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Beyond survival sex. An exploratory study of the labour experiences of female
street sex workers in Ottawa

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BEYOND SURVIVAL SEX
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE LABOUR EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE
STREET SEX WORKERS IN OTTAWA

Emma Maloney
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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades sex work has been the subject of considerable debate. A number of discourses dominate the analysis. The radical feminist perspective emerged in the late 1970s and discussed the sex trade within a framework of violence against women. The sex workers and feminist advocates began to organize in the early 1980s and argued that voluntary prostitution was a source of sexual and economic power. Feminist groups in the 1990s began to incorporate the perspective of sex workers in their approach, and argued that sex work was *work*.

This thesis develops a new theoretical framework outside the research that assumes women engaging in the street sex trade are 'victims' or 'workers', and instead examines the possibility that elements of both categories may be present in their reality. Street sex work is considered as labour, while leaving room for the possibility of the existence of survival sex. This qualitative research consists of an exploratory study of the viability, utility and limitations of a labour framework for understanding and analyzing the experiences of adult female street sex workers interviewed in the Ottawa area.

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult female street sex workers concerning their work in the sex trade, the challenges and risks they faced and the manner in which they addressed the problematic aspects of their work. The central themes of employment, challenges, risks and strategies were determined and identified through a qualitative content analysis of the data gathered, throughout which a labour framework emerged.

The results of the analysis indicate that these women working in the street sex trade in Ottawa view their experiences in the sex industry as labour. This form of employment shares a number of commonalities with other forms of working class labour, including its function as a strategy for women to realize economic independence. Street sex work also provides the flexibility essential for balancing other obligations (i.e. family). It requires a variety of skills and involves the implementation of specific entrepreneurial strategies.

The findings reveal a number of characteristics unique to street sex work that challenge existing labour frameworks and direct us to rethink street sex work beyond employment. These characteristics are specifically related to the criminalized nature of the work and include, among other things, the reported violence perpetrated by police and clientele. Moreover, by deconstructing common stereotypes attributed to female street sex workers, we are able to normalize sex work and address issues of stigma.

The implications of first considering street sex work as labour and second moving beyond existing definitions of employment include the need for the decriminalization of the trade and accountability on the part of the police. There is also a need to expand the current available resources to involve the creation of street sex worker advocacy groups in Ottawa. Finally, it is essential that the perspective of the women be incorporated into any policy changes, particularly their recommendation for the development of 'safehouses' that would facilitate labour.

INTRODUCTION

"I think it's great...keep working at it. Don't let anybody stand in your way 'cause you could help a lot of girls. Maybe they won't find somebody dead." (Patricia- about the research itself)¹

"I probably could if I looked hard enough but I don't think I'd wanna stick to it because of the money situation...what I make in five minutes I wouldn't make that in a month" (Paula- about getting a day job)

"See with me, when I worked, I never stand in one spot. I always walked, because you can't stand in front of a business, because businesses gonna get a fall back in the people going into the store. You can't stand in front of somebody's house. So you walk. They should make an area just for working girls. But it won't be in front of anybody's house or anybody's businesses. And then nobody will be calling the cops on the girls. They're not putting other people out. Or they're not around schools where children are. You know. It's so easy if people would just listen. Like working girls, we're not there to hurt anybody. It's two consenting adults. You know, it's not like we're taking little kids or uh, propositioning teenage boys, you know. Consenting adults." (Patricia)

Sex work² is believed to be one of the oldest professions for women and its longevity is testament to the ineffectiveness of attempts at eradication. It continues, however, to be a contested area, subject to considerable debate by academics, communities, the media and the state. In the late 1970s, a radical feminist discourse emerged which displaced the positivist explanations that had dominated the discussion and instead positioned the sex trade within a framework of victimization and violence against women.

¹ The decision was made to quote the women verbatim throughout the research, in order to maintain the richness of the narratives.

² The decision was made to employ the terms 'sex work' and 'sex worker' as opposed to 'prostitution' and 'prostitute' throughout this thesis. In addition to the fact that the term 'prostitution' is one that is morally loaded, the women interviewed used labour terminology to describe themselves. Variations included 'working girl', 'street worker' and 'worker'. However, when describing the radical feminist perspective, the decision was made to use the terminology of 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' since these terms are employed in the radical feminist literature.

In the early 1980s within a broader context of urban renewal, community groups residing in traditional but now gentrified 'strolls' such as Ottawa's Byward market, put pressure on police and politicians to address what they perceived to be increasing crime rates and highlighted the nuisance posed by sex workers (Bourrie 1995). This discourse of communities, supported by law enforcement, holds that prostitution victimizes the community. Advocates of this perspective draw attention to nuisance, littering and subjective fear. This position has been particularly influential in policing patterns and extra-legal regulatory tactics such as the RIDE program and street closures (Bourrie 1995). It has also impacted the law, particularly the creation of the Communication law (Section 213 of the Canadian Criminal Code), which superseded the enforcement of the Soliciting law in 1985 (Lowman 2002). Accordingly it has, as we will see, had considerable impact on the lives of women who earn their livelihood in the street sex trade.

In the 1980s women working in the sex trades began to organize, voicing their reality and defending themselves as workers in response to both the radical feminist discourse that they were victims and the community discourse which positioned them as (perhaps unintentional) victimizers. Their conversation has been picked up in the 1990s by feminist academics who began to analyse sex work as *work*. In this thesis, which employed a grounded theory method, it is this later perspective that resonated most clearly in the narratives of the ten female street sex workers interviewed. That being said, there was too much pain and victimization and too few choices in the lives of the women for it to be sufficient. Accordingly the research is an exploratory study guided by the following questions:

What is the viability, the utility and the limitations of a labour framework for understanding and analysing the experiences of female street sex workers in the Ottawa area?

To what extent are the women victims engaging in survival sex?

Chapter one provides a detailed presentation of the debate within existing literature on the sex trade industry, and describes the theoretical framework employed for the purposes of this research. In the following chapter, the research methodology is presented, including the qualitative research approach and the collection of data through ten semi-structured interviews with adult female street sex workers in the Ottawa area. The ethical considerations, limitations with regards to methods, obstacles encountered during the interview process and the techniques of data analysis are also explained in this chapter. In terms of findings, a separate chapter entitled “The Women” was included, which offers a presentation of each woman interviewed, for the purpose of personalizing these individuals to the reader. Chapter four entitled “The Work” details the research findings and analysis in terms of the labour structure, the work itself, workplace hazards, unique challenges and positive aspects. Chapter five provides a discussion of the key findings, and includes commonalities to other forms of labour, aspects and situations that are unique to street sex work, and a deconstruction of stereotypes. The thesis concludes with an overall summary of the study in terms of implications and recommendations, and also offers suggestions as to possible avenues for future research.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FEMINIST DEBATES & THEORETICAL POSITIONING

As previously mentioned, sex work has been the focus of considerable debate over the last few decades. Although there exists a number of discourses, for the purposes of this research it is essential that we consider the two dominant feminist perspectives. Delacoste and Alexander, in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, point out that the radical feminist discourse of the late 1970s viewed the sex trade within a framework of violence against women (1987). Others have expanded on that definition by explaining that women engaging in sex work do so against their will as a result of a variety of oppressive personal motivations and exploitative societal structures (Boritch, 1997). A rebuttal surfaced in the late 1980s presented by sex worker organizations that argue that while some women engage in 'survival sex'³ for most it is a choice and a job (Bell 1987). This discourse argues for same labour rights that are afforded to all women, including sex workers (Delacoste and Alexander, 1987; Chapkis, 1997; Brewis and Linstead, 2000).

While resulting in very different analytic frameworks, both the radical feminist and sex worker organization perspectives share a commitment to providing services to women involved in the sex trade. For radical feminists this entails facilitating exit⁴ (Boritch 1997), while for sex worker organizations it means ensuring that sex workers are able to work in a safe environment, free of harassment and victimization (Eisenstein,

³ Sex work as being in and of itself a means of survival, sex being a commodity for staying alive on the streets- women selling their bodies for food, shelter and clothing (Brown 1999). There is a clear distinction made by sex workers between survival sex and sex work, with women engaging in sex for survival, including [among others] drug addicts and women with pimps, because they have no other option. Sex work and survival sex are then defined depending on the quality of the situation and the sense of control involved.

⁴ Exit in this context means leaving the street sex trade.

1979; Cavendish, 1982; McClintock, 1993). This chapter presents the radical feminist and sex trade worker discourses, considers their usefulness for analysing the experience of street sex trade workers in Ottawa, and concludes with the call for an integrated theoretical framework.

Feminist Engagement- Radical Feminist Discourse

All Women are Victims of the Sex Trade, Sex Workers are all Victims

In the late 1970s, a feminist discourse emerged leading to a broader rethinking of gender relations where violence against women was the central theme. Within this radical feminist framework, 'prostitution'⁵ is juxtaposed with victimization. It is both a symptom and a symbol in that all women are victimized by the existence of 'prostitution', and 'prostitution' itself represents the subordination of women. 'Prostitutes' are also seen as victims of sexual oppression, exploitation, sexual objectification, sexual slavery, victims of a false consciousness, of men and of patriarchy (cf. Millet, 1971; James, 1977; Barry, 1979; O'Hara, 1985; Wynter, 1987; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992; Overall, 1992; Ishida, 1994).

Radical feminists define 'prostitutes' as being the embodiment of sexual oppression (Barry, 1979; Wilson, 1983; Ishida, 1994). They argue that the sexual arena is responsible for the subordination of women to men, with sexual objectification being the first step (Barry, 1979; Dworkin, 1979). Female 'prostitution' is viewed as a form of exploitation of women by men and a form of the objectification of female sexuality resulting in violence (James 1977). The women involved become objects of economic exchange, having little value aside from their sexuality (Jeffreys, 1997). Chapkis (1997)

⁵ As previously noted, the terms 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' will be employed when discussing the radical feminist perspective, as it is these terms that are utilized to describe 'sex work' and 'sex trade workers' in the radical feminist literature.

explains that the radical feminist discourse deems it is impossible to think of 'prostitution' as being outside the sphere of subordination because sexuality cannot be separated from the 'prostitute', and the sale of sexuality involves a fundamental sale of the self (71). It therefore follows that for radical feminists, 'prostitution' is an abuse of sex. In their view, for sex to be positive it must be earned through trust and sharing and not purchased. The commercialization of sex is, in turn, believed to be responsible for violence against women. As Chapkis (1997) points out, the radical feminists take the position that 'prostitution' must be abolished in the interest of protecting all women ensuring the possibility that they are provided with a chance to engage in positive sexual experiences in order to be freed from sexual objectification (15). The institution of 'prostitution' is defined by radical feminist discourse as being the commerce of sexual abuse and inequality, falling within the larger sphere of economic subordination and sexual submission (Wynter 267, 1987).

For radical feminists 'prostitution' is not only symptom and symbol of gender oppression, but it also reflects and reinforces other social stratifications. More specifically, 'prostitution' is a form of ageism, racism, classism and sexist exploitation (Overall 717, 1992). It is considered ageist because it is dominated by younger women who are soon discarded as the signs of maturation begin to show. It is believed to be racist in that 'prostitution' often involves individuals from minority groups engaging in sexual activity for the benefit of white men in a position of advantage. As well, it is considered classist because the individuals who are engaging in street 'prostitution' are in a position of disadvantage in comparison to the clients who use their services. Although there are men who engage in 'prostitution', it is seen as sexist because the majority of

individuals engaging in street 'prostitution' are women who are exploited for the very purpose of providing sexual pleasure for men (Overall 717, 1992). Radical feminists also highlight the stratification within the industry claiming that street 'prostitutes' are paid less than women working in brothels and hotels.

Within the radical feminist framework, women engaging in 'prostitution' are viewed as victims (James 1977) and can not freely choose but are necessarily coerced by the circumstances of their lives, either through abuse or rape (Wynter 267, 1987) or because they are victims of violence, or because they come from abusive or broken homes and have few resources (Boritch 85, 1997). For others, 'prostitution' is something that women who were abused as children engage in as a way to regain control over the effects of abuse (Napoli, Gerdes and DeSouza-Rowland 71, 2001).

Since the radical feminist perspective believes that 'prostitution' is founded on sexual abuse (Wynter 268, 1987), 'prostitution' is described as an institution of male supremacy, not unlike slavery (Barry; 1979; Hoigard and Finstad, 1992; Quinn, 2001). Accordingly, men are held accountable as threats to innocent women and responsible for their victimization (Wynter 270, 1987). Radical feminists state that 'prostitution' reinforces the differential standard of the moral regulation of the sexes (Boritch 89, 1997), allowing for the exploitation of a woman's body as a commodity to be made available to men (Brewis and Linstead 228, 2000). The 'pimp' is the ultimate driving force making that commodity available to the clients of a 'prostitute'. According to the radical feminist perspective, the individuals responsible for the very existence of the sex trade industry, are men, and the demand that 'pimps' and 'johns' perpetuate for street 'prostitution' is feeding the fire of sexual exploitation (Quinn 2001).

Not surprisingly, radical feminists also contend that 'prostitution' cannot be conceptualized as a 'profession' or 'occupation', or even 'work' because they define women engaging in 'prostitution' as 'victims' (Quinn 2001). Calling 'prostitution' a form of labour is seen as a tactic for justifying and taxing economic desperation (Quinn 2001). In short, radical feminists perceive 'prostitution' as being victimization in which the victims are merely surviving by selling their bodies for food, shelter and clothing (Brown 1999). Within this context, the question of choice is outside the conversation⁶.

According to Bruckert and Parent, the goal of the radical feminist movement in relation to the sex trade industry is to save the 'fallen' women (3, 2002), and to liberate the 'prostitutes' through a mission of healing and rescue (Napoli, Gerdes and DeSouza-Rowland 72, 2001). They have targeted the men responsible for the victimization (Wynter 270, 1987) and addressed the needs of the women who they perceive to be unwilling victims in desperate need of help. Moreover, for radical feminists the eradication of the sex trade industry is a means to an end of the sexual enslavement of all

⁶ The radical feminist discourse argues that women engaging in the monetary exchange for sex who perceive themselves to be doing so by their own free will are victims of a 'false consciousness' that allows them to be controlled by men (Ishida 1994). Even if a woman believes she is making a choice to engage in this exchange, a degrading transaction of the self occurs because women cannot be separated from their bodies (Quinn 2001). Some researchers supporting the position of radical feminists have argued that women engaging in 'prostitution' are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, making their engagement in the sex trade neither a rational or conscious choice (Napoli, Gerdes and DeSouza-Roland 73, 2001).

women (Wynter 270, 1987). The ultimate goal is to decriminalize⁷ 'prostitution' and abolish⁸ the sex trade entirely (Boritch 127, 1997).

Feminist Engagement- Sex Worker Organizations/Advocates

Sex Work as both a Celebration of Sex and a Form of Labour

In the early 1980s, informed by the existing sex radical literature⁹ and supported by feminists who advocated for the sex workers, women in the sex trade began to organize¹⁰, speak up and defend themselves in response to the radical feminist discourse and the mobilization of communities against street sex work. The discourse they presented was either the sex radical perspective, which views sex work as the embodiment of sexual freedom (Califia 1994), or the socialist feminist¹¹ perspective that describes sex work as a form of labour (Cavendish 67, 1982). Sex worker organizations and advocates presented a defence of sexual labour and spoke of sexual empowerment and freedom to regain control and reject the status of victim, redefining sex work as *work* and sex workers as rational choice-makers.

⁷ Meaning in this case the removal of all existing criminal codes regarding 'prostitution', with the initial goal of creating a safer working environment for women in the sex trade industry (Brewis and Linstead 224, 2000). According to the radical feminist discourse, female criminality and the legal responses to it cannot be conceptualized independently from the subordinate socio-economic status of women, the existing relations of gender in society and the social constructions of sexuality (Boritch 89, 1997).

⁸The complete elimination of all forms of sexual slavery as defined by the radical feminist perspective on 'prostitution'.

⁹Sex radical literature refers to the writings of lesbians, gay men, feminist consumers and in general any individual who's sexual behaviour does not fall into 'moral', 'normal' or 'heterosexual' categories, and challenges the mainstream perspectives surrounding pornography and sexuality (Califia 1994).

¹⁰ Early organizations included CORP (Canada), COYOTE (United States), PROS (United States), ECOP (England) and The Red Thread (the Netherlands).

¹¹ The socialist feminist perspective offers an integrated approach to gender and class, describing patriarchy and capitalism as an integral process (Eisenstein 28). Class and gender are seen as mutually dependent, and there is a widespread acknowledgement of the commercialization of sexuality and its appropriation for capitalist goals (McClintock 1993).

Sex worker organizations and advocates created the opportunity for discussion stating that there can be no ethical philosophy of sex work that does not include the viewpoint of those engaging in the behaviour (Bell 1995). Furthermore, they explain that any critique that does not involve the experience of sex workers serves only to further marginalize an already disadvantaged population (Bell 1995). The sex worker organization perspective maintains that any theory involving sex work needs to come from the women themselves and radical feminists need to acknowledge that it is possible to be a sex worker and a feminist at the same time (Bell 84, 1987). It is inconceivable for the sex worker organizations to believe that those being targeted for 'salvation' by the radical feminist movement are not given the right to participate in the debate (Delacoste and Alexander 54, 1987). For the sex worker organizations and advocates, the radical feminist perspective is hypocritical by condemning, rejecting and stigmatizing the women engaging in sex work while claiming to support all women (Boritch 129, 1997).

Advocates also took issue with the radical feminist claim that female empowerment regarding sexuality is impossible since sexuality is constructed entirely for and by the male population (Bell 1995). According to the sex workers and their advocates, the radical feminist argument means that women cannot be taken seriously if there is anything sexual about them (Alvin 2001)¹².

