What do you picture when you hear the term

“sex worker”?

Sex workers in Canada face unequal access to healthcare

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Map the System

YOU ARE
HERE

What is a sex worker?

What is a sex worker?

Sex work is an umbrella term that defines those involved as adults who exchange sexual services for money or material benefit

What is a sex worker?

Indoor & outdoor spaces

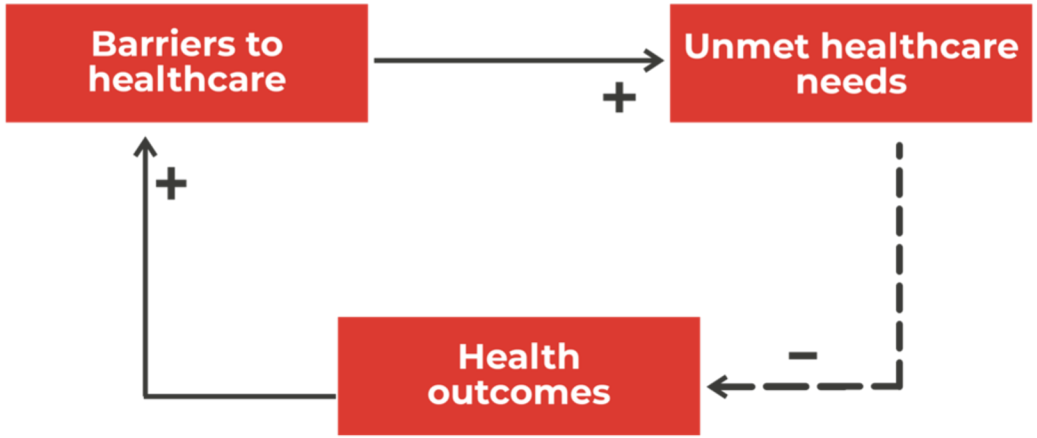
Independent & supervised
(e.g., brothels)

Commercial venues
(e.g., escorts, erotic massages, exotic dancers)

Online
(e.g., porn, camgirls, phone sex operators)

Why does this issue matter?

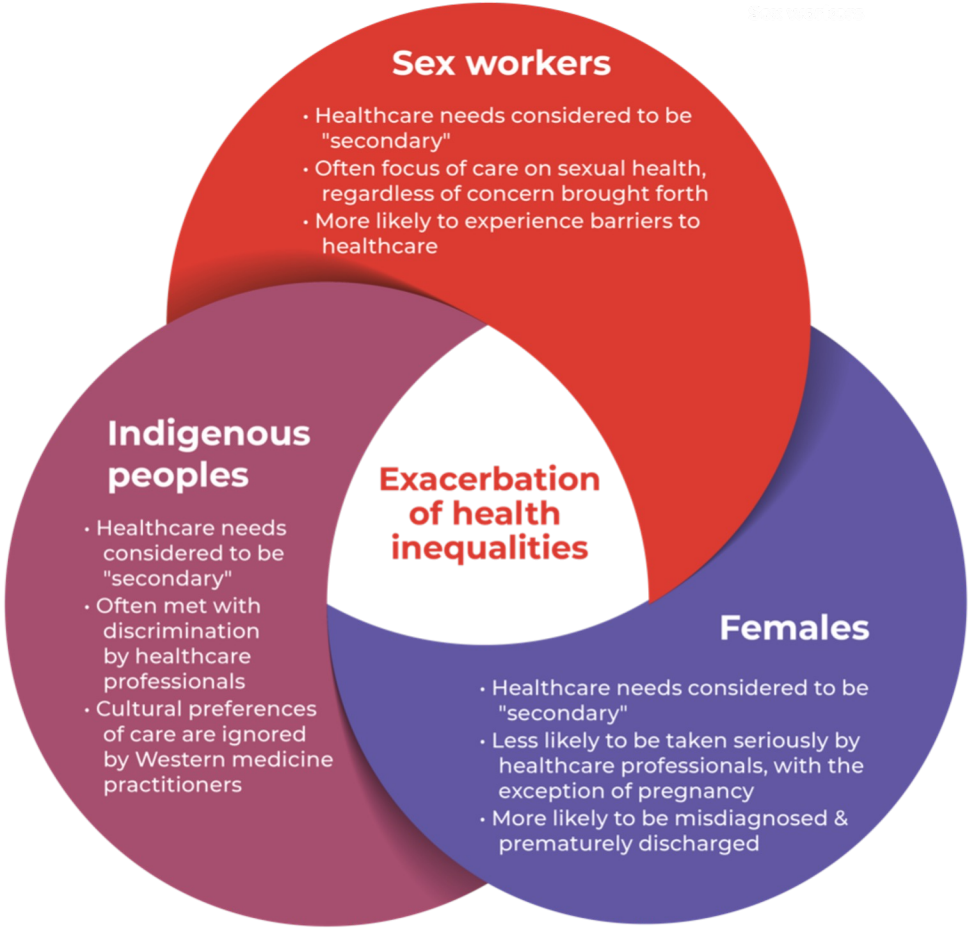
Despite Canada's universal health system, sex workers across the country face an **alarmingly high prevalence of barriers to healthcare.** Which allow sex workers to "fall through the cracks" of the Canadian healthcare system, **resulting in unmet healthcare needs & worse health outcomes.**



