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Organizations working on behalf of prostitutes: An analysis of goals, practices, and strategies

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Abstract

Views on female prostitution are diverse and often hotly contested, both inside and outside academic circles. Some contend that prostitutes are universally exploited, while others argue that they are workers and should be recognized as such. Yet there is little analysis of the role that service-providing organizations play in this larger debate. This article examines programs that offer direct services to prostitutes—which we call prostitute-serving organizations (PSOs)—in order to document both the kinds of services they provide and to assess whether they engage in efforts to change larger social or legal arrangements that impact their constituents. The article draws on data from multiple sources, including the website content of 37 PSOs, 21 in-depth interviews with PSO staff members, and published secondary sources. The organizations are categorized in terms of their core perspective on sex work, which we link to one of the three main theoretical paradigms in the sex-work literature. We distinguish the different types of organizations, describe how their ideological stance impacts their goals, identify their main actions as service and/or advocacy, and suggest factors that account for these practices.

Keywords

Goals, ideology, NGOs, sex work, strategies

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In both media accounts and the public imagination, the dominant view of prostitution is overwhelmingly negative, with any positive aspects downplayed or rejected outright. This view is reflected in scholarly writings that focus exclusively on sex workers' exploitation and victimization, and in laws that criminalize those involved in this trade. An alternative perspective depicts prostitution as work, like any service occupation or profession, and as potentially empowering for those involved. Proponents of this paradigm argue that the harms associated with prostitution are not inherent in it but instead are largely due to criminalization, stigmatization, and marginalization of those who sell sex. They advocate decriminalization and granting sex workers' labor rights, which is expected to enhance their health and safety.

Few studies examine the role that service-oriented organizations play in this larger debate. This article examines non-governmental programs that provide direct services to local prostitute populations, which we call prostitute-serving organizations (PSOs). PSOs are distinct from activist organizations that do not have a service orientation. We assess the kind of work carried out by PSOs, their organizational philosophies, and whether they engage in larger efforts to affect changes regarding their constituents. These non-profit organizations seek to address what the state has largely failed to provide – resources and services for prostitutes. Local governments in North America provide relatively little support either for prostitutes in need or for PSOs that assist this population.

We find that PSOs can be categorized into four distinct types, aligned according to their central ideological perspective on sex work. We distinguish the different types of organizations, describe how their ideological stance impacts their goals, identify their main strategies and activities, and suggest factors that account for these practices. To address these issues, this article draws on data from multiple sources, including the website content of 37 PSOs, 21 in-depth interviews with PSO staff members, and secondary sources that explore particular programs.

Theorizing sex work

Different types of discourse appear in debates on prostitution. The most common are those of public nuisance, traditional morality, patriarchal oppression, and sex work (Kantola and Squires, 2004; Outshoorn, 2001). Public nuisance is most salient with regard to street prostitution and may be muted in places where street prostitution is not an issue. Traditional moral objections to prostitution – as sinful or evil – have been made for centuries and continue to be heard whenever the topic is discussed. But a parallel discourse, which also condemns prostitution, is the Radical Feminist definition of prostitution as a system of patriarchal oppression of women. Diametrically opposed to this view is the Sex Work perspective.

The latter two discourses overlap with two of the three main theoretical perspectives on sex work in the academic literature.¹ Radical Feminism is aligned with the *oppression paradigm*, which depicts all types of sex work as exploitative and harmful because of patriarchal conditions – irrespective of the sector

(street, brothel, escort, strip club, etc.) or the socio-legal context in which commercial sex transpires. According to this paradigm, women are exploited and harmed by their participation (Farley and Kelly, 2000; Jeffreys, 1997) and prostitution gives men the idea that they have a “patriarchal right of access to women’s bodies,” thus reinforcing women’s subordination to men (Pateman, 1988: 199). The writings of academics who embrace this paradigm – such as Catherine MacKinnon and Kathleen Barry – generated advocacy organizations in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Sex Work perspective, by contrast, calls attention to the occupational dimensions of prostitution (i.e. what the work consists of, job satisfaction, relations between sellers and buyers and third parties, etc.) as well as an individual’s right to engage in sexual commerce. This perspective is loosely affiliated with the *empowerment paradigm*, which holds that sex work has the potential to enhance the lives of those who engage in it (Chapkis, 1997; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987). The Sex Work orientation of some early organizations, such as COYOTE in the 1970s, helped generate the empowerment paradigm in academic writings (see Chapkis, 1997; Jenness, 1993).

A third theoretical perspective maintains that sex work is much more complex and variegated than it is portrayed in the other two approaches. This *polymorphous paradigm* asserts that specific working conditions and other structural arrangements dictate to a large degree the experiences of the actors involved (Weitzer, 2010). The social organization of sex work varies considerably across different settings and according to whether the activity is legal or criminalized. Scholars document such variation along multiple axes: earnings, vulnerability to risks, control over working conditions, likelihood of arrest, job satisfaction, and so forth (Shaver, 2005; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Weitzer, 2012).

While the three theoretical perspectives figure prominently in academic writings, we find that they also correspond to the ideological orientations of organizations involved in advocacy and services on behalf of prostitutes. In our analysis, we categorize PSO orientations as one of the following and link it to the underlying theoretical paradigm: Radical Feminist (oppression), Sex Work (empowerment), Youth Oriented (polymorphous), and Neutral (polymorphous).

