

Sex Work and Trafficking Workgroup

Working Paper

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This position paper is a primer on research trends and tensions in the study of sex work and human trafficking. Our intent is not to provide an exhaustive review but rather an overview of the current state of the field based on the authors' expertise. This paper is divided into four sections: First we introduce the cultural and political roots of the study of sex work and trafficking. Next we define terms and identify key theoretical issues and debates. Third, we point to methodological needs and challenges to studies of sex work and human trafficking. Finally, we point to several areas in need of more research.

I. Overview of the field

Scholarly studies of sex work have exploded since the 1990s, moving far beyond a simplistic radical feminist 'women as victim/men as exploiters' paradigm that framed early work. Contemporary sociological studies of sex work have moved toward intersectional analyses (race, class, sexualities and gendered systems); these studies as a whole also emphasize inductive understandings of gender and sexuality paired with new theoretical understandings of desire, discourse, institutions and inequalities. Concurrent with a shift in theoretical frameworks many scholars have moved away from solely individual level questions that interrogate psychological motivations (e.g. why do people become prostitutes?) to questions that engage organizational and structural levels of analysis (e.g. what is the organization of sex work in this setting? How is the organization of sex work impacted by globalization? How are global economies impacted by sexual commerce? How is sex work similar to and different from other kinds of service, body or emotion work? How and why have political discourses of sex work shifted?). While the questions are different in the fields of public and global health, researchers in these fields have as well begun to move toward contextual and structural units of analysis. In general we see researchers in sociology drawing on a much wider variety of subfields to understand sex work; we also see sexual commerce as important to understanding larger social and cultural trends.

II. Key theoretical questions

Defining sex work

While sex work is often equated with prostitution, sex work includes many kinds of work, a variety of commercial exchanges, and involves a wide array of institutions. Sex work scholars refer to sex work as sexual products, sexual services, sexual fantasies and/or sexual contact produced in exchange for financial or material goods. Sex work includes a variety of forms including: pornography, sex chat lines,

sexually explicit live internet video, exotic dance, erotic massage, BDSM, and survival sex work (exchanging services for food, clothing, or other goods). Scholars note great diversity in sexual commerce, especially the wide range of individuals, identities and practices involved. Importantly, the study of sexual commerce implicates the doing of sex work, but also the culture, politics, institutions, values and markets that frame and define the intersection of intimacy and markets.

Political and theoretical context

The Sex Wars between anti-pornography/prostitution feminists and pro-sex feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s figure into contemporary debates around the issue of sex trafficking. Since the early 2000s the issue of human trafficking has captivated governments, NGOs, researchers, and activists around the world. Images of women in handcuffs and chains circulate through print, television, and online news outlets, portraying trafficked women as victims of Third World poverty who are kidnapped, sold, or forced into sex work. Anti-prostitution activists (who have recently renamed themselves “new Abolitionists”) have deployed these images to underscore that most or all sex work is inherently degrading and is a result of coercion and sexual exploitation of women and girls. The remedy from the abolitionists’ perspective is to increase criminal penalties of clients and traffickers (pimps, employers), and to engage in aggressive “end the demand” (criminalization and shaming) campaigns to curb men’s desire for purchasing sexual services from women.

In contrast, sex worker advocates caution against sweeping generalizations of human trafficking. They assert that not all sex workers are women and girls, not all clients are men, and that not all sex workers are trafficked or forced into sex work. In fact, many individuals enter the sex trade because it provides them with more opportunities for mobility and income than other types of work. Sex worker advocates and scholars argue that abolitionist solutions and policies are misinformed by unreliable statistics, sensationalism, and binary gender assumptions. Advocates for sex workers also critique abolitionist and state sponsored efforts for: a lack of attention to human, labor, and immigrants rights; a lack of evidence-based interventions including harm reduction approaches advocated in public health; and the virtual exclusion of input from those affected by policies about trafficking and sex work: most notably trafficked persons and adult sex workers.

In sum, deep misunderstandings, tensions, and outright political battles have occurred between and amongst scholars and activists around the issues of sex work and human trafficking. As a result, perhaps more now than in the past several decades, contemporary researchers of sex work and human trafficking must be prepared to become embroiled in highly political debates. For those coming from sociological perspectives (e.g. those which emphasize how the meaning of sex work must be understood within particular institutional, political, and cultural contexts), this politicization may come with the politically expedient need for researchers to defend an absolute separation between the issues of sex work and trafficking. However just as social and political forces have created conflation between sex work and trafficking, so too have distinct boundaries between these categories been socially constructed. For social scientists it is empirically warranted to theorize all working conditions – including

those for sex workers – as a complicated and contextualized continuum with may contain various aspects of privilege, agency, coercion, and structural constraint.

Sexual commerce as part of larger social processes

From our perspective the most exciting theoretical work in studies of sex work and trafficking are those which do not simply query “why” people engage in sexual commerce, but rather advances our understanding of how sexual commerce can be understood as a key part of larger historical and institutional trends and social processes. This includes theorizing how sex work is part of larger projects that both reproduces and subverts narratives of sexuality, gender, race and consumption in contemporary culture.

Several subfields of sociology and sexuality studies both can inform and be informed by this broader approach to studying sex work and trafficking. These include: 1) work and occupations including emotional and bodily labor 2) sexuality and queer theories of identity and desire, 3) political discourse and moral panics, 4) globalization and political economy, 5) migration/immigration, 6) institutional and organizational processes, 7) social movements, 8) poverty and inequality, 9) criminal justice systems and ideology, 10) structural violence, 11) culture, religion, values and attitudes, and 12) policy, politics, and citizenship.

III. Methodological concerns

Scholarly studies of sex work and human trafficking vary in focus, scope and methodology, within sociology and well as across other disciplines, and commonly include interview, ethnographic, and archival research methods. However, researchers studying sex work and sexual commerce face problems similar to those who study sexuality generally. Both researchers and those researched face severe stigma. There are challenges of access, problems with IRB, sexual harassment of researchers, and concerns with legitimacy. Also, importantly, the field is highly political and scholars must reconcile needs for advocacy with needs for systematic and reliable empirical research. While most sex work research has necessarily been qualitative (given the realities of hidden, stigmatized, and criminalized populations), many of the assertions from the abolitionist and anti-trafficking camps rely on quantitative claims, which have been critiqued as unreliable and feeding political “hype.” Given the politicized nature of sex work and trafficking studies, it is critical for researchers to stay steady on several points including: being rigorous in all of our methods, striving for both validity and reliability of data; grounding all claims in sound empirical evidence and logic; striving for depth (understanding on context, process, and meaning) as well as breadth (quantitative generalizations), being transparent about our own positionalities, and intentional and transparent about our political alliances and community partners.

IV. Areas for future research

While there is already a rich history of empirically sound and theoretically informed research on sex work, especially in the qualitative realm, including research which gestures to and has implications for

trafficking policies, there is a dire need for even more research on sex work and human trafficking, particularly quantitative research. In addition, studies of program and policy practices are needed, including tracing the funding streams for corporate philanthropy, microfinance, moves to privatize aid, corporate models in funding, NGO uses of funding, street level outreach programs. Studies that situate sex work, sexual commerce and trafficking in broad social contexts will continue to be important. Sex work scholarship is highly political and researchers face a number of challenges. Most importantly, studies need to point to practical ways to use existing funding and frames for action and research that will enhance workers rights and human rights.

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