¹² Sex worker organizations and advocates critique the radical feminist conception that women engaging in sex work are involved in something degrading and wrong, and their lack of control is then seen as false (Alvin 2001). These advocates suggest that radical feminists accept the view of exploitation and vulnerability because they have been taught and conditioned to believe that sex should be a private matter and women should 'save' themselves for the right person (Ishida 1994). The assumption that women are the property of their fathers until they are given to their husbands is rejected by the sex worker organizations because a sex worker is in control of her own body and is the property of no one (Ishida 1994). The sex workers and advocates' definition of sexuality exists outside traditional moral discourse and vehemently defends the right of a woman to control her own body (Bruckert and Parent 5, 2002).

Some sex worker organizations and feminist advocates extend the argument further maintaining that sex work is not about the power of the customer in purchasing sexual access, but about the power of the sex worker in setting the terms of the encounters and gaining a financial return from them (Brewis and Linstead 191, 2000). From this perspective, according to Bruckert and Parent (2002), sex work is seen as being a celebration of sexual freedom, women being truly liberated and refusing to have their sexuality controlled by the institutions of marriage and family (5). It can be an industry within which women find self-worth and self-respect, and feel appreciated (Delacoste and Alexander 120, 1987). In short, the sex trade industry can also be characterized by sexual self-ownership and empowerment (Bell 1995). Sex worker organizations and advocates maintain it is the sex worker who decides who she interacts with, what she will do, when to begin and end an encounter, where it will take place and how much she will charge for her services (Ishida 1994).

Many of the women involved in the sex trade take issue with the media-perpetuated stereotypes that characterize sex workers as sick, abused, drug-addicted 'dregs of society'. They note that many sex workers are making a good living, have long-term partners and are raising families (Query and Funari, 2000). There is an acknowledgment within the discourse of the sex worker organizations that victimization can happen as a result of marginality and criminalization but that these are not inherent to the trade. Being safe and responsible can make sex work a very rewarding profession (Scott 2001). For the sex workers and advocates, labelling sex workers as victims is a direct challenge on those who define themselves as assertive, independent adult women who have chosen to engage in sex work (Allman 1998). Sex workers and advocates do

not argue the sex trade industry is free from exploitation, rather they explain it is not exclusively comprised of it.

According to the sex worker organizations, women engaged in sex work reject the victim status given to them by radical feminists. Many women without a history of abuse decide to engage in sex work, just like many women with a history of abuse decide not to (Brewis and Linstead 191, 2000). The perspective of the sex worker organizations claims that treating sex workers as female captives or victims denies them adult and human status (Ishida 1994). Attention is drawn to the tautology of the 'false consciousness' argument, stating that the radical feminists believe anyone disagreeing with their perspective must not realize they are victims (Delacoste and Alexander 211, 1987). In response, the sex worker organizations claim that intelligent and self-confident women have chosen to work in the industry. They indicate that depicting sex workers as emotionally cripple or unable to escape what radical feminists call a 'degrading' means of financial gain serves only to perpetuate the myths that the feminist liberation movement is trying to eradicate (Brewis and Linstead 235, 2000).

In the 1980s, sex workers and organizations coined the term 'sex worker' to better reflect their understanding. These women believe sex work is laborious *work*. Advocates of this position maintain sex work can be a form of healthy employment, and that feminism is about women being entitled to do as they choose with their bodies (Query and Funari 2000). Although financial pressure can be a reason women enter into the field, sex worker organizations maintain it is financial gain that keeps them working (Ishida 1994). Sex work can be considered as an income-generating activity for women (Bindman 4, 1997)- a business proposition between two consenting adults, where the sex

worker is a legitimate social actor entitled to the same rights and freedoms enjoyed by any other kind of worker (Bell 1995).

Advocates point out that individuals make decisions about employment based on an evaluation of the options available to them including financial gain, hours of labour and working conditions. A sex worker's choices are no different (Brewis and Linstead 197, 2000). She chooses to engage in sex work because she believes it to be the best paying method of employment in relation to the skills that she possesses and the amount of time she is willing to invest (Brewis and Linstead 197, 2000). A sex worker, therefore, is a self-determining agent making a rational economic decision with the right to refuse a client (Ishida 1994). Not only is sex work a rational choice made by the women in the industry, it is one that is legal¹³ in Canada. Those advocating for the position of sex workers and sex worker organizations claim it is crucial to acknowledge the right of women to engage in sex work as well as the right of women not to do so (Delacoste and Alexander 211, 1987). That being said, there is a clear distinction made by sex workers and feminist advocates between survival sex and sex work¹⁴. Sex work is defined as a choice that involves the use of one's own body and does not harm anyone else (Bell 1987).

Sex worker organizations and advocates maintain that it is not the engagement in sex work that makes women powerless, but the fact that society has already constructed women as subordinate (Bell 30, 1987). They believe that radical feminists contribute to

¹³ Although sex work is legal in Canada, it is the acts associated with it that are criminalized and subject to legal sanctions (Basman 14, 2000). The contradictory nature of Canada's soliciting and communication laws has been criticized as being a major contributor to the increasing physical and symbolic marginalization of street sex workers (Lowman 19, 2002).

¹⁴ Sex worker organizations also differentiate between sex work involving consenting adults and the sexual exploitation of minors (Allman 1998).

the patriarchal division of 'pure' and 'fallen' women. The female gender is thus separated into different parties, which allows for a reinforcement of patriarchal power (Bruckert 138, 2002) and also contributes to the 'whore' stigma that legitimizes the violence¹⁵.

Sex workers, sex worker organizations and advocates hold firmly to the idea that sex workers have the right to relationships, raise a family, and be gainfully employed in the sex industry. In short, sex workers are entitled to a full social participation (Delacoste and Alexander 211, 1987). Furthermore, all the laws relating to sex work should be repealed. Sex work should be decriminalized. Sex worker organizations call for a movement that will eradicate the conditions that produce the sex trade industry (Lowman 20, 2002). They believe in the creation of laws outlawing poverty, not sex work (Alvin 2001).

Expanding on a Theory of Labour

Since the late 1980s academics began to integrate the voices and perspectives of the women working within the sex trade into their analysis to the sex work itself (Feminist Review 2001). This approach starts from the premise that sex work is *work* and opens up a new opportunity to explore the industry in terms of labour (Chapkis 1997). This has led to exciting research that considers such issues as the labour challenges of sex trade workers (Chapkis 1997), the deconstruction of anti-sex trade moral panics (Brock 1998), challenging of myths and misconceptions about sex work (Shaver 1996), the relation between sex work and sexual identity (Parent 2001) and negotiations around intimacy (Frank 1998).

¹⁵ The laws and stigma surrounding sex work serve to provoke and permit the violence against street sex workers (Brewis and Linstead 185, 2000), and allow for the continuing violence against women in general (Bell 182, 1987).

This perspective resonated in the words of the women interviewed for this research. They described what they did for a living in employment terms, defining street sex work as a job: “My work is going out on the street. I sell sex. That’s my work” (Tracey). The narratives included responses defining street sex work as a “means to an end” (Veronica) and as work because “it paid off” (Paula). Other women simply stated: “You know this is a job” (Michelle) and “My work [is to] sell sex” (Debbie). Similar to workers engaging in conventional forms of employment, they spoke about entry into the field and about the hours that they worked. In addition, they expressed the importance of striving to excel, while maximizing productivity and minimizing time invested in order to earn financial resources.

While agreeing it was a job, another discourse emerged from the narratives. Issues of danger, stigma, need and marginality that were somewhat counterintuitive to the notion of labour were highlighted. There was also a marked lack of consensus on whether the job was *easy*. For instance while Debbie framed it as an uncomplicated way to make money, Julie maintained: “It’s very...well, it’s hard. It’s hard work really because you never know what you’re risking. Like it’s very dangerous.” Others had a more conflicted understanding: “My work is going out on the street. I sell sex. That’s my work. It’s really actually an easy job...except for the danger” (Tracey). It became evident that a straightforward labour analysis was inadequate but that issues around victimization and ‘survival sex’ needed to be integrated. It was also necessary then to identify characteristics that would have pointed to ‘survival sex’ occurring- lack of choice being the primary indicator that the women would be engaging in ‘survival sex’ rather than labour.

In this thesis, the principles of grounded theory were employed. The researcher made the decision to use theory developed from close observation of the world (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The grounded theory approach argues for inductive theory building, forgoing the deduction of hypotheses that are then tested against observations in favour of allowing the theory to emerge from the observations themselves (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This method is also consistent with the feminist commitment to employ the voices of experience and perform fieldwork that can generate grounded concepts, which aid in the development of new theories (Reinharz 46, 1992).

Feminist standpoint epistemology, has been described as the nature of knowledge or 'how we know what we know' according to the position that argues for research that is "not only located in, but proceeding from, the grounded analysis of women's material realities" (Stanley 25, 1990). That is to say that it is knowledge derived from the position of women, from their experience, a knowledge that begins from a very practical rather than abstract stance. It is important to appreciate and incorporate that although women share experiences, they do not necessarily share the same experiences, as the social contexts within which each individual woman lives differ greatly from one person to another (Stanley 22, 1990). This approach to knowledge was employed throughout this research, as it highlights and speaks to the need to listen to the voices and experiences of individual women, and the importance of integrating the perspectives of those who are *living* what we are *researching*. The only valid starting point for this type of research is therefore to begin with the women themselves and what they say about their own lives and experiences in the street sex trade.

On the one hand it is essential that we acknowledge and analyze sex work as *work* in order to step outside the discourses and language of victimization, exploitation and morality that have long dominated the literature (Bruckert and Parent, 2004). By applying the theoretical tools of labour theory, this framework renders the invisible, visible by highlighting issues around labour practices and permits the consideration of both the nature and organization of the labour. Accordingly a series of questions arise, including;

What are the skills and competencies required of a worker in the street sex trade?

As self-employed individuals, what entrepreneurial strategies do they engage in?

How do workers organize their social and labour relations?

How do workers maximize their productivity?

What is the women's relationship with clientele?

How do the women perceive competition?

On the other hand, street sex work, however, cannot be framed as work like any other. We need to leave a space for the recognition of the unique and atypical configuration of challenges, problems and difficulties confronted by sex trade workers and acknowledge the potential for 'survival sex'. We need to consider such questions as;

What is the impact of the law?

What is the nature of the worker's relation to police?

How do the women negotiate stigma?

How is the worker's sexuality conditioned by the labour?

What is the impact of substance use in the women's professional and personal lives?

How do the women experience and subsequently cope with violence?

What is the worker's relationship to 'pimps'?

How does the women's work affect their social and family relationships?

Are the women operating within the context of choice?

In this thesis a theoretical framework was employed that utilized the tools of labour theory while leaving room for 'survival sex' and victimization in order to develop an analytic framework to understand the lives and labour of women who are truly on the margins. The following chapter will detail the qualitative methodological approach undertaken, including descriptions of the interview process and the way in which the labour framework emerged from the narratives of the women interviewed.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The decision was made to employ a qualitative research approach to acquire nuanced, experiential and richly detailed data. Qualitative research seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the persons who inhabit them (Berg 7, 1998). It allows for an understanding and perception of individuals and human behaviour (Berg 8, 1998). Qualitative research has conceptually and theoretically made an impact on the social sciences by contributing to social understanding, and has been utilized by many key social thinkers (Berg 2, 1998). The notion of quality is essential to the nature of things, as certain experiences cannot be meaningfully or completely expressed by the collection of numbers inherent in quantitative research (Berg 3, 1998). The use of a qualitative approach is essential for the purpose of this research, allowing for a richer and greater understanding of the sex worker perspective.

Changing the Framework

Initially the focus of the research was to look at the challenges and risks faced by the women in the street sex trade and to consider if, and how, the existing Ottawa-based programs designed for street sex workers addressed the needs identified by the women themselves. Interviews were to be conducted with program facilitators, directors and staff, and geared towards services provided by the organization the participants were affiliated with. The interviews were also to focus on the problems the individuals identified, their understanding of the needs of adult female street sex workers and a discussion of how the identified problems and needs could be addressed. Despite the

initial positive reaction to the research, the level of involvement the program staff members were able to commit was limited to referring their clientele of female street sex workers as participants for the study. This was due to a number of contributing factors, namely the sudden death of one of the program's core staff members and the subsequent temporary hiatus status of a number of the groups/programs offered by the Elizabeth Fry Society and the Salvation Army. The program contacts that had been made were very supportive of the research itself, and would have been keen participants in the study had circumstances been different at the time that the interviews would have been conducted. As a result of this change in program staff research involvement, the initial approach was abandoned in favour of utilizing only a single set of interviews that had been conducted exclusively with adult female street sex workers. The interview guide was structured in terms of challenges and risks as well as determining the effectiveness of the programs in identifying and meeting the needs of women engaging in the street sex trade.

Despite the fact that the interview guide had been structured to fit the original research focus, what emerged was not in fact rich data relating to the programs that the women had participated in, but instead a nuanced labour framework. It became apparent from the interviews that rather than engaging in survival sex for which of course services are imperative, the women from their own perspectives were engaging in a job – a labour intensive process, one that was dangerous, stigmatized and challenging. This is not to say that since the women interviewed for the purposes of this research were not perceived as engaging in 'survival sex' that they did not need services. To clarify, the particular services existing in Ottawa that are geared towards street sex workers offer resources in an attempt to meet the needs of women engaging in 'survival sex'. Of course sex

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workers could benefit from resources, as illustrated in the conclusion of this thesis, but these services need to be geared towards facilitating labour and not exclusively on facilitating exit.

In light of this shift in perspective, and in the tradition of grounded theory, the decision was made to examine sex work through the lens of labour while also considering the atypical aspects of this particular work.

Data Collection: Interviews

Qualitative research emphasizes the value and subjectivity of the personal experience of the subjects involved (Reinharz 3, 1992). If researchers are interested in a type of social life, interviews are necessary to gain valuable insight into the lives of the subjects (Brenner, Brown and Canter 148, 1985). Key people in the 'Jane School'¹⁶ and 'Hooked-Up'¹⁷ programs, recruited through personal contacts, were asked to distribute a recruitment text (Appendix A) to female street sex workers who previously accessed the programs. Any woman interested in participating in the research was then invited to contact the researcher directly, or make contact with the research supervisor.

Thirteen women initially responded to participate in the study, through agency

¹⁶ 'Jane School' was developed by the Prostitution Networking Group, which is made up of the police, health and social agencies in collaboration with community representatives. The organization was formed in response to complaints from Ottawa residents about the effects of street level prostitution. 'Jane School' is run by the Salvation Army as a diversion program in cooperation with the Ottawa Police. It includes STEP (Sex Trade Education Program), which is made up of workshops related to preventing and dealing with HIV/AIDS, sexual assault, abusive relationships, addictions and financial stability. Speakers include health care professionals, police and ex-street sex workers.

¹⁷ 'Hooked-Up' is a full time program operated through the Elizabeth Fry Society of Ottawa. The target clientele are women and transgendered individuals who are involved in the street sex trade. It is not a diversion program, but a resource that can be accessed at any time. It offers peer support, support to family members, a crisis line, an outreach team, a link to other resources and a weekly 'Gateway' meeting ('Gateway' also serves as a follow-up for the women who have participated in the STEP program through 'Jane School'). The program examines the underlying issues and harms related to street sex work while developing strategies and alternative choices to minimize the amount of harm sustained by those involved in the street sex trade.

staff or having heard about the research from another participant, and contacted the researcher by telephone. Three interviews were cancelled and were not re-scheduled; two due to an inability on the part of the researcher to contact the women in question and the third because the woman had not been a program participant. Ten interviews were then conducted with adult¹⁸ female street sex workers over the course of three months¹⁹, at which point the researcher informed the contacts within the programs that the current sample size was sufficient for the purpose of the research²⁰.

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The participants were asked to select a time and place for the interview that was convenient for them that would take place in a safe and secure environment²¹ for both the participants and the researcher. All the interviews were conducted either in the home of the participant, or in a friend's home. The one exception took place in a public park.

The interviews (Appendix C) were in-depth and semi-structured. Approximately two hours in length, they contained open-ended questions relating to the participant's work in the sex trade, the challenges and risks they face in their work in the street sex trade and the problems they have encountered. In addition, the questions also focused on the program(s) that the participants had attended, what they have offered in terms of

¹⁸ For the purposes of this research a participant was required to be eighteen years of age or older to be considered an adult. It is important to note that the theoretical framework is centred mostly on women, which is why the exclusion of male street sex workers was appropriate.

¹⁹ The interviews were spread out in this manner due to the recruitment process, as women responded to the invitation to participate in the study at different times over the course of the summer, and were scheduled for interviews accordingly.

²⁰ Because contacts were continually being made, a number of telephone calls from women interested in participating in the research were received on a daily basis. After contacting the women to set up interviews, and conducting ten, the amount of rich and detailed information that was collected was more than sufficient. Due to time constraints and limitations on the amount of data that was manageable, it would not have been possible to interview all of the women who expressed interest in participating, and it was therefore necessary for the program contacts to be informed and asked to cease mentioning the study to the women they encountered.

²¹ Safety during the interview process will be further explored later on in this chapter.

resources, and how they could be improved. The participants were also asked how the programs have been useful in helping the participant deal with the challenges, risks and problems presented by street sex work.

Research Sample

The ages of the women interviewed ranged from early thirties to fifties. Five were Native, four Caucasian, and one was Jamaican. Eight of the women had children, ranging in number from one to four. Most of the women were single and involved in intermittent short-term relationships, whereas two were involved in long-term relationships and one woman was married. As a collective, they had over a hundred and fifty five years experience in the street sex trade. Individual time spent working in the trade ranged from nine years to twenty-nine years, with most averaging at fifteen years.

In order to obtain a comprehensive presentation of the interview subjects making up the research sample, a separate chapter entitled “The Women” was created. This chapter allows for an introduction of the participants, to appreciate their unique characteristics and the range of experience and location.

