

## NINE

“SOME OF THEM, THEY DO RIGHT;  
SOME OF THEM, THEY DO WRONG”:  
MORAL AMBIGUITY AND THE CRITERIA FOR  
HELP AMONG STREET SEX WORKERS<sup>1</sup>

**Jill McCracken<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** Debates surrounding criminalization and legalization are often polarized and occur without including the experiences and expertise of street sex workers. This article places street workers at the center of this conversation and offers perspectives on how these women can “get help” in the context of a system that criminalizes sex work. Drawing upon an ethnographic study conducted in a large city in the southwestern United States, I rhetorically analyze how street workers talk about these issues, thereby illuminating the contradictions and complicated existence of sex work while providing insights into how these systems might be rehabilitated.

I need some help.

—Karen, Street Worker

I think [the community] should try to help them more than arrest them and take them to jail because that’s not really teaching them anything... And when it comes to exchanging, if you find somebody exchanging [sex], help; it takes people to help. Show them the way.

—Ava, Street Worker

I wish I could help them, like me, you know, and help them get sober.

—Olivia, Street Worker

### **Introduction: Criminalization, Morality, and Street Work in Jemez**

Unlike other crimes that are viewed more clearly as having perpetrators and victims, prostitution/sex work is complicated because those who exchange sex, especially on the street, are often viewed not as perpetrators of a crime, but as victims themselves in need of services ranging from housing and employment that provides a living wage to counseling and rehabilitation from systemic and personal violence and abuse. Following from this perception, sex workers' bodies and identities have been presented as both sites of oppression and objectification (Jeffreys 2007; Raymond 2003) as well as the basis for social justice and human rights (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Weitzer 2010). When viewed through the eyes of street workers, each of these perspectives can be validated. As Teela Sanders argues: "Few other jobs attract stigma and marginalization to the same extent as sex work. Also, the fact that selling sex, particularly on the street, is criminalized and continually policed by law-enforcement agencies and community protesters increases the stress and stigma experienced when trying to earn money" (2005, 40).

Drawing on his research in the UK, Roger Matthews explores the relationship between prostitution, the vulnerability of those involved, and their risk of victimization. He argues that in the past ten to fifteen years, "there are a number of signs that attitudes to those women who work on the streets are changing and they are increasingly being seen as victims rather than offenders, being more in need of welfare and support than punishment" (2008, p. 54). One factor that contributes to this process is the growth of "prostitute support agencies" that are taking a central role at the local level in finding solutions to problems associated with prostitution (2008, p. 54). This article places street sex workers' voices at the center of these conversations within the context of a system that criminalizes sex work<sup>3</sup>. Drawing on the discussions surrounding the language and lived reality of

victims/offenders/agents, I explore a concept that was at the core of almost every interview I had with the participants in my ethnographic study—getting help. My examination focuses on how the women who participate in street sex work view the morality of their actions, the relationship between this morality and “getting help”, and how help can be enacted in direct community action.

The following analysis demonstrates how quotidian rhetoric, or the language of the everyday, can be analyzed in order to better understand how goals, agendas, interests, and ideologies are represented and implemented through language.<sup>4</sup> A number of these goals and agendas have historically resulted in policies that render the selling and buying of sex illegal, thereby situate those who sell and purchase sex as criminals. Criminalization often silences the voices of the street workers because the act of exchanging sex for money or other gain, or prostitution, is the focus, rather than the individuals who participate in these activities. And even more ominously, sex workers’ expertise on the material conditions of their lives, including the impact of their physical environments upon their bodies, identities, and spirit, are ignored and therefore lost. Because of its significance in my interviews and the emphasis social service agencies place on providing services, I offer perspectives on how this “help” is understood, obtained, and provided by the women who identify and are identified as in need and want of it.

I place the concept of “getting help” at the center of my analysis in order to offer examples of what such “help” means in practice and how street workers situate themselves in relationship to it. Such an approach necessitates a clear understanding of street sex workers’ beliefs about morality and criminalization in the context of their everyday lives. I arrived at this understanding through the rhetorical analysis of how street workers talk about morality and criminalization, thereby bringing the contradictory and complicated arguments surrounding street sex work to the surface

while providing insights into how this transaction of “help” might be better understood, offered, and received.<sup>5</sup>

I conducted an ethnographic study from 2005 to 2007 in an undisclosed Southwestern city of approximately one million inhabitants, which I call Jemez for the purposes of anonymity.<sup>6</sup> Using Marcus’ (1995) theory of multi-sited ethnography, I conducted my research at multiple sites and employed participant observation and conversation in order to examine how individuals use language and how this use impacts individuals, the community, and policies surrounding street sex work. My research focused upon women on the street who exchange heterosexual sex for money or drugs.<sup>7</sup> In the ensuing subsections, I discuss criminalization, morality, and street work in Jemez before analyzing the ways in which Jemez street workers talk about these concepts. Analysis that follows is embedded with the belief that understanding street workers’ perspectives on the kinds of help that are necessary, as well as their own varied relationships with this help, are critical to constructing effective assistance measures.

