

## New directions in research on prostitution

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**Abstract.** This article critically evaluates the theoretical and empirical literature on contemporary 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. Drawing on the sparse literature available on these underexamined topics, the article demonstrates how further research will yield a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of contemporary prostitution.

### Introduction

The literature on prostitution is deficient in several important respects. This article examines these problems as well as some promising recent developments, with the goal of developing a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of contemporary prostitution. The analysis is largely confined to the literature on Anglo-American societies.

### Theoretical issues

There has been little theoretical advancement in recent years. Instead, a great deal of quasi-theoretical, polemical writing makes claims about the nature and consequences of prostitution and other types of sex work. Much of this ideological work has been motivated by an obvious antiprostitution political agenda. *Radical feminism* is the perspective that has done the most to distort our understanding of prostitution, yet it remains quite popular. This section outlines and critically evaluates the main arguments of radical feminist theory, as a prelude to my discussion of several new directions in research that, in the aggregate, offer a more sophisticated and comprehensive model of contemporary prostitution.

Radical feminism sees prostitution as the quintessential form of male domination over women – the epitome of women’s subordination, degradation, and victimization (Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1981; 1997; Jeffreys, 1997; MacKinnon, 1987, 1989). It has been called an *essentialist* perspective

because its sweeping claims apply to all historical time periods, all societies, and all types of prostitution.

In this perspective, prostitution involves not only specific acts of violence but is *a form of violence by definition*. Violence is depicted as “intrinsic” and “endemic” to prostitution – categorically, universally, and trans-historically. These authors argue that any distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution is a myth, since some coercion is claimed to always be involved, even if the worker is unaware of it.

Radical feminist work on prostitution is not limited to the abstract theorizing found in the writings of Dworkin, MacKinnon, and others. A number of empirical studies take this perspective as well. One book-length study concluded that prostitution is an “abomination” and “brutal oppression” that “must be opposed,” even though the authors’ findings do not justify this indictment (Hoigard and Finstad, 1992: 76, 183, 184). Similarly, a study of street prostitution in five countries proclaims that “prostitution is violence against women” and that “numerous violations of human rights” are “intrinsic” to prostitution (Farley et al., 1998: 406, 421). Some writers attempt to present their work as scientific, while others acknowledge their ideological biases. A Chicago study, for instance, indicates that the “research project was designed within a framework of prostitution as a form of violence against women and not prostitution as a legitimate industry . . . The survey questions and administration were likely biased to some degree by working within this framework and by employing surveyors who had left prostitution” (Raphael and Shapiro, 2004: 132). The interviewers “did not see their own [prior prostitution] experiences as ‘work’ or a choice” (Raphael and Shapiro, 2002: 9). This overarching bias stacks the deck: “When researchers have difficulty understanding rational, not to mention positive, reasons for choosing sex work and find it easier to think of prostitutes as victims, it is understandable that the sex workers [interviewed] will stress their victim status and negative motivations for working” (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001: 259).

Authors who adopt this perspective make claims designed for maximum shock value. Customers are labeled “prostitute users,” “batterers,” and “sexual predators.” Farley 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” (Farley, 2004: 1101). 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: 145).

These sweeping claims are not supported by empirical studies. Customers vary demographically, attitudinally, and behaviorally (discussed more fully below). While there is no doubt that some are abusive and violent, a major

study of more than 2300 arrested customers found that most of the men rejected rape myths and other rationalizations for violence against women: “there is no reason to believe that most customers are violent” (Monto, 2004: 76), and “a relatively small proportion of clients may be responsible for most of the violence against prostitutes” (Monto, 2000: 6).

Radical feminism uses emotive language regarding the workers as well. Instead of the term “prostitute,” these writers insist on “prostituted women,” “sex slaves,” or “survivors.” Jeffreys (1997: 330) concedes that use of such terms is ideologically motivated: the term *prostituted women* “is a deliberate political decision and is meant to symbolize the lack of choice women have over being used in prostitution.” These terms are extremely problematic. “Prostituted” clearly indicates that prostitution is something done to women, not something that can be chosen, and “survivor” implies someone who has escaped a harrowing ordeal.

In its central arguments and choice of terminology, the radical feminist perspective *denies workers’ agency*. The only time a conscious choice is made is when women decide to leave prostitution, not when they decide to enter or remain in prostitution. It is simply declared, by fiat, that no woman would choose this type of work: “To the extent that any woman is assumed to have freely chosen prostitution, then it follows that enjoyment of domination and rape are in her nature” (Farley and Kelly, 2000: 54). Underscoring the alleged lack of consent in the sex trade, prostitution is equated with rape, or “paid rape” (Raymond, 1995, 1998).

Workers’ self-conceptions are not necessarily consistent with these claims. Exploitation and victimization are not intrinsic to the sex trade: “Many prostitutes emphasize that they engage in sex work not simply out of economic need but out of satisfaction with the control it gives them over their sexual interactions, just the opposite of what the radicals argue” (Zatz, 1997: 291). Many workers reject the attempt to strip them of agency by labeling them “prostituted” or “sex slaves” and view themselves in more neutral terms. For example, almost all of the 294 prostitutes interviewed in a Miami study “prefer the terms *sex worker* and *working woman* and refer to themselves as such” (Kurtz et al., 2004: 359).

