

The Naked Anthropologist

Dr Laura Agustin on Migration, Trafficking and Sex

Sisters of the Night: why prostitution research is the way it is

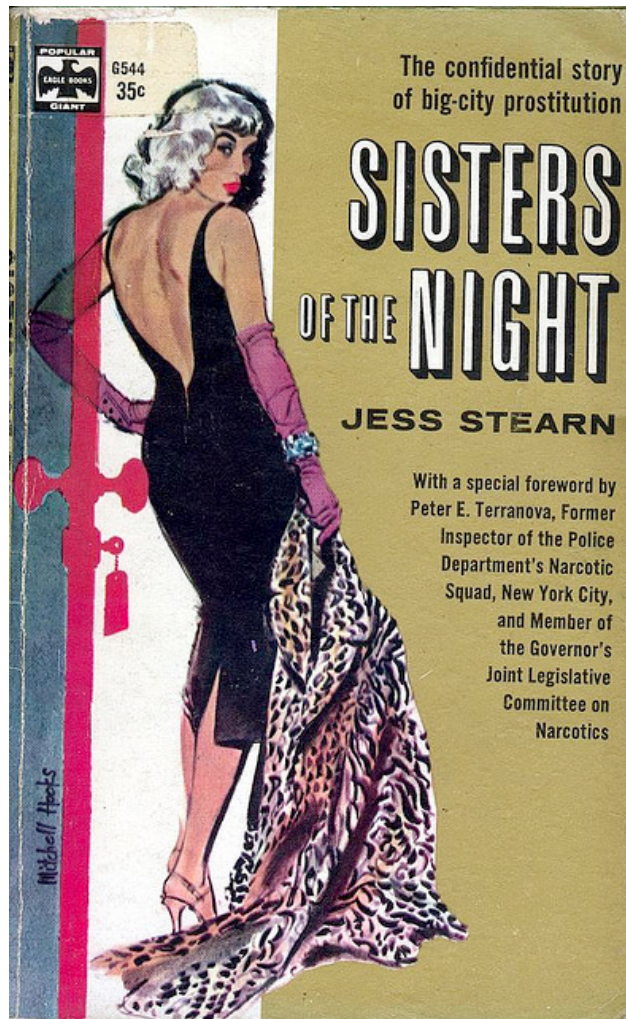
7 January 2012 in [sex work](#) by [laura agustin](#) | [15 comments](#) | [print](#)

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<http://www.lauraagustin.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/sistersofthenight.jpg>) From where we stand now, it seems obvious: people begin selling sex for a variety of reasons, none of them being they were born destined to do it. As I mentioned the other day discussing [research on clients](#) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/sex-buyers-as-a-small-nasty-group-take-their-dna>), social scientists and the Rescue Industry alike now disbelieve the notion that a prostitute *type* exists amongst women.

The book *Sisters of the Night: The confidential story of Big-City*

Prostitution, published in 1956, goes some way toward explaining a question I've had, to wit: why has there been such a large quantity of research attempting to find out why women sell sex? When I first started reading this material in 1997, as a complete outsider to academic research, I could not understand why book after book and article after article asked the same questions: why did you start selling sex? when? were you abused as a child? and so on.

Sisters of the Night is based on an investigation by Jess Stearn, a New York journalist and author of many books. He was assigned to research *not the what of prostitution but the why* - in his words.

'The more I explore,' I told Chief Magistrate John Murtagh, head of New York's famed Women's Court, 'the more I realize how little I understand these women.'

The Chief Magistrate smiled sympathetically. 'They call it the Oldest Profession,' he said drily, 'and yet nobody really knows what makes these girls tick. The prostitute has never been understood by our courts. Indeed, she is still an enigma to science itself. Because of this lack of scientific knowledge, the degree of moral responsibility is essentially a matter that must be left to the Lord himself.'

There were other official indications of the complexities of prostitution. Dorris Clarke, chief probation officer of the Magistrates Courts, who has interviewed more than ten thousand prostitutes, observed with a shrug: "'Psychiatry has been a help, but six different psychiatrists, handling the same case, may still come up with six different answers.'

From our present perspective, two things stand out: 1) the assumption that selling sex means having a terrible life for all women who do it and 2) a confidence that psychology can explain what's going on - ie, why women start to do it. Stearn continues:

. . . prostitution is one of the damning paradoxes of our time. It is a social problem which cannot be understood apart from other social problems - a postwar deterioration of morality, the alarming increase of dope addiction among teenagers, political corruption and the double standard which makes it a crime for a woman to prostitute herself, where her partner in prostitution goes scot-free.

