Prostitution Push and Pull: Male and Female Perspectives

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Smith, Grov, Seal, and McCall’s (2012) analysis, focusing on how young men become, and stay, involved in male escorting, is a welcome contribution to the still relatively thin male sex worker literature. For this study group, notably supportive working surroundings, effective coping strategies, and a growing sense of “self-efficacy” eventually turn sex work into an increasingly comfortable experience and viable moneymaking option. In this commentary, I add some reflections from a broader perspective to these insights. I also consider some evidence on the numbers of men and women in sex work and make some observations on male versus female positions related to push and pull factors, stigma, and the experience of sex work.

Introduction

The question why people enter prostitution persists as a widely debated question in scientific research on sex work. Until the 1990s, this literature focused almost exclusively on female prostitutes and almost exclusively on the Western world. It is by now difficult to believe that the early studies—simmering with abhorrence, incomprehension, and fascination—predominantly looked at individual prostitutes’ presumed “evil characters” or “sick personalities.” More recently, albeit hesitantly at first, a proposition has come to prevail of sex work as a rational, financially motivated choice by adult women in a context of limited (other) career possibilities. At the same time, two developments have widened the scope of the prostitution literature to a more international, global perspective: the HIV epidemic and the worldwide increasing migration. With HIV-related issues dominating the literature from the beginning of the 1980s onward, the question of why women enter sex work somewhat faded into the background. However, growing migration and connected discussions about trafficking have put it in the middle of scientific as well as political debate again. There is now a growing body of literature addressing the exchange of sex for money as a complex social phenomenon firmly grounded in social, economic, political, criminal, and sexual relations in which many actors play a role—policymakers, health care workers, and a so-called rescue industry (Agustīn, 2007) included.

Among all that is now being written on sex work, research on male prostitutes and their background motives for sex work is only beginning to constitute somewhat more than the proverbial needle in the haystack. Therefore, the analysis by Smith et al. (2012) on how young men become, and stay, involved in male escorting is a welcome contribution to the sex work literature. As the authors have shown, the literature on male sex workers compares to that on female prostitutes, first, in the dominance of deviance models and, later on, on the focus on HIV transmission risk. Importantly, Smith et al. (2012) go beyond these limited perspectives by joining the currently expanding trend of looking at sex work as an opportunity rather than as a problem and, even more significant, as a process of rational choice within a certain social context rather than as an (unfortunate) individual inclination. They propose a social cognitive view of sex work as the outcome of a reciprocal interaction between (facilitative) surroundings, (supportive) experiences and cognitions, and (proactive) behaviors. They describe a group of male sex workers in one escort agency that, after initial acquaintance with future colleagues, actively explored its prostitution possibilities. For the young men under study, notably supportive working surroundings, effective coping strategies, and a growing sense of “self-efficacy” eventually turned sex work into an increasingly comfortable experience and viable moneymaking option.

In this commentary, I intend to add some reflections from a broader perspective to Smith et al.’s (2012)
insights for this specific sample. I do not claim exhaustiveness in any way. I will make only some observations on male versus female positions related to push and pull factors, stigma, and coping in prostitution. I start with a short consideration of the number of men and women in sex work.

Number of Men and Women in Sex Work

Figures on the numbers of men and women ever having engaged in the exchange of sex for money vary widely internationally, no doubt partly because of differences in research methodologies. Recent figures for the Netherlands are relatively high. In 2006, more than 3% of both men and women in the adult population (19 to 69 years of age) reported ever having received money for sex (Bakker & Vanwesenbeeck, 2006). In other countries (as in the Netherlands 25 years ago), the prevalence is mostly found to be around 1%. The high prevalence in 2006 is possibly due to increasing readiness to report in connection to increasing normalization of prostitution during recent decades in the Netherlands.

