ONE

EDITORIAL

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Sex workers throughout the world share a uniquely maligned mystique that simultaneously positions them as sexually desirable and socially repulsive. In order to better understand the dynamics of this phenomenon cross-culturally, this special issue presents thirteen articles that focus upon the everyday lives of sex workers, broadly defined as those who exchange sexual services for something of value. While recent years have witnessed a dramatic outpouring of feminist scholarship that situates sex work within its broader socioeconomic and political contexts cross-culturally[2], there remains a tendency for academic scholarship to unconsciously reinforce the social stigmatization of sex workers by depicting them solely through their income-earning activities. This burgeoning research has convincingly demonstrated that sex work is embedded in a complex social matrix that often centers upon sex workers' perceptions of their individual choices and responsibilities[3].

Accordingly, this special issue fills a significant gap in the literature by examining how individual biography intersects with structural position to condition certain categories of individuals to believe that their self-esteem, material worth and possibilities for life improvement are invested in their bodies and sexual labor. Such beliefs inevitably combine with sex workers' knowledge of their marginal, conflicted social status to inform many of their decision-making strategies. Articles in this issue thus illustrate the processes by which sex workers are able to see themselves as agents and entrepreneurs despite pervasive social messages to the contrary.

In the articles that follow, a nuanced and multi-faceted image emerges regarding the social networks and survival strategies sex workers throughout the world employ as they navigate social stigma and, in some cases, criminalization. Kathleen Weinkauf beautifully illustrates how street sex workers use language as a tool with which to establish quasi-familial bonds that provide privileges as well as obligations. Drawing upon her interviews with street sex workers in the Southwestern United States, she argues that insight gained from these forms of linguistic usage vividly demonstrates the impact that criminalization has had upon the women she studied, particularly in terms of their constant need to seek protection from potential violence through participation in social networks. Thus a female street sex worker might refer to "my folks" or "my wives-in-law" to describe the group of women she works with under a single pimp, called "Daddy", who controls the group's finances and activities, while a highly respected "bottom bitch" fills a somewhat maternal role by providing for sex workers' basic needs, such as food and shelter. Most notably from a policy perspective, Weinkauf argues that the level of risk and violence the women in her study faced encouraged sex workers "to maintain kin structures and the sense of obligation and protection that accompany such structures", even when this seemed a counter-productive exercise.

Tiantian Zheng further analyzes the theme of social networks in her compelling portrayal of *sanpei xiaojie*, sex workers in the hostess bars of Dalian, a bustling port city in northeastern China. She argues that sex workers' opportunities to advocate for their rights by forming allegiances based upon their rural places of origin are limited because of state anti-prostitution policies that, in practice, result in a violent working environment. The vast majority of *sanpei xiaojie* are rural migrants who, without a coveted urban residence permit entitling them to work, are pushed into low status service sector jobs. *Sanpei xiaojie* do form bonds and alliances with one another, yet the atmosphere of constant competition for clients, social stigma and the hierarchical structure

of the sex industry render such bonds fragile and unstable at best. While such women have some social status “in their hometowns as brokers of urban ‘modernity’”, they are also constantly subject to arrest through random police raids (which take place under the guise of anti-trafficking activities) and face a climate that constantly reminds them of their precarious positions as rural migrants. Zheng argues that in a situation where the only chance for upward mobility comes from relationships with clients, Dalian sex workers are placed in positions of antagonism vis-à-vis one another, making it exceedingly difficult to join together in any advocacy efforts.

In their co-authored article, Flavia Zalwango, Lina Eriksson, Janet Seeley, Sarah Nakamanya, Judith Vandepitte, and Heiner Grosskurth use life histories collected from Ugandan sex workers to document the elaborate support networks they engage in following their migration to the city, often after a marital separation. The authors rightly note that much of the sex work literature “continues to neglect these workers as women, with lives beyond the body that serves the market for sex”. In order to address this significant gap in the literature, they examine how such women envision themselves as mothers, partners and workers, thus contextualizing sex work within the extremely high social value accorded to motherhood in Uganda. The women in this study often described their entry into sex work as a direct result of their need to support children, which sharply illuminates how the feminization of poverty intersects with family instability and patrilineality to make sex work the best out of a set of limited choices. Notably, however, a majority of these women engaged in other forms of income generation in addition to sex work and also served as a major source of remittances for rural family members. Women made active use of the culturally accepted practice of fostering, sending their older children to live with village relatives in order “to distance their children from the realities of their mothers lives”. For these Ugandan sex workers, the authors found,

social networks were a key survival tool with which to navigate poverty and a limited set of life choices.

