

SLIDE 1

Welcome to this presentation on behalf of the By Us, For Us sex workers' needs and risks assessment, focusing on peer or experiential work.

SLIDE 2

First, I'd like to acknowledge that this Keynote, as well as most of the work I've done has taken place on the unceded, ancestral lands of the **Musqueam**, **Squamish**, and **Tsleil-Waututh** peoples. In addition, I'll be discussing work done by the By Us, For Us – or 'BUFU' - project, which also took place on the lands of the **Kwkwetlem**, **Kwantlen**, **Katzie**, Qayqayt [**Keh-kite**], and **Semiahmoo** First Nations, as well as the lands of the traditional territories of the **Wsanec** and **Lekwungen**, including **Songhees** and **Esquimalt**. As the research we did for BUFU showed us, Indigenous sex workers face their own unique, intersecting forms of stigma and oppression, which impact not only the sex workers themselves, but their families and communities, as the oppressive forces of institutional racism through the Ministry of Children and Families Development – MCFD -, policing, and healthcare, continue to disproportionately impact Indigenous sex workers. While I want to acknowledge the First Nations on whose lands we're meeting and on whose lands we work, today I'd also like to acknowledge and thank the Indigenous sex workers who do the added labour within our movement of holding settlers accountable again and again and again. This is hard, exhausting, and often unappreciated work, done out of necessity and generally without any form of compensation. So, while you did not choose to take this on, thank you to our Indigenous colleagues who are forced to deal with us Settlers as we stumble through learning and unlearning.

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I like to give an overview of what I'll be covering and in what order. Not only does this make the information more accessible to people who are neurodiverse or to people who may need to duck out for any reason, but knowing what's happening and what's coming next is something I've learned is a trauma-informed way of presenting. It reduces suspense and surprises and allows people to plan their energy and attention.

So, in this keynote you'll be getting:

1. An introduction to me – why am I qualified to be up here and talking about this?
2. An introduction to By Us, For Us, or BUFU.
3. What we learned through BUFU about sex workers and working in sex work organizations or projects
4. Recommendations to do better, of which there are multiple slides.

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So, a quick bit about me. The bio reads that I'm a queer, white, neurodiverse cisgender woman working as a freelance researcher. But, as we all know, a short bio isn't the whole story. So, I'll break it down a bit for you and fill in some gaps.

I've worked in sex work research for over 10 years, primarily through An Evaluation of Sex Workers' Health Access, or AESHA, and have worked as a freelance researcher for just over a year, which I find works really well for my ADHD and night owl habits. I am also a member of the BC Coalition of Experiential Communities, or BCCEC.

At this point I'd like to share a few disclaimers. (1 / ONE): Like most people, my life has been a mix of privilege and oppression, and I'm constantly learning and unlearning. While I can bring my experiences forward to inform what I'm doing and to share with others, I don't know everything and I don't think any one person can – I'm always open to new ideas and other ways of thinking and seeing things. (2 / TWO): While I'll be sharing some of the findings from the BUFU project, I will also be sharing some opinions and ideas. These opinions and ideas are my own and do not reflect any employer or client. I'll do my best to be clear when I'm sharing something that's my own and not a finding from published work. (3 / THREE): I wholeheartedly believe that we are all ultimately on the same side – striving and working to improve sex work and the lives of sex workers. We might have different ideas about how that should happen or what that looks like, but, in general, I'm believe in collaboration and solidarity to achieve the bigger goals we're all working towards.

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Now, a bit about By Us, For Us. By Us, For Us or "BUFU", a needs and risks assessment of sex workers in the Lower Mainland and on Southern Vancouver Island. This assessment was run by a consortium of groups including Health Initiative for Men, or HIM, PACE Society, and WISH Drop-In Centre Society. Community partners who assisted with surveys were Atira Housing, PEERS Victoria, and SAFE in Collingwood. It originally sprang from a rapid COVID-19 assessment of sex workers' needs and risks that was done in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The idea was to do a more in-depth assessment of COVID-19 impacts on local sex workers and the initial proposal was a two-week assessment and quick report. This quickly expanded. And continued expanding. And expanded several more times, until ultimately, when it was finished, we had a project that had taken over two years, steered by a research team of 8 (additional) sex workers, involved consulting with 239 survey respondents and 50+ focus group participants, and added an arts-based component to generate art for the final report.

