

# SEX WORK & *Sex Workers*

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## ARTICLES

# **TWELVE-STEP FEMINISM MAKES SEX WORKERS SICK: HOW THE STATE AND THE RECOVERY MOVEMENT TURN RADICAL WOMEN INTO “USELESS CITIZENS”**

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Within the contemporary United States, sex work is typically viewed in terms of a disease, meaning that sex workers are seen as “sick.” This medical understanding is due to the widespread jurisdiction of science, but other factors are at work as well: the “fit” with the bureaucratic nation-state, the ascendancy of the twelve-step recovery movement, the process of institutionalizing knowledge, and a climate of increased tolerance for “victims.” Within these political, cultural, and institutional frames, experts—regardless of sympathetic or feminist intentions—often view sex workers condescendingly. Furthermore, the study of sex work has achieved social and scientific legitimacy at the price of dehumanizing sex workers. This dehumanization may not be intended, but it is a requirement for the production of contemporary institutionalized knowledge.

## **Introduction**

In 1993, just prior to completing my master’s thesis on sex work, I presented my findings for the first time to an eager, standing-room-only, group of feminist scholars at the University of Washington. Though I knew my presentation would be controversial, nothing in my training as a sociologist had prepared me for the political uproar I was about to create. Throughout my talk, entitled, “Is It Exploitative if I Like it?: Sex Workers Compare Notes with Feminists and the Social Problems Industry,” I was

aware that I was holding my audience in rapt attention. I noticed people both nodding and frowning, but more than anything I noticed that they cared about what I was saying. I described my interviews with women incarcerated for prostitution, compared these interviews with those I held with non-incarcerated sex workers, and pointed out that *all* of these women spoke of their sex work in complex, nuanced ways. None of them, even the most down-and-out, spoke of sex work in purely negative terms. None of them, even the most culturally privileged (who were more likely to “love” their work), portrayed sex work as unproblematic. I argued that experts rarely acknowledge sex work as a complicated experience; rather, experts hear what validates their position and disregard the rest—and this happens whether it is a feminist position, a social work position, or even a pro-sex work position. I argued that a better way to do research, and a method long advocated by prominent feminist theorists like Dorothy Smith (1979), is to take seriously the words of women and build those words into our theories about women. I proposed that the argument over whether sex work is *either* exploitative *or* liberating is a ridiculous one that produces ridiculous conclusions, and that this debate had little relevance to the complex, contradictory, and widely varied experiences of sex workers. I finished my talk with breathless enthusiasm and hope, and was met with polite, if enthusiastic, applause.

Little did I know, sitting to my immediate left was a prominent scholar of prostitution. Not a moment of post-applause calm had settled before the scholar turned to me, right index finger pointing, and began her stormy reprimand. She accused me of being an irresponsible researcher, of denying the vast amount of evidence that proves that most sex workers have been sexually abused, of trivializing the pain of sex workers, of being swept up with glamorized visions of prostitution. I responded with my feminist armor up, saying I was just following Dorothy Smith’s lead—and if the women I interviewed claimed that they liked certain aspects about sex work, then I will report that. The scholar responded that if my interviewees claimed they liked their work, they only said that to impress me (the authority) or to maintain

some pride under extremely humiliating circumstances. She also pointed out (and I think this is valid) that the unequal power dynamic between researcher and subject makes it virtually impossible for subjects to tell the “truth.” And yet she did not offer a solution to this problem (such as give up some of our power as researchers) other than to suggest that I educate myself about which statements are untruthful and become aware that “they’re not going to *admit* they’re victims.” The exchange went round and round; others chimed in to both our defenses, though no professors came to mine. I continued to reiterate that sex work is *not* completely liberating for anyone, and that many sex workers, especially street-level prostitutes, *do* experience great physical and emotional pain. But the stage was set, and I was cast as a traitor. The whole exchange not only left me with an enormous headache, but also a fresh commitment to understanding not only sex work, but the politics of its meaning.

Throughout history, humans have been fascinated with sex workers. Whether this fascination comes in the form of condemnation, titillation, pity, or celebration, it’s clear that as an activity it captures the attention of many. The reason lies in considering why *anyone* or *anything* is fascinating; we are fascinated by people or things when we see them as unusual and exotic, as complex, as possessing some power we do not fully understand, and as symbolically relevant to our own lives and identities. If none of these features are present, the person or action is ignored, dismissed, and forgotten. With sex workers, this has never been the case. We do not ignore sex workers, we pay attention to them, and we pay attention because we have a personal stake in the matter. While there is tremendous variation in the economic and social *position* of our stakes, in the following pages I will discuss how most expert views of sex work are framed by a few dominant institutions, institutions that inevitably make sex workers “sick.” I conclude by arguing that the study of sex work has achieved social and scientific legitimacy at the expense of dehumanizing sex workers, and that this dehumanization is not an unfortunate coincidence, but a *requirement* for the production of contemporary institutionalized knowledge.

*Sex Work and the Business of Morals and Truth*

Throughout written history, there are many examples of people attempting to make their own interpretation of sex work into a culturally hegemonic one—and as with any issue, the people with the most social pull “win” the right to legislate truth and morality (e.g., Marx. 1864/1996; Becker, 1963). Although in pre-Biblical times “temple prostitutes” were apparently considered honorable and holy (Walker, 1983), religious authorities later claimed that sex, especially for women, may only occur with a marriage mate sanctioned by the church (and state). But as religious authority began to weaken (corresponding with the rise of “scientific” authorities and a growing middle class), secular authorities began overtaking the business of morals and truth—including the truths about sex work. In the United States, secular authorities (e.g., politicians, police officers, social scientists, social workers, health officials, and feminist scholars) have linked commercial sex work with organized crime, sexually transmitted disease, substance abuse, sexual abuse, violence, and a generally unpleasant social climate. Their rationales for opposing sex work differ, but the overlap is vast. *Overall*, authorities still agree that sex work is a problem.