Prostitute-serving organizations

We distinguish *direct service* organizations that provide tangible assistance to sex workers (PSOs) from *activist* organizations that operate exclusively as interest groups or social movement organizations (SMOs) and lobby for changes in law, policy, and public opinion. Examples of such activist groups include the Desiree Alliance, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), Equality Now, European Women’s Lobby, Prostitution Research and Education, the Sex Workers’ Outreach Project, COYOTE, and WHISPER. Most of these organizations are staunch proponents of either the oppression or empowerment paradigm.² Compared to these activist organizations, there is very little research on

organizations that provide direct services to sex workers. There is a small academic literature on the process of exiting from prostitution that may be facilitated by prostitute-serving organizations (Oselin, 2009, 2010; Sanders, 2007), but little examination of the actual organizations or their relationship to broader legal and cultural arrangements.³ Our analysis classifies these organizations by type, examines their goals, and assesses their actions.

Identifying injustices

Researchers examine how social movements engage in grievance construction by using framing to define “as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate but perhaps tolerable” (Snow and Benford, 1992: 173). Although this study focuses on PSOs rather than social movement organizations per se, we find that framing and grievance construction are useful conceptual tools for this analysis. Framing emerges from the collective beliefs and meanings that in turn influence how organizations generate grievances, targets, and actions. In particular, *injustice frames* revolve around “how the indignities of daily life are sometimes transformed into a shared grievance with a focused target of collective action” (Gamson, 1992: 31).

We are interested in whether and, if so, how PSOs cultivate injustice frames as they construct particular problems that directly impact prostitutes, assign blame to specific targets, and offer remedies (Felstiner et al., 1980–1981). Scholars argue that grievance formation is the most crucial step in this process (Felstiner et al., 1980–1981). The next step is to identify a concrete target responsible for these practices. Finally, when it comes to developing a remedy, frames remain salient insofar as they prompt specific kinds of action to address grievances (Ferree, 2003; Snow and Benford, 1988).

Organizations can also be categorized according to their primary activities. To that end, Minkoff (1999) generated a typology of organizations based upon their foci: advocacy, protest, service, and cultural. All of the PSOs in this study provide services to prostitutes, yet some engage in advocacy as well.

Methods

Our study is restricted to organizations that specifically provide some kind of direct services to prostitutes. The analysis draws on data derived from multiple sources: the websites of 37 prostitute-serving organizations, in-depth interviews with PSO staff members at 21 organizations, and secondary data sources. We compiled a list of all known prostitute-serving programs in the USA and Canada based on internet searches and snowball sampling techniques. The website SWAAY (<http://www.swaay.org/groups.html>) lists a large number of organizations in the sex-work arena throughout the world. After identifying 37 of these organizations – 29 in the USA and eight in Canada – we then collected data from their websites.⁴ These PSOs are located in 17 US states and four Canadian provinces, reflecting all

regions of each country. Regardless of the socio-political differences across sites, all of these programs offer services to prostitutes in an environment where prostitution is criminalized and stigmatized by the public.⁵

Although the amount of information and content on each website varies, they typically provide details about their organization, including mission statements, program goals, brief histories, positions regarding prostitution (and its causes), relationships with other service or criminal justice agencies, and services offered to clients. We coded these variables and paid special attention to mission statements, as they tend to succinctly reflect program ideology, illustrate their approach to sex work, and ultimately shape organizational goals.

Information gleaned from websites was coupled with data from semi-structured interviews with directors or staff members of 21 PSOs. The first author conducted these interviews between 2003 and 2006. All programs were contacted and 21 of them agreed to an interview. Each interviewee provided verbal consent to a tape-recorded interview that lasted approximately one hour. Interview questions focused on the organization's characteristics, goals, decision-making, and services, as well as their views on sex work, relationships with other agencies, and client demographics.

There are probably more than 37 prostitute-serving organizations in the USA and Canada. However, we were unable to obtain information on programs other than those included here and we believe that our sample incorporates a broad range of organizations sufficient to illustrate key similarities and differences across the four organizational types. Data analysis included a comparison of the content of organization websites with statements made by program representatives during interviews, as well as the "constant comparison" procedure advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In general, the information distilled from websites was quite consistent with the interview data, although the latter was more elaborate than what the websites offered. In certain cases, when a PSO mission statement was ambiguous, the interview helped clarify the organization's stance.

Organizational ideologies

After analyzing the data we categorized each PSO by its central perspective on sex work, generating four types: Radical Feminist, Sex Work, Youth Oriented, and Neutral. Each type roughly corresponds with a certain theoretical paradigm in the academic literature (oppression, empowerment, or polymorphous). Table 1 lists PSOs according to their characteristics. Approximately 46 percent adopt a Radical Feminist perspective, 30 percent Sex Work, 14 percent Youth Oriented, and 11 percent were Neutral.

PSOs that we consider *Radical Feminist* promote an essentialist view of prostitution and oppose it unequivocally: Any individual who works in the trade is, by definition, exploited and victimized. They are "survivors" and in "recovery." This terminology is also standard among academics who adopt the oppression paradigm. As a result of these tenets, these PSOs strive to help individuals leave the

Table 1. PSO characteristics.