Central to radical feminist theory is the contention that violence, degradation, and gender oppression are inherent, omnipresent, and unalterable in prostitution – that it has never been and can never be organized in a way that minimizes coercion and safeguards workers’ interests. This universalistic and essentialist reasoning is not consistent with the canons of social science, which cautions against ahistorical and global generalizations and predictions. As Overall (1992: 716) points out, “It is imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative

safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control.” She is not optimistic that this scenario will become the norm, but she does challenge the essentialist notion that prostitution is intrinsically oppressive and dehumanizing. The implication is that there is nothing inherent in prostitution that would prevent it from being organized in terms of mutual gain to both parties – just as in other economic transactions.

The legal context under which prostitution occurs is important, a context typically ignored in radical feminism. Many of the harms that seem to be associated with prostitution are traceable to its prohibited and penalized status: “It is not sex work per se that promotes oppressive values of capitalist patriarchy but rather the particular cultural and legal production of a marginalized, degraded prostitution that ensures its oppressive characteristics while acting to limit the subversive potential that might attend a decriminalized, culturally legitimized form of sex work” (Zatz, 1997: 291). Under criminalization, prostitution is set apart from “legitimate” work, workers are marginalized and stigmatized, and the police provide little protection. Each of these problems is at least somewhat reduced under conditions where prostitution is legal and carefully regulated – as documented below.

Violating the canons of scientific inquiry, the radical feminist literature on prostitution and other types of sex work is filled with “sloppy definitions, unsupported assertions, and outlandish claims” (Rubin, 1993: 36); such writers select the “worst available examples” of sex work and treat them as representative (Rubin, 1984: 301). Anecdotes are generalized and presented as conclusive evidence, sampling is selective, and counterevidence is routinely ignored. Such research cannot help but produce questionable findings and spurious conclusions (Weitzer, 2005a,b).

What is needed is an alternative paradigm that is (1) based on sound empirical evidence, (2) incorporates the multiple realities of workers and other actors, and (3) encompasses different types of prostitution. In the remainder of the article, I build upon the empirical research literature in order to outline key tenets of this alternative, empirically grounded perspective.

### **Variation in prostitution**

Much academic writing seems to equate prostitution with street prostitution.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, Britain, The Netherlands, and many other countries, however, only a minority of prostitutes work on the streets (10–30%) (Alexander, 1987; Matthews, 1997; O’Leary and Howard, 2001). Yet they receive the lion’s share of attention, and findings on street prostitution are “often presented as a feature of sex work per se. Thus, the association of

prostitution and misery prevails” (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001: 279). The irony is that *most research has been done on the least prevalent type of prostitution*. All too often overlooked is the large population of indoor workers: escort, brothel, bar, and massage parlor.<sup>2</sup>

Although more research is needed on the indoor sector, the evidence available points to important distinctions between indoor and street work. Generally, “empirical analyses demonstrate a remarkable diversity of activities that fall under the term *prostitution* and a remarkable diversity of experiences among participants” (Monto, 2004: 164), and “prostitutes’ experiences, situations, and circumstances differ greatly over the gamut of this highly class-stratified occupation” (Chancer, 1993: 163). The diverse experiences are patterned in such a way that the prostitution market is *segmented* between the indoor and street sectors.<sup>3</sup> Yet this variation and segmentation is masked in radical feminism.

Street prostitutes occupy the lowest stratum and receive the strongest dose of stigma; upscale workers are somewhat less reviled. Scattered opinion poll data show that the public is more tolerant of indoor prostitution than street prostitution (Weitzer, 1991, 2000). Workers themselves often draw distinctions between their work and that of others in the sex trade, distinctions that usually include some disparagement of other types of workers.

There is also a hierarchy *within* each tier. Within the indoor sector, call girls generally exercise more control over working conditions and express greater job satisfaction than do workers in brothels and massage parlors (Perkins, 1996; Prince, 1986; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994). Among indoor workers, status increases as we move from massage parlors to brothels to escort agencies to independent call girls (Heyl, 1979). Street prostitution is stratified by race, gender, age, appearance, income, and locale – all of which shape workers’ daily experiences. In some cities, workers of a particular race segregate themselves and operate in distinct street locations, settings that may affect their working conditions (Cohen, 1980; Porter and Bonilla, 2000; Sanchez, 1997). Bernstein’s (1999) study of a ten-block area of San Francisco identified three distinct strata of streetwalkers (based on income, appearance, and status). Drug-addicted workers also differ strikingly from nonaddicts in their willingness to engage in unsafe sexual practices and accept low prices. The world of male prostitution is similarly stratified, though there appears to be more mobility between the ranks than is true for female prostitution (see below).

The stratification of prostitution has implications for working conditions, workers’ self-esteem and psychological adjustment, and its impact on the surrounding community.

