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Original research article

Social support for women working in the sex business

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Abstract
The article's primary goal is to analyse the social support of sex workers in the private sex business, and to find out what its rate is and what factors affect it (age, education, length of practice in the sex business, and its form). The general level of social support is significantly lower for a specific target group than the general population. Quantitative studies in this area are absent in our environment, so the research is innovative.

We used the standardized Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (FSSQ) to collect data on a research group of sex workers in the private sex business (n = 77). We processed the obtained data and determined hypotheses using the IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 programme at the determined level α = 95%. We used correlations and t-test. The results showed that there is a statistically significant difference in social support level regarding sex business types. The length of activity in the sex business has a statistically significant effect on social support. The results did not prove the influence of age and education on social support. Social support is an important topic among sex workers because it can be a significant factor in the case of quitting, or exit programme, violence or human trafficking.

Keywords: Private sex business; Sex worker; Social support; Street sex business

Introduction

After the revolution of 1989, the sex business in the Czech Republic saw a significant increase (Chmelík et al., 2004) due to changes in the political system, optional employment, etc. Over the last decade, there has been a significant transformation of sexual services, in which they mainly moved to private or rented establishments. There are still many blind spots in the sex business that research studies have not mapped. The cause may be that the target groups involved in the sex business are closed to researchers and social services. For this article, the concept of the sex business is defined as sexual work (Ditmore, 2006) and the provision of various forms of sexual services for money or other remuneration (Chmelík et al., 2004). In terms of the environment in which sexual services are provided, the sex business is divided into several types. We based our research on the authors' division in the publication Morality, Pornography and Moral Crime (Chmelík et al., 2004), where the authors distinguish between street sex business, club sex business, hotel sex business, private sex business, and escort services.

The article's goal is to determine the relationship between social support for sex workers using the standardized Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (FSSQ) and selected variables.

Theory

Social support can be defined as any support in emotional, informational, material, or positive social interaction by a trustworthy and reliable person (Kim et al., 2014). Another definition of social support, by Cohen and McKay (1984), states that it is the provision of psychological and material resources to people within a social network. According to the authors, social support can be divided into several categories, and these categories differ. Cutrona and Suhr (1992) divide social support into five categories. The first category is information support, characterised by communication containing facts, advice, or even knowledge. The second category is emotional support, including worry, empathy, sympathy, and caring for others. The third is respect characterised by individual abilities and values and supporting a person's skills. The fourth category is support from the individual's social network, and the last category is material support.

Social support can also be divided into informational, instrumental, and emotional support (Taylor, 2011). According to the cited author, instrumental support includes material assistance (financial assistance, services, ...), information and emotional support covering the same areas as the previous division.

Social support is an essential predictor of better physical and mental health in all populations (Schumm et al., 2006). In addition, sex workers have been found to correlate positively

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with higher levels of mental resilience (Buttram et al., 2014), life satisfaction (Cox, 2011), self-sufficiency (Sarafian, 2012), and reduce the incidence of mental health problems (Ulibarri et al., 2009), which are very common in this target group (Carlson et al., 2017). According to Arriola et al. (2013), as social support increases, so does the quality of life. Liu et al. (2013) report this connection with optimism and greater hope for the future. In addition, the level of social support also correlates positively with the use of protection against sexually transmitted diseases (Qiao et al., 2015) and the search for professional help and related exit programmes (Sarafian, 2012). The research of Mo et al. (2018) shows a correlation between the perception of social support provided and age and time in the sex business. The authors also point out that social support is not enough to improve the above parameters in the case of major psychological traumas. Compared to the general population, women in the sex business report approximately 60% lower level of social support (Carlson et al., 2017).

Social support is directly linked to the quality and breadth of social networks (Berkman et al., 2000). However, in a marginalized environment, social networks may not only be positive, as many people profit from women in the sex business (Zhao et al., 2017). Women in the sex business often come from families with unsatisfactory relationships (Hail-Jares et al., 2016). Therefore, no significant social support can be expected in this area, perhaps only in cases where families do not know the true source of these women's livelihood (Mao et al., 2017). Social support is thus sought elsewhere. These are most often "pimps", or sometimes even clients. Still, the emotional component of the support is also provided by co-workers (Tomori et al., 2016), who are also usually the only friends (Xu, 2009). Bukenya et al. (2019) state that a health or social worker, or even a police officer, can be the person who provides social support to women in the sex business. Very often however, there is no support at all. Qualitative research by Burnes et al. (2018) found that the absence of social support means a greater security risk when working in the sex business. Women without ties to other prostitutes are more often victims of rape, theft, and other crimes.