Which seems more or less contemporary: it *can't be extracted from socioeconomic issues*. And note in 1956 he already mentions the asymmetrical nature of punishment. Jumping a few lines, though, Stearn says:

The move to control prostitution legally has been losing ground. . . Long experience has shown that legalization is no remedy. The International Venereal Disease Congress, which voted overwhelmingly thirty years ago for legalized prostitution, recently voted just as

overwhelmingly against it. It was no safeguard, the group found, against VD, for the simple reason that five minutes after she was examined a girl might be infected again. And the licensing of brothels, the American Social Hygiene Association discovered, makes it easier for girls to begin their careers and forms a convenient center of operations for racketeers and dope pushers. No, legalization was not the answer, and neither were jails, which became practically schools for prostitutes, where young offenders learned about perversion and dope and became further indoctrinated in the tricks of the trade.

Which leaves Stearn where? Somehow he manages to ignore his socioeconomic links a page later when he says:

It became obvious to me . . . that only a real understanding of these women, of their relationships from childhood, and of their outlook on society and on life in general could lead us to a solution. Other scourges of Biblical times have been extirpated by modern science – why not prostitution? But first must come understanding of the girl and her problem.

Back to psychology, then – in the 50s considered more *scientific* than it is today. Find out which experiences cause which perverse behaviours and you know who becomes a prostitute. Stearn now lists some of the apparent conundrums:

- o What makes a teenage girl say sullenly to a probation officer who is trying to help her: 'It's my body. Why can't I do with it what I want?'
- o Or why does another observe slyly: 'If it weren't for us, no woman would be safe on the streets. We're the great outlet.'
- o Why does a girl, able to shift for herself, become attached to a procurer, who mistreats her and takes her money?
- o And why does still another pin on the wall of her cell a portrait of a muscled brute in loincloth, a whip in one hand, and kneeling behind him in chains a nude girl, arms raised in adoration?
- o And why does a girl, while bitterly justifying her own prostitution, say with a gleam of hate in her eyes: 'I'd kill the man who'd make a prostitute of my sister.'
- o Or why does a pretty teenager, given separate suite by doting parents, convert her flat into a brothel and then, impenitently, view it all as an ironic joke on her parents?
- o Why did Anna Swift, one of the most notorious of madams, boast of her virginity and savagely declare she was seeking revenge?
- o And why does a former prostitute, comfortable married for years, revert to her old trade at the first crisis in her marriage?

Wouldn't you think he'd realise himself that there isn't going to be a single determining cause for such a wealth of situations and behaviours? Well, maybe he did realise it perfectly well, but asking the question was his assignment: the why of prostitution. I now turn back to the preface by Peter Terranova, a police inspector in charge of the Narcotics Squad at the

time:

Secrecy has a queer way of adding glamor and mystery to a subject. Rip away the Hypocrites' Curtain surrounding prostitution and the whole community will finally recognize that it's just another social evil which may be tackled with intelligence and perhaps cut down, if not completely eliminated.

In the 50s possibly only a vice cop would have used the term *social evil* unselfconsciously. What can be seen here clearly is the justification for the kind of research that has predominated on the subject of commercial sex for all these decades: the focus on *why women sell*. The idea is find the reason(s) and eradicate them, despite everyone's realisation that the reasons are going to turn out to be widely diverging, if not downright contradictory. Still, the idea of the *bad girl* is very much still alive here, with the *badness* (or evil) seen to be a matter of character, something that psychology can elucidate. For the psychologists amongst my readers, I am not saying that psychological theories are useless, or that [Stockholm Syndrome](http://www.lauraagustin.com/psy-theories-come-to-trafficking-first-brainwashing-now-stockholm-syndrome) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/psy-theories-come-to-trafficking-first-brainwashing-now-stockholm-syndrome>) never exists, or [brainwashing](http://www.lauraagustin.com/teen-prostitutes-dont-want-to-be-saved-so-they-must-be-brainwashed-right) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/teen-prostitutes-dont-want-to-be-saved-so-they-must-be-brainwashed-right>), or denial, to explain individual cases. As in the past, my critique goes to the wholesale explaining of hundreds of thousands of people as suffering from these syndromes, by default.

