Researching Sex Work in the Twenty-First Century
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*Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 2013 42: 713
DOI: 10.1177/0094306113499536b

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://csx.sagepub.com/content/42/5/713
Researching Sex Work in the Twenty-First Century

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The field of sex work refers to the individuals and organizations involved in sexual commerce, which includes prostitution, pornography, stripping, and erotic telephone or webcam enterprises. The participants in these activities are universally stigmatized and marginalized, yet the commercial sex sector remains a significant part of the economy in many nations and appears to be growing as a result of internet-facilitated information-sharing, thereby expanding access opportunities for both sex workers and their customers.

Research on commercial sex has grown exponentially over the past decade. Earlier studies focused on a very limited set of research questions and settings—mostly street prostitution, dancers working in strip clubs, and experimental studies on pornography exposure. The latter attempted to test the "effects" of porn on lab subjects' views of women, and the research question is usually related to aggression or violence—a rather narrow focus that neglects many other important dimensions of pornography.

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Street prostitutes figure prominently in the literature, but much less is known about prostitutes who work indoors (e.g., brothels, bars, escorts), the clients who pay for sexual services, male and transgender sex workers, telephone-sex enterprises, owners and managers of erotic businesses, and real-world consumers of porn. Another major deficiency, in the prostitution arena, is the absence of research on legal prostitution.
systems; most research has been conducted in settings where prostitution is outlawed. This lopsided body of literature seems to have seriously distorted what we think we “know” about those involved in sexual commerce in terms of demographic background, motivations, work experiences, and well-being.

Only a handful of researchers have interviewed porn actors, directors or producers, or conducted observations at film production sets (Abbott 2010; Bakehorn 2010). This means that the (usually negative) depictions of those involved in the pornography industry are rarely based on anything more than anecdotal tidbits. We do know that gender makes a world of difference, with female actors in heterosexual porn typically paid much more per film and having greater recognition and fame than their male counterparts (Abbott 2010). And a recent study found that, compared to a matched sample of the female population, porn actresses in the United States had higher self-esteem, greater social support, and stronger spirituality, as well as greater drug use (Griffith et al. forthcoming).

Some of the glaring research gaps have been partly addressed during the past decade. And a new paradigm has emerged, one that moves away from monolithic portrayals (e.g., workers as desperate, deviant, victimized, and exploited) by documenting and accounting for the rich variation in the world of commercial sex—what I call the “polymorphous paradigm” (Weitzer 2009).

In addition to this paradigm shift, there are three other major trends in the scholarly literature. The first is a growing focus on the work aspects of sex work. Part of this agenda involves investigation of both the erotic and nonsexual dimensions of sex work, including the routine and mundane as well as the substantial emotional labor involved. The second is the gradually expanding interest in under-researched actors: clients, managers, and male sex workers. The third trend is more disturbing: politicization of the field. The progress that has been made in the sociological understanding of sex work has been resisted by a minority of prominent scholar-activists who insist that all sexual commerce is inherently oppressive and either ignore or dismiss evidence to the contrary. Indeed, in no other area of the social sciences has ideology colored knowledge production more than in the field of sex work. This takes the form of either abstract ontological claims or heavily biased empirical work that is designed for the express purpose of advocating more punitive state responses (e.g., stiffer punishment of clients, banning pornography and strip clubs, conflating sex work and human trafficking, repealing laws that legalize prostitution). Critiques of this third perspective, the oppression paradigm, are available elsewhere (e.g., Chapkis 1997; Weitzer 2010).

This essay highlights recent groundbreaking books that fit within the first two trends, and especially those that explore previously under-researched dimensions of sex work in unique ways.

Sex Work in Comparative Perspective

Almost all research in this area consists of case studies of a single population or venue. The result is a patchwork of settings, actors, and social structures that, in the aggregate, affirms the polymorphous continuum on key variables: sex workers’ demographic background, reasons for entry, drug dependency, relationships with clients and third-parties, well-being, and control over working conditions. In general, workers fare better on these dimensions at higher income levels within the indoor sector, while street workers tend to fare poorly whether or not they are operating under duress. An important variable is whether the worker operates independently or is governed by a manager in a club, brothel, agency, or on the street. As in other occupations, manager-worker relations vary tremendously, ranging from collaborative and mutually beneficial to abusive and exploitative—and the available international evidence is not sufficient to conclude that such relationships cluster at one or the other end of the continuum. In other words, the notion that most managers are despotic is not empirically substantiated. At the same time, independent workers by definition exercise control over their working conditions and tend to have higher job satisfaction and earnings than those who work for a manager. This is
why many who initially work for an escort agency or brothel eventually decide to freelance. The downside is that independents face greater risk of victimization by clients than workers who operate in the presence of a manager and/or coworkers.