This study aimed to find the level of social support and what factors influence it for women working in the private sex businesses. We investigated whether the level of social support of private sex workers is influenced by their age, education, length of work in the sex business, or the type of sex business.

Materials and methods

We used an abbreviated eight-item version of the standardized questionnaire measuring the Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (FSSQ) by Broadhead et al. (1988). The questionnaire focuses on the individual perception of social support from a person's surroundings and needs within their social environment (Broadhead et al., 1988). The questions in the questionnaire appear on a scale. The answers range from "as much as I wish" to "much less than I would like", with a score of 1 to 5 points. The higher the number of points the higher the degree of social support.

A limitation is that the questionnaire is not standardised for the Czech population, none of the questionnaires focused on social support are. The research group consisted of women working in the sex business in South Bohemia (N = 77). They were divided into two groups – 40 women working in the street sex business and 37 in the private sex business. Sex workers from the private sex business were contacted through advertisements on the web portals NaPrivat.cz, Agama-seznamka.cz, and others, according to the place of offering sexual services. Their existing social network was used using the snowball sampling method. Sex workers from the street sex business were contacted through social services. The data was processed and encoded using IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.0. Pearson's correlation coefficient and two-sample T-tests were used to statistically process the obtained data. The specified level of significance was α = 95%. The presented results are a part of the dissertation entitled 'Health and Social Aspects of Work in the Private Sex Business'. We analysed selected variables, namely length of activity in the sex business, age, education, and type of sex business.

Results

The research focused on the influence of selected sociodemographic variables on the support level of private sex workers (Table 1). The results show that the length of activity in the sex business has a statistically significant effect on social support. The level of social support decreases with the length of the provision of commercial sexual services. There was no statistically significant effect of age and education.

Table 1. Influence of selected sociodemographic variables on the level of social support of private sex workers

		Length of activity in the sex business	Education	Age	SO score
Length of activity in the sex business	*r*	1	0.017	0.258*	–0.432**
	p		0.880	0.024	
	N	77	77	77	77
Education	*r*	0.017	1	–0.125	0.084
	p	0.880		0.278	0.466
	N	77	77	77	77
Age	*r*	0.258*	–0.125	1	–0.078
	p	0.024	0.278		0.503
	N	77	77	77	77
SO score	*r*	–0.432**	0.084	–0.078	1
	p		0.466	0.503	
	N	77	77	77	77

Note: r – correlation coefficient; *p* – achieved level of significance, *N* – research group size; * correlation at 95% significance level; ** correlation at 99% significance level.

Table 2 shows the relationship between the degree of social support and the form of providing sexual services as another selected variable.

Table 2. Relationship between the level of social support and the form of sex business

Form	Average (m)	Test result
Private sex business	3.69	Mann–Whitney U test U = 544 p = 0.045
Street sex business	3.24	

As part of the comparison with the comparison group, i.e., women working in the street sex business, we recorded a statistically significantly higher level of social support for private sex workers – m = 3.69 (women in street sex business m = 3.24). We can conclude that private sex workers can find greater social support.

Regarding individual sub-items of the FSSQ questionnaire, we studied the influence of selected socio-demographic variables (length of activity in the sex business, education, and age of sex workers). Interestingly, the length of activity in the sex business has a statistically significant effect on the sub-items in all cases (Table 3). No effect was found in the case of other studied socio-demographic variables, i.e., age and education.

