



Research Article

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Walking through the Fire



Katrina Milaney*, Debb Hurlock, Carrie McManus and Caitlin Stokvis

Professor, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N, 1N4, Canada

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***Corresponding author:** Katrina Milaney, Professor, University of Calgary, 2500 University Dr NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N, 1N4, Canada

Abstract

Women involved in sex work experience high rates of abuse often from multiple perpetrators. This study examined the impacts of a novel community-based program addressing the intersecting issues of sex work and abuse using a coercive control framework. Five years of qualitative data from 88 women and 20 peer facilitators revealed complex histories of trauma that deeply impacted women's capacity for healing. Results also showed that the group program created opportunities for shared learning, a sense of community and relationship equity. Follow-up supports are necessary to sustain and build on the program successes and for long-term safety-related empowerment.

Keywords: Domestic abuse; Sex work; Violence; Community; Education; Empowerment; COVID-19

Introduction

Sex work and domestic abuse have been primarily understood as distinct experiences in scholarly literature and in the delivery of services [1]. Understanding and responding to these separately limits what is known about the intersectionality and compounding issues for people living through both. Deering et al., [2] conducted a systematic review and found that between 45% 75% of people involved in sex work have also experienced abuse in their lifetime. For some involved in sex work, their abusive partner is the person who encourages their entry into the trade, profits from it and prevents their exit. Therefore, the perpetrator of violence can be both an abuser and 'pimp'. Perpetrators often threaten to harm children or other family members in order to establish control and ensure compliance [3]. The high rates of abuse amongst 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 [4].

In a collaborative report of the Canadian Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights and the House of Commons, coercive control is defined as a pattern of violent behaviour that seeks to take away a person's freedom and to strip away their sense of self (Khalid, 2021). The perpetrator uses violence to create a world in which the "victim is constantly monitored and criticized, and their every move is checked against an unpredictable, ever-changing, unknowable rule book" [5]. Other descriptive domains include exploitation, intimidation, isolation, and degradation [6-10]. Stark [10] argues that coercive control is gendered because coercive

control is dependent on women's vulnerability and vulnerability is due to gendered inequality. In other words, inequality is the cause of coercive control. If we understand abuse and sex work as intersecting, and both as forms of coercive control, approaches to respond to, or heal from sex work and violence require trust building, healthy relationships, and emotional connections [11] to 'undo' the traumas associated with exploitation and abuse. For the scope of this article, the authors apply coercive control as a paradigm for understanding the relationship between abuse and exploitation within the sex work community to posit responses that can address both [12].

The goal of this study was to explore five-years of evaluative research data of a novel community-based program that addresses the effects of coercive control among women with long histories of trauma resulting from sex work and abuse. The primary research question guiding this study was "Can a volunteer run peer education program, addressing the intersections of abuse and sex work, 'unravel' the effects of coercive control?"

Background

[Sagesse Domestic Violence Prevention Program (Sagesse)] is a community-based service provider in [Calgary, Canada] who work with people who identify as women (women) experiencing abuse. Experiential knowledge of the complex histories and traumas of women in abusive relationships and gaps in services for sex workers, led the leadership team to explore programming meant to address the intersections of abuse and sex work. The

[Believe in You (BIY)] program was launched in 2017 and operates from a client directed perspective using a peer education model as the basis of programming. Key activities of the [anonymized] program include a 20-week group approach with weekly curriculum modules addressing topics that are important for healing from abuse and trauma related to sex work. The program utilizes adult learning principles and contains activities that meet different learning styles including reading, individual activities, discussion activities, and creative/movement activities. Volunteer peer facilitators work collaboratively with program participants to decide which activities to engage in each week, based on the unique needs and values of the group.