And so the official story about sex work is still that there is something inherently wrong with it, but the reasons have changed. Official accounts of sex work no longer describe the phenomenon as a “sin,” and sex workers are no longer officially seen as the conduits of sin. Within the increasingly secularized climates of nineteenth-century Britain and North America, groups of new experts began asserting that prostitutes should be pitied rather than condemned, “taken in” rather than ostracized, and seen as “in trouble” rather than as trouble makers. These new experts were the women social reformers of the late nineteenth century—the same group of women we might retrospectively lump into the “first wave of feminism.” The following is Kristin Luker’s (1996) description of nineteenth-century women reformers in the United States:

Women reformers, mobilizing for the first time as women, engineered a new way of talking and thinking about “women in trouble.” Whether prostitutes, abandoned mistresses, or unmarried mothers, such “unfortunates”

were now defined as victims of social and economic circumstance rather than as moral pariahs. The reformers, who came out of a rich evangelical tradition, were armed with an implicit (and at times explicit) critique of gender relations. Most centrally, they saw themselves as not so different from the women they wished to help: anyone, they argued, could fall prey to sin and to the devil in the person of men. (Luker, 1996, p. 20)

These women reformers' approach created more sympathy for female sexual deviants, which reduced the sting of religious condemnation. However, the notion of "sin" did not immediately disappear: instead, evil became incarnate in promiscuous men rather than promiscuous women. In those times, sexual double standards were criticized, but the solution was seen as holding men to women's "naturally" chaste standards. Rather than arguing for increased female sexual freedoms, promiscuity was universally condemned, and men were at fault for all sex outside of marriage. During this transitional time, notions of sin remained, but the agents of temptation switched genders.

For contemporary western feminists, this religious framing of sex work seems distracting and irrelevant, since the task now is not to curtail the devil's manifestation in men, but to equalize societal entitlements. And yet, this integration of old (religious) and new (feminist) ideas is how all knowledge is made: new ideas are only "seen" if they can fit within an existing cultural frame. In that case, the frame was a religious one.

Feminism, religion, science, or any other philosophy, does not exist as a closed system. In the past century, people from all of these fields have influenced the official story about sex work, but their stories are also affected by their cultural contexts and institutional positions. Therefore, to better grasp the current approaches to sex work, it is helpful to consider the following three questions: 1) Which institutions dominate our contemporary theoretical frames? 2) How do people get their ideas institutionalized, and what happens to an idea once it is institutionalized? and 3) What are the gaps between sex worker and expert accounts, and how concerned should we as social scientists be about such gaps? Answering these questions makes it easier to make sense of the politics of sex work, as well as to better evaluate any proposed "solutions."

## Cultural and Institutional Frames

### *From Anger About Sexism to Concern about "Fixing" Women*

Since the late 1800s and early 1900s, women's increasing activism began influencing expert attitudes about many issues affecting women, including sex work. As a result of this activism, there is today more official sympathy toward the "plight" of sex workers. However, an irony of this increased sympathy lies in how it has become fused with an *individualized* understanding of all social problems: so that a concern for people in troublesome circumstances becomes a concern for troubled people, a focus on fixing unfair social conditions becomes a focus on fixing people, and radical, structural critiques of gender inequality transform into worries about "fixing" women. How did this happen? Examples from history again give us clues.

In her informative book, *Prostitution in Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*, Judith Walkowitz (1980) traces the history of how a well-meaning radical women's group, the "Ladies National Association" (LNA), organized around the issue of sex work. The group formed in Britain during the 1860s in response to Britain's "Contagious Diseases Acts," which required any unescorted woman to submit to official genital examinations—a measure which made sex workers targets for harassment, and institutionalized sexual double standards for everyone. For a brief time, the women of the LNA were able to summon public indignation over these Acts. However, due to their lack of cultural and legislative power, LNA members failed in their attempt to discard these Acts, as well as their goal of requiring men to emulate women's "superior" (i.e., chaste) sexual standards. Furthermore, instead of halting men's sexual licentiousness, the anger of the LNA "was easily co-opted and rechanneled into repressive anti-vice campaigns" leading to a "rise of social-purity crusades and...police crackdowns on streetwalkers and brothel keepers" (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 7). These state-sponsored crusades created a fearful and punitive climate for female sex workers, where they (but not their clients) were stigmatized, isolated, and driven away

from networks of community support—all of which certainly brought these women distress and increased their reliance on (male) organized criminals.

Thus, the mixture of nineteenth-century religious and feminist ideas with the British legal system seems to have hurt sex workers more than it helped them. Sex workers became marked as an official “problem,” and what began as feminist and religious indignation over state-sponsored sexism resulted in even *more* state-sponsored harassment of specific women—those identified as prostitutes. This result should not be explained away as an anomalous, unintended coincidence; once the eye of the state rests upon a group spotlighted as “troublesome,” that group becomes an easy target of interrogation, scrutiny, and control. At first, well-meaning people may merely place their ideological spotlights on specific groups who are “in trouble,” but eventually those spotlighted people may be seen as the *source* of trouble.

### *The Frame of Disease and Recovery*

While religious and feminist views helped focus the British (and U.S.) state’s attention on sex work around the turn of the twentieth century, this was also a growing time for a new cultural authority: science. In the United States, science began overtaking religious authority in the mid- to late 1800s, and its influence and authority continues to spread throughout American culture. Scientific trends have certainly come and gone (such as the popularity of social Darwinism and “scientific management”), but what remains is people’s tendency to see science as the arbiter of truth. Particularly compelling has been the concept of “disease,” which we understand as something that can and should be studied, isolated, and cured. And we not only see disease in the biological sense; since “disease” is something everyone avoids, the word also works as a strong metaphor, as Suzanne Pharr (1988) uses it when she calls homophobia a “societal disease.” So, due to the cultural authority of science, “disease” has replaced “sin” as the legitimate explanation for why bad things happen to people.



