

# Transwomen in Hawaii's Sex Industry

A Report of Data Collected by the  
Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center  
and Harm Reduction Hawaii  
on our mahuwahine community

Issued August 12, 2022 by Tracy Ryan  
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## **Agency Involvement**

Harm Reduction Hawaii is a non-profit organization that provides education on public health and social problems and support for organizations providing direct services. The harm reduction paradigm addresses issues in a non-judgmental, cooperative way, with a goal of reducing the harms associated with risky behaviors.

Harm Reduction Hawaii contracted Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center (HHHRC)'s Kua'ana Project, which provides transgender services, and Kulia Na Mamo to conduct surveys for this phase of the study. Kulia Na Mamo is a non-profit that is aimed at assisting Hawaii's mahuwahine community.

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### **Some definitions (for mahuwahine see end notes)**

Cisgender refers to persons who have consistently identified with and lived in the gender role assigned at birth.

High end escort refers to sex sellers who are generally independent of control, make large amounts of money, and are most often found on the internet.

Madam is a woman who manages and profits from a business, legal or otherwise, in which prostitution is the principal service.

Outreach worker refers to one who goes out into the public to provide services.

Pimp can mean any person who lives off the income of a prostitute, but is commonly understood to mean an abuser who controls the lives of prostitutes for financial gain.

Prostitution as defined by Hawaii law refers to offering to, agreeing to, or engaging in a sex act, in exchange for a fee.

Rescue Organization refers to an entity who provides a residential facility for persons exiting the sex trades.

Sex Trades include any commercial activity that is aimed to appeal to sexual interests. Adult films, nude dancing, and other legal activities are included along with prostitution.

Sex Trafficking is defined in Hawaii law as controlling, abusing, and profiting from a person who engages in selling sex. It can also involve profiting from the prostitution of a minor.

Sex Trafficking Victim is the person controlled by the sex trafficking person. However, the Federal government rounds all minors selling sex into the sex trafficking victim definition, whether they are trafficked or independent.

Sex work may include engaging in a variety of activities such as nude dancing, massage, adult video production, etc. In the context of this paper it only refers to the selling of sex as defined as prostitution.

Streetwalking is a common slang term for a walking about in public in an attempt to meet with men who will purchase sexual services.

Transwoman is, for the context of this report, an individual whose birth assigned gender is male, but who has adopted the identity, and lifestyle of a female.

## **Introduction**

This is a preliminary report, issued as part of an ongoing study of the sex trades in Hawaii by Harm Reduction Hawaii, to contribute towards the development of better policy. The study aims to gather information directly from those who have engaged in the selling of sex, as defined in Hawaii law as prostitution.

This study is aimed at getting responses from persons who have sold sex in a variety of different situations and comparing the experiences and attitudes among groups. It should be noted that what we refer to as “prostitution” is a very multifaceted thing. Persons such as transwomen, massage parlor workers, male providers, under-age runaways, high end escorts, etc., may report a variety of differing experiences and attitudes.

The general problem of research into this area is the difficulty in finding respondents. This is due to the illegal and highly stigmatized nature of the activities involved. Since some sections are easier to reach than others studies that have been conducted have involved specific subgroups at the expense of others. So most research has centered on cisgendered women, those who have engaged in public solicitation (i.e.. streetwalking), and persons who have identified as sex trafficking victims while seeking assistance. Unfortunately, conclusions about the entire field have often been made based on data from a segment of the whole that may not be applicable generally.

### **Executive summary of this report**

A survey was created by Harm Reduction Hawaii to include demographic data, information on individual’s experiences, their opinions, and suggestions in a needs assessment. Due to recent changes in Hawaii law a separate survey was given to youth at risk without first determining if they had sold sex. Results from this survey may be used as a comparison later when a larger sample is available.

Two means of access were used to acquire data from respondents. Survey Monkey was used on Harm Reduction Hawaii’s private Facebook page for transwomen with Hawaii connections. This was accessed by 13 persons. These surveys missed question #14.

Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center (HHRC) collected survey data between December of 2021 and March of 2022. A total of 42 paper surveys were turned in by them for tabulation. Of these twenty-five adult transwomen

(mahuwahine) were added to the thirteen obtained from Facebook and used in this report. Six adult cisgender females and eleven youth responses were considered too small to utilize. Additional responses from these groups is hoped for for future publication.

