

Prostitution: Facts and Fictions

Although sometimes romanticized in popular culture, prostitution is more often portrayed as intrinsically oppressive and harmful. How accurate is this image?

BY RONALD WEITZER

When mentioned the topic of prostitution to a friend recently, he said, “How disgusting! How could anybody sell themselves?” A few weeks later an acquaintance told me she thought prostitution was a “woman’s choice, and can be empowering.” These opposing views reflect larger cultural perceptions of prostitution, as well as much academic writing on the topic.

A growing number of scholars regard prostitution, pornography, and stripping as “sex work” and study it as an occupation. Exploring all dimensions of the work, in different contexts, these studies document substantial variation in the way prostitution is organized and experienced by workers, clients, and managers. These studies undermine some deep-rooted myths about prostitution and challenge writers and activists who depict prostitution monolithically.

The most popular monolithic perspective is that prostitution is an unqualified evil. According to this *oppression model*, exploitation, abuse, and misery are intrinsic to the sex trade. In this view, most prostitutes were physically or sexually abused as children, which helps to explain their entry into prostitution; most enter the trade as adolescents, around 13–14 years of age; most are tricked or forced into the trade by pimps or sex traffickers; drug addiction is rampant; customer violence against workers is routine and pervasive; working conditions are abysmal; and legalization would only worsen the situation.

Some writers go further, characterizing the “essential” nature of prostitution. Because prostitution is defined as an institution of extreme male domination over women, these writers say that violence and exploitation are inherent and omnipresent—transcending historical time period, national context, and type of prostitution. As Sheila Jeffreys writes, “Prostitution constitutes sexual violence against women in and of itself”; and according to Melissa Farley, prostitution is a “vicious insti-

tuition” that is “intrinsically traumatizing to the person being prostituted.” Many writers who subscribe to the oppression model use dramatic language (“sexual slavery,” “paid rape,” “survivors,” and so on) and describe only the most disturbing cases, which they present as typical—rhetorical tricks designed to fuel public indignation.

The oppression model’s images of victimhood erase workers’ autonomy and agency, and preclude any possibility of organizing sex work in order to minimize harm and empower workers. This model holds that prostitution should be eradicated, not ameliorated. But much research challenges the oppression model as well as some other popular fictions.

THE STREET VS. INDOORS

Street prostitution differs sharply from *indoor prostitution*. Many of the problems associated with “prostitution” are actually concentrated in street prostitution and much less evident in the indoor sector.

Certainly many street prostitutes work under abysmal conditions and are involved in “survival sex,” selling sex out of dire necessity or to support a drug habit. Some are runaway youths with no other options. Many use addictive drugs; risk contracting and transmitting sexual diseases; are exploited and abused by pimps; are vulnerable to being assaulted, robbed, raped, or killed; and are socially isolated and disconnected from support services. This is the population best characterized by the oppression model.

Other street prostitutes are in less desperate straits. Some work independently, without pimps (a Miami study found that only 7 percent had pimps, but the percentage varies greatly by city). Regarding age of entry, the oppression model’s claim of 13–14 years is clearly not the norm. A recent British study by Marianne Hester and Nicole Westmarland found that 20 percent of their sample

2 Prostitution: Facts and Fictions

had begun to sell sex before age 16 while almost half (48 percent) had begun after age 19. Childhood abuse (neglect, violence, incest) is indeed part of the biography of some prostitutes, but studies that compare matched samples of street prostitutes and non-prostitutes show mixed results; some find a statistically significant difference in experience of family abuse, while others find no difference. HIV infection rates are highest among street prostitutes who inject drugs and less common among others.



Amsterdam's Prostitution Information Center

Different writers report very different rates of victimization. Scholar-activists and some “survivor organizations” (Breaking Free, Standing Against Global Exploitation, Council for Prostitution Alternatives) cite high levels of violence against prostitutes (70–100 percent). Samples drawn from the clients of social service agencies or from antiprostitution survivor groups yield a much higher level of victimization (their clients were desperate enough to seek help) than samples drawn from the wider population of street workers. A study by Stephanie Church and colleagues found that 27 percent of a sample of street prostitutes had been assaulted, 37 percent robbed, and 22 percent raped. Criminologists John Lowman and Laura Fraser reported similar results: 39 percent assaulted, 37 percent robbed, and 37 percent sexually assaulted. Since random sampling of this population is impossible, we must approach all victimization figures cautiously, but victimization is apparently not nearly as prevalent, even among street prostitutes, as the oppression model asserts.