*Working Conditions:* Prostitutes vary in their access to resources for protection, their freedom to refuse clients and particular sex acts, and their

dependence on managers and other third parties (Chapkis, 2000; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Heyl, 1979; Lim, 1998). Control over these conditions is generally lowest at the bottom of the hierarchy – among streetwalkers – though mid-level workers employed by third parties (in massage parlors and brothels) have less control over working conditions than independent street prostitutes, who do not work for pimps. By definition, independent call girls exercise more control than workers employed by escort agencies.

Workers differ in their risk of victimization: Assault, robbery, and rape are occupational hazards for streetwalkers and for those coercively trafficked into prostitution, but are relatively uncommon among off-street workers who have not been recruited by force or fraud. Substantial, and sometimes huge, differences are reported in studies that compare street prostitutes with call girls, brothel workers, and escorts. 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 more likely than the indoor workers to report that they had ever been robbed (37 vs. 10%), beaten (27 vs. 1%), slapped/punched/kicked (47 vs. 14%), raped (22 vs. 2%), threatened with a weapon (24 vs. 6%), or kidnapped (20 vs. 2%) (Church et al., 2001). A Canadian study found similar differences between street workers and escorts – for robbery (37 vs. 9%), kidnapping (32 vs. 5%), sexual assault (37 vs. 9%), beatings (39 vs. 14%), strangling (31 vs. 5%), and attempted murder (10 vs. 0%) (Lowman and Fraser, 1995). Such significant disparities in victimization rates for street and indoor workers are reported in many other studies of Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States (Decker, 1979; Perkins, 1991; Perkins and Lovejoy, 1996; Perkins and Bennett, 1985; Plumridge and Abel, 2001; Prince, 1986; Whittaker and Hart, 1996; Woodward et al., 2004). Clearly, street prostitutes are much more vulnerable to victimization than indoor workers who engage in consensual sex work. As Plumridge and Abel (2001: 83) conclude, “street workers are significantly more at risk of more violence and more serious violence than indoor workers.” Call girls and escorts and massage parlor workers are in a better position to screen out dangerous customers, and they also have a greater proportion of low-risk, regular clients (Lever and Dolnick, 2000).

Although a full evaluation of legal, regulated indoor prostitution is beyond the scope of the article, indoor work can be organized in a way that greatly increases workers' safety. Indeed, one of the major advantages of Nevada's legal brothels is protection from violence; its legal brothels “offer the safest environment available for women to sell consensual sex acts for money” (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005: 289). Nevada's legal brothels employ a number of safety precautions (panic buttons, listening devices, management surveillance), and similar security measures in other legal prostitution systems help to minimize

the risk to workers. In The Netherlands, the “the vast majority” of workers in brothels, clubs, and window units report that they “often or always feel safe” (Dalder, 2004: 30). And a major evaluation of legal brothels in Queensland, Australia concluded, “There is no doubt that licensed brothels provide the safest working environment for sex workers in Queensland . . . Legal brothels now operating in Queensland provide a sustainable model for a healthy, crime-free, and safe legal licensed brothel industry” and are a “state of the art model for the sex industry in Australia” (Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004: 75, 89).

Risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases varies between street and indoor workers. HIV infection rates vary markedly among street prostitutes (with the highest incidence among street workers who inject drugs [Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Weiner, 1996]), but HIV is rare among call girls (Seidlin, 1988) and among women working in legal brothels in Australia, Holland, and Nevada (Pyett, 1996; Perkins and Lovejoy, 1996). None of Nevada’s legal brothel workers has tested HIV-positive since testing was mandated in 1985.

Other variations in work experiences can be noted. Escorts and call girls are expected to engage in “emotion work” in addition to providing sexual services. They are much more likely to counsel, befriend, and offer emotional support to clients than street workers (Lever and Dolnick, 2000; Lucas, 1998). A similar pattern is found in the dynamics of the encounter itself. Whereas streetwalkers tend to have fleeting interactions with customers, escorts and call girls are much more likely to have encounters that resemble dating experiences (with conversation, gifts, hugging, kissing) as well as to receive massages and oral sex from clients. 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 a customer in their most recent transaction (Lever and Dolnick, 2000). The same receipt of sexual “services” from customers has been reported in other indoor venues. In Queensland, Australia, two-thirds of legal brothel workers and four-fifths of call girls have received oral sex from a customer, compared to only a third of street workers (Woodward et al., 2004). And a comparison of 75 call girls and 75 street prostitutes in California and 150 women working in Nevada’s legal brothels found substantial differences in whether workers experienced orgasms with customers – 75% of call girls, 19% of brothel workers, and none of the streetwalkers reported that they frequently had orgasms with customers (Prince, 1986: 482).

*Psychological Adjustment:* Prostitution does not have a uniform effect on workers’ self-images and psyches. A comparison of 176 streetwalkers who

use crack cocaine and a matched sample of 130 crack cocaine using nonprostitutes, interviewed on the streets in Harlem, found that the street prostitutes were more likely to exhibit psychological disorders (El Bassel, 1997), while another comparison of 29 prostitutes in New Zealand (27 of whom worked as call girls, escorts, or in massage parlors; 2 worked the street) 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). Another study found that call girls, brothel workers, and massage parlor workers generally were "handling themselves well, manifesting good emotional controls, being well aware of conventionality, and doing well in the occupation of their choice," whereas streetwalkers exhibited significant psychological problems (Exner et al., 1977: 483). The stress and danger associated with street work contribute to negative assessments of the work as well as psychological problems (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001).