HHHRC collected survey data in the following ways:

1. HHHRC staff who have sex work experience completed the survey.
2. Unsheltered youth (young adults) were reached through youth homeless outreach.
3. Transwomen coming to the HHHRC office in person for services were asked to complete the survey.
4. Transwomen attending a Kua'ana workshop were asked to complete the survey.

Completed surveys were kept confidential and submitted without review by HHHRC staff. Respondents were given \$25 gift cards in appreciation of their participation.

## **Demographics**

Looking at the data in this report we see that all but three respondents were born in Hawaii. (See Chart #1) All were born male and worked as females, although one worked as both genders. Ages at entry and length of years worked varied. Averages are presented here. Most are non-white, with part Hawaiian the leading answer on ethnicity. In questions #8 through #11 participants could check multiple boxes. The data on ethnicity is consistent with the unpublished census of Hawaii based mahuwahine done in 2011/2012 by Kulia Na Mamo. That census also indicated about 80% had worked in the sex trades.

Two respondents to this survey indicated they had worked with a pimp, but no additional information on those relationships is available. (See Chart #2) None indicated they had been trafficked. Of the age of first trading sex 25 indicated they had been under 18 which meets the Federal definition of "sex trafficking". Respondents may have understood the question in relation to the common definition that involves the control and/or abuse of another person. Within professional circles the Federal insistence of conflating persons who are being controlled with those who are not, as victims of sex trafficking, is a source of contention.

## Chart # I basic information from 38 respondents (37 from #9)

Questions are shown as they appeared on the survey

Data

1	Were you born in Hawaii	35 of 38		
2	About how old were you when you first sold sex for money	16.3	Average	
3	About how old were you when you became a full time sex worker	18.4	Average	
4	About how many years did you work in the sex industry	14.0	Average	
5	About how many of those years were worked in Hawaii	12.5	Average	
6	What gender was assigned to you at birth	All Male		
7	What gender did you present yourself as while working in the industry	Female 36	Mixed 1	
8	Check each box that applies to your ethnic background	#	%	# response
	White	12	31.6%	38
	Black	2	5.3%	38
	Hispanic	1	2.6%	38
	Asian	20	52.6%	38
	Hawaiian	27	71.1%	38
	Other Polynesian	16	42.1%	38
9	Did someone work with you in prostitution			
	I worked with a male "pimp"	2	5.4%	37
	I worked independently	35	94.6%	37
	I was part of a gang	0	0.0%	37
	I worked with a family member	3	8.1%	37
	I worked with a boyfriend	1	2.7%	37
	I worked with another prostitute	22	59.5%	37
	I worked for a madam	1	2.7%	37
	I believe I was sex trafficked	0	0.0%	37

Several common problems relating to the sex trades are discussed in question #10. In question #11 (See Chart #2), seventeen are currently doing sex work.

Chart #2

10	Did you have any of these problems prior to entering prostitution?	#	%	# response
	Sexual abuse from an older person	13	35.1%	37
	Sexual or other abuse by a family member	17	45.9%	37
	I had issues with additive drugs	10	27.0%	37
	My family was very poor	16	43.2%	37
	I was an underage runaway	9	24.3%	37
	There was other bad things	17	45.9%	37
11	How or why did you leave prostitution?			
	I am still working	17	45.9%	37
	I was helped by a social service outreach worker	5	13.5%	37
	I was arrested and sentenced to a rescue organization	3	8.1%	37
	I had gotten older and left on my own	15	40.5%	37
	I had had a very bad situation and sought help on my own	5	13.5%	37

Questions #12, #13, and #14 (See Chart #3) provide insight into the opinions and attitudes of this group. Answers regarding pimps are interesting. Although only two indicated they had ever worked with a pimp, and abuse from pimps was generally rated as a minor problem, attitudes towards pimps were very negative. The most favorable response was to the issue of fast cash.

Attitudes about the law are addressed in question #14. This was not asked of the survey monkey group so the number of responses is only 25. The current Hawaii approach (noted in item e) is strongly opposed. The “arrest the buyers but not the workers” approach (noted in item c) has five votes in favor and nine against. The broad decriminalization (noted in item b) is favored 12 to 1 among those with an opinion. There is support for a legal brothel system. The high incidence of unsure answers to these questions may indicate that respondents were not familiar with the sorts of regulatory models involved.

