Scopus |

**Search Strategy for PsycINFO**

| # | Searches |
|---|----------|
| 1 | "sex indust*" OR "sex work*" OR "female sex work*"OR "male sex work*" OR "trans sex work*" OR "prostitut*" OR "female prostitut*" OR "sex trad*" OR "transact* sex" OR "FSW*" OR "MSW*" OR "TSW*" OR "commercial sex" OR "sex-trade worker*" OR "adult service provider" OR "ASP" |
| 2 | "self-esteem" OR "self-worth" OR "self-efficacy" OR "self-authenticity" |
| 3 | 1 AND 2 |

**Search Strategy for ProQuest**

| # | Searches |
|---|----------|
| 1 | "sex indust*" OR "sex work*" OR "female sex work*"OR "male sex work*" OR "trans sex work*" OR "prostitut*" OR "female prostitut*" OR "sex trad*" OR "transact* sex" OR "FSW*" OR "MSW*" OR "TSW*" OR "commercial sex" OR "sex-trade worker*" OR "adult service provider" OR "ASP" <br> *DocType=All document types; peer reviewed Language=English;* |
| 2 | "self-esteem" OR "self-worth" OR "self-efficacy" OR "self-authenticity" <br> *DocType=All document types; peer reviewed Language=English;* |
| 3 | #2 AND #1 <br> *DocType=All document types; Language=English* |

**Search Strategy for PubMed**

| # | Searches |
|---|----------|
| 1 | Sex industry OR sex trade OR sex worker OR prostitution OR female sex worker OR <br><br> male sex worker OR trans sex worker OR commercial sex OR adult service provider |

| | |
|---|---|
| | OR ("Sex Work/ethnology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/psychology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/statistics and numerical data"[Mesh] ) |
| 2 | Self-esteem OR Self-worth OR self-efficacy OR self-authenticity OR "Self-Concept"[Mesh] OR "Self-Efficacy"[Mesh] |
| 3 | #1 AND #2 |

## Search Strategy for Scopus

| # | Searches |
|---|---|
| 1 | Sex industry OR sex trade OR sex worker OR prostitution OR female sex worker OR male sex worker OR trans sex worker OR commercial sex OR adult service provider OR ("Sex Work/ethnology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/psychology"[Mesh] OR "Sex Work/statistics and numerical data"[Mesh] ) |
| 2 | Self-esteem OR Self-worth OR self-efficacy OR self-authenticity OR "Self-Concept"[Mesh] OR "Self-Efficacy"[Mesh] |
| 3 | #1 AND #2 |

## 9.2 Appendix B

## Table 2: Summary of Studies

| Author, Year Title | Aims, Study design, Methodology | Location, Sample Demographic, size, characteristics & recruitment method | Data collection and Analysis | Key Findings | Strengths & Limitations |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asefa et al, 2022 Does the perception of HIV risk among Female sex workers affect HIV prevention behaviour? application of the Health Belief Model (HBM) | - aimed at assessing HIV prevention behaviours among FSWs in the District, using Health Belief Model -Community based cross-sectional study - | - Dima District, Agnuak zone Gambella region Ethiopia - 449 female sex workers who stayed in the area more than 6 months and those too ill or unable to communicate were excluded -Snowball sampling | - Independent variables comprised socio-demographic characteristics (Age, marital status, religion, educational status, place of residence), alcohol use, khat chewing, knowledge of HIV, HBM constructs (perceived susceptibility, perceived severity, perceived benefit, perceived barrier, cue to prevention behaviours, and self-efficacy). | - self-efficacy was significantly and positively correlated to the prevention behaviour ($r = -0.097$, $p < 0.05$ - respondents who had high self-efficacy in HIV prevention methods were 1.667 more likely to practice HIV prevention methods than those with low self-efficacy (AOR = 1.667, 95% CI: 1.107, 2.511). | Strengths: -is based on a theoretical framework guided by the Health Belief Model, the most recommended model for forecasting why people do not take preventive measures for health promotion and disease prevention -the study considered other variables beyond the HBM constructs, including knowledge of HIV/AIDS and attitude toward HIV prevention methods |