Table 3. Correlation matrix of social support - sub-items × selected socio-demographic variables

		Length of activity in the sex business	Education	Age	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Length of activity in the sex business	*r*	1	0.017	0.258*	–0,406**	–0.329**	–0.373**	–0.475**	–0.285*	–0.274*	–0.374**	–0.357**
	p		0.880	0.024	0.000	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.012	0.016	0.001	0.001
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Education	*r*	0,017	1	–0.125	0.095	0.074	0.077	0.087	0.054	0.002	0.099	0.069
	p	0,880		0.278	0.413	0.523	0.507	0.449	0.643	0.983	0.391	0.551
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Age	*r*	0.258*	–0.125	1	0.039	–0.035	–0.138	–0.179	–0.107	0.000	–0.092	–0.005
	p	0.024	0.278		0.735	0.762	0.230	0.120	0.352	0.998	0.426	0.967
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q1	*r*	–0.406**	0.095	0.039	1	0.753**	0.703**	0.633**	0.625**	0.587**	0.677**	0.740**
	p	0.000	0.413	0.735		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q2	*r*	–0.329**	0.074	–0.035	0.753**	1	0.730**	0.621**	0.534**	0.601**	0.589**	0.672**
	p	0.004	0.523	0.762	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q3	*r*	–0.373**	0.077	–0.138	0.703**	0.730**	1	0.790**	0.639**	0.556**	0.563**	0.717**
	p	0.001	0.507	0.230	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q4	*r*	–0.475**	0.087	–0.179	0.633**	0.621**	0.790**	1	0.653**	0.640**	0.584**	0.714**
	p	0.000	0.449	0.120	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q5	*r*	–0.285*	0.054	–0.107	0.625**	0.534**	0.639**	0.653**	1	0.667**	0.669**	0.669**
	p	0.012	0.643	0.352	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q6	*r*	–0.274*	0.002	0.000	0.587**	0.601**	0.556**	0.640**	0.667**	1	0.688**	0.691**
	p	0.016	0.983	0.998	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q7	*r*	–0.374**	0.099	–0.092	0.677**	0.589**	0.563**	0.584**	0.669**	0.688**	1	0.699**
	p	0.001	0.391	0.426	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000		0.000
	N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
Q8	*r*	–0.357**	0.069	–0.005	0.740**	0.672**	0.717**	0.714**	0.669**	0.691**	0.699**	1
	p	0.001	0.551	0.967	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	
		77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77

Note: r – correlation coefficient; *p* – achieved level of significance, *N* – research group size.
* correlation at 95% significance level; ** correlation at 99% significance level.

Given the nature of the research group, which consists of two groups, we studied whether the form of sex business impacted the sub-items of the FSSQ questionnaire. Based on the analysis (Table 4), we found differences in sub-items regarding the form of the sex business. The difference was also statistically significant in the following questions: Question 3 – I have the opportunity to talk to someone about my problems at work or at home (p = 0.010) and Question 4 – I have the chance to talk to someone I trust about my personal and family problems (p = 0.016). In both cases, we recorded a higher score for private sex workers.

Table 4. The form of the sex business concerning social support

	Form of the sex business	*N*	m	Std.	*p*
Q1	1	37	3.59	1.257	0.104
	2	40	3.13	1.244	0.104
Q2	1	37	3.62	1.089	0.198
	2	40	3.28	1.240	0.196
Q3	1	37	3.65	1.184	0.010
	2	40	2.93	1.228	0.010
Q4	1	37	3.70	1.244	0.016
	2	40	3.05	1.085	0.017
Q5	1	37	3.62	1.037	0.227
	2	40	3.33	1.095	0.226
Q6	1	37	3.92	1.010	0.096
	2	40	3.50	1.155	0.094
Q7	1	37	3.65	1.086	0.183
	2	40	3.30	1.181	0.181
Q8	1	37	3.81	1.175	0.156
	2	40	3.45	1.037	0.159

Note: form of the sex business: 1 – private sex business; 2 – street sex business. *N* – research group size, m – achieved score, std. – standard deviation, *p* – significance level.

Table 5 shows the average values of social support for the entire research group (private and street sex workers). The results show that sex workers are in the middle of the scale. The highest average level of support was found in the answers to questions No. 6 – *I get an invitation,* and No. 8 – *If I get sick, I get help*. The lowest was found for questions 1 – *I have people around who are interested in what will happen to me*, and 3 – *I have the opportunity to talk to someone about my problems at work or home* (the lowest value – 3.27).

Table 5. Averages of social support items in the research group

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
N	77	77	77	77	77	77	77	77
m	3.35	3.44	3.27	3.36	3.47	3.70	3.47	3.62
std.	1.265	1.175	1.253	1.202	1.071	1.101	1.142	1.113
Minimum	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

Note: N – research group size; m – achieved average; std. – standard deviation.