Type	Paradigm	(N = 37)	Name
Radical Feminist	Oppression	46% (N = 17)	Breaking Free, CPA, Dignity House, Emmaus Ministries, Genesis House*, Hookers for Jesus, LGBF, MMP, Magdalene, PRIDE, Safe House, SAGE, SOS*, SSS, VV, Wellsprings, WRC
Sex Work	Empowerment	30% (N = 11)	Cal-Pep, HIPS, Maggie's, PACE, Peers, Power, SJI, Stella, Stepping Stone, STORM, YWEP
Youth Oriented	Polymorphous	14% (N = 5)	AFG, A Way Back, Children of the Night, GEMS, Paul & Lisa
Neutral	Polymorphous	11% (N = 4)	FROST'D, PORA, WISH, YANA

*No longer in existence

trade and also seek the eradication of prostitution. *Sex Work* PSOs espouse a very different standpoint. Their philosophy includes the belief that sex workers have agency (they can choose to engage in prostitution), a harm-reduction approach to sex work (to render the working conditions safer), advocacy for sex workers' labor and human rights, and for the redefinition of prostitution as legitimate work. *Youth Oriented* programs focus exclusively on underage prostitutes and take the position that youths lack the capacity to consent and are thus by definition victims. They want to facilitate exiting for youths and protect them from coercive parties. Finally, *Neutral* programs see prostitution as a variegated phenomenon and thus neither condemn nor embrace it. These organizations are focused on harm reduction and their philosophy can be described as strictly non-judgmental. Neutral organizations facilitate exit from the trade if the person so desires, but overall they prioritize prostitutes' physical and psychological well-being.

PSO goals, actions, and strategies

The following analysis will show that all four types of PSOs formulate some kind of "grievance" on behalf of prostitutes. In doing so, they demarcate a practice they believe unjustly affects this population and indict those individuals or structures responsible for it, which in turn shapes PSO goals. We find there is great variation in these grievances and goals, yet they generally coalesce according to PSO type. Program ideology – their beliefs about prostitution and those involved in it – informs the injustice construction process that in turn affects broader programmatic goals. While these organizational objectives emerge from the "naming and

Table 2. PSO goals, actions and strategies.

PSO	Goals	Primary action(s)	Advocacy strategies
Radical Feminist	Maintain criminalization and abolish social condemnation	Service	A few sponsor "john schools"
Sex Work	End criminalization and social condemnation	Service and advocacy	Engage in community education campaigns, legal guidance, ties to advocacy organizations, promote activist events
Youth Oriented	Abolish punitive laws regarding youth	Service and advocacy	Establish court diversionary programs, community education campaigns, lobby, ties to advocacy organizations, promote activist events
Neutral	Promote harm reduction	Service	None

blaming" aspects of grievance formation (Felstiner et al., 1980–1981; Levitsky, 2008), we are particularly interested in the relationship between goals and subsequent PSO actions and strategies. Table 2 outlines PSO goals, primary actions, and strategies according to type.

Radical Feminist PSOs

Radical Feminist PSOs reject conventional stereotypes and stigmatization of prostitutes and instead portray them as exploited and victimized. They recognize that the public tends to view prostitutes not only as immoral but also as responsible for ecological problems, such as public drug use, noise, altercations, and visible sex acts. PSOs challenge these negative portrayals of prostitutes and attach blame elsewhere. On their websites and in interviews, these organizations frame female prostitutes as "victims," "survivors," and "exploited" by others. Some of these programs draw parallels between prostitution and sex trafficking, in order to underscore the elements of coercion and exploitation.

Save Our Sisters (SOS), for example, strives to alter the public's perceptions by highlighting the harms inflicted on prostitutes. In an interview, a SOS representative recasts prostitution in the following manner:

Labeling individuals involved in commercial sexual exploitation as "prostitutes" can be damaging. Instead, consider the use of our terminology: "victims" and/or "survivors" of commercial sexual exploitation. Bottom line is that individuals usually feel that they have no other options or choices. They are coerced, seduced, manipulated, or lured. Commercial sexual exploitation is a violation of individuals' rights and it includes practices that are demeaning, degrading, and life-threatening. It includes torture, rape, brainwashing, beatings, and other control tactics used by pimps and customers.

SOS's organizational goals, embraced by most Radical Feminist PSOs, are:

- To provide a continuum of services empowering victims to develop alternatives to the sex trade.
- To change public attitudes and stereotypes about commercial sexual exploitation by highlighting the harmful features of the sex trade.

The second point shows that SOS is not solely concerned with service provision but also seeks to alter prevailing views of prostitution. Breaking Free's mission statement similarly highlights victimization:

We understand prostitution/sex-trafficking as a vicious cycle of violence, abuse, incarceration, and addiction. Repeated experiences of violence undermine women and girls' capacities to avoid further victimization. Sexual exploitation distorts the lives of women and girls, destroys families, and communities.

In an interview, the director of Genesis House⁶ provided insight into the program goals for clients:

There are many different program goals with the idea to treat this person as a woman and not as a prostitute. I don't like using the word "prostitute." I use "woman trapped in prostitution," but we always look at them as women first and that leads to another larger goal: to raise public awareness about prostitution. So we try to raise it and frame it as a problem that affects everyone. We try to heal them from physical and sexual abuse in their past and help them recover.

Some programs explicitly trace the existence of prostitution to the larger culture. For example, Magdalene's mission statement asserts that prostitutes are victims of an insidious culture that perpetuates the commodification of sex:

Magdalene was founded not only to help [foster] a subculture of women, but also to help change the culture itself. We stand in solidarity with women who are recovering from abuse, addiction, and life on the streets, and who have paid dearly for a culture that still buys and sells women.