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Throughout the project, the goal was to have sex workers steer development and to distribute funds to them as experts on the project. There were several ways we were able to engage with sex workers as experts on BUFU.

- First, recruiting sex workers to deliver the survey. We knew we would have the widest reach and the best survey delivery by hiring sex workers to interview their colleagues. Our interviewing team would tell their networks about the survey which would help recruit participants, and once people signed up to participate, they'd be speaking with someone who could, in some way, empathize with their experiences. This meant that if people weren't being honest, our interviewers could pick up on it. It meant that when survey participants were struggling, interviewers had the skills and experience to support them through the process. It also meant that if participants had difficult feelings come up, they'd already be with someone who'd be more likely to skilfully hold space for those feelings.
- Second, development of the survey. I wrote a first draft of the survey, with input from the participating organizations, and we hosted interviewer training sessions in-person and online. Going into these training sessions I encouraged the experiential interviewing team to give feedback as we went over the survey, revising several drafts in the process. This was immensely helpful – through feedback we eliminated topics that were likely to be found offensive or irrelevant, added topics that interviewers were curious about, and honed the phrasing and language to be more relevant to the communities we were planning to talk to.
- Third, data analysis. After we finished delivering the interviews, the experiential interviewing team was invited back to analyze data. Approximately half of the original team returned to join for data analysis, and this group ultimately became the experiential research team. This team was walked through the data and all of the final results were shared, in both numbers and accompanying visual breakdowns. Handouts and poster-size visuals were used to engage the team in sharing their thoughts and insights, ensuring that diverse perspectives were considered on the massive amount of data we collected. Having people who were experiential and who were part of the data collection process add their insights to the analysis was invaluable to this project.
- Fourth, focus group development and delivery. After looking at the data we'd collected, we identified emerging themes for focus group analysis. The research team provided insight into how the focus groups should be run and what questions should be asked. Research team members facilitated groups that were relevant to their lived experience. By having experiential facilitators to ask relevant questions, we were able to build better rapport

with the sex workers who showed up and the focus groups were dynamic and engaging.

- Fifth, the creation, development, promotion, and facilitation of the art contest to generate art for the report. As we started to compile everything we'd learned into a written report and talked about how the report would look, members of the research team suggested that rather than paying an outsider to design art that we would have to critique, we could run an art contest to collect art for the report. By making it a contest, we could use a budgeted amount in a set way to put money in the pockets of sex workers, while also making sure we weren't paying honoraria for an unlimited number of art submissions. Sex workers who submitted art to the contest were asked if they wanted their work published in the report, with the choice to opt out if they desired, and four winners of cash prizes were chosen. Winners were chosen by the research team, using a scoring rubric I designed, with each research team member submitting scores using the rubric for each work, which I then compiled to find the winning entries.
- Sixth, report writing. Research team members were part of the draft reviewing and writing process and all research team members were given copies of new drafts and encouraged to give feedback on the final report. Research team members' feedback was helpful and informative for content, wording, and layout of the final report.
- And finally, knowledge translation. This included contributions to the design of support materials, development of merch, production of a community launch event that included door prizes, media interviews, and conference presentation. Research team members gave feedback on posters of our findings and key messages at a community launch event, and helped to design and produce this event. Suggestions for sponsors to donate door prizes gave us a wealth of door prizes to distribute and helped to make the event a success! We also created merch in the form of tote bags, which I have available for sale by donation today – please come see me if you'd like to purchase some sex worker-designed tote bags with affirming pro-sex work messages on them, they are available at a suggested donation of \$25, but we're happy for any donation you're able to make or to sell by bulk. All funds raised from merch sales go directly to a grassroots group that does searches for missing Indigenous women. Three research team members were also willing to act as spokespeople for media interviews, which added to the overall public awareness of our work. Each spokesperson was able to choose their level of comfort with being identified, including whether they wanted to use a pseudonym and whether they were willing to be photographed. Finally, some research team members were willing to attend conference presentations on our work, including the Homelessness Services Association of BC conference last month, where we presented a panel on housing, and

this conference, where one of our research team members participated on a mixed panel.

