

Predictors of Violence, Traumatic Stress, and Burnout in Sex Work

by

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Predictors of Violence, Traumatic Stress, and Burnout in Sex Work, PhD dissertation 2019,
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Abstract

This dissertation reports and discusses the findings of an online survey of 339 sex workers in Canada and the United States concerning their experiences of traumatic stress, burnout, and violence by clients, their working conditions and environment, and their perceptions and experiences of their clients. The survey was designed to collect data on the prevalence of harm and distress among sex workers across the various contexts and locations in which sex work is bought, as well as on how harm and distress in sex work relate to client behaviours and characteristics, structural factors such as sex work stigma and racial or ethnic identity, and protective factors such as working conditions and social cohesion.

The 339 sex workers surveyed reported very high levels of traumatic stress, with at least half the respondents reporting levels of traumatic stress consistent with a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis. Respondents also reported a very high prevalence of violent clients, as nearly half of the clients were reported to be violent. The prevalence of violence by clients was somewhat lower, with half of respondents experiencing violence occasionally and 25% of respondents reporting violence as a rare occurrence. Burnout levels among the surveyed workers

were also high; half the sample reported levels of burnout above the accepted threshold for detecting burnt-out workers. A higher prevalence of clients perceived as adhering to hegemonic masculinity norms significantly predicted higher levels of traumatic stress as well as a higher prevalence of violent clients. Also, a higher prevalence of clients motivated by their inability to access non-commercial sex due to a physical or mental disability or lack of social skills significantly predicted higher levels of violence by clients and higher prevalence of violent clients. More control over working conditions significantly predicted lower levels of traumatic stress, and higher levels of social cohesion significantly predicted lower levels of burnout. Sex work stigma significantly predicted variation in the prevalence of violence by clients, prevalence of violent clients, levels of traumatic stress, and levels of burnout in the surveyed sex workers.

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PREVIEW

A Note on Terminology and a Reflective Statement

"There are various words for that kind of woman; none of them flattering," as the fictional president of Atlantic City Women's Temperance League scornfully says in Martin Scorsese's award-winning series *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010–2014). As is the case with all closeted social practices (Sedgwick, 2007), people have long been fond of resorting to euphemisms when referring to sex workers. However, throughout the past century, those calling to take sex work out of the closet and confront its realities—whether as violence against women or as an extremely stigmatized service industry—have only added to the contested multiplicity of names and terms. This enduring terminological unrest with regard to sex work is indicative of our profound social uncertainty and ambivalence about the commodification and consumption of sexual services.

Sex workers have always carried most of the costs and navigated most of the risks resulting from such social ambivalence and hypocrisy, most notably in comparison to their clients. Social work is always done in the midst of societal uncertainties, ambiguities, and conflict and is ultimately about the specific lives of those who navigate the concrete complexities of such circumstances. Social work is, therefore, mostly about addressing the gap between the way things are called and the way they are experienced by specific people.

The terms "sex work" and "sex worker" were coined in 1978 by the sex workers' rights activist Carol Leigh (Nagle, 2013) and have since become the common affirmative—non-stigmatizing—terms for those who sell sexual services (sex workers) and for the act of providing such services (sex work). Yet advocates of the abolition of the sex industry reject such affirmative framings of commercial sex and insist on the need to retain the negative connotations of the term "prostitution," which, in their view, befits the violating and abhorrent nature of the phenomenon. Having said that, they still reject the term prostitute itself and advocate instead the expressions

“prostituted woman” and “a woman in prostitution” as these more accurately express the circumstances afflicting such women (Banyard, 2016; Ekman, 2013). While critical of the stigmatizing effects of the term prostitute as denoting “a certain kind of woman,” they nevertheless fully embrace the verb “to prostitute” as denoting a violating and abhorrent instrumentalization of a person—literally an abuse (ab-use)—of a person for the unearned profit and non-mutual enjoyment of another. The frequent metaphoric use of the verb “to prostitute” since biblical times exemplifies its unique meaningfulness.