### **Criminalization**

Often described as “the world’s oldest profession,” scholars argue that the concept of prostitution is a social construction that is relatively modern, created as an identifiable concept only within the last two hundred years (Karras, 1996; Lerner, 1986; Otis, 1985). Sex work scholar Laura Agustín argues that prior to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century “the buying and selling of sex was treated as one of an array of social offences” and that there “was no word or concept which signified *exclusively* the sale of sexual services” (Agustín, 2005, pp. 9-10). Agustín (2005) further observes that during this time period, middle-class women created the classifications of prostitution and prostitute in order to have someone to “help,” providing not only employment for these rescuers but also an activity that helped them to feel good about themselves. This construction also created a formalized avenue

through which these women were able to inculcate others with their “middle-class” values regarding women’s appropriate role to those whom *they* identified as prostitutes. (McCracken, 2007, p. 17).

Prior to 1910, prostitution per se was not a crime in any state until the federal government enacted the White Slave Traffic Act, also known as the Mann Act. This act criminalized interstate travel of women and girls for “immoral purposes,” focusing specifically on “prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose” (United States Congress, 1910). Although it was passed as a way to *protect* women from what was then known as “white slavery,” it was selectively enforced in political, racist, and sexist reasons (Ditmore, 2010). Ditmore (2010) argues that within ten years of the Mann Act, every state had passed laws criminalizing prostitution. The creation of this concept and subsequent criminalization has encouraged and solidified the marginalized status of people who participate in these activities. Criminalization of prostitution is currently the dominant legislative approach in the U.S.

### **Morality**

The intrinsic intertwining of sex work and (im)morality seriously complicates understandings of the nuanced power relations surrounding sex workers’ victimization, legal status, and relationships with clients and pimps. Sociologist Teela Sanders notes that, for some, sex work “signals a failure in individual morality, a breakdown of cohesive institutions such as marriage and the family” (Sanders, 2005, p. 158). This reality is inseparable from broader gender norms regarding female sexual expression and propriety, as was exemplified in the second-wave feminist debates of the 1980s. Sociologist Wendy Chapkis traces the antecedents of this debate to the early 1900s by drawing upon feminist historian Sheila Jeffreys’ characterization of the beliefs of many prominent suffragists. Such activists were of the opinion that

...the sexualization of women led to her being considered fit for no other career than that of sexual object and affected the opportunities of all women from the “degradation of her temple to solely animal uses”, so that she might take a full part in all the areas of life previously arrogated to man (Jeffreys, qtd. in Chapkis, 2000, p. 11).

Women were either recognized as sexual objects or civil subjects and being recognized as the former obviated the latter. Nonetheless, women’s rights activists who opposed these beliefs argued that “sex could and should be an area of expanded freedom for women” (Chapkis, 2000, p. 11). It was through these debates, Chapkis observes, that the “prostitute thus comes to function as both the most literal of sexual slaves and as the most subversive of sexual agents within a sexist social order” (Chapkis, 2000 p. 12). Against the fabric of such historical neglect, I strive to give my participants’ voices room to speak, argue, and ultimately create varied understandings about morality, sexuality, and the “wrongness” or “not wrongness” of exchanging sex for money as it relates to the concept of “help.”

### **Street Work in Jemez**

Jemez, like many other U.S. cities, does not foster a liberal attitude toward the sex industry and sex-workers’ rights, a fact that is further complicated by its proximity to the Mexican border and associated prevalence of undocumented migration. The Jemez Police Department recorded approximately 950 sex work-related arrests between January 2003 and May 2005, of which approximately 900 were for prostitution, ten for pandering, and five for other sex-worked related offenses.<sup>8</sup> Jemez was identified as a “High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area” by the Office of the National Drug Control and Policy due to its location on the Mexican border at the crossroads of major interstate highways. The

city is a hub for illegal drugs imported via Mexico and Central America, and some communities in Jemez serve as conduits for drug traffickers, resulting in the concentrated presence of gang members, drug dealers, drug users, and men and women exchanging sex for drugs or money.

The Jemez police first started a unit that focused resources on problems affecting the community at large in 2002, one of which was the Dover Project, which was designed to curb violent crime. The Dover Project comprised the Jemez Police Department, the Office on Building Safety, The City Council Ward Office, and six neighborhood associations. In April 2004, Jemez police initiated a deterrence program that targeted the sex workers' clients, known as "johns". The program requires that each client be photographed by police and then given a booklet on prostitution that includes letters from the neighborhood associations explaining the negative impact of prostitution and drug activity on businesses and families.