However, the fact that the percentages for women and men are very similar is perhaps even more striking than their numbers. And among young populations, figures for boys are often even higher than those for girls. We found 2% of Dutch boys in the ages between 12 and 25 to report ever having received money or another reward for sex, as opposed to 1% among girls in the same age group (de Graaf, Meijer, Poelman, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2005). Some recent Scandinavian studies had comparable results. In Sweden, 1.8% of boys versus 1.0% of girls in a sample of secondary school pupils declared they had received money or another reimbursement for sex (Svedin & Priebe, 2007). For Norway, these figures were 2.1% and 0.6%, respectively (Pedersen & Hegna, 2003). In the United States, two-thirds of the 3.5% of adolescents (grades 7 through 12) who had ever exchanged sex for drugs or money were boys (Edwards, Iritani, & Hallfors, 2006). Research in Québec, however, found a higher percentage among girls (6% versus 2%; Lavioie, Thibodeau, Gagné, & Hébert, 2010).

It remains to be determined how we should explain these results. Maybe boys (in the Western world) are more willing to report selling sex. Maybe homosexual older men (or possibly heterosexual older women) are more willing to pay boys for sex than heterosexual (older) men are to pay girls. Maybe heterosexual men have relatively easy access to sex with younger girls in a romantic context or pretext. Whatever the explanation for these sex differences in reporting, they are at odds with the undeniable truth that the size of the male (either homosexual or heterosexual) sex work industry is still considerably smaller than the female sex work industry, although it is definitely growing. In the Netherlands, about 5% of sex workers are male and about the same percentage are transsexuals (TAMPEP, 2009). Thus, it seems that boys’ reports refer to relatively occasional and short-lived experiences that may be part of a youthful sexual exploration. The limited evidence that exists on young people’s motives for selling sex points to a variety and often a combination of possibilities (e.g., van de Walle, Picavet, van Berlo, & Verhoeff, 2011), much as there is among the adult population.

It’s All about the Money

Considering entry or background motives for sex work, four elements stand out: financial, sexual, recreational motives, and coercion (i.e., trafficking). All of these are bound to play a role for women as well as for men but, noting that the sex work business is firmly rooted in (unequal) gender relations in sex and finance, most likely are not equally strong. For both sexes, however, the number one motive for engaging in commercial or exchange sex is, without a doubt, earning money. Sex work is often chosen from a situation of limited other moneymaking options or is, economically speaking, simply the most favorable alternative. Particularly the younger sex workers can obtain earnings in sex work that they could not obtain anywhere else. The flexibility in working hours also makes combining it with other responsibilities, such as child care, relatively easy.

In one of the few studies that explicitly compared female, male, and transgender sex workers, Weinberg, Shaver, and Williams (1999) found evidence in San Francisco that the financial need among women was relatively high and that men, more often than women, had other sources of income on the side. In light of women’s less comfortable professional and life options, a pervasive unequal income distribution, and the worldwide feminization of poverty of late, economic factors are most probably more of a push factor for women than they are for men. Indeed, for large groups of female prostitutes around the world, sex work is often the only way to earn a living and sustain their families—a background for prostitution that does not apply for men or boys in the same way. Economic factors are more of a pull factor for women as well, as the demand for female sex workers by (affluent) men far outweighs the demand for male sex workers. Basically, we see large groups of female (and to a much lesser extent male) sex workers “follow the money” and travel or migrate to wherever large groups of men with money can be found. A telling example of such (geo-economic) developments is given by Bradley (2010), who observed that prostitution increased enormously in the area around the Persian Gulf because of the oil boom in the 1970s and the connected new generation of Arab men with money in their

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1I use the words prostitution and sex work interchangeably, although I endorse that sex work is the more correct and adequate descriptor (with prostitution useable mostly in a historical sense).
pockets. Bradley also showed that Saudi and Kuwaiti men, having grown extremely rich on oil, seek abroad what they cannot get in their own Islamic fundamentalist countries and have become the largest group of sex tourists in the Middle East. Wherever they go, the number of sex workers multiplies. Wherever there is money, there is commercial sex.