Ethical Considerations

Social science research involves delving into the lives of its subjects. Accordingly, researchers have an ethical obligation to the individuals involved (Berg 31, 1998). In order to fulfill the requirements of the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa, several additional criteria had to be met to obtain approval to work with human subjects including consent, privacy, harm and the confidentiality of data (Berg 31, 1998).

All participants received a consent letter (Appendix B) outlining the research project and its goals, which was also explained orally. The participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification regarding research goals, methods, the researcher's obligations to the subject as a participant in addition to any other concern they may have had.

All the participants were asked if they were comfortable having the interview recorded on audiotape. If they were not as was the case for two of the participants, detailed notes were taken of the interview. Once the interviews were completed, the participants were provided with the opportunity to review the full transcript and delete any information that could possibly put themselves, their co-workers, employers or any family, friends or associates at risk. Participants were also entitled to a follow-up interview if they felt that any clarification or additional information was required. The participants were free to withdraw from the project at any time before, during or after the interview, decline participation and refuse to answer any questions. After each interview, the researcher made a point of taking notes on the interview experience including descriptions of the appearance, behaviour and attitude of the participant.

The participants were not paid for their participation, but were offered an honorarium²² of twenty dollars prior to the interview to cover any expenses incurred. If any of the participants had wished to withdraw from the project, they would not have been required to return the honorarium.

Due to the vulnerability of the street sex workers, anonymity was initially believed to be of primary concern. A number of measures were taken to ensure the

²² The researcher felt that in light of the vulnerability and marginal nature of the street sex worker population, and the time that they were contributing, the honorarium was appropriate.

participants were able to remain anonymous in the research. Some identifying information was not sought including family background and personal history. This information did emerge, however, through the narratives of the women, who willingly shared personal and historical experiences without being asked. Second, any identifying information, including names, events and stories was to be altered immediately after transcription. Of all of the women interviewed, only one opted to use a pseudonym and none voiced objection to their narratives being quoted verbatim.

Limitations

There were a number of methodological limitations of the research that should be noted, including representation, moment in time, and sample size. Given that the participants were recruited using referrals through agencies and to a lesser extent snowball²³ sampling, the sample is not representative. At the time of the interviews the initial research project had not yet been abandoned, which accounts for the sample being made up exclusively of women who had participated in the programs. Women who had not accessed programs and/or potentially avoided interaction with police were therefore not participants in the study. Language and race were also limitations because the research participants were Anglophone Caucasians or Aboriginal Peoples. The research, however, does not call for a representative sample of the street sex worker population. Furthermore, due to the vulnerable, hidden and marginal nature of street sex work, realizing a representative sample would have been impossible within the constraints of this research project. The researcher took into account that only one interview was conducted with each participant and meeting individuals once in a life course may not

²³ Snowball sampling, or *Snowballing*, occurs when research participants are recruited and introduced to the researcher by a third party, who vouches for the legitimacy of the research and safety of the researcher (Berg 132, 1998).

accurately reflect the total sum of their experiences. In addition, the size of the sample may not appear large enough to give a true description of the sex worker position. Despite these limitations, the richness of the narratives and the commonalities that became apparent within each interview allowed for considerable saturation of the research categories emerging through common themes.

Obstacles in the Field

It is important to address the issue of obstacles that emerged throughout the interview process. For instance, one of the women was uncomfortable with the tape recorder, and also wanted to tell her story chronologically, making it difficult to take detailed notes and follow a structured interview. Another woman also refused to have the interview recorded on audiotape, and would not allow notes to be taken during the interview, so the researcher was obligated to write down as much as could be remembered directly after leaving the participants apartment. The same woman had been drinking alcohol prior to the researcher's arrival, and throughout the interview attempted to renegotiate the honorarium in return for permission to use an audio recording, while offering the researcher both alcoholic beverages and narcotics. After being joined in the participant's living room by two male neighbours, who also appeared to be under the influence of substances, the researcher began to feel uncomfortable and decided to end the interview and exited the premises. The safety of the researcher was again in question when another participant continually asked if the police employed the researcher. The interviewee became increasingly agitated until she was convinced the researcher did not work for the authorities.

Analysis of Interview Data

Following the completion of the ten interviews, the audiotapes were carefully transcribed into a written format, and any notes taken were clearly typed. The transcriptions were reviewed and subsequently structured into data grids for vertical and horizontal reading (Appendix D). Central themes in terms of employment, challenges, risks and strategies were determined and identified by conducting a qualitative content analysis of the data gathered, throughout which the previously noted labour framework emerged.

CHAPTER THREE

THE WOMEN

While the women had all worked in the street sex trade, their personalities varied as much as their physical appearances, and each possessed a distinct characteristic that set her apart from the others. They were open, honest, intelligent and welcoming. They allowed for a 'snapshot' to be taken of their lives in the hopes that it would somehow benefit others like them not in terms of exiting the trade, but of making the streets safer for those who walked them and worked them. These are the women.

Angela

A loud brunette in her early thirties, Angela presented as clever and funny. A Caucasian woman, currently divorced, she has three living children between the ages of ten and sixteen, having lost two others when they were in an accident involving a drunk driver when they were very young. Her children live with her father, with whom she is still in contact. Her mother had been a street sex worker and a drug user who apparently sold Angela in exchange for drugs, and died of an overdose at the age of fifty. Angela began working on the streets at the age of fourteen when she ran away from home, after spending time in foster care, but she had been exposed to the trade at a much earlier age because of her mother. She has been working in the street sex trade for the past twenty years, and although she has 'dabbled' in the restaurant industry as a waitress and briefly worked as a telemarketer, she found that she could not hold these types of employment, preferring to remain in the trade. Angela reported that she had been arrested several times for prostitution related offences and also disclosed that she had previously served

three years in prison for aggravated assault against a friend of the family who she discovered had been molesting her daughter. Angela volunteered that she suffers from social phobia, fibromalgia and epilepsy. She lives in a small, comfortably disorderly apartment in a government-subsidised high-rise with her large grey and white longhaired cat. When asked why she agreed to participate in the research she explained that she felt it was important for this kind of work to be done in order for street sex workers to have a voice.

Michelle

Michelle, a slim Native woman in her late forties, was quiet and seemed somewhat unsure of herself in that she hesitated frequently when she spoke, a trait that contrasted sharply with the bright orange mesh outfit she was wearing. She is currently in a long-term intimate heterosexual relationship (six years), and she has four children, three who live with their fathers and one who her mother has raised. Michelle began working on the streets at the age of thirty-two, and has been in the trade ever since. Before turning to the trade, she had worked in construction, on cars, and in the woods, doing mostly what she called “outside man-like stuff” before being injured in a motorcycle accident. She described having been arrested several times for prostitution, and that she has spent a total of fifteen days in jail as a result, after which being put on probation. In terms of health, Michelle has Hepatitis C, and suffers constant pain from the back injury she incurred in the above-mentioned accident. Michelle explained that she rents a room in a rooming house but often stays with her boyfriend who lives in a government-subsidised high-rise. She participated in the research because, she said, “no one has ever asked me what I thought before.”

Veronica²⁴

A smiling Jamaican woman with long dreadlocks and gold teeth, Veronica was open and welcoming, offering advice about a homemade cream remedy she had concocted that left her hands soft and silky. She is in her early forties, having immigrated to Canada in 1983, and is from a family of eight brothers and sisters with an ill mother and a father who passed away when she was young. Veronica is currently single and does not have any children of her own. She first entered the street sex trade in 1991, at the age of twenty-nine, and left it nine years later in 2000. Veronica articulated that she had studied in the nursing and secretarial fields before working as a street sex worker, and that she had in the past worked as a health care aid but that she is now employed as a cleaner. Veronica indicated that she had been arrested once for prostitution, and three times for shoplifting but had never spent any time in jail. In good health, she lives in a small cluttered room in a rooming house that has a social worker on site if need be. Veronica's decision to participate in the research was based on her desire to confirm that the existing programs are helping, and because she feels she has a positive relationship with the people who run them.

Paula

Paula, a slim Native woman in her early thirties, presented as incredibly shy and timid. She explained that she did not have any family, with the exception of her current long-term boyfriend, and that she is the mother of two teenage children who she has not seen "in a long time". Although unclear about the specific length of time she has spent working on the streets, she indicated that she had been working in the sex trade industry for at least fourteen years, beginning in massage parlours and escort services before

²⁴ Pseudonym

turning to the street sex trade. She has also held minimum-wage jobs in the past, working at places like Tim Horton's or McDonald's, and also in motels as a chambermaid. Paula described having been arrested twice for prostitution, spending a total of fifteen days in jail, a year on probation and paying a fine, but that she also spent eighteen months in jail for fraud. She revealed that she has Hepatitis C, and that she has several other physical health issues resulting from continued use of intravenous drugs. Paula rents a downtown apartment with her boyfriend, and stated that her reasons for participating in the research stem from her belief that it is valid and her hope that some other women like her will benefit from the results.

Tracey

A small Native woman in her fifties, Tracey was 'spunky' and humorous. She is single, and did not mention having any family, although she did make reference to a son who lives with his father. She has spent the past fifteen years working in the street sex trade, and that before that she has worked at a waitress, a chambermaid and an exotic dancer. Tracey volunteered that she has been arrested five times for working the streets, after which she was fined or spent a small amount of time in jail, and that she has been in prison several times for non-prostitution related charges. Tracey did not allude to any health concerns, and disclosed that she lives in a government-subsidised apartment building. She commented that she was not sure why she decided to participate in the research, besides the fact that an outreach worker had told her about it, but that she hopes that things only get better, "cause they can't get much worse."

Jackie

Jackie was pleasant and polite, evidently intelligent with a witty repertoire. An attractive thirty-five year old Native woman, she indicated that her brother had also worked on the streets. She is single, without children, and explained that she has been working the streets in Ottawa for over thirteen years but clarified that before that she worked in Edmonton. Jackie had been involved in other types of sex trade work, including working on phone lines, for escort services and also as a private escort. In addition, Jackie had worked in restaurants and for telemarketing companies, and that she had also done some accounting for her brother when he ran several gas stations. She reported that although she has been arrested on a number of occasions for prostitution, after which she was given fines or spent an overnight in jail, she has never served any time for unrelated offences. Jackie made no mention of any health concerns, and lives in a small basement apartment near the 'stroll' with her pet rabbit who she spoke about a great deal. She explained that she wanted to participate in the research because she felt that it could possibly lead to improved community education. She expressed that she believed the research was valuable in that it could also lead to the development of additional resources and supports for women working in the street sex trade.

Patricia

A Native woman in her early fifties, Patricia was smart and funny, with a 'tough' attitude and a ready smile. She was married at sixteen and helped her mother and father raise her brothers and sisters, and her mother in turn has helped Patricia raise hers. Now separated from her husband, Patricia explained that she is still in contact with her grown children, the two youngest who live with their father and the eldest who lives nearby in

Ottawa and also works in the street sex trade. Patricia maintains that she began working in the street sex trade at the age of twenty-three, working both in Ottawa and “out west”, and that she spent twenty-nine years working on the streets before leaving the trade at the age of fifty-two. Prior to working in the street sex trade she worked out of bars and before that was an exotic dancer. She articulated that she also has extensive experience in the construction field from shovelling asphalt to working with sheet metal, explaining that she “loves working hard jobs”. Patricia volunteered that she has been arrested twice for prostitution, but has never spent any time in jail as a result. She did acknowledge that she has spent time in prison for other types of offences, mostly property-related, that she claimed she committed in order to support her children. Patricia reported that except for Hepatitis C and infrequent back pain she is “healthy as a horse.” She rents a room in a house where she shares communal living space with her brother and two other roommates. She commented that she believes that the research is important, and that she decided to participate in part because an outreach worker who she trusts suggested it. Patricia added that she thought the research could help the women on the streets because it could educate communities and increase the safety of the trade.

Julie

Julie was pleasant and excited, if somewhat concerned in that she needed reassurance that the information she was providing was not being collected for the police and would not be used against her in the upcoming legal proceedings with which she was involved. A Caucasian woman in her late thirties with long brown hair who is currently single, she explained that she has a seventeen-year-old son who had been adopted by her sister but who had recently run away. Julie did not mention any contact with any other

family members. She entered into the street sex trade at a fairly young age, after working as an exotic dancer for fourteen years, and has been working on the streets ever since. Although she has completed some high school, she has never been involved in any other type of work. She has been arrested once for prostitution, and she has spent some time in jail as a result. In addition, she mentioned that she has spent time in provincial custody for assault charges. Julie described herself as suffering from Hepatitis C, and revealed that she was a participant in a methadone program, which causes a multitude of uncomfortable side effects. She is currently living in an apartment with two other roommates, and expressed that she believes in the research because “we need to support one another”.

Cheryl

A blonde Caucasian woman in her late thirties, Cheryl was feisty and loud. She wore carefully applied makeup, and described a difficult childhood involving physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her mother’s boyfriends. She indicated that her sisters are also street sex workers and that her brother is the president of a high profile biker gang in the area. Cheryl has two children who are now in their twenties, one of whom has a child of her own. She worked in the street sex trade up until five years ago, and although employed in landscaping continues to work the streets from time to time. Cheryl expressed that she has been arrested once in Ottawa, and twice in Montreal for prostitution, but that all charges were subsequently dropped. She volunteered that she is due in court shortly for two counts of assault and one count of attempted assault in relation to an incident where she was being harassed by a group of women on the street. Cheryl also admitted that she spent time in prison for armed robbery but maintains that

she was innocent and received a pardon. She reported having contracted Hepatitis C, but explained she is otherwise in good health. Cheryl lives in an apartment in a low-income neighbourhood, and claimed to have agreed to participate based solely on the fact that she would receive an honorarium for her time. She did add, however, that she felt she was glad to be of help.

Debbie

Debbie, a Caucasian woman in her fifties, was chatty, comical and direct. She made no mention of any family of origin, but indicated that she is currently involved with one of her ex-husbands, with whom she has four children. Debbie explained that her children are all grown up and have families of their own. Although she was unclear about the length of time she has spent working in the street sex trade, she indicated that she had worked at the Bank of Canada before turning to the streets. Debbie revealed that she has had several run-ins with the law as a result of her work, and added that she has also spent time in prison for credit card theft. She did not report any health concerns. Debbie lives in a government-subsidised apartment building with her ex-husband, and expressed that she decided to participate in the research because she truly believes that the project is important and worth undertaking.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WORK

As detailed in the theories chapter, a modified labour framework emerged from the interviews conducted with street sex workers, making it essential to present the data in employment terms. In the first two sections, the labour structure will be outlined in terms of entry, scheduling and finances, and the manner in which the women manage their business. A job description focusing on required skills, entrepreneurial strategies, clientele and co-worker relations will also be included. The third and fourth sections will look at the challenges and risks that the women face on a daily basis, as well as the strategies that they employ in order to address those challenges. These sections will include discussions on workplace hazards, such as physical/sexual violence, violence perpetrated by police and difficulties with physical health, and other aspects unique to street sex work. The distinctive barriers that the women deal with are categorized in terms of mental/emotional health, stigma, relationships, 'pimps', police corruption, criminalization and substance use. Finally, the positive aspects of the trade, identified by the women, will be presented.

Labour Structure

What do I do? I just go down the street, stand on the street, see what kind of cars are paying attention to me, get their attention, see if they drive around the block, flag them down- it depends on the night- flag them down...if not they pull up and then I play the little shy part, yeah and then I get in the car see how much they can afford, see what they can afford, see what they want, ask what they want, see what they can afford. Then get the money up front, find a private spot and then do the business- always safe sex, always use a condom (Jackie).

The women interviewed framed their entry into the street sex trade as precipitated by a variety of factors operating in combination with each other. A predominant theme for each woman seemed to be that of economic need. The lack of financial support emerged within each interview. Every woman mentioned the attraction of money, of needing additional funds, or of an income that was simply insufficient. Other prevalent themes included entry either as a result of a relationship with a man who already had ties to the street sex trade or the drug trade, or through employment and connections within other sections of the sex trade (i.e. escort services, massage parlours, erotic dance clubs). The question of drugs was also present within the entry narratives of many of the women but did not seem to play a determinant role in their choice to turn to the streets²⁵. Instead drugs was just one of a number of expenses, along with food, shelter, clothing, bills, health, leisure and children, for which the women required additional financial resources.

Three of the ten participants became involved in relationships with men who were also 'pimps' or drug dealers, who introduced them to street sex work. Michelle explained that in her early 30s she was homeless and unemployed after suffering a back injury from a motorcycle accident when she met a man in a bar and went home with him: "He was a good-looking guy...he gave me money he knew what he was doing he knew...I guess he just knows how to set girls up like that." Both Veronica and Cheryl indicated that it was their boyfriends who initially recruited them into the street sex trade. Angela described running away from home at fourteen and finding herself on the streets telling johns that she was nineteen: "I ran away, thinking I'm gonna have a better life, and um, yeah I

²⁵ The relation between entry and drugs will be further explored in 'The Question of Drugs' later on in this chapter.

went from the frying pan straight into the fire.” She became pregnant as the result of a ‘date’ and ended up marrying the ‘john’. Angela continued to work on the streets in order to support her husband and their new baby.

Others (three out of ten) worked as erotic dancers, masseuses or escorts prior to working in the street sex trade. Tracey explained,

At first when I started, I was a stripper and I had a baby. And then I was down on the market just minding my own business, and a guy offered me money. And I said ‘hey all right’ and that’s how it started.

Julie volunteered that when she was ‘stripping’ at a club, she was still unable to make ends meet, which led to her involvement in ‘turning tricks’:

I didn’t really want to go and start dancing [at the club]. I just wanted the money right away so it [street sex work] was faster and quicker. And that’s how [and why] I did it.