Within the first five weeks of the program, approximately two hundred men approached undercover agents disguised as prostitutes. Men were not arrested (unless they ran or fought) but their names and other information were recorded along with a warning that, if stopped again for the same offense, arrest was imminent. The goal of this program was to reach out to as many sex workers' clients as possible "and let them know what they're doing is wrong on so many levels" says Eric Roman, commander of one the agency's division. While this program was only one part of the Dover Project, such actions mirror many of the issues that occur throughout the country. Police departments and neighborhood associations organize programs that try to curb prostitution in certain areas, whether by pursuing street workers, their customers, or the owners of the property where prostitution occurs. (McCracken, 2007, pp. 37-44). This article draws upon only a portion of my ethnographic study: my interviews with seventeen women who had or currently were exchanging sex for money or other gain.<sup>9</sup>

### **Wrong, Not Wrong, and the Spaces In Between<sup>10</sup>**

*Prostitution is Morally Wrong:* Prostitution exists on a gradation between “wrong” and “not wrong” for the women I interviewed. At times, there were even contradictions in these beliefs within the same conversation. The foundation of these beliefs is as follows: prostitution is morally wrong, yet, under certain circumstances (which vary based on the viewpoint of the speaker), this belief does not deter the woman from participating in these activities. For example, Ava, a white,<sup>11</sup> twenty-three year old woman who had lived in Jemez for one year, explained,

When I was younger, [I thought] it [prostitution] was totally immoral, wrong, I could never do that, my family would hate me. And then when I got to the point where my family already hated me because I had lost my son [laughs] and I started doing drugs, I was like, oh well, it’s a way to get money.

The moral beliefs with which she grew up were no longer a deterrent once she had lost her family’s approval for other reasons, and no longer stopped her from participating in these activities. Olivia, a fifty-one year old Hispanic woman who had lived in Jemez all of her life, had a similar experience that caused her to note,

I was raised—not religious, but my mother read us the Bible and I read my kids the Bible, and . . . I just knew morally that [prostitution] was wrong, you know? But I didn’t care. I didn’t care. And now I feel bad. . . I find it hard to believe—no, I don’t find it hard to believe, because I know I was doing that; I just find it hard to believe that I was doing that.

*Arrests—Wrong Vs. Not Wrong:* The subject of arrests, in addition to the circumstances of these exchanges, also led to contradictions about the “wrongness” or “not rightness” of prostitution. Of the



seventeen women I interviewed, seven had been arrested for prostitution. One of these women did not mention arrests at all, and nine were never arrested for prostitution. Thirteen of the seventeen women had been arrested for something other than prostitution, including the possession or sale of drugs, trespassing, fraud, or driving under the influence. Less than half of those interviewed had been arrested for prostitution, and yet all of the women focused on the subject of possibly being arrested for exchanging sex for money as a subject of great concern.

Denise self-identified as a white<sup>12</sup> forty-three year old woman who had lived in Jemez for two years and, at the time of the interview, was not exchanging sex for money or drugs. She offered a more contradictory perspective on the morality of prostitution because she viewed the situation as complicated based upon the circumstances of the individual. At one point in the interview Denise said: I mean, at least use protection; if you're going to do it, use protection. Consider the following excerpt from our interview:

Jill: And if they use protection and they want to do it, that's okay?

Denise: Yes. Yeah, I'm not going to downgrade on it, no, because it's . . . I don't think it should be wrong.

Here, Denise clearly states that she does not think prostitution should be considered "wrong." As she said in response to my question, "Do you think—not that [the police] do it, but do you think that they're..."

Denise: Doing wrong by arresting them and locking them up?

Jill: Mmm hmm [yes].

Denise: On some of them, they do right; some of them, they do wrong to them. You know, some of them are out there because that's the only thing that they do to make a living, you know? And other people, they do it just because

they want to do it to have the extra money or extra drugs or whatever extra that they want.

Denise makes a clear distinction between needing money for drugs and money to survive. One choice is wrong, whereas the other is, while not right, at least somewhat understandable. And Denise ties these moral beliefs to the criminal justice system, stating that if a woman has no other means to make a living, then she should not be arrested for these activities, but if she has other means and is working for “extra” money or drugs beyond what she needs to survive, then she *should* be arrested. Denise’s argument is grounded in her own experience and her reasons for exchanging sex for money, which she characterized as follows.

... I mean, I did [exchange sex for money], and that’s because I had three little kids and my old man went to jail and I had no way of supporting these kids. I was at a motel, I was in a strange town, I didn’t know where the hell I was at, and I had three little kids telling me that they were hungry. I didn’t know what to go to or anything, so I did. Yeah, I went out and sold myself five times just to take care of them three babies. And I feel guilty about it now, to this day I do. But at least I knew that my babies ate.

Denise’s statements and their underlying ideologies are complicated at best. And yet they speak to the needs of the individual, with which all of my participants were intimately familiar. Here, the “victim” status becomes more apparent, rather than simply viewing these participants as offenders who commit crimes.

As Laura, a white 36 year old woman who had lived in Jemez for the past four years simply said, “I know it’s not right, and I know it’s not right when I do it.” In response to Laura’s statement, I asked, “So you do think it should be illegal?”

Laura: Illegal, yes.

Jill: You do?

Laura: Yeah.

Jill: Okay. So you're okay with cops arresting people. You think that's okay.

Laura: Well, I don't think that's okay either.

Jill: No?

Laura: I don't want to be arrested.

