

*This QGuide was developed by Scarlet Alliance for QLife, and is written from a lived and living experience perspective.*

*This information is for anyone who is supporting someone from LGBTIQ+ communities and who is a sex worker.*

## ABOUT SCARLET ALLIANCE

Scarlet Alliance is the Australian Sex Workers Association. Our membership includes individual sex workers and sex worker organisations, networks, groups, projects and collectives in each state and Territory around so-called Australia.

Scarlet Alliance aims to achieve equality, social, legal, political, cultural and economic justice for past and present sex workers. Our membership has the highest level of engagement with sex workers of any other agency, organisation or group in Australia.

## WHAT IS SEX WORK?

Sex work is work that can include participating in sexual activity with or for the benefit of another person, including sexually explicit entertainment, for payment or reward. It is important that health professionals and service providers learn not to make assumptions about sex workers, our sex work practices, or who we are.

Not all sex workers have penetrative sex, or even physical contact with clients, and sex work services can be incredibly diverse. Sex work includes phone sex, peep show work, stripping, erotic dancing, social time, massage work, kink, fetish and BDSM, webcam work, porn, online content and more. Sex work can happen on the street, in parlours, in the client's home, in the sex worker's home, in small collectives, in cars, online as well as many other places.

Sex work is skilled work, and many sex workers have small business skills in addition to the social, work health and safety (WHS), erotic, boundary setting, negotiation and customer service skills.

# SEX WORKERS

A QLIFE GUIDE  
FOR HEALTH AND  
SOCIAL CARE  
PRACTITIONERS,  
SERVICE PROVIDERS,  
AND FOLKS WHO  
CARE

## CONTACT QLIFE

Health professionals wanting to know more can contact [ask@qlife.org.au](mailto:ask@qlife.org.au)

QLife is available 365 days a year, 3pm - midnight.  
call 1800 184 527 | webchat  
[www.qlife.org.au](http://www.qlife.org.au)

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

QLife acknowledges the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia, their diversity, histories and knowledge and their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to all Australian Indigenous peoples and their cultures, and to Elders of past, present and future generations.



# SEX WORKERS

## WHO ARE SEX WORKERS?

Sex workers are diverse in gender, age, culture, sexualities and socio-economic backgrounds. Many sex workers identify as queer. Many of us will perform sexual acts in our sex work that are different to what we enjoy in our personal lives, or with genders that we are not sexually attracted to.

Importantly, not everyone who does sex work identifies as a sex worker.

Some sex workers may come and go from the industry, and others may work consistently in sex work as their sole, primary or secondary source of income. Sex workers will often move between sectors fluidly, influenced by a range of factors such as the legal and regulatory environment, policing practices, and workplace health and safety, privacy, and the availability of work.

People choose to do sex work for lots of different reasons. Sex work allows us to work flexibly and earn an income in a way that suits our individual circumstances. Asking us why we do sex work can sound like judgement, instead affirm our right to choose.

Many sex workers are also part of LGBTIQ+ communities, and many sex workers view sex work itself as a queer act. Many sex workers and our clients have been able to experiment with our sexual orientation and sexual practices in safe and affirming ways in the context of a sex work booking. Sex workers have always played a key role in providing identity affirming services to many people from LGBTIQ+ communities.

Sex workers come in all shapes and sizes, all ages, from all cultures and genders, dressed in all attire, from every socio-economic background. You have probably met many sex workers but didn't know they were sex workers.

## SEX WORKER ORGANISATIONS AND PROGRAMS

ACT: [meridianact.org.au/swop](http://meridianact.org.au/swop)

New South Wales: [swop.org.au](http://swop.org.au)

Victoria: [vixen.org.au](http://vixen.org.au)

Tasmania: [scarletalliance.org.au/tas](http://scarletalliance.org.au/tas)

South Australia: [sin.org.au](http://sin.org.au)

Queensland: [respectqld.org.au](http://respectqld.org.au)

Northern Territory: [ntahc.org.au/swopnt](http://ntahc.org.au/swopnt)

Western Australia: [magenta.org.au](http://magenta.org.au)

For current information on sex work laws in Australia, see <https://scarletalliance.org.au/laws/>

## LEGAL STATUS

Sex work laws in Australia vary in each state and territory and can be confusing even to sex workers. Fear of self-incrimination may result in sex workers not being able to openly disclose their sex work status.

It is important that you do not give inaccurate information about the laws, including as it regards sexual health. It is also essential that you do not assume that you are obligated or expected for reporting sex work to law enforcement or government authorities.