In 1935, Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, utilized this culturally compelling metaphor when they began referring to alcoholism as a disease. The metaphor worked, and thus began the onset of an enormous Twelve-Step empire. Scientifically speaking, alcoholism has never “really” been a disease (Fingarette, 1988; Rapping, 1996), but the prevalence of this metaphorical slogan is so vast that whether it is “true” or not has not mattered.

In *The Culture of Recovery*, Elayne Rapping (1996) argues that the hegemony of the Twelve-Step movement has created widespread faith in a disease-based understanding of behavior, so that not just alcoholism but *all* social problems are understood in terms of disease and recovery. The disease explanation of personal troubles is now so foundational that, when alternatives are proposed, people get confused and even frantic. For example, Rapping reports that on a talk show discussing eating disorders, “an audience member suggested that eating disorders were different from cancer, a biological disease which one did in fact ‘just get’...rather than a form of behavior we learn.” This proposal allegedly made audience members furious:

“How can you question this woman’s suffering?” said many participants, in one way or another. As though the idea that eating was not an addiction or disease somehow was a way of “blaming the victim” for her pain. “Of course she has a disease,” said one and all in support of the distressed guest. (Rapping, 1996, p. 43)

Since the audience member was not blaming women for their eating disorders but was simply suggesting that this behavior was the result of social rather than biological processes, Rapping concludes that “the dominance of addiction theory thus works as an automatic censoring mechanism, making it difficult for any other way of thinking—even a feminist counter-agenda—to be credited” (p.43).

This example comes from popular culture, but the disease model is also prevalent amongst experts outside the media lens—including those experts concerned with the “problem” of sex work. Here the story is often identical to that of talk shows: “Person X” (insert here person who: throws up his/her food, drinks too much, or

sells sex) has no “choice,” no power over his/her behavior, and therefore needs “treatment.” What is distinctive about the treatment of sex workers, however, is that they are far more likely to be diagnosed as drug addicts or sexual abuse victims than as sexual deviants. One could imagine a situation in which sex workers are diagnosed as being “addicted” to selling sex, but instead of *directly* pathologizing sex work or sex workers, experts focus on the addictions and diseases that must be forcing people into such (pathological) behavior.

In my interviews and conversations with officials in the legal system and the “helping professions” (whether they be jail officials, counselors, social workers, or police officers), drug addiction and sexual abuse are always brought up as causes of prostitution. Not symptoms or correlates, but *causes*. It is sexual abuse and drug addiction that “force” women to be whores. If we treat those causes, they will stop acting that way.

In a 1995 videotaped interview with a Seattle Vice Officer, I asked the officer if he felt any “societal changes” needed to be made to help solve what he saw as the problem of prostitution. He responded, “oh, of course.... it’s plagued with drugs.... bad families...” I replied that some people felt that, if women just had other options, other job opportunities, then they would not be as likely to go out on the street. He quickly shot that suggestion down, saying, “no, people don’t go out because of lack of jobs; they go out because step dad’s raping her at home.”

Sexual abuse and drug addiction clearly bring people pain and suffering, and people in the “helping professions” do observe, and are concerned about, these troubles amongst their sex worker clients (as they should be). Furthermore, the stress, humiliation, and violence that is integral to many sex workers’ experiences should never be dismissed. However, what *should* change is the monopolistic frame through which these “bad things” are seen—not only because we could be released from individualistic, medical visions, but because it will enable “helpers” to see other people as something besides patients. Since the crucial aspects of sex work are now seen as “diseased,” it follows that most helpers see sex workers as “sick.”

The idea that all sex workers are forced into it certainly makes it easier for outsiders to sympathize, and it is obviously a better response than stoning sexual deviants to death, as people in Biblical times did. So, in addition to crediting early women reformers for creating a more measured, sympathetic understanding of sex work, perhaps the notion of “victims,” is a necessary adaptation to an increasingly secularized, anonymous, nation-state environment. By this I mean that the less anchored people are in their community and extended family, the less they can rely on unconditional help, and the more they have to either pay for it or conduct campaigns to convince people that they are worthy of help. According to “attribution theory,” people are more likely to help someone when they perceive that person’s trouble as being outside their control, and the response is likely to come in the form of sympathy and pity. If, however, the person’s need is perceived as due to a personal flaw, then people are less likely to help and more likely to respond with anger and irritation (Schmitt, 1994, p. 76). Yet, if the person asking for help is a long-time friend or family member, there is no need to play victim; help is simply part of the reciprocal contract of love and friendship. But if the person asking for help is a stranger—or someone people prefer to keep at arms length—then the victim approach is a rational one, since it increases the likelihood of help.

And so the victim story, in all the ways that it has come about, has brought women and sex workers (and anyone else on the outskirts of power) a reprieve from condemnation and sometimes very welcome help. If someone is forced into deviant outskirt behaviors, it is not their fault, and thus they should be helped, not blamed. In the early 1900s women activists promoted this idea, pointing out that sexist social conditions steer women towards all sorts of unhappy situations and behaviors. Today this structural critique is a basic sociological tenet, and it is an important one, since it takes the heat off “deviants” and begins the process of making the people “in charge” of social conditions accountable (although usually we get no further than a vague, non-confrontational blaming of “society”). Within this frame of structural blame, sex workers are victims, but at least someone or something (like

“society”) is held accountable for bad things. But with our current faith in disease, *no one* is accountable. Sex workers are still victims, but disease “just happens.” Social problems experts are the “doctors,” but they merely “treat” existing diseases. This approach results in both personal *and* political passivity, and this, as Rapping says, is “a far cry from feminism.”

### *Contemporary Feminist Frames*

This politically passive state of affairs cannot be what Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon intended when in the early 1980s they began their thunderous attack against the sex industry. In the tradition of earlier women reformers, feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon have strongly argued that sex work is not the product of faulty individuals, but of larger forces like patriarchy and economic inequality. They claimed that sex work is incompatible with gender equality; when a man “buys” a prostitute, he has the right to objectify, exploit, and abuse her as he wishes, and this leads him to see *all* women as potential property.