Gregory Mitchell also utilizes the themes of migration and strategies for survival in his article on *michês*, straight-identified men who sell sex to gay- and bisexual-identified tourists from Western Europe and the United States. These men, who range in age from late teens to early thirties and largely come from economically underprivileged backgrounds, make significantly more money than their peers who earn minimum wage working in service sector jobs. Yet this income is tempered by the heavy weight of homophobia and stigma that make the *michês* complicit in their own oppression by hiding their true means of income generation at all costs. Most compelling is Mitchell's analysis of *michês*' daydreams as a means by which to explore their aspirations to engage in consumer spending that would otherwise be well beyond their reach as poor Brazilians. Although *michês* very rarely achieve their dreams of, for instance, travelling to Europe or owning a car, the hope that they might someday do so plays a powerful role in their everyday decision-making processes. This carries significant public health implications, as Mitchell finds that *michês* who "console themselves with thoughts of upward mobility and its attendant material conditions and access to luxury commodities" are also more likely to use condoms. As Mitchell concisely notes, contemporary *michês* differ from their predecessors in that they do not believe that HIV/AIDS is inevitable; instead, he argues, they "are not resigned to their fate, even though their lives seldom turn out well."

Yasmina Katsulis also deals with this overlap between sex work and migration as social mobility strategies by situating youth sex workers in Tijuana, a Mexican city close to the U.S. border, in the broader context of their efforts to survive in a fraught social environment characterized by significant risks to their health and safety. She argues that "given the complexity of their circumstances, these youth should be considered neither agents,

nor victims, but both". Like Mitchell, she observes that "a great many" youth sex workers use their earnings to engage in consumer spending that would otherwise be impossible for them. Tijuana provides a particularly interesting case study because of its notoriety for cross-border exchange as well as the real and structural violence that stems from the gross inequalities characteristic of U.S.-Mexico relations. All of the youth sex workers Katsulis encountered had been affected by migration in some capacity, whether through their own movement to Tijuana from elsewhere in Mexico, their desire to migrate to the U.S., deportation from the U.S., or parental emigration. Mexican law allows adult sex workers to register with the government in order to work legally, but youth sex workers, who work illegally, were rendered more vulnerable to arrest and police harassment. This has enormous public health implications, as those who began sex work prior to age eighteen, when compared with adult sex workers, were six times more likely to contract HIV, 12.5 times as likely to have exchanged sex for food, and eight times more likely to have moved three or more times in the previous six months. This is certainly one case in which laws designed to protect have, in fact, effectively rendered a population even more vulnerable.

Thaddeus Blanchette and Ana Paula da Silva further complicate notions of vulnerability, particularly vis-à-vis trafficking discourse, in their focus upon how some Brazilian women consciously manipulate "a globalized view of Brazil as a fertile field for the realization of sexual fantasy" in their interactions with North American and Western European men who frequent particular Rio de Janeiro locales. The authors argue that the Brazilian government's conflation of the "traffic in women" with such tourist-local interactions is, at best, paradoxical given that the exchange of money for sex between a self-employed sex worker and a client is not illegal in Brazil. Such discourses do not reflect the life realities of either Brazilian women who sexually interact with foreign tourists or the worldviews of men who engage in relationships with them. Indeed, the authors argue, marriage to or a

relationship with such a man is perhaps the only feasible option for poor Brazilian women who seek to emigrate. By documenting the nuances of such interactions between Brazilian women and tourist men, the authors argue that current policy frameworks regarding such exchanges are erroneous and naïve.