By challenging cultural stereotypes, Radical Feminist organizations hope to cultivate more sympathetic public views of "prostituted" individuals. They do this by insisting that the latter are not to blame for their involvement and by accenting the ways in which others commodify, exploit, and victimize them.

These PSOs have a secondary goal: to maintain laws that outlaw prostitution. They staunchly oppose legalization because they feel it would amplify victimization and symbolically condone sex work. By adopting this stance, Radical Feminist PSOs help sustain current prohibitionist legal practices in America and Canada. For example, SOS condemns attempts to liberalize the law:

Systems which legalize or decriminalize prostitution continue to oppress and exploit those involved. Legalization or decriminalization of prostitution does not significantly decrease the risks or trauma often associated with prostitution. These systems continue to perpetuate the myths and stereotypes used to lure or recruit people into prostitution. The fact that victims are commodities being bought and sold for profit has not changed with any system of legalization or decriminalization.

The Council for Prostitution Alternatives (CPA) also denounces reforms that alter prostitution laws:

Prostitution is not about sex. It is about exploitation, violence, and abuse. Prostitution is harmful in and of itself: legalization or complete decriminalization of the entire industry doesn't remove the harm of prostitution – it simply makes that harm legal.

While certain Radical Feminist PSOs use website discourse to challenge conventional stereotypes and condemn those who victimize prostitutes, we find that most of them do not actively attempt to redress what they identify as injustices against this population. Instead, they are primarily service- and exit-oriented – providing food, shelter, counseling, drug treatment, educational services, job training, and social support to facilitate leaving the sex trade. Their service orientation is much more prominent than their advocacy work. An exception to this pattern is SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation). Reflecting both a service orientation and larger advocacy goals, SAGE seeks “to effect change on two levels: (1) in the lives of vulnerable and exploited individuals and (2) in the local, national, and international community, by providing opportunities for healing and justice while challenging societal attitudes that foster ignorance and acceptance of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking.” SAGE has a website link titled, “advocacy,” which encourages people to take action against human trafficking, and the group's leaders have occasionally participated in activities sponsored by other anti-prostitution groups.

A few of these organizations seek to reconstruct conventional public perceptions of sex workers by targeting what they consider the root cause: male “demand” for sexual services. They do so by sponsoring or participating in “john schools”: day-long classes for arrested customers that are designed to alter their perceptions of prostitution (by highlighting its harms) and deter future acts of solicitation. SAGE describes the San Francisco john school (which it helped create in 1995) as an “innovative and award-winning partnership between SAGE, the District Attorney's office, and the San Francisco Police Department to shift local government's approach to commercial sexual exploitation by educating clients and [thus] helping women and girls exit the criminal and juvenile justice systems.” Few of these PSOs, however, are actively involved in customer-related programs. Organizations in our sample that sponsor a local “john school” include CPA, Magdalene, Dignity House, and Lola Greene Baldwin Foundation. The *primary*

focus of Radical Feminist PSOs, however, is on female prostitutes rather than the customers.

Sex Work PSOs

Sex Work organizations see “injustice” in both the societal disapproval and legal punishment of prostitutes. They challenge the public’s moral condemnation of sex workers and the punishment and marginalization of all parties involved in consensual, adult sexual commerce. For these groups, it is social stigma and mistreatment of prostitutes, as well as punitive laws, that inflict the most damage on this population. Part of the solution is for the legal system and the public to recognize adult prostitutes as *workers* who should have the same rights and protections as those in other occupations. This view generally aligns with the empowerment paradigm, which highlights the normal or routine dimensions of sex work and the agency of the participants.

Sex Work PSOs seek to alter public perceptions by first condemning the stigmatization of the trade. Like the Radical Feminist programs, these organizations resist conventional views of prostitutes as deviants, but instead of embracing the tropes of “victim” or “survivor,” they want the public to view sex work as legitimate, respectable work comparable to other types of service labor. One program, Sex Trade Opportunities for Risk Management (STORM), advocates for workers’ autonomy and safety, and seeks to cultivate positive public perceptions of prostitutes. The following list of principles appears on their website:

- We believe current and former prostitutes must have access to services just as any other segment of the population should.
- We believe social change is necessary but must not be prioritized over the lives of those in or exiting the sex trade.
- We believe individuals involved in the sex trade must have their experiences validated and their courage and bravery [respected].

The St James Infirmary (SJI) works to “build upon existing skills and strengths in order to allow individuals to determine their own goals while providing culturally competent and non-judgmental services.” SJI links the hardships prostitutes face to larger structural and cultural conditions:

There are many factors which affect the working conditions and experiences for all Sex Workers including the political and economic climate, poverty and homelessness, stigmatization, violence, as well as the overwhelming intricacies of the legal, public, and social systems.

The second objective of these PSOs is that of eradicating laws that criminalize sex workers. Most organizations in this category favor decriminalization. STORM, for

instance, declares: “Current and former prostitutes are not criminals and should not be viewed as such. We support decriminalizing the women and men involved in adult prostitution as arrest and prosecution are inconsistent with our harm reduction objectives.” Stella takes a similar position:

Stella’s goals are to provide support and information to sex-workers so that they may live in safety and with dignity, to sensitize and educate the public about sex work and the realities faced by sex workers, to fight discrimination against sex workers, and to promote the decriminalization of sex work.