Overwhelming majority of sex workers **identify as female** (around **75%**)[3]

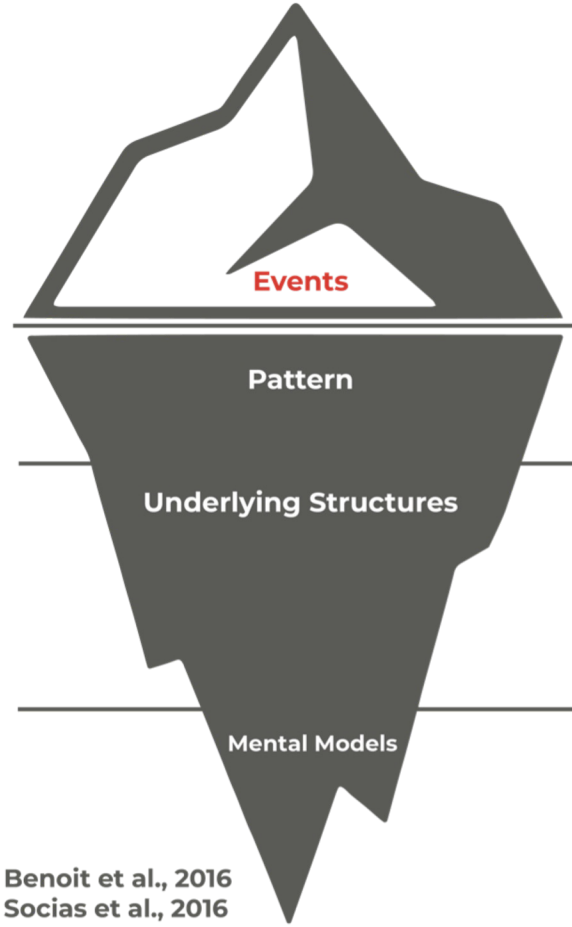
Disproportionate representation of **Indigenous women in street-level sex work** (estimated **15-20%**)[2, 3]

[2] Benoit & Millar, 2001
[3] Benoit et al., 2016


Sex workers
• Healthcare needs considered to be "secondary"
• Often focus of care on sexual health, regardless of concern brought forth
• More likely to experience barriers to healthcare
Indigenous peoples
• Healthcare needs considered to be "secondary"
• Often met with discrimination by healthcare professionals
• Cultural preferences of care are ignored by Western medicine practitioners
Exacerbation of health inequalities
Females
• Healthcare needs considered to be "secondary"
• Less likely to be taken seriously by healthcare professionals, with the exception of pregnancy
• More likely to be misdiagnosed & prematurely discharged

Problem landscape

Why do sex workers face unequal access to healthcare?



40% of sex workers reported having **unmet healthcare needs**[3]

70% of sex workers reported experiencing **barriers to healthcare**[5]
Experiences of **judgement & inadequate care** in healthcare settings

Federal policies that criminalize sex work,
Lack of funding for support services,
Accessibility & cost of healthcare,
Institutional exclusion & Structural violence
(Capitalism, Patriarchy, Colonialism, Oppression)

Stigma surrounding sex workers derived from various deep-rooted mental models: **Paternalism, Otherization, Moralism**/faith-based beliefs, Objectification, Victimization, Racism, White supremacy, Criminality, Sexism, Patriarchal beliefs, Misogyny