It is the immense amount of meaning packed into the term prostitution that the term sex work aims to avoid, suggesting a lean description in the hope of promoting a fresh and unbiased analysis instead. Abolitionists, however, contest the pretense that the term sex work is merely descriptive, arguing that the term normalizes the practice by suggesting it to be a form of labour rather than violence perpetrated against the alleged worker.

These are not merely semantic brawls. Given that language is not only a medium of communication but also an organ of perception, social change is always conditioned and constrained by changes in language. Following the feminist philosopher of science Sandra Harding’s notion of objectivity as fairness rather than value neutrality (Harding, 2015), I use the terms sex work and sex worker in this dissertation because they are the fairest terms available. Terminology wars have the unfortunate consequence of becoming a way in which people signal their camp allegiance well before they have presented their actual argument. The terms sex work and sex worker typically suggest the person using them is an advocate of sex workers rights and decriminalization or legalization rather than the abolition of the sex industry.

Here I wish to reiterate the above-mentioned social work ethos of addressing the gap between the way things are called and talked about and the way they are experienced by specific

people. I believe that, at our current historical junction, anyone hearing or reading the terms sex work and sex worker is automatically reminded of other more colloquial terms, such as prostitution. Indeed, the mere use of the term sex work invites some reflection on the gap between colloquial language and the issue (even if just to sneer at “political correctness”). Therefore, in this study, the terms sex work and sex workers are consistently used, even when describing the arguments and findings of researchers and theorists who do not use these terms.



One’s position in social space, where the dimensions are axes of social stratification (e.g., class, gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality) and one’s position, described in terms of an intersection of these axes, generates epistemological biases. According to feminist standpoint theory (Hartsock, 1998; Hekman, 1997) and its subsequent refinement in intersectional feminism (McCall, 2005), research is never done from a privileged, disembodied, and disembedded perspective (indeed this may only be a lingering remnant of the Divine point of view). Rather, research is always done by people who experience the world through a specific body and from within a specific social context and trajectory.

This calls for a short reflective statement of one’s position in social space, its possible epistemological biases and blind spots, and any strategies employed so as to address these. This is similar to the idea of the limitations section of this dissertation, allowing the reader to take the researcher’s social location and past trajectory into account.

I am, currently, a middle-class, cisgender, gay, Jewish man, newly immigrated to Canada after spending my first 30 years in Israel and another two years in South Africa. I neither sell nor buy sex. Growing up gay in Israel of the 1990s, I first became familiar with the sex industry around the age of 16 due to the overlap and porous boundaries separating the (at the time) still clandestine

Israeli gay scene and the sex industry. I had a very different encounter with the sex industry when I worked in a large youth homeless shelter in downtown Toronto and became involved in a program for young women escaping sex trafficking. For the purpose of this study, I have held frequent informal interactions with sex workers and sex workers rights activists, both in-person and via social media.

PREVIEW

Chapter 1 Introduction and Overview

This dissertation reports and discusses the findings of an online survey of 339 sex workers in Canada and the United States, concerning their experiences of traumatic stress, burnout, and violence by clients, their working conditions and environment, and their perceptions and experiences of their clients. The survey was designed to collect data on the prevalence of harm and distress among sex workers across the various contexts and locations in which sex work is bought, as well as on how harm and distress in sex work relates to client behaviours and characteristics, structural factors such as sex work stigma and racial or ethnic identity, and protective factors such as working conditions and social cohesion. The following section presents the policy debates structuring the problem addressed by this research, the theoretical approaches underpinning these debates, and the study itself as it is detailed in each of the following chapters.

On Monday, December 31, 2018, The Israeli Parliament—the Knesset—approved a bill criminalizing the purchase of sexual services as well as being in a location chiefly used for buying sex, such as a brothel (Staff, 2018). The bill was embedded within a wider policy aimed at establishing the criminality of buying sex as a public norm and supporting sex workers transition into alternative employment. In approving the bill, Israel adopted the so-called Nordic model (Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Yttergren & Westerstrand, 2016), first introduced in Sweden in 1999 (Ekberg, 2004; Levy, 2014) and since adopted by Finland (2006), Iceland (2009), Norway (2009), Canada (2014), Northern-Ireland (2015), and France (2016).

