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Women Who Sell Sex

A Review of Psychological Research
With Clinical Implications

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Chapter 1

The Psychology of Selling Sex: An Introduction



Although it is difficult to accurately estimate the total size of the commercial sex industry, there is a broad consensus that the industry is large, profitable, and growing (Weitzer, 2010). This book focuses on one slice of commercial sex: private, in-person, consensual sex acts exchanged between a woman and a paying customer. It goes by many names: prostitution, sex work, hooking, whoring, escorting, hustling, and has various legal statuses across the world. Public policy debates about selling sex focus on many concerns, such as public health, community safety, human rights, women's rights, violence, oppression, and human trafficking. Psychological views of selling sex can range broadly, from the idea that selling sex is intrinsically traumatizing and results in mental health problems to the idea that selling sex can be consistent with a positive expression of sexuality. In recent times, popular attention has focused on women marketing themselves on personal websites, offering more in common between the commercial sale of sex and conventional service industries. In an age in which websites and apps are making the sale of sex more accessible to a larger proportion of society, questions about the psychological motivations and mental health correlates of this activity are particularly pertinent. This book explores these themes by reviewing the empirical literature about women who sell sex.

Before delving into the empirical research in subsequent chapters of the book, we cover four preliminary matters in this chapter. First, we present the goals of this book. Next, we offer background information about the methodology and terminology used throughout the book. Then, we review the primary ideological stances toward selling sex and explain how these viewpoints inform the topics covered in this volume. Finally, we highlight a few methodological issues in the primary research of women who sell sex that are important to have in perspective when learning about this literature.

The Goals of this Book

Topics Covered

This book is not about the act or institution of selling sex. Rather, it is about the psychological experiences of women who sell sex. This book will review the literature on a number of psychological concepts related to selling sex, including motivation, stigma, stress, coping, and mental health. Quite an extensive body of scholarly work exists on this topic. The purpose of this book is to summarize themes from the research in order to offer a brief introduction to the topic with implications for mental health professionals and directions for future research.

The goal is to evaluate these topics among women who have made some level of deliberate choice to sell sex. This raises an important question regarding freedom of choice. Some philosophers, theorists, and researchers have argued that consensual sex can exist only when there is economic and social equality between the persons involved. Under this theory, women who sell sex from a position of low economic or social power are likely to experience coercion, calling into question the voluntary nature of their encounters. Some believe all or the majority of women who sell sex do not have a choice, or they have a choice so constrained that it should not be considered a true choice (e.g., Raymond, 2013). For example, Moran (2012), a woman who describes herself as having been prostituted between the ages of 15–22, wrote in her blog, *The Prostitution Experience*: “When I think of my choices there were simply these: have men on and inside you, or continue to suffer homelessness and hunger. Take your pick. Make your ‘choice.’”

We have decided to include empirical research from around the world of women who sell sex in many different contexts and for many different reasons. Clearly, there are socioeconomic influences at work for the women included in this review. These women will have made the choice to sell sex within some degree of constrained conditions, though some will have had more freedom of choice than others. Where we have drawn the line with regard to a deliberate decision to sell sex, is that we will exclude research on women who sell sex under overt coercion, such as sex trafficking or slavery, at least to the extent this is reported in the research.

We will start by exploring the wide variety of motivational factors why women start selling sex (Chap. 2). Next, the book will highlight some important sociocultural contexts surrounding the sale of sex that contribute to stress, and examine how women cope with these circumstances (Chap. 3). The heart of the book focuses on how selling sex relates to a host of mental health variables, which include potential precursors and outcomes of selling sex (Chap. 4). Next, the book examines the large literature on alcohol and drug use and abuse among women who sell sex (Chap. 5). Consistent with historical trends within the field of psychology, Chaps. 4 and 5 will place emphasis on mental health concerns. Despite the rise and popularity of the discipline of positive psychology, examination of positive topics such as meaningful personal strengths and qualities are rare in the study of selling sex, but will be included where

available. Subsequently, the book will consider motivational factors for why women stop selling sex, what can make this change difficult, and what makes for successful transitions (Chap. 6). Having reviewed the research, we will offer implications for mental health professionals (Chap. 7) and provide a synthesis of the psychological knowledge about women who sell sex with directions for future research (Chap. 8).