Patricia explained that she was the recipient of endless sexual propositions from men when she worked as an erotic dancer, yet she consistently refused until her mother passed away, and she assumed the responsibility of caring for her sister in addition to being the sole provider for her own children:

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My friend, who was a working girl already, she said ‘well why don’t you come down with me and make some easy money and fast’...And uh, so I went, popped two Valiums, drank a beer, sat in the bar and uh, I was there for fifteen-twenty minutes and then I had my first date.

Paula reported that she began working in the sex trade as a masseuse in a massage parlour before turning to employment with a number of escort services. She explained that, being unable to support her children and her lifestyle on her salary as an escort (her partner was in prison at the time), she became involved in street sex work²⁶.

²⁶ This is contrary to the stereotype of street sex workers actually making less money than escorts, and suggests that employment in the street sex trade can be more profitable.

Jackie differed from the other women in that she attributed her entry to youth and curiosity and to the fact that, in Edmonton, where she began her career in street sex work, most of the people she knew were involved in the street sex trade.

I was seventeen or eighteen, more like eighteen, and I was just uh, it was introduced to me and I thought it was interesting, you know. Make money real fast, and I was young and stupid and didn't know the streets then and I thought it was so cool, you know...fast money. And I was like proud back then- 'oh, look at me, I'm making this fabulous money and all this' (Jackie).

Some of the women commented that even though they had made the decision to change employment fields, street sex work continued to have a certain magnetism. "I don't really want to keep on working the streets, it's not one of my priorities. But once in a while I do it if I have to make some money" (Julie). Other women indicated that they did not believe it was something that they could ever give up.

I don't think I would ever refuse money for sex. But I would, like stop, like you know like I always have. I don't think I could ever say no if a guy said 'I'll give you fifty bucks for a blow job'. I don't even care if I'm eighty, I'm gonna say yes. It's so fast. It's like lickety-split. And you know that I had to work eight hours stripping to make a hundred bucks. I work five or ten minutes and make the same amount (Tracey).

When asked about the possibility of obtaining a conventional job, Paula said: "I probably could if I looked hard enough, but I don't think I'd wanna stick to it because of the money situation. What I make in five minutes, I wouldn't make that in a month."

Hours/Prices

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I used to do it every night and now it's down to when I need the money or you know, just when I need it. Like I used to just go out all the time automatic, but now it's just every once in a while when I need the money, if I'm flat broke or I need smokes or something. Food money and stuff (Jackie).

A common theme that emerged from the interviews was that, unlike conventional labour structures, the women were self-employed and enjoyed the flexibility of

determining their own work schedules. This flexibility also allowed the women the freedom to take time off when they were so inclined. As Tracey, who does not work every day but two or three times a week, pointed out, "Oh, it's not really a shift, it's just go and come back and go and come back...it's not like nine to five." Similarly Julie described her approach as going out to "turn a couple of tricks" and then going home.

Many structured their work hours in order to maximize income with a minimum investment of time. Although Paula works both during the day and evening and periodically works twenty-four hours in a row, most of the women (six out of ten) work at night. "We don't live in the daytime, only normal people do," explained Michelle, before elaborating that she worked every night and slept during the day. Jackie adjusts her hours according to the volume of traffic in order to ensure that she makes the most money in the shortest amount of time: "I usually go out around eight when it starts to get dark, then if it happens fast, then I just head home. I gotta make at least a hundred." Other women, like Julie, made reference to working only Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights claiming they were the busiest.

Similar to conventional forms of employment, a theme that appeared within the discussion of street sex work was the long hours that women worked forcing them to be away from their families²⁷: "I didn't like not having enough time with my kids" (Patricia). As a result, some of the women organized their work hours around family or other work commitments:

²⁷ In contrast, some of the women identified that some days the worst part of the job was having to make the effort to go to work. "Getting dressed up and having to go out...picking the outfit, making the effort and sometimes it's like 'ugh I don't want to'."(Jackie)

I had my times, what time I went out, 'cause I had to get babysitters...so I worked from seven o'clock at night until one o'clock every night. It was a six-day week for me; I didn't work on Sundays because I had to take care of my kids (Patricia).

Angela worked on the chat lines to supplement her income: "I get all the horny guys first thing in the morning and afternoon and just before they leave work...and then at night it's oh bother, they're home with their wives and kids and you know all that kind of good stuff." Thus she chooses to go out at night and is able to cater to the non-familial clientele.

Still others were sensitive to the needs of the community. Angela thought it was important to wait until later in the evening and explained, "As soon as it starts getting dark, and the kids are in bed. That's when I would come out to prowl."

According to the women, the amount of money they made depended not only on what street they were on but, not surprisingly, on the length of time they stayed out on that street. As entrepreneurs, they determined their total hours based on need. The issue of sufficient pay to meet their needs was prevalent in almost every interview. Angela explained, "You know, it's how I support my kids," and went on to describe 'turning tricks' to pay bills, buy groceries, feed the cat, purchase cigarettes and splurge on luxury items. In a similar vein, many of the other women were the family's principle source of income.

What kept me doing it? My kids. My kids came first 'cause I raised them without a father, so I took care of my kids. They weren't asked to be brought into this world, they weren't gonna pay badly for it. So every week, every week I'd put so much money away every night, and I took my kids shopping every weekend. And they got new clothes, new clothes, new shoes, whatever they need (Patricia).

Although four of the women did not comment on the prices, the six others were quite willing to explain the cost of standard services, and to provide an estimate of a

single day or a complete week's income. It would appear from this that prices and total income are shaped not by services but by the location of the 'stroll' on which the worker is located. It also became apparent that the fees of other workers would often drive rates²⁸. Jackie explained, "Well down here [Gladstone] its forty bucks, it starts at forty bucks but I usually get sixty to a hundred, and then down on the market it's eighty and up." Angela quoted the same figures but specified that a client will be charged forty dollars for oral sex, fifty dollars for straight sex and eighty dollars for a bit of both. She explained that the prices go up to fifty, eighty and a hundred if you are on the Byward Market, and added that travel time²⁹ is not included in the initial price.

In terms of total income, Michelle said that she could make roughly five thousand in five days. For Tracey, that translated into a hundred dollars in five or ten minutes five times in a day that was less productive than the norm. Paula commented that she could make anywhere from two hundred to two thousand dollars a day.

The Job

Having explained the logistics of the labour structure, it is important to consider other facets of the street sex work employment experience. Due to the nature of the work itself, street sex workers are required to possess a number of skills and practice specific entrepreneurial strategies in order to ensure maximum productivity while maintaining high levels of personal safety. These skills and strategies are often essential in dealing with the clientele, especially since these dealings could have negative consequences. It

²⁸ Other workers driving the rates will be addressed further in 'Relation to Other Workers' later on in this chapter.

²⁹ Travel time referred to the amount of time spent moving from the pick-up location to the final destination where the business transaction would take place. For instance if a street sex worker was asked to return to a client's hotel room across town, the time that they spent in his vehicle or taxi to get there would be an additional cost.

also became evident from the narratives that there was a strong sense of solidarity among the street sex trade workers, and this will also be explored in this section.

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Skills

The women identified a number of skills that they deemed essential not only for them to be successful in their employment, but also for their very survival. Some of the employment qualifications mentioned were intelligence, knowledge of the streets and of safety measures, interpersonal skills, politeness, ability to act, positive presentation of self, and candour in the sense that one is careful to “never make promises that you can’t keep” (Patricia). It is important to note that some of the women appeared to underestimate their competencies claiming that it took no real skill other than “spreading your legs” (Tracey), while at the same time describing awareness, knowledge, intelligence and ‘toughness’ as necessary skills for a street sex worker to possess.

‘Street-smarts,’ which is a combination of intelligence, astuteness, acquired knowledge and interpersonal skills, surfaced as the primary competence required when working in the street sex trade: “Well you do need some skills, streetwise, because if you’re not street smart then you won’t survive” (Julie). This was clearly demonstrated in reference to personal safety on several different levels. The women made it quite clear that awareness of their surroundings was vital:

Be smart. Pay attention, street smarts...don’t go thinking that you can just go out...you have to watch out more, watch their [johns] actions, pay attention more or less, pay attention (Jackie).

Almost all of the women mentioned safety in the context of preventing sexually transmitted diseases. They explained that by being aware and informed in terms of their own sexual health they were able to better protect themselves.

The women often made reference to some form of acting as a necessary skill in ensuring personal safety.

You have to be a good actress out there. Because if you're not you're not going to survive, you're gonna end up dead...And you have to be able to talk your way out of pretty near any situation and I mean you have to think so quickly on your feet (Angela).

For others acting was part of the work itself. Jackie described it as essential to customer satisfaction: "Cause then you have to go 'ok, ooh ooh ahh', and you're thinking 'don't look at me, don't breathe on me'." Patricia also addressed the issue of pleasing the customer in the context of possessing good presentation-of-self: "You gotta be polite. In my eyes, you gotta be polite. You've gotta know how to dress, you've gotta know how to talk. You have to treat the person like they're a human being." The ability to keep the men company and engage them in conversation also emerged as an important qualification: "A lot of the guys that I see aren't into just sex so they just might sometimes want to go for a coffee or play cards and stuff like that" (Paula).

Entrepreneurial Strategies

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In addition to specific skills, a number of entrepreneurial strategies to increase productivity and ensure safety emerged. The goals of these strategies included ensuring customer satisfaction, establishing a regular client base, maintaining availability of the service, avoiding a decrease in 'sales', evaluating the market and controlling the environment.

Ensuring Customer Satisfaction & Establishing a Regular Client Base

The predominant theme in terms of entrepreneurial strategies was ensuring that the customer was satisfied and returned to the same worker on a regular basis. Patricia described setting boundaries in order to make certain that the parties involved were made

aware in advance of what to expect. She made the rules of conduct clear from the onset in order to avoid complications and also to ensure her safety while guaranteeing her clients remained *her* clients. She also explained that the way she treated her customers had a positive impact on their return rate: “And he’d say ‘oh, come on, please, I always looked for you because you’re so mean, but you’re so nice about it’. Like I never treated anybody just because they were paying me that you’re less than I am.” Similarly, Paula noted:

A lot of the guys on the street like me because they say I’m more friendly and I’m not like the ones that will say ‘okay get in the car and let’s do it and get the hell out of here’. Cause I talk to them. Yeah. Ask them questions like ‘are you married? Do you have kids?’ like normal not like ‘let’s get this the hell over with’. So they like that too.

It was important for many of the clients that the worker enjoyed the experience as well: “You know this is a job too you know so if you’re not going to enjoy it you’re not going to please the guy then they’re not gonna come back to you” (Michelle). She added, “I enjoy pleasure so, and my job, if I enjoy it then my client’s going to enjoy it, and they’re going to come back.” Given that enjoying the work was not always possible, some of the women employed the acting skills already noted as a strategy to ensure customer satisfaction to create a pleasing persona for the client’s consumption. After establishing a positive professional relationship with a client, many of the women made themselves available by telephone in order to schedule ‘dates’ similar to escorts. Telephone scheduling allowed the women to work ‘on-call’ from their homes on evenings when they chose not to work the streets. They were then able to continue to be available to their regular clientele while allowing for a certain degree of flexibility in terms of fitting ‘dates’ in their personal schedule.

Maintaining Availability of the Service

Maintaining availability of the service implies the need for advertising in order to attract clientele. For some women, this was as simple as walking up and down the 'stroll'. Patricia explained that this advertising was strategic in that it was necessary to avoid any conflict with the community:

See with me, when I worked, I never stand in one spot. I always walked, because you can't stand in front of a business, because businesses gonna get a fall back in the people going into the store. You can't stand in front of somebody's house. So you walk.

Clothing, or dress, also played a large part in attracting clientele, although not in the manner one would normally think:

My outfits depend on the mood but usually I make the most money when I'm just wearing jeans and a t-shirt. Yeah and then because if you look too dressed up it's like they think, 'hey, she looks too expensive,' you know, and they drive by. Sometimes there's nights and it's like boom boom boom and if you're dressed to the nines then that's when they'll stop for you, and then there's the nights when you're dressed to the nines and no one will stop for you. So I run one [outfit], get undressed and put on something simple and run out (Jackie).

Avoiding a Decrease in Sales and Evaluating the Market

In order to avoid a decrease in income the women took precautions to minimize contact with police. Police presence served as a deterrent for clients, which motivated the women to modify their behaviour accordingly: "Sometimes all the tricks will be in the market area and then the cops will start circling, and then I'll head down to Gladstone or Montreal road. It all depends on the cops, where the cops are" (Jackie). In order to ensure that her evening will be productive, some street sex workers will also go out during the day to evaluate the market:

Take a walk down and check it out. See, like if I'm about to go out I always take a quick walk around and see how things are, like how the clients are, how many

cars are driving by. And check out how many cops drive by and in the certain amount of time (Jackie).

By being strategic in appearance, behaviour and location and by limiting the environmental factors that would deter customers (i.e. police presence), the women are able to attract a large and regular clientele. By assuring that they are attracting the maximum number of clients and by keeping those clients satisfied, the women are in turn able to maintain a high level of income and meet their economic needs.

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Clients

The clientele in any field shapes the employment experience as a whole, and often has an effect on perceptions of the labour itself. Within street sex work, the men accessing the service were often responsible for presenting the women with a number of difficulties. Violence, described as 'bad dates', was the most severe hazard faced by the women with respect to their clientele. This will be explored further in upcoming sections. The disposition of the men affected the experience as well. For instance, the women described dealing with men who were unattractive: "Uh...stinking older guys. Stinking guys" (Julie), disrespectful or rude, or in poor humour as being generally unpleasant. Other obstacles included clients who did not want to wear a condom and disputed the issue, seemingly unable to understand the consequences that such behaviour could have:

These men are married men, you know like, if I wanted to be a bitch, or if I hated men...I don't really like men, but, if I hated men that much and I had something, then I could be well 'okay let's go', you know if somebody wanted to be like that (Patricia).

An issue that surfaced a number of times was that of the financial transaction itself. Several of the women made mention of clients who refused to pay for the service

after the fact or demanded a refund on the grounds that they were not satisfied with the worker's performance or proficiency.

The women have adapted to these difficulties by practicing a number of different strategies to prevent them from occurring in the first place and to ensure worker safety. Outlining boundaries prior to performing the service was a simple way to guarantee that both the street sex worker and the client were aware of the logistics of the transaction. Patricia sets clear-cut rules that are to be strictly followed:

I don't kiss, I don't fondle...we do our thing and we get out of here. You know what I want, you know what you're not allowed to do so don't do it and we won't have any problems.

In addition, she requests that the client pay for the service in advance: "Money talks, bullshit walks I always say. So gimme my money, here's your condom, automatically." If the men do not agree to the conditions of the arrangement, and for example decide that they do not want to wear protection, then the women do not perform the service at all: "If the guys come up and say I don't want one [condom] then I say 'well I don't do it then. Fine'" (Debbie). Jackie mentioned discussing prices and making an arrangement for payment beforehand not only to ensure that she is paid for the service she provides but also as a screening process for the clientele: "Cause when you talk about the money and that you can tell where they're coming from, what kind of things they don't want." Other women engaged in a similar screening process in order to select clientele that would present minimal risk:

I never got into the car right away- I talked through the window- and then that way if there's something about them that you don't like you can...I'm the kind of person that I look at everything. And if there's just something about them, or the little hair on the back of my neck stands up I say 'no, it's okay'.

Tracey explained that regardless of the client's positive presentation-of-self or how comfortable she feels in their presence, she follows her guidelines for safety purposes: "Yeah, well I don't do it in a car...I prefer like if it's even in a car to get him out of the car." Once the women have established that a client is safe, and they feel that they will be treated with respect, the client is then considered to be 'regular' material and the worker will take steps towards integrating him into her regular client base: "A lot of them are regulars. The ones I get to see after a couple of times I'll bring them to my place, once I get to know them, then they just come over"(Jackie). Ideally, a street sex worker's clientele is rarely made up of strangers but instead is comprised of a group of regular clients. These are men who have proven themselves to be safe and respectful and are therefore given the privilege of making daily, weekly or monthly appointments with the worker. Some of the women also referred to developing friendships with the clients, which ensured maximum safety:

Most of them are my friends now, like more or less like I can call ninety percent of them up and just ask them 'can you pass me fifty bucks or take me grocery shopping' like I have relationships like that with them now (Paula).

Relation to Other Workers

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As the women described their relationships with one another, it became apparent that although each woman was self-employed, they were part of a larger system comprised of a loose network of workers. This network appeared to be characterised by support, competition, and mutual respect and included the development of friendships.

Competition was an important aspect of the relationship between street sex workers. As previously discussed, the women developed a number of entrepreneurial strategies that allowed them to build a regular client base. In striving towards this idea of

regular clientele and to ensure high levels of productivity, the workers entered into an aggressive market where they were competing against one another. A re-occurring issue that emerged affecting this rivalry was the lowering of service fees by one worker, which in turn forced the other women to do the same in order to remain competitive. Another issue was the willingness of some women to do things that others would refuse to do, such as bending their 'no-condom' rules for men who refused to wear a prophylactic.

Regardless of the high levels of competition on the street, a definite solidarity became apparent throughout the interviews. The concept of support was present in the narratives of all the women interviewed and came into play regardless of the personal relationships that existed between workers. For instance, Tracey explained:

Yeah we do if there's a bad date or something then we'll tell. Even if it's a girl you don't like, you know, you have a problem with or something, other than the street problem. I mean, like I've had my little differences with some people, but if I'd seen them on the street and something bad would happen I would tell, only because you're a street worker and that's what they do.

