

# Research Guide: Conducting Ethical Research on the Sex Trades

By [The Sex Workers Project](#)  
of the Urban Justice Center



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Cover Photo: November 12, 2021, Mariah Grant, Abby Anzalone, and Clement Lee, representing SWP Policy Advocacy, Research, and Legal staff meet with AIDS Center of Queens County (ACQC) staff and members of an ACQC support group, including some current and former SWP clients. SWP is an organization that thoughtfully and intentionally engages across our different disciplines and takes every opportunity to inform our policy advocacy and research with the lived experiences of SWP clients and the communities they are part of.

# THE SEX WORKERS PROJECT

This guide was developed by interns, consultants, and staff at the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center (SWP). SWP is a national organization that defends the human rights of sex workers by destigmatizing and decriminalizing people in the sex trades through free legal services, education, research, and policy advocacy. We aim to create a sexually liberated world where all workers have the autonomy and power to fully enjoy their human rights. SWP has pioneered an approach to service grounded in human rights, harm reduction and the lived experiences of our staff and clients.

All our services are free for sex workers, people profiled as sex workers, and human trafficking survivors. We share our expertise through legal education workshops for sex workers and trainings for service providers and community organizations. We engage in media advocacy, support sex worker-led organizations and pursue policy change, aiming to make a real and demonstrable impact in the lives of people who trade sex. We conduct groundbreaking human rights documentation rooted in the real-life experiences of sex workers and survivors of trafficking.

We give particular thanks to SWP's Interns Lance Michael Nelson and Varsha Shrinet, Consultant Francesca Maviglia, and Director of Research and Advocacy Mariah Grant, along with Yale University Global Health Justice Partnership's Marie-Fatima Hyacinthe for their roles in developing this guide.

# INTRODUCTION

Research on the sex trades poses distinct challenges which, without diligent and careful navigation, can and have harmed sex workers.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of good intentions, research carried out haphazardly can worsen social stigma, exploitative and violent policing, and discrimination inflicted upon sex workers. Research that is poorly executed or prioritizes the aspirations of the researcher over the interests of sex workers, risks endangering sex workers' dignity and human rights by threatening our safety, health, choice of employment, bodily autonomy, freedom of expression and movement, and even life itself. This guide is part of broader efforts to stop this harm done in the name of research.

## What this guide is:

This research guide provides an overview of promising practices and considerations to produce ethical research on the sex trades. The information contained here represents the types of research practices we at the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center use when conducting original research and sets expectations for individuals or organizations we partner with on research.

Internally this guide informs current and future SWP staff, interns, and consultants on the ethical development, implementation, and dissemination of original research. Externally, we provide this guide to anyone requesting our partnership on research; these partnerships may include longer term collaborations on original research projects, or shorter term engagements including the sharing or promotion of calls for research participants through our networks and social media, as well as interviews of SWP staff as part of a research project.

We also provide this guide on our website to be used and shared by anyone conducting or considering a study on the sex trades. By making this document open access, we hope it will be part of a critical shift in thinking and approach to research on the sex trades. There is a long history of universities and colleges, also referred to as academic institutions, using extractive and harmful research practices when engaging with marginalized communities and individuals, including sex workers. Thanks to the labor and advocacy of sex workers, we have seen a movement away from this type of research which tends to significantly benefit academic authors over the participants whose expertise and experiences are the foundation on which the research is based. **This guide challenges traditional research methods and uplifts research that is sex worker-led along with participatory forms of research on the sex trades.**

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Elena Jeffreys, [Sex worker-driven research: best practice ethics](#)

### What this guide is not:

The sex trades and the people involved in it are diverse; as such, this guide cannot comprehensively address any and all issues to consider when researching topics related to sex work. This guide is not exhaustive and while we attempt to provide several resources for further reading, we are not able to reference all of the ever growing literature from sex workers and sex worker-led organizations on ethical research practices. Therefore, **this guide is not meant to be used in isolation, but is just one of the many resources researchers should refer to when doing research on the sex trades.** Several resources and additional guides are listed with links at the end of this guide.