Language in Sex Work and Violence

Definitions and theoretical frameworks for understanding 'sex work', come primarily from feminist theorists and researchers. There is considerable debate about the appropriate theoretical framework to use when discussing 'sex work'. Sex-positivists argue that people have a right to choose sex work as a form of employment [13]. However, some theorists, typically referred to as neo-abolitionists, radical, or Marxist feminists, argue that all forms of sex work, voluntary or not, are a form of oppression against women because sex work is never completely consensual and is inherently about men's power or domination over women [14,15]. Ouspenski [16] argues that anyone who is forced into or who has not chosen sex work should not be called sex workers because this term assumes that sexual services are happening by choice. Ouspenski [16] further argues that sex work that is not choice-based is trafficking and including trafficked persons in the same understandings as choice-based sex workers diminishes the seriousness of trafficking and confuses understandings of what trafficking and sex work are, including the implications. 'Sex trade' is often associated with sex workers who experience complex circumstances including poverty and housing instability, alcohol and/or drug use and physical and/or mental health constraints who may trade sex to survive [17-22]. Sexual exploitation or sex trafficking includes the use of threats, force, violence, or coercion to solicit a person for sex work. Still others argue that choosing singular understandings, that is, sex work or trade, or trafficking is far too simplistic to fully understand the nuances and individual experiences of 'sex work' [23-28]. In other words, the experiences and realities of sex work, sex trade, or sex trafficking transcend the existing categories we use to describe them. These terms are unable to fully capture the nuance and complexities inherent within such experiences because they extend beyond the limitations imposed by our current semantic frameworks. We argue that the language and/or theoretical understanding to be taken up in an examination of sex 'work' should be determined by the experiences and choices of the research participants. All the women in our study were in the process of exiting from sex work, had/were experiencing abuse, and were seeking programming meant to support recovery from substance use and trauma, and

so the use of sex trafficking/exploitation language would seem fitting. However, our participants used the language of sex work, since it was their primary source of income, and since they were lived experience experts, not theorists, we use sex work language in this paper. However, we recognize the complexity, multiple and ever-shifting experiences of these women who continuously move between and among consent, exploitation, and coercion.

There are also multiple understandings of abuse and violence. They include domestic, interpersonal, family violence or abuse as well as emotional, verbal, financial, physical, and sexual abuse/violence [29]. The women we met during our five-year study had experienced all the above. [Sagesse] uses the language of 'abuse' and argues that abuse impacts people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, abilities, orientations, and status. They define abuse as "the attempt, act or intent of someone within a relationship, where the relationship is characterized by intimacy, dependency or trust, to intimidate either by threat or by the use of physical force on another person" (Sagesse 2021, p.10). To align with the wishes of the program creators, we use the language of abuse in this paper.

Peer Support and Education

Peer support is yet another phrase with multiple meanings and definitions. The varying approaches to peer support range from informal and/or voluntary peer support to formal and/or paid peer support within a structured organizational setting. However, they are similar in that the peer has shared or similar life experiences with the people they are working with [30]. In the context of peer support in sex work, a 2005 study found that "the simple act of sharing with others who have experienced sexual exploitations and make successful transitions can be extremely empowering" [31]. Peer support has been demonstrated to positively influence both women's [32] and peer volunteers' [33] mental health, a process often referred to as joint healing.

Peer education is typically a co-teaching relationship between people who are in some way equals and where the 'educator' is a volunteer. Peer educators and learners typically share a desire to help and learn from each other and the educator is a facilitator rather than a teacher or counsellor [34]. In peer education models the 'responsibility' for learning sits with the learner and whatever growth occurs is at their own pace without expectation or set progress related goals or case plans. Peer educators are not expected to be experts, but they have been 'impacted' by their lived experiences. Educators and learners work together to find answers and solutions. This approach can help build problem solving skills and ways to strengthen decision-making. Educators and learners often gain knowledge and skills to expand their social networks, become self-advocates and gain autonomy and control over their lives [34]. One of the most important aspects of peer education is argued to be a safe and non-judgemental space to share feelings, worries and anxieties with someone who has 'been there' [16,35].

Coercive Control as a Paradigm

Much of the available literature on sex work intersects with other topics, including (de)criminalization/ policing practices [36-39]; harm reduction [40-42]; HIV and sexually transmitted and blood borne infections [43-46]; engagement in high-risk behaviours (Lavalley et al., 2021) and intergenerational and other traumas [47]. While there is ample evidence surrounding the constellations of sex work, we discovered limited academic insight relating to specific interventions that directly address coercive control and connections to abuse and sex work.