Stella’s statement reveals its goal of educating the public about the hardships prostitutes face through repressive laws and public prejudice. Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work Educate & Resist (POWER) likewise demands the repeal of laws that penalize prostitutes: “The criminalization of sex workers, their partners, clients, and families is unacceptable. The decriminalization of sex work is imperative.” As the director of Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS) told us, HIPS believes in “speaking out against criminalization as one of many harms we hope to help sex workers address.”

Most of the PSOs in this category characterize prostitution as a form of *work* – legitimate and comparable to other service occupations. They view the lack of formal recognition and protection under the law as a labor and even human rights issue that constitutes a form of discrimination. Maggie’s depicts sex work in the following manner:

Sex work is real work. We are not criminals, deviant, or victims. We are working people and we demand to be recognized as such. Sex work is socially legitimate, important, and valuable work. All sex work is equally valid, whether it be dancing, street work, or domination, and we are entitled to...the right to form unions or professional associations; the right to work independently, collectively, or for a third party; and the right to occupational health and safety.

On POWER’s website, above an icon of a fist raised in the air, is a sentence declaring that “Sex Workers’ Rights are Human Rights.” And the empowerment paradigm is boldly proclaimed as well: “Sex work is honorable, valuable work worthy of celebration. Sex workers are entitled to the same legal and human rights as any other persons in Canada and the same labor rights as any other persons working in Canada.”

While the Sex Work PSOs provide services to sex workers (support groups, food, temporary shelter, medical and social services), they also engage in advocacy in an effort to remedy what they see as injustices burdening this population. They do so by sponsoring community educational campaigns, disseminating their beliefs via the mass media, providing legal advice and representation to prostitutes, cultivating ties to like-minded social movement organizations, and promoting activist events.

Stella, a Canadian PSO, posts an education booklet on its website which reflects their views on stigma and misperceptions:

[The booklet] is intended for social services and health professionals, police officers and community workers, as well as people from the media, the justice system, or the government. Its purpose is to shed light on some preconceived ideas about sex work and to suggest a few ways to improve services offered to these women and to support them in a respectful and empathic way. Without being exhaustive, this booklet will hopefully increase awareness and reduce ignorance. As professionals, we can do a lot to make sex workers benefit from prejudice-free public or community services. We can take action to oppose stigmatization in our environments and make better-informed interventions to properly fulfill these women's needs.

The SJI recently launched a media campaign to educate the public about sex workers, titled, "Someone You Know is a Sex Worker." They created a poster with pictures of sex workers and slogans intended to alter public perceptions. This advertisement will soon be visible across the city of San Francisco through a variety of social media outlets and on the side of city buses. SJI's website summarizes how this strategy works to alter social perceptions of sex workers:

- To point out that sex workers are ordinary people and should even be considered valued members of the community.
- To educate the general community that sex workers are equal members of society, and that our rights are human rights.
- To promote our position that sex work is real work, and that sex workers deserve labor rights.

Beyond educational campaigns, Maggie's and a number of other Sex Work PSOs provide legal advice and guidance for prostitutes. PACE is one of these and hosts experts who give legal suggestions and information to sex workers and accompany them to court should they desire it. Stepping Stone offers sex workers workshops about legal rights and occasionally brings in individuals who can provide legal aid to prostitutes.

Cal-Pep was originally created by workers associated with the group Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), the first and most prominent American prostitutes' rights organization (Jenness, 1993; Weitzer, 1991). Cal-Pep and SJI indirectly advocate for the advancement of prostitute rights (Majic, 2010). The SJI website proclaims that they are "committed to the global sex worker rights movement, and the core principles that sex work is real work, that our rights are human rights, that we deserve social justice and labor rights." Stella summarizes its mission as one that "favors empowerment and solidarity by and amongst sex workers, since we are committed to the idea that each of us has a place in society and human rights worth defending." To further this, Stella has a webpage dedicated to upcoming events and activities that promote sex workers' rights in the USA and Canada.

The final advocacy strategy used by Sex Work PSOs is to establish ties to allies in social movement organizations and encourage activism among sex workers, both of which they feel are remedies to address grievances. To work toward strengthening these ties and increasing the efficacy of rights' organizations, numerous programs call for member activism. For example, STORM declares:

We believe there is a need for activists both in the social change arena and in direct service/harm reduction. Individuals are encouraged to take part in activism that feels right to them.

Stella also calls on sex workers to participate in activism to challenge current laws and public perceptions about prostitutes:

If you want to encourage solidarity and discussion amongst the women you know or who work in your area, Stella's team can offer you advice and support. At Stella, we believe that the more we sex workers speak up about our work, and the more we share and debate ideas which are important to us, the more things will move in our favor. We know that it's not always easy or even possible to express ourselves and share our realities; this is mostly because of widespread prejudice as well as today's repressive Canadian laws.

The Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) similarly encourages member activism and participation "grounded in harm reduction and social justice organizing by and for girls and young women impacted by the sex trade and street economies." Elaborating on this, the director stated that YWEP "is about systemic change. We are a social justice program. We are about building a community. In order to have this change, you have to have young people involved in this." Promoting activism and mobilization is a delicate balancing act for these organizations, as they encourage and engage in advocacy but must also continue to provide services to sex workers. We argue that the advocacy work of Sex Work PSOs is a function of two factors: their ability to identify a target and a specific remedy and their fairly strong ties to larger sex workers' rights organizations that are actively involved in advocacy work.

