

# Sex in the Archives FINAL

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

COVID-19 impact, mental health, police stereotypes, sex work misconceptions, financial barriers, community support, legal obstacles, stigmatization, advocacy efforts, intersectionality, cyberbullying, duty of care, archival project, sex worker history, future advocates

## SPEAKERS

Chantelle Krupka, HANIA AND AKOSUA, Alyssa Reid, Gabrielle McMann, Jelena Vermilion, Anna Patterson, Yanika Saluja, Video Clip, Unnamed Voice, Akosua Yeboah, Noel Tesfa, Hania Noor, Carmine Posteraro

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00:05

This is We Met U When... a podcast by journalism students at Toronto Metropolitan University. I'm your host, Yanika Saluja, we go back in time, dig up news stories from the past, and track down the people in those stories. Usually we go back 10 years, but this season, we're going back to 2020. The World Health Organization declared COVID 19, a global pandemic. It was a time of lockdowns, global protests, disruption around the world, and it affected all of us in different ways.



Gabrielle McMann 00:45

During COVID, like we weren't allowed to gather. We weren't allowed to come together for pow wows. And I think many people's spirits and their mental health kind of felt that,



Carmine Posteraro 00:56

you know, I woke up, I had a catheter in me. I had a philosophy bag in my backside. It was just like intense. I couldn't move like my you know, I didn't move for 12 days. My muscles were all deteriorated. I got this scar.



Chantelle Krupka 01:08

I'm not all the things that they like to stereotype us as, and I was still almost killed by the police. And so, like, I'm trying to say that they use those stereotypes as an excuse to devalue us.



01:23

We want to know what happened after their names were in the news. I've



Jelena Vermilion 01:28

had journalists like, reach out after to follow up on a different story, but not not. I've never once had a journalist be like, Hey, are you okay? I saw those comments. I want to check in like, no, not once, not one time.



01:41

No one was in a position of power, but many of them felt the power a new story can have. We're exploring what's changed and what hasn't.



Unnamed Voice 01:52

Chloe. Can I say something? Is it fair to say that you're of Korean origin?



Noel Tesfa 01:58

It's a heavy thing to talk about. But I think it's also very important. This is something that people need to hear.



Yanika Saluja 02:07

We're also thinking about the difference we journalists can make going forward by first going back to 2020. You're listening to. We Met U When season three. This is sex in the archives.



Jelena Vermilion 02:31

People think that people go into sex work because they are abused or traumatized or they have diseases or they're drugged like no it's because we need fucking pay rent.



Hania Noor 02:41

Jelena Vermillion, she her isn't one to sugar coat it. As a trans woman and a sex worker, for more than a decade, she's lived the realities of the industry. Jelena has been a fierce advocate for sex workers and their rights for just as long. Her advocacy was recognized with a YWCA Women of Distinction award in 2024 and in her acceptance speech, she made a point of sharing that spotlight

**J** Jelena Vermilion 03:13

many of us rather do not understand what it's like to be in a room like all of You and still feel like we don't belong, okay? And I am so glad to stand here as a symbol of a person, an avatar, and to say and accept this award. But I also would like you to take a moment to just consider the people who are not here. I think of Chevron Abdi, a sex worker in 2003 who lost her life.

**H** Hania Noor 03:37

Jelena is the executive director of swap Hamilton. Swap stands for sex workers Action Program. The program advocates for sex workers while offering community services through education and outreach. It's based in Hamilton, where Jelena also lives, about 75 kilometers southwest of Toronto. While hunting for the right story for this podcast, our team went through hundreds of 2020 news stories, including this one from City News.

**V** Video Clip 04:08

Those in the sex industry say they feel unfairly targeted by the government officials and say without the supports many other industries are receiving, these workers are being left in

**H** Hania Noor 04:18

But it wasn't until we came across a 2020, global news story that something seemed to finally click. That's when we first came across the name Jelena Vermillion. At the height of the COVID 19 pandemic. In person, sex work wasn't safe. Jelena lost her main source of income.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 04:39

I mean, I stopped working for six months. So I was, you know, it had a chilling effect of sorts. And I think that I was very, you know, I stopped kissing clients and actually continued that as a practice, because it's easier to not, I think, more than anything, I was focused on trying to help the community.

