



## **Walking Through the Fire: The Impacts of a Community Based Program on Intersecting Issues of Sex Work and Abuse.**

*Summary for RESOLVE Newsletter by: Jayna Lecuyer / RESOLVE Alberta Undergraduate Volunteer Student*

Women involved in sex work experience high rates of abuse, often from multiple perpetrators. In scholarly literature and delivery of services, sex work, and domestic abuse are often viewed as separate experiences, restricting what is known about the intersectionality and compounding issues for people living through both (Milaney et al., 2014). In 2014, Deering et al., conducted a systematic review and found that between 45% to 75% of people involved in sex work have also experienced abuse in their lifetime. The prevalence of abuse among sex workers and the potential for complex and compounding traumas is a critical social and public health concern, and there is a need for integrated and strength-based responses (Milaney et al., 2024).

Based out of Calgary, Alberta, **RESOLVE Alberta Steering Committee member Carrie McManus** and the Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention (Sagesse) team utilized a community-based approach to address this problem. The research article “Walking Through the Fire” (Milaney et al., 2024), explores the resulting research data and its respective impacts in addressing the effects of coercive control among women with long histories of trauma resulting from sex work and abuse. By challenging long-standing beliefs and developing innovative initiatives Carrie McManus and her team empower individuals, organizations, and communities to disrupt the structure of domestic abuse.

Research data from this study (Milaney et al., 2024) was collected for five years, starting in 2017 and included 88 women and 20 peer facilitators through The Believe in You (BIY) program. Offered through Sagesse to Calgary based clients, this program addresses the intersecting issues of sex work and abuse. As it progressed, the program evolved according to the needs of the participants and at the discretion of the peer facilitators. The 20-week BIY course operates from a client-directed perspective, using a peer education model with weekly curriculum modules based around adult learning principles. Peer education was an impactful aspect of the program, as it is argued that this creates a safe, non-judgmental space to share feelings, worries, and anxieties with someone who can relate (Milaney et al., 2024).

Throughout the five years of evaluative research data, complex histories that deeply impacted women's capacity for healing were revealed (Milaney et al., 2024). These results showed that the BIY program created opportunities for shared learning, a sense of community, and relationship equity (Milaney et al., 2024).

The researchers (Milaney et al., 2024) highlighted themes related to the lived experiences of the participants and facilitators as:

1. histories of coercive control and trauma,
2. personal revolutions through the program content,
3. shared learning, and experiences, and
4. processes of healing together.

Participants and facilitators derived numerous benefits from the peer education program, emphasizing the importance of the group format and peer facilitators in promoting growth and healing (Milaney et al., 2024). Given that experiences of coercive control and trauma can erode autonomy and self-worth, the BIY program sought to create a safe environment for rebuilding through shared experiences. It achieved this by empowering participants to enhance their skills, confidence, and capacity for thriving in supportive relationships. Therefore, increasing a sense of safety, fostering hope, and the ability to envision a future defined by connection and growth (Milaney et al., 2024).

In addition to conducting the research study above, Sagesse continues to evolve regarding programming and research. They offer a variety of other peer support programs for women affected by domestic abuse:

- *Finding Our Voice*, a program focused on issues related to self-esteem and effective communication, and
- *Growth Circle*, a follow-up program focused on creating support systems, reclaiming autonomy, and moving beyond abusive relationships.

For more information on Sagesse please visit their website at <https://www.sagesse.org/>

To read the full report of this research study and the respective programming in more detail, please visit: <https://juniperpublishers.com/asm/ASM.MS.ID.555774.php> or DOI:

10.19080/ASM.2024.09.555774



## References

Deering, K., Amin, A., Shoveller, J., Nesbitt, A., Garcia-Moreno, C., et al. (2014) A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers. *American journal of public health*. 104(5): e42-e54. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2014.301909>

Milaney, K., Hurlock, D., McManus, C., & Stokvis, C. (2024). Walking Through the Fire. *Ann Soc Sci Manage Stud*. 9(5), 55574. DOI: 10.19080/ASM.2024.09.555774