Sex work is decriminalised in some states and territories, and in others where some or all aspects of sex work are criminalised, condoms are used as evidence against sex workers.

If you are working with sex workers and you think it would be helpful to know the laws in your state or territory the best place to learn about this is from your local sex worker peer organisation or the [Scarlet alliance laws guide](#).

Sex workers are organising and fighting for better industrial protections and workplace health and safety standards, and criminalisation and stigma can make this challenging. Decriminalisation is considered best practice for sex workers' health and safety.

## DISCLOSURE

Due to stigma, discrimination and the criminalisation of sex work, sex workers are constantly weighing up the risks associated with disclosing our sex work to service providers. We may have concerns about being 'outed' or other breaches of our confidentiality, including our sex work being revealed to other practitioners.

This should be considered by any practitioner who is recording information in the course of service delivery. The consent of the sex worker must be informed and explicit. Sex workers may also fear disclosure of our sex work to partners, family, friends, colleagues, or other services.

These barriers are heightened for migrant and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sex workers, who can also be impacted by racism, incarceration, criminalisation, and a lack of access to culturally-appropriate services.

Migrant sex workers (particularly those in criminalised settings) may have a strong fear that their information will be shared with the government or immigration authorities and will lead to them being deported.



# SEX WORKERS

## PROVIDING SEX WORKER FRIENDLY SERVICES

### Language

Use 'sex worker' and 'sex work'. 'Prostitute' and 'prostitution' are stigmatising terms and not preferred by the sex worker community. Some of us may prefer to refer to ourselves as a massage worker or escort. If our sex work is not important to the service, please don't bring it up, as it can make us feel uncomfortable and undermine the effectiveness of service delivery. Have resources translated but remember that we may not be comfortable to take them with us due to privacy concerns. Offer interpreting services if you cannot provide the services in the language that the person speaks.

### Confidentiality

Take a moment to explain confidentiality policy and practices, with the use of a translator if necessary. Avoid presuming we know about confidentiality. Be clear about any records you are keeping, and only record sex work status if it is necessary and we have consented to you doing so. Allow us to use an alias name if we want to.

### Be patient

Give us the time and space to build trust and disclose our sex work or other parts of our lives to you. Your support and patience can make a big difference.

### Questions

Only ask questions that are relevant to the service or support that you are providing. Do not subject sex workers to invasive questioning about work and work practices.

### Sex workers are the experts on our own lives and on the services we need

Check if the person is already aware of the information that you are offering. Sex workers often have comprehensive knowledge of safer sex practices and sexual health. Ask us what information or services we would like, as many of us will come in knowing this in advance.

### Don't make assumptions

Do not assume we want to leave sex work, or that someone's sex work is a problem to be solved. If we want to talk more about our work or life or we need some other kind of support that you do not offer, refer us to your local sex worker organisation.

### Testing

Do not automatically assume we need sexual health testing unless we ask for it.

### Sex worker organisations

There are peer-based sex worker organisations in every state and territory that provide a wide range of support services to sex workers. Refer people to them for peer support, education, and community connection

### Visual cues

The red umbrella is the universal symbol for sex worker rights. By displaying a picture of a red umbrella, you are telling us that your service is sex worker-friendly.

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## MYTHBUSTING

### Sexual health

Sex workers in Australia have [similar or lower rates](#) of Sexually Transmitted Infection and Blood Borne Viruses, and [much higher rates of condom use](#) than the general community. We are widely recognised as the safer sex educators of our clients.

### Drug use

Sex workers are [on par](#) with the general population for drug use in all but nicotine, which is more common among sex workers.

### Relationships

Sex workers maintain, manage, negotiate and struggle in our relationships with partners and families just like everyone else. Not all sex workers are 'out' about their work to their family and friends, and this is a personal choice that should be respected.

### Our clients

Like sex workers, our clients come from all walks of life, and not all clients are men. Female and gender diverse clients book sex workers every day.

### Trafficking

Despite media-driven portrayals, trafficking in the Australian sex industry is extremely uncommon. Due to racist stereotypes about Asian women being uneducated, and without agency, sex workers of Asian appearance are unjustly targeted by police and immigration departments in brothel raids. The reality is that the vast majority of migrant sex workers choose to travel and sex work. Data from [research](#) by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) and Scarlet Alliance shows that there are no measurable differences between migrant and non-migrant sex workers in age, hours worked, condom use, rates of HIV and STI's or number of clients seen.

## REFERENCES

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