**H** Hania Noor 04:58

That news story mentioned the Canada emergency response benefit, or Cerb. It was created to help Canadians financially, but many sex workers weren't earning enough money to qualify. Many wouldn't have the documentation required. Those are just some of the barriers.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 05:18

It's like this catch 22 so if the industry is criminalized, people aren't wanting to tell the CRA, even though there is a tax code for sex workers and, you know, erotic providers and things like

this, even if it's legal to tell CRA, and the CRA doesn't communicate with the police that we know of, or at least that's written in the law, there's the potentiality for that information to be exploited and to be used against people who have identified, self-identified willfully as sex workers.

**H** Hania Noor 05:52

Our team was struck by Jelena's care for her community, even during some of her toughest personal times. It quickly became clear to us that Jelena was fighting for something far bigger than herself.

 06:12

Oh, my God, so cute. Hi, pretty.

**H** Hania Noor 06:22

I'm sitting in Jelena's new apartment, every inch of the walls seems to tell a story. There's artwork of the people she's inspired by, clippings of news stories she's been quoted in. The headlines read: Jelena Vermillion is working to put an end to stigmatization of sex workers in Canada, what it's like to be a trans woman in porn, Sex workers are human beings. It's almost like a mini museum of sex workers realities. Her fight for survival, Justice and Safety as a sex worker is far from over. It's hard to feel safe because the world often isn't safe for people like Jelena. What was your idea of a safe space growing up?

**J** Jelena Vermillion 07:08

I don't think I knew what that was, no.

**H** HANIA AND AKOSUA 07:13

Have you understood it now?

**J** Jelena Vermillion 07:16

I think at 31 years old, probably Yeah, but I think we're always seeking safety, all of us, we just don't realize it.

**H** HANIA AND AKOSUA 07:25

Where do you feel safe?

**J** Jelena Vermilion 07:27  
Usually, with my pets.

**i** 07:30  
Yeah, lie down, lie down.

**i** 07:34  
Kira, lie down. Be nice.

**H** Hania Noor 07:41  
With baby, her cat, Kira, her dog, and her collection of books piled on the shelf, Jelena has created a space for love in her apartment. Jelena grew up reading books, playing with dolls, biking around town, but something was missing. Jelena didn't have the kind of stability she needed, In her eyes, home was often a place of judgment and uncertainty. By 17, she was out on her own,

**J** Jelena Vermilion 08:10  
the fact that I had to move out informed the fact that I needed to do sex work. If my parents loved me the way that they should, I wouldn't necessarily be a sex worker. But that doesn't make my decisions to do sex work, any less empowering? Would one rather see me destitute? Would some would one rather see me groveling on the streets? Oh, no, I've never had to suck a dick for money, but at least I'm here like innocently on the street, like begging for no what is empowering is being housed. Is being sheltered. You know, being sheltered, being fed, having my loved ones around who think good things of me, who want me to be protected from the law.

**H** Hania Noor 08:48  
Some of these laws include Bill C 36 the protection of communities and exploited persons, act that came into place in 2014. The government says it aims to protect those who sell their own sexual services, but it sparked protests across the country, and

**i** 09:05  
we're here today honoring sex workers rights and as part of the December 17 International Day Against Violence against sex workers. So we are

**H** Hania Noor 09:14

this CBC News report from 2014 covered a demonstration in Newfoundland.



09:20

We are calling on our premier, Paul Davis to actually send that bill C 36 to the Provincial Court of Appeal.



Hania Noor 09:28

Many sex workers say it puts their community at risk by criminalizing their line of work and forcing them into the shadows. The bill criminalizes the operations of sex work like brothels. This gives sex workers limited spaces to turn to, leaving them more susceptible to stigma and violence. Jelena says this kind of legal obstacle is a threat to sex workers safety. She says that it just intensifies the stigma which leads to society supporting criminalization. It's a cycle. That keeps sex work taboo. Jelena keeps using her voice to try to change that.