The Nordic model reframes sex work as violence perpetrated by the client (as well as anyone else profiteering from the selling of sex). Its growing adoption by countries around the world completes an epochal policy transformation: from viewing sex work as a problem of social

order (public decency and public health) to confronting sex work as a problem of gender relations and inequality (Sanders & Campbell, 2014). Its underlying vision equates sex work with slavery and calls for the abolition of the commodification of sexual services in the same way the commerce in slaves was mostly abolished throughout the nineteenth century. It aims to bring about a society that regards the selling and buying of sex as heinous and illegitimate just like the buying and selling of human beings into slavery.

In a special discussion in the Knesset on March 1, 2017, the Swedish ambassador to Israel stated that in 1999 Sweden had criminalized the purchase of sex but not the selling of sex, in accordance with its view that selling sex is not a choice but rather a symptom of extreme social marginality and distress. Sweden regards the criminalization of the purchase of sexual services as only one component in an overall strategy to eradicate the sex industry and sexual trafficking. The ambassador concluded that after 18 years, the Swedish public widely supports the model, and that data proves the efficacy of the model in the fight to end sex work.

Norway's ambassador to Israel added that the criminalization of the purchase of sex has an important role in reducing the market for sex, sexual trafficking, and the abuse of women everywhere. Noting the related issue of sex tourism, the ambassador pointed out that Norwegians may also be persecuted in Norway for the purchase of sex abroad. However, he also stated that there is an ongoing public debate in Norway concerning the Nordic model and that while data from 2014 did show a 20% decline in the consumption of sex for pay, others have explained this decline as sex work merely becoming more clandestine and, as such, more violent and dangerous (available on the Knesset website:

<https://m.knesset.gov.il/News/PressReleases/pages/press010317-m9.aspx>). The ambassadors' claims are supported by the findings of a 2017 scoping review that looked at the evidence of the consequences of criminalizing the purchase of sex in Sweden (Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017).

It is noteworthy that, unlike in Sweden and Norway, people who sell sex and men who buy sex, were not represented and involved in the Israeli legislation process. Due to disagreement about who really speaks for sex workers, the Nordic model has not been developed and implemented in other countries with sex workers involved in the process as key stakeholders (Danna, 2012). In this, the Nordic model repeats the practice that people living with HIV/AIDS since the 1980s and people living with disabilities since the 1990s, influentially condemned as “nothing for us without us” (Stone, 1997).

The same year that a bill criminalizing the purchase of sex was first introduced in the Knesset, 2009, three Ontario sex workers challenged the constitutionality of provisions of Canada’s Criminal Code relating to the sale of sex in the Ontario Superior Court. They argued that the Criminal Code provisions increased the risks faced by sex workers and were a key source of their stigmatization and resulting discrimination (*Bedford v. Canada*, 2010; Lowman & Louie, 2012; Shaver, Lewis, & Maticka-Tyndale, 2011; Waltman, 2014). At the time, the criminal law did not prohibit the selling or buying of sex but did prohibit public communication for the purpose of prostitution, operating bawdy-houses, and living on the avails of prostitution. These provisions were arguably preventing sex workers from safely selling sex, because, in effect, any indoor location where sex is sold and bought—including the sex workers own home—becomes a bawdy house; anyone involved in the facilitation of the selling and buying of sex (even a receptionist, a driver, a security officer, etc.) is guilty of living on the avails. Finally, the definition of communication for the purpose of prostitution was vague and broad so as to prohibit any form of street-based sex work effectively.

In other words, these sex workers did not ask the State to help them stop selling sex (as assumed by the Nordic model), but to stop preventing them from selling sex safely. The Crown defended the disputed legislation by arguing that sex work is “inherently harmful” (Canada 2009,

para. 1), adding later that “[i]t is the practice of prostitution in any venue, exacerbated by efforts to avoid the law that is the source of the risk of harm to prostitutes” (Canada 2011, p. 2). That is, sex work cannot be practised without harm because it is in itself harm, and, therefore, cannot be sold or bought safely. Any further harm and risks afflicted due to the criminality of sex work should hence be seen as a deterrent.