Due to the success of “second wave” (i.e., 1970s) feminism, a cultural frame existed in which such articulation of male abuses could be “seen,” and institutions existed in which they could settle. And for a short time (primarily in the 1980s), the Dworkin/MacKinnon camp became the predominant feminist position on sex work. Feminist scholars articulated disturbing similarities between traditional gender roles and commercial sex work (e.g., Boyer and James, 1983), and traditional marriage and sex work: “[t]raditional marriage is premised on the long-term private ownership of a woman by an individual man, whereas the institution of prostitution is built upon the short-term public ownership of women by many men” (Giobbe, 1991, p. 144). However, these anti-sex work positions were not without feminist critics, and during the 1980s an ongoing argument known as the “sex wars” ensued amongst feminists. While these “wars” were initially lopsided,<sup>1</sup> the bald assumptions of the Dworkin/MacKinnon camp provided easy contrasting points, which probably made it easier for others to articulate a “pro-sex work” feminist frame. This new

frame critiqued (and continues to critique) the anti-sex work feminist position as patronizing, sex-negative, and disrespectful of any professional pride a sex worker espouses. Furthermore, in direct contradiction to anti-sex work feminist assumptions, many of these critiques assert that sex work can radically *disrupt* patriarchy and traditional gender roles.

However, despite increasing articulation of pro-sex work feminism (and increasing proliferation of pro-sex work publications),<sup>2</sup> this particular feminist position is still seen as radical, and has yet to be institutionalized in most U.S. (or even feminist) institutions. Just four years ago, when I asked a spokesperson from the Seattle branch of the National Organization for Women about her position on prostitution, I received this standard reply:

In general, the position is that prostitution, along with pornography, is a civil rights violation of women...in general...that it's a form of violence against women, and that it is part of...patriarchal oppression of women. That would be in a nutshell. I mean it's a fairly complex issue.... We do not look down on women who earn their living through prostitution; rather we see it as a form of cultural oppression of women and violence against them.

In addition to institutionalizing their claims in feminist realms, anti-sex work feminists have also found a home in the legal realm. In 1983 and 1984, Dworkin and MacKinnon wrote and led efforts to install anti-pornography ordinances in Minneapolis and Indianapolis.<sup>3</sup> In 1985 the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors considered an ordinance similar to the original Minneapolis version (Ellis et al., pp. 29, 64, 72). Although these legal measures did not stick, the ideas behind them made their way in through the State's back door. For example, in 1993, I attended a Washington State sponsored conference "for legal and social service professionals" in which clear threads of this feminist position were prominent. The conference began with a keynote speaker who linked sex work to universal patriarchal oppressions: "My hope is to inspire you...we must fight sexism, racism, homophobia. All of these oppressions are symptoms of prostitution." For an entire state-sponsored day, this speaker along with a folder full of anti-sex work pamphlets, produced resounding anti-sex

work feminist messages. Looking back on the experience, these messages now seem remarkable to me (since I was, after all, sitting amongst more police officers than women studies professors):

Prostitution serves men alone. Nobody ever asks if it was good for her. Every time you look at the act itself it is unwanted sex. She is forced to leave her body and endure this. (Keynote speaker)

The prostitute-client relationship is almost always one of abuse, degradation and violence. The “sex” which the client buys turns women’s bodies into an instrument for men’s use. The woman becomes a commodity and the trade of which she is the object seriously damages her identity and destroys her sense of self-worth. (Tremblay, 1987)

As I talk to you about prostitution, I am referring to this as a system of cruelty to women. This is true whether it’s an escort service, street work, working at the Four Seasons, or at a strip joint. (Keynote speaker)

The fact that the state now sees sex work as a “women’s issue” as well as a moral or public health issue, is reflective of a significant cultural shift; it is a sign that feminism continues to succeed in heralding women as a legitimate group with interests and concerns independent of men. With this legitimacy comes the right to elbow one’s way into state-sponsored conferences, into the inner circle—the place where cultural truths are made. However, why are only anti-sex work feminist positions allowed into the state’s sacred circle? And why is it that when feminist ideas get institutionalized in state and social service industries, the targets are no longer sexism, racism, economic inequality, or homophobia, but sexual abuse and drug addiction?

### *Disease, Institutionalized Feminism, and the State: A Nice Fit*

Institutionalized feminism is soft on structural critiques and heavy on individual solutions for at least two reasons: it fits better into state and other institutions and it makes sense within our cultural frame. After “The State” squishes the radical out of any feminist thought, one crucial essence of the feminist anti-sex work position remains, and it remains because it resonates with state-sanctioned approaches. This crucial essence is the idea that sex workers are victims with no choice.

In addition to fitting into the state welfare system, the institutionalization of anti-sex work feminism is also understandable from the perspectives of the sociology of science and social problems theory. In her study of cancer research, Joan Fujimura (1987) shows that scientific solutions are possible only when they are simplified, or "doable." Bruno Latour (1987) points out that a scientific category is an extremely condensed version of "reality." Both Fujimura and Latour envision science, facts, and knowledge as a social process that *requires* the simplification of an empirical phenomenon. Similarly, social problems theorists, such as Gusfield (1989), have shown that remedies for social problems are usually narrowly focused—not because social problem workers are dim, but because this is institutionally required: "[I]f the condition is perceived as that of individual illness or deficiency, then there can be a social technology, a form of knowledge and skill, that can be effectively learned" (p. 433). Thus, while feminists have expansive and varied visions of why sex work is a "problem," patriarchy is not a scientifically "doable" problem. State institutionalized feminism, therefore, must be far more compressed.

What is a doable problem? It is something that is small, simple, and contained. Radical ideas like overthrowing patriarchy do not settle very well outside of feminist camps. But the notion that women are victims and that they have no choice *does* make sense; it fits right into the larger cultural frame of disease.

