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Sociology of Sex Work

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Key Words

prostitution, pornography, stripping, sex industry

Abstract

This review examines key dimensions of contemporary sex work, particularly prostitution. Most research focuses exclusively on street prostitution and female workers, with much less attention devoted to indoor prostitution, male and transgender workers, customers, and managers. Furthermore, most of the literature examines prostitution where it is illegal, neglecting contexts where it is legal and regulated by the government. The review demonstrates how research on these topics can enrich our understanding of contemporary sex work.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature on sex work has grown tremendously in the past decade but remains deficient in several important respects. Disproportionate attention has been paid to certain types (strip clubs, street prostitution) and much less to other types (the pornography industry, indoor prostitution, telephone sex agencies), more to some actors (female prostitutes) and much less to others (managers, customers, male and transgender workers). This article examines prostitution (and to a lesser extent other sex work) with particular attention to several underexamined dimensions that, in the aggregate and with greater research, will enrich and broaden understanding of sex work. The focus is largely but not exclusively on Anglo-American societies.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Sociologists have examined sex work as a form of deviant behavior, a type of gender relations, and as a distinct occupational sector. The deviance framework is based on the traditional stigmatization of sex work and highlights the ways in which actors are subjected to social control and discriminatory treatment. The other two frameworks are related to three main theoretical perspectives in the literature. The oppression paradigm and the empowerment paradigm are diametrically opposed models based on entirely different assumptions, whereas the polymorphous paradigm integrates aspects of the others and is more empirically driven than the other two. Each is sketched below, as a prelude to a discussion of core substantive issues.

The oppression paradigm holds that sex work is a quintessential expression of patriarchal gender relations. The most prominent exponents of this position go further, however, claiming that exploitation, subjugation, and violence against women are intrinsic to and ineradicable from sex work, transcending historical time period, national context, and type of sexual commerce (Barry 1995; Dworkin 1981, 1997; Jeffreys 1997; MacKinnon 1989). These indictments apply equally to pornography, prostitution, stripping, and other commercial sex. In addition to these essentialist claims regarding male domination, some writers make generalizations about specific aspects of sex work: that most or all sex workers were physically or sexually abused as children; entered the trade as adolescents, around 13–14 years of age; were tricked or forced into the trade by pimps or traffickers; use or are addicted to drugs; experience routine violence from customers; labor under abysmal working conditions; and desperately want to exit the sex trade (Farley 2004, Raymond 1998). When generalized to most sex workers, these claims are fallacies, as shown below.

Writers who subscribe to the oppression paradigm typically use dramatic language to highlight the plight of workers (sexual slavery, prostituted women, paid rape, survivors). "Prostituted" clearly indicates that prostitution is something done to a person, not something that can be chosen, and "survivor" implies someone who has escaped a harrowing ordeal. Customers are labeled as prostitute users, batterers, and sexual predators. Farley (2004, p. 1101) declares that "the difference between pimps who terrorize women on the street and pimps in business suits who terrorize women in gentlemen's clubs is a difference in class only, not a difference in woman hating." All male customers and managers are motivated by animus: "When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body" (Dworkin 1997, p. 145).

Some of these claims are articles of faith not amenable to verification or falsification, and the very definition of sex work (as inherently oppressive) is one-dimensional. When oppression theorists present empirical support for their arguments, they typically describe only the worst examples of sex work and treat them as representative. Readers who are unfamiliar with this literature would be surprised at the abundant, serious violations of the canons of scientific inquiry: Anecdotes are generalized and presented as conclusive evidence, sampling is selective, and counterevidence is consistently

ignored. Such work is replete with tainted findings and spurious conclusions, as many critics have pointed out (Agustín 2007, Rubin 1993, Vanwesenbeeck 2001, Weitzer 2005).

A diametrically opposed perspective is the empowerment paradigm, which focuses on the ways in which sexual commerce qualifies as work, involves human agency, and may be potentially empowering for workers (Carmen & Moody 1985, Chapkis 1997, Delacoste & Alexander 1987, Strossen 1995). This paradigm holds that there is nothing inherent in sex work that would prevent it from being organized in terms of mutual gain to both parties—just as in other economic transactions. This kind of work may enhance a person's socioeconomic status and provide greater control over one's working conditions than many traditional jobs. Analysts who adopt this perspective tend to accent the routine aspects of sex work, often drawing parallels to kindred types of service work (physical therapy, massage, psychotherapy) or otherwise normalizing commercial sex. McLeod (1982, p. 28) argues that prostitution is quite similar to other "women's work" and that both sex workers and other women "barter sex for goods," although the latter do so less conspicuously. Writers who adopt the empowerment model also argue that most of the tenets of the oppression model reflect how *some* sex work manifests itself when it is criminalized. Much less is known about prostitution in legal, regulated systems. It is important, therefore, to avoid essentialist conclusions based on only one mode of production.

Empowerment theorists tend to highlight success stories to demonstrate that sex work can be edifying, lucrative, or esteem-enhancing. It can be liberating for those who are "fleeing from small-town prejudices, dead-end jobs, dangerous streets, and suffocating families" (Agustín 2007, p. 45). Writers operating in this paradigm do not necessarily argue that sex work is empowering but instead that it has the potential to be so. At the same time, they tend to neglect sex workers who have had highly negative experiences.

Both the oppression and empowerment paradigms are one-dimensional. Although exploitation and empowerment are certainly present in sex work, there is sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to demonstrate that prostitution cannot be reduced to one or the other. An alternative perspective, what I call the polymorphous paradigm, holds that there is a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences. Unlike the other two, this paradigm is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions shaping the uneven distribution of agency, subordination, and job satisfaction (Chapkis 2000, O'Connell Davidson 1998, Weitzer 2007a). In the remainder of this review, I examine empirical research that, in the aggregate, highlights the variegation of the polymorphous model.

TYPES OF SEX WORK

This article focuses primarily on prostitution, but a brief discussion of other types of sex work is warranted as well. Much of the literature on pornography is psychological, confined to laboratory experiments in which subjects are exposed to images and then tested to measure effects on their attitudes toward women. Most of these studies find that the key variable is depictions of violence, rather than sex, in increasing viewers' negative views of women. In other words, pornographic films with violence have the same effect on viewers as nonpornographic films with violence (Bauserman 1996, Donnerstein et al. 1987). Having said that, it is well known that such experimental studies may have little resonance in the real world given the artificiality of the viewing conditions in a lab.