This care for each other's personal safety appeared to be an unwritten rule: "I'll walk up to them and say 'oh watch out for this one' or 'watch out for that one he's an undercover cop in the car', you know, we look out for each other here and there, the ones we know" (Jackie). Even though the women worked independently, they were in each other's field of vision every night and as a result developed a certain rapport: "Most of the girls you know stay to themselves, we all know each other more or less 'cause we all see each other" (Jackie). This affinity often led to a mutual respect, especially in terms of 'territory': "When you're on the corner though and it's your corner and you're always there and some other girl is on your corner, they see you coming and they just walk away" (Michelle). When asked whether or not territorial disputes became an issue,

Angela responded with, "I mean yeah you run into some of them that are like 'oh you fucking bitch get off my street corner,' well so what."

The more experienced women, often those with the most time on the streets, tended to take on a measure of responsibility of caring for and educating the younger, less knowledgeable workers. These women described adopting the role of 'den mothers' (Veronica) and made sure that safety, as well as health were addressed on a regular basis:

Cause I'm the type when I was on Wellington Street, I had a small little room, smaller than this, it was a bachelor. Right, every day my door was open, every day...I'd say come on inside I have soup on so come on in and eat. Every day I fed those girls, I'd say 'did you eat today?' They'd say 'no'...and I say well come and eat first then go out and work. Every day my door was open and my brother was there and I took care of them. And here I am on Welfare and I'm making soups like crazy. 'Come on in, it's wintertime' or 'Come on in you've got no place to stay tonight okay so stay' (Patricia).

These women also offered guidance to the newer workers on the street by directing them towards clients that they know will treat them with some degree of respect. Patricia explained that when she first began working on the streets, it was a more experienced worker who showed her 'the ropes' and helped her settle in: "So she said 'yeah this guy's okay' because he came over to me, and she said 'she's new, she's my friend, you know the rules'."

Dealing With Workplace Hazards

The women interviewed described a number of challenges they faced on a regular basis, identifying them not as dangers or risks but simply as ever-present contingencies. Given that these challenges were directly related to the nature of their work, the clientele, the environment and various obstacles with which they were confronted, they have been identified as workplace hazards. As these hazards have been identified as part of the

daily work routine, a set of strategies also emerged for dealing with them, thus minimizing the risks they presented to worker productivity and safety.

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Physical/Sexual Violence

All of the women had been exposed to some form of work-related violence at one point or another in their careers as street sex workers, and were very straightforward in describing their experiences. That having been said, it is important to note that they did not frame these experiences in the context of challenges or risks. Although the most predominant type of violence described throughout the narratives was that perpetrated by police³⁰, a close second appeared to be the suffering incurred from physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by clients, or 'bad dates':

You gotta watch out for those. You usually can read them but some of them you just don't know. One time, I had a really bad one in Edmonton, he was sick, ugh. Doped up for a good month period. I was on antibiotics just swollen out to here because he just beat the shit out of me, eh (Jackie).

Danger was a predominant theme: "Danger because you never know who, if the guy has a weapon or a knife, you never know who you're going with" (Julie). Along the same lines Paula expressed: "You don't know who you're getting in with. I've gotten punched out many a times, just for doing it too fast. It's scary." She added that members of the community failed to respond to this type of situation, which she believed indicated their unwillingness to come to the aid and intervene on behalf of a street sex worker:

Cause I was being beat up so bad that I couldn't breathe right in front of the 7-eleven store and they [bystanders] were standing there just staring at me, they wouldn't even call the cops. I had to go in there lock myself behind the door, run behind the counter and pick up the phone myself (Paula).

³⁰ Violence perpetrated by police will be further explored later in this chapter.

The prevalence of violence in the street sex work environment required the women, even the ones who did not report being physically assaulted, to develop strategies that allowed them to either avoid that violence in its entirety, or to respond to it in the event that it occurred. For instance, Patricia explained: "Once a guy tried to cross the line. I just pushed him into the door." Jackie emphasised the importance of being able to 'read' people and how essential it was for women to possess the knowledge of how to avoid or escape a situation in which they may be harmed: "You have to know how to street fight too. How to get out of the situation. I've always gotten out of it, like, fought my way out of it." Debbie noted that she will always have an escape route prepared in advance, and that she will only have sex in a location that she is easily able to vacate if there is a problem or she feels threatened in any way. She also carries a knife in her pocket as a last resort. Other women have set up a 'buddy' system where they routinely notify one another of where they are planning to work, how long they will be out for and if possible who they are with.

She [Michelle] said 'I made it here' and I said 'okay I'll send a ride for you it will be there in half an hour, okay?' The driver called me back and said 'nobody's answering the door and there's no girl around'. And it's like WHAT? I actually had my cabbie friend pick me up here and run me to the address that I know she was at, I was literally beating the door in. And also like, I'm fucking freaking, I sent people patrolling her old stomping grounds, okay, like I've got my friends going, my cabbies going, my dealers looking for her because I'm freaked out because my friend has disappeared on me. I know either something was wrong or something happened (Angela).

Other strategies included hiring a private cab driver who would be available for pick-ups and who would wait for the worker nearby as well as establishing a solid network of regular clientele so as to avoid getting into a car with a stranger. Another strategy was the already-noted tactic of screening clients by sharing knowledge about negative

experiences between workers in order to avoid 'bad dates'. One woman indicated that the creation of a 'bad date' list would be essential to the safety of the women in Ottawa:

You know they have a SITE van here, but uh in Edmonton they have people that go around and they have a little paper with a bad date list, Montreal too. They should have that out here. Tell you to watch out for the licence plate, the colour of the car, the make of the car, the guy, what he looks like (Jackie).

Jackie, one of the few women who mentioned turning to the police for support, indicated, "If there's a cop around, then I'll say, 'hey there's a bad guy in this certain car' and give the colour of the car."

A theme that emerged through a number of the interviews was the need to present one's self as confident and to use one's intuition (acknowledging and acting upon any uncomfortable feelings) when involved in interactions with men. Julie explained that she often uses her instincts to avoid putting herself in a position where she may be at risk of harm: "You know, if you want to go you go. If you don't want to go you don't." Patricia indicated that the most important strategy in terms of avoiding violence for her was not being afraid. She approaches her clients with confidence to which she attributes the fact that although she has been in many situations that could have ended in violence she has never had a 'bad date':

I'm always aggressive. I say 'you do this, this and this. You don't do this. Forget it, your money's in my pocket.' I don't make promises that I don't keep and I never have any problems. But girls that do say well 'okay I promise I'll do this...or I'll do that' and they don't do it- that's where the problems start.

Another theme that was prevalent throughout the interviews was that, due to the criminalized nature of the work, services that would be crucial in protecting the women from physical and sexual violence in the workplace were non-existent. The idea of 'safehouses', a "safe place for the women to go and to work" (Debbie) was prevalent:

I would say maybe have a safehouse, that would be good. 'Cause if you're gonna have a bunch of girls like on like Wellington street for example, you know what I mean, you've got ten girls in a matter of four miles or something you know. Have one house for those ten girls and you're not going to find any of them dead, beaten up and you're not going to find the guys in jail, because they're tricks, you know what I mean, that's my point (Tracey).

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Police Violence

Throughout the interviews, the women identified the police as the principle challenge that they faced in their work on the streets: "You can't walk down the street without getting picked up" (Michelle). It is important to note that, although not all the women had experiences with violent clients or violent partners, all relayed descriptions of violent confrontations with police. Through harassment, arrest, corruption, brutality and even by their very presence, the women felt that the police went far beyond what was necessary by law to inhibit them from engaging in their work³¹, thus putting both the worker's productivity and safety at risk.

Although every woman interviewed commented on having been arrested at one time or another, they presented it in a manner that implied this type of interaction with the law was normal and to be expected. These women described constant harassment and frequent police brutality as a normal part of their daily experiences on the street. Julie explained that she herself had been severely beaten by police several times and added that every street sex worker she knew had experienced a negative situation involving police:

They [street sex workers] said they get beaten up by the cops all the time, it happens all the time. They [police] call them 'the fucking ho' they bash their heads in, and they call them a fucking ho, bash my head in, look left and look right to see if anybody was looking and bashed my head in against the trunk of the car and the cop was like this on me [indicating that he was pressed up behind her], right on me. You thought he didn't get a thrill? He got a fucking thrill off that.

³¹ Notably, although prostitution itself is not against the law, the women had internalized an understanding that the police were entitled to undermine their livelihood.

Fucking right he did, fucking pig. He is paid to do that, and he's using excessive force. It's brutal (Julie).

A frequent occurrence was the combination of physical and verbal abuse apparently designed to demean the women and justify their mistreatment. Michelle explained that when she was arrested she was strangled and choked until she lost consciousness, after which she was handcuffed and placed in a cell with a number of men, who subsequently sexually assaulted her. When she attempted to report what had happened the arresting officers told her that she "deserved whatever she got". The police also frequently attempted to obtain information from the women, using force. On another occasion, Michelle described being mistreated by police who wanted information on drug dealers:

They had me in the car for two hours, and I had to make up an empty drug house, a drug house that was empty at the time...you know they had me in there, they'd keep me in and make up any excuse to take me in.

Paula described similar experiences, attributing them to an abuse of power:

Beaten up by cops, yeah, lots of times. Just smart ass cops that will grab you over and say what's your name? And if I don't answer them quick enough they'll slam my face into the car or they'll rough the cuffs on me, you know. Or 'get the hell over here' and they'll just fire me into the ground, stuff like that, just to try to tough themselves up you know.

In addition to the physical abuse, the women reported verbal harassment from the police as well as remaining in close proximity to the women and making threats:

I have problems because they harass me, they know me because I took action and I got a lawsuit with them. So they recognise me, they know me and they come right at me and they go 'if I were you I'd go home 'cause you're not gonna make any money 'cause we're gonna harass you' or that type of thing. 'Cause they're right there so I have to go (Julie).

Besides yelling at the women, and telling them to "stay off the streets", the police also stalked the women, even when they were not working: "Every ten minutes they're

pulling me over and asking my name and trying to run me through and find something so they can lock me up” (Paula). Patricia explained that since she has been working for years and only been arrested once, she feels that the police ‘hate her’ as she has proven that she is able to outwit them. This dislike often translates into harassment:

Oh, there’s a cop in the West end, when I was living on Wellington, and he’d turn around and start yelling at me ‘get off my street you fucking ho!’ And I turned around and looked at him and I yelled at him ‘I hope you’re not fucking talking to me.’ He goes ‘I’m talking to you’. And there was an old lady sitting in front of the Church, St-Francis Church I think it is on Wellington, she says ‘was he talking to you like that?’ and I said ‘I guess so’. Right, and I just sat down long enough to light a cigarette and he thought I was sitting there patrolling the streets. He turns around and says ‘what’s your fucking name?’ and I took my card out, my status card, and I turned it around and I threw it on his suit, and I said ‘you take my name, and you put it through your files, there, I have no record for prostitution, and you owe me an apology for slandering my name in public’. And the old lady turns around she walks up and she says ‘I’m her witness’...and he kept saying to me ‘I know you’re a working girl, I know you’re a working girl’ and the old lady had said ‘she just sat down to light a cigarette, what did she do wrong?’... ‘Oh, I’ll get you, I’ll get you’ and he couldn’t say anymore because witnesses again, right, and then three days later he tried to run me over on Armstrong (Patricia).

Given that the officers who patrol the areas that the women work often become familiar with both the workers and the clientele, they target the women that they have arrested in the past: “They know my name and they just do it to harass me so that I’ll get pissed off and give them a hard time so then they’ve got a reason to slam me into the car” (Paula). Many of the women argue that the harassment is ineffective in prohibiting them from working, despite the police’s thoughts to the contrary:

I think they should leave us alone, stop harassing us on the corner of the street, let the girl- it’s hard enough to make money out there- to let her work, let me work without harassing me. It’s not going to change things, if he’s in the back and I need the money I’m still going to go somewhere else and do it (Julie).

Physical Health

In terms of physical health, the women commented on a number of difficulties similar to those experienced by employees labouring in the late-night customer service industry such as restaurants and bars. For instance, they reported sore feet from walking, difficulty with irregular sleep patterns and poor diet due to shift work. They also described a variety of challenges that fall outside of the norm for conventional labour. In particular, the women identified sexually transmitted disease as the predominant physical risk in the street sex trade. Patricia explained, “You’re getting everybody else’s leftovers.” In order to respond to this risk, the women interviewed indicated that they underwent regular check-ups and STD testing. They also refused to have intercourse without a condom: “I have condoms all the time. A lot of guys offer me hundreds of dollars to do without and it’s just not worth it” (Paula). In ensuring that they remain informed and aware in terms of their sexual health, the women are able to deal with the daily risk of sexually transmitted diseases and provide a healthy service to their clientele.

I’d say ‘if there’s no condom then it’s a no-go’ and they’d say ‘well the girl down the street...’ You know like, I’m older than she is probably, but I’m still here to talk about it (Patricia).

Dealing with Unique Challenges

In addition to the daily workplace hazards previously mentioned, street sex workers are also faced with a number of other challenges unique to their work. That is to say they are unique in that they are a direct result of the marginal, criminal and stigmatized nature of the work.

Mental/Emotional Health

Another hazard that the women described as being fairly common for women working in the street sex trade was the negative effects their work had on their mental and emotional health. It was apparent that the particular challenges, the emotional difficulties, and the stress that the women faced were not necessarily related to the job per say³², but to the illicit and criminalized nature of the work. Their stress arises out of the criminalized aspect, danger and social stigma associated with their work. The work was characterized often as mentally exhausting, stress inducing and emotionally damaging. Angela explained that she attributed her mental exhaustion to being constantly on guard while working on the street:

You have to be careful about tricks, you have to be careful about not getting busted or you know your mind is constantly on guard and it's so exhausting by the time you're done for the day you don't want to see another man.

Within street sex work, similar to any other form of employment, the emotional and mental health of the employees is affected by their environment and the varied behaviours of their clientele. Jackie elaborated that the stress often depended on the circumstances of a given day, for instance:

It's usually the police that make it stressful. They won't let you work, they'll keep following you around until you go home...It can get stressful when you get two grumpy dates after another. Then you're like 'okay drop me off I'm outta here, okay I'm getting pissed off now'.

This stress can also lead to feelings of depression and burnout, which are also shaped by the marginal nature of the occupation. Julie, for example, explained that her feelings of self-esteem and self-worth could easily be undermined by the work:

³² As they are excluded from traditional stressors such as pay deductions, dealing with supervisors and office politics.

“Emotionally it’s very hard, because then you regret, you feel guilty, you don’t like yourself so it’s like a vicious cycle.”

Some of the women choose to find outlets for their stress and negative emotions in order to address their feelings in what they describe as a constructive manner: “Oh they piss me off, and you wanna hear something funny? When I get in a bad mood that’s when I’ll go out on the street” (Tracey). Other strategies to respond to ‘bad days’ included seeking comfort and support from other workers and looking to shelter/outreach workers for counselling. Some of the women indicated that it was essential that they unwind at the end of their day and spend some time relaxing: “Come home and grab your kitten and grab a pillow and run a hot bath and that’s all you want” (Angela). Seeking comfort in pets such as cats, and in one case a rabbit (who provided the women with unconditional love) appeared to be a commonality many of the women shared.

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Negotiating the ‘Whore’ Stigma

Although the women were very clear and direct in their descriptions and discussions of their employment, relaying their daily experiences without self-deprecating comments or slurs towards the trade as a whole, the stigma of sex trade work became apparent when the women engaged in discussions regarding the surrounding community and also within their experiences in intimate relationships.

The women’s perceptions-of-self appeared to emerge from their reflection of the community response to their presence. For instance, Cheryl explained feeling disrespected which led to her having difficulty respecting herself or her choice of work. In a similar fashion, Veronica expressed that she felt she was sleeping with too many men, by society’s standards, and as a result felt ‘nasty’ and ‘degraded’. Jackie explained

feeling embarrassed when other people walked by her: "Cause they're [passers-by] like 'oh she's a whore' you know, whispering. And I think that I've been doing it for so long that I should be used to it. But you know, sometimes..." Other women responded in a similar manner, stating that: "They [passers-by] know...there's people watching you and everything" (Michelle). In response to their feelings of embarrassment, some of the women have developed the skill of countering any such thoughts although still not in relation to justifying their own choice of employment:

...But you know it's like what the hell, I don't live with them, I don't know them, you know. You have to remind yourself 'cause you know, sometimes I feel embarrassed and I have to think that I'm not going to see them again (Jackie).

Paula explained that she believed that other people held the opinion that "a prostitute is worthless." This is often reinforced by her experiences in the community, specifically the time when she was being severely beaten by a client in a well-lit parking lot with a number of people nearby: "[The people] just looked at me, like as if it was a movie going on in the theatre." Because of this experience in particular, she refuses to tell anyone what she does for a living, and even feels ashamed to participate in an outreach program geared towards offering support to street sex workers:

I was too embarrassed. Thought that somebody of *importance* might come in and see me sitting there or something. Like say, a boyfriend's mother or you know something like that...somebody who knows me but doesn't know what I'm doing (Paula). [*Emphasis mine*]

This same sense of shame or embarrassment emerged throughout other interviews as well, often in the context of which locations were appropriate for the women to frequent when they were working. For instance, the women appeared to be very conscious of the image they believed they were projecting to the younger population:

Where I worked there was a little park and you know there's kids there, kids walking with their parents and you don't wanna be standing there on the street corner with all these kids walking around (Angela).

Angela, as a result of her feelings of 'inappropriateness' for the general population, will modify her work schedule in order to avoid 'offending' members of the community and 'influencing' their children: "I'll wait until at least nine o'clock most kids are in bed at home, tucked in...then I can go out." Some of the women described segregation as the only solution, suggesting a 'red light district,' which would be kept separate from the larger community:

But it won't be in front of anybody's house or anybody's businesses. And then nobody will be calling the cops on the girls. They're not putting other people out. Or they're not around schools where children are. You know. It's so easy if people would just listen (Patricia).