Topics Excluded

As important as outlining the goals for the book, is delineating the boundaries of what will be covered. First, addressing psychological concepts relevant to women who choose to sell sex is not sufficient for offering a complete picture of how selling sex relates to overall wellbeing, which encompasses not only psychological, but also physical and spiritual domains. Addressing wholistic wellbeing would require a broader review of topics, as well as a deeper philosophical discussion about the body, use of the body, human sexuality, and how these topics relate to mind and spirit.

This book is not intended to offer conclusions about the overall merits or harms of selling sex or the morality of selling sex. This introduction to the psychological concepts related to selling sex is not equipped to endorse, indict, or even evaluate the larger institution of selling sex. What the book offers is a better understanding of some important psychological concepts relevant to women who sell sex. However, this is only one piece of a large and complex puzzle. For individuals hoping to develop or defend arguments for or against selling sex, understanding the extant psychology research may be important, but needs to be supplemented by other sources of knowledge relevant to arguments about the sale of sex, including empirical research from other disciplines, as well as theories and values from social, cultural, political, moral, and religious studies. Some topics in this book will overlap with topics of interest to other disciplines. However, the major contributions of other fields to understanding the sale of sex, such as the politics, economics, sociology, legality, and health issues involved in selling sex will be left to other books.

Definition of Selling Sex

Our definition of selling sex should be clarified. This book is focused specifically on private, in-person, consensual sex acts exchanged between a woman and a paying customer. Given this definition, activities such as pornography and erotic performances will not be covered. The emphasis will be primarily on selling sex for money. However, research has also focused on trading sex for other things of value, such as food, clothing, shelter, or drugs. This is sometimes referred to as transactional sex or indirect sex work. Using sex to obtain basic necessities is also called survival sex. Further, a topic of interest in recent popular culture has been young women using

sex for things that go beyond basic necessities, such as to pay for higher education or to receive luxurious gifts (e.g., Motyl, 2013; Nayar, 2017). On closer consideration, there are many ways in which sex can become transactional in nature, ranging from the sugar baby whose sex partner pays her rent to the woman who does not want to say no because her date paid for dinner. Therefore, this concept can quickly become a fuzzy one. To maintain a clear focus, we will concentrate on the use of sex as an income-generating tool. Our review is inclusive of transactional sex only when this is combined with selling sex for money, such as when researchers group together trading sex for money *or* goods.

Populations Included in the Review

At the outset, some important distinctions should be made about the populations that will be examined. We will focus specifically on cisgender women. Men and transgendered individuals may have very different motivations, experiences, and mental health outcomes associated with selling sex (e.g., Burnette et al., 2008; Vanwesenbeeck, 2013). Therefore, we will mostly exclude studies in which analyses are conducted for men and women together. We make an exception for a few noteworthy studies that include a small percentage of men. In such cases, we will clearly highlight that the sample included some men.

In addition, as noted, we will not focus on research about victims of sex trafficking. Although the question of whether any or many women freely choose to sell sex is a contentious one, there is clear consensus that victims of sex trafficking have had no choice with regard to selling sex. As might be expected, the experiences and mental health correlates of trafficking victims differ from those of women who sell sex under other circumstances (e.g., Muftić & Finn, 2013). Unfortunately, how women first start selling sex is a variable that is not systematically assessed and reported in the research literature. This makes it likely that some proportion of study participants within the research reviewed in this book will have been trafficked or otherwise directly coerced into selling sex. Nevertheless, we will exclude research conducted explicitly among victims of trafficking. For similar reasons, research on children and youth will not be reviewed in this book, because minors are legally (and, one might argue, psychologically) not able to give informed consent to have sex. Therefore, exchanging money for sex with a minor falls outside of our definition of selling sex. Studies that include minors as participants will be excluded unless specifically noted, for example, in instances when study samples consist mostly of adults, but the age range begins slightly below adulthood. We will not use age of first involvement in the sale of sex as an exclusionary criterion, because this variable is not consistently reported in the research literature.