Heather Montgomery also makes an important point about gaps between public policy and reality by drawing upon her long-term ethnographic research with poor Thai children who sell sex to North American and Western European male tourists. Montgomery found that such children regarded their obligation to financially contribute to their (often destitute) families as far more important than the acts in which they engaged to earn money. Tracing the widespread media outcry against child prostitution in Thailand to the early 1990s, Montgomery observed that a rather predictable script of human misery emerged that featured "young Thai girls being tricked into leaving home, or sold by impoverished parents into a brothel, where they were…terrorized into servicing many foreign clients a night, before being rescued by a charitable organization, only to be discovered to be suffering from HIV".

Notably, the children and their families remained voiceless in such accounts, which ignored the strong filial obligations that children felt to contribute to their families, who eked out an existence in an informal housing settlement on the outskirts of a tourist town. Referring to the foreign pedophiles as "friends", the Thai children and their families in Montgomery's studies understood sex work "as yet another hazard to be negotiated in a life full of difficulties". Yet the policy implications of ignoring their views were far-reaching in the Thai context, as the disproportionate amount of international attention focused upon foreign sexual predators obscured the abuse of undocumented Burmese migrant children by Thai men (often with police collusion) as well as the kind of poverty and endemic inequality that facilitate child prostitution.

Jill McCracken seeks to fill what seems to be a cross-cultural gap between sex workers' experiences and the policies that shape their work environment. Based upon detailed interviews with female street sex workers in the Southwestern U.S., where selling sex is illegal, she analyzes the ways in which women talk about the services and assistance measures they believe would benefit them the most. She finds that, at the policy level, criminalization renders such women voiceless by ignoring their expertise regarding their life conditions. The most prevalent attitude that McCracken found amongst street sex workers was the (not-unexpectedly) contradictory notion that "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". Women who subscribed to this moral continuum, in which addiction, mental illness, responsibilities for small children, and material lack played powerfully mitigating roles in their attitudes toward illegal sex work, never described prostitution as "right". For those in McCracken's study, sex work was but one aspect of the many unsavory activities that were integral parts of their life circumstances, in which genuine "help" was rarely forthcoming from others on terms desired by the women.

Emily van der Meulen also emphasizes the need to draw upon sex workers' lived experiences in evaluating public policies. She argues that the criminalization of sex work in Canada renders sex workers more vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Focusing specifically upon the impacts of Canadian anti-procuring legislation on sex workers' everyday lives, the author's research with current and former sex workers as well as advocates of decriminalization clearly demonstrates that a number of negative consequences resulted from Section 212 of the Canadian Criminal Code, which deals with "the criminalization of procuring, living on the avails, cohabiting, and gaining or aiding a person to engage in prostitution". The intent of this law is to protect sex workers from violence, extortion and harmful pimps, but in practice, the "living on the avails" aspect of this law effectively criminalizes many of

sex workers' relationships with loved ones. The disconnect between policy and practice is part of a broader cross-cultural pattern whereby, as van der Meulen notes, policymakers "overlook, ignore, and disregard sex workers' own experiences and expert knowledge of their own lives, loves and work". Criminalization not only pushes sex work into clandestine indoor locations, but also places additional pressure on women to do all of the negotiating with their clients while alone, which one sex worker van der Meulen spoke to called "a recipe for disaster" due to the risk of potential violence it entails.

Norma Jean Almodovar tackles criminalization's further implications in her discussion of the consequences of arbitrary police enforcement of U.S. anti-prostitution legislation. Based upon her years as an employee of the Los Angeles Police Department, followed by her largely positive experiences as a sex worker, she argues that laws criminalizing prostitution result in an abusive environment for sex workers. Almodovar argues that prostitution is the only criminal activity in which police have a choice regarding which offenders they will arrest, which has two troubling potential consequences: the potential for police to coerce prostitutes they arrest into unpaid sex, and the diversion of police and public resources from the apprehension of violent criminals who pose a far greater risk to society. Employing multiple case studies drawn from the U.S. media, she demonstrates the hypocrisy of a system that positions sex workers as individuals who are simultaneously victims (of sexist violation by their clients) and perpetrators (of criminal acts). She notes that abolitionist rhetoric cannot help but result in such an intractable quandary precisely because it is premised on the presumption that all sex workers are victims in need of rescue. All too often, however, this "rescue" takes the form of arrest. Almodovar concludes with the powerful assessment that criminalization makes prostitutes especially vulnerable to violence due to their stigmatization as criminals, and yet abolitionists continue to insist on the maintenance of a system that ensures the continuation of such violence.