Although in-depth case studies are certainly valuable, researchers have rarely compared multiple geographical settings or different kinds of actors in the same location—analyses that can pay huge dividends. A model example of comparative analysis is a San Francisco study of 140 male, female, and transgender prostitutes (Weinberg, Shaver, and Williams 1999). Both similarities and differences were found between the three groups in their income, work experiences, and job satisfaction.

For systematic, comparative analysis of multiple venues, there are two truly exceptional recent books. One is Mindy Bradley-Engen’s Naked Lives: Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance (2009)—a book based on three years of participant-observation as a dancer in an astounding 37 clubs, five years of observations at other clubs, and 50 in-depth interviews with other dancers. The multiple study sites and comparative framework allow Bradley-Engen to accomplish something unprecedented in the literature on strip clubs (almost all such studies are confined to examination of a single club, only a few of which are excellent). Bradley-Engen draws insightful generalizations from her extensive data and builds a typology of clubs, which range along a continuum from extremely harsh working conditions to those with a high level of worker agency and sociability. Hustle clubs are those where management puts a premium on workers’ hustling for money and offers them little support. Dancers develop a rather mercenary occupational identity, ferociously competing with each other for customers and “manipulating and swindling” money out of men (p. 39). They receive little protection from management in the event of customer abuse. Overall, the “management, language, formal policies, and informal rules create a social world in which dancers were devalued, sexually harassed, and exploited” (p. 34). At the other end of the spectrum is the show club—upscale, “classy” establishments that feature very attractive women who are required to take weekly dance and aerobics classes, wear expensive costumes, are taught to self-identify as “entertainers” rather than strippers, and engage in pageant-like, group performances as well as individual lap dances. Dancers do not hustle customers for money but instead elicit tips or lap dances by virtue of their seductive stage performances and pole work. The club atmosphere is theatrical and the women assume the persona of an aloof “goddess.”

Rules prohibiting aggressive conduct toward other dancers are strictly enforced by management, and the same is true for customer behavior. The third type is the social club, similar to a neighborhood bar with regular patrons, a low-pressure work style, camaraderie among dancers, amity with their customers, and fairly harmonious relations between management and dancers. Seasoned dancers mentor new arrivals and are actively invested in the very running of the business. The workers make less money than in the other clubs but their job satisfaction is much higher. Consistent with the polymorphous paradigm, Bradley-Engen’s book highlights the many socially significant differences in the way strip clubs are organized, differences that “create varying experiences of agency and constraint” for the dancers (p. 17) and range along a continuum from highly unpleasant and exploitative to fairly comfortable and empowering workplaces.

Another model of systematic comparison of multiple study sites is Ko-Lin Chin and James Finckenauer’s Selling Sex Overseas: Chinese Women and the Realities of Prostitution and Global Sex Trafficking (2012). The authors collected a huge amount of field data on the experiences of Chinese women who travel outside the country to work in sex markets elsewhere in Asia and beyond. The destinations included Bangkok, Singapore, Macau, Hong Kong, Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and two American cities (Los Angeles and New York). The authors interviewed 350 sex workers and their managers, state

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1 One outstanding and nuanced ethnography examines not only relations within a strip club but also the broader lives of its dancers—their economic circumstances and challenges faced as mothers and spouses (Dewey 2011).
officials, and representatives of NGOs, in addition to the authors’ observations in red-light districts and inside a few of the premises. The scope of this data collection is absolutely unprecedented in the literature, and clearly underscores the prismatic and differentiated nature of commercial sex enterprises and the actors involved in them.