Video Clip 10:06

Jelena also advocates more broadly, for marginalized women, intersex and non binary folks, particularly those living with or at risk of contracting HIV. She is a consultant with trans pulse Canada, and has co authored academic articles and research reports for community members.



Hania Noor 10:27

That was Reverend Dr Sherry de Novo of Trinity St Paul's United Church. Jelena was the guest minister for their Trans Day of Remembrance service.



Jelena Vermilion 10:36

As we reflect on the lives of transgender, non binary, intersex individuals who have been lost to violence. We honor their sacredness in the eyes of God, we stand against the violence, hate and discrimination that targets them, and we affirm their...



Hania Noor 10:51

Jelena says not much has changed for the industry since 2020. One of the biggest misconceptions about sex work from what Jelena tells me is the idea that all sex workers are rich. These myths are often fueled by glamorous portrayals in films, or even from the rise of social media platforms like only fans, where some influencers flaunt million dollar earnings. But Jelena says this couldn't be further from the truth for the majority of sex workers,



Jelena Vermilion 11:21

Unfortunately, conventional beauty standards plays a factor, and it's a hard time to do sex work right now because it's difficult. It's like guys are fucking cheap right now.

H

Hania Noor 11:33

She says intersectionality plays a huge role.

J

Jelena Vermilion 11:36

Black sex workers make less money. I mean, trans sex workers typically get treated like shit. We're talking about porn work. Trans women make more money because they're more fetishized and more coveted than cis women, but also the camera person will make the same as the main actress, believe it or not, in a film, like a porn production, because it's the camera person's work. It's, it's like, very interesting. You have a fat sex worker and a thin sex worker that both are selling their services at 300 per per visit, or whatever. The person who's fat is going to face a lot more haggling and a lot more like, like, attempts to negotiate her rate, to lower her rate. Yeah, disrespect.

H

Hania Noor 12:23

Jelena says her clients are usually quite respectful. It's other people who are disrespectful because she's a sex worker. That often shows up as cyber bullying. When we found that 2020 article that quoted her, we looked through the comments, and our team was shocked to see the extensive abuse thrown at her and the sex worker community.

J

Jelena Vermilion 12:45

It just really underscores the sort of like attitudes that are like common in society. And it's like, if people feel emboldened or like, people feel comfortable making like, hateful comments, you know, like, even if you just think about like, ha, ha, ha. What's your stripper name? It's the first street that you lived on, and you name your first pet. It's like, my stripper name is a name that I use to keep clients from knowing my legal name so that I don't get murdered. That's my joke. You know, like, it's like, wild. It's just wild. The the sort of lack of care.

H

Hania Noor 13:19

This lack of care comes from many people, including reporters.

J

Jelena Vermilion 13:23

Like, it's not, like, it's a research ethics board where you have to be like, literally lay out how this might impact someone psychologically in a negative way. Like, it's not they don't have the same duty of care. It's just the fact of the matter, journalists can get away with more because of the lack of duty of care.

**H** Hania Noor 13:40

We learned a lot about duty of care during this interview process, we had constant back and forth conversations with Jelena about what she was comfortable sharing, and we also had constant back and forth conversations with our professor, Shari Okeke about how to prepare questions and how to craft emails to request interviews from sources in communities we are not part of. But this episode goes up, there might be backlash, Oh, for sure, and that's important for us, you know, check in with you and make sure that you've you feel supported.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 14:13

I think that that's responsible. I don't like that has not been my experience. But that doesn't mean to say that I think that all those people are bad journalists. That is to say that we live in a world.

**H** Hania Noor 14:26

Looking back on our time with Yelena, I'm struck by just how important it is to truly care for the people you interview, especially when they're opening up and trusting you with some of their most vulnerable moments. Jelena cares deeply about her community, and part of that is recognizing the importance of preserving their history. Jelena gets this on a deep level, we could see the passion and care she puts into documenting the lived experiences of sex workers. She wants to make sure their stories are remembered and celebrated. That's why she started in archive at the Hamilton Public Library. The collection is a resource available to the public for people who want to learn about the industry.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 15:09

It's called the Jelena Vermilion Fonds officially, it's the sex worker media library archive and stewarded by the sex workers action program of Hamilton, which I direct. And it contains a ton of collection of books, documentaries, films, zines, newspaper articles, research, ephemera, you know, artifacts related to sex work, by sex workers or for sex workers.