Over 25,000 pages of evidence were submitted to the court in aid of determining whether the occupational health and safety of sex workers are compromised by the criminalization of sex work, or whether sex work is inherently harmful and risky. Put differently, does the right to security of people who sell sex trump society’s right to forbid the commodification of sex and prevent the emergence of markets for sexual services? In 2013, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the existing laws relating to the selling of sex were indeed unconstitutional since they violated sex workers’ right to security (*Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford*, 2013).

The sex workers and activists involved in this effort wished to promote a decriminalization of sex work within a labour-rights and harm-reduction framework (Shaver et al., 2011), similar to the one adopted by New Zealand in 2003 (G. Abel, Fitzgerald, Healy, & Taylor, 2010; Harrington, 2012; Shaver et al., 2011; Wahab & Abel, 2016). The sex workers and advocates involved in this campaign promoted a vision of a society in which sex work was fully decriminalized and destigmatized just like homosexuality was in the last decades of the twentieth century. Arguably, normalizing the commodification of sexual services will provide sex workers with the labour protections already available to other legal occupations; the sex industry will be able to organize and establish standards and procedures guaranteeing the occupational safety and wellbeing of the workers. However, in November 2014, Canada enacted *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act* (Bill 36) that treats sex work as a form of sexual exploitation and denounces and prohibits the purchase of sexual services (D. of J. Government of

Canada, 2014). In spite of certain campaign promises, this decision was not reversed by the Trudeau government (Comment, 2018), which may be merely following public sentiment in this matter (“(1) Majority of Ontarians oppose any change to current prostitution laws,” 2018).

The second chapter of this dissertation presents the theoretical framework of the study. It begins by describing two competing approaches, or visions, to the question of sex work. The first, underlying the Nordic model, is the abolitionist vision, grounded in radical feminism. It sees sex work as a form of violence against women and, as such, a site and context of exploitation, abuse, and trauma. It views the commodification of sex as incompatible with a just, decent, and gender-equal society (Dworkin, 1993; Ekman, 2013; Farley, 2004; Jeffreys, 2008). Deploring the purchase of sex as a patriarchal practice, advocates of this approach point out the sexual entitlement underpinning the practice of buying sex and its ideological function within the reproduction and stabilization of gender inequality.

The other feminist approach, grounded in sex-positive and the intersectional critique of radical feminism, sees sex work as a matter of sex worker rights (Bernstein, 1999, 2012; Crago, 2008; Gall, 2006; Meulen, Durisin, & Love, 2013), arguing that existing labour legislation is, in fact, sufficient to address all the occupational health and safety concerns of sex workers if only enforced on the sex industry. Denying that the practice of selling sex is, in itself, a form of violence, advocates of sex workers’ rights, see the stigmatization of sex work as the root of the problem. They claim that the violence and abuse that currently pervade the sex industry would disappear once sex workers are allowed to organize and institutionalize their profession with equal open access to institutional resources such as licensing and regulatory bodies (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000).

The two approaches, while commonly seen and presented as diametrically opposed, may, in fact, be more profitably reframed as complementary. Agency in the context of oppression (such as that existing under patriarchal conditions) may be consistent and in a sense complicit in oppressive and violent dynamics and circumstances (Madhok, 2014). Sex work may be viewed as both labour and violence. Aiming to bring both approaches together and collect evidence to inform the ongoing policy debate, this study articulates the arguments of both approaches into concrete theoretical constructs, which are then operationalized, measured, modelled, and tested (as detailed in Chapter 2).