### Who this guide is for:

This guide is to be used by researchers studying issues related to the sex trades. We intentionally refer to the sex trades and not sex work as a means to be inclusive of any research that may impact people who engage in transactional sex. This includes sex workers doing legalized (e.g., stripping, camming, porn) or criminalized (e.g., full-service sex work) forms of labor, people who have only experienced trafficking in the sex trades, and people who have had varied experiences across the spectrum of choice, circumstance, and coercion. We also refer to the sex trades because even research that does not explicitly identify sex work as its area of inquiry may still have a significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of sex workers. We hope that any researcher embarking on a study related to any aspect of the sex trades will see that this guide is for them.

When referring to researchers, this guide challenges assumptions and stereotyped perceptions of who is a researcher and who is a research participant or subject. Frequently, researchers are thought to be professors or students from academic institutions who do not have sex work experience. This guide intentionally uses the title “researcher” to refer to people conducting research either through an academic institution, or not, and with sex work experience, or not. In doing so, **we aim to minimize assumptions that sex workers are not also researchers and that researchers are not also sex workers.**

### How this guide is organized:

This guide is organized in sections that align with the steps involved in many research projects: 1) determining research method 2) developing research/study topic, 2) conducting research, 3) analyzing data, and 4) publishing findings.

# Determining Research Method

## DO

- **Be sex worker-led**
  - Sex workers are researchers and researchers are sex workers; sex workers should be able to lead research about our own lives and be in positions of leadership on research that will impact us and our community.
- **Consider using Participatory Action Research (PAR) Methods**
  - Although this research method is not perfect, it centers communities in a way that other research methods do not. PAR minimizes the divide between researcher and research participant by attempting to put both in equal roles throughout each phase of a research project, and to emphasize a benefit to the community through the outcomes of the research.<sup>2</sup>
- **Consider using Community Driven Research (CDR) Methods**
  - There is increasing advocacy to adopt CDR methods from sex workers and other communities that have long been used as populations “to be researched” and not as the leaders of research on our own lives. In part, this method, “...supports our research questions, which are formulated in *consultation with* institutional researchers, rather than *by* institutional researchers.”<sup>3</sup>
- **Provide a variety of roles for sex workers or sex worker-led organizations to play**
  - If your research project is not sex worker-led but there are sex workers or sex worker-led organizations who wish to partner, work with them to identify the role that is best suited to their capacity. They may wish to play a consistent role throughout each stage of the research or advise on specific phases; figure out what makes sense and then be sure to provide a clear compensation structure and agreement on access to research findings.
- **Determine strategies for maintaining the anonymity of sex workers**
  - Because of criminalization of some forms of sex work and the stigma associated with many forms of sexual labor, sex workers’ safety and privacy must be maintained throughout the research process; a privacy plan must be developed and used consistently.
- **Receive Institutional Review Board (IRB)/ethics approval, but acknowledge its limitations**

<sup>2</sup> Poonam Daryani, Leila Ensha, Mariah Frank, Lily Kofke, Francesca Maviglia & Alice M. Miller, [When Principles and Pedagogy Clash: Moving Beyond the Limits of Scholarly Practices in an Academic-community Partnership with Sex Worker Activists](#)

<sup>3</sup> Caty Simon, Sarah Brothers, Knina Strichartz, Abby Coulter, Nick Voyles, Anna Herdleina, & Louise Vincent, [We are the researched, the researchers, and the discounted: The experiences of drug user activists as researchers](#)

- IRB approval exists with the stated purpose to ensure research involving human subjects is conducted ethically and does not harm participants; while this approval is necessary, there is a history of the IRB process lacking the insights and expertise of the communities from which research participants will be identified, including sex workers. The IRB process has been criticized for prioritizing, “the knowledge and experience of university-based researchers,” and creating barriers for community members to inform methods for conducting ethical research. There are growing calls for community members to be part of the IRB process and to “ensure folks with sex work experience, perhaps especially those who are also well-versed in academic research, gain seats at the tables where policies are being established and research protocol-related decisions are being made.”<sup>4</sup>
- Consider engaging a Community Review Board (CRB)
  - In addition to the IRB approval, engaging a CRB creates a process for community members with or without academic research experience to provide critical expertise and insight. The inclusion of a CRB can play an instrumental role by having members review, “...research plans to determine risks from the community members’ and organizations’ perspectives.”<sup>5</sup> The CRB is made up of people from the community that is intended to benefit from the research. They would be tasked with reviewing all aspects of the research before approving its implementation.
- Be transparent with research team and participants
  - Develop strategies from the beginning to maintain transparency across research team members, including on fundraising/grant writing, plans for publication, compensation, and payment for participants.
- Provide equitable compensation
  - For each role of the research team, provide compensation commensurate with their expertise and experience. If the project is not sex worker-led, roles for sex workers to advise on the research project should receive compensation in line with that of other research team members doing similar work. It may be necessary to do some contextual research in order to set a fair compensation. For example, “...poor peer researchers should receive cash payments that do not threaten their government benefits and which do not value them less highly because of their limited allotments.”<sup>6</sup>
- Determine a compensation amount carefully
  - For research participants (in interviews or surveys) determine a compensation rate that takes into account risk exposure, potential lost income, travel costs,