**H** Hania Noor 15:42

She's been working on this since 2020. Jelena started gathering a variety of books to preserve the history and narratives of sex workers.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 15:51

I think it is technically the largest sex work archive in the world. It's 19 bankers boxes full and growing.



**H** Hania Noor 15:57  
We wanted to see it for ourselves. We hopped on the train to the central branch of the Hamilton Public Library and got to see Jelena's extensive archival sex workers collection In the flesh. Please scan your library card.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 16:20  
Okay, welcome.

**A** Anna Patterson 16:23  
This is just a truly incredible collection of material. This would be a research this is a researcher's dream to to have this collection.

**H** Hania Noor 16:36  
That's Anna Patterson. She is the exhibition and Outreach Coordinator of local history and archives at the Hamilton Public Library. She's in charge of watching over Jelena's archive from horror carnival by Shannon bell to sex working in the Bible by Avaren Ipsen to Dirty by Laura Lemon. Jelena also showed us her digital archive, an online world built to showcase the lived experiences of sex workers, pages and pages that have never been digitized before.

**A** Alyssa Reid 17:11  
This is a spread magazine issue illuminating the sex industry.

**H** HANIA AND AKOSUA 17:16  
This is really cool. It's like super nostalgic. This is from January 31 2008

**A** Akosua Yeboah 17:23  
it says, spread illuminating the sex industry. The DC madam, in her own words, yoga for strippers, Co Op brothels in Canada, immigration reform and the sex industry. I love that Jelena has managed digitalize this stuff so that it's always there. Years from now, when we're all gone and, you know, a new generation comes in, they'll be able to see what the sex workers of the 20th, 21st generation were doing to fight against the stigmas that are against them.

**H** Hania Noor 17:54  
Jelena told us, an academic has already used this archive for post doctoral research.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 17:58

Maybe we weren't necessarily sure how this would go at the beginning, we weren't sure practically how, like the value of these books would be protected or respected, but we pleasantly are surprised, not necessarily surprised, by the library or librarians, but we are grateful that it has been, you know, embraced and the value has been recognized because it's a labor of love.

**H** Hania Noor 18:26

I'm thankful we met Jelena because it taught us something profound, not just about building a connection with her, but about honoring and nurturing that connection as a way of showing gratitude. Of course, we'll follow up with Jelena after the story is published. That goes without saying, but I find myself wondering, if our conversation hadn't reached the depth it did, would I be making that same commitment? As for the future Jelena vermilion has hope for the next generation of advocates.

**J** Jelena Vermilion 19:05

I'm not special, like you can do this too, and I want you to do it too, and if my advocacy has inspired you, then, then just know that you can do it too. You know, like, and anybody. I want everybody to know that, like the feeling of being less than or the feeling of my voice won't be heard. You need to speak through those fears. You need to push those fears, and you need to work through them in order to, you know, in the name of your community. And so I hope that people are inspired, but I also hope people take action, more importantly, because it's not just about lip service, it's about actually changing the world.

**H** 19:51

We Met U When... is a production by journalism students at Toronto Metropolitan University. This episode was narrated by Hania Noor. It was produced by Hania Noor, Akosua Yeboah and Alyssa Reid. Additional editorial support by Ali Sirois from edit audio. Shari Okeke is our executive producer and professor. Eunice Kim is our senior producer and teaching assistant. Angela Glover is our Director of audio production. Our season three theme music, and all Music in this episode was composed and performed by Eric Crooda, web design by Lindsay Hanna. Thank you to the Mary Ann Shadd Cary 2024 Fellowship for Black Journalists for supporting this episode. Special thanks to the creative school, the School of Journalism, and the journalism Research Center at Toronto Metropolitan University for supporting Season Three by sending some of our producers to the resonate 2024 podcast festival in Richmond, Virginia. I'm your host. Yanika Saluja, thanks for listening.