Unfortunately, much popular discourse and some academic writing extrapolate from (a caricature of) street prostitution to prostitution in general. What gets less attention is the hidden world of indoor prostitution in venues such as bars, brothels, massage parlors, tanning salons, or in services provided by escort agencies or independent call girls. An estimated 20 percent of all prostitutes work on the streets in the United States. Although this number is hard to substantiate at the national level, some city-level studies support it. Regardless of the exact numbers, indoor sex work clearly accounts for a large share of the market.

Less research has been conducted on indoor prostitution, but available studies indicate that, compared to streetwalkers, indoor workers have lower rates of childhood abuse, enter prostitution at an older age, and have more education. They are less drug-dependent and more likely to use softer drugs (marijuana instead of crack or heroin). Moreover, they use drugs for different reasons. Street workers consume drugs or alcohol to help them cope with the adversities of the job, whereas indoor workers use them both for coping and as part of their socializing with customers. Sexually transmitted diseases are fairly rare among call girls, escorts, and women who work in brothels where condom use is mandatory. Indoor workers tend to earn more money, are at lower risk of arrest, and are safer at work. They are in a better position to screen out dangerous customers (through a referral system for call girls and vetting by gatekeepers in brothels and massage parlors), and they have a higher proportion of low-risk, regular clients.

Studies conducted in a variety of countries have found that indoor sex workers are less likely to experience violence from customers than those who work on the streets. For example, Church found that few call girls and sauna workers had experienced violence (only 1 percent had ever been beaten, 2 percent raped, and 10 percent robbed). This and other studies support Lilly Plumridge and Gillian Abel's conclusion that “street workers are significantly more at risk of more violence and more serious violence than indoor workers.” (Obviously, this does not apply to persons recruited by force or fraud and trafficked into brothels, who are at high risk for subsequent exploitation and abuse.)

Research finds that many indoor workers made conscious decisions to enter the trade; they do not see themselves as oppressed victims and do not feel that their work is degrading. Consequently, they express greater job satisfaction than their street-level counterparts. And they may differ little from nonprostitutes: A study by psychologist Sarah Romans and colleagues comparing indoor workers 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.

Some prostitutes feel validated and empowered by their work. In some studies, a large percentage of indoor workers report an increase in self-esteem after they began working in prostitution, state that they are very satisfied with their work, or feel that their lives improved after entering prostitution. Escorts interviewed by sociologist Tanice Foltz took pride in their work 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, while they as prostitutes are using it to their own advantage as well as for the benefit of society.” A study by the Australian government reported that half of the 82 call girls and 101 brothel workers interviewed felt their work was a “major source of satisfaction” in their lives; two-thirds of the brothel workers and seven out of ten call girls said they would “definitely choose this work” if they had it to do over again; and 86 percent in the brothels and 79 percent of call girls said that “my daily work is always varied and interesting.” Ann Lucas’s interviews with escorts and call girls revealed that 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.” Other studies indicate that such control over working conditions greatly enhances overall job satisfaction among these workers.

Indoor and street prostitutes also differ in whether they engage in “emotion work” (providing intimacy, emotional support) in addition to sexual services. Emotion work is rare among streetwalkers, whose encounters are limited to quick, mechanical sex. But call girls and escorts (and, to a lesser degree, brothel and massage parlor workers) are often expected to support and counsel clients, and their encounters may resemble dating experiences, including conversation, gifts, hugging, massage, and kissing. Janet Lever and Deanne Dolnick’s comparative study of a large number of street and indoor workers in Los Angeles found striking dif-

ferences between the two groups in the quantity and quality of their sexual and emotional interactions with clients. Emotion work is not necessarily easy; workers who feign intimacy or emotional support over an extended period of time may find the work quite draining.

Many customers are looking for more than sex from indoor workers. Reviews of several websites where customers discuss their preferences and experiences indicate that many seek women who are friendly, conversational, generous with time, and who engage in cuddling and foreplay. This has come to be known as a “girlfriend experience” (GFE), with elements of romance and intimacy in addition to sex. One client writing in the popular Punternet websites said that he had “a gentle GFE that was more lovemaking than sex,” and another stated, “There was intimacy and sweat and grinding and laughter, and those moments that are sexy and funny and warm and leave you with a grin on your face the next day. Girlfriend sex.” Escorts and call girls also contribute to these web-sites, and their comments make it clear that many do not believe the oppression model applies to them.

In sum, prostitution takes diverse forms and exists under varying conditions, a complexity that contradicts popular myths and sweeping generalizations. Plenty of evidence challenges the notion that prostitutes, across the board, are coerced into the sex trade, lead lives of misery, experience high levels of victimization, and want to be rescued. These patterns characterize one segment of the sex trade, *but they are not the defining features of prostitution*. Sex workers differ markedly in their autonomy, work experiences, job satisfaction, and self-esteem. It’s time to replace the oppression model with a polymorphous model—a perspective that recognizes multiple structural and experiential realities.