Of special interest were workers’ experiences in both the migration process and at the destination, including an assessment of whether interviewees had experienced coercive or deceptive trafficking. All but 10 of the 159 migrant prostitutes interviewed had been assisted by an intermediary, and the majority of the latter were other prostitutes who had returned from abroad and then helped a novice obtain a visa, accompanied her in transit, or introduced her to a business owner at the destination. Such chain migration lends itself to building small networks of sex workers who can socialize and protect each other. A minority of women relied on other types of middlemen including boyfriends, male and female pimps, and business representatives. None of the sex workers reported that they had been coerced, only a small fraction felt unfairly treated by middlemen, and “conflicts between them and their facilitators were rare” (p. 243). The interviews uncovered just one incident of violence, by a Taiwanese agent who was in prison at the time of the interview. And few of the women had sex with any of their facilitators.

Almost all of the women displayed a strong sense of agency, seeking out migration opportunities for economic betterment and understanding the general nature of the work at the destination (if not the specifics). But they were not particularly fond of the work. They did not enjoy selling sex regardless of how long they had done so, but the income helped them cope, and 80 percent said they did not regret their decision to engage in prostitution. They frequently returned to China for short periods in order to relax and rejuvenate before embarking on their next trip overseas.

The venues varied as much as the different cities. Women sold sex in brothels, dance clubs, residential apartments, hostess bars, karaoke lounges, saunas, hotels, restaurants, massage parlors, and on the streets. Whether de jure legal or not, in every city studied “there was clearly a culture of tolerance for commercial sex,” although local norms dictated how overt or clandestine the activity needed to be (p. 116). Although the work sites varied, clients were mostly Chinese men living in each of the cities rather than other Asian or foreign men. Only 8 percent of the women interviewed reported that they had ever experienced violence from a customer. Condom use was routine, and the average number of clients per day varied by venue: from 1.75 (in karaoke clubs) to 6.60 (for escort agency employees). Many of the women complained that business was too slow, yet their earnings could be substantial in comparison to what they would earn in China.

Many were self-employed: “They do everything on their own: placing ads online or in newspapers, answering the phone and giving directions, soliciting business on the streets, in hotel lobbies, restaurants, or bars by themselves, and then providing sexual services” (p. 129). Others saw advantages in working for an established business, including less need to hustle for clients, the potential camaraderie with other workers at the site, and greater safety precautions.

The findings are presented both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the abundant interview data in the book offer a rich and fascinating picture of lived experiences—negative, positive, and neutral. Much has been written about sex trafficking, but almost all of it lacks a substantial evidence basis. Selling Sex Overseas is one of the few empirical studies of both breadth and depth to document migrants’ pathways, motives, and experiences in travelling to destinations with the help of intermediaries. The book, along with some less ambitious studies, suggests that much of the conventional wisdom (i.e., widespread victimization) about these actors needs to be amended.

**Bringing Customers Out of the Shadows**

Researchers have studied female sex workers to a far greater extent than their customers, but three major studies center on the latter. While Bradley-Engen’s book discusses strip club customers to some
extent, for a full exposé we need to turn to Katherine Frank’s book, *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire* (2002). Like Bradley-Engen, Frank’s conclusions are based on field research in several kinds of clubs, though little in the book draws specific comparisons among them. She was a dancer at five clubs in a large Southern city, clubs that ranged from the most prestigious upscale to middle tier to “dive bars.” Her participant-observation and conversations with male customers led to in-depth interviews with 30 of them outside the club. These were regular customers who had visited the club repeatedly, and Frank was especially interested in what motivated them to keep visiting the club.

They valued the clubs because they offered a fantasy space where they could escape their everyday lives in a haven that offered one of the few remaining opportunities for “men to be men” by enacting traditional gender roles as well as transgressing them. Strip clubs offer a “temporary respite from both changing definitions of masculinity and requests from women for either instrumental support or reciprocal emotional communication” (p. 97). The men liked the fact that they were being “pursued” by women in the clubs, who initiated encounters: “simply being in the presence of a beautiful woman who appears to be genuinely interested can boost a man’s ego and restore security in his masculinity” (p. 119). At the same time, these customers continually sought “what they described as authentic or ‘real’ encounters with the dancers” and dancers used “elaborate strategies of authenticating” their identities to convince men that they were indeed interested in them (p. 33). An intriguing finding is that customers experienced their visits to the clubs within “a framework of confusion and frustration rather than simply one of privilege or domination” (p. 96), confusion regarding modern gender norms and expectations and anxiety about aging and losing one’s attractiveness and virility. And many of the men felt guilty about visiting strip clubs—because of the stigma involved, because they knew their wife or girlfriend would disapprove, or because they felt that paying for sexual services diminished their masculinity. Frank concludes that, “Becoming and remaining a customer, then, is a complicated process that is rife with ambivalence” (p. 118)—a dynamic that is similarly apt for clients of other types of sex workers.

