



Prostitution as a Form of Work

Ronald Weitzer*

George Washington University

Abstract

In recent years, prostitution increasingly has been recast as a form of ‘sex work’, which directs attention to both the work itself and the larger occupational milieu in which it takes place. This article examines several aspects of the work environment, including important variations between different types of workers (on the street and in indoor venues), relations between workers and customers, and what is known about the role of various managers involved in recruitment, socialization, and control over workers. The article highlights areas in which further research will provide a more complete picture of sex work in different kinds of contexts.

Introduction

Scholars have examined prostitution through three different lenses: as a form of deviant behavior, a form of gender oppression, or a type of work. The deviant behavior framework is based on the popular view that prostitution is immoral and the fact that it is criminalized in most societies. As a criminal activity, prostitution is set apart from ‘legitimate’ work and the workers are marginalized, stigmatized, and vulnerable to victimization. Each of these problems is at least somewhat reduced under conditions where prostitution is legal and carefully regulated by the government. Yet the continuing stigmatization of prostitution has made it difficult for the public to view it as work, as is true for other deviant occupations.

In its purest form, the gender oppression model holds that prostitution inherently involves male domination over women. It is claimed that exploitation, subjugation, and violence – on the part of male managers and customers – are omnipresent and ineradicable in prostitution. Some of the proponents of this perspective – most notably Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon – advance bold claims with little empirical support aside from anecdotes, while others have conducted research studies that appear to lend credence to the perspective. However, evaluations of these studies have found them to be methodologically flawed and analytically biased (see the critiques by [Vanwesenbeeck 2001](#); [Weitzer 2005](#)). While exploitation and violence are certainly *present* in prostitution, there is

sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to demonstrate that prostitution cannot be *reduced* to gender oppression and is much more complex in terms of workers' experiences as well as power relations between workers, customers, and managers.

Over the past two decades, the 'sex work' paradigm has become increasingly popular among scholars. The focus on dimensions of work shifts attention away from the moral issues highlighted by the other two perspectives, but does not deny the continuing importance of mores and legal norms. The work framework also has clear policy implications: If prostitution is regarded by the state as legitimate work, this can be a basis for workers' mobilization to win rights and improvements in their working conditions. This article examines the occupational structure of prostitution and what research tells us about workers, customers, and managers. The focus is largely on Anglo-American societies (with a few exceptions) and on female prostitution, since space limitations preclude a comprehensive analysis of all types of societies as well as male and transgender sex work (on the latter, see Aggleton 1999; Kulick 1998; Weinberg et al. 1999; West 1993).

Occupational stratification by type of prostitution

When people think of prostitution, they often think of street prostitution and, until recently, most academic studies focused on street prostitution as well. Yet in many societies, the majority of prostitutes work indoors – as independent call girls, as employees of escort agencies, or in brothels, bars, massage parlors, saunas, and tanning salons. The *type of prostitution* makes a significant difference for the workers involved, but the biggest disparity is between street and indoor workers. In general, street prostitutes face greater risks and work under more difficult conditions than prostitutes who work indoors.

The pathways into prostitution differ depending on the type. Many street prostitutes are runaways who end up in a new locale with no resources and have little recourse but to engage in some kind of criminal activity – such as theft, drug dealing, or prostitution (Hagan and McCarthy 1998). For those who do the latter, the concept of 'survival sex' is apt. Many indoor workers, by contrast, drift into prostitution gradually and tentatively. Some initially worked in other branches of the sex industry (e.g., in strip clubs, as phone sex operators, or nude online entertainment), and later decided to experiment with prostitution. Economic motives predominate, but it is less about survival than a desire for financial independence or upward mobility.

Street prostitutes are more likely than indoor workers to engage in risky behavior; for example, to use illegal drugs and addictive drugs, to engage in sex without condoms and contract sexually transmitted diseases ([Church et al. 2001](#); [Plumridge and Abel 2001](#); [Whittaker and Hart 1996](#)).

