Takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ People's Experiences of Homelessness and Sex Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

At present, there is limited research on the intersection of sex work, takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ communities, and experiences of homelessness in Aotearoa New Zealand. This paper helps to bridge this gap, exploring how takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people who had been failed by the welfare state engaged in sex work during periods of homelessness, and expressed agency in difficult circumstances. Specifically, we look at sex and sex work as a means to secure basic needs, and in the context of exploitative relationships; the emotional effects of sex work; and safety and policing. A stronger welfare state is needed to provide sufficient support for people to realise an adequate standard of living and treat them with dignity and respect.

Introduction

This paper explores the intersections of takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ identities, experiences of homelessness, and sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand (henceforth Aotearoa NZ; Aotearoa is the name for New Zealand in te reo Māori, the country's indigenous language). Using qualitative data, we explore how some takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people experience homelessness, meet their basic needs through sex, are exposed to exploitative relationships, blur boundaries in intimate relationships, experience emotional effects of sex work, and navigate safety and policing. We seek to move beyond simplistic framings of sex workers as lacking in agency, contributing to existing literature on sex work and agency through

the lens of takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ homelessness.[1] The data we present serves to deepen existing scholarship on LGBTIQ+ homelessness and sex work both in Aotearoa NZ and internationally, particularly through our exploration of agency and exploitation.

At the 2018 Census, there were over 41,000 New Zealanders, or nearly 0.9% of the population, who were experiencing homelessness.[2] Of these, Māori (Aotearoa NZ's indigenous people) and Pacific people's rates of homelessness were nearly four and six times higher, respectively, than Pākehā/New Zealand Europeans. The 2018 Census data also showed that slightly more women were experiencing homelessness than men. Rates of homelessness in Aotearoa NZ have steadily been increasing since counts first began. Homelessness in Aotearoa NZ is the sharp edge of precarity, in which precarity of labour markets and place contribute to pathways into homelessness.[3] Other research identifies that there are 'drifters' for whom homelessness is a continuation of their existing hardships and experiences of poverty, and 'droppers' who have higher class backgrounds and have somewhat unexpectedly dropped into a state of homelessness.[4] Liberal welfare states, such as Aotearoa NZ, see high levels of poverty and homelessness due to neoliberalism and subsequent decreases in state-provided support, particularly since the 1980s and 90s.[5] A 2019 government-mandated review of the welfare system found that it is not fit-for-purpose, and that low benefit rates do not cover basic costs and thus result in increased poverty.[6] People experiencing homelessness face extreme levels of poverty and struggle to obtain incomes on par with the wider population, even after receiving support from programmes such as Housing First.[7]

[1]   R Andrijasevic and N Mai, 'Editorial: Trafficking (in) representations: Understanding the recurring appeal of victimhood and slavery in neoliberal times', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121771; C Cojocaru, 'My Experience is Mine to Tell: Challenging the abolitionist victimhood framework', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 12–38, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121772.

[2]   K Amore, H Viggers, and P Howden-Chapman, *Severe Housing Deprivation in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2018*, Wellington, 2020.

[3]   N Christensen, 'The Sharp Edge of Precarity', Master's Thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2017.

[4]   D Hodgetts *et al.*, 'Drifting Along or Dropping into Homelessness', *Antipode*, vol. 44, issue 4, 2012, pp. 1209–1226, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00977.x.

[5]   S Fitzpatrick and M Stephens, 'Welfare Regimes, Housing Systems and Homelessness', *European Journal of Homelessness*, vol. 1, December 2007, pp. 201–212.

[6]   Welfare Expert Advisory Group, *Whakamana Tāngata: Restoring dignity to social security in New Zealand*, Wellington, 2019.

[7]   N Pierse *et al.*, 'Two-Year Post-Housing Outcomes for a Housing First Cohort in Aotearoa New Zealand', *European Journal of Homelessness*, vol. 16, issue 2, 2022, pp. 121–144.

There is a small amount of research on takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ homelessness in Aotearoa NZ. It is estimated that a fifth of transgender and gender-diverse people have experienced homelessness.[8] Thirty-eight per cent of takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ high school-aged youth have experienced housing deprivation, compared to 28.4 per cent of non-takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ youth.[9] Qualitative research on the backgrounds of takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people who had experienced homelessness showed they shared commonalities: their family relationships, finances, and housing were unstable; they had to grow up fast due to social and material conditions; they had difficulties accessing housing in stressed markets; and they had been affected by systems failures that resulted in a lack of autonomy.[10] Other research has highlighted the importance of community engagement, insider research, and scholar-activism when conducting research on takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ homelessness in Aotearoa NZ.[11]

International research on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness has often focused on their vulnerability and victimisation, including their participation in sex work. Participation in sex work is often motivated by economic stressors. LGBTIQ+ people who are experiencing homelessness engage in 'survival sex' and sex work at consistently higher rates than non-LGBTIQ+ people who are experiencing homelessness.[12] 'Survival sex' is defined as trading sex to meet one's survival needs, including housing, and is often a non-cash exchange that is a response to poverty.[13] However, the term has been critiqued as it reiterates the harmful notion that no one would choose to sell sex under other

8   J Veale *et al.*, *Counting Ourselves*, Hamilton, 2019.

9   T Clark *et al.*, *Youth19 Housing Deprivation Brief*, University of Auckland & Victoria University of Wellington, Auckland, 2021, https://www.youth19.ac.nz/publications/housing-deprivation-a-youth19-brief.