So, what did we find?

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Some of the broad themes in our overall findings included: living with disabilities; the overdose crisis; race and racism; gender diversity; access to mental health supports and services; violence, potential violence, and lack of police support; and peer work – a desire to design and lead solutions. I don't want to spend too long on many of these themes today, because I'd like to focus on the theme of "peer" or experientially designed and led solutions, but I encourage everyone here to take a look at the report, which is available at ByUsForUsBC.com. That's ByUsForUsBC.com to view the full final report.

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Zeroing in on the topic of "peer" or experiential involvement, we had several recommendations that came from our research work, for both sex worker support organizations and for future needs and risks assessments or similar works.

For sex worker support organizations, we made several recommendations. For the purposes of today's presentation, I'm going to focus in on the ones that relate to "peer" or experiential work.

- First, expanding & increasing peer-based programs.
 - Sex workers wanted to see structural or process changes in peer-based programs, broken down into 4 categories. The first was direct involvement with bad date reporting systems, including design and management of these systems. The second was acknowledgement of "levels of lived experience", which would consider variations in sex industry experience when hiring for experiential roles. Someone may have many years and extensive experience in the sex industry, but it might not be applicable to your community. The third change sex workers wanted to see was time-based limitations for who is considered an "experiential worker"; someone who did sex work 20 years ago may not have experience that would be relevant in today's sex work settings and could give outdated advice. The fourth change sex workers wanted to see was separating indoor or online workers from emotional or mental health peer support for street-based sex workers. In general street-based sex workers were resentful of indoor or online workers placed as peers and then unable to relate or respond to street-based sex workers' experiences.

- There were also many supportive program additions that our research participants suggested, such as resume-writing workshops or resources, facilitated discussion or workshops on how to transfer skills from sex work to other professions, training and mentorship programs to develop non-sex work skills and adapt to non-sex work workplace etiquette and standards, financial literacy beyond budgeting, such as banking, investing, or educational grants, home economics skills such as cooking or sewing, and computer and internet literacy workshops or skill shares. Technology skills were the most highly valued skills by sex workers in the BUFU assessment. Each of these program additions would be designed and led by experiential staff.
 BUFU participants and research team members also wanted to see a willingness to upgrade experiential staff's skills to move into new positions traditionally held by specialized professionals. What I mean by this, is that if you have experiential staff who want to work on computers with numbers and documents, consider getting them training in accounting. If you have experiential staff who want to get into writing in more formal ways, consider letting them work on the first draft – and later final drafts – of grant applications. Be curious about your experiential staff's goals, and see if there are ways your organization can provide tangible support in helping them reach those goals.
- There were also several suggestions on specific tasks, positions, or jobs that could be peer-based or experientially run, potentially with additional training. Some of the suggestions we heard were: being a check-in or "kitestring" to other workers by text while working; providing emotional support immediately after experiences of harm; advocacy or navigation for healthcare and criminal justice systems; advocacy or navigation for alternative supports such as Indigenous-specific or community-based mental health supports; educating police on sex work topics; acting as a police liaison on behalf of sex worker communities; and, working in harm reduction sex work workplaces. More on that last one in a moment.
- Another recommendation for sex worker support organizations was to support sex workers' professional development beyond sex work. Practical steps included education or professional development such as courses on computer skills or business correspondence, allocating specific space for professional clothing or office wear among donated clothes, and resume-writing workshops or resources, including support around transferable skills.
- A third recommendation for sex worker support organizations was providing harm reduction workplaces to sex workers. When we asked sex workers

about their ideal workplace, many showed support for an Insite-style or safe injection site-style drop-in space or a shared suite in their building. It's likely that previous experiences and familiarity with Insite influenced this preference, and the Insite-style drop-in option provides anonymity and confidentiality that a shared suite wouldn't offer. Advantages of offering this option include familiarity for users on how to use a space like this, public acceptance and understanding of these kinds of sites (which may vary based on geographic location) and this model being a potential pathway to government endorsement, as demonstrated by Insite. Offering a site like this would allow sex workers to build relationships with each other, which would strengthen community and safety, and it could also be a good location for support services, such as substance use treatment and mental health counselling.