The experience of abuse within the sex work community can occur within a landscape of intersecting social and structural vulnerabilities, including gender, sex, race, employment and income status, housing status, trauma, stigma, and institutional discrimination. Collectively, these vulnerabilities can affect one's willingness and/or reluctance to access safety-related resources, social services, legal support, and/or medical care [1], rendering the sex work community with adverse mental and physical health outcomes, and higher risk of experiencing harm [39,48]. Considering the experience of abuse and sex work through the lens of coercive control in this study, allows us to transcend the explicit act of abuse as a singular or unidimensional experience. This framework is reflective of the diverse and complex needs of women who have survived multiple experiences of trauma and are on the path to recovery and healing.

Methods

Setting

The [BIY] program was developed by [Sagesse], a community-based not-for-profit organization in [Calgary], Canada that has a history of offering peer support and education programming to women fleeing abuse. In 2017, [Sagesse] received five years of funding to implement a new program utilizing a peer education approach to adapt existing programming to include women engaged in sex work. The site for the programming itself was two partner organizations, offering housing and substance use treatment as well as several other daily programs specifically for women who have or are trying to exit sex work.

Curriculum delivery occurs in a group setting over 20 weeks with modules that address topics that are 'best practices' for healing from abuse and sex work. Finding Our Voices (FOV) is a six-week, program focused on practical supports, skills, and tools to deal with shame, build self-esteem, self-image, effective communication skills, compassion, and healthy relationships. Growth Circle (GC) is a 14-week follow up program, focussed on understanding abuse, the impact of trauma and the intersection of abuse and sex work. The latter weeks specifically focus on how to move beyond abusive relationships, remain out of sex work and reclaim autonomy. All facilitators had either engaged in sex work

and/or survived abuse and received 24 hours of training in course curriculum and facilitation. All facilitators were volunteers.

Safety-related empowerment is a core objective of the program. Safety-related empowerment is defined as "the experience of power and control in relation to keeping safe from physical and emotional abuse" [49] as cited in (Goodman et al., 2015). The program curriculum supports participants to make decisions that effectively deal with the covert and overt forms of abuse in their lives including the cumulative impacts, the cycle of abuse, and family of origin relationships. The goal is to build confidence and capacity to make decisions that will help them, and their families feel safer because many women with histories of abuse may never actually feel safe [49]. According to Goodman and colleagues, participants who believe they possess the necessary internal resources to facilitate feeling safer, are better equipped to identify their needs to move forward in their lives [49].

This evaluative research project was informed by the following primary question: "Can a volunteer run peer education program addressing the intersections of violence and sex work 'unravel' the effects of coercive control? Sub-questions were: 1) What are the experiences of the program participants as they work through the 20-week curriculum? 2) What are the experiences of peer facilitators as they try and build trust and safe spaces? 3) How do these experiences shape, interact, and impact the peer relationship and healing?

Design

Data presented in this paper are from of a larger five-year evaluation that assessed the development and implementation of the program (process) and the effectiveness of the program to enable women to exit sex work and experience safety related empowerment in their lives (impact). The project design applied a community-engaged and participatory approach that included an advisory committee of community-based researchers and service providers from the sex work and/or violence service sectors.

The larger evaluation design included quantitative and qualitative research. The quantitative research was based on the use of two validated tools: 1) Measure of Victim Empowerment Related to Safety (MOVERS) Tool; and 2) Feedback Informed Treatment Tool (FIT) (ORS/SRS). Data presented in this paper is from the qualitative interviews with program participants and peer facilitators and is primarily from the impact evaluation results. The purpose of the group interviews was to assess the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program and the curriculum, the impact the program content and approach was having on the women's experiences/learnings and the role of the Peer Facilitators, all to generate ideas to enhance the program. All participants provided signed consent and were given a \$25 gift card to thank them for their time.

Data Collection

All participants in the program were women over the age of 18 who had diverse backgrounds and identities relating to age, length of time in sex work and race. The commonality among them was that they were in a residential housing program meant to support addiction recovery and exits from sex work. Between 18 and 26 women participated in group interviews twice per year for five years (2017-2021). Because women could reside in the residential program for up to a year, some women participated more than once in the group interviews. Approximately 20% of women were repeat participants each year and so in total, 88 unique women participated in group interviews. Each time the researchers returned to the site to conduct an interview, we reviewed summaries of the results from the previous discussions in a member check format. This was done to encourage reflection and feedback from the participants but also to help ensure validity for the researchers [50]. Due to Covid-19, interviews in 2020 were done virtually.