Research on streetwalkers and call girls in California and legal brothel workers in Nevada found that 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: 454). Call girls expressed positive views of their work; brothel workers were generally satisfied with their work; but street prostitutes evaluated their work more negatively (Prince, 1986: 497). Similarly, a study of indoor prostitutes (most of whom worked in bars) 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 enjoy their work (Decker, 1979: 166, 174). In The Netherlands, three-quarters of indoor workers report that they enjoy their work (Dalder, 2004: 34). Research on 95 call girls in Sydney, Australia found that they were generally emotionally healthy (Perkins and Lovejoy, 1996). All of the escorts studied by Foltz (1979: 128) took "pride in their profession" and viewed themselves as "morally superior" to others: "they 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." And 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, while 7 out of 10 said they would "definitely choose" this work if they had it to do over again (Woodward et al., 2004: 39). Other studies of indoor work report that the workers felt the job had at least some positive effect on their lives or believed that they were providing a valuable service (Brents and Hausbeck, 2005; Bryant and Palmer, 1975; Chapkis, 1997; Farley and Davis, 1978; Lever and Dolnick, 2000; Lucas, 1998; Verlarde and Warlick, 1973; West, 1993).

Workers' psychological well-being is associated with a range of structural factors, including their education, control over working conditions, resources for protection, and client base. As Lucas (1998: 320) concluded from her interviews with escorts and call girls, these women had 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." In sum, although certain aspects of the work are disliked, indoor workers are more likely than street prostitutes to describe positive aspects of their work.

*Community Impact:* Street and off-street prostitution have very different effects on the surrounding community. Indoor prostitution has little, if any, negative impact on the environment and, if discreet, there is normally little public awareness of it (Reynolds, 1986).<sup>4</sup> A recent examination of legal brothels in Queensland, Australia, found that they had no negative impact on the local community (Crime and Misconduct Commission, 2004). Street prostitution, by contrast, is associated with a host of problems, including disorderly conduct, sex in public places, discarding of condoms and syringes in public areas (public health hazards), customer harassment of women on the streets, increased noise and traffic, and loss of business to merchants (Scott, 2001; Weitzer, 1999, 2000). Such adverse impact on communities explains why contemporary antiprostitution campaigns are largely directed at street prostitution rather than the indoor trade.<sup>5</sup> In countless cities in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere, residents living near prostitution strolls have mobilized to drive prostitution off their streets.<sup>6</sup> While local community groups have been known to exaggerate the problems associated with street prostitution in order to attract attention from the authorities (Hubbard, 1998), the problems they describe are largely confirmed by independent observers (Cohen, 1980; Scott, 2001; Weitzer, 2000).

Although we need more research on indoor sex workers, the studies reviewed here provide strong evidence contradicting radical feminism's assertions about the universality of various harms in prostitution. The type of prostitution matters greatly. Although there is variation both within a particular sector (e.g., from one brothel or massage parlor to another) and among individuals doing the same work, the evidence presented above shows that, in general, *the type of prostitution is the best predictor of worker experiences*. Victimization and exploitation are highest among street prostitutes and among those who have been trafficked into prostitution, but other workers are much less vulnerable to violence, exercise more control over their work, and derive at least some psychological or physical rewards from what they do. None of this is meant to discount similarities across types of prostitution, insofar as there are certain generic experiences involved (e.g., coping with stigma, interacting with customers). But differences between types of prostitution appear

to be important enough to justify further examination of (1) the structural conditions associated with each type and (2) the ways in which workers in different echelons experience and describe their work – negatively, positively, or indifferently.

Not only does prostitution vary by occupational subtype, but workers' gender also appears to make a difference, as shown in the next section.

### **Male and transgender prostitution**

Most theory and research concentrates exclusively on female prostitutes. Much less is known about male and especially transgender workers, despite the fact that they comprise a significant segment of the sex trade in many cities. What we do know about male prostitution points to some basic similarities as well as important differences with female prostitution. Both males and females, for example, are stratified into street and indoor work, and both men and women engage in similar types of indoor work (massage, bar, escort, “call boy” services) (Lucas, 2004; Perkins and Bennett, 1985; Pittman, 1971; Salamon, 1989; West, 1993). 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 prostitution earlier (Aggleton, 1999; Prestage, 1994; Weinberg et al., 1999);
- less dependent on prostitution as a source of income or for survival (Prestage, 1994; Weinberg et al., 1999);
- more mobile across types of prostitution – moving between bars, massage parlors, and escort agencies or independent call boy operations (Aggleton 1999; Luckenbill, 1986; West 1993);
- more compelled to define their sexual orientation: while some self-identify as gay, others insist that they are heterosexual despite engaging in homosexual acts – a behavior-identity disparity that typically does not pertain to female prostitutes (Aggleton, 1999; Boyer, 1989);
- less likely to have been abused as children (Weisberg, 1985);
- less likely to have been coerced into prostitution, less likely to have pimps, and subjected to much less violence from customers (Aggleton, 1999; Valera et al., 2001; Weinberg et al., 1999; 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);