Interestingly, notwithstanding the stigma and their awareness of negative community attitudes to their work that emerged in all of the narratives, the women presented themselves as confident in terms of what they did for a living, and where they stood in relation to their clientele. As previously noted, some of the women mentioned treating the clientele with respect: "Like I never treated anybody just because they were paying me that you're less than I am" (Patricia). Moreover, some made a point of noting that it was a morally acceptable job:

Like, working girls, we're not there to hurt anybody. It's two consenting adults. You know, it's not like we're taking little kids or uh, propositioning teenage boys, you know. Consenting adults (Patricia).

Relationships, Isolation & Social Support

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Due to the stigmatized and illicit nature of the work, the women are often isolated from their families, their children and the 'pro-social' community. A majority of the women did not have any contact with their parents, siblings or children, and often

explained that these individuals either were not aware of their employment choices, or that they had made the decision to separate themselves from them because of that choice: “Mine [children] don’t know. I’ve got two in Sudbury, they’re adults, and my other one, she’s an awful witch and tried to beat up her grandmother. So I just said goodbye” (Debbie). Tracey expressed that she had little contact with her son:

He lives with his dad and I’m sure he knows but it’s never talked about. I’m sure he knows but he’s just, he would never say anything. He’d block it right out of his head. But they don’t know, our kids don’t know, no. Mine only knows from word of his mouth from his father. Like, I still talk to his father all the time but his father is the type of guy that if Terry and Matt were going down Montreal road or something, right. Terry’s the type to say ‘oh, there’s your mom- oh wrong one’...that kind of thing.

Children’s Aid had also been involved in a number of the cases, resulting in additional difficulties when it came to the women wanting to have a relationship with their children: “I can still call my kids the two oldest ones, they changed the numbers of my two youngest ones, so I can’t have no contact with them” (Michelle). Paula expressed that her children were placed in CAS custody, and stated, “No, they won’t give me anything, any information. They’ve been adopted out. They have a different name and everything now.”

The nature of the work also made it very difficult to engage in positive intimate relationships: “I can’t stand men. I can’t stand the way they look at me, I can’t stand the way they touch me, it just, I don’t want them to touch me” (Angela). An issue that was raised by several of the women was the difficulty of separating their personal lives from their professional lives and the tendency for the two to nuance and affect one another. For example, Debbie indicated that, while in a relationship, she feels as though she is getting cheated if she has sex and is not paid. Tracey elaborated:

It's just that it really does take away a lot of your emotion for men and stuff, it does. It changes it. You know, because I used to really want a boyfriend really bad, but now about sex I don't even care and if I don't get paid I feel like I'm giving it away. But that's just the way it is.

Many of the women expressed difficulties being intimate in the first place when they were not working: "I like my sex, just when I want it, on my terms. You know, it's why I can't get into a relationship" (Angela). Similarly, Tracey expressed, "Don't have any desire for sex. Normally. Like I'm turned off sexually. You know what? I don't think I'll have sex unless I'm paid for it." Sexual interaction, then, was for some exclusive to the work, which makes relationships with men extremely difficult:

And I just had a recent boyfriend when I just moved in here and he wanted me to be intimate and I couldn't, so now I don't have a friggin boyfriend. Like to kiss a guy it's like EWWW. Or like you know to wake up beside him it's just like...unless I get my money for it then... (Tracey).

Despite the difficulties noted, there were some women who were involved in intimate relationships. For those who are involved in relationships, the work often becomes the basis for significant strain:

Yeah he doesn't like it. He doesn't like it at all. And when I come home the first thing I do is run in the shower with the bottle of Javex you know. He's always worried about me catching something off somebody or, and it hurts him emotionally more than anything (Paula).

Angela mentioned that despite efforts to develop positive relationships with men she has been unsuccessful: "I had tried to get into normal relationships, I can't, I cannot do it." This has led to her involvement in a string of abusive partnerships, a common theme in the experiences of many of the other women. The propensity for violence shared by police and clients seemed to also apply to a number of the women's partners as well, as many of the women described getting beaten up and/or sexually assaulted by abusive partners or male friends. Michelle explained that men in her life sexually assaulted her

simply because they felt that they could because she was a street sex worker. Tracey's definition of violence³³ had been shaped by her experiences as well and had much to do with stigma and self-impressions:

I was raped but it wasn't like well, what do you call rape? Yeah, kind of...but he didn't have a knife to my throat, it was just I just call it rape because I said, 'okay fuck don't hurt me and uh...but I've never been terribly beaten up or anything.

Angela referred to her life with her now ex-husband: "...my husband beat me so badly that it damaged my uterus...I was leaving my house with my kids and he came home early...my jaw was wired, all my ribs were broken and I had all sorts of bruises from the beating." Other women commented on current unhealthy relationships:

My boyfriend has HIV, and we [didn't] have safe sex. Um, but when you're out there [working] for a long time I'd come home and you can have a tornado you can have anything happen in the house and I won't hear nothing. He used to have sex with me. He'd have sex with me and I didn't know about it. So he was coming inside me and I didn't know it. He told me I was a better lay when I was sleeping then when I'm awake (Michelle).

The stigma of sex trade work often infiltrates the women's private lives in terms of tainting their intimate relationships in other ways. Jackie described her relationships with men as interfering with her choice of work since her partners would always tell her not to go out on the street³⁴. The relationships ended quickly, and Jackie explained, "But it's my life, and you know it's my decision and they can always say they don't like it but I'm gonna do it whether they like it or not." As previously noted, many of the women became involved in abusive relationships, where they faced physical brutality and sexual assault on a regular basis justified by the perpetrators on the basis of the women's choice

³³ It is important to note that some of the other women did not comment on sexual violence as being a significant risk in their lives, indicating perhaps that their own definitions of this form of violence may warrant closer inspection as well.

³⁴ This is in direct contrast to the idea of men sending the women out to work.

of employment. As a result of past experience, many of the women choose either not to be involved in intimate relationships in their private lives at all, or not to be completely honest with their partners. Debbie's husband, for instance, is unaware that she is working in the street sex trade. She explained: "He'd be doing something in the middle of the night so I'd be able to go out."

Given their isolation from family, and their negative experiences with men outside of the trade, the street sex worker social support network seemed to be made up of clients, dealers, cab drivers and other workers, since they tended to gravitate towards relationships with individuals who were also part of the more marginal and less conventional workforce:

It's more or less comfortable because they're more or less in the same kind of situation that you're in, like not...making money but you're not on the street living in a doorway but you're still on the poverty line and you feel comfortable that you don't have to pretend that you have money and you don't have to pretend that you are something that you are not (Jackie).

Many of the women described their friendships with their 'their dealers'³⁵:

They look for me when I'm on the street, they'll drive by to make sure that I'm okay, or bring me a coffee, make sure nobody's beating me up, bring me cigarettes, things like that, give me my free coke of the day (Paula).

For those who were able to maintain intimate relationships, it appeared that these developed from the client base. Angela explained, "My first child's father was my first trick." She later married him. The women also described clients who fell into the "Pretty Woman" mould of the wealthy rescuer:

Well I've only had like two really serious boyfriends and I both met them as dates. One I met on the phone, and the other I met on the streets out West. And he was a hundred dollar date and he was a regular. And then it just turned into a relationship. He was like 'come with me and I'll take care of you' and I was like 'okay!' Yeah he was wealthy (Jackie).

³⁵ This positive relationship with individuals involved in the drug trade is contrary to popular stereotype.

It appeared that it was essential to the development of a long, healthy relationships that the partners be understanding of the profession:

So, no with him it was a good relationship because he understood, he was already into that. And uh, I was always faithful to him. The only time I ever went out with another man was when I was working. That's it. But uh, yeah, 'cause after a while, well we're not together anymore- he wants to get together. He still treats my daughter like his daughter. When I have problems with her it's like 'talk to your kid'. Okay, you know (Patricia).

Similarly, relationships with family members such as parents or children, seemed to be positive if those individuals were accepting of the employment choice. Angela explained that her relationship with her father, who raises her three children, had been tense up until the point where she was honest about what she did for a living:

I was like 'Dad you're not going to believe this' and I actually had to sit down and I think he had some sort of idea what my life was like and I don't think he really knew the full picture so I actually had to sit down and be totally honest with my father and say 'Dad, uh, you know these kids, you know your grandkids are from a guy that paid me for sex'. So, I thought my dad was gonna have a heart attack.

Police Corruption and Inaction

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In addition to the previously noted police violence, their failure to protect the women from violence perpetrated by others or respond to that violence, as they would if it had involved a less marginal or less controversial member of the community, appeared to be criminal in itself.

The narratives of the women described police corruption as prevalent, and depicted officers offering street sex workers money or gifts in exchange for sexual favours, or forcing the women to offer their services for free in order to avoid arrest. In addition, the women commented that the police officers with whom they interacted failed to protect them or to respond to any violence that was perpetrated against them, thus

suggesting a selectiveness as to who is worthy of protection. One of the women referred to a specific situation where, after she had been severely beaten, she telephoned the police: "They just more or less drove me home and asked me if I was okay. That was it. 'Cause I was a prostitute, they just wanted to leave it as that" (Paula). Most of the women indicated that they did not in fact turn to the police when faced with a negative situation. Paula, after having experienced this selectiveness, no longer turns to the police for support: "Walk away. Just go home. What can you do? Call the police? And they're not gonna do anything" (Paula). These experiences caused the women to feel that neither the law nor the police would protect them, and fostered the belief that in fact they were not worthy of that protection in the first place. These experiences also drew outrage from the women working on the street:

There should be some kind of protection for the girls. There should be. Like there are a few cops that I met on Gladstone that are really nice. There's also cops that are real assholes. They don't care if a working girl gets hurt or not. They couldn't give a shit- 'well you shouldn't be on the streets anyway'. Well if I'm not on the street you know, where would I be? What happens if that guy [referring to a time when she intervened when a 'john' was beating up another worker] would have grabbed a young girl? They should have some kind of protection [in addition to other workers] for the girl (Patricia).

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Dealing with the Criminalized Nature of the Work

The women have developed a number of strategies to deal with the problems they face in connection with local law enforcement in their workplace. A dominant theme that emerged in discussions with the women was to be as inconspicuous as possible in public. The women described being careful to appear as though they were not working. For instance, Michelle indicated that she rides her bicycle up and down the different 'strolls' instead of standing still in one spot. She explained that her regular clientele are aware of this, and know where and how to find her. This still allows her to be able to solicit new

clients by riding along side their vehicles. Other women prefer to stand near a doorway or alley and simply hide when a patrol car is approaching. Tracey, having been arrested several times, avoids confrontation with police by dressing down and disguising herself as a commuter: "...I just kind of like mind my own business, you know, I don't wear a mini skirt and that. I wear the jeans and running shoes and I'm at the bus stop." In the event that they should come in contact with the police, the women make sure to prepare by hiding the money they make or the drugs they may have in order to avoid giving the officers any reason to detain them. One woman has even gone to the lengths of rolling up the money she had made in a condom and hiding it inside her vagina in case she was pulled over by police³⁶, thus they were unable to charge her with prostitution since they would not find any money on her 'person'. Other women choose to look to the more positive officers³⁷, predominantly female, who are less likely to behave inappropriately or with violence. A more infrequent strategy that emerged was to 'fight back', in a manner of speaking, by filing lawsuits charging police brutality, as for example Julie has done.

The criminalized nature of the work obviously presents a major obstacle not only to the women's level of productivity, but also to their safety. All of the women indicated that they were supportive of the legalization or decriminalization³⁸ of street sex work, in order to ensure that the working girls were safe, and that the police and legal system could better focus their attentions elsewhere: "I think it [sex work] should [be legalized] because then they [police] would leave us alone and deal with the real world criminals

³⁶ Her behaviour speaks to possible misunderstandings of the prostitution laws in Canada

³⁷ Almost all of the women mentioned two female police officers, one named Stephanie Blaze and the other simply described as a 'pretty blonde', who patrolled the Gladstone area and treated them with respect.

³⁸ Although both legalization and decriminalisation were discussed with the women interviewed, neither one nor the other presented as being a 'better choice'. It is unclear to what level the women understood what the terms implied, simply stating that 'anything would be better' than the current legal situation.

and leave us alone” (Julie). Paula suggested that safehouses, which could be highly regulated, be an alternative to working on the streets: “maybe open some kind of place where people could go and have...have rooms for people to go into and pay taxes or something like that.” Paula did acknowledge that there were some negatives associated with legalization:

If they legalized it I don’t think we’d make as much money. For sure. And I think that there would be less men out there actually because I think they’d be nervous...I think they’d be more nervous. Because they’d be publicized.

Other women suggested legalization with the intention of keeping track of the street sex workers for their own safety:

Have your name on a paper that uh, they know who you are ‘cause then if you do go missing then they ‘okay she hasn’t been out for a while’ and they check it out and something like that. A registration system (Jackie).

The Question of Drugs

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“Coke is not spelled C-O-K-E, it’s spelled M-O-R-E”(Michelle).

It is important to note that substance use was very much a part of the experiences of the women interviewed. All the women had, at one time or another, been involved in ‘heavy’ consumption of illicit substances and/or alcohol. In contrast to the dominant discourse, in which drug addiction is considered to be one of the defining characteristics of street sex workers and causally linked to street sex work, what emerged from the interviews was far beyond a simple and simplistic linear dependence model. The women made the distinction that substance use was not necessarily the reason behind the work, but simply one component of it. Substance use was defined as part of the street sex trade lifestyle, therefore becoming one of a number of expenses for which the women required the financial resources that street sex work provided. Thus it becomes necessary to

reframe the relationship between street sex work and substance use in terms of the individual relationships between the women and their personal use of alcohol or drugs, without falling into the moral condemnation of associating the work itself to the substance use.

What emerges is then a highly nuanced set of relationships to drug and alcohol use, where some of the women use substances to work, some work to use substances, and others see their use as inhibiting the work itself. None of the women identified the use of alcohol or drugs as a strategy to cope with the challenges or workplace hazards associated with street sex work. Even though some of the women explained that they used substances while they were working, they made it clear that it was necessary that they remain in control of their surroundings in order to ensure their own safety. Angela indicated,

And of course when you're doing dates, if you do them when you're totally straight it makes you want to puke on them. I've told a date, said I'm going to be sick, and he says 'no, you're not' and I said, yeah, and if I puke on your lap I charge you extra for the chunks.

She is also quick to add that "If you're gonna drink then don't do dates, you have to have your senses." Along the same lines, Michelle explained, "I can't go out when I'm high." She described using substances recreationally after work, often in the company of friends. Paula explained that if it were not for her drug addiction, she would not continue to return to the streets: "Well mainly, mostly I start off by doing a toké and then I run out of dope so of course I'm right out on the street. And make some money, I run home, I buy some dope and I'm right back on the street again." In contrast Patricia, however, spoke about drug use as being part of her lifestyle but not the reason behind her work.

Then I'd go out and party, when I decided that I wanted to go out and party but then I'd end up working again, making money...and the money'd be sitting there, and I'd say 'I could use this or I could use that'. But then I got into the drugs...I could take it or leave it. I never got...I could never say that...well I could say that I was kind of addicted, but not addicted to the point where I'd go and do a date, just for my dope.

Substance use became an obstacle for some of the women in that a side effect of regular use was that they began to physically rely on the drugs, and given that they were living in an environment where drugs and alcohol were prevalent it was even more difficult to abstain. Julie described that it was her addiction to cocaine that prevented her from maximizing her productivity at work: "Cause the drug took over, eh, I've got an addiction, a cocaine addiction. So that's what to feed my habit. So at that point you do anything for the next hit. I would even go under my price to get high." She explained that it became difficult for her to save any money, or ensure that her other financial needs were met:

You want to get ahead of things by working and making a few bucks but then you end up sucked into it and you start over and you take all the money that you made and it all goes into the drug.

Michelle also explained that her use of substances interfered with her ability to work safely: "And it [physical pain] ends up happening to a lot of us 'cause we're out there and we're on drugs, when you're on drugs, so um, I don't think your perception is all there."

The Good Stuff

In spite of the challenges associated with street sex work, the women's narratives also drew attention to positive aspects of their work. It became clear that there were a number of features, benefits and characteristics that counteracted the challenges, risks and negatives associated with street sex work. First and foremost were the financial benefits. Money, "fast easy money" (Jackie), was the primary response from all

respondents when asked what they liked the most about their jobs. The flexible schedule was also an asset, in that the women were able to structure other responsibilities and family commitments as priorities, and work around them. Having a strict '9 to 5' schedule would not necessarily provide the opportunity for this amount of leeway. The women were also able to work a minimal amount of hours, at their own discretion of course since some chose to work longer, for a maximum amount of financial return due to the entrepreneurial strategies they employed.

Another positive element of the labour, in addition to deciding when to work and how much they wanted to charge for their services, was that the women were able to choose who they 'dated', what they were willing to provide in terms of services and where they wanted to work. These elements of control allowed the women to structure their labour to their own specific needs and tastes, and permitted them to avoid engaging in behaviours that they were not comfortable with. They did not have to answer to employers, follow the rules and regulations of others or endure taxing of their wages, instead making a full profit on every 'date'.

The women described the individuals that they interacted with in the workplace as being a positive as well, in that they were able to meet new people on a daily basis, clients and workers alike, and develop relationships as a result. Veronica explained that her favourite part of the job was the fact that men would say nice things to her, give her money, and then go away. She expressed that interaction with a number of different men kept the job enjoyable and interesting. For Patricia, one of the men she encouraged became a solid source of support for her and her daughter:

And, uh, I had this one date; he was the best thing that ever walked into my life when I was working. He was an Indian Chief. He wouldn't go out with any

white girls. Just Native, and I was the only Native one around. Yeah, he'd send me money, from where he was...he phone me, I even introduced him to my daughter when she was young...he used to send me five hundred every month, besides he knew I was working, he didn't want me working as much, he wanted me to stay home with my daughter. So he sent me five hundred a month, he'd send her fifty dollars a month for whatever she wanted, her treats or whatever. Paid my phone bills, paid my cable bills, paid everything...I still went out anyway, not as much, you know. Spent more time with my kid. It was good.