Youth Oriented PSOs

The central grievance of Youth Oriented PSOs is that underage prostitutes are subject to arrest and punishment for their participation in the trade. They contend that the laws need to be altered to give minors alternative sentences or to treat them outside the juvenile justice system entirely. This PSO type is most closely aligned with the polymorphous perspective in academia – as they distinguish youth from adult sex workers, highlight the unique conditions facing underage prostitutes (e.g. abusive home lives, being runaways), and avoid making blanket generalizations about sex work per se. These PSOs recognize that many members of the public

consider underage prostitutes “victims” because they are viewed as too young to make mature, informed decisions and because of their greater vulnerability to being coerced or deceived by third parties. As a result, these PSOs are fairly easily able to sell their position to the public, namely that underage prostitutes are in desperate need of assistance and should not be subject to criminal sanctions.

Youth Oriented PSOs are unequivocal in their condemnation of laws that punish underage prostitutes. For example, Girls Educational and Mentoring Services (GEMS) calls for support rather than punishment:

End commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking of children by changing individual lives and revolutionizing the systems and policies that impact sexually exploited youth. GEMS advocates at the local, state, and national level to promote policies that support young women who have been commercially sexually exploited and domestically trafficked.

GEMS founder Rachel Lloyd underscores this point in her prediction that, “In ten years we will look back and consider it ludicrous that we ever prosecuted children for prostitution” (Baker, 2010).

A Way Back, now called GIFT (Gaining Independence for Tomorrow), started as a street outreach program “designed to encourage and support young women that wanted to leave ‘The Life’ [of prostitution] and end their exploitation.” The director depicts the program as “a holistic approach that deals with sexual abuse of kids.” As their website states, the organization seeks to change current laws and enforcement practices toward underage victims:

Work with law enforcement, child-serving public agencies, and other non-profits to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children through public awareness campaigns and the passing of [protective] legislations.

Youth Oriented PSOs provide housing, food, social services, educational services, court liaisons, and more to this population. Yet they are also keen on advocacy, primarily geared toward abolishing laws that penalize young prostitutes. Advocacy strategies include the creation of court diversionary programs, engagement in community educational campaigns, and promotion of activism among members. As a result of these practices, we deem them service and advocacy PSOs.

Arguing that the laws should protect rather punish these minors, many of the Youth Oriented PSOs seek to coordinate with local courts and law enforcement to run diversionary programs that would keep adolescent prostitutes out of the juvenile justice system and help them exit prostitution. Children of the Night (COTN) works with law enforcement to rescue children and place them in shelters:

Rescuing children from prostitution; prosecuting pimps; and provide the time, tools, and care they need to build trust with responsible adults, to catch up on school credits, and to participate in normal activities typical of a normal childhood.

Similarly, GEMS attempts to shield adolescent prostitutes from incurring arrest records and criminal charges through their court advocacy program. The program employs a staffer who serves as the Criminal Court Advocacy Coordinator, a role specifically designed to advocate for alternative sentences to incarceration for young prostitutes.

Youth Oriented PSOs also sponsor workshops, give lectures to community members, and publicize their views in the media. Paul & Lisa staff give presentations at schools about the harms and risks of commercial sexual exploitation. Their website describes these activities:

Our vision is to work for a world where today's children and adults are educated and informed on the dangers of sexual predators, when individuals and organizations become public advocates for this underserved and misunderstood population. The Paul & Lisa Program empowers youth, families, and communities through education.

A few of these PSOs are particularly savvy at utilizing the mass media to reinforce the view that underage prostitutes are victims in need of protection under the law. One of the most poignant examples of this is found in the 2007 documentary, "Very Young Girls." The film follows the work of GEMS, who helped produce the film, as the program officers interact with adolescent prostitutes. It emphasizes the coercive nature of their relationships with pimps and portrays the underage participants as victims of adult male "predators." The documentary attracted much public attention and was a selection endorsed at numerous film festivals. GEMS' website prominently features this film.

Another PSO that stands out for their frequent use of mass media in their educational campaigns is Children of the Night. For instance, the program's founder, Lois Lee, was a guest on the national television show, "Dr. Phil," where she discussed the prevalence and dangers of domestic child prostitution. By engaging in a TV forum, the program is available to millions of Americans and has the potential to generate support and funding for COTN.

These PSOs have not only defined the problem and identified a target, but also advocate a specific remedy: a change in legislation and law enforcement practices. To some extent they have influenced legislation, just as they strive to popularize the view that underage prostitutes are victims by definition. For example, as their website highlights, COTN "is dedicated to helping state legislators develop tough sentencing legislation to help remedy this problem." This program has a long-standing commitment to creating legislation that protects underage prostitutes. Similarly, GEMS played a key role in getting the Safe Harbor Act passed in New York State in 2008. The law mandates that minors in prostitution be treated as victims, not criminals, and provides a multi-agency program to facilitate their exit from prostitution and reintegration into the community.

There has been some progress at the federal level, with passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000. The statute defines sex trafficking in such a way as to include youth under the age of 18, regardless of whether they were coerced, and

mandates 10-year minimum sentences for those convicted of recruiting or managing underage prostitutes. On the state and local level, however, there is considerable variation in the extent to which the criminal justice system applies this law to underage prostitutes. Many officials continue to treat young prostitutes as criminals rather than victims in need of help.