Discussion

The results show that the length of activity in the sex business has a statistically significant effect, as the level of social support decreases with the length of providing commercial sexual services. Mo et al. (2018) reached similar conclusions. They state that the perception of provided social support correlated with time spent in the sex business and age. Ondrášek (2020) came to the same result in his dissertation. However, our research did not show a statistically significant effect of age, which Mo et al. (2018) stated in their study conclusions. Regarding another socio-demographic variable – education, our research found no effect. Our results show that the respondents have the opportunity to solve their problems within a circle of close people. They are mainly friends, colleagues from private homes, and family members – if relationships with them are maintained. The study results of Malinová (2016) showed that relationships with colleagues in the private sex business were important for sex workers because they affect

how they feel in the workplace. Březovská (2017) came to a different result. She states that the interviewed respondents have an unresolved relationship with their families and, thus, do not have emotional support from their close family members. The same conclusion was reached by Tanaka et al. (2019), who stated that respondents did not receive proper affection from their families or friends. They ran away from home and lived in the city centre at night. In some cases, social support from friends can be negative, but friends can also support and encourage the sex worker to provide sexual services (May et al., 2000). The research results show that sex workers have a relatively low level of social support, which may be associated with a small network of relationships. It happens mainly because of fear of detection and stigma (Heumann, 2010).

On the other hand, the fact that sex workers relatively frequently financially support their close families or friends may have a significant impact on social support or existing social ties (Wawer et al., 1996).

Conclusions

The research results showed that the social support of women working in the private sex business is influenced by various factors, namely the length of work in the sex business when the level of social support of a sex worker decreases because of it. Another critical factor is the type of sex business, or the environment in which the sex worker provides the services. We found that the overall social support score is statistically significantly lower for sex workers working in the street sex business than for sex workers in the private sex business. From the point of view of social work, we can expect that, in the case of the private sex business, the sources of social support (from family, friends, partners) can be used more within interventions and counselling. In the case of social support from a colleague within the sex business, the opposite effect may occur. Such support may result in the person remaining in the sex business. The different rate was further examined within individual sub-items. In some cases, social support was significantly lower for street sex workers than for private sex workers. We were also interested in whether socio-demographic variables such as the age and education of sex workers have an effect. Such an effect has not been statistically proven. Due to the nature of the research group, the findings cannot be generalised. However, these results point out this issue. Social support and the level of this among sex workers is an essential issue, mainly because it can significantly impact whether a sex worker leaves the sex business on their own or completes an exit programme without a "relapse". It also affects whether they fall victim to phenomena that accompanies the sex business, such as violence or human trafficking.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

Sociální opora žen pracujících v sexbyznysu

Souhrn

Hlavním cílem článku je analyzovat sociální oporu u sexuálních pracovnic v privátním sexbyznysu. Zjistit, jaká je její míra a jaké faktory ji ovlivňují (věk, vzdělání, délka praxe v sexbyznysu a forma sexbyznysu). U dané specifické cílové skupiny je obecná míra sociální opory ve srovnání s populací významně nižší a kvantitativní studie v této oblasti v našem prostředí absentují, výzkum je proto inovativní.

Sběr dat byl uskutečněn pomocí standardizovaného dotazníku Duke-UNC Functional Social Support Questionnaire (FSSQ) na výzkumném souboru sexuálních pracovnic v privátním sexbyznysu (n = 77). Získaná data a stanovené hypotézy byly zpracovány pomocí programu IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 při stanovené hladině α = 95 %. Použity byly korelace a t-test. Výsledky ukázaly, že existuje statisticky významný rozdíl v míře sociální opory mezi typem sexbyznysu a také statisticky významný vliv délky působení v sexbyznysu na tuto míru. Vliv věku a vzdělání na míru sociální opory nebyl prokázán. Téma sociální opory a její míry u sexuálních pracovnic je důležité, protože sociální opora může být významným pozitivním faktorem např. v případě odchodu, exitového programu, ale také v případě násilí nebo obchodování s lidmi.

Klíčová slova: pouliční sexbyznys; privátní sexbyznys; sexuální pracovnice; sociální opora

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