Similarly, other women indicated that they were able to meet not only a number of men, but also other workers with whom they developed friendships. "Met lots of nice people. Oh, I met a lot of girls, a lot of girls" (Patricia).

Some of the women felt a sense of fulfillment and job satisfaction from providing a positive influence in the lives of the men, encouraging them in their lives and giving them tips on dealing with their wives or girlfriends. They were able to provide sexual fulfillment and satisfaction in addition to the more important aspects of stress relief, conversation and companionship. For instance, as previously noted, some of the women indicated that the men they 'dated' often needed someone to talk to, and spend time with, more than they needed sexual gratification. In being able to provide such services, the women polished their communication skills and interpersonal skills, and were able to hone their best attributes. Positive experiences in the workplace then led to increased self-esteem and the building of self-worth, as other individuals were actually paying the women for their time and for the privilege of being intimate with them.

The women also pointed out that "well there's nothing wrong with sex" (Michelle). Other positives that arose in conversation were the 'thrill' of the job and the 'rush' that it gave the women. The lifestyle itself as a whole was described as providing intrigue, excitement and adventure as well: "Sometimes, the thrill, I guess something like

life in the fast lane, I guess. But no, you meet different people too and sometimes it's a thrill, you know, like" (Julie).

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Starting from the voices of the women involved in street sex work, and employing a theoretical framework that emerges from those voices (as opposed to being imposed on them) allows us a unique point of entry for analysis. It provides us with an opportunity to step outside of the language and assumption of deviance, and rethink sex work in terms of labour. More specifically, by employing a different language and new concepts we can identify the commonalities between street sex work and other forms of working class labour. When we attend to specificity, we are able to tease out the unique aspects and characteristics of the labour, highlighting those conditions that speak to the need for an expansion of existing labour theory. At the same time we are able to *see* and acknowledge unique aspects of the trades including challenges such as law, police brutality, and the potentiality for violence from customers due to the criminalized nature of the work. We are also able to leave room for the existence of 'survival sex'. In short this approach to the research permits for the adoption of a normalizing framework that renders the invisible, visible, which then becomes a point of entry for deconstructing stereotypes. At the same time, we attend to issues of stigma and the construction of self-image that varies from one individual to another.

Labour Commonalities

I think it's work, it's a job and you get paid for it (Angela).

Women working in the sex trade industry portray themselves as service workers who are selling sexual services in addition to other more conventional elements of their

labour power³⁹, such as their social skills or physical strength (see also Brewis and Linstead, 2000). The women interviewed for the purposes of this research, while acknowledging that street sex work was considered deviant by the 'moral majority', operated outside this frame of reference and presented their engagement in sex work as *work*, describing their experiences using the language and terminology associated with employment.

The women identified having gravitated towards the sex trade industry given that sex work was a strategy that allowed them to realize economic independence and to access the financial resources that were necessary to support their lifestyle and oftentimes their families⁴⁰. The women's entry into the street sex trade in many ways mirrors the process of women into working class service sector employment (Paules 1991) in that, unlike the middle class 'career' model, these women seemed to have 'drifted' into this form of labour often through contacts in the trade (see also Bell, 1987; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987; Fraser Committee, 1985).

I had two kids and their father was in prison, and welfare there was...after my rent was paid I only had a hundred and twenty five dollars for the month to do groceries, everything so it was like, what other opportunity do I have? (Paula)

As a number of authors have pointed out, today women are choosing to work in the sex trade in the context of limited and unappealing options of either minimum wage service sector labour⁴¹ or inadequate (and declining) social service support (Bruckert, 2002; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987; Brown, 1999). Put another way, and to paraphrase

³⁹ See also Mary Romero (1992)'s discussion of domestic workers struggling to control the work process by changing the labour relationship to one in which they are selling labour 'services' not labour power in Maid in the U.S.A.

⁴⁰ Of course most workers are engaged in employment due to financial pressure.

⁴¹ See also Ester Reiter (1991) who discusses the low pay and appalling working conditions of the fast food labour force in Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer.

Marx, women are making choices but not in the conditions of their own choosing (Marx [1859] 1954). The majority of the women interviewed described having few opportunities for employment that would provide sufficient funds to meet their needs within the time they have available given the myriad of obligations (i.e. family) that characterize their lives⁴². Their collective employment history was predominantly made up of service sector, minimum wage positions where they worked long hours with very little job security and often poor working conditions. They served in fast-food restaurants and gas stations, engaged in janitorial duties, cleaned motel rooms and laboured on construction sites. As a result, they made the decision to move towards self-employment as a tactic to cope with increasing financial obligations and lack of state support (see also Bruckert, 2002). Accordingly, some of the women initially entered the sex trade industry by working on 'chat lines', in clubs as exotic dancers or in massage parlours. Interestingly, it appears that these forms of employment were not as lucrative as street sex work, regardless of the benefits they provided:

It seemed cleaner and I was more protected. And the people were checked when they came in and they had a shower, they were more polite and you knew that you weren't gonna get roughed up pretty much. There was a buzzer that I could push alongside of my bed and all the men were checked when they first came in the door. The men also had to sign and to show I.D. (Paula).

Despite the existence of a safer and 'cleaner' environment within which to work, the women interviewed made the decision, based on their assessment of costs and benefits, to shift⁴³ to street sex work: "That's why I stopped dancing... I can make more money on

⁴² See also Meg Luxton (1987) who discusses family obligations and women's 'double day' of labour in More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home.

⁴³ In terms of movement within the industry, the shift from exotic dancing to street sex work is somewhat comparable to a waitress who decides to turn in her resignation in order to begin working at another establishment where the financial gain is further profitable.

the street doing the same thing.” (Julie) Tracey, who pointed out that she is now able to make a minimum of five hundred dollars a day, indicated that she left erotic dancing for similar reasons:

Yeah, back then it was different, you know what I mean. I was there in 1989 and I did it, twenty years ago, no going on fifteen. It was completely different then than today. I mean you got a paycheck back then. You know what I mean, three hundred bucks a week. Well now you don’t get paid you just freelance and they don’t have to pay you.

In addition to the financial rewards it provides, engaging in street sex work also allows the women to benefit from the flexibility⁴⁴ of determining their own hours of employment in order to meet their other responsibilities including parenting. Like many other working mothers, they also balance their occupational responsibilities with family obligations as Patricia explained:

I had my times, what time I went out, ‘cause I had to get babysitters...so I worked from seven o’clock at night until one o’clock every night. Saturdays I went out in the afternoons, took my kids out shopping and bought them whatever they needed, take them to the babysitter, then I went Saturday night to work. It was a six-day week for me; I didn’t work on Sundays because I had to take care of my kids.

Further to the characteristics of flexibility and financial access, street sex work, like any other form of labour, requires a specific set of skills⁴⁵ that are essential to and complement the work. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the women indicated that intelligence, knowledge of the work environment, awareness of appropriate safety measures, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and performance abilities were competencies that were necessary for success and survival in the street sex trade. These

⁴⁴ See also Mary Romero (1992)’s discussion on job flexibility as being one of the major advantages of domestic service in Maid in the U.S.A.

⁴⁵ See also Susan Porter Benson (1984) who explores the increasingly necessary development of skills, particularly in terms of customer service, within the retail industry in “Women in Retail Sales Work: The Continuing Dilemma of Service.”

skills are not unlike those required in other areas of the customer service industry, where soliciting and securing clientele is essential.

Moreover, similar to any other self-employed agent, it is essential that their hours of operation be structured around a schedule that ensures greatest productivity. This is comparable to women who sell crafts or jewellery in stalls on the Byward Market in Ottawa, as often their financial profit is greatest on the weekend during the day when they can be certain that the flow of pedestrians will be heavy and constant. The women therefore are very much aware of the locations and times of day that provide maximum return, although these are continually shifting, and carefully plan their agenda accordingly: “[I] take a walk down and check it out. See, like if I’m about to go out I always take a quick walk around and see how things are, like how the clients are, how many cars are driving by” (Jackie).

The women are self-employed and are working within a competitive market where other service providers contribute to the fluctuating rate of monetary exchange for services. This competition within the street sex trade leads to the development of entrepreneurial strategies that are critical for economic success in any field. For instance, as detailed in chapter four, the strategies employed by street sex workers for ensuring customer satisfaction, establishing a regular client base and maintaining availability of the service in order to avoid a decrease in sales. Although the methods that the women employ differ in some respects from other customer service fields, the women remain strategic in appearance, behaviour and location while limiting the amount of environmental factors that would dissuade clientele from accessing their services, characteristics that are inherent to the success of any customer service providers. Within

this context the sexual component of the labour (so important for the moral majority) is almost incidental to their narratives. It is the process of acquiring clientele, implementing skills and negotiating their business that appeared to be most important to them.

The entrepreneurial manner in which street sex work is undertaken is very similar to independent contractors (i.e. private therapeutic massage therapists or self-employed housecleaners), and is also increasingly characteristic of the new economy, characterized by the dismantling of the welfare state, obliging working class women to employ a number of innovative strategies. The resulting shift towards non-standard labour, including self-employment, although somewhat precarious and unstable, can provide a beneficial work arrangement for women in that they are then able to manage other obligations and responsibilities in a flexible fashion (see also Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Townson, 2003; Duffy, Glenday and Pupo 1997).

Unique Characteristics to the Work

While there are a number of similarities between street sex work and other forms of working class labour dominated by women, it is critical that we recognise the unique characteristics that challenge existing labour frameworks and direct us to rethink sex work as more than simply *work*.

There is no question that street sex work is a dangerous profession, and in attending to the voices of the women interviewed we are able to discover that violence is normalized by workers in the field. This can, in part, be attributed to the general societal and legal perception that a sex worker who is sexually assaulted or beaten actually deserves to be mistreated (Dalla, 2002; Basman, 2000; Bell, 1987). Of course other working class occupations are also dangerous and continue to be more likely to extract a

physical toll from the worker (Houtman and Kompier 1995). However, violence is so much a part of the existence of the women engaging in street sex work⁴⁶ that when asked about the dangers and risks they faced in their work in the street sex trade, they had difficulty identifying any. It was throughout the narratives that it became apparent that the women approached the challenges relating to violence and personal safety as daily occurrences that translated into workplace hazards. In short, for these women the potential for physical and sexual violence that many 'outsiders' would consider to be negative and dangerous are instead conditions of work that must be *managed*.

The criminalized⁴⁷ nature of the industry, however, presents a massive barrier for the women in a number of ways. First of course is the risk of arrest—street sex workers are employed in a milieu in which they are constantly facing the possibility of criminal prosecution. For the women interviewed the risk of arrest was accepted as a consequence of their occupational choice and another obstacle to be managed (by for example minimizing their contact with police).

Second, like other employees, street sex workers sometimes have to work with unpleasant individuals, but because they are self-employed, and operating outside of an institutional context, they have limited organization or state resources to deal with these challenges and are obliged to utilize their own wherewithal. Because they are employed in a criminalized labour sector they are, in practice, denied their right as citizens to police protection. Silbert and Pines's (1981) finding that less than one percent of women who

⁴⁶ Dalla (2002) reported that there was no reference to female sex workers abandoning the streets due to personal safety concerns anywhere in the existing literature on sex work or prostitution (65).

⁴⁷ As noted in previous chapters, although prostitution is legal in Canada, the existing criminal laws (in particular Criminal Code sections 213-Communicating and 212- Procuring and living off the avails) circumscribe prostitution in a way that makes it virtually impossible for an individual to engage in street sex work without breaking the law.

fell victim to violence perpetrated by customers reported those instances to the police (397) is consistent with the findings of this study. The women clearly indicated that it would be highly unlikely that they would turn to the police for support if they were to be victimized by clients or partners. Chapman and Gates (1978) credit the lack of reporting to the fact that a sex worker who does so is likely to feel more victimized by the discrimination of the legal system than by the violence she experienced by the individual men (190). This is also the case here, as by reporting instances of physical aggression committed by clients, the women would place themselves at risk of being charged with a criminal offence or a violation of probation as they would have to describe the context within which they were assaulted. They are also confronted with the reality that their clientele are much more likely to use violence knowing that it is unlikely that their behaviour will be reported to the authorities.

One of the most striking findings was not that the police failed to protect the workers but that *they were the principle source of violence!* All of the women interviewed had, at one time or another, experienced harassment by police, had been subjected to the actions of corrupt officers (i.e. extortion), and had been recipients of brutality for which they had little recourse. It is remarkable that the women described the deplorable and offensive manner in which they were treated by the officers of the law as part of their daily employment experience. This normalization of their reality of violence is also evident in their descriptions of experiences involving sexual assault and physical aggression in both their personal and professional lives.

The criminalized nature of the work further inhibits safety in that it prevents the existence of structures, for instance 'safehouses', which would limit the possibilities for

customer-perpetrated violence⁴⁸. As a result, the women are left with their own intuition, self-defence and avoidance tactics- that do offer a measure of safety and should not be overlooked.

The research found little evidence of 'survival sex'. The women interviewed described what they did for a living while continually incorporating elements of choice- the women expressed being in control of who they 'dated', what they were willing to do, where they wanted the 'date' to take place, when they wanted to work and how much money they wanted to charge for the services they provided. As previously mentioned, the women identified that they do in fact refuse clients that they are not comfortable with, and choose not to engage in acts that they deem inappropriate or derogatory. The question of choice was also quite evident in that the women interviewed refused, as a collective, to engage in any interaction without using a prophylactic. That being said, periodically there was some indication that the women's relation to their work was also a reflection of the reality of their lives. As an outside observer, without undermining the women's own sense of agency, it is necessary to acknowledge that while these women are exercising choice they are operating within an environment where choices are constrained and limited so that at times it can appear that the concept of 'choice' becomes an exercise in semantics. Here we see financial need intersected with limited resources, little cultural capital, minimal education and rough working class presentation-of-self and low self-esteem. It would be presumptuous to make correlations or causal links but it is possible to draw attention to the fact that these women's lives are full of pain. They have

⁴⁸ Contrary to research indicating that street sex workers are at high risk of robbery (Lowman 2000), particularly by clientele, there was little evidence to suggest that the women interviewed had been subjected to such experiences. There was, however, mention of instances in which physical altercations would result from the unwillingness of the clients to pay for the service after it had been provided.

collectively experienced poverty, disrespect, isolation from their families, loss of the custody of their children, drug addiction, police brutality, and victimization at the hands of clients and partners alike. An understanding of the reality of the women working the streets perhaps can be found somewhere in between the concept of what we would call 'free' choice and the need to employ whatever strategies are available to survive. The women interviewed described managing risks, dealing with workplace hazards and employing entrepreneurial strategies, all of which could be perceived as engaging not in 'survival sex' but instead in the use of survival tactics.

Stigma & Stereotypes

They say prostitutes, they assume prostitutes do it without condoms, they say that prostitutes are dirty, but what they seem to forget is that a lot of prostitutes are normal people. (Boynton 2002)

Approaching sex work as not a deviant activity but a labour practice opens up a space for an understanding of behaviour that moves beyond what is commonly considered to be culturally undesirable and inappropriate⁴⁹. We are able to normalize sex work and view those involved as individuals negotiating a sense of self within an environment that is harshly judgemental and often intolerant. We are then able, to address the image of the street sex worker as a drug addict or alcoholic, who is immoral, homeless⁵⁰, lacking intelligence and mentally deficient, who is controlled and exploited by 'pimps' (Gardner 2002). Instead we find a collective of individual women who are intelligent, respectable, independent, and self-sufficient.

⁴⁹ See also Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988), who describes strategies employed by African American household workers for gaining mastery over work that was socially defined as demeaning, and how these individual acts of resistance can have collective consequences for the overall organization of domestic labour as an occupation in "Making Your Job Good Yourself: Domestic Service and the Construction of Personal Dignity."

⁵⁰ It is important to note that all of the women interviewed for the purposes of this research resided either in apartments, some with partners or peers, or in some other form of housing.

I'd like to say that prostitutes aren't all slags and dirty bleached-blond girls and drug addicts and alcoholics. Some of us are *decent* women who have got families and only do it for our children or...to help us out. (Boynton 2002)

Although it has already been established that many of the women involved in the street sex trade participate in drug or alcohol use, the research findings allow us to rethink the relationship between sex work and drug use as being situational and not necessarily determinate. The women indicated that their use of substances was part of their lifestyle but not causally related to the work. Instead, like many individuals who recreationally use substances, part of their employment earnings goes to leisure activities, and drug or alcohol use are part of the leisure activity for many individuals who do not work in the sex trades. That being said, it is important to note that like any other individual, it is possible that the excessive use of substances among these women starts to negatively impact their lives in that it begins to impede daily functioning, and compromises their ability to make rational decisions in relation to their work.

Because they are stereotyped as drug users⁵¹ (Wolf and Geissel 1994) the media characterizes street sex workers as desperate and isolated, when in fact regardless of personal distinctions and competition solidarity was apparent among the women. It is essential in part due to the danger inherent to the work and in part due to the fact that the work itself is criminalized. This unity among self-employed workers is interesting as it appears to have developed due to the lack of legal protection and the association of criminal status to the women employed in the street sex trade, which makes the sharing of information essential among workers. Contrary to research that indicates supportive relationships with other sex workers as being non-existent (Dalla 2002), the women

⁵¹ Here we see an intersection of morally loaded discourses- the judgement of the lifestyle of street sex workers also speaks to the imposition of morality onto drug use.

spoke of friendship, support, mentoring and care. At the very least, even if the women disliked one another on a personal basis, they took the time to inform each other on 'bad dates' by describing the client's appearance and detailing the vehicle he was driving. Some of the women interviewed indicated that they had set up an informal system of notification to ensure others were aware of the location, hours and length of time they planned to be working. This provided the opportunity for swift action⁵² in the event that a woman failed to register with another worker after a certain amount of time.