These programs also maintain ties to broader anti-sex trafficking advocacy organizations and encourage activism among supporters. Paul & Lisa have an entire page on their website that describes the laws pertaining to sex trafficking and child prostitution. At the bottom of the page, they encourage people to contact their elected officials to exert pressure to reform laws: “Call, write, or e-mail them to encourage them to support legislation that will prevent commercial sexual exploitation.” Additionally, GEMS founded a movement called the Council of Daughters, intended to get supporters mobilized to fight the exploitation of children in the sex industry:

A national network of individuals and communities committed to strengthen laws and public policies that protect and provide services for girls and young women who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking, to encourage Americans to support girls’ and survivor empowerment initiatives at the local levels, and to bring this urgent issue into schools, offices, college campuses, places of worship, and other community spaces.

Because of the variety of advocacy strategies they perform, we consider Youth Oriented PSOs to be both service *and* advocacy organizations. Their relationships with other activist organizations increase their support base and visibility, deepen their commitment to their cause, and engender coalitions that broaden pressures for legal reform.

Neutral PSOs

A few of our organizations take what we describe as a neutral position on prostitution inasmuch as they present a non-judgmental stance, and therefore are most closely aligned with the polymorphous paradigm’s maxim that individuals’ experiences in prostitution vary along the oppression–empowerment continuum (Weitzer, 2010). The central concern of these organizations is to promote *harm-reduction* for those involved in prostitution and assistance for those who want to leave prostitution. Harm reduction includes improving individuals’ physical and mental health and enhancing their safety. Some groups define harm to include the social condemnation of prostitutes, which marginalizes them and thus indirectly contributes to risk-taking in their commercial sexual transactions.

The director of Positive Options, Referrals, and Alternatives (PORA) described the organization as one “whose mission is to help people with a history of prostitution change their lives by encouraging spiritual and emotional growth, good health and education through street outreach, safe housing, individualized support,

and referrals.” She described their primary focus: “We focus on recovery, health, and education for women in prostitution. We want them to move onto a healthy lifestyle, stay in recovery, stay connected to PORA as much as is needed.”

The Foundation for Research on Sexually Transmitted Disease (FROST'D) began as a program that exclusively served prostitutes. They embrace a harm-reduction approach and emphasize prevention and treatment related to HIV/AIDS. FROST'D's mission is to “promote overall health and quality of life for people who may have difficulty accessing services elsewhere, due to substance use, mental illness, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity.”

Their website reports that the population they serve now includes both sex workers and other marginalized individuals:

While the agency got its start in serving prostitutes, our experience in reaching out to and serving female, male, and transgender minority street-based sex workers results in much more than a renowned and respected reputation as “that agency that works with prostitutes.” Our work with a severely traumatized, vulnerable, mistrusting and fragile population taught FROST'D the very principles of harm reduction years before this term became a mantra for work with hard to engage, substance-abusing persons at risk from and living with HIV/AIDS.

FROST'D takes no specific position on sex work but “meets people where they are at” and employs “a non-judgmental relationship with the participant.” Their goals are focused on improving prostitutes' health and well-being.

WISH is also concerned with the low standards of health among prostitutes, and targets social conditions that exacerbate this phenomenon:

Women survival sex workers are at risk of contracting serious illnesses such as Hepatitis and HIV/AIDS and their lack of housing, income and support as well as lack of access to health care serve to exacerbate many serious health concerns. Living in constant danger and isolation coupled with the ongoing trauma of their lives often affects the mental health of women working on the street, and may cause behavior that further marginalizes them. WISH desires to increase the health, safety, and well-being of women who work in the survival sex trade.

Similarly, You Are Never Alone's (YANA) mission is to promote the “collective healing and survival” of women involved in prostitution. YANA offers education programs for prostitutes diagnosed with AIDS and more generally strives to empower women who work on the street. YANA's executive director, Sid Ford, stated, “This program took the women off the street and gave them time to explore feelings about themselves. They focused on self-esteem. They practiced behavior management and coping skills.”⁷

Unlike the other three types, we found no evidence that the Neutral PSOs advocate for legal or social reform. Instead, the Neutrals focus exclusively on harm-reduction and improving the well-being of sex workers through service provision.

Conclusion

In this article we identify four types of prostitute-serving organizations whose ideologies mirror one of the three main theoretical paradigms in the sociology of sex work. Little research has been done on these organizations and the role they may play in larger cultural and political debates on sex work (exceptions are Bjonness, 2012; Davis, 2000; Majic, 2010). Our analysis documents a complex range of goals and practices that are shaped by PSO ideology. We find not only substantial ideological variation across PSOs but also document organizational objectives that directly challenge prevailing norms and practices in North America.

We find that certain PSO types limit themselves to providing services to prostitutes while others engage in both service and advocacy, a finding that blurs prior distinctions between organizational categories (Minkoff, 1999). The Radical Feminist and Neutral PSOs generally limit themselves to directly serving this population, while Sex Work and Youth Oriented PSOs are more likely to have split foci – service and advocacy intended to catalyze legal and/or social changes with regard to prostitution.