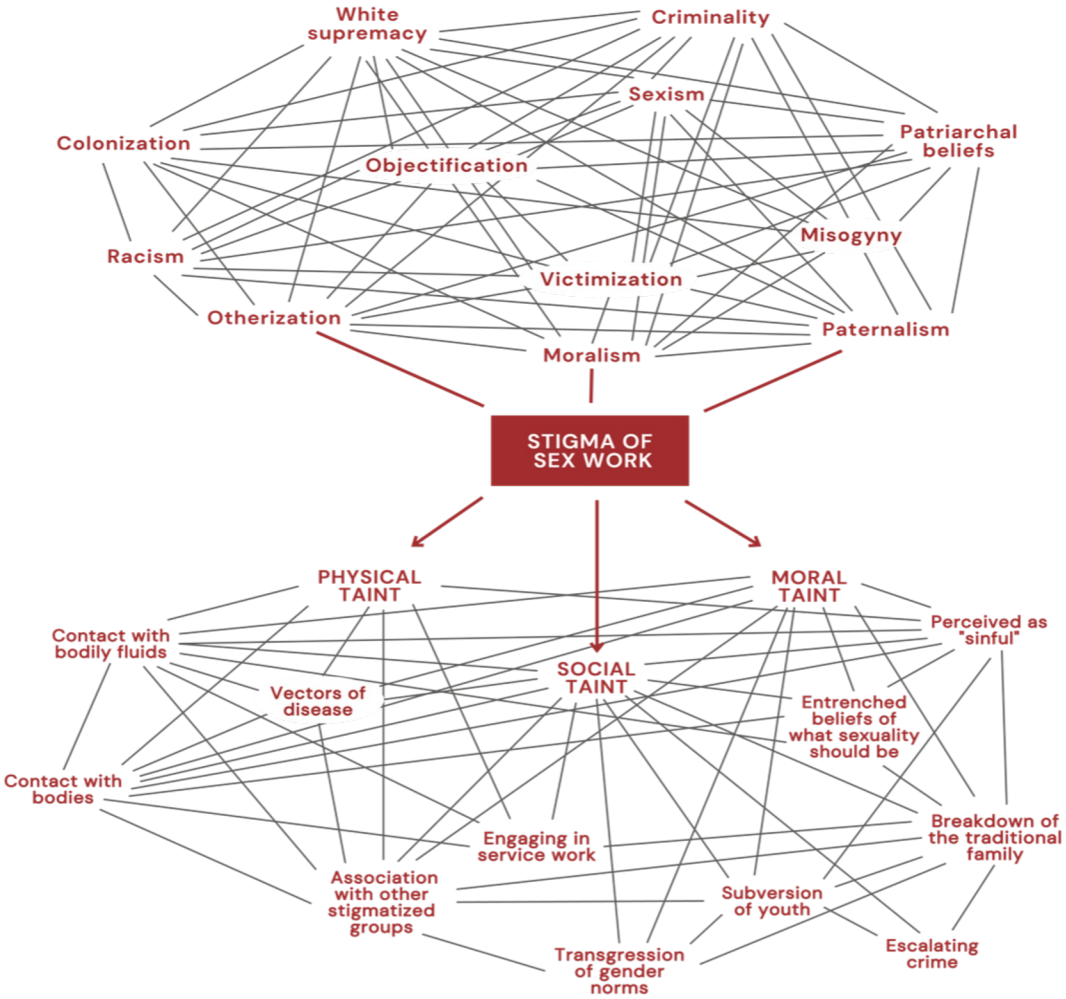
[3] Benoit et al., 2016
[5] Socias et al., 2016