10 B Fraser, E Chisholm, and N Pierse, '"You're so Powerless": Takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people's experiences before becoming homeless in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Plos One*, vol. 16, issue 12, 2021, pp. 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0259799.

11 T Vandenburg, S Groot, and L W Nikora, '"This Isn't a Fairy Tale We're Talking about; This Is Our Real Lives": Community-orientated responses to address trans and gender diverse homelessness', *Journal of Community Psychology*, vol. 50, issue 4, 2022, pp. 1966–1979, https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22606.

12 R Gangamma *et al.*, 'Comparison of HIV Risks among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Heterosexual Homeless Youth', *J Youth Adolescence*, vol. 37, 2008, pp. 456–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-007-9171-9; S K Kattari and S Begun, 'On the Margins of Marginalized: Transgender homelessness and survival sex', *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, vol. 32, issue 1, 2017, pp. 92–103, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109916651904.

13 N E Walls and S Bell, 'Correlates of Engaging in Survival Sex among Homeless Youth and Young Adults', *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 48, issue 5, 2011, pp. 423–436, https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2010.501916.

conditions, and serves to stigmatise and disempower.[14] Compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers, LGBTIQ+ youth experiencing homelessness who engage in 'survival sex' report significantly higher numbers of clients, as well as inconsistent condom use with clients, putting them at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections.[15] Other research has found that LGBTIQ+ youth who engage in sex work and 'survival sex' are aware of the risks associated with these practices, and the importance of safe sex.[16] Furthermore, LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness report minimal protection and frequent victimisation when engaging in 'survival sex'.[17]

Such research has not been common within the Aotearoa NZ context, given the jurisdiction's legislation and policy on sex work. Aotearoa NZ was the first country to fully decriminalise sex work amongst adults with the passing of the *Prostitution Reform Act 2003*.[18] Decriminalisation has had little effect on the numbers of sex workers and has served to lessen power imbalances between sex workers and police, as well as protect them from exploitation.[19] It remains illegal for migrants on temporary visas to work in the sex industry, which has caused division within

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[14] K McMillan, H Worth, and P Rawstorne, 'Usage of the Terms Prostitution, Sex Work, Transactional Sex, and Survival Sex', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, vol. 47, issue 5, 2018, pp. 1517–1527, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-1140-0.

[15] B D L Marshall *et al.*, 'Survival Sex Work and Increased HIV Risk among Sexual Minority Street-Involved Youth', *J Acquir Immune Defic Syndr*, vol. 53, issue 5, 2010, pp. 661–664, https://doi.org/10.1097/QAI.0b013e3181c300d7.

[16] G L Ream, K F Barnhart, and K V Lotz, 'Decision Processes about Condom Use among Shelter-Homeless LGBT Youth in Manhattan', *AIDS Research and Treatment*, vol. 2012, 2012, pp. 14–17, https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/659853.

[17] E J Alessi *et al.*, 'Victimization and Resilience Among Sexual and Gender Minority Homeless Youth Engaging in Survival Sex', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 36, issue 23-24, 2020, pp. 11236–11259, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519898434.

[18] G Abel, 'A Decade of Decriminalization: Sex work "down under" but not underground', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, vol. 14, issue 5, 2014, pp. 580–592, https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895814523024; G Abel, L J Fitzgerald, and C Brunton, 'The Impact of Decriminalisation on the Number of Sex Workers in New Zealand', *Journal of Social Policy*, vol. 38, issue 3, 2009, pp. 515–531, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279409003080; E Aroney, 'Changing Minds and Changing Laws: How New Zealand sex workers and their allies shaped decriminalisation in New Zealand', *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, vol. 18, issue 4, 2021, pp. 952–967, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00564-z.

[19] Abel, 2014; Abel, Fitzgerald, and Brunton; L Armstrong, 'From Law Enforcement to Protection? Interactions between sex workers and police in a decriminalized street-based sex industry', *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 57, issue 3, 2017, pp. 570–588, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw019.

the community, and opens them up to exploitation.[20] Decriminalisation has also meant that scholars are more likely to view sex work as legitimate work and have less-often focused on sex work as a behavioural risk factor. This differs dramatically from the emerging body of literature that suggests LGBTIQ+ communities are over-represented in 'sex trafficking' figures and are vulnerable to 'sex trafficking', particularly when experiencing homelessness.[21] Such studies have predominantly been conducted within a United States context, where federal law conflates all sex work with trafficking. There has been no evidence to suggest human trafficking into sex work is, or was, an issue in the Aotearoa NZ context.[22] In exploring structural failures (such as an inadequate welfare system) and agency in the context of LGBTIQ+ homelessness and sex work, we hope to provide further nuance to these discussions of exploitation and power that frequently emerge in the 'sex trafficking' literature.