Parallel studies examine whether pornography has effects on the real-world treatment of women. Such research examines whether places with high availability of pornography (magazines, adult theaters) have higher rates of sex crime than places where pornography is less available, and other studies examine whether increased availability over time increases rates of sexual offenses. A comprehensive review of

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the literature concluded that macrolevel associations between pornography and sexual aggression were dubious (Bauserman 1996). These studies are bedeviled by their inability to control for all potentially relevant influences on male behavior. Moreover, some studies report that a correlation between pornography and sex crime disappears once other variables are included in the model, whereas others find that increased availability of pornography coincided with a decline in sexual offenses. Part of the explanation for these findings may be the fact that most pornography is nonviolent and thus unlikely to promote sexual violence: "In the absence of any actual element of coercion, viewers would not have any messages about sexual coercion to process and would not be expected to change any of their attitudes in this area" (Bauserman 1996, p. 424).

Few researchers have investigated the deeper meanings of pornography in the real world—to men and women, consumers and nonconsumers. The few studies that have done so indicate that both men and women decode sexually explicit materials in myriad ways, ranging from very negative to entertaining and educational (Attwood 2005, Boynton 1999, Loftus 2002). It should be noted that pornography is hardly a fringe market: In 2002, 34% of American men and 16% of women had seen an X-rated video in just the past year, according to the General Social Survey.

In-depth sociological work on the porn industry and its workers is almost nonexistent, with the important exception of Abbott's (2000) study of heterosexual performers and Bakehorn's (2009) study of the producers of women-oriented porn. Likewise, little is known about telephone sex agencies and their employees (Flowers 1998, Rich & Guidroz 2000). These few studies shed unique light on the social organization and work experiences of those involved in pornography and telephone sex, including their occupational aspirations and attempts to neutralize stigma.

Stripping, by contrast, has been studied fairly thoroughly, largely because of unfettered researcher access to strip clubs. This literature may have reached the saturation point, with study after study documenting similar types of worker socialization, stigma management, patterns of interaction between dancers and clients, and power relations at clubs (Frank 2007). These studies show that club norms are a strong predictor of workers' job satisfaction and their experiences with clients and managers, with some clubs being highly exploitative and disempowering dancers and other clubs affording them much more control over working conditions. Dancers may be exploited, to varying degrees, by managers, bartenders, and deejays (Chapkis 2000), and they have diverse experiences with customers. They experience, in greater or lesser degree, violations of personal boundaries by customers, such as uninvited touching and kissing, pulling off clothes, insults, and rejection. Over time, the accumulation of such experiences can deflate one's self-esteem and result in job burnout. On the positive side, many dancers find the work exciting, validating, and lucrative. In addition to receiving daily compliments, tips, and gifts from customers, dancers may develop a genuine fondness for some of them, especially the regulars (Frank 2002). At the same time, a common finding is that performers seek the maximum economic exploitation of customers. They "derive a sense of satisfaction at the power they felt they had over men," including manipulating men's fantasies and the "thrill of the chase" in the pursuit of customers' money when they were dancing on stage and afterwards when they engage in "strategic flirting" and perhaps lap dancing with individual audience members (Deshotels & Forsyth 2006, pp. 231–32).

The few studies comparing male and female strip clubs suggest that female audiences tend to be more aggressive toward male dancers than vice versa (Montemurro 2001, Peterson & Dressel 1982) and that women typically attend clubs in groups as a bonding ritual or as part of a celebratory gathering, whereas most male patrons seek an individualized experience and are much more likely to be repeat customers (Montemurro et al. 2003). It also appears that male strippers experience less stigma

Table 1 Types of prostitution and associated characteristics[a]

	Business location	Prices charged	Exploitation by third parties[b]	Risk of violent victimization[c]	Public visibility	Impact on community[d]
Call girl	Independent operator, private premises/hotels	High	Low to none	Low	None	None
Escort	Escort agency, private premises/hotels	High	Moderate	Low to moderate	Very low	None
Brothel worker	Brothel	Moderate	Moderate	Very low	Low	None, if discreet
Massage parlor worker	Massage parlor	Moderate	Moderate	Very low	Low	Little, if discreet
Bar or casino worker	Bar/casino contact, sex elsewhere	Low to moderate	Low to moderate	Low to moderate	Moderate	Equivalent to impact of bar or casino
Streetwalker	Street contact, sex in cars, alleys, parks, etc.	Low	High	Very high	High	Adverse

[a]Table refers to female workers. The brothel and massage parlor workers depicted here do not include those who have been trafficked against their will or otherwise forced into prostitution, whose experiences differ from those who have entered this work consensually.
[b]Exploitation by third parties means third-party receipt of at least some of the profits.
[c]Risk of violent victimization refers here to victimization of the prostitute, not the customer.
[d]Impact on community refers to effects on the surrounding neighborhood's quality of life.

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than their female counterparts. Relations between customers and dancers in gay clubs have their own distinctive patterns, but power struggles over personal boundaries are common to all types of clubs (DeMarco 2007).

Prostitutes vary tremendously in their reasons for entry, access to resources for protection, number and type of clients, freedom to refuse clients and specific sex acts, relationships with colleagues, dependence on and exploitation by third parties, experiences with the authorities, public visibility, and impact on the surrounding community. **Table 1** presents a typology of prostitution (excluded from this typology are borderline cases, such as lap dancing, "kept" women or men, geishas, and other arrangements in which one party receives material benefits and the other receives some erotic pleasure but do not involve conventional sex-for-pay transactions). The most consequential division in this stratification model is that between street and indoor prostitution. Street prostitution[1] has received the lion's share of attention from scholars, with much less research on the large population of indoor workers in brothels, massage parlors, bars, casinos, hotels, and private premises. In many countries, including the United States, Britain, and Australia, street work is far less common than indoor work. The irony is that most research has been done on the least prevalent type of prostitution, the net effect of which is a rather skewed picture of this world.

There are multiple pathways into prostitution. Some sex workers are recruited by pimps or otherwise coerced into the trade; others drift into prostitution gradually and tentatively, often at the encouragement of friends. Some initially worked in other branches of the sex industry (e.g., strip clubs, phone sex, online entertainment) and later decided to experiment with prostitution. Many street prostitutes are runaways who end up in a new locale with no resources and little recourse but to engage in some kind of criminal activity, whether theft, drug dealing, or selling sex. Economic motives

[1]In street prostitution, the initial transaction occurs in a public place (sidewalk, park, truck stop), while the sex act takes place in either a public or private setting (alley, car, park, hotel, etc.).

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predominate throughout the trade, ranging from survival to a desire for financial independence or upward mobility.

Street prostitution is stratified by income, race, drug dependency, and third-party involvement. Many street workers experience abysmal working conditions and are involved in survival sex. They sell sex out of dire necessity or to support a drug habit. Many use addictive drugs; work and live in crime-ridden areas; are socially isolated and disconnected from support services; risk contracting and transmitting sexual diseases; are exploited and abused by pimps; and are vulnerable to being assaulted, robbed, raped, or killed on the streets.[2] This is the population best characterized by the oppression model. Other street prostitutes, especially those free of drugs and pimps, are in less desperate straits but still confront a range of occupational hazards.