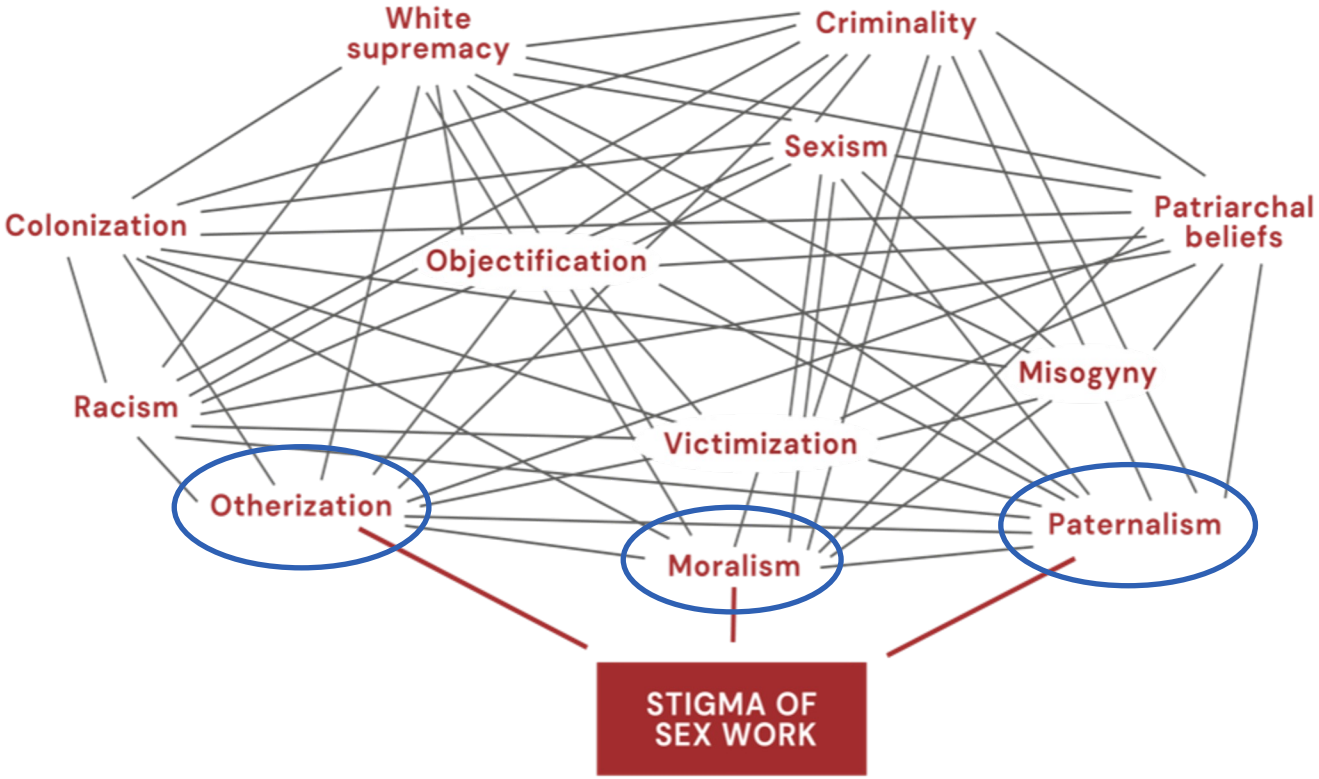
Stigma

Mental Model

Reduces an individual's ability to be **socially accepted** & lessens them from a whole person to a **tainted, discounted one.**

This can involve **labelling, stereotyping, separating, status loss, & discrimination.**