Annie George analyzes an equally contradictory set of social norms and expectations in her discussion of women who sell sex to support their families in rural South India. In a social context in which women are the barometer of family honor and premarital female chastity (followed by absolute postmarital fidelity) is of paramount importance, these "secret" sex workers engage in elaborate subterfuges to prevent the community from becoming aware of their activities. George argues that by keeping the family's true source of income secret, women and their relatives "manage contradictory expectations, uphold their social standing, and remain enmeshed in the kinship and community structures that form the core of their social identity". Based upon her detailed interviews with such "secret" sex workers, George documents the complex nature of discriminatory factors, including low caste status, limited literacy, or low status as an unmarried or separated woman, which combined to make sex work the best (and sometimes only) option for income generation. She observes that, for such families, "economic considerations trumped morality" and so while some families worked together to maintain secrecy, others abused the woman who was so central to their family's survival. George argues that such a system is embedded within broader socially sanctioned ideologies about gendered power and the privileges accorded to different caste and class groups.

Ferreday also addresses the social consequences of exposure for women who engage in sex work. She presents an analysis of the various British media responses to the revelation that popular blogger Belle de Jour, who chronicled her work experiences as a highly paid London escort, was actually a research scientist at a prestigious English university. While little known outside the U.K., Belle de Jour's popularity was such that her anonymously authored tales prompted the publication of a book series and a novel in addition to providing the material for a television show featuring a popular actress. Prior to public knowledge of Belle's real identity, many media critics insisted that the literary skill with which she described her life meant that she was really a professional writer

posing as "an authentic sex worker". Ferreday contends that these debates centered upon authenticity in "mobiliz[ing] fears about the disembodied nature of cyberspace to position her as doubly inauthentic: as a writer posing as a prostitute, and as one who misrepresents the reality of sex work". This is particularly significant, she argues, in the way that it conjures much older debates about the divisions between public and private, which is of particular import during a historical moment in which the Internet renders individuals both more intimately connected and more distanced from one another than ever before.

Lucy Blissbomb also addresses the looming dilemma presented by the possibility of public exposure in her account of two decades working simultaneously as a feminist social activist and a closeted sex worker. As a self-identified white, relatively privileged Australian, the author (who uses a pseudonym), discusses her experiences coping with social stigma while simultaneously incorporating a very similar skill set into both of her professional roles. In her home state of Queensland, where prostitution is legal for sole operators, "whore stigma" prevents many sex workers from disclosing their source of income to others for fear of judgment. Blissbomb began to advocate for sex workers' rights when she reached her mid-thirties, although she has only begun to discuss her sex work experiences relatively recently with friends and colleagues. Some of the professional skills she employed in both her activist and sex work roles included the ability to negotiate, establish boundaries, and make rapid character assessments. Most notably, however, Blissbomb draws attention to the fact that almost all forms of feminized labor are devalued, whether through low pay (as in social services or community work) or stigma (as in sex work). For her, sex work "was really about the dollars, not exploring sexual boundaries".

Many, if not most, of the women and men whose lives form the basis of this special issue, would likely echo Blissbomb's sentiments. Public policy on sex work is often shown to be

seriously lacking when contextualized within the broader realities of many sex workers' everyday life experiences throughout the world. As such, contributors to this special issue offer sound ethnographic evidence that clearly demonstrates the global need for policy and legal reform with respect to sex work.

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[2] For particularly thought-provoking, book-length examples of this work, see Brennan (2004), Brents, Jackson and Haubeck (2010), Cabezas (2009), Day (2007), Kelly (2008), Nencel (2001), Padilla (2007), Zheng (2009).

[3] Often, these perceptions of choices and responsibilities are heavily influenced by the need to care for children, partners, or family members, often via remittances, which are themselves informed by the gendered nature of caretaking. For some women, sex work is a social mobility strategy chosen out of a limited menu of life options (Agustín 2007; Bott 2006; Dewey 2011).

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