Methods

Terminology

The acronym LGBTIQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and other minority gender and sexual orientation identities (such as pansexual, non-binary, and asexual). The word takatāpui historically translates to 'intimate partner of the same sex' and is widely used among LGBTIQ+ Māori as both an identity in and of itself, to describe their sexuality or gender in culturally

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[20]   G Easterbrook-Smith, 'Resisting Division: Migrant sex work and "New Zealand working girls"', *Continuum*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2021, pp. 546–558, https://doi.org/10.10 80/10304312.2021.1932752.

[21]   J K P Greeson *et al.*, 'Prevalence and Correlates of Sex Trafficking among Homeless and Runaway Youths Presenting for Shelter Services', *Social Work Research*, vol. 43, issue 2, 2019, pp. 91–100, https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svz001; K A Hogan and D Roe-Sepowitz, 'LGBTQ+ Homeless Young Adults and Sex Trafficking Vulnerability', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2023, pp. 63–78, https://doi.org/10.1080 /23322705.2020.1841985; J S Middleton *et al.*, 'Youth Experiences Survey (YES): Exploring the scope and complexity of sex trafficking in a sample of youth experiencing homelessness', *Journal of Social Service Research*, vol. 44, issue 2, 2018, pp. 141–157, https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1428924; C Schwarz and H E Britton, 'Queering the Support for Trafficked Persons: LGBTQ communities and human trafficking in the heartland', *Social Inclusion*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2015, pp. 63–75, https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v3i1.172.

[22]   L Armstrong, G Abel, and M Roguski, 'Fear of Trafficking or Implicit Prejudice? Migrant sex workers and the impacts of Section 19', in L Armstrong and G Abel (eds.), *Sex Work and the New Zealand Model*, Bristol University Press, Bristol, 2020, pp. 113–134; N Mai *et al.*, 'Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, issue 9, 2021, pp. 1607–1628, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1892 790.

appropriate ways, and as an umbrella term which embraces all Māori with diverse sexualities, gender identities, and sex characteristics.[23] We choose not to use the term 'sex trafficking' as it is poorly defined, and often employed to refer to all sex work—especially in the US context.[24] For the Aotearoa NZ context, we do not believe 'trafficking' to be a useful term.[25] We use the term sex work to refer to instances where sexual services are provided for payment or reward (not necessarily monetary), and emphasise the agency available to those who participate in sex work as a direct result of structural constraints and inequities.

Sampling and Procedures

The data we present in this paper comes from BF's doctoral research, which was one of the first to look at takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people's experiences of homelessness in Aotearoa NZ. The aims of this broader project were to explore the experiences of homelessness for takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people; to investigate how takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ homelessness relates to other sites of oppression; and to understand how both government and wider support systems shape the experiences of takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ homelessness. Interviews with takatāpui/LGBTIQ+-identifying people who had been, or were, homeless were conducted between October 2018 and February 2019. Participants were required to be in the same region as the research team, so they could easily join a participatory video project intended to complement interviews.[26] Participant recruitment was carried out via posters in key locations across Wellington, social media and emails, word of mouth, and researcher visits to additional key locations. Social media and word of mouth were the most effective form of recruitment; visits to key locations did not eventuate in any recruitments; and one participant was recruited from a poster in a public library. The research utilised the critical paradigm, which allows for the researcher's values to be central in the purpose and methods of the research.[27] This gives spaces for BF's insider position as a queer and non-binary person, enabling them to understand the research findings in ways that outsiders to takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ communities might not.

23   E Kerekere, 'Part of The Whānau: The emergence of takatāpui identity', Victoria University of Wellington, 2017.

24   B Chapman-Schmidt, '"Sex Trafficking" as Epistemic Violence', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 12, 2019, pp. 172–187, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.2012191211.

25   Abel, 2014.

26   B Fraser, E Chisholm, and N Pierse, 'A Failed Attempt at Participatory Video With Takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ People Who Had Experience Homelessness', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 21, 2022, pp. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221103663.

27   J Ponterotto, 'Qualitative Research in Counseling Psychology', *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 52, issue 2, 2005, pp. 126–136.

Eight people were interviewed who met the Aotearoa NZ definition of homelessness, which includes couchsurfing and living in temporary or inadequate accommodation.[28] Ethics approval was granted by the University of Otago's Human Ethics Committee, reference 18/147. This is the same sample of participants as discussed in our previous work.[29] Table 1 provides basic demographic details for participants. They had experienced homelessness at a range of points in time, as we kept the inclusion criteria open to any lifetime experience of homelessness. For the most part, participants were highly educated. Avery, Ayeisha, Marielle, and Omar had all attended university; Felix and Clara had attended polytechnics (tertiary institutions that offer hands-on, vocational, study options). All participants experienced severe poverty and financial insecurity before, during, and after their periods of homelessness. Six of the eight participants (all except for Ayeisha and Avery) reported engaging in sex work or using sex to secure their basic needs; all participants were asked about sex work. Most participants were Pākehā. We chose not to collect iwi (Māori tribes/nations) data to maintain confidentiality; the small sample size and small size of the takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ community means participants would have had their anonymity jeopardised as they would have been easily identifiable. For this same reason we have not specified Omar's nationality to maintain anonymity.