The regular customers Frank interviewed are a distinct subgroup. Their recurrent conversations with the same dancers gave many of them the impression that they could distinguish real from counterfeit intimacy. They did not believe that the exchange of money was necessarily a barrier to genuine sharing and an authentic connection with a dancer, and felt that they had indeed developed relationships that were not mere charades. And they cited specific cues to convince themselves that what they were experiencing was more than a fantasy—such as a dancer who gave the man her real name, details about her life, or other personal information about her true self. For these men, “Finding out things about a dancer, to a certain extent, made her seem more genuine and, in turn, made the entire encounter seem more real, as well as more individualized and special” (p. 192).

The book also describes larger interactional patterns in the clubs, between dancers and all customers, not just regulars. Some studies of strip clubs describe customers’ treatment of dancers as often obnoxious, demeaning, and physically intrusive, and documents the adverse effects of this cumulative treatment on dancers’ job satisfaction and perceptions of men. This was not evidenced in Frank’s five clubs, where a no-contact rule was enforced. In general, the men were “exceedingly polite, restrained, and respectful” (p. 151) even when intoxicated. In short, the amount of customer aggression and harassment toward dancers is a variable, not a constant—a finding confirmed in Bradley-Engen’s research on numerous clubs.

Pornography has become increasingly popular since the advent of the internet. According to the General Social Survey, one-quarter of Americans (34 percent of men, 16 percent of women) have seen an X-rated video in the past year. But little is known about these real-world consumers (as opposed to lab subjects)—remarkable in light of pornography opponents’ sweeping claims about pornography’s impact on
them (e.g., reinforcing misogyny or callousness toward women, enticing viewers to seek out increasingly extreme genres in order to maintain their interest, causing violence against women). Still, a handful of studies has shown that consumers decode and engage with erotic materials in a wide variety of ways. For some men, there is no question that exposure reinforces objectification or sexism toward women, while others interpret and experience it in the opposite way.

An entirely unique study is the book, *Watching Sex: How Men Really Respond to Pornography* (2002), by David Loftus. The author conducted in-depth interviews with 150 male pornography viewers accessed via the internet. The study’s findings may surprise some readers. First, these men saw porn as a fantasy world and clearly distinguished it from the real world. Second, they liked porn that portrayed female assertiveness and disliked depictions of domination or aggression against women on the rare occasions when they encountered such images. It is “important to male viewers that the women really do seem to be enjoying themselves, that they are utterly involved in the sex for their own pleasure too, and not just serving the interests of the male actors and onlookers” (p. 249). Third, rather than emulating the men in pornography, the men interviewed by Loftus “usually did not like the men they saw in porn” and saw them as “unsuitable models for behavior” (p. 61). And fourth, in stark contrast to the slippery-slope claim that viewers gravitate toward increasingly extreme material, most of these men “have not sought ever more vivid, kinky, and violent pornography, but have either stuck with what they liked from the first, investigated wilder content and returned to what they preferred, or lost interest altogether” (p. xii). Variation in tastes is abundantly illustrated in the book: some viewers prefer to see idealized bodies while others favor realistic ones; some like plots and the appearance of “chemistry” between the performers while others want unadulterated sex; some believe that women exercise power in the interaction while others take the opposite view. Although the findings are not based on a representative sample of consumers (perhaps difficult to construct), the book’s rich qualitative data offer numerous insights into how the men interviewed perceive and experience pornography as well as their tastes, thereby shattering numerous stereotypes.

The findings are consistent with the only other major study of consumers. McKee, Albury, and Lumby (2008) surveyed 1,023 male and female pornography consumers in Australia and conducted 46 in-depth interviews with a subsample of them; subjects were accessed online and by posting the survey in an erotic magazine. Like Loftus, McKee et al. found variation in tastes, but a substantial number of respondents preferred realistic bodies, activities, and genuine enjoyment as well as good production values. Over half of the respondents were currently in monogamous relationships, 46 percent had watched porn with their partner, and 58 percent described themselves as religious. The sample generally mirrored the Australian population, except that it was disproportionately male, reflecting the fact that men are more likely to view porn than women.