- Finally, a fourth recommendation for sex worker support organizations was to support cooperative sex worker initiatives. Sex workers are a resourceful group and there are many collaborative and cooperative sex worker initiatives that already exist or which may come up. There may be room for sex worker support organizations to support these efforts, for example, through service referrals, legal aid, electronic infrastructure such as internet servers or web design, and tax reporting.

A full list of recommendations for sex worker support organizations is available in the full report at ByUsForUsBC.com. And, I promise, that's my last plug for the website.

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Through this project, and either feedback or our own experience, we came up with four recommendations for future needs and risks assessments or similar projects.

1. Include active sex workers in developing assessment tools and analyzing data. Sex workers' experiences and voices were essential in the design and execution of this project. While many projects limit experiential sex workers' involvement, sex workers contributed to this project in essential ways, as I've already detailed. Sex workers are a diverse group, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a wide variety of talents. Evaluators and researchers need to put sex workers' views and ideas up front, allowing sex workers to so that we can be leaders in our own industry.
2. Fair honoraria and wages. Too often, attaching the word "peer" results in downgrades to the pay attached. Future projects need to consider several factors when determining honoraria or wages. Factors that may raise the rate of honoraria or wages include: the high level of specialization in the knowledge being shared; the high risk of re-traumatization; the absence of

health benefits, especially given the risk of re-traumatization; previous sex work experience, including length of time in the industry and diversity of experiences; contribution to the employer, project, service, or program; and, reparation-based wage approaches that consider historic and ongoing workplace exclusion and poverty faced by certain groups, including Indigenous people, 2SLGBTQQIA people, and people with disabilities.

3. Arranging an Indigenous Elder for the duration of the project. During BUFU, the Indigenous Elder helped steer the project to do things “in a good way”. The Elder called out disrespectful processes and used word-of-mouth networks to ensure Indigenous voices were present and heard. She added tremendous value to the project and our results. Based on our experiences, we recommend ensuring you have one or more Indigenous Elders available for any sex worker services or projects that Indigenous sex workers might participate in.
4. Ask about participants’ Indigenous background. During BUFU, concerns were raised by Indigenous research team members about the lack of data on participants’ Indigenous background. Specifically, whether participants identified as First Nations, Metis, or Inuit and their specific First Nation affiliation or background, if it was available to them. During data analysis, we saw that, without prompting, survey participants offered this information and wanted to share more about their backgrounds and that this could have offered additional insights that we might have missed.

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This slide focuses on additional recommendations that come from my own experiences and insights, and are my personal recommendations that did *not* come from the BUFU report. Through this process of working alongside an experiential research team, I had the opportunity to hear a lot of thoughts and ideas that weren’t captured in the work we did. I also had a lot of time to consider additional insights that led me to come up with recommendations that extended beyond our findings. So, disclaimer, this slide does not come from the BUFU findings, this specific slide is based on my own reflections and insights.

- Avoid replication or repetition of previous research. This means doing literature reviews, either formally or informally, before starting new projects. Sex workers are tired of repeating themselves and answering the same questions they have been asked *for decades*. This past summer I had an opportunity to work on a project examining local sex work history. During that project I discovered a report from the Alliance for the Safety of Prostitutes, or ASP, written in the early 1980s, which showed that sex workers in Canada have been repeating themselves for *40 years*. Repeating the same processes that have happened before results in burnout,

exhaustion, and research fatigue for research participants and high turnover among staff. You'll be better able to engage with your participants and staff in the long term if you don't exhaust them with work that's already been done.