Notwithstanding these variations within street prostitution, it remains the case that the street arena differs fundamentally from indoor sex work. Street workers are much more likely than off-street workers to engage in risky behavior: e.g., to use addictive drugs and to engage in unprotected sex (Church et al. 2001, Harcourt & Donovan 2005, Jeal & Salisbury 2007, Plumridge & Abel 2001, Porter & Bonilla 2000, Seidlin 1988, Weiner 1996, Whittaker & Hart 1996). Street workers are also more likely to be victimized by others: They face ongoing dangers of assault, robbery, and rape, which are less of a risk for off-street workers who have not been coerced into prostitution. Studies that compare street and indoor workers, using well-constructed purposive samples, find substantial and sometimes huge differences in victimization rates. A British study, for instance, of 115 prostitutes who worked on the streets and 125 who worked in saunas or as call girls found that the street prostitutes were much more likely than the indoor workers to report that they had ever been robbed (37% versus 10%), beaten (27% versus 1%), slapped/punched/kicked (47% versus 14%), raped (22% versus 2%), threatened with a weapon (24% versus 6%), or kidnapped (20% versus 2%) (Church et al. 2001). Other studies similarly find disparities in victimization, with some reporting high percentages of indoor workers who have never experienced violence on the job (Decker 1979, Lowman & Fraser 1995, Perkins 1991, Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, Perkins & Bennett 1985, Plumridge & Abel 2001, Prince 1986, Sanders & Campbell 2007, Whittaker & Hart 1996, Woodward et al. 2004). Although random sampling was not possible in these studies, the fact that they consistently document significant street-indoor differences lends credence to the general conclusion. In addition to street-indoor differences in ever being victimized, similar disparities have been documented in the frequency and severity of victimization.

This does not mean that off-street work is risk-free: Structural conditions are a key predictor of vulnerability—conditions that include workers' immigration status, drug dependency, third-party practices (as protectors versus exploiters), options for leaving the trade, etc. (Thukral et al. 2005). Moreover, indoor work in the Third World often operates under harsher conditions than in developed countries (e.g., Kelly 2008, Kempadoo 2004). Having said that, there is no doubt that indoor settings are generally safer than the streets. Overall, "street workers are significantly more at risk of more violence and more serious violence than indoor workers" (Plumridge & Abel 2001, p. 83). Moreover, it appears that legal context makes a difference: that is, the safety of indoor work increases where prostitution is legal (see below).

There are obvious reasons why victimization rates would differ between street workers and those who work collectively indoors. Brothels, bars, and massage parlors have the advantage of gatekeepers and coworkers, who can intervene in the event of an unruly customer, although

[2]Customer violence is sometimes premeditated, and it is sometimes situational, resulting from disputes over money, customer intoxication, clients feeling rushed or sexually unsatisfied, arguments over condom use, or workers' refusal to provide certain kinds of services.

some managers turn a blind eye to such abuses.[3] Indoor venues typically have some screening mechanisms, video surveillance, and alarm systems. Call girls and escorts are more vulnerable given their isolation when doing out-calls at hotels or clients' residences. But they also have a greater proportion of low-risk, regular clients (Lever & Dolnick 2000), and they have their own methods of vetting potentially dangerous customers (though these methods are not foolproof). They share with other workers stories of bad clients who are then blacklisted, and they routinely check in by phone with the agency or a friend at a designated time before and after an engagement. As one agency booker stated, "The girls call to check in when they first get to an appointment. We had code words, like 'Red Bull.' If I heard her say she needed a Red Bull, I'd try to distract the guy on the phone so she could get out of there" (quoted in Kimberlin 2008, p. A11). Over time, call girls develop "a sensitivity to detecting potential danger in the caller's attitudes, manners, tone of voice, or nature of the conversation" (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 51). Harassment is a recurrent problem, however. In one study, 60% of call girls reported that nuisance phone calls from men were a problem, and 41% said that obsessive clients were a problem (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 110), a hazard documented in other studies as well (Perez-y-Perez 2003, p. 181; PLRC 2008, p. 56).

Regarding age of entry, it is sometimes claimed that 13–14 years old is the norm, but this appears to be a myth (Winick & Kinsie 1971, p. 57). An Australian study (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 34), for instance, found that almost none of the 95 call girls (3%) and 124 brothel workers (4%) interviewed had entered prostitution between the ages of 12 and 15. The vast majority of both groups entered when they were 19 or older: 84% of the call girls and 76% of the brothel workers. Street workers are more likely to enter at a younger age, but even for them it appears that the 13–14 age frame is not the norm. For example, one recent study of street prostitutes reported that 20% had begun to sell sex before age 16, and almost half (48%) had entered after age 19 (Hester & Westmarland 2004).

Childhood abuse (neglect, violence, incest) is part of the biography of some prostitutes, though it is more common among street workers (Jeal & Salisbury 2007, Perkins & Lovejoy 2007) and also occurs within at least one-fifth of families in the wider population (National Research Council 1993). Studies that compare demographically matched samples of street prostitutes and nonprostitutes reach mixed results; some find a statistically significant difference in experience of family abuse, while others find no difference (Nadon et al. 1998). Very few call girls report that they began selling sex to support a drug habit or to support another person, including a pimp, and most said they began in order to earn more money or to become independent (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 32).

Both street and off-street sex work also have differential impacts on the surrounding community, not surprising given that other types of deviant behavior (e.g., drug sales) manifest themselves quite differently in public and in private. This difference explains why community mobilization against prostitution is usually focused on the street trade rather than on indoor establishments. Common grievances include visible sex acts in public, traffic and noise, johns' harassment of female residents, physical altercations, and the health risks presented by discarded condoms and syringes. These complaints are remarkably consistent across cities where street prostitution takes place, and the problems cited are largely confirmed by independent observers (Cohen 1980; Scott 2001; Weitzer 1999, 2000).

Indoor prostitution, by contrast, may have no appreciable impact on the surrounding neighborhood, and, if it is discreet, there is normally little public awareness of it (some

[3] A survey of 100 Asian workers at 12 San Francisco massage parlors found that 62% reported ever being beaten by a customer (it did not report whether the attack happened once or more times), and the authors suggested that one reason for such victimization was a lack of alarm systems in the rooms (Nemoto et al. 2003).

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residents might mobilize against an indoor establishment if they become aware of its existence, so the lack of public opposition should not necessarily be equated with approval of indoor prostitution). Escorts and call girls are characteristically invisible to the public, except when they advertise or post pictures on a Web site. Illegal brothels are similarly hidden.[4] Visible massage parlors, as with strip clubs and adult video stores, are occasionally the targets of community groups because of what they symbolize (e.g., immorality), because they are viewed as out of place in a residential or suburban area, or because of some alleged negative effects on the surrounding area.[5] Many parlors avoid such opposition by operating in a discreet and orderly fashion.