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| | | | | | Limitations: -snowball sampling may impact generalisability to wider SW population<br><br>- social desirability bias as it utilised self-reported data, so risk of overestimating findings |
| Bellhouse C, Crebbin S, Fairley CK, Bilardi JE, 2015<br><br>The Impact of Sex Work on Women's Personal Romantic Relationships and the Mental Separation of Their Work and Personal Lives: A Mixed-Methods Study. | - aimed to explore the impact sex work has on women's personal romantic relationships and the use of mental separation as a coping mechanism to balance the two aspects of their lives.<br><br>-exploratory study<br><br>-mixed methods | - Victoria, Australia<br><br>-55 sex workers, over 18, understood English and employed in licensed brothel, massage parlour or private escort<br><br>-opportunity sampling. Recruited by nurses at sexual health clinic during their 3 month check up | - anonymous questionnaire – 54 item self-report questionnaire<br><br>- member checking: after questionnaire data collection 6 more women were recruited for semi-structured qualitative interviews<br><br>-SPSS for questionnaires<br><br>-Open ended were transcribed and thematically analysed | - majority of the women who were in relationships believed that overall, sex work affected their romantic relationships (78%) in mainly negative ways.<br><br>- positive impact some of the women felt that sex work had enabled them to experience deeper intimacy with their partners and that sex work improved their private sex life as well as their self- | Strengths: - the research adds to what is already limited data on the impact of sex work on women's personal intimate relationships<br><br>-focused on sex workers employed in the legal sex industry where occupational health and safety measures are in place and enforced<br><br>- qualitative aspect allowed for in-depth exploration of the Women's' experiences |

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| | | | | esteem and confidence. | -anonymity may have allowed for participants to be more honest<br><br>Limitations: -small sample of indoor sex workers so may not be generalisable to wider sex worker population<br><br>-self-reported nature not allowed for full exploration of feelings |
| Benoit et al, 2018<br><br>Sex work and three dimensions of self-esteem: self-worth, authenticity and self-efficacy | - the paper presents a qualitative account of how self-esteem is understood by a heterogeneous sample of adults engaged in sex work in Canada.<br><br>- multi-project community engaged study<br><br>-mixed methods | -Canada<br><br>- 218 participants, mean age = 34, 19 years and older, legal working status in the country, and have received money in exchange for sexual services on at least 15 different occasions in previous 12 months<br><br>-76% women, 17% men, 7% other<br><br>- non-random sampling, participants were recruited via contact online, through | -closed ended section of data collection got demographic data<br><br>-assessed resilience, perceived stigma, substance use<br><br>-grouped participants as indoor and indoor based<br><br>-data analysed using SPSS; bivariate analysis on quantitative measures including t-tests and chi squared<br><br>-qualitative analysis on set open ended questions | - Most participants' accounts addressed more than one type of self-esteem, with 59% reporting elements of at least two of them and 19% mentioning all three components | Strengths: - might be the only study that captures in detail the findings in relation to self-esteem for relatively large and heterogenous sample<br><br>Limitations: - lack of validated measure of self-esteem<br><br>-non-random sampling reduces generalisability<br><br>-participants may have been biased to only give positive accounts |

| | | research posters in newspapers, through social and health services, non-profit community partners and referrals from other participants<br><br>-given CA$60 honorarium for participation | coded using NVivo and thematic analysis | | of themselves and their experiences |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yelena Bird, Mark Lemstra, Marla Rogers & John Moraros, 2016<br><br>Third-world realities in a first-world setting: A study of the HIV/AIDS-related conditions and risk behaviors of sex trade workers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada | - purpose of this study was to (a) describe the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the sex trade workers in the health region, (b) identify their significant life events, self-reported problems, knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, self-efficacy, and barriers regarding HIV, and (c) | -Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada<br>-convenience sampling<br>- 340 sex trade workers at risk of contracting HIV<br>-only 18 or older who gave both informed and written consent<br>-69.9% women and 30.1% men<br>- $20 honorarium for participation | -sex trade workers identified as those who answered 'yes' to if they had ever given sex to get money in the last 6 months and if they had ever given sex to get drugs within the last 6 months<br>-Socio-demographic and socio-economic data<br>-HIV/AIDS related knowledge and behaviours<br>-SPSS used for analysis | -all relevant questions demonstrated a greater than 50% chance of agreement implying high self-efficacy | Strengths: - unique contributions of sex trade worker data<br>Limitations: - convenience sample of self-reported data so there might be desirability bias and over or under reporting<br>- lack of generalisability to wider sex trade worker population |