Nature of Research Included in the Review

Finally, this book is meant to offer a concise rather than a comprehensive review of psychology research on women selling sex. Our goal is to provide insight into what is known, how it has been studied, and what is still missing in the research literature. We will be most inclusive of research that examines women who sell sex in comparison to a peer group of women who do not sell sex, because research that focuses exclusively on women who sell sex is not able to account for the effects of other influential life factors. Therefore, we will be most comprehensive in reviewing comparative studies. In addition, we will focus more on research with quantitative rather than qualitative designs. A great deal of qualitative research has been conducted, and these studies provide rich detail. We will use qualitative findings for illustrative purposes, and will draw on qualitative work more extensively on topics where quantitative research is sparse. As a form of quality control, this book will favor peer-reviewed sources of research findings, meaning that the findings reviewed come primarily from journal articles, rather than from books, book chapters, dissertations, news articles, or other sources.

What's in a Name? The Terminology of Selling Sex

To date, the terms used in research to describe selling sex have contributed to both controversy and confusion. The two most common contenders are prostitution and sex work. The etymology of the term prostitute is the Latin *prostituere*, which comes from *pro*, meaning “before,” and *statuere*, meaning “to set up” or “place.” This term was originally used to describe a person who was publicly exposed or offered for sale. Although the root of this word is not necessarily derogatory, the early use included putting something to an unworthy use or dishonoring someone and exposing her to public shame. The primary definition for prostitution in the Oxford English Dictionary (2007) is value-neutral: “the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment;” however, some of the secondary definitions have a negative connotation, such as “licentiousness” and “lewdness.”

Some have argued that the terms *prostitution* and *prostitute* are offensive, and therefore promote the use of the alternative terms *sex work* and *sex worker*. Proponents of the term sex work tend to argue that it lends dignity and professionalism to selling sex and that the term emphasizes that selling sex is a legitimate form of work. However, opponents of this term have argued that creating a polished image of selling sex serves only the sex industry, and not the women working in it. Along these lines, the Oxford English Dictionary (2008) notes that the term sex work is used both to diminish negative connotations and to evoke affinity with the sex industry. A particular limitation of the term sex work for the purpose of the current book is that it is broader in meaning, in that it includes commercial sexual services of any kind,

such as pornography, exotic dancing, phone sex, internet webcam services, and other activities excluded from the current review.

The debate about terminology is often, at its core, a battle over how selling sex should be viewed within society and addressed by public policy. Advocates of the term sex work tend to emphasize legalization and acceptance of the choice to sell sex, whereas advocates of the term prostitution tend to emphasize the need to protect people from coercion and sex trafficking by abolishing commercial sex. What makes this controversy even more complex is that, in the absence of clear data, it is unclear how many women are represented by each side of the argument: vulnerable women who sell sex to survive versus middle class or elite women who have a free choice whether or not to sell sex.

These discussions are extremely important for many reasons, but are not the focus of this book. Divergent ideological stances about selling sex will be discussed briefly in the next section of this chapter as a foundation for understanding the various viewpoints undergirding research on women who sell sex. The point here is simply to provide a rationale for the terminology used in this book. Because the goal of this book is to review what can be learned from the empirical psychology literature about selling sex, without making an a priori argument about the meaning of selling sex, we will mostly use the behavioral description “selling sex” to avoid the value judgments and associations that may be linked to more commonly used terms. Our emphasis will be on selling sex as a behavior, rather than a personal descriptor or identity label. Therefore, we have chosen to use the more cumbersome “women who sell sex” over the alternative options of “prostitutes” or “sex workers.”

Ideological Stances Toward Selling Sex

Common Ideologies

In approaching the research literature, it is important to acknowledge that theorists and researchers differ in their views of the causes, consequences, and responses to selling sex. On any topic of study, beliefs about the subject matter inform the formulation of research questions, hypotheses, and study methodologies. There are many different ideological stances to selling sex. We briefly consider three of the common ones, which equate selling sex to violence, legitimate work, and sexual freedom, respectively. Each of these stances is based on extensive theory from a variety of fields beyond psychology, including in particular feminism, but also philosophy, law, sociology, political science, and economics. Here, the goal is to briefly summarize some of the components of these theories in order to understand some of the perspectives that may underlie the research reviewed in this book. For more insight into the vigorous conversation around selling sex, see Spector’s (2006) edited volume in which many of these ideas are debated from a philosophical perspective.