They are also more likely to be victimized by others: Violence is an occupational hazard for street workers, but less of a risk for off-street workers who have not been forced into prostitution. Studies that compare street prostitutes with indoor workers find substantial differences in whether they have ever been raped, robbed, assaulted, or otherwise victimized (Church et al. 2001; Decker 1979; Lowman and Fraser 1995; Perkins 1991; Perkins and Bennett 1985; Perkins and Lovejoy 1996; Plumridge and Abel 2001; Whittaker and Hart 1996; Woodward et al. 2004). In addition to differences in *ever* being victimized, similar disparities have been documented in the *frequency* (over time) and *severity* of victimization. In general, 'street workers are significantly more at risk of more violence and more serious violence than indoor workers' (Plumridge and Abel 2001, 83). Independent call girls and those who work for escort agencies, massage parlors, and brothels are in a better position to screen out dangerous customers, and they also have a greater proportion of regular clients, who are low risk (Lever and Dolnick 2000). Brothel and massage parlor employees have one advantage over call girls and escorts: Because they work in an environment with a gatekeeper and other workers present, they are at lower risk of customer violence than are individuals who work alone. Of course, this does not mean that indoor work is risk free (Sanders 2005), but there is no doubt that it is safer than street-level work.

Moreover, it appears that the safety of indoor work increases where prostitution is legal. Recent studies of legal brothels in Nevada, Australia, and Holland indicate that indoor work can be organized in a way that greatly increases workers' safety. Indeed, Nevada's legal brothels 'offer the safest environment available for women to sell consensual sex acts for money' (Brents and Hausbeck 2005, 289). Likewise, in Queensland, Australia, 'There is no doubt that licensed brothels provide the safest working environment for sex workers' (Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004, 75). The brothels employ a number of safety precautions that reduce the likelihood of abuse by customers, and their legal status means that they can call on the police for assistance if trouble occurs. Where prostitution is illegal, there is an obvious reluctance to involve the authorities to deal with problem situations.

Other variations can be noted. For one thing, the impact on the surrounding community is quite different. Street prostitution is associated with an array of adverse effects, especially in residential or mixed residential-commercial areas. Both local residents and merchants are disturbed by the performance of sex acts in public; traffic and noise on the streets; johns' harassment of women who live in the neighborhood; violent attacks and other altercations; and by the health risks presented by used condoms and syringes (O'Neill and Campbell 2006; Scott 2001; Weitzer 1999, 2000). Indoor prostitution may have no appreciable impact on the surrounding neighborhood ([Weitzer 1999](#)). Escorts and call girls are

characteristically invisible to the public, and residents are often unaware of the existence of a brothel in their neighborhood. Massage parlors, like strip clubs and adult video stores, are occasionally the targets of community groups, but many parlors avoid such opposition by operating in a discreet and orderly fashion. The indoor–outdoor difference is not surprising in light of the fact that other types of deviant behavior (e.g., drug sales) manifest themselves quite differently in public and in private.

Street and indoor workers differ somewhat in the services they provide. In addition to providing sexual services, escorts and call girls offer a larger menu. First and foremost, they are expected to engage not just in sex but also in ‘emotion work’. Prince (1986, 490), who studied a large number of sex workers in California and Nevada, found that most call girls and brothel workers believed that ‘the average customer wants affection or love as well as sex’ – a view held by only a third of street prostitutes. Consequently, indoor workers are much more likely to counsel and befriend clients and their encounters often include a semblance of romance and dating (e.g., flirtation, hugging, kissing, gifts) (Lever and Dolnick 2000; Lucas 1998; Sanders 2005). On top of the sexual services, indoor workers face the added challenge of ensuring that customers are comfortable, relaxed, and happy, and ensuring this by being conversational, supportive, and pleasant. This tall order makes indoor prostitution ‘extraordinarily stressful work ... it calls for emotional labor of a type and on a scale which is probably unparalleled in any other job’ (O’Connell Davidson 1995, 4).

Whereas streetwalkers tend to have fleeting contacts and quick sex with customers, indoor interactions are typically longer, multidimensional, and more reciprocal. In Los Angeles, for example, call girls were much more likely than street workers to say that customers had caressed, hugged, or kissed them; to report receiving nonsexual massages from customers; and to reveal that they received oral sex from a customer (Lever and Dolnick 2000). The same receipt of sexual ‘services’ from customers has been reported elsewhere. Fully two-thirds of legal brothel workers and four-fifths of call girls in Queensland, Australia, report receiving oral sex from a customer, compared to only a third of street workers ([Woodward et al. 2004](#)). Indeed, in at least some indoor venues, the workers *expect* such reciprocal sexual behavior from customers as a routine part of the encounter.

Like other jobs, prostitution does not have a uniform effect on workers’ self-images. Research indicates, as one would expect, that street prostitutes are much more likely than indoor workers to exhibit psychological disorders ([El Bassel 1997](#); [Exner et al. 1977](#)) and that indoor workers appear to be more well adjusted, satisfied with their work, and differ little in self-esteem and mental health from non-prostitutes (Decker 1979; Perkins and Lovejoy 1996; Prince 1986; Romans et al. 2001). An Australian study, for instance, 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).