- derive more gratification from their sexual contacts with customers: males experience orgasm with clients much more often than females (Weinberg et al., 1999), and many male workers view prostitution as just another form of recreational sex, with the added benefit of material compensation (Boyer, 1989; Prestage, 1994);
- less susceptible to arrest or harassment by the police, due to the fact that they dress less conspicuously than female prostitutes and are thus less obviously involved in prostitution, spend less time on the street, and because of police homophobia, which tends to discourage contacts with male workers (Aggleton, 1999; Lucas, 2004; Weinberg et al., 1999).

These male-female differences should be considered tentative at this point; much more corroborating evidence is needed (van der Poel, 1992). Moreover, almost all of the literature is divided into separate studies of males and females, with virtually no *systematic comparative* examinations of males and females at the same level of work (an exception is Weinberg et al., 1999). And there are few comparative studies of male workers in different echelons, such as street, bar, and escort work. The research that does draw such comparisons finds significant objective and experiential differences by type of work – differences that mirror those found among female prostitutes (Luckenbill, 1986; West, 1993).

Given the dearth of research on transgender prostitutes, too little is known 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 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 non-transvestite male and female prostitutes” (Boles and Elifson, 1994: 85). Cohen’s (1980) street observations of 120 transvestite prostitutes in New York City revealed that they were dressed much more conspicuously and scantily than female prostitutes; they were more aggressive in approaching and propositioning potential customers (“in a loud, harsh, and belligerent tone” and often quickly jumping into men’s cars); and they almost always behaved in an “indignant and hostile” fashion upon rejection by a potential customer, more so than the female prostitutes Cohen 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: 55). Other customers, however, expressly seek out transgender workers precisely because they appear to be women but are really males – something the customer finds exciting or “kinky.” 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: 177). This is just one area in which transgender workers, as well as their customers, have fairly unique experiences, distinguishing them from male and female prostitutes and their customers.

One victimization study found that transgenders were less likely than females but more likely than males to be assaulted or raped while at work (Valera et al., 2001). Other research reports that transgenders do not differ from male and female workers in their level of satisfaction with the work or their willingness to leave prostitution if offered another job at the same pay (Weinberg et al., 1999). Regarding sexual satisfaction, transgenders are more likely than women, but less likely than men, to say they enjoy their sexual experiences with customers (Weinberg et al., 1999). A Brazilian study also reported that transgender workers had substantial satisfaction in their sexual relations with clients; moreover, prostitution was the only sphere of life that fostered positive self-images for these individuals. Prostitution gave them a “sense of personal worth, self-confidence, and self-esteem” (Kulick, 1998: 136). They sold sex not only for the money but also for emotional and sexual fulfillment.

Does a roughly equivalent power relationship characterize female, male, and transgender workers’ experiences with their clients – with all three types of workers subordinate to other men? The available evidence suggests a more complex picture, especially in terms of male workers’ relative power vis-à-vis their customers. But systematic, comparative research is needed to identify core similarities and key differences between female, male, and transgender workers. Further research on male and transgender prostitutes would be valuable not only in terms of the empirical information yielded but also theoretically: Such comparative studies are ideally suited to testing arguments regarding workers’ objectification, exploitation, and victimization. Such studies will help to determine the degree to which workers’ gender shapes their experience of the work and their relations with customers and third parties, and whether there is anything truly inherent in prostitution. At present, we can propose the following hypothesis: Male and transgender workers experience less exploitation and victimization, and exercise greater power and control over working conditions, than most female workers. If this proposition is corroborated, the next step would be to explain these differences, with a view toward identifying the factors that help to reduce victimization and increase worker’s power. At the theoretical level, further investigation of male and transgender prostitution, as well as female escort and call girl prostitution, will help to demonstrate the fallacy of reifying “prostitution” and underscore the need to base conclusions on findings drawn from multiple levels and incorporating

workers of different genders. Similar points can be made about customers, as indicated in the next section.

### Customers

When we think of prostitution and other sex work, we tend to think of female actors, despite the fact that prostitution involves at least two parties (at least one of whom is usually male), and despite the fact that customers far outnumber the workers who service them. A gender disparity also pervades the research literature, which overwhelmingly focuses on female workers, partly because customers are so difficult to access.

Customers vary demographically (age, race, class, marital status, etc.), but we are only beginning to understand their motivations, attitudes, and behavior patterns (Atchison et al., 1998; Campbell, 1998; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992; Holzman and Pines, 1982; Jordan, 1997; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; Monto, 2000; Simpson and Schill, 1977; Winick, 1962; Wortley et al., 2002). This literature suggests that customers patronize prostitutes for several reasons:

- they desire certain types of sexual experiences (e.g., oral sex) or more variation in their sexual experiences;
- they desire sex with a person with a certain image (e.g., sexy, raunchy, etc.) or with specific physical attributes (e.g., racial, transgender);
- they find this illicit and risky conduct thrilling;
- they wish to avoid the obligations or emotional attachment involved in a conventional relationship;
- they have difficulty finding someone for a conventional relationship.