This victim notion also fits right into the need for large institutions (like the state) to encourage passivity and deference in its members. Alvin Gouldner (1970), a critic of standard solutions to social problems, argues that "[i]ncreasingly, the Welfare State's strategy is to transform the sick, the deviant, and the unskilled into 'useless citizens,' and to return them to 'society' only after periods of hospitalization, treatment, counseling, training, or retraining" (Gusfield, 1989, p. 433, emphasis mine). Why would "the state" or anyone in the helping professions want a citizen to be "useless"? As Gusfield (1989) points out, the social problems industry *requires* its clients to be dependent and weak—victims of forces outside their control. Today this is expressed in terms of "sickness": "The development of professions dedicated to benevolence, the so-called 'helping' professions, depend upon and accentuate the definition

of problem populations as ‘sick,’ as objects of medical and quasi-medical attention” (Gusfield, 1989, p. 432).

As well as fitting into the cultural frame of disease, this scientific categorization of humans is a convenient fit with the bureaucratic state system. Max Weber pointed out that bureaucracy (in its ideal form) seeks out efficient, “rational,” standardized ways of treating people. In this way, bureaucracies—ideally, anyway—are able to transcend tribalism, nepotism, and favoritism, and get on with the task at hand. The problem is that any time anyone must navigate through a bureaucracy his or her humanity begins to disintegrate. For those who encounter state agencies on a frequent basis (i.e., the poor and the “sick”), official dehumanization is a way of life (Funiciello, 1993). And this dehumanization is integral to the institutionalized, scientific measures through which we “treat” sex workers. It is one thing to take a germ out of its context, isolate it, categorize it, and then treat it. It is another thing to do this to a human. When we focus solely on sorting, categorizing and diagnosing people, we shrink people into a label, and much of their humanity and power is excluded—even when it is done with feminist, religious, or humanitarian intentions.

In an effort to help a sex worker out of a bad situation, must we also require her to don a victim identity, like a flimsy hospital robe? Must we strip her down and examine only specific aspects of her body, while ignoring the multifaceted, interwoven, and non-biological aspects that affect her health? Within our current cultural and institutional frame (and anonymous social circumstances), it seems we must. And in so doing we degrade ourselves into making dichotomous choices. (For example, if a person is “sick,” how can she or he also be healthy? If a person is a victim, how can he or she also be liberated?) For those wishing to jump out of these mutually exclusive notions, it is useful to consider how they become institutionalized as our only options.

### **The Social Problems Industry: How Issues Become Problems and Solutions Get Institutionalized**

Social problems become institutionalized through at least three mechanisms. First, the social problem must be defined in reason-



able terms; it must be mapped, framed and isolated as conquerable territory. Second, the group claiming this territory must be widely recognized as legitimate owners. Third, the group claiming ownership must have enough power and resources to build solutions within the problem's defined borders. Once this occurs, solutions can become institutionalized. This generates new jobs and new needs, and people employed by the institution are motivated to rebuff any attempts at re-framing the original problem.

### *Mapping and Framing the Territory*

In order to understand a phenomenon, people select portions of the phenomenon, dissect those portions, and then try to explain them. With each new explanation, new labels are created; the more specialized the understanding, the more specialized the labels, leading to a language only specialists can comprehend. In his book, *Science in Action*, Bruno Latour writes, "When we use a map, we rarely compare what is written on the map with the landscape—to be capable of such a feat you would need to be yourself a well-trained topographer" (Latour, 1987, p. 254). So, unless one knows the map-maker's language, one may live in mapped territory yet not recognize the map.

This difference in how people see an issue results in a quandary when experts stop trying to *explain* people and start trying to *help* them. Since people won't seek out help if they don't recognize themselves as falling into official categories, experts must teach people how to translate their problems into expert language. For instance, at the Washington State conference on sex work, one counselor noted that "[s]ome of the women don't identify themselves as being a part of domestic violence—these women do not have the right terminology when they approach services—so they aren't helped as much as they could be."

In a personal interview, a counselor recalled for me an instance in which she had to explain to a client that she had been sexually abused: "She said that she had sex with her father and brother, but that she wasn't *abused* by them!" When I asked this same counselor if she thought her clients who work as erotic dancers thought of themselves as being "objectified," she replied: "When a person is

doing it they don't see it as being objectified. It's more about learning how to demean yourself and do it well. *Until someone teaches you what that is, you don't know you're demeaning yourself.*"

One element of starting a new social movement is in creating a new language for old things, as well as in making new linkages between things previously seen as unrelated. These new linkages and words are then placed within a new theoretical frame. Something I find intriguing about this process is how one phenomenon (like sex work), can wind up with completely separate frames (such as that it is either "liberating" or "exploitative"; that it is either "just a job," or "sexual slavery") with no room for variation, overlap, or considerations of social context. For example, a former sex worker now specializing in counseling sex workers defines sex work as "erotic dancing, stripping, pornography, prostitution, and phone sex; any job where a person's body, mind, or emotions are sexually exploited for purposes of money or another's gratification." According to this definition, there is no real difference between phone sex work and prostitution; there is no situation in which a sex worker might *not* be exploited, and presumably one's race and class background is not very relevant. All sex workers fit into the same frame of exploitation. In my readings and interviews, I have observed that anti-sex work proponents are far more likely to use this reductive tactic, but the "other" side does this as well. Pro-sex work activists also "close ranks" and give out only flattering information—again, in my observation, often overstepping how and why race and class can bring about significant differences in the experience of sex work. In no case would I say that this oversight is malicious; experts are simply mapping and framing the same enormous landscape that is sex work from two very different observation decks. One view is that of the State, which requires its people to be victims; the other is from the Professional point of view, which assumes that people have full control over their circumstances.

### *Claiming Ownership*

The second stage of institutionalizing a social problem comes when people claim ownership over the territory they have mapped.

As with physical property, conflicts arise over territory boundaries, but if one group's "ownership" is generally accepted by outsiders, then others vying for a claim sometimes choose not to fight but to form coalitions—or at least to co-opt the more dominant language. For instance, when political and religious conservatives joined feminists in supporting the Indianapolis anti-pornography ordinance, their official reason for doing this was not that pornography destroys "the family," but that pornography degrades women (Ellis et al., 1992, p. 68).