Peer facilitators were also all women over the age of 18. All disclosed experiences of trauma, some related to abuse and/or sex work. Over the course of five years, we conducted small group interviews with 20 facilitators. All participants provided consent and received a \$25 gift card to thank them for their time. This study was approved by the [anonymized] Research Ethics Board REB#17-1576.

Data Analysis

Analysis of data was guided by the assumption that experiences of coercive control are the 'reason' women were in the [anonymized] program. Examining discussions of acceptance, understanding, care, compassion, trust-building and emotional connection (in many ways, the opposite of coercive control) provided an analysis framework that was strength-based rather than deficit-based. This approach understands women living at the intersections of abuse and sex work as survivors not victims and examined whether or not the intervention helped build safety-related empowerment.

Textual analysis of data was completed using Braun and Clarke's [51,52] coding method. Five evaluation reports for the BIY program were produced between 2017 – 2021; the reports included direct quotes from participants and peer facilitators. A total of 179 quotes were included in the thematic analysis. The data were manually labelled into codes. Subsequent candidate themes were developed and then linked to broader macro-themes or patterns [52]. One member of the research team created and reviewed the candidate themes that were shared with the larger team for reflexive discussion and further exploration. The nature of group interviews mean that we could not assign pseudonyms or codes to individual quotes and so quotes are presented as participant or facilitator interview and the year.

Results

The researchers identified two themes related to participants and facilitators histories of coercive control and trauma and their personal (r)evolution through the program content and group format delivery, and two themes from both participants and facilitators related to their shared learning and shared experiences and the processes of healing together. While our primary goal was to understand the impact of the program on women participants, interviews with peer facilitators produced similar themes and so we present data from both. The themes below are organized under the following. 1) histories of trauma; 2) personal (r)evolution; 3) empathy, connection, and community; 4) the healing journey.

Histories of Trauma

This theme emerged in discussions with the women about the reasons they participated in the [anonymized] program. Their discussions highlight the depth and complexity of their traumas, including recognition that there are some traumas they may never fully recover from. Their experiences before joining, or in the early days of participating help set a foundation for understanding the impact of the program as the rest of the themes highlight.

"I didn't even know what boundaries were and before I came into the program, my background was pretty violent...I was never really allowed to say no without there being a consequence like a gun being held to my head... Then its also made me realize I guess just how many times I've been abused, sexually or physically. And that's been a real struggle for me... cuz I'm gonna take that with me forever." (Participant Focus Group, 2018)

It's a very, very touchy subject because where we come from most of us, we experience violence, just unbelievable experiences that are very traumatizing and horrible. To the extent that we're lucky to be alive...when I step outside or go somewhere, I never know if I am gonna see someone who has hurt me...it's not just one abuser, it's hundreds..." (Participant Focus Group, 2017).

"A lot of us have PTSD, a lot of us have a lot of stuff. A lot of baggage. When we open this and it's not in a safe, well managed situation it could be more damaging to us ...my first session I guess, yeah I was triggered...you have to really appreciate and have not sympathy but empathy for us. Cuz we don't want your pity. We don't want you to feel sorry and we don't want you to be afraid of us cuz you're not gonna do us any good." (Participant Focus Group, 2020)

Facilitators also acknowledged the depth of trauma these women have faced.

"I don't think there's anything that can prepare you for it. And even after doing it over a year, that room changes depending on who is in it. It changes every week. I mean you can be more mentally prepared for what's going on and develop a good basis for what sex work is and what that looks like and all that kind of stuff. All that textbook knowledge that's not gonna prepare you for the girl that tells you that she was kept in a dog kennel by her

pimp... (Facilitator, 2018).

A Personal (R)evolution:

Analysis also revealed that participants experienced a relearning, a reckoning, or a call to action. Participants had their own personal (r)evolution and were rebuilding themselves, akin to learning how to walk again. They saw a path forward, knowing what they wanted out of life. The group format in particular was difficult, but powerful.

"It's just like relearning how to walk again, relearning how to just function in normal society without having a lot of the traumas coming up in public and stuff like that. The lifestyle we lived before and the people we were used to being around... we had to adapt to that life. So now we're in a different lifestyle and it's completely different. So now we have to adapt to this life right? But really the trauma, we're traumatized and... We have to learn to rewrite those experiences... We have to relearn everything all over again." (Participant, 2020).