At my prompting, and in order to clarify her statement, Laura reveals that she believes it is “not right” and it should be illegal, but when the subject of actual arrests is addressed, especially in terms of her own arrest, she doesn't want that “wrongness” of prostitution to be realized. This conversation is the only instance wherein one of my interviewees used the word *right* in the context of morality and prostitution, and in this case, it was to specify that these activities were in opposition to “right” beliefs and actions. No one used the word *right* to refer to prostitution as a correct or morally acceptable action, but rather, they referred to it as “not wrong.” In the context of my interviews, the word *right* was never used as a descriptive of prostitution, which underscores the powerful connection that exists between morality and prostitution even in the minds of those who participate in these activities.

The relationship between arrests and access to services is also complicated. Only one of my participants argued that arrests provide access to services or “getting help.” At the time of our interview Olivia had been homeless for “a couple of years” and was currently living at a shelter. She had been arrested for prostitution “three or four times,” and we had been discussing police activity in response to prostitution when the following exchange took place:

Olivia: Oh, I think they're doing a good job and I think they're in the right. Because. like now, like I said, in the community... It's wrong. It's wrong to do that... It's

against the law, you know? Prostitution. And now that I have a clear mind, *if they could banish it completely, these girls could get help* [emphasis mine].

Jill: If they could what?

Olivia: They could get help, you know? Because they're doing it because of the drugs. If they don't have a job, then they can't buy...kinda theory. I mean, it's not a good theory, but I mean...I think the police are...I pray for them. I mean, I'm glad they're doing that. I'm glad they did that to me, because it helped me, too, in a way.

Jill: How did it help you?

Olivia: It opened my eyes more. It made me more observant, made me [feel] more guilty, more like, "That's wrong," you know? "I can't do that. It's wrong," you know?

Jill: Oh, I see.

Olivia: "I'm going to jail." It made me think more, scared me more.

The underlying belief operating in this statement is that because Olivia was scared of going to jail and felt guilty about participating in these activities because they were judged "wrong" by society and the criminal system, she felt increased pressure not to participate in these activities, which in turn helped her to discontinue participating in these activities. Olivia's story is one of achieving what is morally right, or no longer participating in these activities and using drugs, through the fear of jail or prison. And yet my experiences with Olivia, which occurred over my two-year period of fieldwork, revealed something different. At the time of our interview, Olivia had experienced an extended period of sobriety and movement toward achieving her goals of reconnecting with her family. In our interview Olivia told me that she attributed her sobriety and current status to Mark, a friend and social service agent who had found her on the street and introduced her to the shelter in which she was currently living. As she states:

[Mark said] “We’ve... been out there for eight months looking for you..We’ve been worried about you.” I said, “No, no, no.” Then I was like, “I’m going back out there” [to use drugs]. He said, “No, that’s going to kill you,” because they already talked to the doctors that day [about Olivia’s pneumonia], you know? “Because you’ll die, Olivia,” and he says, “I’m not going to let that happen.” He says, “Give me two weeks. Stay clean for two weeks,” he says, “and I’ll get you a bed.” And the week before, I had already talked to my counselor and she said, “It’s two to four months, you know, the waiting list. I cannot get you in until then.” I said, “I’m going to relapse and then I’m going to die.” She says, “I can’t [help you]. There’s a long wait.” So I said, “I’ll go see Mark,” and I was like, “If you guys don’t help me, I’m going to go get high and die... So Mark said, “Please just give me two weeks. If I can’t do it in two weeks, then go ahead. But just [do it] for me, please just this one time.” I said, “All right, Mark.” But twelve days [later], I’m already unpacking in here [the shelter]. [Mark] can move mountains.

The contradictions in these statements reveal the complications inherent in the narratives told about criminalization and accessing help—even when the women stated that exchanging sex was wrong and that people *should* be arrested for it, when it became personal, arrest was not necessarily the best course of action, especially in terms of “getting help.”

*Prostitution is “not wrong”*: And finally, the perspective expressed by many of the women who participated in my study: Prostitution is not wrong. These responses varied from simply saying it was not wrong to adding certain conditions, such as that it occur between consenting adults or was based on a participant’s past or present circumstances. For example, in response to my question: What do you think of women who participate in sex for money or drugs? Anna, a white forty-three year old woman who

had never been arrested for prostitution, said: “I don’t see anything wrong with it. It’s their body, y’know.” Lisa, a forty-seven year old Hispanic<sup>13</sup> woman who had lived in Jemez her whole life, was living “between places” and looking for an apartment at the time of the interview. Lisa estimated that she had been arrested about thirty times and spoke from years of experience in both exchanging sex and experiencing the justice system. Lisa echoes Anna’s response: “I still don’t see anything wrong with it if it’s a consenting adult.”

The following analysis employs these definitions of “wrong” and “not wrong” to describe how sex workers discuss the need for, the existence of, and the process involved in “getting help”, which most mentioned as a necessity those exchanging sex for money or other gain.