In one study of 700 customers, for instance, 43% reported that they “want a different kind of sex than my regular partner” provides; 42% agreed with the statement, “I am shy and awkward when I am trying to meet a woman”; 47% said that they were “excited by the idea of approaching a prostitute”; 33% said they did not have the time for a conventional relationship; and 30% said they did not want the responsibilities of a conventional relationship (Monto, 2000).

Few studies have explored customers’ *experiences* of the prostitution transaction and the services provided. Some recent work, however, has begun to shed light on their experiences. Internet message boards (e.g., *alt.sex.prostitution*, *craigslist*, *punternet*, *bigdoggie.net*) offer a wealth of information that customers share with each other: what to expect in terms of prices and services; “reviews” of a specific worker’s appearance, demeanor,

and performance; where to locate certain kinds of workers (e.g., which massage parlors have Asian workers or offer certain types of services); and information on recent law enforcement activity against an escort agency or massage parlor. In addition, the sites provide unique insight into customer beliefs, justifications, expectations, and behavioral norms – things that have been addressed only superficially in interview and survey research on johns. Many of the cyber exchanges discuss appropriate and inappropriate behavior toward sex workers, with wayward individuals chided by others – what might be called an emergent code of ethics in buying sexual services. Review of these sites shows that many of these customers are looking for much more than sex; they place a premium on the provider being friendly, conversational, generous with time, kissing, cuddling, and providing what has come to be known as a “girlfriend experience” with elements of romance and intimacy that go beyond mechanical paid sex (Kern, 2000). One customer wrote to a message board, “I have to keep reminding myself that this is an appointment and not a wild time with a girlfriend” (quoted in Kern, 2000, p. 63).

Little is known about how customers feel about their encounters with prostitutes. Judging from Internet discussions and from interviews with customers, it is clear that some report very good experiences and feel that such activities have enhanced their lives. Others, however, report largely negative experiences. A survey of 169 arrested customers in Edmonton, Canada, found that 71% said they did not enjoy sex with prostitutes and two-thirds reported that patronizing prostitutes had caused problems in their lives (*Edmonton Sun*, November 8, 1998) – comparable figures to those reported in a survey of 140 customers in two American cities, 64% of whom said they did not enjoy sex with prostitutes while 60% said that going to prostitutes had caused them problems (see Table 1).<sup>7</sup> Neither survey asked follow-up questions to explore why respondents felt unsatisfied or what kinds of problems they encountered as a result of buying sex – but other studies (listed above) suggest that some customers are unhappy that the sexual encounter was rushed or perfunctory, while others feel guilty for betraying their wives or girlfriends or feel shame and stigma for engaging in this disreputable behavior.

Somewhat more information is available on customers' *attitudes* toward prostitution. As shown in Table 1, a majority of customers believe that prostitutes are victims of pimps, and a majority rejects the notions that prostitutes enjoy their work or want to be prostitutes. Only a minority sees “nothing wrong with prostitution,” would marry a prostitute, would approve of their son patronizing a prostitute (24%), or would approve of their daughter becoming a prostitute (8%).

What influences a person's decision to buy sex on the street as opposed to some other venue? Streetwalkers are often preferred because of easy access,

*Table 1.* Customers' attitudes toward prostitution

	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Currently in a sexual relationship	59	41
Usually enjoys sex with prostitutes	36	64
Tried to stop using prostitutes	50	50
Patronizing prostitutes has caused problems for me	40	60
Prostitutes are victims of pimps	61	39
Prostitutes make a lot of money	44	56
Women are prostitutes because they want to be	42	58
Prostitutes enjoy their work	27	73
Prostitutes genuinely like men	43	57
There is nothing wrong with prostitution	46	54
Prostitution should be legalized	61	39
I would marry a prostitute	24	76
It would be okay if my son went to prostitutes	24	76
It would be okay if my daughter became a prostitute	8	92

*N* = 140 men arrested for soliciting a prostitute in a Midwestern city and West Coast city in the United States.

*Source.* The first three items were reported in Sawyer et al. (2001–2002). Figures on the remaining items provided courtesy of Steven Sawyer.

low cost, anonymity, choice of women, and the excitement of cruising for sex. Indoor establishments have the advantage of being safer and more discreet (Campbell, 1998). Massage parlors and brothels typically allow customers to select a woman from a "lineup," whereas such choice is limited when one calls an escort agency or a call girl, which often operate sight unseen. Brothels can offer a relaxing, homey or club atmosphere. Men who patronize escorts or call girls are often looking for companionship and emotional support, in addition to sex – something workers in other sectors may be unwilling or unable to provide (Perkins, 1991: 250). Lever and Dolnick's (2000) comparison of call girls and street prostitutes in Los Angeles found that customers expected and received much more emotional support from the call girls, and Prince (1986: 490) found that 89% of a sample of call girls in California and 74% of Nevada brothel workers believed that "the average customer wants affection or love as well as sex" – the view of only a third of streetwalkers.