What explains whether PSOs engage in one or both of these actions? We contend that the main factors are (1) an organization's ability to identify a clear target and remedy and (2) whether they have built ties to ideologically aligned advocacy organizations. Regardless of type, each PSO articulates a problem or "injustice" that affects prostitutes, yet not all of them clearly identify the *source* of this injustice. Neutral PSOs generally neglect to clarify who or what is at fault for problems afflicting prostitutes and focus instead on harm-reduction. Although prominent Radical Feminist abolitionist organizations – such as CATW, WHISPER – consider societal gender inequality responsible for prostitution, the Radical Feminist PSOs in our sample (with the exception of CPA and SAGE) offer a much more muted critique, if any, of the structural causes of prostitution. Sex Work PSOs target the laws that deny labor and human rights for prostitutes and favor decriminalization, while Youth Oriented programs seek to rescind laws that treat underage sex workers as criminals. The Sex Work and Youth Oriented organizations clearly spotlight criminalization as the key cause of discrimination and marginalization of prostitutes, and they appear more active in advocacy than the other two types of organizations. Their advocacy is in part fueled by their ability to identify a specific, concrete target – the prohibitionist criminal law – while at the same time working to elicit public support for legal change.

When organizations attribute the cause of an injustice to ambiguous forces (e.g. society, patriarchy, misogyny) it often hinders their ability to provide specific remedies and therefore engage in advocacy actions (Gamson, 1992). Neutral PSOs decline to enter the larger debate on prostitution and instead focus on providing assistance to prostitutes. The fact that most of the Radical Feminist PSOs do not identify a concrete source of the problem makes it difficult for them to devise attainable large-scale remedies and to advocate for them. Thus, they largely confine their work to service-provision as well.

Another important factor that bolsters PSO advocacy is their relationship with other like-minded activist organizations working for social, political, or legal change. Some service organizations draw on the expertise of advocacy groups for information or advice or try to solicit the latter's support for the former's activities – whether or not they are partners in a formal coalition. We did not find evidence of these connections for most of the Radical Feminist or any of the Neutral PSOs. But Sex Work PSOs tended to align with sex-worker rights organizations and Youth Oriented programs had ongoing relationships with anti-trafficking groups. Most of the latter two PSOs did so by advertising upcoming events sponsored by other groups that promoted their cause and by appealing to members to engage in activism.

In short, we argue that the factors conducive to PSO advocacy strategies include their ability to clearly “name and blame” a fixable problem and a culpable target as well as their relationships to other advocacy organizations. Our data do not allow us to account for *why* some PSOs are able to do this effectively while others are not. We encourage future researchers to examine the internal mechanisms within these organizations that influence frame construction and the formation of strategies, which can further illuminate why certain PSOs limit themselves to providing services to clients while others also advocate for social or legal changes.

While other studies note how local sociopolitical context shapes NGO goals and strategies (Brumley, 2010; Limoncelli, 2006), our data suggest that local context does not significantly influence the various missions of the organizations discussed here. Instead, we found patterns across locations that did not seem to be context dependent. We think this is a function of the PSOs' generalized definitions of prostitution, whose imputed character and practical “solutions” span geographical boundaries. However, while the mission of these organizations transcends local context, the setting may certainly influence an organization's *specific operations* vis-à-vis local government, police, and clients as well as their routine resource-mobilization activities. But PSOs' core beliefs and principles regarding sex work are universalistic rather than contextually determined. Research in other nations may corroborate this finding.

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Notes

1. “Sex work” refers to the sale of sexual services and erotic performances, which include prostitution, pornography, commercial stripping, and telephone sex services. We use the conventional term “prostitution” to refer to the direct physical exchange of sexual services for material compensation.
2. Studies of organizations that promote the oppression paradigm include the (now-defunct) group WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) and the

- Council of Prostitution Alternatives (Davis, 2000; Wynter, 1987). There are several studies of organizations that take the empowerment position as well (Gall, 2007; Jenness, 1993; Mathieu, 2003; McLeod, 1981; Weitzer, 1991).
3. In a related study, Bjonness (2012) explores how various institutional actors (including NGOs) in Denmark have altered the public discourse on prostitution, perspectives that tend to align with either the oppression or empowerment paradigms. She finds those who argue for the latter promote a viewpoint that is generally dismissed and viewed as illegitimate, leaving the oppression paradigm the reigning public stance on sex work.
 4. Only a few PSOs did not have websites. We gathered information on these organizations either through interviews conducted with a staff member or through SWAAY, a published compendium of PSOs.
 5. In Canada, the act of prostitution is legal, but “communicating” about sex services in a public place is illegal and many street workers are arrested for such communication. Running a brothel and pimping are also illegal.
 6. Genesis House collaborates with the police and courts and rejects decriminalization and its mission statement describes some prostitutes as “victims” who are “caught” in the lifestyle. At the same time, the organization also underscores individual decision-making regarding exiting the trade, strives to support them by providing resources, and works to alter negative perceptions of prostitutes. The mission statement highlights these tenets: “The mission of Genesis House is to offer hospitality to all adult women caught up in the system of prostitution, to provide an environment where they can make a free choice regarding their life-style and to assist those who choose to leave prostitution by offering them appropriate services and support.” Compared to the other Radical Feminist PSOs, Genesis House espoused a more nuanced view on prostitution, rather than simply reiterating the one-dimensional position of the oppressed paradigm.
 7. This quotation is taken from a newspaper article, ‘Along came a spiral,’ by Afefe Tyehimba and published in Baltimore’s *City Paper* in 2004 (Tyehimba, 2004).

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