And Sometimes It’s about Sex

The second most often discussed background factor for sex work is early sexual victimization, most certainly for female sex workers (for a review, see Vanwesenbeeck, 2001). However, this literature is characterized by strongly contradictory findings and methodological limitations, most importantly related to the specificity of the group of sex workers under study (Abramovich, 2005). When street workers are studied, for instance, the prevalence of child sexual abuse is much higher than when a more diverse group is the focus. Significantly fewer studies have looked at male sex workers and their sexual histories. Nevertheless, there is some evidence for associations between child sexual abuse and trading sex among men as well, at least when investigated among relatively vulnerable groups such as injection drug users or samples of patients at sexually transmitted infection (STI) clinics (e.g., Braitstein et al., 2006; Senn, Carey, Vanable, Coury-Doniger, & Urban, 2006). It still remains to be seen to what extent early sexual victimization is a background factor for the diverse population of male sex workers as a whole. It seems, however, that (early) experiences of sexual victimization and harassment are much more often mentioned by female than by male sex workers. This may have to do with the fact that men are less open about their sexually abusive experiences in the first place. It may also have to do with the much higher prevalence of abuse and victimization among women compared to men. Particularly for women, sex work is often a good alternative to, for instance, a working situation in which they are considered fair prey and constantly being harassed by their coworkers, or to financial dependence in an abusive intimate relationship (e.g., Castillo, Rangel Gomoez, & Delgado, 1999).

For male prostitutes, sexual fun rather than victimization is sometimes stressed. Weinberg and colleagues (1999) found striking differences in sexual enjoyment with a client. Both in comparison to male and to transsexual workers, women much more often never enjoyed their commercial sex and were much less likely to experience orgasm. Female sex workers also seemed to have a relatively regular, busy, professional work schedule. A recreational element is less likely to be part of women’s sex work than of men’s, these authors concluded. Among young people exchanging sex for money or goods in the Netherlands, it was particularly the heterosexual young men who reported (sexual) enjoyment with, in this case, the female partners they catered, whereas homosexual young men showed more ambivalence about their exchanges with men (van de Walle et al., 2011). Heterosexual male sex workers may have altogether different working attitudes than their homosexual colleagues (e.g., de Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, van Zessen, Straver, & Visser, 1994). Homosexual men in different stages of coming out may also experience their commercial exchanges differently, notably as more pleasant when also functional in this respect. We also observed that transsexual sex workers in the Netherlands often mentioned the confirmation of their sexual and gender identities as a motivation for sex work (Vennix, van Mens, ten Horn, Lavina, van ’t Hof, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2000).

An Ethic of Fun

Motivations relating to (sexual) enjoyment are not absent in female prostitutes’ accounts. In addition to the many freedoms, alternations, and thrills traditionally brought up as attractive, recent studies have stressed no less than a postmodern ethic of fun as a background for the choice for sex work among educated, and largely middle-class, women in Europe (notably England) (Bernstein, 2007). New technologies, particularly the Internet, allowed the women in Bernstein’s study to organize their own work without any interference of third parties and to focus upon a selective, well-paying clientele. These “new technologies of sexual exchange” are still economically motivated but guided by an ethic of fun, sexual experimentation, and freedom (Bernstein, 2007). Bernstein suggested that this is a relatively new strategy by which the present-day, young “petite bourgeoisie” tries to differentiate itself as a modern class. In another study from the United Kingdom it was found that, for a certain group of sex workers, their commercial sexual relationships increasingly mirrored the traditional romance and the emotional intimacies found in “ordinary” relationships (Sanders, 2005). Thus, the limits between commercial and intimate sexuality may fade—at least for some.