White supremacy
Criminality
Sexism
Colonization
Patriarchal beliefs
Objectification
Misogyny
Racism
Victimization
Otherization
Paternalism
Moralism
STIGMA OF SEX WORK
PHYSICAL TAINT
MORAL TAINT
Contact with bodily fluids
Perceived as "sinful"
SOCIAL TAINT
Vectors of disease
Entrenched beliefs of what sexuality should be
Contact with bodies
Breakdown of the traditional family
Engaging in service work
Association with other stigmatized groups
Subversion of youth
Escalating crime
Transgression of gender norms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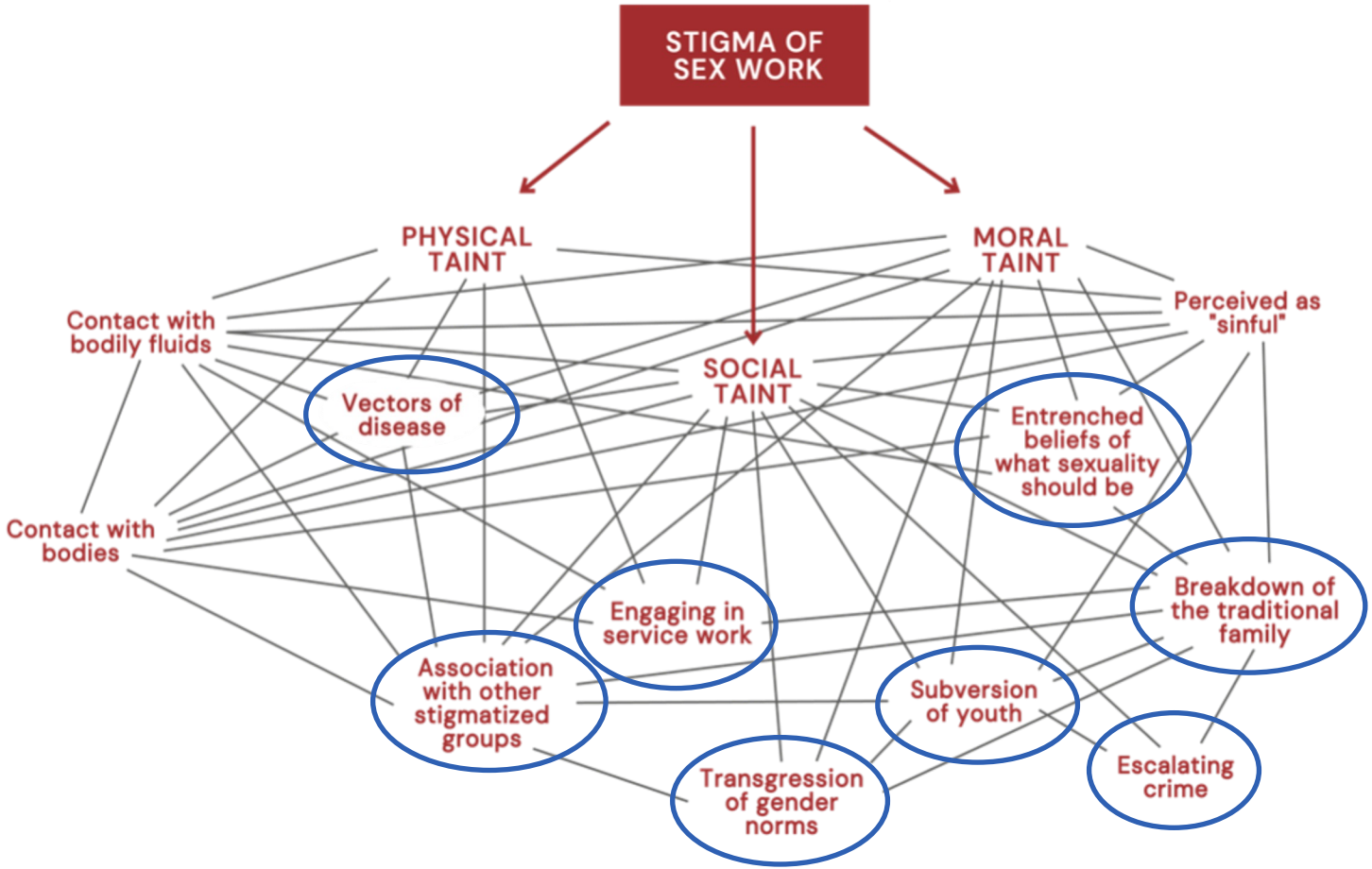
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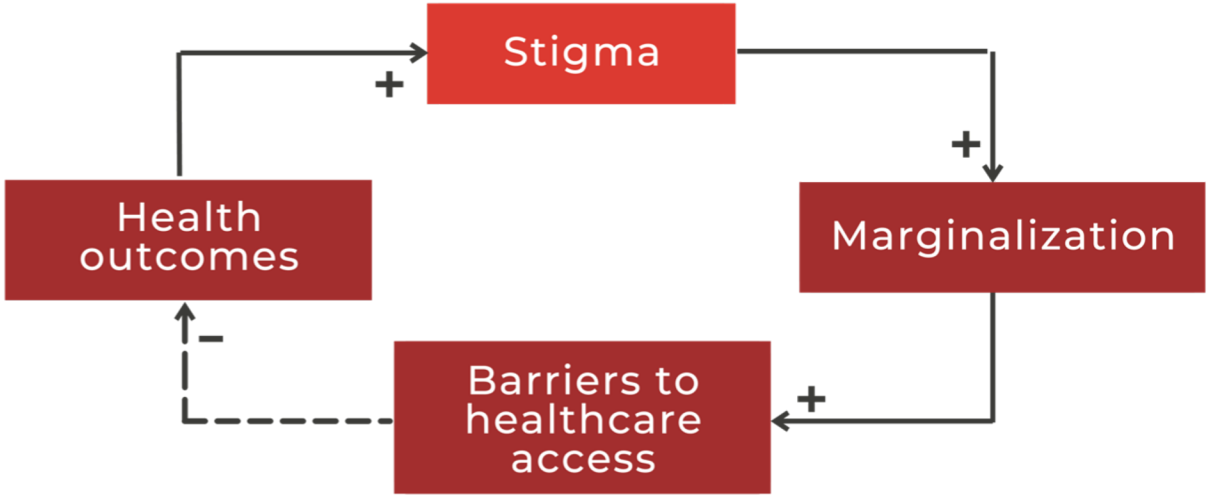
Intersecting stigmas — Additive effect

Examples:

- HIV & STI status
- Substance use
- Sexual orientation
- Migration status
- Gender identity
- Ethnicity
- Mental illness
- Socioeconomic status