Harm and distress in sex work are articulated through the constructs of traumatic stress and violence as well as through the occupational health construct of burnout. The stigmatization of sex workers—sex work stigma—and social cohesion articulate the decriminalization approach's stress on structural factors and protective factors within the work environment. Finally, the abolitionist claim that the buying of sex is part of a patriarchal repertoire of masculine gender practices is articulated through the construct of hegemonic masculinity—the embodied gender ideology of male supremacy. The construct of hegemonic masculinity, together with the construct of violence, brings the men who buy sex—the clients—into the analysis, who have so far been perceived and studied as a separate issue with very little interaction between the two fields of inquiry (the notable exception being Sanders, 2013a).

The abolitionist approach and the decriminalization approach have each guided extensive empirical research, some of which contain explicit references to policy and some do not. As shown in Chapter 3, reviewing the findings of the empirical research currently available, the review, assessment, and amalgamation of evidence on sex work are still rudimentary and far from sufficient for proper research-informed policy analysis and design regarding the sex industry.

At the same time, in support of the abolitionist approach, studies have shown that sex workers consistently report high levels of traumatic stress and violence. A study conducted from a decriminalization perspective, and the only study so far to measure burnout levels, found mild levels of burnout ([Vanwesenbeeck, 2005](#)). Sex work has been shown to be extremely diverse and heterogenous, with significant differences in levels of distress and harm as well as in control over working conditions between different sites of finding and serving clients. At the same time, sex workers were shown to be highly stigmatized and commonly discriminated against when trying to access healthcare, social services, and housing. Sex workers report they are most discriminated against by the police, who were found to be consistently abusive and unresponsive to sex workers seeking help. The men who buy sex have so far been shown to be highly diverse and, in fact, undistinguishable from the majority of men who never buy sex. Motivations for buying sex were multiple, and some evidence suggests that the men who buy sex cluster around several types, some more violent and abusive than others.

The specific gap in the literature this study addresses is, therefore, the prevalence and predictors of harm and distress in sex work, specifically those relating to clients, to working conditions and environment, and to structural factors such as stigma. These are the three issues suggested by the Bedford case and the subsequent enactment of the criminalization of clients model: (1) the harmfulness of sex work; (2) the efficacy and significance of working conditions environment and stigma; (3) highlighting the clients as key source of harm in sex work and what may be the best form of state intervention in this regard (*Bedford v. Canada*, 2010).

Chapter 4 presents the model, research questions, design, and methods. It details how the study constructs were operationalized and assesses the extent to which we may regard each of the scales used as reliably and consistently measuring the underlying construct. Noting the lack

of consistent and validated measures for studying sex work, a significant intended contribution of this study is the validation analyses carried out and the various insights gained for them.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study. The 339 surveyed sex workers reported very high levels of traumatic stress, with at least half the respondents reporting levels of traumatic stress consistent with a PTSD diagnosis. Respondents also reported a very high prevalence of violent clients, as almost every second client was reported to be violent. The prevalence of violence by clients was somewhat lower, with half of the respondents experiencing violence occasionally and only 25% of the respondents reporting violence as a rare occurrence. Burnout levels among the surveyed workers were also high with half the sample reporting levels of burnout above the accepted threshold for detecting burnt-out workers. A higher prevalence of clients perceived as adhering to hegemonic masculinity norms significantly predicted higher levels of traumatic stress as well as a higher prevalence of violent clients. Also, a higher prevalence of clients motivated by their inability to access non-commercial sex due to a physical or mental disability or lack of social skills significantly predicted higher levels of violence by clients and a higher prevalence of violent clients. Greater control over working conditions significantly predicted lower levels of traumatic stress, and a higher level of social cohesion significantly predicted lower levels of burnout. Sex work stigma significantly predicted the variation in the prevalence of violence by clients, prevalence of violent clients, levels of traumatic stress, and levels of burnout in the surveyed sex workers.

Chapter 6 discusses and situates these findings. Both the claims of the abolitionist approach (sex work as violence against women) and the decriminalization approach (sex workers rights) are consistent with the high levels of traumatic stress, burnout, and violence by clients reported by the surveyed workers. The abolitionist approach predicts extreme levels of harm and distress as merely the nature of sex work, while the decriminalization approach predicts these