In defining prostitution as an institution of male domination, radical feminist theory assumes that the clients are male (Overall, 1992). Female customers, a small but theoretically important fraction of the market, have been almost totally neglected. One arena in which women buy sex from male prostitutes is as tourists to the Caribbean and other vacation venues, yet this

type of “sex tourism” has received almost no attention. A handful of studies have examined prostitution transactions between affluent European and American female tourists and young Caribbean men, who meet on the beaches and at clubs (Phillips, 1999; Sanchez Taylor, 2001), but both the empirical findings and larger implications of this thin literature are embryonic.

There are some basic similarities between female sex tourism and male sex tourism (e.g., economic inequality between buyer and seller) as well as some differences (e.g., female sex tourists rarely act violently against male prostitutes). It has been asserted that female customers of male prostitutes are *not* equivalent to male customers of female prostitutes for the simple reason that males experience more sexual gratification (and, hence, a greater degree of exploitation) in both types of encounters:

Women can never sexually exploit men in the same way that men exploit women because penetrative sexual heterosexual intercourse requires the woman to submit to the male – she is “used” by him. No matter how great the asymmetry between [affluent] female tourist and local male [prostitute] in terms of their age or economic, social, and racialized power, it is still *assumed* that the male derives benefits from sex above and beyond the purely pecuniary and so is not being exploited in the same way that a prostitute woman is exploited by a male client. (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 1999: 52, emphasis added)

The “assumed” universality of male exploitation and female submission in all heterosexual encounters requires empirical testing with data on female customers’ own experiences.

Such information would help to address the question of whether customers’ gender influences the character and subjective meaning of the encounter. To what degree, if at all, is gender domination or any other kind of oppression present in exchanges between female customers and male (and female) workers? Do female customers engage in less objectification of the workers, or is objectification evident irrespective of the customer’s gender? Do female customers expect more emotional labor from female workers than is true for male customers? When the customer is a woman, is there less likelihood of violence from either party? Do female prostitutes who service female customers derive more gratification from the act of sexually satisfying another woman – perhaps seeing it as a feminist practice? These questions have yet to be investigated, but such research would be invaluable in answering the theoretical question of whether prostitution has certain “fundamental” or “essential” qualities irrespective of the gender of the worker and the customer, or whether it varies significantly according to the actors involved.

## Managers

Prostitution is not necessarily organized by third-parties (call girls/boys and many female and male streetwalkers operate independently), but many other workers are controlled by a manager – i.e., someone who exercises control over the worker and extracts some or all of the profit. Research is scarce on both street-level pimps and the managers and owners of indoor establishments (brothels, massage parlors, escort agencies) (Albert, 2001; Brents and Hausbeck, 2001; Decker, 1979; Hausbeck and Brents, 2000; Heyl, 1977; Milner and Milner, 1972). Such neglect of management is unusual in the sociology of work and occupations, though researcher access is clearly more difficult in the prostitution arena.

Pimps are actively involved in promoting the prostitution of others and benefiting 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, though it fits the standard definition above. Almost never studied directly, the little we know about pimps comes mainly from prostitutes, rather than from the pimps themselves. One recent exception is a British study of 16 pimps, which found that 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 by their pimp, ranging from being slapped to assaults that required hospitalization; 10 reported having been raped by their pimp. In other studies, approximately two-thirds of street prostitutes report being assaulted for showing disrespect, making too little money, breaking the pimp's rules, and trying to leave (Davis, 2000; Silbert and Pines, 1982). Pimps rarely provide protection for their workers, because they are only intermittently on the street monitoring their workers. 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). 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; pimping arrangements vary in terms of emotional, economic, coercive, and sexual relationships (Chapkis, 2000; Decker, 1979: 238–258; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992). Although it is commonly assumed that pimps routinely administer violence to their workers, the frequency and scope of violence by pimps is unknown and it is in the pimp's interest to control the worker through the development of a "consensual"

relationship rather than through outright coercion. (The figures presented above are based on whether pimps ever assaulted or raped, not how frequently they do so; and these findings cannot be generalized to contexts outside those investigated in these studies.) Some massage parlor and brothel owners treat their workers poorly, while other managers take pains to ensure safe and healthy working conditions (by screening clients, subjecting them to a code of conduct, etc.). Nevada brothel workers, for example, expressed “very positive feelings about their madams” (Prince 1986: 497).

Another type of manager is the *panderer*, a person who “induces, entices, or otherwise steers another into the occupation of prostitution” (Decker, 1979: 259). According to Decker (1979) pandering was more prevalent historically, but fairly sporadic and isolated today. The recent trafficking debate, however, has focused new light on pandering. Coercive *sex trafficking* can be 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, though many writers lump this kind of migration into the trafficking category.