Criminalization

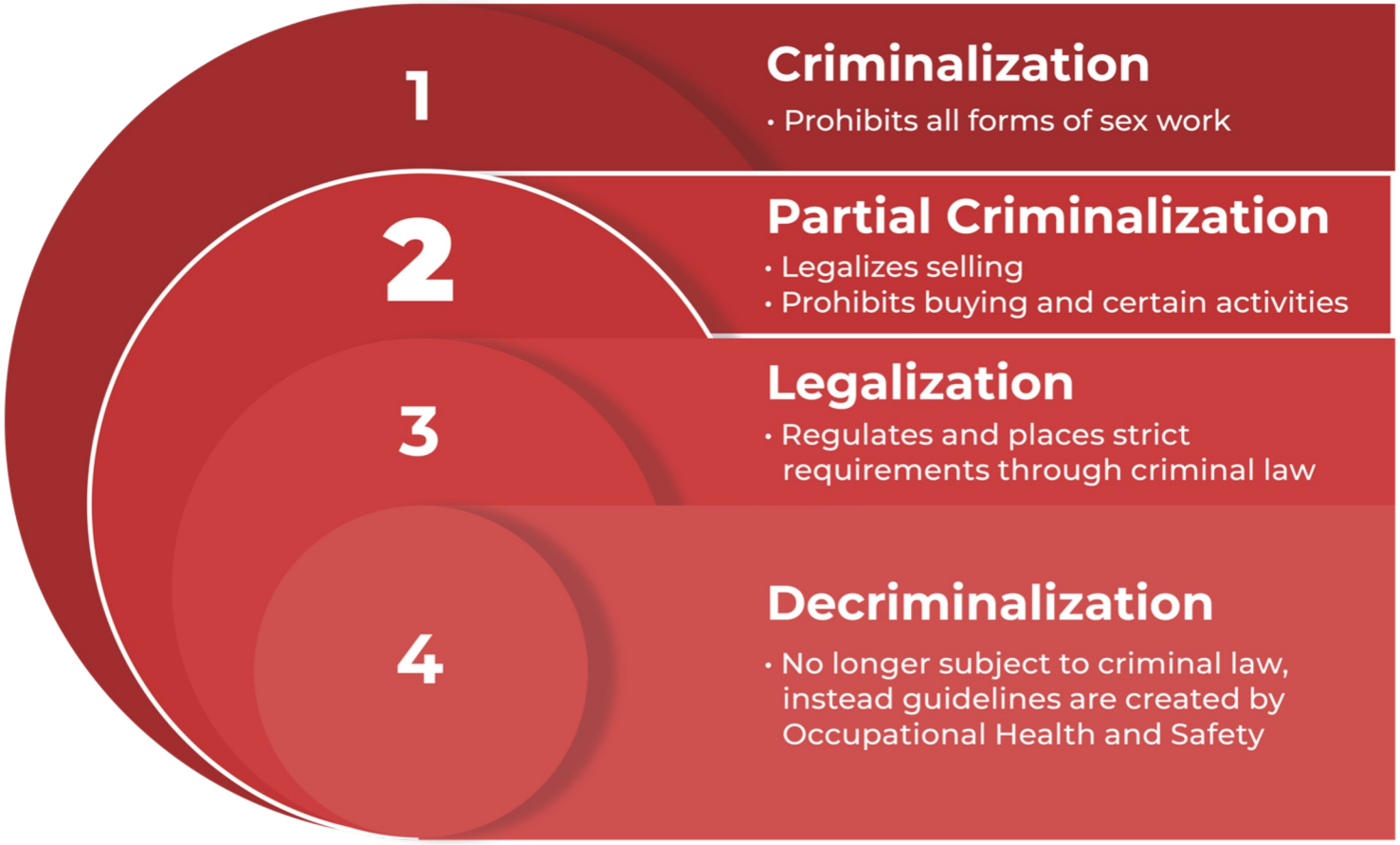
Underlying structure

Protection of Communities & Exploited Persons Act

Canadian federal legislation created in 2014

- "**Protect those who sell** their own sexual services
- **Protect communities**, especially children, **from the harms caused by prostitution**
- **Reduce the demand for prostitution** & its incidence"[4]

[4] Department of Justice, 2018, para 1


1
Criminalization
• Prohibits all forms of sex work
2
Partial Criminalization
• Legalizes selling
• Prohibits buying and certain activities
3
Legalization
• Regulates and places strict requirements through criminal law
4
Decriminalization
• No longer subject to criminal law, instead guidelines are created by Occupational Health and Safety