Chart #3

		Major Problem		Mixed		Minor Problem		Responded
12	Most common problems associated with prostitution	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
a.	Drugs	16	44.4%	11	30.6%	9	25.0%	36
b.	Rape by trick	12	33.3%	4	11.1%	20	55.6%	36
c.	Violence by trick	14	38.9%	9	25.0%	13	36.1%	36
d.	Rape by cop	5	14.3%	4	11.4%	26	74.3%	35
e.	Abuse by cop	8	22.9%	8	22.9%	19	54.3%	35
f.	Going to jail	14	38.9%	6	16.7%	16	44.4%	36
g.	Abusive pimp	6	17.1%	4	11.4%	25	71.4%	35
h.	Stigma of work	16	44.4%	3	8.3%	17	47.2%	36
		Negative		Mixed		Positive		Responded
13	How do you feel about the following	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
a.	Pimps	26	70.3%	11	29.7%	0	0.0%	37
b.	Cops	8	21.6%	25	67.6%	4	10.8%	37
c.	Tricks	3	8.1%	14	37.8%	20	54.1%	37
d.	Outreach workers	4	10.8%	7	18.9%	26	70.3%	37
e.	Other sex workers	3	8.1%	11	29.7%	23	62.2%	37
f.	Residential “rescue”	10	27.8%	12	33.3%	14	38.9%	36
g.	The excitement of sex work	2	5.6%	11	30.6%	23	63.9%	36
h.	Fast cash of sex work	1	2.7%	3	8.1%	33	89.2%	37
		Favor		Opposes		Not Sure		Responded
14	What is your opinion of the following ideas	#	%	#	%	#	%	#
a.	A legal brothel system	14	56.0%	2	8.0%	9	36.0%	25
b.	No laws against consenting adults	12	48.0%	1	4.0%	12	48.0%	25
c.	Arrest the buyers, not the workers	5	20.0%	9	36.0%	11	44.0%	25
d.	Focus only on abusers	16	64.0%	4	16.0%	5	20.0%	25
e.	Arrest everyone involved	1	4.0%	19	76.0%	5	20.0%	25
f.	Public education to address stigma	10	40.0%	4	16.0%	11	44.0%	25
g.	More social service options	16	64.0%	2	8.0%	7	28.0%	25

In the needs assessment medical insurance, assistance with benefits, and long term housing are the most noted items.

	#	%
Medical insurance	28	75.7%
Assistance with benefits	27	73.0%
Long term housing	26	70.3%
Hygiene services and supplies	22	59.5%
Food /clothing	21	56.8%
Medical care and treatment	21	56.8%
Sexual health	21	56.8%
Emergency housing	20	54.1%
Mental Health	20	54.1%
Transitional housing	17	45.9%
Education	16	43.2%
Dental services	15	40.5%
Employment	15	40.5%
Substance abuse/alcohol	15	40.5%
Social service advocate	14	37.8%
Legal forms of identification	13	35.1%
Life skills	13	35.1%
Victim assistance/legal advocacy	11	29.7%
Family reunification /counseling	8	21.6%
Child care	5	13.5%
Supportive crises intervention	5	13.5%
Safer injection equipment	1	2.7%
Safety planning	0	0.0%
Transportation	0	0.0%



## **Moving Forward**

We hope to be able to identify and receive data from a wider spectrum of cisgendered women, youth, and others selling sex. This will allow for more comparisons between persons in differing areas of this industry. Several organizations that service persons who have or are selling sex, will be asked to assist us.

## **Conclusion**

Conclusions at this point can only be drawn in relation to Hawaii mahuwahine who have sold sex. Comparisons can be made to the dominant narrative reported in the media, but not to data that is not yet available. In the dominant narrative prostitution is almost totally controlled by abusive pimps and traffickers. This report does not show evidence of this within the mahuwahine community. It does show support for various changes in the law that would allow for consenting adults to buy and sell sexual favors.

## **End Notes**

Historically, Mahu is a term within Kanaka (Native Hawaiian) culture that refers to aspects of duality (male to female/female to male) on multiple levels; Physical, Psychological, Emotional, and Spiritual.

In 1999, the word “mahuwahine” was coined by Ashliana Hawelu, Hinaleimoana Wong-Kalu, Roxanne Paige Peahi and other community members associated with the peer based non-profit Kulia Na Mamo. The term was developed to describe a statewide sector of individuals in our community. It has been embraced by people in Hawaii whom might otherwise use various Eurocentric terms to describe gender variant expressions of self.