Workers' psychological well-being is associated with a range of structural factors, including their education, resources, control over working conditions, and client base (Chapkis 2000). Street work features a high degree of stress and danger that can only increase negative views of the work as well as psychological problems (Vanwesenbeeck 2001). By contrast, escorts and call girls tend to have the 'financial, social, and emotional wherewithal to structure their work largely in ways that suited them and provided ... the ability to maintain healthy self-images' (Lucas 1998, 320).

None of this is meant to suggest that indoor prostitution is problem free or without risk to workers, but only to show that it differs significantly, in the aggregate, from street prostitution. Of course, there are some similarities as well: One overarching factor is that workers throughout the sex industry experience stigma and condemnation from the wider society. This is amply demonstrated by opinion poll data on public attitudes about various types of sex work (see Weitzer 2000, 1–2, 163–4). Workers respond by engaging in various strategies in order to reduce the effects of stigmatization. These strategies include compartmentalizing their deviant work persona from their 'real identity'; concealing their work from family and friends; distancing themselves from clients; using neutral or professional terms to describe their jobs ('working woman' or 'sex worker'); and viewing their work as a valuable service (keeping marriages intact, giving men pleasure or sex therapy) (Foltz 1979; Kurtz et al. 2004; Lever and Dolnick 2000; Sanders 2005). These techniques are designed to normalize the sale of sex.

Two caveats are in order. First, there is some mobility between different types of prostitution. If a move takes place, it is usually roughly lateral, such as between stripping and a massage parlor. Escort agency employees sometimes decide to leave and become independent call girls, in order to maximize both their freedom and income. It is rare for workers to experience substantial upward or downward mobility, such as moving from street work to escort work or vice versa. Occasionally, an upscale worker whose life situation changes (e.g., because of aging, drug addiction) is no longer able to work in that stratum and gravitates to the street. Most sex workers, however, remain at one echelon for the duration of their career (Benson and Matthews 1995; Heyl 1979; Plumridge and Abel 2001).

Second, there is internal variation within each tier. As independent workers, call girls, for example, exercise more control over working conditions and generally express greater job satisfaction than do workers in brothels and massage parlors. The latter generally feel safer at work due to the presence of gatekeepers and other workers. Street prostitution is

stratified, and often segregated, by race (Porter and Bonilla 2000), by the relative socioeconomic status of the workers (Bernstein 1999), and by their drug dependency, which affects their willingness to engage in unsafe sexual practices and accept low prices.

Although we need more research on indoor sex workers, the studies reviewed here indicate that the harms typically associated with prostitution vary between different types of work. Naturally, there is variation both within a particular sector (e.g., from one massage parlor to another) and among individuals doing the same work; yet in general, the type of prostitution is the key variable.

Customers

According to the 2000 General Social Survey, 17 percent of American men report that they have paid for sex at some time in their lives. This figure is almost identical to figures reported for Australia (16 percent) and the average for European nations (15 percent) (Rissel 2003). The real numbers are likely higher given the inclination to underreport disreputable or illegal activity.

Even though customers far outnumber the providers, research on prostitutes' clients is fairly limited, partly because they are so difficult to access. We do know that clients are a diverse group, in terms of age, race, class, and marital status (Atchison et al. 1998; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Monto 2000; Wortley et al. 2002). Their motives for buying sex vary tremendously, ranging from satisfying a 'need' for sex, fulfilling a fantasy, desire for a certain type of sex, having an encounter with a certain type of woman, or a desire to avoid the obligations of a conventional relationship (Holzman and Pines 1982; Jordan 1997; Monto 2000, 2004). In addition, some customers are motivated by a desire to degrade, control, or physically mistreat women, but Monto's (2000, 2004) research on a large number of customers suggests that these abusive men are a small minority.