Another difference between street and indoor workers, though not widely known, is the services they provide. Because street workers spend little time with customers, their social interaction is fleeting. As one street worker remarked, "Usually, they're not even interested in talking to you. What they want is quick sex" (quoted in Bernstein 2007, p. 46). Indoor interactions are typically longer, multifaceted, and more reciprocal. Prince (1986, p. 490), who interviewed 75 call girls in California and 150 brothel workers in Nevada, found that most of them believed that "the average customer wants affection or love as well as sex." Consequently, indoor workers are much more likely to counsel and befriend clients, and their encounters often include a semblance of romance and dating (e.g., conversation, hugging, kissing, gifts) (Lever & Dolnick 2000, Lucas 2005, Sanders 2008). A similar pattern is found in the dynamics of the encounter itself. In a Los Angeles study, for example, 30% of call girls (but only 2% of street prostitutes) reported receiving nonsexual massages from their most recent customer; 42% of call girls (3% of streetwalkers) said that their most recent customer had caressed, kissed, or hugged them; and 17% of call girls (4% of street prostitutes) reported that they received oral sex from their most recent client (Lever & Dolnick 2000). An Australian study reported that fully two-thirds of legal brothel workers and four-fifths of call girls have at some time received oral sex from a customer, compared with only a third of street workers (Woodward et al. 2004). Indeed, in at least some indoor venues, the workers expect such reciprocal sexual behavior from clients as a routine part of the encounter. One outcome of this mutuality is both party's sexual pleasure: Prince's (1986, p. 482) large-scale study reported that 75% of call girls, 19% of brothel workers, but none of the street workers frequently had orgasms with customers, and in another study 70% of street prostitutes never had orgasms with clients (Weinberg et al. 1999).

Like other jobs, prostitution does not have a uniform effect on workers' psyches and self-images. Research indicates, as one would expect, that street prostitutes are much more likely than both nonprostitutes and indoor sex workers to exhibit psychological disorders. Indoor workers tend to be more adjusted and satisfied with their work than street workers, and the former differ little in self-esteem and mental health from nonprostitutes (Decker 1979, Exner et al. 1977, Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, Prince 1986). A comparison of indoor prostitutes in New Zealand and an age-matched sample of nonprostitute women found no differences between the two groups in physical health, self-esteem, mental health, or the quality of their social networks (Romans et al. 2001), whereas a comparison of crack cocaine–using street prostitutes and nonprostitutes found psychological problems to be more prevalent among the former (El Bassel 1997). The stress and danger associated

[4]Some prostitution straddles the street-indoor line. In places with "window prostitution" in red-light districts (Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands), the venue is technically indoors but also very visible from the street. The windows' public accessibility explains why there is some degree of disorder (though less than in street prostitution) associated with them, including rowdy clients, petty crime, and other nuisances (Wagenaar 2006).

[5]A sophisticated study by Linz (2004) found that crime was much more prevalent in the immediate vicinity of bars and gas stations than in the area surrounding strip clubs, partly because of the security measures taken by strip clubs.

with street work contribute to psychological problems (Vanwesenbeeck 2001).

Not only do call girls generally express greater job satisfaction than do street workers, but in some studies they are also more satisfied than those employed by third parties (brothels, massage parlors, escort agencies). The latter types of workers are subject to employer demands and may lack the capacity to reject a customer or a particular sex act. A comparative study of streetwalkers and call girls in California and legal brothel workers in Nevada found that most call girls expressed positive views of their work; brothel workers were less positive but generally satisfied with their work, whereas street prostitutes evaluated their work more negatively (Prince 1986, p. 497). Other studies find less difference in job satisfaction between those who work as call girls and those who work in brothels. An Australian study found that half of call girls and brothel workers felt that their work was a "major source of satisfaction" in their lives, and seven out of ten said they would "definitely choose" this work if they had it to do over again (Woodward et al. 2004, p. 39). As a worker in one of Nevada's legal brothels remarked, "I've always been a sexual person. I enjoy doing it. I mean, the money's wonderful but, hey, I enjoy what I do for a living too. I love the people, it's safe, it's clean" (quoted in Waite 2007).

Even more striking are studies that find that self-esteem may increase after one begins sex work. In one study, a remarkable 97% of the call girls reported an increase in self-esteem after they began working in prostitution, compared with 50% of the brothel workers but only 8% of the streetwalkers (Prince 1986, p. 454). Similarly, a study of bar prostitutes in a Midwestern city in the United States found that three-quarters of them felt that their life had improved after entering prostitution (the remainder reported no change; none said it was worse than before); more than half said that they generally enjoyed their work (Decker 1979, pp. 166, 174).

Why would self-esteem be high or increase among those working in the upper echelons? Psychological well-being is associated with a range of structural factors, including education, income, control over working conditions, and client base. As one study concluded, independent call girls generally enjoyed the "financial, social, and emotional wherewithal to structure their work largely in ways that suited them and provided . . . the ability to maintain healthy self-images" (Lucas 2005, p. 541). Income is a major source of self-esteem. Whereas middle-range, independent call girls earn $200–$500 per hour, higher-tier providers charge between $1000 and $6000 per hour or per session, and they are also lavished with fringe benefits such as expensive gifts and paid travel to meet clients. Escort agency, brothel, and massage parlor employees make considerably less because a large share (30–50%) goes to the agency.

Another source of job satisfaction is continuous, positive reinforcement from customers, as illustrated by upscale workers who describe "feeling 'sexy,' 'beautiful,' and 'powerful' only after they had begun to engage in sexual labor and were receiving consistent praise from their clients" (Bernstein 2007, p. 100). In addition, many indoor workers feel that they provide a valuable service to persons in need (e.g., giving clients pleasure, sex therapy, or companionship) or for society more generally (e.g., keeping marriages intact) (e.g., Brents & Hausbeck 2005, Chapkis 1997, Lever & Dolnick 2000, Lucas 2005, Perkins & Lovejoy 1996, Verlarde & Warlick 1973, West 1993). All the escorts studied by Foltz (1979, p. 128), for example, took "pride in their profession" and viewed themselves as "morally superior" to others: "[T]hey consider women who are not 'in the life' to be throwing away woman's major source of power and control [sexual capital], while they as prostitutes are using it to their own advantage as well as for the benefit of society."

At the same time, workers throughout the sex industry experience stigma and condemnation from the wider society, amply demonstrated by public opinion data on prostitution, pornography, and stripping (Weitzer 2000, pp. 1–2, 163–165). This compels workers to engage in various normalization strategies, including compartmentalizing their deviant work

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persona from their real identity, concealing their work from family and friends, distancing themselves from clients, using neutral or professional terms to describe their jobs, and viewing their work as a valuable profession (Foltz 1979, Hirschi 1962, Kurtz et al. 2004, Lever & Dolnick 2000). The invisibility of escorts and call girls makes it easier for them to disassociate themselves from the work compared with more visible workers.

