

The Mythology of Prostitution: Advocacy Research and Public Policy

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Abstract Over the past decade, public policies on prostitution and other types of sex work have been increasingly contested, both in academia and in popular debates. One perspective, the oppression paradigm, is increasingly reflected in media reporting on the sex industry and is steadily being articulated by government officials in the USA, Europe, and elsewhere. The proliferation of myths based on the oppression paradigm is responsible for the rise of a resurgent mythology of prostitution. This article examines the claims made by organizations, activists, and scholars who embrace the oppression paradigm, evaluates the reasoning and evidence used in support of their claims, and highlights some of the ways in which this perspective has influenced recent legislation and public policy in selected nations. The author presents an alternative perspective, the polymorphous paradigm, and suggests that public policy on prostitution would be better informed by this evidence-based perspective.

Keywords Sex industry · Sex work · Sexuality policy · Prostitution myths · Legalization

Knowledge regarding sex work is increasingly being distorted by a group of influential activists, organizations, and some academics who regard the sex industry as a universally harmful institution. The ultimate objective of

these individuals (whom I refer to here as *prohibitionists*)¹ is to abolish the entire sex industry—namely prostitution, pornography, strip clubs, and other commercial sex. Their campaign has had two major outcomes: Firstly, it has resulted in the ascendancy of what I call the *oppression paradigm*, which in turn is contributing to a newly resurgent mythology of prostitution. Secondly, this mythology has important real-world consequences: Public policies increasingly are based on the contentions of prohibitionist activists and scholars. This article critically evaluates the main claims of this body of work and then documents their growing incorporation into government policies.

Prescientific Reasoning

Renowned philosopher of science Karl Popper (1959) has described *prescientific reasoning* as conclusions formed in the absence of evidence or lacking in the critical ingredient of falsifiability. Prescientific claims are especially apparent among ideologues and political actors, whose passionate commitment to a cause can undermine their objectivity, but prescientific reasoning also has been documented in some empirical research in various areas of knowledge production (Best 1999; Buchanan et al. 2003; di Mauro and Joffe 2007; Epstein 2006). Such so-called knowledge can have profound policy implications.

The prohibitionist stance toward sex work is based on a perspective that regards paid sexual services and performances as inherently oppressive and exploitative.

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¹ Prohibitionists also are sometimes referred to as abolitionists or radical feminists.

Research deriving from this central, ontological pillar typically contains one or more prescientific dimensions. The net effect of this body of writing is twofold: a serious distortion of the reality of prostitution and resultant public policies that are not evidence based. This article focuses on prostitution, but my critique can also be applied to prohibitionist writings on other sectors of the sex industry (e.g., stripping, pornography) because they are construed in an identical way.

Claims Advanced by Fiat

Prohibitionist writers adopt what I call the oppression paradigm, which depicts prostitution as the epitome of male domination and exploitation of women regardless of historical period, societal context, or type of prostitution (Weitzer 2009b). The boldest claims are articles of faith. A good scientific theory is one whose propositions can be verified and falsified through empirical testing; however, only some tenets of the oppression paradigm are amenable to verification (discussed subsequently). Oppression theorists present their central claims by fiat—as self-evident, absolute principles. Farley (one of the leading advocates of the oppression paradigm) and coauthors (1998) have described the oppression paradigm as a “political perspective” (p. 406), an approach that may be contrasted with a scientific one.

The oppression paradigm defines prostitution in a one-dimensional manner—as inherently exploitative and harmful to workers. Prostitution is “a particularly vicious institution of inequality of the sexes” (Farley 2004, p.1117) and “an institution that doles out death and disease” (Raymond 2004, p. 1182) to women. Oppression theorists insist that prostitution is by definition a form of violence against women, irrespective of whether outright physical violence is involved: “Prostitution must be exposed for what it really is: a particularly lethal form of male violence against women” (Farley and Kelly 2000, p. 54). The distinction between coerced and voluntary prostitution is regarded as a fallacy—according to prohibitionists, some type of coercion and domination is always involved: “Pimps bait us with the myth that there is a vast gulf between what they call ‘freely chosen’ prostitution and physically coerced” prostitution (Farley 2007, p. 97). In contrast to the prostitution-as-violence notion, an alternative, evidence-based perspective would characterize victimization differently—that is, as a factor that varies across time, place, and echelon. Violence is by no means endemic throughout the sex trade (see Shaver 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Weitzer 2009b).