Before people can claim ownership of a social problem, they must convince others of their authority. Outsiders are more convinced of a claim if a consistent argument is publicly maintained and if the argument rests on accepted truths. However, to convince non-feminists of either anti- or pro-sex-work feminist arguments is difficult because many find the implications too radical and unsettling. As a result, the ideas of both anti- and pro-sex work feminists become oversimplified; the arguments become packaged and displayed in a more palatable form. Boyer and James (1983) allude to this tension between feminist theory and application when they write, "Viewing the prostitute as a victim may be a positive first step, but only if the prostitute is viewed as the victim of a contradiction in the structure of male/female relations rather than of individual psychopathology" (p.141). And yet, in a twelve-step, bureaucratic climate, this psychopathologizing is exactly what seems to be necessary for claiming ownership over a social problem.

### *Building an Industry*

Studies of the social problems industry (or what Joseph Gusfield calls "the troubled person's professions") have shown that movements addressing social problems eventually develop into industries with their own agendas (Gusfield, 1989; Beck, 1978). Thus, ideology can inspire individual action, but when ideology is streamlined into a social movement—especially a well-established, well-funded one—ideology is but one inspiration for action. In *Outsiders*, Howard Becker (1963) theorized that people

concerned with solving social problems (whom he called “moral entrepreneurs”) come in two varieties: rule makers and rule enforcers. Rule makers are often sincerely concerned about an issue and internally motivated to influence social change, but rule enforcers may be “people whose motives are less pure than those of the crusader” (p. 149). Keeping in mind that there is overlap, this distinction between rule makers and rule enforcers seems appropriate for comparing anti-sex work feminists with workers in the social problems industry.

If a social problem, as framed by rule makers, is to develop into an industry, people must learn to see the problem within that same particular frame. After ownership is established, people must be uniformly trained to diagnose and treat the specific problem. This ensures help for the problem population as well as employment for the helpers, or rule enforcers. When an issue is officially defined as a social problem, when its “causes” are isolated and simplified, and when there is an official frame or “master narrative” (as Rapping calls it) enveloping it, the issue becomes an official problem, and the problem can then be institutionalized. Also, successful (or institutionalized) social movements usually have catchy terms or tenets, such as “alcoholism is a disease,” or “pornography is rape.” Organizational savvy, monetary funds and influential believers all help elevate such tenets into truths. Once truths are mapped and structured, entirely new supporting structures (e.g., social work departments, twelve-step programs, specialized government departments) cushion them. Much energy is devoted to teaching others how to maintain these new structures. Meanwhile, other terms or tenets remain homeless and ignored, living on the outskirts of mainstream institutions.

There is not anything inherently wrong with favoring certain ideas over others, of paying attention to certain details while ignoring others; in fact, this process is necessary to get anything accomplished. By choosing to focus on certain issues while weeding out the rest, and doing this within a structure that supports these choices, the task at hand becomes more manageable. So the problem is not the fact that specialized knowledge exists. It is a problem, however, when alternative perspectives

are systematically blocked by the skyscrapers of institutionalized knowledge.

This systematic blocking of alternative views is what has happened, and continues to happen, to sex work. Sex workers are generally less organized and financially supported than experts, who have the political and economic resources to generate and disseminate their truths. And the social recognition of truth is what Bruno Latour (1987) has argued is the main difference between experts and non-experts: "You may have written a paper that settles a fierce controversy once and for all, but if readers ignore it, [it] cannot be turned into a fact; it simply *cannot*" (p. 41). In other words, facts achieve their status through a social process. Like people working their way up a corporate ladder, claims do not become facts unless an authority gives them a promotion. The more powerful people supporting a claim, the harder the fact becomes, and the more likely it is that the fact becomes institutionalized.

Further, since a position needs social recognition to become a fact, and since social recognition is related to social status, the construction of facts is a class-related (as well as race- and gender-related) endeavor. For example, one (religiously-based) anti-pornography movement during the 1960s attempted to convince people that "pornography had the potential to become an item the consumption or support of which indicated the social status of the user or approver" (Zurcher et al., 1971, p. 222). And, in 1993, the president of the National Organization for Women, Cathy Ireland, proposed an identical anti-pornography approach: that is, to "make the consumption of pornography seem philistine and unenlightened, as humiliating and socially unacceptable as smoking has become" (Wilkerson, 1993).

Professional images—the flip side of "stigmatizing" working-class images—also enhance social recognition of knowledge. Realizing this, spokespersons in the sex industry have increasingly used professional words in an effort to gain more respect and legitimacy for their issue, as when sex industry executives coined the term "the sex industry" (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1989, p. 328). Similarly, by highlighting the professional aspect of prostitution, COYOTE has been moderately successful in redefining

prostitution from “sex as sin to sex as work” (Jenness, 1990). This process of “professionalization” thus allows people to climb out of “deviant” categories into the realms of legitimacy, which in turn transports them from *being* a social problem into agents in redefining the social problem (Kitsuse, 1980).

In sum, if a social problem is to be institutionalized, it must be mapped and framed, claimed, and then channeled into small-scale solutions. If the solution is well advertised, utilizes class and/or professional images, and is backed by enough money and influential people, then it can become institutionalized. An industry is created, experts are trained, their jurisdiction is set, and people take their appropriate places.

### **Institutional and Ideological Gaps between Experts and Sex Workers**

Convincing sex workers to see their experiences through outsider-defined frames takes some work, but this is what experts in the social problems industry do every day. While exposure to external views can be a positive experience (since it offers alternative, and perhaps more helpful, frames for seeing the world), problems arise when ideologies and remedies are administered to people “for their own good” (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Thus far I have focused on how experts in the helping professions do this, but social researchers also participate in this unfortunate dynamic. Academic careers, like social problems careers, rely on a certain amount of “protection” from outside competitors, so that experts in each world can maintain their authority. If lay people could do the job just as well or better, experts would lose their jobs, identities, and privileged social positions. Therefore, experts generally have a vested interest in disproving the validity of non-expert positions.