Turning to the clients of prostitutes, 15–18 percent of American men report that they have ever paid for sex, according to a dozen GSS polls over the past two decades (with 2–4 percent saying that they have done so in the past year). Similar figures are reported in Australia and parts of Europe. Until recently, very little was known about these men and their interactions with prostitutes. We know now that they differ little from the wider male population demographically and that their motives and experiences are more complicated than suggested by the conventional wisdom. Some are looking for nothing more than immediate sexual pleasure or an experience that bolsters their sense of masculinity, but many others seek emotional satisfaction as well. For those who become regular clients of a particular provider, the experience may come to resemble a quasi-romantic paid relationship more than paid sex. Sex remains part of the service but it is coupled with mutual sharing, support, and companionship. Like any other commercial leisure activity, intimacy is now available for a price.

This is where Teela Sanders’ *Paying for Pleasure: Men Who Buy Sex* (2008) comes in.
Based on 134 emailed biographies and other correspondence, and in-depth interviews with 50 customers in Britain, Sanders sheds light on what has come to be known as the “girlfriend experience.” Many clients of indoor prostitutes desire expressions of emotion from their providers, and the latter have become increasingly sensitive to making this part of the experience (Bernstein 2007). In fact, the value of the physical experience is often contingent on the perceived emotional chemistry between the parties—intangible benefits that mirror nonpaid romantic relationships except that the amity and intimacy are paid for. Sanders’ clients were adamant in their desire for conversation, cuddling, kissing, and being emotionally attended to, and they spent time on the internet searching for a provider who met these requirements. As one of the interviewees stated, “I don’t want to go and be sexually processed, for me it’s like dating” (p. 95). Some clients put a premium on “sexual stability that led to intimacy” rather than successive superficial encounters (p. 97).

Men who develop a bond with a particular sex provider thus depart from the conventional view that clients commodify and objectify them. The men in Sanders’ book did not view the providers “simply as bodies” or as “targets of sexual conquest” but were “respectful of sex workers as women and as workers” (pp. 98, 60). They desired “rapport,” “chemistry,” and having a “connection” with someone, and were also interested in giving satisfaction to the woman, sexual and emotional. Some clients become so attached to a particular sex worker that they have trouble grappling with their feelings and remaining cognizant that the relationship is first and foremost remunerative. And, unlike some caricatures of clients, Sanders found that “clients are usually not interested in bizarre sexual acts, do not act violently, and generally stick to the conditions of the commercial contract” (p. 112). Of course, there are customers who mistreat sex workers, but other studies confirm that this is not the norm among patrons of indoor prostitutes in Britain and the United States. It is also important to note that some men, especially those who patronize street sellers, are not interested in any kind of emotional “connection” with the provider and are looking for variety and novelty rather than an ongoing relationship. But, as Sanders’ book and some recent content analyses of client chat rooms demonstrate, many men desire and are willing to pay for nonsexual intimacy and companionship as well as sex.

This pattern is mirrored in two other arenas: men and women who buy sex from men. A small but growing literature on male and female tourists suggests that some of them are looking for the same kinds of “romantic” connection with a local entrepreneur. The Caribbean appears to be one hot spot for these kinds of liaisons; both male and female tourists become involved in paid relationships that can become protracted love affairs, albeit materially based (Herold, Garcia, and DeMoya 2001; Mitchell 2011; Sanchez Taylor 2006). Whether the client is male or female, these male sex workers are often expected to engage in the same kinds of emotional labor as is true for many female sex workers.

Legal Prostitution Regimes

Scholars have rarely studied legal prostitution systems, but four recent books show how different regimes operate and how they differ from contexts where prostitution is illegal and operates underground. Legal and state-regulated in 13 of Mexico’s 31 states, this type of commerce is the focus of Patty Kelly’s Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel (2008)—a participant-observation study exploring the Zona Galactica in the state of Chiapas. The Zone was created in 1991 in an effort to move the sex trade outside a particular city (Tuxtla) and to better control it. The Zone contains 180 rooms owned by different landlords who collect rent but otherwise have little involvement. Legal and state-regulated in 13 of Mexico’s 31 states, this type of commerce is the focus of Patty Kelly’s Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel (2008)—a participant-observation study exploring the Zona Galactica in the state of Chiapas. The Zone was created in 1991 in an effort to move the sex trade outside a particular city (Tuxtla) and to better control it. The Zone contains 180 rooms owned by different landlords who collect rent but otherwise have little involvement. In addition to the brothel, the Zone hosts a clinic, school, and jail staffed by police officers. Clients like the Zone because they do not risk being robbed or assaulted and can avoid being observed and stigmatized by people they know in Tuxtla.