Table 1 – Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender & Sexuality	Ethnicity	Age at Interview	Forms of Homelessness	Decade of Homelessness Experience
Avery	Female, Gender fluid, Bigender, Trans, Bisexual	Pākehā	50s	Garage, Couch surfing, AirBnB	2010s
Ayeisha	Female, Lesbian	Pākehā	70s	Garage	1980s
Clara	Female, Trans, Heterosexual	Māori	30s	Emergency accommodation, Rough sleeping, Hostels, Couch surfing	1990s, 2010s
Felix	Male, Pansexual	Pākehā	30s	Rough sleeping, Couch surfing	1990s, 2000s, 2010s
Marielle	Female, Queer, Pansexual	Pākehā	20s	Rough sleeping, Couch surfing	2010s
Nico	Takatāpui, Trans, Queer	Māori	30s	Couch surfing, Squatting, Bus/van, Foster care	1990s, 2010s
Omar	Male, Bisexual	African	30s	Rough sleeping, Shelter	2010s
Thom	Male, Bisexual	Pākehā	40s	Rough sleeping, Couch surfing, Hostels	1990s

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28   K Amore *et al.*, *Severe Housing Deprivation*, Statistics New Zealand, Wellington, 2013.

29   Fraser, Chisholm, and Pierse, 2021; Fraser, Chisholm and Pierse, 2022.

Data Analysis

The research used constructivist grounded theory, which meant there was no target sample size set in advance, this is determined by theoretical sufficiency.[30] Theoretical sufficiency is said to be reached when the data no longer produces theoretical insights. Once theoretical sufficiency was reached at seven interviews, the research team was consulted to confirm this was appropriate. An additional participant was interviewed to ensure theoretical sufficiency was reached. A total of 126 codes were created. Of these, 72 were top-level codes and a further 54 were secondary-level codes nested underneath. Codes were created by BF and the remaining authors were consulted throughout. During the beginning of coding, the codes were mostly descriptors, many of which aligned with BF's literature review and the interview schedule. As more interviews were conducted, categories were determined, and the data was coded accordingly. These intermediary codes/ categories were discussed, refined, and expanded upon with the remaining authors to form our final categories. In this article we discuss categories related to sex and sex work; other categories are discussed elsewhere.[31]

Results

Meeting Basic Needs through Sex

Sex and sex work were a means through which participants could secure their basic needs, such as income and shelter, while they were experiencing poverty and homelessness. Clara explains how it felt to begin sex work:

> *Cool, cuz I had all this money. But also, also freaky…you're like underage and suddenly you're introduced into doing very adult things like having sex with men…and all those sorts of things, it's really very different when you're 14, but you just think about the money…you need the money to live, you've gotta eat, you've gotta pay rent, you've gotta stay in a hotel room, so you do it.*

Clara's ambivalence is evident in this quote: sex work empowered her to access the money she needed for her basic needs, but it was also 'freaky'; as a child doing 'very adult things', she focussed on the importance of the money to get through it.

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[30]   K Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, SAGE Publications, London, 2006; P Liamputtong, *Qualitative Research Methods*, Third edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009.

[31]   Fraser, Chisholm, and Pierse, 2021.

At a time when Clara was unable to receive support from the social welfare system, or secure a formal job, sex work was her means of survival:

> *Yeah so you would have everything on you, your razor, your shampoo, your conditioner, body wash, on you, in your handbag, with your make up and maybe like a slutty dress to wear as well because you'd never know where you'd be and you'd just have to whip out the dress and make some money, could be anywhere, anytime, you might need money, so that's like your credit card… your slutty dress is the hooker's equivalent of a credit card where you could just whip it out and boom, make some money.*

In making sure she was always prepared, Clara gave herself the power to decide when and where she would find clients and make money.

Marielle shared how, when she was experiencing homelessness, people would offer her accommodation in exchange for sex, or suggest she go out in order to obtain accommodation this way:

> *Oh, 'you can have a bed for the night if you come and sleep with me.' Like I had a few people offer me that, like 'oh, it's a bed for the night' or, 'why don't you just go to town, it's much more possible, you can get free drinks, numb yourself down, and then go and fuck someone and you've got a bed for the night, really nice, really easy.'*

Here we can see that sex had the potential of being a way for Marielle to obtain somewhere to sleep for a night. Yet, this option was one that caused considerable inner turmoil for Marielle, as is clear by her description of the need to 'numb' herself with alcohol in order to go through with it.