One way that social science experts maintain authority is through use of standard research methodologies. For example, when administering interviews and surveys, social scientists are warned to watch for “socially desirable” (i.e., false) answers, a warning that usually comes without any concerted discussion (ex-

cept in feminist methodology classes) about why anyone would “lie” in a research setting. For instance, people are probably less likely to lie to their equals or to people they see as insiders. Therefore, the risk of people lying (in either direction) is probably heightened when there is a large gap of status and trust between interviewers and interviewees.

Furthermore, if one accepts that all social researchers indirectly affect their data, then one should also accept that all researchers, regardless of their position on sex work, may intimidate respondents into saying certain things and omitting others. This is especially relevant in cases where the interviewer has influence over the respondent’s future, as is the case when the respondent is incarcerated or requesting social services. This point is plainly illustrated by the following conversations, tape-recorded in jail. The first of these excerpts comes from a twenty-three-year-old white woman from a working-class background—a woman who though small in stature seemed to me tougher and more emotionally impenetrable than Clint Eastwood. Here she is responding to my question about her relationship with the jail supervisor:

RE: I open up to her to a certain point, but when I know I’m getting too far in, you know what I’m sayin’? I cut it off.

KL: Have you told her stuff you’ve told me?

RE: No.

KL: Why is it easier for you to tell me?

RE: Cause you kinda...you’ve talked to a few prostitutes, you know how it is.... But see...she don’t, she can’t...she can’t like, how do you say it? She don’t know how it is to be a prostitute, you know what I’m sayin’? She can’t...she can’t fit in with...you know what I’m sayin’? *So you got to tell her, you know you can tell her little white lies, cause you don’t want to tell her the truth cause she’ll look at you like (shocked face)...you know, she’s kind of like, she’s a square.*

This second excerpt is from a twenty-five-year-old African American woman who appeared to be from a middle-class background. Here she is replying to my questions about the support groups available in jail:

KL: What sorts of groups here do you like the best?

BE: The best group we do have here are the meetings where it's just us women, no counselors, no SDA's, nobody's patrolling us, and we can get some honest feelings. A lot of the time, the threat of someone that's an authority is that we feel that we have to say certain things. And not say others.

Apparently, the incarcerated women were more comfortable talking with me about certain issues because, unlike jail employees, I am perceived as holding little power over their lives. Therefore, just as sex workers may not admit they are victims with some interviewers (as my critic pointed out), with other interviewers sex workers may not admit enjoyment.

Most of my respondents were not familiar with either feminist terminology or the feminist debate over sex work. However, four of my twenty-one interviewees identified themselves as feminists, and all four of them demonstrated disgust for and alienation from "mainstream" (i.e., anti-sex work) feminism. One woman with years of prostitution experience and a self-described "women's libber" argued that "if a woman has got enough sense, has got enough intelligence in her to even know what a feminist is all about, she doesn't have, she could not possibly be in that situation where she would have no choice, O.K.? [She waits for me to nod in agreement.] O.K."

An erotic dancer who attended a private woman's college and grew up in a sexually liberal home argued that objectification is not confined to sex work, but a normal part of life: "I think that we all objectify people constantly in our life. The bellboy, the grocery clerk, the receptionist—we pass by these people and they have no impact on our lives. It's not necessary to go, 'Gee, I wonder what they like for breakfast.... I wonder what their political views are.' Who cares!"

And another erotic dancer justified her work as a way to play economic "catch up":

For me...as a dancer I have always struggled to place my work in a feminist context. I made on the average \$25 an hour...and sex work is the only work I could get paid that amount of money for. I just felt that I was playing a very fair game of catch-up. I had a theater company for four years—my rent was \$150 a month and in a good night I could make \$150. So I would work a few days a month and the rest of the time I could do what I



wanted...theater, travel...and I really resent the fact that people tell me that I'm a victim of patriarchy. I mean, I'm a vegetarian—and if I hadn't danced I probably would've been working in a burger joint or something. To me that would be worse.

Another woman, who had eleven years of erotic dance experience and some intermittent prostitution experiences, said she felt alienated when she went back to school and encountered what she calls the “textbook mentality”:

KL: When did you start reading or knowing about feminism?

D: I took some social work courses...I don't think I was a feminist then, but I understood empowerment. But I became disillusioned because of this textbook mentality. I thought, “you will never be able to help people like me...fuck you people.”

Finally, a phone sex worker (with brief experiences in pornography and exotic dancing) who declared she was *not* a feminist, saw the anti-sex-work feminist view as interfering with her freedom:

I don't think that we're buying into anything. I think that we see our power, we see what we have, and that we should damn well use it whichever way we fuckin' want to. And that's the bottom line. I think that no one, as a group or individually, should tell any woman what she should do or how she should feel about her own body, or with her own body, or with her own talent, or expertise. In any area whatsoever. I think that freedom is the thing that I'm after, the thing that I stand up for even more than anything else. I can't think of anything else. Personal freedoms, I think need to be upheld.

It is important to note that all these rebuttals to anti-sex-work feminism come from women with post-high school education. Of the four explicitly feminist women, the first attended vocational-technical school, and the last three attend(ed) (and one graduated from) four-year universities. Being the educational elite of my sample, these women had more non-sex work options available to them than most, and thus were probably more likely to feel they had chosen their work. Further, their outrage at feeling patronized and at being labeled “victims” is further evidence of their class privilege. Nevertheless, it is clear that all of these women, whether incarcerated or not and despite their class or

race, felt alienated from, and distrustful of, the experts. And why wouldn't they be distrustful, if the experts seem to be systematically ignoring much of what they are saying?

## Conclusions

The fact that sex work is now seen as a "women's issue" is a general advance for women. However, history is full of examples of activists whose radical intentions are stymied because: 1) they rely on conventional assumptions; 2) they lack access to conventional, culturally legitimate tools; or, ironically, 3) their ideas become enveloped by those same conventional, culturally legitimate tools. In the case of women radicals attempting to define sex work, all three of these factors have inhibited truly radical approaches.