So far no interest has been shown in men who sell sex, despite equally well-known scenes like Los Angeles's cruising as described by [John Rechy](http://www.lauraagustin.com/hustling-and-cruising-with-john-rechy) (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/hustling-and-cruising-with-john-rechy>). I will advise on this and other matters as I advance in the book.

–Laura Agustín, *the Naked Anthropologist*

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[%2C%20Trafficking%20and%20Sex\)](http://www.lauraagustin.com/sisters-of-the-night-why-prostitution-research-is-the-way-it-is&description=Dr%20Laura%20Agust%C3%ADn%20on%20Migration)

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B.B. Wye on 8 January 2012 at 01:06

Well, the idea that there is a prostitute *type* is alive and well among prostitutes, if not, as you say, among social scientists or Rescue Industry

professionals. Amanda Brooks makes the "born, not made" argument [here \(http://www.texasgoldengirl.com/afterhours/genetic-prostitute/\)](http://www.texasgoldengirl.com/afterhours/genetic-prostitute/); Maggie McNeill's discussion of it is [here \(http://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/born-not-made/\)](http://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/born-not-made/).

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Maggie McNeill on [8 January 2012 at 03:27](#)

Hi, B.B! To clarify, Amanda wasn't proposing that all prostitutes are of a single type, but that a certain percentage of career prostitutes (rather than those who do it opportunistically or out of necessity) feel drawn to it from an early age, and are perhaps somehow genetically predisposed in that direction. I myself have often stated that professional prostitution is merely a range on a continuum which cannot be separated by a "bright clear line" from other female behaviors, but I certainly feel it's *possible* that some small percentage of women are indeed "natural" whores, though not in the way envisioned in the 19th century by Lombroso and his ilk.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [8 January 2012 at 04:45](#)

I am familiar with the argument, but it seems to lead to the possibility that we may be born fire fighters or born data entry operators or whatever – which is predestination. Or if not, the argument relies on the idea that sexual activity is inherently different from all other activity, so that to go into selling sex isn't analagous with going into any other profession. Or perhaps that whoring belongs to an elite tier of jobs, the way people say she's a born writer or born athlete, and I don't like elites, myself.

[Reply](#)

B.B. Wye on [8 January 2012 at 05:13](#)

Thanks, Maggie! In my brevity I didn't intend to suggest anything simplistic about your views or Amanda's; I appreciate your clarifications and the subtleties of the original posts.

[Reply](#)

B.B. Wye on [8 January 2012 at 05:26](#)

Laura, I think one can speak of genetic predispositions without committing oneself to predestination. Some people are more suited to firefighting than others. Some firefighters are more suited to firefighting than others. Some of this suitability is genetic. These don't seem like very ambitious claims.

[Reply](#)

Jobrag on [8 January 2012 at 06:56](#)

"but sex different psychiatrists, handling the same case, may still come up with six different answers."

Love the typo.

[Reply](#)

[laura agustin](#) on [8 January 2012 at 17:58](#)

and i didn't even see it until i read your message twice!

[Reply](#)

[chenoa](#) on [8 January 2012 at 09:36](#)

And maybe older women who enter prostitution do it because the world is boring for them and they simply want to experiment, then find it to be easy and natural, a secret joke on the rest of the world, who tends to examine and re-examine because they can't get their heads around it. Prostitutes don't fit the mold of the one road philosophy of life. If the girl enters the prof at an early age then their road must be damaged and the girl must be out of her mind, but maybe she is and maybe she isn't. If she is older and wiser and still enters then she must either really want lots of sex, or somehow have a messed up series of life situations. But what if neither is true? The main problem with all of this analysis is the mistaken idea of the one road: one life philosophy, and we must get it right from the start, and ensure our youth do as well, or we have failed as a society. But in truth this is not one road and we have not simply lived one life. When the truth of reincarnation and the continuity of the wheel of lives from one life to the next is INCLUDED in this research and analysis, only then can the real answers be discovered. Genetic disposition? that's crap, our only genetic disposition is the urge to procreate. Childhood upbringing? There is birth karma and individual karma. The birth karma is the abused or the adored child. Individual karma starts to kick in around age 12, when the child either rebels and does whatever he/she wants or quietly chooses a life path step by step. This is why a prostitute could either have been abused or not abused. Prostitution is an individual life path, as personal as one's sexual orientation. Whether a person has abusive experiences or healthy experiences is related to their state of consciousness, their karmic burden and the speed at which they learn to stay away from the stove, as well as the energetic quality of their psycho-spiritual self as it is incarnated in the body.