Some of the Zone’s regulations may be viewed as burdensome: the mandatory health card that includes the worker’s name, photo, and health status (they are regularly tested for STDs). Yet, Kelly shows that
the Zone’s form of legal prostitution has a number of advantages over criminalization: sex workers alone determine their working hours, their prices, and which clients they will serve; they come and go as they please; and they take extended leaves to visit family members. Only a dozen of the 140 women had pimps; the remainder worked independently. On a good day they can earn ten times the daily minimum wage in Chiapas. The women are able to buy consumer goods that they otherwise could not afford, such as nice clothes, jewelry, cell phones, and gifts for their children. Despite the Zone’s tight regulations and other irritants, working in the Zone tends to bolster their self-esteem, confidence, and sense of empowerment: the women have a “great deal of freedom and exercise control over their work” (p. 79).

New Zealand decriminalized all types of adult prostitution in 2003, by a one-vote margin in parliament. The sex workers’ rights movement played a key part in the debate over decriminalization and now enjoys three seats on a government oversight agency—the eleven-member Prostitution Law Review Committee. This active involvement in policy making and review of the law explains why many analysts consider New Zealand to be the best international example of legal prostitution.

How has the new regime fared since 2003? An extremely comprehensive book offers many answers: Taking the Crime out of Sex Work (2010), edited by Gillian Abel, Lisa Fitzgerald, and Catherine Healy. The contributors trace the background to the 2003 law and the lobbying that surrounded it, its impact on brothel owners and other legal managers, media reporting on law-related outcomes, the ways in which local authorities regulate and monitor the trade, and the consequences for workers’ health and welfare, empowerment, stigma-reduction, and risk of victimization. Among the key findings: The number of sex workers has remained fairly constant since legalization. Most (90 percent) sex workers surveyed are aware that they now have legal and employment rights under the law; two-thirds feel that the law gives them more leverage vis-à-vis clients; a majority (57 percent) feel that police attitudes have changed for the better since passage of the law; and most of the managed and private indoor workers have “never experienced violence” at work, though street workers remain at greater risk (p. 223). Employment conditions have remained somewhat inadequate, however, and although the general public “has accepted decriminalization” as a policy (p. 263), stigmatization of sex workers persists—not surprising over such a short span of time. Overall, the book shows that legalization has achieved many of its objectives and that the majority of those involved in the sex industry are better off now than under the preceding system of criminalization.

Prostitution is legal in one U.S. state. A 1971 Nevada state law allowed rural counties to license and regulate brothels. Street or escort prostitution remains prohibited in these rural areas and all prostitution is outlawed in the counties hosting Las Vegas and Reno. The number of legal brothels has remained remarkably stable over time (between 28 and 36). Brothel owners are thoroughly screened by county or town officials; sex workers must be at least 21 years old; condom use is mandatory and workers undergo weekly testing for STD’s. Local governments impose regulations governing the location of brothels, licensing, and additional restrictions on the workers, while each brothel stipulates its own conduct norms as well. Overall, the package of state, county, and brothel rules make for a much tighter regulatory regime than what exists in most other legal prostitution systems.

Even though this system has existed for more than four decades, no comprehensive research was conducted until the 2010 publication of The State of Sex: Tourism, Sex, and Sin in the New American Heartland, by Barbara Brents, Crystal Jackson, and Kathryn Hausbeck. The authors spent a decade conducting interviews and observations in many of the state’s legal brothels, resulting in a cutting-edge, in-depth examination of this system. Readers may wonder why Nevada and not other states opted for legalization, and the authors argue that much of the explanation has to do with the state’s historical culture (an Old West, free-wheeling place) and a mining industry where men greatly outnumbered women in rural areas.
Brothels existed throughout the nineteenth century and the 1971 law simply institutionalized what was technically illegal until then.