Sex workers do not necessarily confine themselves to one type of work for their entire career. There is some mobility between different types of work. Some porn stars tour strip clubs where they are the featured entertainer and command much higher prices than local talent (Abbott 2000). Similarly, some performers, male and female, advertise online for personal encounters with their fans, a crossover between pornography and prostitution (Escoffier 2007). Independent call girls may occasionally accept appointments from an agency, and massage parlor and brothel workers may moonlight in violation of agency policy, meeting some customers in private and keeping the earnings for themselves.

It is rare, however, for workers to experience substantial upward or downward mobility. As Heyl (1979, p. 198) states, "the level at which the woman begins work in the prostitution world determines her general position in the occupation for much of her career as a prostitute. Changing levels requires contacts and a new set of work techniques and attitudes." Occasionally, an upscale worker whose life situation changes (e.g., because of aging, drug addiction) is no longer able to work in that stratum and gravitates to the street. But transitioning from street work to the top echelons is quite rare because most street workers lack the education and social skills associated with upscale work. If a move takes place, it is usually lateral, such as from the streets to a down-market peep show or from a massage parlor to an escort agency. For instance, one study reported that less than a tenth of call girls and brothel workers had previously worked on the streets. Two-thirds of the call girls had previously worked in brothels, while very few of the brothel workers had previously worked as call girls, what may be considered downward mobility (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 35, 154). Escort agency employees sometimes go independent to maximize both their freedom and their income.

Table 2 Empirical research

Predominant focus	Underresearched topics
Workers	Customers and managers
Female workers	Male and transgender workers
Street prostitution	Indoor prostitution
Illegal prostitution	Legal prostitution

The studies reviewed here provide strong evidence contradicting some popular myths and the central tenets of the oppression model. While certain experiences are generic to prostitution (coping with stigma, managing client behavior, avoiding risks), the literature indicates that other work-related experiences, as well as the harms typically associated with prostitution, vary greatly. The prostitution market is segmented between the indoor and street sectors, marked by major differences in working conditions, risk of victimization, and job satisfaction and self-esteem.

Not only is the empirical literature heavily weighted toward the study of street prostitution, it is also lopsided in at least three other ways. **Table 2** displays these patterns: Workers have been studied much more than customers and managers, female workers much more than male or transgender workers, and systems of criminalized prostitution much more than legal prostitution. These underresearched topics are examined below.

MALE AND TRANSGENDER SEX WORK

Most theory and research concentrates exclusively on female prostitutes, but a growing body of literature centers on male workers. This research points to some basic similarities as well as important differences with female prostitution (Browne & Minichiello 1996). Both males

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and females can be located within the typology presented in **Table 1**. Like female street workers, young men on the street often enter the trade as runaways or to support a drug habit and engage in survival sex. Like upscale female workers, call boys and escorts may have regular customers and develop emotional attachments to some of them (Smith et al. 2008, Van Der Poel 1992). And, like female workers in the mid- and upper-level tiers, similarly situated males are more likely than street workers to express positive views of their work and selves (Koken et al. 2009, Minichiello et al. 2001, West 1993). Uy et al. (2007) interviewed 46 male escorts and reported that they felt desired, attractive, empowered, and important as a result of being generously paid for sex; they also experienced increased self-confidence and improved body images over time. Others pride themselves on being sex educators, instructing clients on safe sex practices (Parsons et al. 2004).

Differences in the ways male and female prostitutes experience their work are evident in the following areas. Males tend to be

- involved in prostitution in a more sporadic and transitory way, drifting in and out of prostitution and leaving the trade earlier than women (Aggleton 1999, Prestage 1994, Weinberg et al. 1999);
- less likely to be coerced into prostitution, to have pimps, and to experience violence from customers (Aggleton 1999, Valera et al. 2001, Weinberg et al. 1999, Weisberg 1985, West 1993);
- in greater control over their working conditions because few have pimps and because males are able to exercise greater physical power over customers (West 1993);
- less stigmatized within the gay community (Koken et al. 2004) but more stigmatized in the wider society because of the combination of homosexuality and prostitution.

A caveat is that almost all the literature is divided into separate studies by gender, with virtually no systematic comparative examinations of males and females at the same level of work (exceptions are Koken et al. 2009, Weinberg et al. 1999). This means that the differences bulleted above must be considered tentative.

Too little is known about transgender sex workers to draw even tentative conclusions along most of the dimensions outlined above. However, it does appear that transgenders occupy the lowest stratum of the status hierarchy and generally face greater difficulties than either female or male prostitutes: They have higher HIV infection rates, "usually have the least desirable prostitution location, make the least money, and are stigmatized and ridiculed by nontransvestite male and female prostitutes" (Boles & Elifson 1994, p. 85). Transgender sex workers are also more likely than males to be assaulted or raped while at work (Valera et al. 2001).

Cohen's (1980) observations of 120 transvestite street prostitutes in New York City revealed that they are more aggressive in propositioning potential customers, and they almost always behaved in a belligerent fashion upon rejection by a potential customer, more so than the female prostitutes he observed. Many biologically male transgender workers do not disclose to customers that they are not women (Weinberg et al. 1999), increasing the chances that deceived customers will react violently (Cohen 1980, p. 55). Other customers, however, expressly seek out transgender workers precisely because they appear to be women but are really males, something the customer finds kinky or excitingly transgressive. Some customers "are attracted by the idea of (experimenting with) sex with another man but are reluctant to choose a partner who actually is a man" and instead seek out transgenders who appear to be female (Prestage 1994, p. 177). This is just one area in which transgender workers and their customers have fairly unique experiences, distinguishing them from male and female providers and their clients (Kulick 1998).

Comparative studies of males, females, and transgenders will help document the degree to which workers' gender shapes their experience

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of the work and their relations with customers and third parties and will help address the larger question of whether there is anything truly inherent in prostitution. Do male and transgender workers experience less exploitation and victimization and exercise greater control over working conditions than female workers in the same tier? If so, the next step is to explain these differences, with a view toward identifying the factors that help to reduce victimization and increase workers' power.

CUSTOMERS

The literature has traditionally ignored customers, but this has begun to change in recent years. As in any commercial relationship, customers of prostitutes far outnumber the workers who service them, and a sizeable number of men have bought sex. The General Social Survey reports, in eight polls from 1991 to 2006, that 15–18% of American men say that they have paid for sex at some time in their lives and (in 2006) 4% had done so in the past year. Remarkably similar figures are reported for Australia (16%) and the average within Europe (15%) (Rissel 2003). The real numbers are likely higher given the stigma involved in revealing such conduct. Most customers appear to have bought sex only once or a few times, and a smaller number are frequent clients (Brooks-Gordon 2006, pp. 82–83; de Graaf et al. 1996).