Protection of Communities & Exploited Persons Act

Treats sex work as a **form of sexual exploitation**

Wrongly equates all sex work with human trafficking

Trapped sex workers in the dualities of both criminality & victimization

Access to health & support services

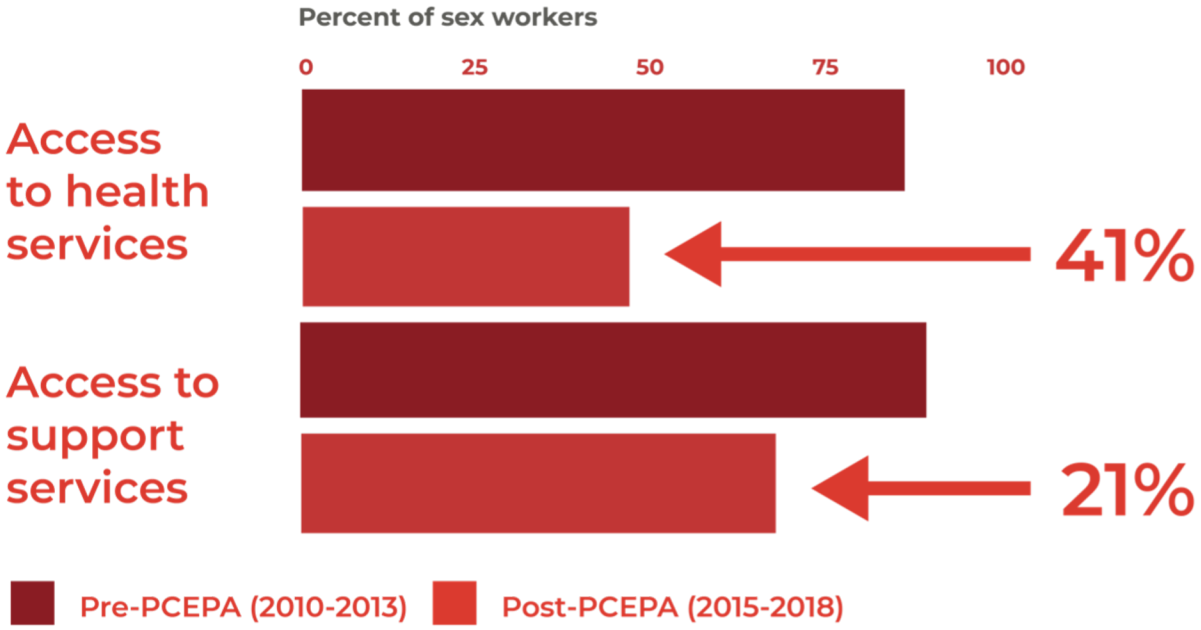
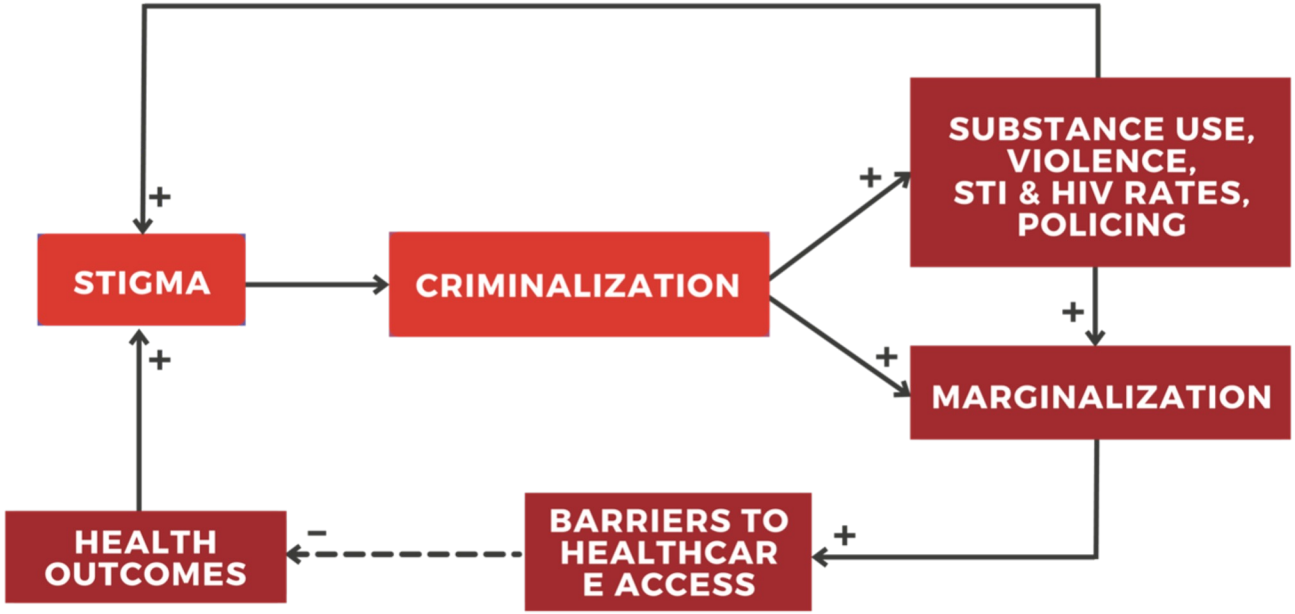