### **The Help Transaction and Street Workers’ Perspectives**

Within each of my interviews with street workers some concept of “help” was discussed, whether in the context of assistance from social service agencies, from family, or even in reference to sex work itself. For instance, when I asked street sex worker Karen the question “What do you call it when people exchange sex for money or drugs?” she replied with a laugh, noting “Ummm, getting help with my money”. Examining street workers’ perspectives of “help” did not yield easy answers, and yet this analysis did reveal insights that can be applied to the current system of criminalization and social service assistance in the United States, as well as contribute to the public’s understanding of street sex work.

“Help” is a concept that can be understood as a transaction between a giver and a receiver. Through this transaction, a power differential is also created and/or realized, because to need help is to state explicitly or imply a lack on the part of the individual has that she cannot fill on her own, whether it involves experiencing

homelessness, hunger, or sickness. Because of this lack, the one who has access to providing this help has more power, particularly in terms of resources or access to resources, than the individual being helped with money, food, medication, housing, programs, or emotional/spiritual support. This results in a power differential within this transaction, particularly since, in many cases, the helper sets the terms of the help that is provided, including where, when, how, how much, and in what format such assistance is given.

To need, ask for, or open oneself up to receiving help implies this lack, as stated above, but it can also imply membership in a group of individuals who cannot meet their own needs, such as those who are experiencing homelessness, addiction or poverty. These groups can be viewed pejoratively by those who are both on the inside and the outside. Membership in these groups occurs on a continuum, as one can move in and out of them and define oneself in relation to these groups—as a member or not—even within the same conversation. My analysis offers examples of help and the ways in which this help determines the women's membership in groups that need these services.

### **What Does Help Look Like?**

At its most basic, help frequently took the form of food, housing, medicine, and access to programs. As Karen, a white, forty-nine year old migrant woman who had lived in Jemez for the past twenty years said of social service workers “I asked them to help me with food. And they refused me. They said, ‘No, we don’t do that.’ And I said, ‘I need some help.’” In another example, Donna, a forty-seven year old woman who self-identified as white and Cherokee and had lived in Jemez for twenty years stated: “I’m bipolar, and I used to take medication, and I haven’t for years and . . . I didn’t want to be like my father—mental, you know, labeled that. . . . But I decided I need help. So I’m trying to get back. I think I’m going to apply for SSI [Supplemental Security Income].”

*People Won't Help.*

A common observation of help by my participants was that people simply won't. As Brenda, a white woman in her late forties who had lived in Jemez for two decades and had been arrested four times for prostitution explains in reference to a particularly violent encounter with a client:

...he took me way out and he wanted something that I wasn't willing to give him. And he beat my face in—I mean my face was out to like this [extends hands]. He stole my shoes and everything and my coat, and I got out and I ran. And do you think anybody in this town would help you? No... I walked all the way home to my sister. And do you think anybody would stop and help you? No. Not even the cops—and the cops went by me. And I mean, I'm bleeding, my face was out to here and stuff, and nobody stopped.

Sandy emphasized the same point when she explains her simultaneous high visibility on the street and social invisibility:

We're called at as cars drive by, you know, when we are out there. We're spit upon. You know, it's really sad. You know how many times I had someone stop and say, "Hey, I'll pray for you", "Here's some money. Why don't you come off the street?" Never. Not even pray for you. Or, "Do you need help?" ... Never have I ever had that.

*Alternatives to Arrests*

Several street workers emphasized that alternatives to arrests would be more "helpful" for the women participating in these activities. For example, Ava argues against arresting the women who participate in these activities because their participation stems from larger needs. Ava is a white,<sup>14</sup> twenty-three year old woman



who had lived in Jemez for one year. At the time of the interview, she had been living in an apartment for one month with her boyfriend and was currently attending Jemez Community College and looking for work. Ava had never been arrested for prostitution, but she had strong feelings about it.

Jill: What do you think about the police or other people in the community in terms of exchanging sex?

Ava: I don't know why they go arresting girls for it. I think they should try to help them more than arrest them and take them to jail because that's not really teaching them anything; that's just, you know, if they're doing it, they're probably needing money for bills or something *that* day. If you arrest them that day, while they're doing it... you [just] throw more fines [additional expenses] on them... Then they're just going to go do that [prostitution] to pay the fine. I think the police and law enforcement goes about it the whole wrong way.

Jill: How would you think they should do it?

Ava: Based on the girls individually, you know? Not necessarily as to why they're doing it, but like, what kind of mental history they have, what kind of drug history they have, you know? And then they should put them in a program and make that mandatory instead of giving them "Hey, here's another fine. Good luck paying it because you don't have a job. Good luck getting a job because you don't have a home." You know?

Ava emphasizes throughout her interview that more services need to be provided, offered, or even required for people who participate in prostitution. She focused on the underlying reasons for prostitution and suggests that simply fining these women will not help the situation. Rather, the individual's psychological needs and/or chemical dependencies must be addressed. Ava sees the solution as residing in the community, which is explained in more detail below:

Jill: Do you think the public should be concerned about women who exchange sex for money or drugs?

Ava: Definitely. And I think there should be people out there, people actually going out and trying to find these women and trying to help them and showing them, you know, “If you do this, take this program, do this thing, eventually it will help you.” But instead, they wait for the women to come to them. Like I said, when the police arrest them, they tack on fines...