Exploitative Relationships

Some participants reported sex occurring as a result of exploitative relationships; in these cases, sex enabled the continuation of a relationship that helped people survive systems failures such as poverty and an inadequate welfare state. Exploitation occurred in both professional and familial relationships. Clara reported how, while engaging in sex work prior to its decriminalisation, her drag mother took advantage of her financially:

> *I met up with some trans people…they'll take you under their wing as like your drag daughter, they'd be your drag mother…through them you would go out and work on the streets, earn money, and…your drag mum would take your money and use it for your accommodation and for whatever else they wanted…they would just like take all your [money]…I was like 14…and didn't really click on to stuff like that.*

Clara was exposed to exploitation because of her youth; because sex work was not yet decriminalised; and because she was experiencing homelessness and needed an income. Clara had left home at age 14 due to instability in her family and the lack of a supportive community. By helping her access accommodation, Clara's drag mother played some of the role of providing support ascribed to the term;[32] yet, she also exploited Clara by using her earnings for herself and not allowing Clara autonomy over her finances. Due to her age and newness to the industry, Clara was exposed to exploitation from older, more experienced workers. In addition, the then-criminalisation of sex work meant workers were less able to work independently, which thus increased opportunities for exploitation by third parties.[33] These experiences are congruent with existing literature which shows the multifaceted relationships between drag mothers and young trans sex workers, and that these relationships can be simultaneously sites of exploitation and care.[34]

Exploitation also occurred in familial relationships. Marielle spent several months rough sleeping when she could not afford accommodation because her mother had asked her for financial support to leave Marielle's abusive father. For several months, she sent her mother her entire savings, plus most of her weekly income, plunging her into poverty. During this period, she used sex to obtain a bed for the night. Unfortunately, Marielle eventually discovered her mother had not left her father but was still taking her money. Nico was exploited by their foster mother. They had arranged informal foster care for themself in adolescence in order to access welfare support, which they were unable to access independently; the government paid the money to their foster mother, who in turn gave the money to Nico. Nico described how this put them into a potentially unsafe situation:

> *The foster mum totally set me up to have sex with her brother who was like 25 or something and I was like 'I am not into him'.…[She] ended up getting me to go and hang out with him at his house in the middle of nowhere, it's not like I could go home at the end of the day because it's not like I had a fucking car, and oh there's only one bed there, obviously I'm supposed to have sex with him.*

32   H Collie and G Commane, '"Assume the Position: Two Queens Stand Before Me": RuPaul as ultimate queen', *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2020, pp. 402–416, https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1765081.

33   C Healy, A Wi-hongi, and C Hati, 'It's Work, It's Working: The integration of sex workers and sex work in Aotearoa/New Zealand', *Women's Studies Journal*, vol. 31, issue 2, 2017, pp. 50–60.

34   V Sampethai, 'Workers, Migrants, and Queers: The political economy of community among illegalised sex workers in Athens', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 19, 2022, pp. 28–46, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222193.

This example shows the nuanced ways youth in foster care (both informal and formal) can be sexually exploited. While Nico was not explicitly forced into a sexual relationship with this person who was approximately 10 years their senior, there was an unspoken expectation from their foster mother, a person who held power over them, that Nico would have sex with this man. Other studies about underage sex work in Aotearoa NZ report similar coercion from older people.[35]

Yet, participants also showed how they maintained a degree of agency within exploitative relationships. The above example from Nico, about being expected to have sex with their foster mother's brother, also gives us insight into how Nico attempted to navigate the situation while still maintaining some autonomy:

> …I think that a lot of adults assume that you're a bit stupid if you're young… when I was 14 I knew exactly what 'go and hang out with my brother' meant, but I knew how all that would go down, you know? So I could have potentially been like 'nah, I don't wanna hang out with your brother' [laughs] but you know, it's like you, you have a view of what your cards are and then you play them the way you think is the best way for you and I think that…you learn through trial and error to like think in survival-y ways and to think about strategy, basically.

Nico could have resisted this expectation, but they knew, for their continued survival and the benefits afforded to them from this informal foster care relationship, they needed to meet their foster mother's expectations and so made the 'micro-decision' to meet with their foster mother's brother.[36]

Blurred Boundaries in Intimate Relationships

We also saw evidence of blurred boundaries between sex work and other relationships, friendships, and sexual encounters. Thom shared how he would sometimes go home with men without telling them he was experiencing homelessness, and only later he would attempt to get money from them:

> Through dishonest means because I would like pick up a dude somewhere and go home with him and either beg, borrow, or steal money from them to obtain enough cash to do various straightforward things. So, nothing major, probably,

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35 N Thorburn, 'Consent, Coercion and Autonomy: Underage sex work in Aotearoa New Zealand', *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, vol. 28, issue 1, 2016, pp. 34–42, https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol28iss1id114.

36 J M Wojcicki and J Malala, 'Condom Use, Power and HIV/AIDS Risk: Sex-workers bargain for survival in Hillbrow/Joubert Park/Berea, Johannesburg', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol. 53, issue 1, 2001, pp. 99–121, https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-9536(00)00315-4.

> *I think like I said the most I got was a 50 once, usually 10 or 20 bucks, and yeah, that would be lunch for a couple of days or something like that.*

During periods of hardship, Thom was able to use his limited agency in deciding to initially conceal that his main reason for going home with someone was to have a place to sleep for a night and to obtain money. This blurring of boundaries between a straightforward sexual encounter and sex work arose out of the poverty he was experiencing and a need to secure his basic needs; he noted this was 'dishonest' but he was not getting 'major' amounts of money from these interactions. The poverty Thom was experiencing resulted in him adapting and choosing to blur the boundaries of these interactions.