Customers vary demographically, and these differences parallel differences in the larger male population, according to a study comparing a large sample of customers with a nationally representative sample of American men, which found few differences between the two populations (Monto & McRee 2005). And most do not fit the stereotype of the violent misogynist: A "relatively small proportion of clients may be responsible for most of the violence against prostitutes" (Monto 2000, p. 76). Monto's study was based on clients' attitudes but is consistent with reviews of arrest records, where only a fraction of arrested customers, 8% in one study, had a previous conviction for a violent or sexual offense (Brooks-Gordon 2006, p. 198). Many clients of upscale workers treat them very respectfully (Bernstein 2007, Lucas 2005, Sanders 2008).

Motivations for buying sex vary and differ somewhat between clients of indoor and street markets (de Graaf et al. 1996, Holzman & Pines 1982, Jordan, 1997, McKeganey & Barnard 1996, Monto 2000, Perkins 1999, Sanders 2008). This literature suggests that customers patronize prostitutes for rather different reasons:

- They desire sex with a person with a certain image (e.g., sexy, raunchy, etc.) or physical appearance (e.g., physique, race, transgender).
- They are unsatisfied with the sexual dimension of their relationship with their current partner, if they have a partner.
- They have difficulty finding a partner for a conventional relationship.
- They find this transgressive conduct risky, thrilling, or sporting.
- They wish to avoid the long-term obligations or emotional attachment involved in a conventional relationship.
- They seek a limited, quasi-romantic, emotional connection in addition to or instead of sex.

The largest study of customers reported that 43% sought "a different kind of sex than my regular partner" provides; 47% said that they were "excited by the idea of approaching a prostitute"; and 30% said they did not want the responsibilities of a conventional relationship (Monto 2000).

A subgroup of clients are motivated by the possibility of forming a short- or long-term relationship with a worker, rather than a brief transaction. In Thailand, the Philippines, and the Caribbean, Western men meet dancers at nightclubs and pay a bar fine to leave the club with a woman. They may spend a night or several days together (perhaps visiting tourist sights), and the men pay for the woman's time or for assorted expenses. Some of the men become boyfriends and enter into long-term or serial relationships, sending email, gifts, and money from overseas and reuniting with the

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woman on return visits. Many of the women and some of the men are consciously seeking a long-term relationship, and some end up marrying (Brennan 2004; Kempadoo 1999, 2004; Lim 1998; Ratliff 1999). In this context, prostitution can be a precursor to prolonged and possibly permanent attachments. The women see such engagements as a means of securing upward mobility, whether or not it results in marriage. They see the sex trade as a "fast track to economic success—a way not just to solve short-term economic problems but to change their lives" (Brennan 2004, p. 24). A similar dynamic occurs among gay tourists and male sex workers, where the contact begins as paid sex but can evolve into a boyfriend relationship (Padilla 2007).

Few studies have explored customers' experiences during or the meanings they attach to paid sex encounters, but some recent analyses of data from the Internet shed light on this dimension. In addition to those Web sites where workers advertise (sites listing services and prices, biographical sketches, photos, and personality descriptions), some sites contain message boards and chat rooms for clients and providers (Castle & Lee 2008). These sites offer a forum where novices can learn from seasoned clients and find information on what to expect in prices and services; reviews of a specific worker (appearance, demeanor, performance); location of establishments (e.g., massage parlors, strip clubs offering lap dances); and information on local law enforcement activity. The sites provide unique insight into customer beliefs, justifications, expectations, and behavioral norms—dimensions addressed only partially in previous interviews and surveys. Derogatory comments about providers are made in online entries (Holt & Blevins 2007), but other entries lavish praise on workers. And many of the cyber exchanges among men also discuss appropriate and inappropriate behavior toward sex workers, with warnings for misogynists, those seeking underage workers or unsafe sex, and other wayward individuals—what might be called a code of ethics for consumers. The Internet thus constitutes a new data source offering a unique window into customers' experiences, the meanings they attach to paid sex, and an emergent subculture.

Data from these Web sites and from interviews indicate that many clients of indoor workers seek much more than sex. These clients place a premium on the provider being friendly, affectionate, attentive, and generous with time; having good communication skills and life experience; and perhaps engaging in kissing, cuddling, and sensual massage (Holt & Blevins 2007, Sharp & Earle 2003). This kind of treatment has long been sought by customers of indoor workers and would occur naturally when regulars get to know a provider over the long term. Recently, it has acquired a new label, the girlfriend experience (GFE), which borders on what one would expect from a girlfriend.[6] (Some escort Web sites emphasize their expertise in providing a GFE, such as **http://www.gfe-girls.com**, **http://www.bestGFE.com**, and **http://www.girlfriendexperienceescorts.co.uk**, and some escort agencies include in their contracts a GFE code of etiquette that includes instructions about cuddling and not rushing the client). One study found that customers' online entries focused more on the GFE and the workers' personalities than on their physical attributes or sexual performances (Sharp & Earle 2003), a finding echoed in interviews with escorts: "For many men, sex is the pretext for the visit, and the real need is emotional" (Lucas 2005, p. 531). For others, the GFE means romantic sex, as in this posting:

> From the moment I stepped through the door this was a full GFE. Mint was flirtatious in a girly way (but not cloying at all). Lots of hugs and kisses as we undressed, a nice bubble bath, then back to bed. . . . The longest, gentlest sex I've had in ages. Lots of kissing and fondling all the way through, she said sweet words which made things all the more satisfying.

[6]A parallel among male workers is providing a boyfriend experience (van der Poel 1992).

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> Even after the climax she was helpful and attentive as I showered again, and she helped me dress. Mint is an absolute delight. For a gentle GFE that is more lovemaking than sex, she is unbeatable (Easy S, *Punternet*, February 7, 2006).

Frequently, the men wax affectionate, recounting being treated lovingly or calling the provider a "sweetie," as a boyfriend or husband might. Many customers also place a premium on reciprocity: They value giving a sex worker pleasure, such as massaging or performing oral sex or manual stimulation. Clients who seek emotional intimacy and companionship present a challenge to the notion that commercial sex necessarily involves objectification. One study of indoor customers found that they did not view sex workers "simply as bodies" or as "targets of sexual conquest" but sought instead a meaningful, personal connection (Sanders 2008, p. 98).

The testimonials indicate that some clients, and perhaps large numbers, have had very good experiences with sex workers and feel that such activities have enhanced their lives. Others, however, report negative feelings, such as fear of discovery, shame for engaging in disreputable behavior, guilt for betraying their wives or girlfriends, or dissatisfaction with the encounter itself (e.g., the sex was rushed or impersonal, feeling manipulated or economically exploited). Nearly two-thirds of the customers interviewed in one study felt guilt or shame (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 107). Yet others fear contracting a disease, feel embarrassed about paying for sex, regret spending time cruising online advertisements or prowling the streets, or feel they should be pursuing a conventional relationship (Bernstein 2007, pp. 131–33).