Jill: Anything else they should be concerned about—the public, in terms of exchanging?

Ava: I just think people should be more, like, concerned for humanity in general. And when it comes to exchanging, if you find somebody exchanging, help; it takes people to help. Show them the way. Instead of just saying, “You could do this, this, or this,” show them what this, that, and that is and how it’s going to help them. I mean all of the public—if the public would get more involved, just volunteer hours, whatever, outreach . . . If the public would get more involved, there’d be a lot more help. There’d be a lot less girls exchanging.

For Ava, help resides in individuals helping people on the street through outreach and programs. Her underlying assumption is that women should not and do not want to be participating in these activities and that it will take community help and support, rather than arrests and fines, to provide access to the services these women need.

### **“Then I’ll be Complete”:**

#### **Telling One’s Story to Educate and Help Oneself and Others**

Many street workers emphasized the power of telling one’s story, both for the speaker and the listener. Such women felt that community assistance, defined as the creation of increased access

to services, was far more beneficial than more arrests. Yet such community assistance, they noted, was also dependant on a change in the public's perception of street sex work and related issues. This change, women observed, could only begin with education via increased outreach and public involvement. As Olivia explained in response to my question about what made her decide to participate in the interview with me:

People need to know it. And if this is going to be published or help somebody—a report or documentation or whatever it is—I think, um, my remarks will help... I think this will help educate people, you know? If somebody would have sat down with me back then and done this, maybe I wouldn't have done the things I did, actually. I think like that now, sober. Back then, it was like, "Yeah, right." But I mean, [now that I am] sober... [I realize that] People need to help people.

Ava emphasized that what street sex workers regarded as necessary help was not likely to be forthcoming until the public identified the prevalence of addiction and homelessness among Jemez street sex workers as a problem.

Jill: How would you like it to be different, the perception, the public perception?

Ava: I would just like for people to accept that's what goes on (laugh). To accept it and help with the problem.

Jill: What do you think could be done to make it different?

Ava: Like I said, people just doing, like, outreach. Street outreach.

When I asked Sandy how her perception was different from the public perception, she said:

If they only knew. If they only knew why we went there... it's not [that] we're out prostituting because we want to go to college, you know? ...Some [street sex workers say] "My kids don't have food." Well, usually they don't have food because you have a drug addiction that takes the money from the food or the food stamps... We weren't born saying, "I want to be a prostitute someday." It's something that we—yes, we did it to ourselves, but if there was more help, if there was more centers... that would take people off the streets.

Later in the interview, I asked, "How would you like the community perception to be different?"

Sandy: How can we help? Is there some way I could contribute that would help these women? ...How can the public keep these facilities [that assist street sex workers] open? Or how can we support them? Instead of tearing down the women, where do they go for help? How can we keep these places open? How can we open another place? How can we get them off the streets?

Jill: What do you think can be done to make the perception different? Anything?

Sandy: Let's tell the public: Help us. Help the women. We need help. And, you know, being out there, nobody will ever stop and ask us, can we help? And sometimes we need help.

And again, in response to my question about what made Brenda decide to participate in the interview, she said:

If this is going to help someone realize that there is a problem out there, and that something has to be done about the problem, but you can't look down on these girls and say "Hey, you're nothing, you're never going to amount to anything." ... that's pretty much how the community looks

at them. But if your story can get that out to the world and shows that they are human, that they can change, then I did something to help.

In addition to wanting to change the public perception, my participants had an urgent sense of wanting to help these women on a personal level. Because they occupied a position of “having been there”, they spoke with authority about street work and the related issues, which ultimately served to help both themselves and others. Below, Donna makes connections to her own life when she talks about helping others. In response to my question, “What made you decide to participate in this interview?” she said:

Um. . .one, money<sup>15</sup> [but] I always thought if I could help one girl, you know, that I could give back something, you know? Um, I see younger girls every day getting younger and younger out there [on the street]... There was this one girl out there one time, she was fourteen, and... the guy she was with ended up blowing her head off, and that always hurt me. I mean, in a way, I was glad she died because she's at peace, and I really believe when women die, you know, when they die of overdose or whatever, they find . . . They don't have to hurt no more, you know? They don't have to struggle no more... I don't want anybody to have the life I've had, you know? ...if there's some kind of way that somebody could, you know, say, “Hey, look at this woman, you know, she was a good person. Look what she's had to survive”, you know? And if it could just help one person, you know, I would feel good.

Sandy also emphasized this point in her interview:

And I know someday maybe I'll be able to say that to another that's struggling, that I know she's doing it: “Here's a flier. This place helped me.” Then I'll be complete. You know, I'll carry the message to those who

suffer, because it's sad. It's sad. I wasn't born and I wasn't little one day and said, "I'm going to be a prostitute because I'm addicted to crack cocaine." You know what I mean? But it's just not drugs, too, you know? I've learned a lot of people out there, they're not addicts or alcoholics; they're mental; they don't have a home.