People who experience homelessness often engage in intimate relationships in attempts to secure their basic needs. Watson notes this is often described as a form of 'survival sex',[37] which although useful, reduces individual's experiences to transactions within an informal economy. This serves to minimise the complexity of relationships being undertaken within the context of structural constraints and inequities such as poverty. Such experiences highlight the blurring of boundaries between relationships, sex, and sex work. Nico explains how they entered into a relationship so they would be able to meet their most basic needs:

> *So, I hooked up with this guy and I was kind of into him, and I was also kind of not into him but I was like 'well, he seems like he's got money'…My friend was like 'he's always got like change in his car' and I was like 'that's a good point, and he always brings biscuits over to our house and stuff' which is like, hilarious shit, you know? Poor children, being like 'hmm, biscuits' [laughs]…So anyway, I hooked up with him, partially on the basis that I was like well, I need somewhere to live, and he had a house…and he always had a car.…I was like 'yeah, this seems like a sensible move.'*

This example shows how people who are experiencing homelessness can draw on intimate relationships to obtain housing and food, and how they cope with doing so. In this instance, the relationship became abusive, and while Nico gained a place to live, it was not safe or secure housing. However, to cope with this later in their life, Nico had come to view it (or to portray it to others) as a humorous situation. This links to our previous findings which demonstrated how systems failures result in a lack of autonomy.[38] Lack of adequate support for people experiencing homelessness, particularly takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people, forces them into survival strategies which may have long-term detrimental impacts on their wellbeing.

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[37] J Watson, 'Understanding Survival Sex: Young women, homelessness and intimate relationships', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 14, issue 6, 2011, pp. 639–655, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2011.588945.

[38] Fraser, Chisholm, and Pierse, 2021.

Emotional Effects

Some participants discussed how sex work affected their emotions and sense of self. Despite being a strategy that helped her to meet her needs while experiencing homelessness, Clara still faced a lot of judgement and stigma for her work in the sex industry:

> *…14, 15, 16 years old, with no qualifications and being transgender, the only work there was, was sex working, which was quite lucrative…I'm not saying it's the best thing for young teens to be doing, but…what I also want to point out is that often transgender people are pushed up against a wall and then when we have to make bad choices for ourselves cuz there's nothing else to do, then society looks down on us for making those choices when they've actually put us in those positions to begin with…*

This caused inner conflict for her: she refers to sex work as being a 'bad choice', while simultaneously recognising it was the only option available to her in a neoliberal welfare system which did not support her during a time of need. Furthermore, she also acknowledged there is nothing inherently wrong with sex work, but rather it is the systems failures that forced her into unsafe situations (particularly pre-decriminalisation) which were detrimental to her wellbeing. Clara powerfully resists individualisation of her situation, recognising the role societal structures have had in placing her in this position.

Marielle struggled to come to terms with her experience of utilising sex to secure shelter for a night. She said for her '…the worst part of it [experiencing homelessness] long term has been the inner conflict of like, people offering you a bed for the night if you'd do things'. Marielle only once used sex as a means to secure shelter for a night and concealed her motivations for sleeping with this person. She felt intense shame about experiencing homelessness and concealed it from as many people as possible. Of this encounter, Marielle said she 'hated [her]self afterwards' for it; 'I never did it again, it just made me feel cheap and nasty'. Marielle attempted to use sex as a means to lessen the difficulties of homelessness and extreme poverty, yet had internalised the stigma attached to this, which negatively impacted her sense of self and wellbeing.

Some participants' experiences of sex work had positive emotional elements to them; sex work enabled Clara to find acceptance and community. She had run away from home due to the lack of acceptance of her gender identity in her small town. She felt accepted when she met a group of trans sex workers and began working with them.

> *…and that's when I met street workers, they were all transgendered, and I'd never met anyone else that was transgender before and I think because I hadn't been accepted all through my childhood into any like, group, and I felt like this [is] where I belong to, so that's when I started sex work…*

This was not a healthy situation for a 14-year-old—Clara was also introduced, and became addicted, to drugs. Yet, it enabled her to have an income, to find her feet in the trans community, and connect with other people who had similar life experiences. For her, the acceptance and community she found through sex work gave her a place where she finally felt comfortable, even when it was, as previously mentioned, also a source of exploitation. As Fletcher notes, in the Canadian context, sex work can provide a sense of community to trans women who have been excluded from other parts of society.[39] This is important in the context of LGBTIQ+ homelessness, wherein LGBTIQ+ identities can exacerbate existing instabilities and strains within conditional families—wherein certain conditions related to gender and sexuality have to be met in order to remain part of one's family—often resulting in LGBTIQ+ youth simultaneously experiencing homelessness and familial disconnection.[40]

Safety and Policing

Participants also discussed their experiences with safety and policing while engaging in sex work, particularly focusing on experiences pre-decriminalisation. Prior to decriminalisation, there were limited protections for those who engaged in sex work, and outing themselves as sex workers put them at risk of prosecution. Because of this, sex workers had little control over their safety, and often had to survive unsafe situations on their own. Thom discussed how sex work repeatedly make him feel unsafe:

> *…I was always more afraid when I was with people in the houses than I was out on the street. Like…where's the door out, how high up are we, where's the window, can I get out a window if I need to, can I pick up something that…I could protect myself with, things like that. But I mean at the same time… you're there for a reason…I think that's what sort of slowed me down…you try be in the moment…dudes are horny…but also if you look like you're fucking scared as shit then no one's going to have sex with you…may as well make the most of it…but yeah, I was always, always more scared in people's houses than I was on the streets…*

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[39] T Fletcher, 'Trans Sex Workers', in E van der Meulen, E M Durisin, and V Love (eds.), *Selling sex*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2013, pp. 65–73.

[40] B A Robinson, 'Conditional Families and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth Homelessness', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 80, issue 2, 2018, pp. 383–396, https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12466.

Earlier in our interview, Thom had discussed how he felt unsafe during his prolonged period of homelessness, particularly at times when he was rough sleeping. As above, however, he felt even less safe when he went home with a stranger. The criminalisation of sex work served to create significant power imbalances between Thom and the people he had sex with. Similarly, Felix revealed that:

> …while I was homeless in Wellington I was also doing a bit of working boy stuff, cuz it was the only time I wasn't on a full benefit, so I was a working boy, so I did have an assault happen because of that.

The power imbalances between client and worker, and an absence of legal protections, contributed to a lack of safety and security for these two.[41]

The policing of sex work prior to decriminalisation continues to impact participants' lives despite the law change. People who had been charged for 'prostitution soliciting' prior to decriminalisation have not had their police records cleared, and in 2021 the then Minister of Justice's office noted that expunging these records was not a priority.[42] Such convictions, and others that sex workers obtained while working, continue to negatively impact their lives. Clara explained how these historic convictions have prevented her from getting jobs, and that she was 'lucky' her current job did not run a background check:

> …they didn't do a background check or police records…which thank god because they'd find a really atrocious long list of hideous things…back when sex work was illegal and police used to come down K'Road [Karangahape Road] and hassle us girls because everything we were doing was completely illegal and you weren't allowed to solicit, so they'd arrest you, strip search you on the spot, on the side of the road…

These historic police records contribute to the continuing precarity faced by many takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people who have experienced homelessness. They open people up to discrimination and stigma for their history of sex work and restrict the number of jobs and houses available to them when background checks are performed. This lessens the autonomy of people with these convictions when

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[41]   Armstrong, 2017; L Armstrong, 'Stigma, Decriminalisation, and Violence Against Street-Based Sex Workers: Changing the narrative', *Sexualities*, vol. 22, issue 7–8, 2019, pp. 1288–1308, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718780216.

[42]   K Harris, 'No Work Underway to Expunge Historic Sex Work Convictions Affecting More than 1000', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 July 2021, retrieved 25 February 2023, https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/no-work-under-way-to-expunge-historic-sex-work-convictions-affecting-more-than-1000/4566BZYG3YCIQYQF4LIAXKPJ3U.

they navigate both the job and housing markets. They represent one way in which stigma against sex workers is entrenched in the legal system.[43]

Discussion

Our findings show that sex and sex work were a means of securing basic needs during periods of homelessness. Structural failures such as an inadequate and inaccessible welfare state resulted in participants utilising sex to obtain money, shelter, and food. Homelessness and its relation to sex exposed our participants to exploitative relationships; the poverty and precarity inherent in experiences of homelessness resulted in some participants being exploited by people who were supporting them in various ways. Furthermore, we saw how homelessness resulted in boundaries becoming blurred between sex work and sex within personal relationships, wherein some participants entered into, or continued, intimate relationships in order to secure housing or financial support. Our findings also showed how sex work, in conjunction with homelessness, can have lasting emotional effects, and that safety and policing were considerable concerns prior to decriminalisation. Most of the experiences we presented occurred pre-decriminalisation, so we are unable to clarify whether the exploitation our participants faced lessened after decriminalisation. However, decriminalisation has undoubtedly served to equalise power relations and lessen exploitation in the sex industry in Aotearoa NZ.[44]

Sex work is a key way LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness can obtain an income, and they engage in it at higher rates than non-LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness.[45] Our findings reiterate this; the majority of our participants had engaged in sex work in order to meet some of their basic needs when faced with structural failures such as poverty, homelessness, or the inadequacies of the welfare state. While they were able to express their agency and find community in these situations, they saw that they had been failed by institutional support systems, and that engaging in sex work while *also* experiencing homelessness sometimes resulted in exploitation and reduced personal safety. Our participants struggled, in multiple ways, to access welfare benefits and found themselves having to obtain shelter and income without the support of the state. The urgency of survival under inequitable and unsupportive structures, especially during periods of homelessness, necessitates imperfect solutions—

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[43] Z Stardust *et al.*, '"I Wouldn't Call the Cops If I Was Being Bashed to Death": Sex Work, Whore Stigma and the Criminal Legal System', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, vol. 10, issue 2, 2021, pp. 142–157, https://doi.org/10.5204/IJCJSD.1894.