The oppression paradigm is increasingly articulated in public debates about prostitution policy and has been

championed by some influential academics who are also active antiprostitution campaigners (e.g., Donna Hughes, Sheila Jeffreys, Catherine MacKinnon, Jody Raphael, Janice Raymond). Many prominent advocacy groups throughout the world also embrace this paradigm. The following statements from some of these organizations illustrate the ways in which prostitution is constructed in the oppression paradigm:

- The Poppy Project's (2008) report on indoor prostitution in London states: “On a fundamental level, prostitution is an absolute expression of men’s power against women’s subordination and lack of choices. Paying for prostitution services enables men to assert power and control over women in a way which would be deemed unacceptable in any other sphere” (p. 8).
- Scotland's Women's Support Project (2003) has proclaimed, “We believe that prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation are part of the spectrum of men’s violence against women and children” (§ 1). It is thus no surprise that the project's recent report on clients of prostitutes (MacLeod et al. 2008) states, “Once viewed as a form of violence against women stemming from sex inequality, prostitution is best understood as a transaction in which there are two roles: exploiter/predator and victim/prey” (p. 30).
- One of the most prominent prohibitionist organizations is Prostitution Research and Education (PRE), whose central goal is “to abolish the institution of prostitution” (Prostitution Research & Education 1998–2008, ¶ 1). PRE director Melissa Farley has stated, “Prostitution not only harms the women in it, it also promotes sexist attitudes and sexually aggressive male behavior toward all women in the community....Assuming the right to treat women as prostitutes means that they are treated as if they are not human, thus harming both prostitute and nonprostitute women” (Farley 2007, p. 181). This organization has been extremely successful in propagating the oppression paradigm in the mass media and in gaining acceptance for this perspective in official government circles in the USA and elsewhere.
- The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW 2009) declares on its website: “All prostitution exploits women, regardless of women's consent. Prostitution affects all women, justifies the sale of any woman, and reduces all women to sex” (Philosophy, ¶ 3). CATW has branches throughout the world and claims that it “has changed the terms of the debate over prostitution and trafficking in many regions of the globe and at the United Nations level” (History, ¶ 1). CATW was founded by Janice Raymond.
- The Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (2009) states on its website (<http://www.caase.org>) that

the organization “is committed to building a global community free from sexual exploitation. We know that...the commercial sex trade [is] detrimental to a healthy society and undermine[s] the dignity of all people.” In association with Melissa Farley, the organization sponsored a recent study of customers in Chicago (Durchslag and Goswami 2008).

The way something it is defined can make a huge difference in how it is perceived. In the oppression paradigm, prostitution is conflated with other practices that are widely condemned: domestic violence, rape, sexual slavery, and commercial sexual exploitation. According to this view, customers buy women² rather than use sexual services, and are labeled prostitute users and sexual predators. Prohibitionists impose such labels by fiat:

- “When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body” (Dworkin 1997, p. 145).
- “Prostitution is better understood as domestic violence than as a job” (Farley 2008, p. 16).
- “Prostitution is rape that’s paid for” (Raymond 1995).
- “These men must be viewed as batterers rather than customers” (Raphael and Shapiro 2004, p. 137).
- “Men who purchase sex acts do not respect women, nor do they want to respect women” (Hughes 2005, p. 7).
- “These [clients] are not just naughty boys who need their wrists slapped. They could be more accurately described as predators” (Melissa Farley, as quoted in Brown 2008). Farley (2004) has stated elsewhere that “johns are regularly murderous toward women” (p. 1102).³
- “The difference between pimps who terrorize women on the street and pimps in business suits who terrorize women in gentlemen’s clubs is a difference in class only, not a difference in woman hating” (Farley 2004, p. 1101).
- According to Macleod et al. (2008), customers should be branded as sex offenders and listed on a sex offender registry: “This naming is important since it places men who buy sex in the same category as rapists, pedophiles and other social undesirables” (p. 27).

As they have done for customers of sex workers, prohibitionists have also applied dramatic labels to the workers themselves. Antiprostitution agencies, activists, and scholars have argued that prostitutes should be called prostituted women, victims, or survivors. These labels clearly indicate that “prostitution is something that is done to women”

² One could argue that the term *buy women* objectifies women who work in prostitution by treating them as commodities rather than as people supplying a sexual service.

³ In addition to the lack of documentation for this statement, it is problematic because the terms *regularly* and *murderous* (which sounds like an innate tendency) are opaque.

(Raymond 2004, p. 1183), not a voluntary practice. Jeffreys (1997) has written, “Antiprostitution campaigners use the term *prostituted women* instead of *prostitutes*. This is a deliberate political decision and is meant to symbolize the lack of choice women have over being used in prostitution” (p. 330). In the oppression paradigm, individual agency is deemed impossible. The logic for this argument is sometimes stated in a dubious manner: “To the extent that any woman is assumed to have freely chosen prostitution, then it follows that enjoyment of domination and rape are in her nature” (Farley and Kelly 2000, p. 54).

Sensationalism is abundant in this body of literature. Anecdotal horror stories are a staple of these writings, and clearly are designed to arouse readers’ indignation. Reports, websites, and journal articles in the prohibitionist vein feature quotes from women who have had horrible experiences, which are presented as typical. Moreover, the authors themselves frequently write in an alarming manner. For instance, Farley (2006) has written, “When women are turned into objects that men masturbate into, profound psychological harm results for the person who is acting as receptacle” (p. 107). With this kind of language, Farley herself appears to objectify the women.⁴ Another example of such sensationalism is Farley’s declaration that “prostitution, pornography, and trafficking meet or exceed legal definitions of torture” (p. 114). The tone of such writings is a radical departure from that of conventional scholarly writings.