In addition to the work relationships and friendships existing between street sex workers, their social support networks appeared to be comprised of other individuals involved in various forms of marginal, or criminalized labour. As an example, some of the women described peer relationships with taxicab drivers and individuals who engage in the trafficking of narcotics. These people operate within the same environment as street sex workers, and seem to also be willing to assume a measure of responsibility in ensuring the safety of the women while they are working. As previously mentioned, the women interviewed described instances where acquaintances made it a point to visit the workplace and make contact with them on a regular basis, which contributed to the informal system of worker protection. It is equally important to note that these relationships are not parasitic:

I kept looking for signs that the women were really miserable or neurotic or self-destructive. I wanted them to be that way. I think I wanted call girls to be 'sick' because I believed that anybody- at least any woman- who sold sexual access ought to be sick. (Stein 21, 1974)

⁵² As mentioned in 'The Work', this action usually entailed a sort of search party made up of members of the women's support network combing the area where the worker was last seen. It was not made clear whether the police were notified or if a 'missing persons' report was subsequently filed.

The women interviewed for the purposes of this research did not exhibit signs of mental deficiency or mental illness. It is clearly difficult for the 'moral majority' to accept that women engaging in this type of work could do so because they made a choice, not because they lacked the capability to conceptualize choices. The actuality that the women involved in the street sex trade develop strategies to maximize productivity and ensure safety, to cope with the challenges presented by police and the law, and to interact with other workers speaks to intelligence. They present as capable, exhibit a genuine concern for the community that they live in, and are considerate of the people in their lives. These women possess resources and competence essential to the work that they do, and they are managing, on an ongoing basis, a complex web of difficulties, problems and challenges.

Women engaging in street sex work are cognisant that they are often considered to be individuals who are willingly setting aside any human dignity (EFC 2000), principles or personal integrity in order to financially benefit. As we have seen, this stigma does not only affect the women in the workplace, but also verberates into their personal lives. They are mistreated not only by strangers, but also by partners, 'friends' or family members as a direct result of the way in which they choose to earn their livelihood. They face derogatory comments, character defamation and personal slurs, often on a daily basis. As a result, they have developed a number of strategies for negotiating the stigma. For some, that means embracing a relational identity that is contrary to the 'typical' street sex trade worker⁵³. For instance, some of the women mentioned that they take pride in their conversational and entertainment skills, which

⁵³ See Price 2000 for a discussion on this process with erotic dancers.

they felt set them apart from the other women working the streets. Others indicated that their professional approach provided the distinction between employment and promiscuity. One of the women made it a point to state that men would tell her that she was “different” and “not like a real prostitute”. Others managed the stigma without a ‘straw hooker’ but instead more generally highlighting the incongruence of the discourse. Regardless of their approach to identity management⁵⁴, while the women are aware that the societal response to street sex work is largely unfavourable and are affected by the perceptions of the community, the “looking glass self” (Cooley 1902) is not completely internalized: “Like I never treated anybody just because they were paying me that you’re less than I am. You know.” (Patricia)

The description of the interactions with clients also challenges taken-for-granted assumptions of the street sex trade as characterized by quick impersonal sexual release. Instead what emerges is a much more complex interactions of the kind that are normally associated with escort services⁵⁵. According to the women interviewed, the transaction also often involves much more than just the sexual acts, and includes conversation in addition to companionship. Consequently, as previously mentioned, and perhaps as a result of the variety of needs fulfilled by the sex workers, clients have a tendency to seek out their preferred service provider on a regular basis. These professional relationships often become long term and can mature into intimate partnerships.

The final stereotype that we will address is also perhaps the most enduring. A prevalent image within the media and the feminist literature is that of street sex workers

⁵⁴ See also Robin Leidner (1991), who discusses identity management in employment where identities are often not incidental to the work but an integral part of it.

⁵⁵ This is consistent with the Bruckert, Parent and Robitaille (2003) findings on massage parlours.

as victims (see Brown 1999; McLelland 2001; Quinn 2001; Bell 1987). These women are often portrayed as victims of clients, and as defeated, desperate women cowering under the coercion of brutal 'pimps' (Chapman and Gates 189, 1978). Despite this popular impression of the controlled and exploited lives of the individuals engaging in street sex work (Hodgson 1997), studies have indicated that less than half of the women interviewed reported such involvement, and that the involvement they did report appeared to greatly resemble intimate partnerships, even families with children, and seemed to be far removed from the concept of exploitative relationships (see also Fraser Committee 1985). This study found little evidence to support the presence of 'pimps' in the Ottawa street sex trade. Only a few of the women related experiences involving this type of men and these were in the context of 'pimps' who happened to be their intimate partners and to whom they gave their earnings. Although their descriptions spoke to abusive relationships, there was no mention of 'stables' or 'quotas'. Instead, the women referred to the men as their 'boyfriends'. The absence of traditional 'pimps' in this research⁵⁶ speaks to the fact that these women are voluntarily engaging in street sex work and are self-employed agents in the field.

To summarize, street sex workers are often perceived as victims because of their lifestyle, their apparent 'immorality' or 'degradation', or because they are exploited by 'pimps' (Chapman and Gates 175, 1978). The findings from this exploratory research suggest that their victimization is a result of their labouring in an illicit sector of the labour market. That is not to say that the women interviewed for the purposes of this

⁵⁶ However, as previously noted, the interview guide did not contain specific questions relating to "pimps", which points to the need for this topic to be further explored in future research. A more detailed exploration of how the women define a 'pimp' would also be necessary in order to gain additional information on this topic.

research were not victimized in other ways in the context of their private lives. As illustrated in the chapter entitled 'The Women', and as articulated in previous chapters, these women have in their personal lives experienced a variety of different forms of victimization, ranging from abuse or neglect as a child to violent intimate relationships. The victimization that they experience in the workplace at the hands of clients and police, however, is specifically linked to the fact that the work that they engage in is in fact criminalized.

The women interviewed identified as voluntary actors within a complex labour structure. That being said, it is essential to recognise that they are also persecuted by being labelled as outcasts and treated as such by the moral majority, which leads them to be at increasing risk of violence. They are subject to the discriminatory enforcement of the law by individual police officers, and as a result are victimized by the criminal justice system, the laws against street sex work, and of the ways in which the laws are enforced.

CONCLUSION

"I would say maybe have a safehouse, that would be good. 'Cause if you're gonna have a bunch of girls on like Wellington street for example, you know what I mean, you've got ten girls in a matter of four miles or something you know. Have one house for those ten girls, and you're not going to find any of them dead, beaten up and you're not gonna find the guys in jail, because they're tricks, you know what I mean. That's my point" (Tracey).

It became apparent from the research that the women working within the street sex trade in Ottawa are neither 'happy hookers' nor 'desperate junkies'. Instead, we find a group of marginal women who are positioned within very complicated life and labour circumstances and whose lives cannot be 'plugged' into pre-existing categories. These women are utilising the resources available to them to make the best of their situation, while engaging in a form of labour that also incorporates survival tactics. What really emerged, however, was not a class of women, but ten different women who possessed intelligence and personality. Despite significant commonality in their narratives, these were a series of individuals who shared a labour location.

Providing an exploratory study of these labour experiences is a unique point of entry for analysis and speaks to the need to address stigma and the criminalized nature of the street sex trade. Considering street sex work as a viable form of labour therefore allows us to rethink policy and practices, and recognize the benefits of decriminalization. These benefits include alleviating many of the negative aspects of the work such as work-related interaction with police, the high potentiality for violence from clients, the stigma and the risk of incarceration. In short, this would significantly improve the experiences of women engaging in street sex work.

Other implications include highlighting the need to ensure accountability on the part of the police, specifically in relation to the reports of harassment, brutality and extortion perpetrated by the officers patrolling the 'stroll'. This accountability could also include the implementation of mandatory sensitivity training for the members of the police force engaging in regular interaction with street sex workers, and the development of new strategies to ensure that those interactions remain within existing legal guidelines. There is also a need for the creation of new policing practices that would ensure that street sex workers are afforded the right to police protection when they are victimized in both their professional and personal lives.

Essential to the safety and well-being of women engaging in street sex work would be the foundation of advocacy groups in Ottawa, similar to Stella⁵⁷ in Montreal and Maggie's⁵⁸ in Toronto, which would aid in the expansion of the knowledge of available resources. In addition, organizations of this nature could provide workers with personal and professional support, access to health services and information regarding sexually transmitted diseases, and offer legal assistance. Advocacy groups such as these centred in the National Capital would also be well-suited to lobby for the decriminalization of the street sex trade.

The research was also able to provide an opportunity for the women in the street sex trade to voice their reality, offer suggestions that could lead to the improvement of

⁵⁷Stella is a community resource for sex workers run for and by workers and ex-workers. This organization offers support and information to sex workers in order to facilitate their ability to live and work in security and with dignity. In addition, Stella attempts to educate and sensitize the public to the reality of sex work, fights discrimination and promotes decriminalization of the sex trades. Stella also offers group and individual counselling support, referrals, a 'bad trick' list, prevention material and advice.

⁵⁸ Maggie's operates under the mandate of providing education and support to assist sex workers in their efforts to live and work with safety and dignity. It offers information about health promotion, AIDS and STD prevention, Canadian law and dangerous clients.

their current working conditions by alleviating the negative aspects of the work and addressing their labour, safety, legal, social, emotional and physical needs. In addition to noting that the creation of numerous services that provided a safe meeting place for the women, similar to 'Sophie's Hope'⁵⁹ on the Byward Market in Ottawa, would be instrumental in improving the professional lives of the women in the trade, the women interviewed advocated for the creation of 'safehouses'. Within these structures women would be able to continue operating as self-employed agents but within a safe working environment in which clientele could be screened and monitored. The financial transaction could therefore be regulated, and the women would be able to ensure payment. In addition, the women could have access to sexual health resources, and information regarding HIV, AIDS and STD prevention. Having a designated area for sex workers to engage in their labour may also aid in reducing the stigma associated with the illicit nature of the trade, and promote the normalization of sex work as employment. Moreover, the creation of such establishments could potentially address community concerns about nuisance and noise, in that the women would no longer be working on the streets.

In addition to these implications, the thesis opens up a number of possible avenues for future research. One could begin by expanding on the current study through the incorporation of a larger number of participants, utilizing a variety of different recruitment methods with the intention of targeting women who had not accessed any of the services provided by the Salvation Army or the Elizabeth Fry Society in order to compare their experiences. It would also be beneficial to conduct interviews in different

⁵⁹ Sophie's Hope is a drop-in centre that offers support, sustenance, shower and laundry facilities to women who are living or working on the street.

cities where sex worker organizations exist, for instance in Montreal or Toronto, and evaluate the effectiveness of such resources in alleviating the negative aspects of the work. Conducting an inquiry into the existence and prevalence of exploitative relationships between 'pimps' and sex workers would also be essential to the development of a better understanding of the work. Moreover, considering elements such as language, gender and race as significantly contributing to the different experiences of street sex workers as a whole would also be a valuable point of entry for understanding the complexities of labour in this field.

This thesis will, as it should, end with the voices of the women working in the street sex trade in Ottawa.

"The work? Uh, I don't know, just uh if we had a place to stop in, where the girls could stop in and uh talk, exchange, safe, talk about what's driving around and that and um, more or less just a stop in for the girls with coffee and that. Like a meeting place." (Jackie- on what would make the work easier)

"I think they should leave us alone, stop harassing us on the corner of the street, let the girl- it's hard enough to make money out there- to let her work, let me work without harassing me. It's not going to change things. If he's [police officer] in the back and I need the money, I'm still going to go somewhere else and do it." (Julie)

"You've gotta find some people to talk to the girls that have been there, that have lived the life. Like 'walk in my moccasins' type thing. You know, get them to talk, get them to listen, like, listen between the lines not just the lines, right, know what they are talking about. Been there, you know what's going on. 'Cause to talk to someone, it's just like somebody talking about drugs to me. 'Oh, really...where did you learn this?- Well I read it in a book.- Well then don't bother me.' Tell me about putting a needle in your arm and then I'll listen to you. 'Cause then you know what you're talking about, you don't know what you're talking about through a book." (Patricia)

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INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The goals of the research have been explained to me, this consent letter and form has been reviewed orally and I have the opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification regarding research goals, methods, researcher's obligations and the rights of the participants or any other concerns.

I agree to have the interview tape recorder: Yes _____
No _____

Date: _____

Participant: _____

Signature: _____

Researcher: _____

Signature: _____

APPENDIX C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide: Adult Female Street Sex Workers

As I mentioned before I would like to speak to you about your work in the sex trade on the street and the programs offered to you in terms of intervention.

Street sex work

Describe your work.

Describe your typical workday?

How did you get involved in this type of work?

What other types of work have you done?

If you have changed the type of work you do, why?

What other types of sex work have you engaged in?

Why did you select street sex work?

How long have you been working in the street sex trade?

Why did you begin working in the street sex trade?

Why do you continue to work in the street sex trade?

(or if applicable) Why did you leave the street sex trade?

What kind of challenges or dangers do you face in your work in the street sex trade?

- What kind of risks do you face with regards to your physical health and security?
- What kind of risks do you face with regards to your emotional health and well-being?

What do you like about working in the street sex trade?

What do you dislike about working in the street sex trade?

What would make the work easier?

What kinds of problems do you encounter with the law?

Do you believe that decriminalization or legalization would benefit street sex workers?
Why?

What kinds of skills do you need to work in the street sex trade?

What kinds of problems have you encountered while working in the street sex trade?

- In relation to...
- Police?
 - Other workers?
 - Community?
 - Johns?
 - Relationships?
 - Children?

Programming

What program(s) did you attend/are you attending?

Why did you attend/are you attending the program(s)?

How did you hear about them?

Have the programs helped you to face the challenges you face in your work? Explain.

How have they helped you deal with the risks you are faced with in regards to your physical health and security?

How have they helped you deal with the risks you are faced with in regards to your emotional health and well-being?

How have they helped you?

-emotionally, socially, physically (i.e. health)

What else have they given you in terms of both positive and negative experience?

Have you changed your behavior since participating in the programming? If so, how?

Is there anything valuable that you see as missing from the programs? If so, what?

How could the programming be improved?

(If the program is offered as a diversion from the criminal justice system)

Would you attend the program if it was not a diversion?

What are the limitations of the program?

What other kinds of services do you need? Explain. Please elaborate.

What kinds of programs do you see as being helpful? How do you envision them?

What other programs are available to you in the community? Why have you not participated in them?

Would you participate in these other programs in the future? Why/Why not?

Information about the Interview and Research

Why did you decide to participate in this research project?

What are your thoughts about this research?

Under what pseudonym would you like to be identified in this research project?

Would you like to review the transcript of this interview?

If yes, please write down the e-mail or mailing address where we could send the transcripts.

APPENDIX D: Data Grid Template

Physical Description	
Demeanour	
Profile	
<u>Alias</u>	
<u>Age</u>	
<u>Ethnicity</u>	
<u>Sexual Orientation</u>	
<u>Family</u>	
<u>Relationship Status</u>	
<u># of Children</u>	
<u>History in the Trade</u>	
<u>Time on the Streets</u>	
<u>Criminal History</u>	
<u>Education</u>	
<u>Work History</u>	
<u>Drug/Alcohol History</u>	
<u>Health</u>	
<u>Reasons for Research Participation</u>	
Description of Environment	
<u>Housing</u>	
<u>Lifestyle</u>	
<u>Industry</u>	
<u>Prices</u>	

Description of Job	
<u>Definition</u>	
<u>Hours</u>	
<u>Entry</u>	
<u>Skills</u>	
<u>Pimps</u>	
<u>Relation to Work</u>	
<u>Relation to Drugs</u>	
<u>Relation to Other Workers</u>	
<u>Labour Conditions</u>	
<u>Entrepreneurial Strategies</u>	
<u>Positives</u>	
<u>Negatives</u>	
Challenges/Risks	
<u>Physical Violence</u>	
<u>Sexual Violence</u>	
<u>Mental Health</u>	
<u>Emotional Health</u>	
<u>Physical Health</u>	
<u>Stigma</u>	
<u>Community</u>	
<u>Drugs</u>	
<u>Johns</u>	
<u>Pimps</u>	
<u>Relationships</u>	
<u>Family</u>	
<u>Law</u>	

<u>Police</u>	
<u>Other Workers</u>	
Strategies to Manage Risk	
<u>Physical Violence</u>	
<u>Sexual Violence</u>	
<u>Mental Health</u>	
<u>Emotional Health</u>	
<u>Physical Health</u>	
<u>Stigma</u>	
<u>Community</u>	
<u>Drugs</u>	
<u>Johns</u>	
<u>Pimps</u>	
<u>Relationships</u>	
<u>Family</u>	
<u>Law</u>	
<u>Police</u>	
<u>Other Workers</u>	
Needs (To alleviate negative aspects Of the work)	
<u>Labour</u>	
<u>Safety</u>	
<u>Legal</u>	
<u>Social</u>	
<u>Emotional</u>	
<u>Physical (Sustenance)</u>	
<u>Substance Use</u>	

<u>Human Needs (Respect)</u>	
<u>Employment</u>	
<u>Finances</u>	
<u>Exit (If Necessary)</u>	
Services Accessed	
<u>What?</u>	
<u>When?</u>	
<u>Experience</u>	
<u>Assessment</u>	
<u>Suggestions</u>	
<u>Reasons for Participation</u>	

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