She goes on to explain that she only tells her story when it's absolutely necessary, which also reveals the power that her story holds: "My story is only told when it's needed to be told, because of people looking down on me. Half the people—like when I worked at [the department store] never knew. I never would tell anybody anything... Your story is told when it's necessary. To help another, you know what I mean?" In response to my question of what motivated her to participate in the interview, Sandy explained that telling stories about her life into her future plans as well:

...I believe somehow my helping you would help another. And I just believe my hand needs to be extended out. Um, I was ashamed of my past at one time, but I think my freedom and my being clean now will lead another to where I am. And if it [helping others] comes through your study... [that will be a good thing]... I would've done it if it was free, you know? Because I believe I need to help another, and maybe this will, maybe it won't. Maybe it will help my story, perfect my story. I mean, because I want to be a speaker someday. I used to go to a lot of conferences and they used to have these speakers come in. I want to do that someday, I do. I want to help somebody. And if one of my words, one thing that I share with somebody will be planted in their brain or their memory...then what I've done is okay, by sharing my story.

Language has power in these examples—to educate, change circumstances, provide information for my study, assist others on their journey, and even heal the teller—and the woman’s stories are the source. Their lived experiences, perspectives, and expertise are what will create spaces where this “help” can be imagined and received.

### **Getting Help? Or Direct Involvement and the Power of Exchange**

As women shifted their subject positions in their interviews with me, the pronouns they used blurred as well. I offered a subtle example of this blurring in my opening excerpts, both to reveal how “help” was discussed in my interviews and to show the different positions my participants inhabited as they talked through exchanging sex and the related issues. In these examples, the women inhabit the “I need help” position. Karen, for instance, referred to programmatic or familial support by using her specific circumstances as examples. Yet when women described the public perception of women who exchange sex, they referred to the women who are in need of help as “them”. Ava exemplified this position when she said, “I think [the community] should try to help them.” When these statements were made, it was clear that the speaker did not identify with either population, but as an outsider—both outside the “women in need” category as well as outside the “community.” And finally, as women discussed their own perceptions of street work and their reasons for participating in the interview, they bridged the divide between street worker and community by expressing their desires to help others through their own experiences, knowledge, and empathy—as Olivia said: “I wish I could help them.”

These ideas of getting and providing help are grounded in a system that views exchanging sex as immoral and illegal. The women I interviewed argue the public perception needs to be changed and that the community needs to be more involved in addressing these

difficult issues. But as long as these core beliefs of immorality and illegality exist, it is extremely difficult for the one who is acting in illegal and immoral ways to identify what she needs systemically, and it becomes even more difficult to identify as one who needs that help because her position is devalued by the moral and legal systems. She can ask for this help, but she's most likely to believe and experience that she *won't* get it, largely because of her position in this system as someone who does not *deserve* it. Asking for this help becomes even more difficult if she believes that her actions are wrong. And when she is surrounded by a culture that tells her how wrong it is over and over again, she must almost identify as *amoral*, in contrast to either moral or immoral, in order to preserve her sense of dignity and self as a valuable person.

I offer the following suggestions as a way to begin to modify the discourse and ideologies surrounding the exchange of sex for money or drugs. Researchers, policymakers, and other community members can:

- focus less on criminalization and stigma, which only reinforces cycles of violence and pain, and more on the needs and desires that lead individuals to participate in these activities. Arresting women in order to provide them with access to substance abuse treatment is not the best course of action and should not be the priority. Rather than further penalizing those participating in these activities, the focus should be on addressing systemic violence and the individual's needs.
- involve sex workers in discussions about criminalization, decriminalization, and/or legalization and how these systems impact their positions in the community.
- talk more to the individuals who are participating in these activities about their needs, desires, and expertise and the issues related to exchanging sex for money or other gain.
- consider the "help" transaction and its inherent power relationships; rather than providing the receiver with both



the morality and resources owned by the giver, develop a mutually reinforcing process, an exchange, that can sustain and uplift all participants;

- involve street workers in the creation and facilitation of a mutually reinforcing process of exchange (for both the giver and the receiver in the transaction) that responds directly to the street workers' needs.

Making and understanding the connections between criminalization, morality, and accessing services are complex ideas that require further research and discussion that must be grounded in an understanding of the street worker as a person. In most cases, the women do not want to be participating in these illegal activities, and in some cases, criminal charges more firmly entrench the women in a marginalized lifestyle because it inhibits access to more legitimate jobs, housing, and other mainstream pursuits. Although in some cases fear of arrest was a deterrent to exchanging sex, in most cases the women participated in these activities because their immediate needs outweighed the potential consequences.

Examining the rhetorical constructions and interactions and their related effects on policy elucidates the discursive complexity that exists in meaning-making systems. My analysis offers representations that are generated by the marginalized populations themselves in order to provide insights into how these systems can be made differently in order to better meet the needs of the street workers and the communities in which they live.