"I have to be honest, when I first got here, I hated the group session... I guess it's kind of an echo chamber of what the other girls were saying, but once I started listening to everyone's story, I realized that the work is great, but I think connection would be hearing other people's journey and I felt connected" (Participant Focus Group, 2019).

"For me, personally, I was very intimidated...because I never really had healthy relationships with other women before. So, this class, because I got to hear more of their stories in this class, gave me a chance to connect with them on a deeper personal level and feel more empowered" (Participant Focus Group, 2019).

"Like they're really heavy topics, you know, [Facilitator] always gives you the time to talk... So that lets me work through a lot of the stuff in there that I would never, never go deep into and never talk about right... And they're just so patient and everything... and that you're able to say those things, like you've been digging, like hiding deep in there, they make it so like you're ok to say it and you feel really, really good about it and you're not gonna have any judgement or whatever and really work through that stuff in there" (Participant Focus Group, 2017).

Facilitators also observed growth in the participants during the program.

"She was struggling and there were family things going on for her and a partner that she was kicking to the curb. Just to see her, just as a visual from a slumped shoulder to sitting up with bright eyes and moving forward and looking forward to her future... to me that's what it's all about." (Facilitator, 2018).

"Any time they talk about their future plans. Like 'I'm gonna go to college and I'm gonna study social work'. It's not, talking about if I get to go to college, or if things get better then maybe... it's not in uncertain terms. It's I'm doing this, I'm moving forward with my

future." (Facilitator, 2018).

"Just looking down to looking up and not feeling that shame and taking back her power back. She was in charge of her life. She wasn't just a participant in life, she was making things happen. She was creating things for herself." (Facilitator, 2017).

Empathy, Connection and Community

This theme highlights the waves of relationship development between and among the participants and the peer-facilitators. The fluidity within these relationships explores a "fuzziness" between the significance of a shared experience (e.g., trauma, abuse, involvement in sex work) and the universality of an emotional experience (e.g., vulnerability, stigma, and shame). Within the context of peer education in general and the program specifically, relationship-equity through acceptance and understanding emerged as an important aspect towards building empathy, connection, and community.

"It's changed my life... It's kind of like a sisterhood. You're building with other women who have gone through the same degrading thing that you went through. All these women know what that's like. So let's say 20 years down the line, I call up one of the girls. 'Hey I'm having this flash back, I don't know what to do. Nothing is working, what do I do?' I can talk to K about it because she understands" (Participant, 2018).

"I'm telling you right now, damned if I'm gonna let some facilitator walk in here and hurt one of these girls. Because you're dealing with a lot of beautiful women that are broken. We are broken vessels. You really have to come in here with empathy and with compassion... the fact that [facilitators] are not paid to be here is unbelievable... they are really committed (Participant, 2020).

"The facilitator, she talked about her own experiences and for her to share that with us was huge. It showed us that she was human. She's not just some robot reading from a book and being book smart and saying 'Hey yeah I know what you guys are doing'. But she really did. For them to be up there and say 'Hey you push us a little bit and shared and you're safe'. (Participant, 2018).

"The facilitator's nice and she never judges us. When I talk about my own experiences, she never looks at me like 'Oh my God you pimped out girls' or 'Oh my God you did this for money' I feel really trusting in her and she's established that because she's shown that she's trustworthy. I feel that if push came to shove, she totally would have our back. She would be like This is an amazing young woman and she has gone through the fire and you do not have the right to judge her." (BIY Group Participant, 2017).

Peer facilitators also talked about the benefits of building connections through their shared experiences, particularly shared vulnerability.

"I rely on my experience and my intuition more than on any

counselling skills I may have... that is what women need. They need to know we have their back and have been there" (Facilitator, 2020)

"I wanted some more experience in the field. I also was really interested in doing peer support because having accessed services before, I knew what it was like to be on the other side... I was a little scared because I hadn't shared all of my story before and it was a very private part of myself. So, after talking with [anonymized] and meeting staff and just seeing the [program] culture I was in a place where I was like "Yeah I really wanna do this". (Facilitator, 2019)

"I like this conversation around vulnerability and how that it might be vulnerability that makes you a peer, right...your experiences don't have to be exactly the same...we've all felt shame, we've all felt embarrassed. It's about breaking down that power, it's really about the vulnerability" (Facilitator, 2018).