| | determine the significant independent risk indicators for STW self-reporting a chance of greater than 50% of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS<br><br>-quantitative cross-sectional descriptive study | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Andrea N. Cimino, 2019<br><br>Uncovering Intentions to Exit Prostitution: Findings from a Qualitative Study | - purpose of the current study is to qualitatively elucidate IEP/IMBP (Integrative model of Behavioural Prediction) theoretical constructs (i.e., attitude, norm, and efficacy beliefs, agency) related to the prostitution exiting process | -14 former and 2 active prostitutes; 13 female and 3 male and 2 of the male participants self-identified as gay<br><br>- recruitment through adverts posted in high prostitution neighbourhoods, support group and adult jobs section of Backpage.com a site known to facilitate prostitution | -qualitative interviews<br><br>-template analysis for flexibility and use of a priori themes based on IEP/IMBP constructs | - what the participants who had exited were describing was resilient self-efficacy, the notion that in spite of challenging circumstance, I believe I can do better and I deserve better.<br><br>- Upon re-analysing the narratives, all of the exiters exemplified resilient | Strengths: - the sampling method used helped improve the research's transferability<br><br>Limitations: - qualitative data so no quantitative criteria to measure quality or make generalisable conclusions |

| | | | | self-efficacy to some degree. | 62 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | -qualitative component of an exploratory sequential mixed methods study | -stratified purposeful sapling to get participants that were representative of major variations of prostitution in the USA and the exiting process | | | |
| Shannon Deer, Jill Zarestky, Lisa M. Baumgartner, 2020  Learn how to hustle for good": Women's work transitions out of the sex trade | -purpose of this study was to explore women's experiences transitioning from illegal engagement in the sex trade to legal employment  - qualitative research design | - 10 women participated, English speaking, over 18 years old, engaged in sex work in Texas, for at least 12 months and had exited prior to inclusion  -Organisations in Texas that support women exiting the sex trade assisted in participant recruitment. organisations' leaders initiated all contact with potential participants by sending the corresponding author's contact information and a summary of the study to potential participants | -2 semi-structured interviews with open ended questions | -All 10 participants valued the positive influence earning an income, providing for themselves and, in some cases, providing for their families had on their self-esteem | Strengths: - findings support evidence that self-efficacy is a critical factor in transferring skills from one context; sex work; to another; legal work  Limitations: - lack of diversity of participants in race, gender and category of sex work engaged in |

| | | via email, phone, or in person, and inviting potential participants to reach out to the first author if they were interested in participating<br><br>-purposive sampling | | | 63 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| G. Kalemi, 1 S. Gkioka, 1 P. Tsapatsari, 1 G. Tzeferakos, 1 T. Kandri, 2 M.L. Psarra, 1 F. Konstantopoulou, 1 A. Douzenis, 2017<br><br>Stigma and self-esteem:<br>A case of HIV-positive sex-workers | -the study attempted to identify specific ways in which stigma may affect female HIV positive street workers stigmatized by the media in Greece of 2012, and how the stigmatization was related to their self-esteem<br><br>- | -Greece<br>- 27 imprisoned and HIV positive sex workers, aged between 18 and 48<br>-convenience sampling | -semi structured interviews developed by the multidisciplinary team of the Forensic Unit aiming specifically to outline the HIV-positive sex workers' experience after their personal information exposure in national media, and to investigate how this experience along with their lifestyle and the new issues uplifted (imprisonment, HIV), affected their feelings and thoughts about themselves and their life in general | -Rosenberg self-esteem scale 22% (6/27) of the women presented low self-esteem, 74% (20/27) of them presented normal self-esteem and a 3,7% (1/27) presented high self-esteem | Strengths: - provided additional insights on stigma and self-esteem<br><br>Limitations: - cannot draw causal relationship just associations between variables<br><br>-participants were interviewed whilst imprisoned so they did not experience the stigmatising events directly, they were informed of them |

| | | | -descriptive statistics calculated for behavioural and medical data<br><br>-Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for interview data<br><br>- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale | | 64 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sage J. Kim and Caryn Peterson, 2020<br><br>The health effects of gendered and devalued work: health outcomes of incarcerated women engaging in sex work and care/service work | - study examined incarcerated women's engagement in sex work and low-wage care/service work and the impact of this work on their health and wellbeing<br><br>- | -Cook County Jail, Chicago, Illinois, USA<br><br>-400 women detained in a large urban jail in original study<br><br>-68.6% black<br><br>-final sample n=277 women<br><br>-24% engaged exclusively in sex work and 34% in care/service work. However, 41% of women held both sex work and care/service work jobs before incarceration | -Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale<br><br>- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale<br><br>-socio demographic characteristics<br><br>-social support survey and adverse childhood events survey<br><br>-Analysis using Strata; chi square and t-tests and multivariable logistic and linear regression | -women in care/service work jobs exclusively reported lower levels of self-esteem than women engaging in sex work | Strengths: - findings add valuable insight to existing literature<br><br>Limitations: - the data was self-reported which might introduce bias especially with regards to data on illicit activities<br><br>-highly specific group of women so generalisability is a problem |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ian Mc Cabe, Rónán Mills, Donnchadh Murphy, Sarah-Jane Winders, Judy Hayden, Deirdre Reynolds, Jenny Mc Cabe & Anne McQuaid, 2014