- Take action on previous research. When you're doing a literature review before starting a new project, you might find results that confirm what your team has already suspected. Endless research and evaluations, at the expense of action, result in frustration and loss of interest and trust by your participants and staff. Use the pre-existing research you've found to apply for funding to take action instead. If you're applying for research-specific pots of funding, consider trying a pilot program or new approach and including ways to measure the results, like surveys or focus groups. Instead of finding what issues need solutions, find out which solutions work for your community, in a way that can be measured and then justified to others.
- If your organization is doing interviews to hire experiential staff, consider asking questions that connect sex workers' sex work experiences to the work you are hiring them for. Sex workers have many transferable skills, as we've heard a few times during this conference, which often aren't recognized by employers. Here are a few examples.
 - Can you tell me about a time when you successfully diffused a conflict between yourself and another person, at work?
 - Can you give examples of how you've been successful at work with limited resources?
 - Can you tell me about strategies you've used to fill gaps when you're working with a tight budget?
- Next, provide support and training, with room for feedback, in your experiential projects. Build this in. Train sex workers on education they need to participate in your organization, such as computer skills, budgeting, or leadership skills – including mentorship for Elders. Lack of support and training creates unsafe environments and sets experiential staff up for failure. Providing support and training sets people up for success. For the BUFU project, we had some team members who struggled with the relatively accessible work that was available and I problem-solved by supporting them in various ways. Some members had substance use struggles, which made them late to meetings, so I offered a pick-up, or they struggled with being attentive, and were given tasks that came in bursts, like handing out outreach supplies when we engaged with community. I also provided training on basic research concepts and trauma-informed interviewing before the experiential interviewing team began the survey process. I also walked the experiential research team through data analysis, using visuals and verbal presentations, in addition to hard data or numbers, to help the team see and make connections that I didn't notice. Some of the former research team

members have been able to apply the learnings they gained to new projects, work, or education that they have pursued since their BUFU training. And because these are community members who have a vested interest in the wellbeing of sex workers, they will continue to apply the knowledge they gain to sex work communities. This is very different from training university graduates in the nuances and unique complexities of working alongside sex workers, where the education they have versus the knowledge they need to learn might mean they are good academically, but might or might not be able to connect with community members. It's a lot easier to train people who are already community members in academic concepts, because they will be better able to navigate situations they see every day. By training sex workers, who might already be activists in the sex work movement, in just the academic concepts they need to become more involved, we build a stronger movement, *long term*.

- Next, *listen* to experiential staff. Experiential staff during BUFU provided essential feedback that resulted in more successful outcomes. This included changes to the survey and focus groups, unique insights into the collected data, the formation of the art contest to generate art for the final report, and development of the final media strategy. Experiential staff will bring important and relevant ideas forward that can improve your organization's processes and achieve better end results. If a piece of feedback won't work, explain why not – maybe the person making the suggestion will have a creative solution to address your concern and if not, they'll understand your reasoning and feel heard. Understand that "We don't have a budget for that" is not heard as an explanation, but as an excuse, if the person or people can see other areas where money is being spent. I'll talk about budget transparency more in a moment. Hiring experiential staff and then not listening to their input results in both a waste of rich resources and, ultimately, high turnover in experiential staff roles. Everyone benefits from listening to sex workers' feedback in sex worker support organizations – the organization, the experiential staff, and the communities the organization serves. It's a win-win-win scenario.
- On a similar note, strive to match your experiential staff's expertise to the roles they're in. Do they want to work with people or are they better working on a solo focused task? Are they artistic, or a people-person, or do they like to take work away and come back with results? On the BUFU research team, I did my best to match team members' roles to the strengths they came with. Artists were asked to facilitate art-making workshops. Activists with strong voices were asked if – with relevant training – they would like to become spokespeople. Those who showed skill in connecting with other sex workers were asked to do outreach. Matching skills to roles sets up people, projects, and organizations for success.