LEGALIZATION?

According to the oppression model, legalization would only institutionalize exploitation and abuse. Antiprostitution groups insist that legalization is a recipe for misery and has a “corrosive effect on society as a whole,” according to the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. It is difficult to measure something as vague as a “corrosive effect,” but it is possible to evaluate some other dimensions of legalization, including the effects on workers themselves. To address this question, we need to examine cases where prostitution is legal and regulated by the government. Brothels are legal in a number of places, including Nevada, the

4 Prostitution: Facts and Fictions

Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand. Statutory regulations vary by country, but a common objective is harm reduction. New Zealand's 2003 law, for instance, gives workers a litany of rights, provides for the licensing and taxing of brothels, and empowers local governments to determine where they can operate, limit their size, vet the owners, ban offensive signage, and impose safe-sex and other health requirements.

Research suggests that, under the right conditions, legal prostitution can be organized in a way that increases workers' health, safety, and job satisfaction. Mandatory condom use and other safe-sex practices are typical in legal brothels, and the workers face much lower risk of abuse from customers. According to a 2004 report by the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands, the "vast majority" of workers in Dutch brothels and window units report that they "often or always feel safe." Nevada's legal brothels "offer the safest environment available for women to sell consensual sex acts for money," according to a recent study by sociologists Barbara Brents and Kathryn Hausbeck. And a major evaluation of legal brothels in Queensland, Australia, by the government's Crime and Misconduct Commission 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." In each of these systems, elaborate safety measures (surveillance, panic buttons, listening devices) allow managers to respond to unruly customers quickly and effectively. These studies suggest that legal prostitution, while no panacea, is not inherently dangerous and can be structured to minimize risks and empower workers.

The question of whether legalization is preferable to criminalization—in terms of harm reduction—is one thing. The question of its feasibility in the United States is another. Today, it is legal only in Nevada, where about 30 brothels exist in rural counties; it is prohibited in Las Vegas and Reno. According to a 2002 poll, 31 percent of Nevadans are opposed to the state's legal brothels while 52 percent support them. And a 2004 ballot measure to ban brothels in one of Nevada's rural counties was defeated: 63 percent voted to retain legal prostitution in Churchill county. Rural support comes largely from the tax revenues that counties derive from the brothels.

And the rest of the country? Although many Americans consider prostitution immoral or dis-

tasteful, a large minority disagrees. In the 1996 General Social Survey, 47 percent (52 percent of men, 43 percent of women) agreed that, "There is nothing inherently wrong with prostitution, so long as the health risks can be minimized." If consenting adults agree to exchange money for sex, that is their business." Moreover, a sizeable number favor alternatives to criminalization. A 1991 Gallup poll found that 40 percent of the public thought that prostitution should be "legal and regulated by the government." Unfortunately, no American poll has specified the meaning of legalization, which could involve licensing, mandatory health exams, brothels, a designated zone of street prostitution, or other regulations.

A fair number of men have bought sex. According to the 2000 General Social Survey, 17 percent of American men have paid for sex at some time in their lives, and 3 percent have done so in the past year. Recent surveys indicate that 9 percent of British men and 16 percent of Australian men report paying for sex. The actual numbers are likely higher, given the stigma involved.

Despite the significant support for legalization and sizeable customer base, there has been almost no serious debate among American policymakers on alternatives to prohibition. As a 1999 task force in Buffalo, New York, reasoned, "Since it is unlikely that city or state officials could ever be convinced to decriminalize or legalize prostitution in Buffalo, there is nothing to be gained by debating the merits of either." This logic seems to put the cart before the horse, but on those rare occasions when policy alternatives have been floated in other cities, they have met with the same status-quo outcome. When a San Francisco task force boldly recommended decriminalization in 1996, the city's political leaders promptly rejected the idea. And in 2004 a Berkeley, California, ballot measure that called on police to refrain from enforcing prostitution laws was defeated: 64 percent voted against it. Opposition was likely due to the measure's laissez-faire approach; people are more inclined to support some kind of regulation, just as they are with regard to some other vices. Still, despite the substantial minority of Americans who support legalization in principle, outside of Nevada the idea has attracted little public attention.

INCREASING CRIMINALIZATION

Although the issue of legalization is dormant in the contemporary United States, prostitution policy has recently become a hot issue. An antiprostitution

coalition has gathered steam, composed of the religious right and abolitionist feminists. Judging by their publications and pronouncements, the coalition not only accepts the myths I have described but actively perpetuates them.