A psychocultural comparison of male street prostitutes in Dublin and San Francisco | - the aim of the study is to identify psychocultural differences and similarities between male street prostitutes in Dublin and San Francisco

-quantitative; cross cultural | - 23 MSPs; 11 in San Francisco; 12 in Dublin

- non-random direct approach and snowball sampling

-a flyer was distributed providing contact details of the head researcher

-each participant would receive $20 or the equivalent in Dublin.

-All participants were offered free counselling with a counselling psychologist in San Francisco and a psychiatrist in Dublin, in the event of resultant distress | -semi structured interview

-Beck Depression Inventory

-Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation

-Drug Assessment Screening Test

-CAGE questionnaire

-Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory. | -There were no statistically significant differences in self-esteem, suicidal ideation, or alcohol or other drug dependencies | Limitations: - very small sample size

- participation selection was non-random, limited to the working environment in San Francisco and the social environment in Dublin so samples may not be identical

-data relied on self-disclosure so it may not accurate |
| Cory L. Pedersen, Amanda R. Champion 1, Cassandra L. Hesse, Brodie J. Lewis, 2015 | -the aim of this study was to evaluate similarities and differences between exotic dancers and non- | -Canada

-230 women, 18 – 49 years, predominantly English speaking

-178 students from research participant | - demographic information and descriptive statistics

-Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale | - study indicated no significant differences between university students and exotic dancers on self-esteem, or on the personality variables | Limitations: - the study was not longitudinal

- difficulty in recruiting exotic dancers to participate means that those who took part may not be |

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| A Question of Deviancy: Comparing Exotic Dancers and Female University Students | dancing female university students on demographic variables, self-esteem, aspects of personality, attitudes toward sex and sexuality, and attitudes toward exotic dance and exotic dancers<br><br>- quantitative | pool of a large Western Canadian University<br><br>-52 exotic dancers recruited through site visits to 9 exotic dance clubs the snowball sampling<br><br>-students completed the surveys in exchange for course credit and exotic dancers entered their names into a gift certificate draw | -Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Brief Version<br><br>-Brief Sexual Attitudes Scale<br><br>-Attitudes Toward Exotic Dance Scale | of either neuroticism or extraversion | representative of the average dancer<br><br>-sample only reflects a small portion of the exotic dancer population |
| Ruth Pinedo González,1 Andrés Palacios Picos,1 and Myriam de la Iglesia Gutiérrez, 2021<br><br>"Surviving the Violence, Humiliation, and Loneliness Means Getting High": Violence, Loneliness, and | -This study uses the theory of loneliness to explore the relations among violence, self-esteem, loneliness, health, and drug use | - autonomous region of Spain<br><br>-146 female sex workers; 19% being transgender women<br><br>-Purposive sampling; participants were recruited with the help of local NGOs that support sex workers<br><br>-Participants were engaged in different types of prostitution, 14% on the street, 23% | - Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults Short Version<br><br>-Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale<br><br>-WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire for quality of life | - self-esteem has a protector role on loneliness | Limitations: - sample was not random and thus may not be representative<br><br>- self-reported data, so responses might be subject to social desirability bias |

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| Health of Female Sex Workers | | in nightclubs, and 63% in brothels<br><br>-mean age of participants was 30.88 years old (SD = 7.63), ranging from 19 to 53 years old<br><br>-Most participants were of non-Spanish origin (77.4%) but they were native Spanish speakers | | | |
| Marla Rochelle Rogers, MPA; Mark Edgar Lemstra, PhD, John Simeon Moraros, PhD, 2015<br><br>Risk Indicators of Depressed Mood Among Sex-Trade Workers and Implications for HIV Risk Behaviour | - aimed to determine the prevalence of depressed mood among people who have traded sex for money in SHR; to determine adjusted risk factors for having depressed mood among this sample; and to determine if depressed mood was associated with decreased self-efficacy for | -Saskatoon, Canada<br>-299 people, 18 and over who have traded sex for money<br>-recruited from a primary care clinic in one of the low income neighbourhoods; needle exchange and primary care facility, AIDS Saskatoon and from a facility that offers free meals | - Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale<br>-measure self-efficacy for safe sexual practices, the research team used 7 sexual health–related items from an HIV risk behaviour self-efficacy scale<br>-Analysed using SPSS | - study suggests that high rates of depressed mood among people who have traded sex for money is associated with injection drug use and low self-efficacy for safe sexual health practices | Limitations: - study was cross-sectional and, therefore, unable to determine causation.<br><br>-Although validated scales were used, all of the information generated was based on self-report thus subject to bias<br><br>-study did not discriminate between the various types of STWs or the conditions under which they traded sex for money. |