Nevada’s legal brothels employ a number of safety precautions (alarm buttons, listening devices, management surveillance) that preempt altercations. None of the women interviewed had ever felt the need to press an alarm button and none had experienced violence from a customer. Indeed, women who had previously worked in illegal prostitution “said that safety was one of the main reasons they came to the brothels” (p. 131). In addition to reducing the chances of assault, the rules governing these brothels serve to deter other problems that are often associated with prostitution: drug use, disease, exploitation, and involvement of minors.

The women interviewed exhibited a strong sense of agency and normalized their work, comparing it favorably to other kinds of service work. Similarly, brothel owners presented themselves as ordinary entrepreneurs, and many of them sought to shore up support among the local population by sponsoring events and donating to worthy causes. Polls show the state’s legal brothels face little opposition in the rural towns, largely because they benefit from the tax revenue gleaned from the businesses.

The fourth book in this genre is my own: Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business (2012). Whereas the other three books illuminate a single case, mine has a broader, comparative scope—focusing on three European nations and a major city within each (Amsterdam, Antwerp, and Frankfurt). After documenting national-level structures and trends, the analysis explores each city in depth. Data were derived from government documents, newspaper reports, public opinion polls, interviews with key informants in the government, NGOs, and the sex industry, systematic observations of red-light districts in each city, a review of discussions of each setting in online chat rooms, and secondary studies.

Each city’s red-light districts differ in physical landscape and social ecology, in the types of businesses adjacent to sex venues, in the kinds of individuals who frequent the area, and in social control patterns. This ecology and atmosphere is captured in detailed descriptions and in photos in the book. The three cases also vary in the kinds of regulations imposed on legal actors—e.g., eligibility requirements, health and safety standards, screening and licensing of business owners—and the role of state agencies in monitoring compliance with the law. In terms of government oversight, public order, worker safety, and physical appearance, Antwerp ranks highest and Frankfurt lowest, with Amsterdam intermediate. In the aftermath of legalization, which took place fairly recently in each case, the cities have grappled with some similar and distinctive challenges as well as some unanticipated outcomes—all of which are examined in the book.

Legalizing Prostitution is unique in analyzing national-level structures and political struggles, arrangements and changes at the city level, and micro-level dynamics in urban red-light districts. I argue that “there is nothing inherent in prostitution that prevents it from being structured like other service occupations, aside from the stigma associated with it…. A yoke of disreputability hangs over commercial sex that, if lifted, would allow existing legal prostitution systems to operate more openly and less controversially” (p. 205). A resolution passed by the National Organization for Women in 1973 declared that the organization “opposes continued prohibitive laws regarding prostitution, believing them to be punitive” and “therefore favors removal of all laws relating to the act of prostitution.”

But this is just the first step. The central finding of the book is that legal prostitution can be superior to blanket criminalization, but that this depends on the specific kinds of formal regulations, rights, and protections that are enshrined in the law and, importantly, the degree to which they are enforced. The book concludes with a presentation of about 30 “best practices” that are distilled from my data as well as the few other studies of legal prostitution systems. I attempt to identify conditions that help to improve working conditions and public order as well as those that have adverse outcomes for sex workers, local residents, and/or the authorities responsible for managing the commercial sex sector. The findings
therefore have clear policy implications for both existing systems (that are deficient and need reform) and for societies that may decide to decriminalize prostitution in the future—following Erik Olin Wright’s (2011) insights for transforming existing institutions into viable, emancipatory alternatives built on the premise of harm reduction. As another analyst has argued, “It is imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control” (Overall 1992:716). The four books discussed in this section of the essay help to identify the ways in which these outcomes can be furthered as well as the kinds of policies and practices that should be avoided.

Conclusion
The books examined in this essay document the complexity and diversity of sex work in a variety of contexts. The empirical findings greatly broaden our understanding of the world of sex work and challenge both social scientists and policy makers to critically examine taken-for-granted assumptions regarding prostitution, pornography, strip clubs, and other types of sexual commerce. While certain experiences seem to be generic to sex work (avoiding risks, managing clients or coworkers, coping with stigma), these books, coupled with a growing body of other studies, indicate that other work-related experiences vary tremendously from place to place.

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