<sup>4</sup> Shawna Ferris, Amy Lebovitch, & Danielle Allard, [Sex Work Research, Ethics Review Processes, and Institutional Challenges for “Sensitive” Collaborative Research](#)

<sup>5</sup> Shawna Ferris, Amy Lebovitch, & Danielle Allard, [Sex Work Research, Ethics Review Processes, and Institutional Challenges for “Sensitive” Collaborative Research](#)

<sup>6</sup> Caty Simon, Sarah Brothers, Knina Strichartz, Abby Coulter, Nick Voyles, Anna Herdleina, & Louise Vincent, [We are the researched, the researchers, and the discounted: The experiences of drug user activists as researchers](#)

or other factors that must be accounted for to make it financially viable and worthwhile for a representative sample of sex workers to participate.

- **Be mindful of sampling and statistical challenges**
  - Stigmatization and criminalization of sex work makes it impossible to know the general population of sex workers; traditional methods of sampling can be biased as participants willing to participate in research may not be equally vulnerable to the issues affecting workers less likely to participate.

## DON'T

- **Prioritize your own comfort and ambitions**
  - The research method that may be the fastest or lead to accolades for the researcher may not also be the method that is most beneficial to sex workers; the wellbeing of sex workers and our community should take precedence over the aspirations of an individual researcher.
- **Put sex workers in harm's way**
  - At this first stage it is critical to consider harms the research might cause and develop strategies to reduce that harm; this includes maintaining sex workers anonymity or safety planning if sex workers involved will be publicly open about their experiences. Identify safe locations for interviews, including security of online platforms for remote interviews, secure data storage, and methods for anonymizing participants in publications.

## Developing Research/Study Topic

## DO

- **Use a “desire-based” research framework**
  - This type of research is, “...concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives.”<sup>7</sup> In the context of sex work, this framework acknowledges social realities, such as the criminalization of sex work and its role in sex worker’s lives, but keeps the focus on the nuanced and diverse experiences of sex workers and our desires. This type of research does not ignore harm within the sex trades, but seeks to accurately identify the source or perpetrator while not pathologizing sex workers or collapsing our lives into one-dimensional tropes.
- **Research a topic sex workers identify as timely and necessary**

<sup>7</sup> Eve Tuck, [Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities](#)

- Sex workers are the experts of our own lives and are best positioned to identify knowledge and data gaps as well as timely topics of study that address our needs; you may ask:
  - What are sex workers saying are the key research questions worth exploring?
  - How do I support sex workers in areas of policy and program development, in ways that sex workers themselves have identified?<sup>8</sup>
- Consider how the research topic could be manipulated or used by anti-sex work organizations and policymakers
  - Even research that is sex worker-led may be at-risk of being used against sex workers; it is critical to consider how groups or individuals opposed to sex workers' rights may utilize research findings to further their harmful efforts.
- Include the expansive scholarship authored by sex workers in the literature review
  - Sex workers have created a wealth of knowledge through writing, podcasts, documentaries, and other media about our lives; this should be relied on heavily and attributed accurately in preparing a literature review to inform the research question and be included in the final publication.
- Seek demographic information that is valuable to sex workers
  - The questions and information collected on demographic and background information of research participants should be informed by sex workers; there may be specific details that are valuable for sex workers and sex worker-led organizations that someone without sex work experience may not identify.
- Be precise about how sex work is defined
  - Sex work can include a diversity of roles: it may be in legalized sectors such as stripping, camming, or porn or criminalized sectors such as full-service work and some types of escorting; it is important for the research project to be clear about the area of the sex trades it is focused on and how this will impact participation, including the safety of participants.
- Be clear about the role of race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, education, and income
  - People who do sex work come from all backgrounds and communities but sex workers experiences in the sex trades vary significantly; Black, Indigenous, and sex workers of color, as well as migrant sex workers, trans and nonbinary sex workers, and sex workers in under resourced areas are exposed to harms and are targets of violence, including police violence, at disproportionate rates which must be considered when developing a research topic.