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| | safe sexual practices and injection drug use among people who have traded sex for money | -$20 was given to each participant for taking part | | | |
| Tsang, E.Y.H., 2021 "Be the Dream Queen": Gender Performativity, Femininity, and Transgender Sex Workers in China | - study uses the conceptual framework of gender performativity, that is, gender is performative and distinct from physical bodies and binary classifications -qualitative | -Tianjin, North China -49 male to female (MTF) transgender sex workers (TSWs); 23 - 48 years old - TSWs knew that the author was a full-time researcher but not a full-time bartender which is how the researcher recruited participants -all signed consent forms | -recorded in-depth interviews and post field notes - interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed with the guidance of grounded theory -translated into English and NVivo software used for coding and analysis | - Embracing their femininity constitutes a self-help program, enabling them to build self-confidence and develop a positive self-image | Strength: - Research focuses on an underrepresented population, contributing to the literature Limitations: - small sample |
| Mathilde Turcotte1 and Nadine Lanctôt, 2021 Managing the toll of sex work with bounded agency: | - objectives were to identify strategies they used to protect their self-concept and better understand the challenges they | -Quebec, Canada -14 participants; 18 years and older who were former sex workers -Practitioners who work with sex workers | -qualitative narratives, semi structured interviews -QDA Miner was used for coding and analysis | - Findings show that ex-sex workers were very aware of the risks of sex work for their self-concept. Indeed, they used a variety of strategies to avoid being | Strengths: - contributions of first hand perspectives such as the shame, guilt, and tendency to self-blame of ex-sex workers, who perceived their decisions to relax their |

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| Perspectives of ex-sex workers | faced in their efforts to keep sex work within their comfort zone<br><br>-qualitative | or vulnerable women helped recruit participants or participants also referred others<br><br>-Participants were give $50 gift certificate for participation | | discovered and to protect their sense of self | rules and to compromise with boundaries caused a gradual weakening of their sense of self<br><br>Limitation: - focus on narratives by ex sex workers only limits transferability to active sex workers<br><br>-small sample, so not generalisable |
| Tal Yaakobovitch,· Moshe Bensimon, Yael Idisis, 2024<br><br>A qualitative analysis of male actors in amateur pornography: motivations, implications and challenges | - study focuses on amateur porn male actors' lived experiences and initially explores their motivations, challenges, and ways of coping with particular difficulties in this business<br><br>-qualitative | -27 Israeli male amateur porn actors<br><br>-21 years and over<br><br>-21 identified themselves as gay, 5 as heterosexual and 1 was bisexual<br><br>- they were recruited through internet dating sites and advertisements and porn producers were asked to send the researchers' invitation to actors | -Semi Structured Interview<br><br>-interpretative phenomenological analysis | - positive implications such as increased self-esteem and gaining admiration and appreciation, as well as negative implications, such as impaired interpersonal relationships, social stigmatization, harassments and persecutions, and physical and | Limitations: - could not recruit an equal number of female participants<br><br>-could not recruit equal numbers in terms of sexual orientation |

| | | | | psychological work injuries | |
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## 9.3 Appendix C

### Fig 1. Flow chart of included studies

**Identification of studies via databases and registers**

**Identification**

Records identified from:
Databases (n = 16,669):
PsycINFO (n = 191)
ProQuest (n = 7656)
PubMed (n = 6713)
Scopus (n = 2109)

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records (n = 490)

**Screening**

Records screened
(n = 16 179)

Records excluded
(n = 16 009)

Reports sought for retrieval
(n = 40)

Reports not retrieved
(n = 6)

Reports assessed for eligibility
(n = 34)

Reports excluded:
Wrong publication type (n = 4)
Not eligible (n = 15)

**Included**

New studies included in review
(n =15)