Few studies have explored how clients feel about their contacts with sex workers and the meanings such contacts have for them. However, a new data source offers a unique window into the world of customers: Internet message boards and chat rooms (e.g., *craigslist*, *punternet*, *bigdoggie.net*) contain reports from clients on what they expect in terms of services; 'reviews' of a specific worker's appearance and conduct; and norms regarding proper client behavior. Many of these customers claim to be looking for much more than sex; they place a premium on the provider being friendly, conversational, affectionate, generous with time, and providing what has come to be known as a 'GFE' or 'girlfriend experience', with a semblance of romance and intimacy (Sharp and Earle 2003). The importance of a GFE is well illustrated by the following postings on *punternet* ('punter' is the British term for 'john'):

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. (Tempt Me, *Punternet*, February 7, 2006)

From the moment I stepped through the door this was a full GFE. Mint was flirtatious in a girly way (but not cloying at all). Lots of hugs and kisses as we undressed, a nice bubble bath, then back to bed.... The longest gentlest sex I've had in ages. Lots of kissing and fondling all the way through, she said sweet words which made things all the more satisfying. Even after the climax she was helpful and attentive as I showered again, and she helped me dress. Mint is an absolute delight. For a gentle GFE that is more love making than sex, she is unbeatable. (Easy S, *Punternet*, February 7, 2006)

Such testimonials indicate that some clients have had very good experiences with sex workers and feel that such activities have enhanced their lives. Others, however, report dissatisfaction (e.g., the sexual encounter was rushed or impersonal) or feel shame for engaging in this behavior or guilt for betraying their wives or girlfriends.

Almost no research has been conducted on female customers of male prostitutes, a small but intriguing sector of the market. One context in which women buy sex 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 European and American female tourists and young Caribbean men they meet at bars and the beaches (Phillips 1999; Sanchez Taylor 2001). Based on these few studies, it appears that female and male sex tourism are similar in patterns of economic inequality between buyers (who tend to be affluent) and sellers (who are largely poor). And there is evidence that female sex tourists hold certain racial stereotypes about men in the Caribbean ([Sanchez Taylor 2001](#)), just as male sex tourists stereotype Asian sex workers. These female and male clients differ in that the women rarely act violently toward male prostitutes. While there are comparable patterns of economic power, the two types differ in the exercise of physical power over workers.

Managers

Some types of prostitution are unmanaged, with no intermediary between the buyer and seller. Other types are controlled by third parties who receive some or all of the earnings. Research is scarce on both street-level pimps and the managers and owners of brothels, massage parlors, and escort agencies. Such neglect of management is unusual in the sociology of work and occupations, yet it is understandable in light of barriers researchers face in gaining access to clandestine occupations whose managers are involved in disreputable if not criminal behavior.

Only a handful of studies examine the practices of those who run brothels, massage parlors, and escort agencies. Almost all of the research

on massage parlors was published in the 1970s, and these studies focus on the workers rather than management. A unique study of a gay escort agency revealed the techniques used by the management to camouflage the fact that workers sold sex and to maintain the image of a respectable operation (Salamon 1989). Heyl's (1977) classic study of one brothel focused on the ways in which the madam trained and socialized new workers, including both sexual techniques and other rules of the game. Nevada's legal brothels have only recently been studied. This research identifies a host of house regulations and penalties for violating them but also indicates that managers have an interest in maintaining a generally positive environment in which to work and live (the workers live on the premises) (Albert 2001; Brents and Hausbeck 2005; Hausbeck and Brents 2000).

Based on this limited body of research, it is clear that managers of indoor establishments vary tremendously in their *modus operandi*. Substantial differences in worker–manager relationships characterize all kinds of occupations, both inside and outside the sex industry. One variable that appears to influence the quality of managers' relationships with their workers in the sex industry is whether the work is legal. Where legal, workers enjoy greater power in their formal and informal negotiations with management, compared to where prostitution is illegal. Legal prostitutes have much greater latitude, for instance, in forming labor unions to advocate for their interests (Gall 2007), whereas criminalization presents almost insurmountable obstacles in mobilizing to advance sex workers' interests. There are several prostitutes' rights organizations around the world, but they have largely failed to achieve their goals where prostitution is illegal (Mathieu 2003; Weitzer 1991; West 2000).

Street-level pimps are the most infamous kind of manager. Like other managers in the sex industry, pimps actively promote the prostitution of others and benefit materially from that association. Almost never studied directly, the little we know about pimps comes mainly from prostitutes, rather than from the pimps themselves. What we do know is that some pimps fit the stereotyped image fairly closely – exercising total control over their workers and physically abusing them (May et al. 2000; Silbert and Pines 1982). The protection that pimps provide for their workers is something of a myth, because they are only sporadically on the street and in a position to intervene when a worker is in trouble. In one study, only one-fifth of the prostitutes interviewed felt that their own pimp provided them with protection, and only a minority of the pimps interviewed believed that pimps protect their workers (James 1973). However, not all pimps fit the stereotype of the abusive parasite. Their relationships with workers vary in the nature and degree of coercive control, emotional attachment, and economic exploitation (Decker 1979, 238–58; O'Connell Davidson 1998). Some appear

closer to boyfriends than the iconic pimp, even if they live off their partners' sex work and 'manage' it to a limited extent.