The Healing Journey

This theme highlights the extent to which the women have developed core survival skills, tools, and techniques and the importance of going through their journeys together. Facilitators also described a healing process because they also participated in shared learning and growth. By acknowledging that personal growth involves shared and intentional work, this theme highlights that healing is an active process, rather than a passive event.

"It kind of scares me... to accept that if we're gonna move on from this we can't just sit here and hide what happened. Cuz what happened to us... it's definitely the hardest part for me for sure. To learn how to cope with it, it's like ok, I wanna leave the room. Ok, well how, how do I stay in the room without having a flashback or panic attack. Because it's so normal to hide it and not to hide it is something that is pretty amazing to figure out but it's scary..."

"First you're understanding your thoughts, feelings and actions. Embracing being vulnerable and self-compassion. The next heavy hitter would be domestic violence, the [sex] industry and then finding out where our challenges are and standing tall and getting past them, then... resilience. It doesn't matter what we've been through, we can bounce back... We're like nobody else, but here we get to share our stories and realize, you know what, we stand strong we're not alone. We're not the only one this is happening to." (Participant, 2017)

"We are women that matter, we have strengths that are unbelievable... We understand who we are, that we are strong, we are better than what happened, better than the mistakes or the things that others did to us. So it's really nice to start growing and recognizing our value cuz in that whole mess of a really heartbreaking life, you forget that. Every day it seems like we walk out a little better able to actually love ourselves." (Participant, 2017).

Two women in a group interview talked to each other about their experience connecting with each other.

- i. P1 *I remember that first time you came in.*
- ii. P2 *I know and I cried, I sat like right where you're sitting and I cried.*
- iii. P1 *Cuz you were scared?*
- iv. P2 *I was terrified.*
- v. P1 *But we like made her feel like she was already here, we were like "We got you, you're here, that's your spot, you've got problems loving yourself until you love yourself". Then we'll just keep on loving you and yeah." (2019).*

Peer Facilitators talked about their own healing journeys and the importance of a safe space where they themselves are not judged.

"After a session I am beat for the rest of the day...When I get home I need to recharge and chill for a bit... you worry about the women. I have had lots of time to deal with my experiences of DV so that helps. I have processed that myself...I put a lot of weight on prior exposure to sorrows and angst of humanity. Most people have not seen or know about this. It is an ugly thing I have exposure too." (Facilitator, 2020)

"I needed intense self-care. It was the hardest thing I have done. It pushed and tried me in ways I have never been pushed before... my soul took a big hit. I really struggled... I have a better understanding of my own need for boundaries and my vulnerabilities and trust issues because I get to work with these women"" (Facilitator, 2020)

"You hear what your colleagues have to say about it. You're like "Ok, that's me" and you feel like you have to hide these parts of yourself all the time. So, to be able to walk into a space and not have to hide any of it and not be afraid that you're gonna be fired and not be afraid that people are gonna gossip around the office about you... It's really healing in of itself. Because I know that every other job, every other place... I've been terrified, if something got out, if I said the wrong thing, if I expose too much, I'm gonna be out the door...it's just I have an experience that is not accepted...even though we're in a helping profession." (Facilitator, 2018)

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to examine the impacts of peer education programming on the healing journeys of women with long and complex histories of sex work and abuse using a coercive control framework. Our results align with other researchers who argue that coercive control impacts women's sense of self and autonomy and limits their opportunities to move forward because of the oppressive nature of their relationships with perpetrators [53,54]. In the case of the women in our study, multiple perpetrators.

Our findings add value because participants were engaged in a community-based intervention that was specifically designed to address both sex work and abuse and to build safety related empowerment, heal from trauma and begin to rebuild self-worth through healthy connections, trust and non-judgement. The program is novel in that it has never been offered before and is peer run by volunteers in a group setting who themselves have similar histories.

Our results show that the women in the [anonymized] program have experienced terrible trauma's including some they may never fully recover from, including gun violence and fear for their safety when out in public. Despite this, the women talked about a re-learning, a personal (r)evolution where they felt supported to acknowledge and deal with their traumas and begin to rebuild. The peer nature was critical for removing power hierarchies and imbalances [16,35] and was an important first step in unravelling the impacts of oppressive relationships where choices were taken away from them.