## REFERENCES

- Agustín, L. M. (2005). Helping women who sell sex: The construction of benevolent identities. *Rhizomes 10, Special issue on neoliberal governmentality: Technologies of the self and governmental conduct*. Retrieved from <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue10/agustin.htm>.
- Brummett, B. (1991). *Rhetorical dimensions of popular culture*. Tuscaloosa, AL.: University of Alabama Press.
- Chapkis, W. (2000). Power and control in the commercial sex trade. In R. Weitzer (Ed.) *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry* (pp. 181-201). New York: Routledge.
- Dimore, M. (Forthcoming). Prostitution. *Governing America: Major Decisions of Federal, State and Local Governments from 1789 to the Present*. Ed. Paul Quirk and William Cunion. Facts on File.
- Jeffreys, S. (2007). *The industrial vagina: The political economy of the global sex trade*. New York: Routledge.
- Karras, R. M. (1996). *Common women: Prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kempadoo, K. and Doezema, J. (1998). *Global sex workers: Rights, resistance and redefinition*. New York: Routledge.
- Lerner, G. (1986). *The creation of patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24: 95-117.
- Matthews, R. (2008). *Prostitution, politics and policy*. Abingdon: Routledge-Cavendish.
- McCracken, J. (2007). *Listening to the language of sex workers: An analysis of street sex worker representations and their effects on sex workers and society*. Dissertation, University of Arizona.
- Otis, L. L. (1985). *Prostitution in medieval society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Raymond, J. (2003). Ten reasons for not legalizing prostitution and a legal response to the demand for prostitution. In M. Farley (Ed.), *Prostitution, trafficking and traumatic stress* (pp. 315-332). New York: The Haworth Press.
- Sanders, T. (2005). *Sex work: A risky business*. Oxford: Willan Publishing.
- United States Congress. (1910). The white slave traffic act of 1910 [a.k.a The Mann Act]. Congress 61.
- Weitzer, R. (2010). *Sex for sale: Prostitution, pornography, and the sex industry*. New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank my anonymous reviewer for pushing my thinking and analysis further and making this article much stronger. I also wish to thank Morgan Gresham, friend and colleague, for her suggestion to rhetorically analyze the street workers' positions in relationship to "getting help" and Jeff Daum for his help with the title.

<sup>2</sup> Jill McCracken is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg and can be reached at [mccracken@mail.usf.edu](mailto:mccracken@mail.usf.edu).

<sup>3</sup> Although this term is well known in the academic and activist communities, many people who are identified as sex workers by these populations do not identify themselves as such. This is particularly applicable to my research population. In one case, a participant even laughed at others' use of the term. I did not use the term in my interviews with street workers, but I use it here in order to define a population for an academic audience.

<sup>4</sup> I draw on Barry Brummett's analysis in *Rhetorical dimensions of popular culture*, where he defines quotidian rhetoric as "the public and personal meanings that affect everyday, even minute-to-minute, decisions. This level of rhetoric is where decisions are guided that do not take the form of peak crises [. . .] but do involve long-term concerns as well as the momentary choices that people must make to get through the day. [. . .] People are constantly surrounded by signs that influence them, or signs that they use to influence others, in ongoing, mundane, and nonexigent yet important ways" (Brummett, 1991, p. 41)

<sup>5</sup> As often as possible, I include the street workers' language so that, in addition to my analysis, the readers can find their own knowledge in the street workers' words. In making this statement I do not mean to imply that I do not have significant power in choosing the quotations, contextualizing them, and offering my analysis. Rather, I make this statement in order to emphasize that their voices and words should be at the center of these discussions.

<sup>6</sup> Because my research involved interviews with people that participate in illegal behavior, the Institutional Review Board requires that my research site not be identified.

<sup>7</sup> My study focused upon self-identified women who exchanged heterosexual sex for money or drugs, and while male and transgendered sex workers were outside the scope of this project, I encourage research that addresses such populations. Although I was open to interviewing transgendered women, none volunteered for this study.

<sup>8</sup> In order to maintain anonymity, all reported figures are approximate.

<sup>9</sup> In most cases, these interviews were simply conversations that encouraged the participant to discuss what was most important to her. At the end of the interview, I would then address any areas that might have been missed. If one of my specific questions elicited a response, I have included it here; otherwise, I

---

simply introduce the participant's quotation as it emerged from our conversation.

<sup>10</sup> In no case did my participants use the words *criminalization* or *decriminalization* to refer to prostitution or exchanging sex for money or other gain. Rather, they primarily used the words *illegal* and *wrong*.

<sup>11</sup> Ava identified as white, but later in the interview told me her mother was white and her dad was Sioux Indian.

<sup>12</sup> Later in the interview, in response to my question about her parents' ethnicity, she said: "Well, we got Cherokee Indian in us. We got like five different blood lines in us, but I always tell everybody white because I . . . The way I look at it, it's like I'm a Heinz 57."

<sup>13</sup> Lisa identified as Hispanic, but later told me her father was born in Mexico and her mother was Apache.

<sup>14</sup> Ava identified as white, but later in the interview told me her mother was white and her dad was Sioux Indian.

<sup>15</sup> I paid my participants \$30 for their time. These interviews typically ranged from one to two hours.