The *panderer* is a third party with a limited role, a person who 'induces, entices, or otherwise steers another into the occupation of prostitution' (Decker 1979, 259), but whose involvement ends once the person enters sex work. The recent emergence of the sex trafficking issue has focused new light on pandering. An evolving body of law defines 'severe sex trafficking' as any trafficking of minors or, regarding adults, the use of deception or force to procure, transport, and sell persons to work in the sex industry (the relevant US statute is the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act* of 2000). This definition does not apply to persons who travel willingly in search of such employment.

Little is known about the various profiteers involved in sex trafficking. Reliable data are unavailable, due to the hidden nature of this underground economy and the reluctance of workers to identify traffickers either because they do not consider themselves victims or, if they do, because they fear retaliation (General Accountability Office 2006; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005). An unknown number of traffickers use deception or outright coercion to entice a person into relocation to another locale, while others alter the terms of the contract after transit or renege on specific promises. Traffickers do not necessarily fit the evil-doer stereotype, however; some operate with the worker's informed consent. Relatives, friends, or associates recruit workers and facilitate migration with the full cooperation of these workers, and have a qualitatively different relationship with workers than do predators who use force or fraud to lure victims into the trade. Some studies indicate that this kind of facilitated migration is fairly common, at least in certain parts of the world. A study of Vietnamese women working in Cambodian brothels found that many of them had been recruited and transported by their mothers and aunts, not by professional traffickers (Steinfatt 2003, 24). And an investigation of women who had migrated from Eastern Europe to Holland reported that few had been coercively trafficked, and that almost all had been recruited and assisted by friends, acquaintances, and family members (Vocks and Nijboer 2000). The facilitators made travel arrangements, obtained necessary documents, and provided money to the women. In short, the evidence indicates that migration for sex work is a complex and varied process. There are multiple migration trajectories and worker experiences, ranging from highly coercive and exploitative to those reflecting workers' initiative, consent, and active participation (Kempadoo 2005; Weitzer 2007).

In summary, the management of prostitution is one of the most invisible parts of the trade. We know almost nothing about the backgrounds of managers working in different niches, how they became

involved in the sex industry, their occupational identity, or their methods for neutralizing the stigma associated with their work. Likewise, little is known about their everyday practices, their recruitment, training, and control of workers, and their strategies for avoiding or dealing with authorities like the police.

Conclusion

A great deal is known about street prostitution, and a growing number of researchers are exploring indoor prostitution as well. The existing research indicates that there are some major differences between street and indoor sex work, constituting what researchers have called a 'segmented' occupation ([Plumridge and Abel 2001](#)). Although there are always exceptions to generalizations, street and indoor workers tend to differ in their risk of victimization, job satisfaction, control over working conditions, and in other ways. Additional studies are expected to confirm these differences and to identify other ways in which the two types differ. It is also expected that future research will help to clarify the ways in which indoor prostitutes differ according to the arena in which they work. A comparison of call girls and escorts illustrates this point. Even though they both tend to charge high prices and occupy the upper echelon of the trade, independent call girls differ from people who work for escort agencies. The former controls her working conditions and retains all of her earnings. As agency employees, escorts have less power regarding client assignments and other job requirements and typically pay the agency a substantial share of their earnings. And both escorts and call girls differ from those who work collectively in a brothel or massage parlor. The group dynamics and (often) residential nature of such establishments contribute to a fundamentally different experience from sex work performed alone. Our knowledge and understanding of prostitution will be enhanced tremendously by comparative research on two or more types of indoor sex workers, as a handful of studies have already done ([Perkins and Lovejoy 1996](#)). There is also a great need for further investigation of the other two corners of the work triangle – customers and managers – and particularly how patterns in their relationships with workers may vary depending on the type of prostitution.

Short Biography

Ronald Weitzer is Professor of Sociology at George Washington University in Washington, DC. His publications include an edited book, *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry* (Routledge, 2000), and articles on changing government policies regarding prostitution and sex trafficking. He has also written extensively on the issue

of relations between the police and racial minorities, including his recent co-authored book, *Race and Policing in America: Conflict and Reform* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Note

* Correspondence address: Department of Sociology, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA. Email: weitzer@gwu.edu.

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