Within the contemporary United States, social problems are most commonly seen in disease terms, meaning that people in problematic circumstances are seen as "sick." This frame has developed in response to several societal factors, such as: scientific authorities taking over the jurisdiction of religious authorities, women activists campaigning for more sympathy for "deviants," the rise of individualism and the decline of community and family anchors, the rise of the bureaucratic nation-state, the hegemony of the twelve-step recovery movement, and the nature of how ideas get institutionalized within a bureaucratic, science-focused environment. Add to that a long cultural tradition of managing "problem populations" (where people on the outside of legitimized institutions are seen as both threatening and disposable), and we end up with a situation in which the people in problematic circumstances come to be seen as problem people.

For a time, women activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were able to shift their focus from "women in trouble" to problems of sexism. Again, during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States., with the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism, people sought out structural explanations for social problems. With much work, some of these ideas were institutionalized and, as a result, it is now far more likely that ethnic minorities and women will be afforded legal entitlements

and rights. So, in cases where equal rights and entitlements are ensured, the institutionalization process is very helpful. However, an insidious process often occurs when an issue becomes institutionalized as a problem rather than an entitlement. In these cases, my concern is not just that complex issues are girdled into simplistic and individualized solutions, but that the issues are defined from a point of condescension.

Social problems experts do address some problems that concern some sex workers (such as drug abuse and sexual abuse), but there is still substantial variety between how experts and sex workers understand sex work. Experts, whether they be “rule makers” who frame the issue in broad ideological terms or “rule enforcers” who shrink this broad ideology into more doable problems, often miss central aspects of the people they are trying to explain. In part, the gap between expert and sex worker perspectives is simply due to the process of institutionalizing truths. Since sex workers have less centralized organization and fewer influential allies, many of their views are not easily promoted and thus they remain on the outskirts of institutionalized knowledge. Meanwhile, state-funded agencies, or other socially recognized authorities, have organizational, economic, and political advantages in institutionalizing their positions. Some divergence in opinions between sex workers and experts is also to be expected; it is the expert’s job to point out patterns not obvious to people who are concentrating on other things. However, experts in the social problems industry also systematically *ignore* sex workers’ challenges to expert ideologies.

If we accept that social problems are constructed, and that the success of social movements depends on their ability to package knowledge for general consumption, then we must realize that the social problems industry never “clearly” reflects the issues of its subjects. Knowledge is a *social* process, produced by people with specific positions that they generally want to advance or protect. Yet, rather than giving up on institutionalized solutions altogether, thinking of oneself as a *knowledge maker*<sup>4</sup> enables one to self-consciously strengthen connections between research and institutionalized knowledge. Rather than being controlled by ide-

ology, we can dictate its course, or at least be more honest about our positions within the machine of institutionalized ideology. One need not choose between ideological slavery and cynicism; the view that knowledge is socially constructed does not have to exclude dreams of progressive social change. But when we see our options in only two camps—like seeing “bad things” as either true *or* false, objective *or* constructed—then we will forever be trapped in a headache of an argument. Defining something as socially constructed does not mean that its effects do not hurt.

One advantage to cultivating more complex understandings of sex work is that we could improve the social services for sex workers. However, any call for social services I make with great caution; just as there is sometimes a fine line between sexual admiration and sexual harassment, so there is sometimes a fine line between state benevolence and state oppression. But there is a difference between admiration and harassment, and benevolence and oppression, and it lies in how much social power the “gazed upon” has to alter, prohibit and/or act upon the “gazer.” Furthermore, institutions, when we build them for ourselves, give us safety, predictability, and livelihood, but when we build institutions for others, we do it to contain others.

It is true that the urge to study a group often comes out of concern or sympathy, but it is also true that researchers overwhelmingly study those to whom they believe they have rightful access. In the early days of medicine, for example, medical researchers took study subjects from the poorest ranks, particularly those already contained in state institutions (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). So, unless researchers are studying their own in-group, this assumption (or exertion) of rightful access to others, is usually a disrespectful act—especially in the context of researching a social problem.

Sex workers have been contained, scrutinized, analyzed, criminalized, and disrespected long enough. In research, a halt to this treatment can be accomplished in two ways. First, by refocusing the research lens on non-sex workers; for instance, rather than asking sex workers how they “manage” the stigma of selling sex (as several sociological studies in the 1970s and 1980s did),

question non-sex workers about why they use words like “slut” in a derogatory manner. Rather than study how prostitutes run from the law, ask law makers and police officers what business they think they have telling people what to do with their bodies. (Psychological diagnoses could then be utilized to explain such odd behaviors and attitudes.) A second way of improving the treatment of sex workers is by cultivating a closer relationship between researcher and subject. Namely, more sex workers should become researchers, and more researchers should become sex workers. Not only would this dramatically cut down on the level of disrespect and condescension towards sex workers, but it would increase the quality of both the scholarship and its applications. Scholars would be more personally invested in telling and institutionalizing truths that enhance, rather than degrade, the quality and integrity of sex workers’ lives.

Radical ideas look different when they are contained and institutionalized because they are seen through increasingly standardized lenses. The point is not to discard institutional frames, but to recognize them, use them as tools, and create new ones that better coincide with one’s visions. So, if your vision is to enhance rather than degrade the status of sex workers, wear a pair of frames that allows a sex worker to look you in the eye.

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## Notes

1. Gayle Rubin reflects that the term “war” deceptively invokes the “image of equally polarized sides,” when in fact the pro-sex work side was merely “defending itself against attack” (Nagle, 1997, p. 14).
2. See, for example, Bell, 1987; Chapkis, 1997; Delacoste & Alexander, 1987; McElroy, 1995; Nagle, 1997; Pheterson, 1989.
3. The Minneapolis bill passed, but the mayor vetoed it on constitutional grounds. The Indianapolis bill passed in 1984 but was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1986.
4. In a presentation at the Gender Research Roundtable at the University of Washington, Kathryn Addelson argued that scientists (and humans in general) are “knowledge makers” rather than “knowledge seekers.”