[44] Healy *et al.*.

[45] Kattari and Begun; Marshall *et al.*; Walls and Bell.

such as doing sex work under drag mothers who keep half of one's income, or blurring boundaries within intimate relationships. While decriminalisation has since improved the conditions in which sex work is done, institutional support systems—particularly the welfare state—are failing takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa NZ.[46]

The welfare state in Aotearoa NZ does not currently provide sufficient support for people to realise an adequate standard of living, nor does it treat them with dignity and respect.[47] This, and an ongoing housing crisis (particularly in terms of affordability), are key contributors to the consistent rise in the number of people experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa NZ. Navigating the welfare system is complex—particularly for those seeking housing support—and when support is accessed, it is not sufficient for people to live stable, dignified lives. As a result, it frequently falls on individuals, their communities, and non-government organisations to fill these gaps. The experiences we have presented in this paper are one such way in which takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people, in particular, are meeting their needs during periods of homelessness. For some of our participants, sex work, at times, felt like the only choice available to them. As we have shown, survival in this context can be difficult. It can have significant effects on people's physical and emotional wellbeing and push them into situations they would have otherwise avoided. If the state were to provide adequate support with dignity, we believe that the conditions under which people engage in sex work would continue to improve, allowing them more freedom and choice about if, why, how, and when they participate in such work. This, combined with the conditions already facilitated by decriminalisation, will continue to improve the safety and wellbeing of sex workers.

Much of the existing LGBTIQ+-specific sex work literature focuses on victimisation, but not exploitation, power, and agency. Literature which *does* discuss exploitation is focused on 'trafficking' and, with one exception, does not discuss agency. This singular paper focuses on trans sex workers and victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation—rejecting the view of all sex work as a form of 'trafficking', but highlighting instances of trafficking as per the UN Trafficking Protocol, even when participants did not necessarily view these experiences as such.[48] In this context, agency is discussed in terms of popular narratives that position trans women as being 'less exploitable' due to their presumed willingness to work in the sex industry; they are given less support by police, the legal system, and service providers, because of their decision to work in the sex industry.

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[46] Fraser, Chisholm, and Pierse, 2021.

[47] Welfare Expert Advisory Group.

[48] A E Fehrenbacher *et al.*, 'Transgender People and Human Trafficking', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2020, pp. 182–194, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.20 20.1690116.

Personal agency, in these narratives, is used to deflect from power dynamics and structural failures such as a lack of legal protection and discrimination; it allows the very real safety needs of trans women to be ignored simply because they choose to work in the sex industry. This choice to engage in sex work is often mediated by structural factors such as discrimination within job markets—which leaves trans women without secure jobs—and inaccessible welfare states. Our findings reiterate this point; our participants' entry into sex work was necessitated by homelessness, poverty, and an inability to access support from the state. In neoliberal discourses of individualised responsibility, these factors, as well as any exploitation and unsafe situations experienced while engaging in sex work, are frequently framed as a series of 'bad choices' on the part of the individual; the role of wider social structures remains hidden.[49] It is important, then, that we continue to acknowledge the centrality of structural factors in people's experiences of both homelessness and sex work.

Conclusion

Our research shows that in the context of a weak welfare system and a lack of affordable housing, some takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people turn to sex and sex work to secure their basic needs, including shelter. They have some degree of agency in these situations, but they also have negative experiences. Therefore, we need a more just welfare system. Doing sex work within the confines of systematic structural failures and inequities, such as poverty and homelessness, influence takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people's agency, relationships, sense of self, and wellbeing with both positive and negative consequences. For some participants, sex and sex work were ways to meet their needs. For others, sex work and internalised stigma resulted in a negative sense of self. Similar to existing literature both in Aotearoa NZ and internationally, we found high levels of structural failures—such as inadequate and inaccessible welfare systems, discrimination, stigma, and poverty—all of which influenced our participants' experiences of sex and sex work.

Decriminalising sex work has created a safer and more equitable sex industry in Aotearoa NZ, but further structural changes are needed to promote greater wellbeing and equity, particularly for takatāpui/LGBTIQ+ people experiencing homelessness. We advocate for the transformation and modernisation of Aotearoa NZ's welfare system in line with the many comprehensive recommendations made by the government-mandated Welfare Expert Advisory Group. In terms of the experiences we have presented in this paper, we specifically highlight the importance of implementing recommendations around restoring trust (e.g., removing sanctions and improving frontline service), reducing the generation of

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49   P Dardot and C Laval, *The New Way of the World*, Verso, London, 2013.

debt (e.g., abolishing the concept of owing debt as a result of receiving support from the welfare state), increasing the amount of support (e.g., increasing benefit rates by at least 40%), clarifying eligibility and relationship status (to make it easier to access support, and reduce incidence of people being fully reliant on their partners for support), and alleviating the housing crisis (e.g., increasing access to affordable and suitable housing support, including public housing).[50]

Acknowledgements

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[50]   Welfare Expert Advisory Group.