When the life path is fallen into, there is more of an unconscious attraction to the life situations that show up, but when the path is chosen, day to day the conscious attraction behaviours kick in, and believe it or not, the prostitute will use conscious attraction to attract the kind of clients she wants to see. There is a lower stage one consciousness happening with many prostitutes; a stage two, conscious of one's psychology group who admit their personal dysfunctions and see their real attributes; and then there is the stage three conscious prostitute, who acts from love, gives in love, and meditates to attract the best quality client she can.

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[Laura Agustín](#) on [9 January 2012 at 04:12](#)

All these explanations are possible. What I wanted to point out here was rather that the focus of 99% of research, or the curiosity about 'prostitution' has been: Why do women do it? When that is only one of

very many possible questions and curiosities. It's been a dramatically narrow focus, mostly leading to psychological explanations about disadvantage, abuse, trauma – and the reactions of women to those, the consequences. It's been obsessive!

[Reply](#)

Daniel vE on [9 January 2012 at 22:19](#)

I have very little of my own to contribute to this thread, but I like to read the blog of a Dutch prostitute who has taken it upon herself to explain a lot about her world and her work. She also wrote some lengthy pieces about her motivation. You can find them here: zondares.blogspot.com/2011/04/hoekan-ik-dat-nou-doen.html. In Dutch her style is much more polished than Google translation suggests.

[Reply](#)

Iamcuriousblue on [10 January 2012 at 05:37](#)

"So far no interest has been shown in men who sell sex, despite equally well-known scenes like Los Angeles's cruising as described by John Rechy."

Indeed. Nothing could illustrate that clearer than the difference in the stories, a year apart, of Mike Jones outing his client Ted Haggard and Ashley Dupre's exposure in the Elliot Spitzer case. In Dupre's case, you had Melissa Farley go over her entire life story and cherry pick out all the scary parts to paint a portrait of Dupre as a vulnerable young innocent who fell into the evil clutches of sex industry. (Never mind that she entered as an adult, sought it out without being recruited, and entered at the top end of the industry.) On the other hand, in the case of Mike Jones just a year earlier, his sex worker status wasn't even an issue, and, if anything, he was largely hailed as a hero in liberal circles for outing arch-homophobe Ted Haggard's hypocrisy. The difference between how the two were treated and the readiness of so many to push Dupre into the role of *victim* really stood out.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [10 January 2012 at 17:35](#)

For anti-prostitutionists, prostitution means men paying women for sex – an entirely gendered transaction. They know men pay men, and lament the exploitation if there is a 'boy' involved, but without the biological story of innate vulnerability of the female body and soul, the male case is of no real interest.

I meant in Sisters of the Night, specifically, which I'm coming to the end of without seeing any mention of men who sell, but I will report at the end.

[Reply](#)

Sergio Meira on [22 January 2012 at 05:14](#)

"So far no interest has been shown in men who sell sex, despite equally well-known scenes like Los Angeles's cruising as described by John

Rechy.”

Indeed. Another question that shows the need of a ‘female vulnerability model’ to explain this early research orientation is: “why do men buy sex?” This question is never asked, because, from a traditional perspective, there is no need to explain it. There is something ‘evil’ in men, so of course they would do something like paying for sex. Besides, from the perspective of prostitute-as-victim, the buyer is not a victim: he is acting out of self-interest, which needs no explanation. It is the women’s behavior that needs explanation, since no sane person would allow him/herself to be willingly victimized.

[Reply](#)

Laura Agustín on [22 January 2012 at 14:45](#)

Sergio, by now there are numerous studies asking the question of clients ‘Why do you buy sex?’ I wrote about the latest very recently, look for the Men Who Buy Sex post just before this one [<http://www.lauraagustin.com/sex-buyers-as-a-small-nasty-group-take-their-dna> (<http://www.lauraagustin.com/sex-buyers-as-a-small-nasty-group-take-their-dna>)]

Other studies have shown how everyday buying sex can be and imply buyers are ordinary, but this particular study set out to show the opposite – that they are a special deviant group that needs to be corrected.

[Reply](#)

85 יתיר on [5 February 2012 at 21:36](#)

thank you, that has been a very interesting post to read. please continue with the good work!

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