For the workers, providing a comprehensive GFE has both advantages and disadvantages. One benefit is that time spent in nonsexual pursuits reduces wear and tear on the body, but the downside is that one has to feign intimacy with some clients who are not especially likeable. The GFE can be quite draining for the provider, who must work hard to ensure that customers are comfortable, relaxed, and happy, and to remain pleasant, witty, and attentive. This tall order makes the provision of a GFE "extraordinarily stressful work. . . . It calls for emotional labor of a type and on a scale which is probably unparalleled in any other job" (O'Connell Davidson 1995, p. 4). Such stress is amplified when a client reveals unpleasant or troubling details about his personal life, begins to expect free sex, wants a date on demand, becomes obsessed, or falls in love. Street workers are largely free of these strains.

Indoor workers' views of clients are predictably mixed—ranging from favorable to highly unfavorable—just as for any service occupation in which providers spend an extended amount of time with clients. Although some customers are demanding, disputatious, or unsatisfied with their experiences, this does not appear to be the norm among clients of upper-echelon providers, a much more selective group than those in other tiers. In one study, "most call girls have not had bad experiences, and more often than not they have positive things to say about their customers" (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 112). In fact, workers may become quite fond of regular customers, as one call girl reveals,

> The only way I can sustain regulars is if I actually like them and I may like them for different reasons . . . . Most of my regulars know who I am, so I can be myself, and I try to enjoy myself sexually too because I really hate wasting time doing things that I don't want to do . . . . A number of my clients are intelligent men who are well informed and can carry on a stimulating conversation (quoted in Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 63).

One escort remarked, "To me they're friends and I've never talked about them as 'johns' or 'jobs.' . . . I get as much pleasure from them as I like to think they get from me, and I'm not just talking about the sex but building up a real rapport with them. . . . I treat them as I would a boyfriend" (quoted in Perez-y-Perez 2003, p. 204). If the GFE is nothing more for some

providers than "counterfeit intimacy"—a manufactured emotional connection with a client that is also a staple of strippers and telephone sex operators (Frank 2002, Rich & Guidroz 2000)—other sex workers, like the one just quoted, develop genuine bonds with at least some clients. Bernstein (2007, p. 103) describes this as "authentic (if fleeting) libidinal and emotional ties with clients, endowing them with a sense of desirability, esteem, or even love." The GFE may be precisely what is desired by the buyer—a brief but meaningful human connection, free of the strains of a noncommercial relationship.

Bernstein (2007) claims that the GFE has expanded from its previous niche market to indoor prostitution in general and that customers are increasingly seeking this kind of experience. But the evidence for this trend is thin and is arguably data-driven, i.e., a function of greater documentation with the advent of Internet postings. Clients of call girls have long sought emotional intimacy; what has changed is the marketing of this experience. Moreover, the GFE is most emblematic of the work of call girls and escorts and somewhat less common or elaborate in brothels or massage parlors. For the former, "a show of affection is offered their clients because the nature of their business depends on a 'love nest' scenario to attract clients, in contrast to the more obviously mercenary sexual services found in most brothels" and the limitations imposed by their managers (Perkins & Lovejoy 2007, p. 110; cf. Perez-y-Perez 2003, p. 195).

What influences a person's decision to buy sex in one venue as opposed to others? Streetwalkers may be attractive because of easy access, low prices, or the excitement of cruising for sex. Some clients prefer the more sordid and risky street scene to the staid indoor scene. These customers are not seeking a GFE, and the brevity of these encounters preempts anything beyond brief chitchat. Other clients avoid the streets because they are seen as dangerous places (where one risks health, safety, and arrest) or because they see street workers as more vulnerable, desperate, or exploited by pimps (de Graaf et al. 1996; Sanders 2008, pp. 49–52). Many indoor establishments have the advantage of being safer, less sordid, and more discreet. Massage parlors and brothels typically allow customers to select a woman from a lineup. Some customers prefer to view the providers in person or online before making a choice (escort agencies and call girls are increasingly advertising on the Internet, but the online photos sometimes conceal faces to safeguard anonymity). Brothels can offer a relaxing, homey, or club atmosphere. Men who patronize escorts or call girls, as mentioned above, are often looking for companionship and an emotional bond—something workers in other sectors may be unwilling or unable to provide.

What about female customers? They are a small fraction of the market but have important theoretical implications. One setting where women buy sex from men is vacation spots. A handful of studies have examined transactions between affluent European and American female tourists and young Caribbean men, who meet on the beaches and at clubs (Phillips 1999, Pruitt & LaFont 1995, Taylor 2001). This literature points to some similarities between male and female sex tourism, such as patterns of economic inequality between buyer and seller. Economic inequality can translate into unequal power relations between the parties, with some female tourists "expressing a preference for keeping a man dependent on them" so that he will be "fully available to meet her needs" (Pruitt & LaFont 1995, p. 427), but it is not known whether these transactions differ significantly from the male client/female provider type in terms of objectification of the worker, amount or type of exploitation, and customers' control (including coercion) over the workers. Finally, little is known about commercial sex transactions between women. What experiential differences, if any, are there between encounters where both parties are women, those where both are men, and those involving a man and a woman? Answers to these questions will help clarify the impact of gender on the dynamics of paid sex transactions.

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MANAGERS

Sex work is not necessarily organized by third parties, but managers are centrally involved in other settings. A manager or owner is someone who exercises control over a worker and extracts some or all the profit. Research is scarce on both street-level pimps and the managers and owners of indoor establishments.

Some brothel and parlor managers provide extensive training for novice workers (Heyl 1977), whereas others provide none (Bryant & Palmer 1975). One of the few in-depth studies in this area is the participant-observation work of Perez-y-Perez (2003), who managed three New Zealand massage parlors. Her study provides a rare, inside view of how massage parlors operate simultaneously as ordinary businesses and face special challenges owing to the illegality of prostitution (illegal in New Zealand at the time of the study) and how managers attempt to control workers and act as a broker among workers, customers, and owners. Workers expect managers to screen customers and act as allies with respect to problem clients, but also to mediate disputes between workers. Owners, for their part, expect managers to ensure that workers are not stealing from the establishment or pocketing unreported earnings, as well as to deal with tardiness and absenteeism. Again, some of this is par for the course in any business, whereas other aspects are unique to an illegal enterprise.

Pimps actively promote the prostitution of others and benefit materially from that association. In commonsense usage, a pimp is someone who manages street-level prostitutes; the term is rarely applied to managers of indoor establishments, although it fits the standard definition above. Reports of the percentage of street workers who have pimps vary considerably by locale.