The view of selling sex as violence (e.g., Dworkin, 1997; Farley, 2003, 2004; Jeffreys, 2009; MacKinnon, 1993; Pateman, 1983, 1988, 1999; Raymond, 2013) often originates from the radical feminist perspective that selling sex involves the violent subordination of women by men, enabled by a patriarchal society in which women are viewed as sex objects. For example, Pateman (1983, p. 561, 1988) referred to selling sex as “one of the most graphic examples of men’s domination of women.” From this perspective, selling sex is equivalent to rape and sexual slavery, which, by their nature, cannot be voluntary. Also relevant to this ideological stance is the closely related idea that sexuality is intertwined with one’s core identity, thereby making the sale of sex, which involves the most intimate parts of one’s body, harmful not only to one’s body, but also to one’s self (Pateman, 1988). Consequently, those who equate selling sex with violence and harm advocate for abolishing prostitution. From this approach, selling sex is at its core always nonconsensual, even though some women submit to and collaborate with their social oppressors because this is less threatening than resisting. For these reasons, opponents of prostitution argue that characterizing selling sex as work or describing it in commercial or contractual terms is problematic (e.g., Pateman, 1983, 1988).

Those who view selling sex as legitimate work do not deny that coercion and sex trafficking exist, rather, they argue that these phenomena do not represent all cases of selling sex and that their existence does not negate the fact that there are many women who freely choose to sell sex. Thus, the argument is that voluntary and forced sale of sex are distinct and should not be confused with one another. Proponents of this perspective have included researchers (e.g., Weitzer, 2012), sex worker rights organizations such as COYOTE (see Jenness, 1990), labor unions representing sex workers (see Gall, 2007, 2016), and other organizations such as Anti-Slavery International (Bindman, 1997). They often aim to challenge the perception of women who sell sex as victims and replace this with an emphasis on agency. In this line of thinking, the sex industry is compared to conventional forms of labor. The idea is that selling sex is a simple “contractual relation in which services are traded” similar to those found in conventional service professions (Ericsson, 1980, p. 353). From this perspective, taking away women’s rights to sell sex is to deny autonomy and self-determination for those who would choose to engage in this work. The assumption is made that women who sell sex should have labor rights similar to other workers and that important reforms may be needed with regard to the conditions under which sex is sold.

Finally, the view of selling sex as sexual freedom suggests that selling sex can be a positive expression of sexuality that can empower or otherwise benefit women (e.g., Bell, 1995, 2009; Queen, 1997). This perspective has been referred to as *pro-sex feminism*, *sex-positive feminism*, and *sex radical feminism* (Bernstein, 1999; Comte, 2014). Similar to the view that selling sex is violence, the view that selling sex is an expression of sexual freedom is grounded within feminist ideas about patriarchy creating an unhealthy sexual environment. However, rather than emphasizing the concepts of sexual objectification and exploitation, proponents of the view that selling sex represents sexual freedom emphasize that selling sex is an appropriate response to sexual repression and control. The thinking is that society controls women through

stigmas, taboos, prejudices, and double standards surrounding sexuality. As such, selling sex can be viewed as a legitimate avenue for women to explore their sexuality and act against sexual guilt and inhibitions instilled by a patriarchal society.

Each of these ideologies about selling sex promotes different assumptions about the motivating factors for selling sex. For example, taking the perspective that selling sex is violence supports the idea that free consent to sell sex is highly unlikely or impossible, and that motivations to sell sex stem from external forces rather than internal motivators or choices. In contrast, the viewpoint that selling sex is legitimate work supports the notion that women are motivated to sell sex in the same fashion they are motivated to engage in any kind of work, when the ratio of benefits to costs is greatest for this work in comparison to other available work opportunities. When selling sex is viewed as a profession, consent can be thought of as being *more* explicit than in non-paid sexual encounters, because a priori agreements are made about the specific nature and length of sexual interaction. Finally, the perspective that selling sex represents sexual freedom promotes the idea that women are motivated to sell sex as a way to explore and express their sexual desires and emancipate themselves. From this perspective, it is possible that women find it intrinsically exciting and pleasurable to sell sex, which is in direct contrast to the notion that women say selling sex is a positive experience only as a way to cope with their *true* subjugation to external forces, an idea sometimes promoted by those who believe selling sex is violence.

