

Book review

SEX WORK MATTERS: EXPLORING MONEY, POWER AND INTIMACY IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

Melissa Hope Dittmore, Antonia Levy and Alys Willman (eds)

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This book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the sex industry. What makes it particularly interesting is the fact that it includes the writings of academics, activists and sex workers, adding to the diversity which this book obviously aims to illuminate within the sex industry, not only amongst the workers themselves, but of the opinions surrounding sex work (or prostitution) as an occupation.

The authors contributing to this volume highlight the importance of examining both structure and agency when doing research around individuals' entry into sex work. There is a focus by all authors in this book to refute the equation made by radical feminists between sex work and exploitation and violence (Barry, 1995; Farley, Barbal, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998). Such feminists contest the notion of 'choice', arguing that there is a 'gender power dynamic (which) is intrinsic to prostitution' (Sullivan, 2007:37) and thus, no woman freely chooses to sell her body for sex (Barry, 1995; Farley, 2004; Pateman, 1988). Radical feminists contend that inequality and subordination underpin prostitution and this should be viewed as coercion and not agency (Sullivan, 2007). However, this denial of women's choice or agency to work in the sex industry is argued by others to be a denial of their human rights (Csete & Saraswathi Seshu, 2004; Doezenia, 1998). More liberal feminists insist that "the position of the prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in male sexual practice, but instead can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order" (Chapkis, 1997:29).

Research done in many countries with different legislative systems regulating sex work indicates that people enter the sex industry primarily for economic reasons (Abel, 2010; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2008; Benoit & Millar, 2001; Browne & Minichiello, 1996; Davies & Feldman, 1997; McKeganey, 2006; Perkins & Lovejoy, 2007; Plumridge & Abel, 2000; Svanstrom, 2006; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Ward & Day, 2006). This book reinforces the money argument with Weldon, coming from the position of having been a sex worker herself, suggesting that the fast instant cash which working in the sex industry provides is a powerful draw card. She argues for the need to look at structural issues which means that sex work is a more lucrative alternative to other occupations.

Kelly contributes to this debate in chapter ten and talks of the rise in neoliberalism worldwide, likening the neoliberal state to that of pimp as growing inequalities through cuts to social services and support have lead to more poverty. Economic marginalisation leads to feelings of

powerlessness and, as Carlen (1988) found in a study of economically marginalised women in the United Kingdom, can encourage people to enter sex work as a survival option. Welfare states, such as New Zealand, have tried to minimise informal street activity through the provision of state benefits and minimum wage (Jordan, 1999). Yet the rise in neoliberalism has seen structural changes in New Zealand, which have led to inequalities, poverty and exclusion (Jordan, 1999). Kelly argues that sex workers rarely give accounts of the broader socio-economic structures that facilitate their entry into sex work but their stories of family and personal hardship are underpinned by poverty.

Yet, as Petro argues in chapter nine and Hossain in chapter six, money is not the only reason for people to choose to work in this industry. There is a continuum of choice with some entering for the excitement, flexibility and autonomy which working in this industry provides. Hossain's research with transgender sex workers in Bangladesh found that entering sex work was not just a way to earn money but a way of celebrating or making sense of life. This chapter by Hossain and the previous chapter by Kaye on male sex workers further highlights the diversity in the sex industry. Although the majority of sex workers are female and research tends to focus on female sex workers, there is a substantial number of male and transgender sex workers who potentially are faced with different choices. Kaye, too, highlights the need to look at the importance of poverty in shaping the social lives of male street-based workers.

Merely focussing in a decontextualised way on individuals' lifestyle choices and putting pressure on people to change these lifestyles leads to victim-blaming and does not take into account the structural causes for the choices made (Richmond & Germov, 2005). Agency can never be free of structure as choices are not made in a social vacuum (Demers et al., 2002). A structural approach acknowledges the roles institutions, social relationships and resources play in constraining or enabling courses of action (Cockerham, 2005). As O'Neill and Pitcher argue in this book, official discourse in the UK and in other countries which criminalise sex work activities, have laid the blame for the social problems sex workers face squarely with the individual justifying punitive responses.

The trafficking debate, which has been fuelled by some feminists, has prevented many sex workers from working safely and denied them their human rights. Women who migrate voluntarily, with the full knowledge that they will be working in the sex industry are conflated with helpless women and children, forced against their will to a life of slavery and sex work: both acquiring the label of trafficked victims. Agustin's chapter suggests that research which focuses on 'trafficking', 'violence against women' and 'AIDS' is not helpful but instead needs to explore the life histories of women who travel to work which may reveal structural injustices along the way.

The authors in this book build on an argument which Weitzer (2005) has made that much research done in the area of sex work is methodologically flawed as researchers do not take into account (or deliberately ignore) the heterogeneity of the sex worker population. As Koken argues extremely eloquently in chapter three, researchers' positionality on sex work plays a large role in shaping both discourse and research on sex work. Radical feminists intent on linking entry into sex work with childhood abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and exploitation tend to focus on this vulnerable sector. Whilst not denying the need to do research with this sector, it should be acknowledged that street-based work constitutes a mere 10-20% of sex work in most developed countries (Scambler, 1997; Vanwesenbeeck, 2001, 2005; Weitzer, 2005) and the majority of sex workers work indoors either privately or under a system of management such as in a brothel or escort agency. Pejorative claims made by researchers focusing on the street-based sector are made as representing all sex workers, which is clearly not the case. It seems that researchers who come from a position of sex work (or should I say prostitution)

as violence and exploitation, are not only intent on casting all migrant workers as trafficked, but all sex workers as having the sometimes limited resources and thus choice as many street-based workers. This argument was very articulately made along with some well-informed suggestions for alternative research approaches.

There was an argument made in many of the chapters for research to take collaborative or participative approaches, not focusing solely on sex workers' sexual health, but on how their human rights are constrained by the discrimination they experience from police, health professionals and the general public. Sex workers' voices and knowledge are most often disregarded as well as their real needs in the effort to save them from their chosen profession, blame them for entering the profession or rehabilitate them. All the authors argue for the voices of sex workers, and not only sex workers with the fewest resources, to inform the debate on how sex work should be regulated. O'Neill and Pitcher's chapter includes details of the participatory approach which they took to their research. The goals and methods used in participatory research take into account the structures controlling people's lives, focussing not only on the negative aspects but revealing the positives and working for social justice (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Internationally, there is increasing interest in developing innovative, multi-methodological approaches to explore marginalised populations and approaches and those that are finding increasing popularity are collaborative and truly community based (Benoit, Jansson, Millar, & Phillips, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). These approaches require a shift in the purpose of doing research from merely amassing knowledge for the use of academic and policy audiences, to a purpose which will be beneficial to the populations or communities involved, where participants are active players in the social construction of knowledge, empowerment and social change (Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale, 2000; O'Neill, 1996).

In conclusion, this book was an enjoyable read. The messages this book delivers are the need to look at structure as well as agency in the sex work debate; the need to be aware of the position from which different researchers are coming in interpreting their findings; and the need to have the voices of sex workers reflected in research, policy and service provision. This book also attempts to get past the focus on sex and, as Willman and Levy argue in the introductory chapter, address the 'challenges they face everyday: managing money, juggling family and other intimate relationships, dealing with legal restrictions and policing, confronting social stigma, and challenges to them organizing collectively' (p1).

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