During the Bush administration, this coalition has played a major role in redefining the issue and influencing public policy. Coalition views have been incorporated in key legislation and in the official policies of several federal agencies. What began (in the 1990s) as a campaign focused on international trafficking has morphed into a frontal assault on the domestic sex industry in America.

In 2001, the State Department created a new unit, the **Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons**. This office has endorsed the same extraordinary claims that are made by the antiprostitution coalition. One example is the State Department's remarkable website, "The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking," which contains these nuggets: "Prostitution is inherently harmful. Few activities are as brutal and damaging to people as prostitution"; it "leaves women and children physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually devastated;" and **"Prostitution is not the oldest profession, but the oldest form of oppression."**

Similar claims appear in the websites and publications of some other government agencies—the Justice Department, Health and Human Services, United States Agency for International Development—and have been recapitulated by some members of Congress and by the president. In 2002, President Bush signed a Presidential Directive on trafficking that defines prostitution as "inherently harmful and dehumanizing," and in a 2003 speech at the United Nations he declared, "The victims of the sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life—an underground of brutality and lonely fear.... Those who patronize this industry debase themselves and deepen the misery of others."

The Bush administration has funneled more than \$350 million into international and domestic organizations fighting prostitution, many of which are right-wing, faith-based, or abolitionist feminist in orientation. These groups have received funds to conduct "research," operate "rescue" missions, and engage in other interventions. Organizations that provide services to sex workers but do not formally condemn prostitution have been denied funding.

Criminalization of other sectors of the sex industry also appears to be on the American agenda. Activists have been pressing the government to criminalize the commercial sex trade as a whole, contending that the oppression model applies to all

forms of sex work. For example, in a 2005 report funded by the State Department, scholar-activist Donna Hughes condemned both stripping and pornography. She claimed that women and girls are trafficked to perform at strip clubs (though she found only six cases of this in the United States during 1998–2005) and that the producers of pornography "often rely on trafficked victims," a charge made with no supporting evidence. Some government officials have echoed these claims.

In 2005, the Justice Department launched a new crackdown on adult pornography and obscenity. (Under the Clinton administration, child pornography was the main target.) The stated objective of the 2005 End Demand for Sex Trafficking bill was to "combat commercial sexual activities" in general. The rationale for this sweeping approach, according to the bill, is that "commercial sexual activities have a devastating impact on society. The sex trade has a dehumanizing effect on all involved." Commercial sex is defined remarkably broadly as "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to, or received by, any person." The overall trend is clear: the Bush administration has embraced the oppression model as a rationale for its expanding, multifaceted crackdown on the sex industry.

Although the oppression framework dominates today, there is a diametrically opposed cultural representation that romanticizes prostitution. We see this in some rock and hip-hop songs, films like *Pretty Woman* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, novels like Tracy Quan's *Diary of a Married Call Girl*, television shows like HBO's *Cathouse*, and a handful of academic writings. Such representations portray prostitution as enjoyable, empowering, and lucrative work. In my view, this celebratory model is just as one-dimensional and empirically limited as the oppression model. **The alternative, superior perspective recognizes that prostitution varies enormously across time, place, and sector—with important consequences for workers' health, safety, and job satisfaction.**

Recommended Resources

Elizabeth Bernstein. *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). Tracks trends in commercialized sex, focusing on the growing marketing of intimacy coupled with sexual services.

Wendy Chapkis. "Power and Control in the Commercial Sex Trade." In *Sex for Sale:*

6 *Prostitution: Facts and Fictions*

Prostitution, Pornography and the Sex Industry, ed. Ronald Weitzer (Routledge, 2000). Identifies variables that shape worker experiences in different sectors of the sex industry.

Martin Monto. "Female Prostitution, Customers, and Violence." *Violence Against Women* 10 (2004): 160–68. Exposes several myths regarding prostitutes' clients.

Ine Vanwesenbeeck. "Another Decade of Social Scientific Work on Prostitution." *Annual Review of Sex Research* 12 (2001): 242–89. A comprehensive literature review, providing support for the polymorphous model.

Ronald Weitzer. "New Directions in Research on Prostitution." *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 43 (2005): 211–35. Analysis of deficiencies in

the research literature and some promising studies that help to address them.

Ronald Weitzer. "The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade," *Politics & Society* 35 (2007): 447–75. Critical evaluation of the claims of antitrafficking forces and their increasing endorsement in U.S. government policy.

Ronald Weitzer teaches at George Washington University. His current research is on legal prostitution systems.