Since the article focuses on the domestic situation in Anglo-American societies, international pandering is not examined in depth. But what is clear is that radical feminist arguments have increasingly dominated the debate over sex trafficking and that radical feminist claims about trafficking have catalyzed a larger campaign to abolish all forms of prostitution.

Unfortunately, fairly little is known about the various profiteers involved in the international trafficking of persons recruited through deception or coercion (O’Neill Richard, 2000). Reliable statistics on the extent of trafficking are unavailable, due to the hidden nature of the underground economy, the lack of standardized recording procedures, and the reluctance of victims to report abuse out of fear of reprisal. Although “no one U.S. or international agency is compiling accurate statistics” (O’Neill Richard, 2000: 3), this has not stopped concerned organizations and some governments from claiming that large numbers of women are trafficked worldwide each year. Estimates vary wildly, from as many as 2 million victims to a tiny fraction of that (McDonald, 2004). The U.S. State Department claims, without providing any credible evidence, that “hundreds of thousands” of women are trafficked into prostitution every year (U.S. Department of State, 2004). Such alarming figures are conveniently vague and totally unreliable.

None of this is to suggest that trafficking is a myth. It does occur, alongside voluntary migration in search of work. The fall of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the opening of borders within

Europe created new opportunities for economically marginal women to travel to Western Europe for sex work, and east-west migration for this purpose has been documented. But it would be wrong to conclude that most of these people, or migrants elsewhere in the world, have been trafficked against their will; in fact, it appears that only a small minority fall into this category (McDonald, 2004).

Sex trafficking has been called a moral panic. Inflated figures and anecdotal horror stories are used to support the claim that there is a worldwide epidemic of coerced prostitution. As McDonald (2004: 158) points out, the campaign against trafficking has exploited “one of the most powerful symbols in the pantheon of Western imagery, the innocent, young girl dragged off against her will to distant lands to satisfy the insatiable sexual cravings of wanton men.” Contemporary claims about sex trafficking are reminiscent of the frenzy over “white slavery” early in the 20th century, except that now the prototypical victim is a poor, young woman from the Third World or Eastern Europe. A litany of wild claims have elevated the problem to a moral panic reminiscent of the white slavery panic of the past.

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 elaborate model of varying power relations in prostitution, ranging from those types where workers experience extreme domination by managers to those where workers experience little exploitation and no coercion.

## **Conclusion**

The literature is lopsided in its concentration on female street prostitutes, which results in an unbalanced and distorted picture of the world of prostitution. A major shift is needed, requiring much more research on actors who have received insufficient or no attention – namely (1) indoor prostitutes, (2) male and female customers, (3) male and transgender workers, and (4) managers. Access to many of these actors is admittedly difficult, but this should be regarded as a challenge to be overcome.

Further research on these underexamined populations should have the cumulative effect of producing a more nuanced, multifaceted, and comprehensive understanding of prostitution than what currently exists in a body of literature that is heavily dominated by studies of female street prostitutes. Studies of male and transgender workers as well as of women at different levels of the sex trade will help to address the following issues:

- actors' multiple experiences of the work;
- different kinds of power relations between workers and managers and workers and customers;
- the extent to which gender inequality or any other kind of inequality characterizes different forms of prostitution.

Additional research in these areas will also have important theoretical implications, allowing for the development of more sophisticated theories that avoid the pitfalls of one-dimensional perspectives like radical feminism.

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### Notes

1. Street prostitution means that the initial transaction occurs in a public place (sidewalk, park, truck stop). The sex act takes place in either a public or private setting (alley, car, park, hotel, etc.).
2. Massage parlors were well studied in the 1970s, but that literature needs updating since many massage parlors today employ foreign and sometimes trafficked workers. See Armstrong (1978), Bryant and Palmer (1975), Farley and Davis (1978), Simpson and Schill (1977), Verlarde (1975).
3. Of course, the line between indoor and street prostitution is not written in stone. There is a degree of mobility between different types of sex work, but most workers remain at one echelon for their entire career (Benson and Matthews, 1995; Heyl, 1979; Plumridge and Abel, 2001). Moreover, it is rare for workers to experience substantial upward or downward mobility, such as moving from street work to escort work or vice versa. If a move takes place at all, it is likely to be lateral, such as from stripping to a massage parlor to an escort agency.
4. In some societies there are types of prostitution on the street-indoor borderline. In The Netherlands, for example, "window prostitution" in red-light districts is both technically indoors but also very visible from the street, in contrast to the more discreet and publicly invisible prostitution in brothels and clubs. The window units' 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, forthcoming).
5. There has been some community mobilization against massage parlors, strip clubs, and adult video stores – either because of what they symbolize (immorality, degradation of women) or because of some alleged negative effects on the surrounding area. 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.

6. The fact that indoor prostitution is less visible may be an important determinant. It is possible that residents would be inclined to mobilize against an indoor establishment if they became aware of its existence, so the lack of public opposition should not be equated with approval of indoor prostitution.
7. Each study questioned men who had been arrested for solicitation and completed the survey at a "john school," and most had been arrested for soliciting a prostitute on the street rather than an indoor establishment. Therefore, the results, while suggestive, cannot be taken as representative of customers in general.

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