Here, as in many other respects, it is important to realize that there are huge varieties in forms and practices of sex work. Sex work is best considered in terms of a continuum ranging from firmly organized forms of sex work to unmediated transactions and chance encounters (Altman, 1999). In some contexts, exchange is not at all uncommon in the average sexual encounter in the first place. This is now increasingly reported from low-income countries, particularly on the African continent (e.g., Dunkle et al., 2004; Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; Penwell-Barnett, Matticka-Tyndale, & HP4RY Team, 2011; van Reeuwijk, 2010; Wamoyi, Wight, Plummer, Mshana, & Ross, 2010; Wojcicki, 2002).
These reports almost exclusively relate to girls and women at the money-receiving end in contexts with strong conservative, heteronormative moralities, double standards, and unequal gender relations. A variety of background motivations is found. Penwell-Barnett and colleagues (2011), for instance, analyzing exchange sex for Nigerian young women, concluded that on the positive side it provides a power niche for those with limited social and economic power, enabling them to seek and access material goods, social status, and sexual experience. The negative side is that it is also a means of coercing unwanted sex via peer and parental pressure in a context of dire poverty and gender inequality.

**Trafficking**

In the past few decades, large-scale migration has at least doubled and the share of female migrants has increased strongly (Monzini, 2005). Discussions of migrant sex workers and trafficking almost exclusively feature women (and a few transgender people), although some young men are bound to travel for sex work as well. In the Netherlands, about 60% of an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 sex workers are reckoned to have migrated into the Netherlands. Some 400 cases of trafficking are brought to the attention of authorities on an annual basis (Daalder, 2007). Estimates of the number of sex workers coerced or trafficked worldwide are often significantly diverse and far apart. This is, first and foremost, due to differences in definition. There is huge international confusion over what exactly comprises trafficking. For some, any coercive or exploitative element is crucial; for others, the crossing of national borders; for yet others, the mediation by third parties. Clearly, the meaning of the concept has once more been expanded under the particular influence of antimigration policies in the Western world and of neoconservative moral positions vis-à-vis prostitution (Cornwall, Correa, & Jolly, 2008). It has been observed that the antitrafficking lobby has not only encouraged the demonization of both prostitution and trafficking but also, in the process, systematically blurred the distinction between the two (Csete & Seshu, 2004). The contention that every migrant sex worker is a deceived victim of evil traffickers is a short-sighted denial of many women’s initiative and agency. As a matter of fact, the extent to which deceit, violence, and coercion is involved varies widely. It is true immigration restrictions are often such that migrant sex workers are dependent on intermediaries, a market that has increasingly been taken advantage of by expanding networks of criminals. Migrants’ financial exploitation is ubiquitous. Sex workers’ poignant lack of rights and protection makes them even more vulnerable than other migrants. But the conflation of female sex work with trafficking is a fundamental mistake. It follows from an analysis of sex work as fundamentally so degrading that no women could freely choose it. This mistake causes a worldwide violation of sex workers’ rights with the argument of protection. It also strongly hampers well-coordinated search and prosecution of criminal traffickers and pimps, and principally forecloses the development of appropriate responses to prevent and fight their crimes (also see Vanwesenbeeck, 2011).

Because there is so much more money to be made on female sex workers in a predominantly heterosexual sex business, they are more often and more violently targeted by organized crime than male sex workers are. Antitrafficking policies and repressive policies in general are also powerfully aimed at female sex workers in particular. Besides their relative vulnerability to all forms of gender-based and stigma-laden victimization, female sex workers in particular are targeted by violence and extortion because of their illegality—not the least of which occurs at the hands of state officials and the police (e.g., Ditmore, 2008). In addition, women are notably cast as victims in a protectionist feminist analysis of prostitution. It seems as if stigma operates from many angles for the female prostitute.

**Gendered Stigma and Coping**

Fundamental to all analyses of the stigma of sex work is the notion that the female prostitute transgresses norms of femininity and female sexual modesty. Under double standards for gender and sexuality, female sex workers in particular are stigmatized as having “a spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963). Male prostitutes may be less affected by stigma because male sex work can be understood within traditional perspectives of masculinity and male sexuality. For instance, Browne and Minichiello (1995) showed for male sex workers in Australia that they succeeded well in avoiding being objectified as sex objects and in deflecting the stigma of sex work away from themselves by using an occupational perspective that associated sex work with masculinity, sexual prowess, work, career, and entrepreneurship. Likewise, it is sometimes suggested that male sex work is inherently less exploitative than female sex work because interactions between two men make for a certain mutual equality that is missing in the interactions between a male client and female seller (see Scott et al., 2005).