A major vacuum in the literature is the lack of research on pimps, with a few exceptions. A British study of 16 pimps found that, consistent with stereotypes, they exercised almost total control over their workers (May et al. 2000). Two-thirds of the 19 prostitutes interviewed in the same study saw no benefits in having a pimp, and few felt protected by their pimp. All 19 had been physically abused, ranging from being slapped to assaults that required hospitalization, and 10 had been raped by their pimp. In other studies, approximately two-thirds of street samples report being assaulted for showing disrespect, making too little money, breaking the pimp's rules, and trying to leave (Silbert & Pines 1982). Pimps rarely provide protection for their workers because they are only intermittently on the street monitoring their workers (Bernstein 2007, p. 55). Only one-fifth of the 72 prostitutes interviewed in one study said their pimp provided them with protection, and, surprisingly, only a minority of the 38 pimps interviewed (43%) believed that pimps provide their workers with protection (James 1973). In a more recent study of street prostitution in New York City, the workers described pimps as more of a hindrance than a help: They were "ineffectual in their roles as protectors and most women saw them as 'just another habit to feed'" (Maher 1997, pp. 153, 154). Pimps are very concerned, however, with protecting their women from poaching by other pimps and may use violence against workers who even speak to another pimp.

Pimping and other manager practices should not be regarded as a monolithic enterprise: Arrangements vary along emotional, economic, coercive, and sexual axes (Decker 1979, pp. 238–58). Although it is commonly assumed that pimps routinely assault their workers, the frequency of violence is unknown. (The figures presented above are based on whether pimps ever behaved violently, not how frequently they do so.) Some massage parlor and brothel owners treat their workers very poorly (e.g., Verlarde & Warlick 1973), whereas others have collegial relations with their employees and take pains to ensure safe and healthy working conditions (Brents & Hausbeck 2005, Heyl 1977, Smith et al. 2008).

Some third parties perform a short-term role. The panderer is a person who "induces, entices, or otherwise steers another into the occupation of prostitution" (Decker 1979, p. 259). According to Decker (1979), pandering

was more prevalent historically but is fairly sporadic and isolated today. The recent trafficking debate, however, has focused new light on pandering. Coercive sex trafficking has been defined as the use of force, fraud, or deception to procure, transport, harbor, and sell persons, within and between nations, for purposes of prostitution. This definition does not apply to persons who willingly travel in search of employment in the sex industry, although many writers lump this kind of migration into the trafficking category. Despite the recent flurry of writings on trafficking, little is known about the various profiteers involved in this trade. We do know that some intermediaries do not fit the folk-devil stereotype of the shady trafficker, but instead are associates, friends, or family members of the worker (Steinfatt 2003, Vocks & Nijboer 2000). These facilitators acquire visas, make travel arrangements, and provide money to the traveler, and have a qualitatively different relationship with workers than do predators who use deception or force to lure people into the sex trade (Agustín 2007, Weitzer 2007b).

The management of prostitution is one of the most invisible aspects of the trade. Much more research is needed on the dynamics of recruitment, socialization, surveillance, exploitation, coercion, and trafficking. Such findings will help to provide a more comprehensive picture of power relations, ranging from those types where workers experience extreme domination to those where they exercise substantial control and are free of mistreatment.

LEGAL CONTEXT

Most research has been conducted in nations where prostitution is illegal, which limits or distorts full understanding. In fact, the legal context under which prostitution occurs may be an absolutely critical variable—just as it is in other arenas, such as abortion, gambling, and drug markets. The few existing studies of legal prostitution systems suggest that many of the harms often associated with prostitution are traceable to its prohibited status. Under criminalization, prostitution is set apart from legitimate work, workers are marginalized and stigmatized, and the police provide little protection. These problems may be alleviated after legalization.

Brothels are legal and regulated by the government in some Australian and German states and in the Netherlands, New Zealand, and several other countries. Regulations vary from place to place, but a common objective is harm reduction (Rekart 2005, Sullivan 1997). New Zealand's 2003 law, for instance, gives workers labor rights, provides for the licensing and taxing of brothels, and empowers local governments to determine where they can operate, determine their size, vet the owners, ban offensive signage, and impose safe sex and other health requirements (PLRC 2008). Western Australia recently legalized brothel and escort prostitution, modeling much of its approach on New Zealand's (Weitzer 2009).

Although a full evaluation of legal, regulated prostitution is beyond the scope of this review, the available evidence suggests that it can be organized in a way that increases workers' safety. Nevada legalized prostitution in 1971 and currently has about 30 brothels scattered around its rural counties (prohibited in Las Vegas and Reno). According to recent research, these legal brothels "offer the safest environment available for women to sell consensual sex acts for money" (Brents & Hausbeck 2005, p. 289). A report by the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands indicated that the "vast majority" of workers in Dutch brothels and window units report that they "often or always feel safe" (Daalder 2004, p. 30). Likewise, in Queensland, Australia, "[t]here is no doubt that licensed brothels provide the safest working environment for sex workers. . . . Legal brothels now operating in Queensland provide a sustainable model for a healthy, crime-free, and safe legal licensed brothel industry" (Crime & Misconduct Commission 2004, p. 75). Of the 101 Queensland brothel workers interviewed by Woodward et al. (2004), 97% felt that an advantage of working in a legal brothel was safety and security. In each of these cases, the brothels employ safety precautions (screening, surveillance, panic buttons, listening devices) that

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reduce the likelihood of abuse by customers, and legal status is intended to shift the role of the police from a punitive orientation to one of protective intervention in the event of trouble.

Stigma does not necessarily erode where prostitution is legal. Workers in Holland's red-light window prostitution zones do not allow themselves to be photographed and typically avoid working in their home town to reduce the likelihood of being recognized by unknowing neighbors, friends, or family members. On the other hand, legalization can help to normalize sex work at least to some extent. In Holland, for example, three-quarters of citizens consider prostitution an acceptable job (Weitzer 2000, p. 178). Legalization can also facilitate normalization among the workers: In New Zealand, the 2003 legalization of prostitution accorded workers numerous rights, increased their willingness to report problems to the police, and "increased confidence, well-being, and a sense of validation" because sex work was no longer illegal: "Decriminalizing prostitution made sex workers feel better about themselves and what they did," according to a government evaluation of the impact of the statute (PLRC 2008, pp. 49, 50).

CONCLUSION

The literature is lopsided in its concentration on street prostitution, female sex workers, and illegal prostitution, resulting in a distorted picture of the world of commercial sex. A major shift in the research agenda is needed, focusing on actors and structures that have received insufficient attention—namely, indoor workers, male and transgender workers, male and female customers, managers, organizations, and legal systems. Likewise, sociological examinations of the pornography and telephone sex industries are almost nonexistent. Further research on these sectors should have the cumulative effect of producing a more nuanced, multidimensional, and comprehensive understanding of sex work than what currently exists. Studies of male and transgender workers and women in all tiers will clarify whether and how gender structures work experiences and power relations. And research on legal prostitution systems will help to differentiate dimensions of sex work that are intrinsic to this occupational sector from those that are context specific. Additional research in these areas should enrich and broaden our understanding of the polymorphous nature of sex work.

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