Women were supported by each other and the peer facilitators to move through the program curriculum at their own pace and learning styles and this allowed them to begin to build healthy relationships with other women in ways they had not done before. The peer education approach was effective in encouraging autonomy and helping to build a sense of community [55], women reported reduced feelings of isolation, improved connections, and growth [56], and a safe and non-judgemental space to share trauma and vulnerability with people who have shared experiences [35]. Peer education appears to be an effective way to support women with intersecting histories of abuse and sex work since the very purpose and goal of peer education is to dismantle power hierarchies and provide an alternative to the 'expert' model, which would exist in a one-on-one therapeutic relationship between client and social worker, or client and psychologist. Peer education is a radical departure from the nature and deleterious effects of coercive control that women experienced in relationships with perpetrators. Given that facilitators were also volunteers, not paid staff, appeared to further strengthen the women's opportunities to build trust and feel safe, which is particularly important since they have been exploited and harmed.

Both women and facilitators described a healing process or journey that was arduous. Both groups brought their own diverse backgrounds, assumptions, experiences, and biases, but collectively they created a circle of support and a community of knowledge-sharing, predicated on mutual trust. The skills, tools, techniques, and knowledge generated were mutually reinforcing, creating a shared sense of identity, a culture of safety and strong community. Shared experiences help individuals find shared meaning; and shared meaning can create connection [57]. However, while there were many benefits to participation, and women reported feeling

safer, they also talked about lingering fears not feeling completely safe. Additional and potential long-term supports meant to sustain the beneficial effects of the [BIY] program, perhaps in the form of 'light touch' follow-up with peer educators and/or administrative support for continued relationships with other women in the program could help to build extended healthy and supportive relationships. This could include logistical support for women to continue their peer approach but in a less formal way [58].

The value of this project was framing both abuse and sex work as experiences of coercive control. In so doing, coercive control is understood as the 'mechanism' by which women were stripped of their self-worth, exploited, abused, and degraded, we understand that surviving abuse and sex work, requires responses that oppose or challenge the strategies, activities, and implications of coercive control rather than seeing and responding to abuse and sex work as distinct experiences.

Limitations and Future Research

First, the setting of the program created some limitations in that women in a residential treatment program all live together and attend other programming together so they have established relationships which may have helped in trust building. Future research could examine the experiences of program participants who lived in community and were not known to each other, to see how this program might need to be adapted for different contexts.

Second, the [BIY] program was designed and developed to serve women. However, individuals across diverse gender identities and gender expressions experience coercive control, therefore the program demographic represents a limitation. [Sagesse] organization is utilizing the full evaluative results to develop scaling strategies to other jurisdictions and diverse communities, including to under-served gender-diverse communities. Future research could examine the experiences of gender diverse people in a peer education model.

Third, in understanding abuse and sex work as intersecting experiences of coercive control the analysis framework was developed to seek out experiences of growth and personal connection and so was strength-based. Several women shared that they have lived experiences in their past they may never recover from. Future research could be longitudinal and seek to further examine women's healing journeys once they complete the program and in particular, identify issues that women need long-term supports for.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the [BIY program] to pivot to an online delivery model for six months in 2020. While the program continued operating, group interviews that year were conducted virtually, which may have impacted the research team's capacity to build trust in the interviews and support dynamic discussions that often come from group discussions.

Conclusion

Participants and Facilitators experienced many benefits from a peer education program. The group format and volunteer peer facilitators appeared to be critically important components to growth and healing since women's previous experiences of coercive control stripped their sense of autonomy, identity, and self-worth. The [BIY] program created safe spaces for both participants and facilitators to rebuild together through shared experiences. Women with long and complex histories of exploitation and violence may never fully feel 'safe' but they can feel a greater sense of safety by building their skills, confidence, and capacity to thrive in supportive relationships and by feeling empowered to make their own decisions.

Participation in this program helped the participants feel hope and able to imagine an alternate future where their story can change. The story is no longer about coercive control but connection and healing. It is a story about change, growth, discovery, movement, transformation, and continuously expanding what is possible. It is about learning to see clearly and deeply, listening to intuition, and taking courageous challenges. It is a forward story about triumph, healing, dignity, courage, and possibility.

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