- Be aware of the issues that may have made people choose sex work over other employment in the first place and how that might impact involving them in your organization's work. In particular, consider how your organization will support people who live with disabilities, including mental health disabilities, people who need cash payments for better financial management or to navigate government assistance payments, and people who live with trauma, whether that trauma is sex work-related or not sex work-related. Trauma that might that could make it difficult for someone to keep a job at your organization includes experiencing racism, especially anti-Indigenous racism, experiencing ableism, and dealing with leadership who don't talk to them about issues in accessible ways. Strive to be an organization that doesn't replicate the same issues that push people into sex work in the first place.
- Be transparent about budgets. Overall, organizations guard their budgets too closely, resulting in confusion and resentment in their communities about where money is being spent, and why. There is also prejudice against people who might be experiencing poverty, which is unwarranted. In my experience, both from childhood and as a sex worker, people who may be in or near poverty, as well as sex workers, who may or may not share the poverty experience, are very good with cash and budgets! People with limited budgets have to make decisions about prioritizing funds every day, while sex workers have to make rapid calculations about cost versus benefit, often with creative solutions, on a regular basis. Transparency may be controversial, but it doesn't mean sharing detailed line items of a budget with all staff members. Some items may need to be anonymized and a certain level of trust may need to be built in order to feel secure as a leader when sharing a budget. As I built trust with the BUFU research team, I started to include them on budget discussions. I would draft an initial budget and present it to the group, while grouping together specific line items to anonymize some items for privacy, like pay. I would show them a budget and listen to their feedback. I would explain my rationale in how I drafted the budget. We had discussions about how certain budget items could be spent. By sharing how much money we had to work with and why certain dollar amounts were allocated in specific ways, I was better able to get buy-in on what we were doing and why we were doing it that way. The team was also better able to understand why we needed to limit the scope of our work in certain areas and why other areas had wiggle room. Working collaboratively, we were able to be creative with how we used the available funds and achieve success.
- Provide informed-trauma training for leadership if your organization is hiring experiential staff. Not only do ALL staff benefit from trauma-informed leadership, but if your organization is hiring experiential staff, it is essential that leadership work in a trauma-informed way. Frontline workers are not the

only people who need to understand how to be trauma-informed. Trauma can be triggered by surprises, lack of understanding, and ways of communicating that are standard in institutional settings, such as universities or government. Trauma-informed leadership is an essential component for leadership to work with experiential staff in any organization.

- Understand the difference between “unsafe” versus “uncomfortable” and teach all staff at your organization that this is a component of working in trauma-informed and self-reflective ways. If your organization is going to hire people who haven’t worked in more standardized workplaces, you are going to encounter non-standard workplace language. While certain verbal altercations may need to be addressed to ensure safety in the workplace, don’t confuse being insulted or told off by workplace subordinates with being “unsafe”. I can think of at least two situations during BUFU when I came into conflict with research team members, both of which I used to reflect on my place of power and privilege in relation to the people I was having conflict with. Rather than dismissing their concerns, I spoke with the relevant team members, addressed their strengths – including in engaging me in conflict – and worked with them to address their concerns. I did not convey my hurt to these team members, because I had external resources where I could process those feelings and because I understood my priority was to problem solve from my position of privilege and power. On reflection, I could see that even being able to go home after conflicts, which was a safe place for me, I was accessing more privilege than the people I was in conflict with. I believe that we, as activists, need to learn to accept some level of discomfort if we’re going to engage on complex and challenging issues. Seeing that both parties are striving to achieve the same goals goes a long way in being able to address conflict.

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Not all recommendations that I’ve covered today are going to work for everyone or in every situation. Not all organizations or projects have the capacity to immediately hire experiential staff or expand their experiential staff capacity. Nor should having experiential staff be rushed into, because you could unintentionally do harm to your organization or to the sex workers who want to be involved with you. Being thoughtful about integrating experiential staff and ensuring you have the capacity to work with experiential staff in a meaningful way is key to success, for everyone. Take things at the pace of community – slow down when you need to, be intentional with your work. Take a decolonizing approach by not marching to the beat of larger institutions. If a process takes steps A, B, and C and you wanted to get that done in 6 months, but the community process slows that down to only getting step A done in those 6 months, see if you can adapt your project to the concerns that are being brought up and apply for additional funding. Or, come back

to the community with your restrictions and ask for input on how you can collaboratively and creatively address those restrictions. So often, we are trained by larger institutions, such as schools or governments, to work at a fast pace, but by slowing down we'll engage in a more authentic, collaborative, and ultimately better process. See where you can extend timelines or get more funding, as well as where you can push back on institutional demands for productivity. Rather than pushing institutional demands down onto our communities, it is our job as leaders and within the power of organizations to amplify sex workers' voices and push back against the larger institutional forces that press on us all.

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That's all I have for today. If you'd like to buy some tote bags or discuss any of this further with me, I'll be around until this afternoon and I'm available to go into more detail. We'll also do a Q&A next – I'd love to hear any questions you have. Thank you to everyone for coming to this keynote, thank you to the BUFU research team and experiential staff for all their hard work and their trust in me, and thank you to all sex work activists for persevering in this struggle and movement. Together, we can achieve more, so let's work together in this movement.