Each of these ideologies about selling sex promotes different assumptions about the consequences of selling sex. The ideology that selling sex is equivalent to violence, rape, and sexual slavery naturally leads to the assumption that selling sex will result in post-traumatic stress and a host of other mental health problems for those subjected to this experience. In contrast, the ideology that selling sex is legitimate work does not presuppose that selling sex would cause mental health concerns; however, consideration is given to the social stigmatization and legal status of this work and the potentially associated negative consequences. Finally, the ideology that selling sex represents sexual freedom, with the notion that selling sex provides healthy sexual exploration and liberation from personal guilt and taboos, suggests that selling sex could result in positive psychological growth and greater well-being.

A final implication of the divergent ideologies about selling sex is that each of the viewpoints tends to promote different goals for responding to the sale of sex. Those who view selling sex as violence will fight for the abolition of the commercial sale of sex to protect those being harmed by it, taking the stance that selling sex harms women even if legalized or decriminalized (Farley, 2004; Raymond, 2004). They may also target the socioeconomic forces that contribute to women selling sex for survival purposes and prioritize creating viable alternative options for women. For additional abolition arguments, see Pateman (1988, 1999) and Raymond (2013). In contrast, those who maintain that selling sex is legitimate work often argue that selling sex should be decriminalized or legalized to give women an autonomous choice whether or not to engage in this activity. Those taking this perspective tend to focus on minimizing stigma and prejudice directed at women who sell sex and offering these women the respect of any type of worker. For reviews of legalization, see Sanders, O'Neil, and Pitcher (2018) or Weitzer (2012). Finally, of the three ideological stances,

the argument that selling sex represents sexual freedom is the least commonly heard in public discourse, but similarly promotes the goals of decriminalization or legalization and destigmatization of selling sex. For example, Thompson (2000) argued that selling sex can be a tool of empowerment that allows women who choose it as a career to exercise personal power, economic freedom, and sexual autonomy, but that this can only occur if selling sex is decriminalized: “Only through a system of decriminalization can the social stigma associated with prostitution be erased, granting the freedom to choose prostitution as a respectable occupation” (pp. 217–128).

Even though those who adhere to different ideologies hold vastly different viewpoints with different implications for selling sex, there are points of commonality that are worth emphasizing, particularly with regard to their end goals. First, of importance to almost all those engaged with this topic is their care and concern for women’s wellbeing and a desire for women to be empowered. All agree that consent is essential (whether or not they believe it is possible) and that human trafficking is abhorrent. Further, spokespeople on all sides maintain that what is needed is for women to have true alternatives. That is, even those who view selling sex as legitimate work do not necessarily believe that it is ideal work, or that it is suitable work for all, or even most, women.

Our Approach

Although we acknowledge that what is known about women selling sex is influenced, to a certain extent, by the ideological views of those researching this topic, we made efforts to take a neutral approach within our review of the literature. We include research on the basis of criteria about the research topic, sample, methodology, and publication type outlined in the section about the goals of this book, without favoring or excluding research on the basis of whether it supports any particular ideology about selling sex. That is not to say we claim to be personally value free with regard to a topic as controversial as selling sex. For example, some of our own values are guided by the belief in a mind–body–spirit connection. However, the purpose of this book is not to persuade or argue for an ideological perspective and we have made efforts to include research findings on the basis of objective inclusion criteria rather than personal convictions.

We approach this project on the basis of our professional interests and training in the fields of Clinical Psychology (EKM) and Industrial/Organizational Psychology and Health Management (BEP). My (EKM) interest in the topic was first sparked while growing up in the Netherlands at a time in which there were ongoing discussions surrounding the tolerance and then legalization of prostitution. For a period of time, the government’s stance was that selling sex was a job like any other, meaning it was advertised by employment agencies and sex workers registered with the chamber of commerce, paid taxes, and joined trade unions. Many of these circumstances remain