## DON'T

- Use a "damage-centered" framework

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Elena Jeffreys, [Sex worker-driven research: best practice ethics](#)

- This type of research, "...is often used to leverage reparations or resources for marginalized communities yet simultaneously reinforces and reinscribes a one-dimensional notion of these people as depleted, ruined, and hopeless."<sup>9</sup>
- **Increase stigma against sex workers**
  - Although research led by sex workers will be more likely to avoid this, it is critical for any researcher to be conscientious of how their research may minimize or increase stigma against sex workers based on the type of sex work we do, our race, gender, sexuality, nationality/immigration status, ability, religion, language, education level, and income.
- **Moralize on sex workers' choice of employment**
  - Research topics should not negatively influence or interfere with sex workers' right to make our own decisions and judgements, including our right to choice of employment.
- **Prioritize convenience over inclusivity**
  - Researchers must be equitable when recruiting participants and avoid including or excluding participants based simply on the convenience of the study.
- **Perpetuate exclusion of certain sex working populations**
  - A significant amount of research on sex work focuses on cisgender and transgender women doing full-service sex work; when developing the research topic, consider ways it will or will not address knowledge gaps based on race, gender (e.g. trans-masculine and cis-male identified sex workers are frequently invisibilized in research on the sex trades), sexuality, nationality and migration status, education, language, location (e.g., urban, suburban, rural), and type of sex work (e.g., online, in-person, legalized, criminalized).

## Conducting Research

### DO

- **Make compensation easy to access**
  - Provide cash in a form that is accessible quickly and easily; frequently, payments are conducted online, and considerations should be made on whether prepaid cash cards may present any challenges or barriers to use due to internet access or digital literacy.
- **Secure personal details of sex workers**
  - Make sure identifiable information (such as government names or names someone does not use publicly) about sex workers involved in the research

<sup>9</sup> Eve Tuck, [Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities](#)

who do not want to be identified is secured, including in interview transcripts, notes, and recordings. For all research participants, even those who are public about doing sex work and are okay being identified as a research participant in publications, secure personal information (e.g., home address, email, telephone number, etc.) and do not make it available publicly.

- **Identify safe and comfortable interview locations**
  - Whether this be in person or remote, ensure that the interview environment is safe and secure; this may include using less conventional or formal interview methods, such as walking and talking.<sup>10</sup>
- **Adopt strategies that minimize participation barriers**
  - This may include holding interviews during evenings or weekends, doing in-person outreach to identify participants who have limited access to digital spaces, providing public transportation vouchers, and conducting interviews or surveys in multiple languages.

## DON'T

- **Use gift cards to specific companies as compensation**
  - Company gift cards may be challenging for research participants to use or hold little value to the research participant; additionally, a gift card indicates a level of support for the company it is for, which may not align with the needs and principles of research participants.<sup>11</sup>
- **Assume safety risks are all the same**
  - When conducting the research, not all sex workers involved will face the same risks or potential for harm; sex workers of color and trans or nonbinary sex workers are disproportionately targets of client and police violence, sex workers with children face potential risks from abusive partners or others who would use their job against them in custody disputes, while migrant sex workers face unique risks that may lead to their detention and deportation; dynamic harm reduction strategies must be adopted to meet the individual needs of participants.

## Analyzing Data

## DO

<sup>10</sup> Doris Murphy, [Walking, Talking, Imagining: Ethical Engagement with Sex Workers](#)

<sup>11</sup> Katy Simon, Sarah Brothers, Knina Strichartz, Abby Coulter, Nick Voyles, Anna Herdleina, & Louise Vincent, [We are the researched, the researchers, and the discounted: The experiences of drug user activists as researchers](#)

- **Maintain transparent and ongoing communication with research team and partner organizations**
  - Researchers with sex work experience should be able to review and provide feedback on the analysis of data and presentation of results throughout this stage of the research.
- **Ensure identifying information is redacted**
  - For researchers without sex work experience, it is critical to get input from sex worker participants and research partners on this process; there are ways details of an individual's story may be identifiable that someone without sex worker experience would not recognize.