Figure data from Argento et al., 2020

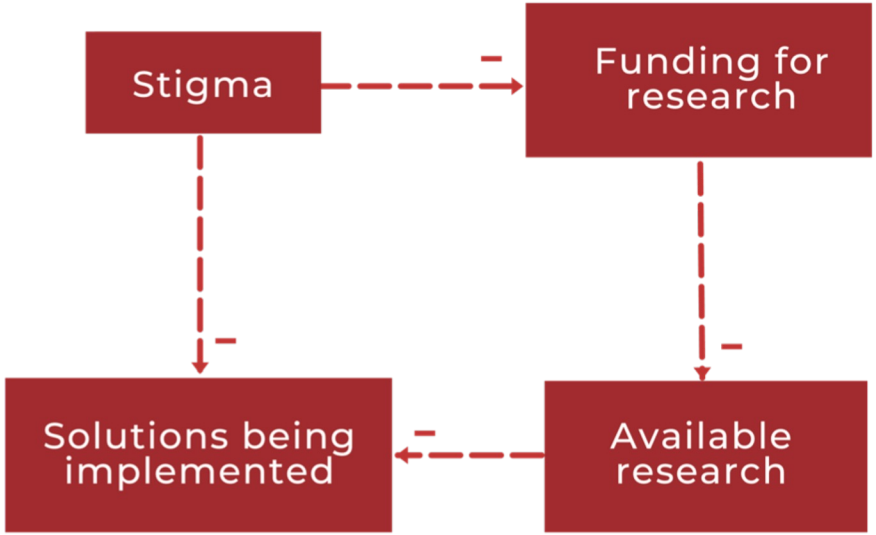
The criminalization of sex work undermines the health & human rights of sex workers.



Solutions landscape

This issue has **limited research available**; most likely due to the stigma surrounding sex work, making it not as easy to gain funding for as other topics.

There is also a **limited range of solutions** currently being implemented. Most large cities have a sex worker support organization, but there is a lack of collaboration between regions & between stakeholder groups.



Safeworks Outreach Program

Community-based healthcare in Calgary, AB

Team of nurses, social workers & outreach workers who bring comprehensive healthcare & harm reduction services directly to vulnerable populations

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Prostitution Reform Act

Decriminalization legislation in New Zealand

- Safeguards human rights, Promotes welfare & occupational health & safety
- Resulting in sex workers having more control, occupational benefits, & safety; as well as higher condom use, lower rates of STIs, & increased access health services

Gaps & levers of change

Gap

Levers of change

Lack of adequate education

Improved training for healthcare professionals

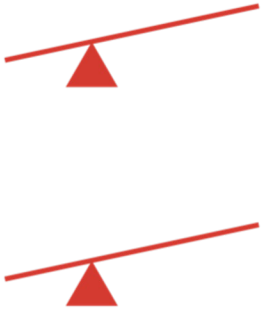
Education & training should include trauma-informed & providing individualized, adequate care

Anti-discriminatory health policies

Gap

Levers of change

Lack of support

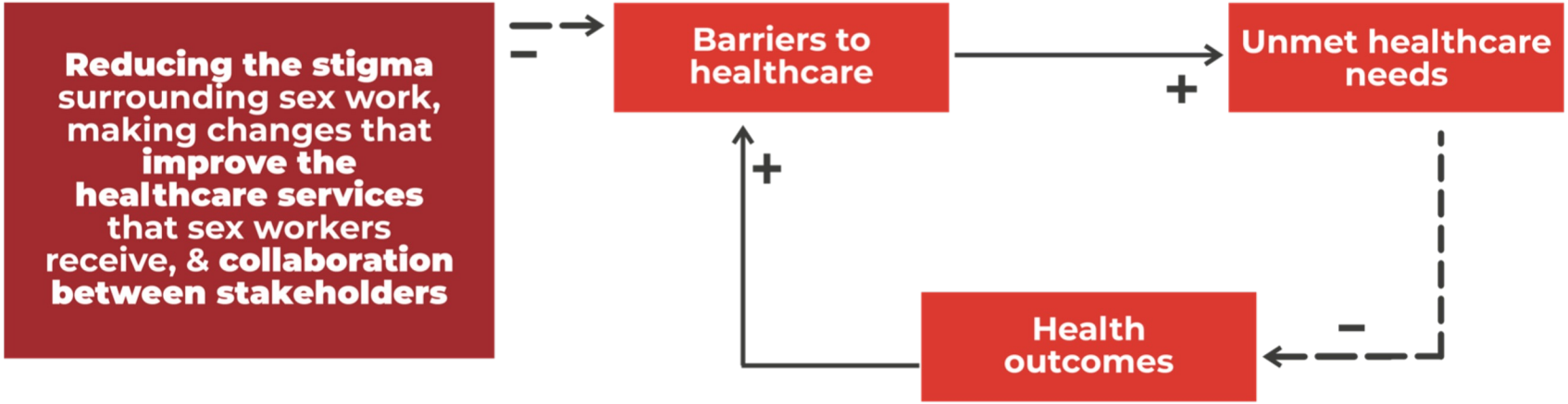


Community-based healthcare initiatives

E.g., Mobile medical clinics are an effective way to bring healthcare directly to vulnerable populations

Increased funding for support services

The issue of sex workers' access to healthcare is **solvable.**



Thank you

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