In particular, (the relatively small group of) male prostitutes working with female clients may experience commercial sex as least deviating from norms of masculinity, and therefore least threatening of their reputation. Male sex workers working with male clients, on the other hand, may experience double stigma: the stigma of homosexuality and the stigma of commercial sex. However, norms of masculinity are more strongly violated by male homosexuality than they are by casual,
promiscuous, or even commercial sexual behavior. Already having to deal with the stigma of being gay may even facilitate the choice for sex work, as was indeed reported by some of the male escorts in Smith et al.’s (2012) study. There is comparable evidence from female sex workers that the experience of (early) stigma, either as a sexual minority, a gender “deviant,” or a sexual victim, makes it easier to decide to cross the line to become a commercial sex worker or to cope with its reality.

The number of studies on female sex workers’ coping strategies is substantial (for a review, see Vanwesenbeeck, 2005), and those describing men’s experiences of sex work and their ways of managing the stigma involved are growing (e.g., Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, & Halkitis, 2004; Morrison & Whitehead, 2005; Smith et al., 2012). In these studies, the management of double lives and cognitive strategies of rationalization, minimization, and legitimization prevail, for men as well as for women. The standard work by Erving Goffman (1963) on stigma still excellently applies to all sex workers. Stigma calls for heavy-duty identity management and careful organization of one’s social life. There is no doubt that gender affects the extent to which this is experienced as negative or positive. Although I have not come across recent studies explicitly comparing female and male sex workers on stigma and coping, it may be assumed that gendered patterns of coping are present among sex workers as well. This implies that women would be more inclined to use internal coping, men to use external coping. A rough comparison of various accounts gives some reason to believe that shame, guilt, low self-esteem, and self-stigmatization are relatively prevalent among female sex workers.

However, in a study of my own on associations between sex work, coping strategies, and burnout among indoor sex workers (Vanwesenbeeck, 2005), the large differences among (in this case only) female sex workers stand out in particular. Three elements of burnout were distinguished: emotional exhaustion, personal incompetence, and depersonalization. The latter refers to a cold, indifferent, and cynical attitude toward one’s clients as a result of distancing strategies and was found to be the only element on which sex workers as a group significantly differed from other professional groups. On all aspects, variation among study participants was substantial. The level of burnout seemed to be particularly linked to negative social reactions to doing sex work, role conflict, experiences with violence, and lack of a worker-supportive organizational context. In Smith et al.’s (2012) study, notably supportive working conditions in the male escort agency under study gave way to the increased personal competence and positive working experiences of the young men involved. In general, working conditions and the experience of stigma will also be tempered by sex worker specifics such as age, class, and ethnicity. Very young sex workers, sex workers with few other options, and migrant sex workers are more likely to work under negative circumstances and more likely to have hard times managing their identities, stigma, safety, and health.

In Conclusion

Overall, it seems fair to conclude that (most) male sex workers appear to benefit from a somewhat more favorable balance between exploitation and profit when compared to (most) female sex workers. One has only to imagine the many ways in which the qualification slut operates to know that the stigma is harsher and more consequential for women. The alternative stigma of victim is more often applied to women as well. Women in sex work are subject to more profound incomprehension, more often the object of political as well as general (feminist) worry and concern, more often the target of interventions of various kinds. Male sex workers seem to have the better options to “simply be left alone and do their work,” a desire that is voiced by many people in the sex business, or to simply step out when one so wishes. However, under conditions of illegality and repression, male sex workers suffer discrimination and violence as well. They may be somewhat more likely to experience self-determination, autonomy, and control in their work and thus be somewhat less likely to have their health and well-being seriously threatened, but they too experience stigma and its vast social consequences. Therefore, rather than comparing male and female push and pull toward sex work, it seems desirable to work toward the realization of the human and worker rights of all sex workers, male or female, so that at some point there will be less pulling and pushing them about altogether.

References