## DON'T

- **Withhold data or findings**
  - All researchers should have equal access to the research findings, even if certain data is not reflected in the final research report. The information collected may be useful for multiple purposes, including internal knowledge to sex workers or sex worker-led organizations involved in the research.

## Publishing Findings

### DO

- **Publish as Open Access**
  - This could include publishing in an Open Access journal, on a website, or in another format that makes the publication easy to find and use for free.
- **Publish findings in a variety of formats**
  - This may include publishing all findings together in one report, in addition to a concise Executive Summary, individual fact sheets, short toolkits, videos, and infographics and other material that is easy to share on social media.
- **Use language that is easy to understand by a diverse audience**
  - Research findings should be published using language that is accessible to the diversity of individuals who do sex work, which includes people with different education levels and knowledge of research terminology.
- **Make publications available in multiple languages**
  - Consider which languages will make the findings most useful to the sex workers represented in the study and the communities that will utilize and

benefit from the research.

- **Make the findings accessible to people of different abilities**
  - Sex workers rights is also a disability rights issue, when publishing findings consider ways to make it as accessible as possible to all abilities; doing webinars, community calls, or other training and teaching on the findings expands the reach of the research; consider also publishing teach-ins online.
- **Consider internet access and digital literacy**
  - While publishing online may make the research widely accessible, it does not make it available to all; consider ways to provide hard copies or in-person training to communities that face barriers to accessing digital spaces.

## DON'T

- **Publish behind a paywall**
  - This makes the research hard to access and be utilized by sex workers outside of academic institutions.
- **Only publish lengthy reports or academic papers**
  - This limits the reach of the research and values one type of learning over all others.
- **Use jargon or inaccessible language**
  - This limits who can use the research findings.
- **Prioritize research authors' prestige over access to sex workers**
  - Publication in academic journals that aren't open access and/or easy to access for many sex workers puts the research authors' aspirations over the benefit of the research to sex workers.

## RESOURCES

[Alternate Ethics, or: Telling Lies to Researchers](#)

Laura Agustín

[Ethical Considerations for Conducting Sex Work Research](#)

Katie Bloomquist, Sex Workers Outreach Project (SWOP) USA

[Ethical dilemmas in sex work research](#)

Lacey M. Sloan, Stéphanie Wahab

[Interviewing in Qualitative Research](#)

[Just Say No: Why you Shouldn't Study Sex Work in School](#)

Sarah Mann

[Language Matters: Talking About Sex Work](#)

Stella in collaboration with allies to educate and mobilize communities around legal advocacy and decriminalization of sex work

[Research more than extraction? Knowledge production and gender-based violence in African conflicts](#)

Annie Bunting and Joel Quirk, openDemocracy

[Research for Sex Work](#)

Global Network of Sex Work Projects

[Research Statement from SWOP USA](#)

SWOP USA

[Sex worker-driven research: best practice ethics](#)

Dr. Elena Jeffreys, Scarlet Alliance

[Sex Work Research: Methodological and Ethical Challenges](#)

Frances M. Shaver

[Sex Work Research, Ethics Review Processes, and Institutional Challenges for "Sensitive" Collaborative Research](#)

Shawna Ferris, Amy Lebovitch, Danielle Allard

[Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities](#)

Eve Tuck, State University of New York, New Paltz

[Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing](#)

Emma L. Vickers, Liverpool John Moores University

[Walking, Talking, Imagining: Ethical Engagement with Sex Workers](#)

Doris Murphy

[We are the researched, the researchers, and the discounted: The experiences of drug user activists as researchers](#)

Caty Simon, Sarah Brothers, Knina Strichartz, Abby Coulter, Nick Voyles, Anna Herdleina, Louise Vincent

[When Principles and Pedagogy Clash: Moving Beyond the Limits of Scholarly Practices in an Academic-community Partnership with Sex Worker Activists](#)

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