Labeling prostitution as paid rape, workers as prostituted women or survivors, and customers as predators and sex offenders has shock value. The oppression paradigm superimposes these emotionally laden constructs on the actors in a universalistic manner. Such categorical terminology obscures the empirically documented relationships between workers and customers, which are complex and varied. Moreover, many customers and workers themselves reject these derogatory labels. In a study of 294 street prostitutes in Miami, for instance, almost all of them “prefer the terms *sex worker* and *working woman* and refer to themselves as such” (Kurtz et al. 2004, p. 359). Others call themselves escorts or providers. In contrast to the demonization of clients prevalent in oppression literature, a unique comparative study (Monto and McRee 2005) found few differences between prostitutes’ customers and a nationally representative sample of American men.

Besides grand ontological characterizations, the mythology of prostitution also features a set of specific claims regarding the sex trade: that the vast majority of prostitutes enter the trade when they are 13 to 14 years old, were physically or sexually abused as children, were tricked or forced into the trade by pimps or traffickers, use or are addicted to drugs, and

⁴ Similarly objectifying is Farley’s (2006) blanket assertion, “Her self and those qualities that define her as an individual are removed in prostitution and she acts the part of the thing he wants her to be” (p. 122).

desperately want to exit the sex trade. When generalized to sex workers, these claims are fallacies; they apply best to one sector within the street population (those engaged in *survival sex*), less to other street workers, and even less to indoor sex workers (Weitzer 2009b).⁵

Young age of entry, for example, was identified as an age-old myth by Winick and Kinsie (1971) in their classic book on prostitution. Contemporary studies have reported varying percentages of individuals who started selling sex when they were minors. These studies (e.g., Hester and Westmarland 2004) have documented that only a minority began to prostitute before age 18 and an even smaller percentage before 14. Workers' desire to leave the sex trade is by no means as universal as the prohibitionists have claimed. A study of Thai sex workers, for example (Steinfatt 2002), found that only 15% wanted to quit selling sex, whereas the remainder wanted to keep working in the sex trade, and 69% said they thought sex work was a good job. Other evidence challenging the aforementioned myths can be found in major literature reviews (Shaver 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Weitzer 2009b).

Claims Based on Flawed Research

Some oppression writers have conducted advocacy research in order to further their policy objectives. Their studies often take the form of nonpeer-reviewed reports for sponsoring organizations, many of which adopt the oppression paradigm,⁶ but others have published articles in academic journals, notably *Violence Against Women* and some law reviews (the latter typically lack peer review).⁷ For example, Raymond edited a special issue of *Violence Against Women* in October 2004, titling the collection “The Case Against the Legalization of Prostitution.” These writings can be faulted on several grounds, which I discuss subsequently.

⁵ Indoor sex workers are those who do any type of sex work behind closed doors, rather than on the street.

⁶ These include the two most prominent organizations—the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (headed by Janice Raymond) and Prostitution Research and Education (headed by Melissa Farley)—as well as lesser-known groups such as the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and Standing Against Global Exploitation. For a study of the ideology of one prohibitionist organization (Council on Prostitution Alternatives in Portland, Oregon), see Davis (2000).

⁷ One example is Yen's (2008) law review article on the customers of prostitutes, which is filled with unsubstantiated claims and relies almost exclusively on the prohibitionist literature. Yen has conflated prostitution and sex trafficking, has referred to the “ugly truth of the commercial sex industry” (p. 676), has written that prostitution is the “oppression of women” (p. 678), and has described nations where prostitution is legal as having “legitimized the oppression of women” (p. 680).

Sweeping Generalizations

The writings of those who adopt the oppression paradigm are striking not only for their grand a priori assumptions and articles of faith (described previously) but also for the generalizations they draw from their empirical studies. In a book on prostitution in Norway (Hoigard and Finstad 1992), for example, the authors wrote that prostitution is an “abomination” (p. 76) and a “brutal oppression” (p. 183)—despite the fact that the authors' empirical findings do not support such grand indictments.

Writers who adopt the oppression paradigm tend to select or accent the most disturbing instances of abuse and present them as representative and indicative of intrinsic problems. Gayle Rubin (1984) has criticized an earlier generation of prohibitionist writing for selecting the “worst available examples” (p. 301) in the sex trade and casting them as the norm. The generalizations are often demonstrably false, empirically dubious, or unsubstantiated (i.e., the evidence is inconclusive). Overarching terms and phrases, such as *prostitution is linked to, prostitution causes, women told us, johns say, or prostitution damages*, are standard fare. Such deterministic constructions should give pause to social scientists, who use probabilistic language to describe research findings—for example, such phrases as *increases the likelihood of, heightens the probability of, or is more likely than*.

Prohibitionist writers consistently generalize about prostitution, claiming that there is no difference between different sectors of sex work.⁸ Other analysts (Vanwesenbeeck 2001) have criticized these writers' “failure to adequately differentiate between sex workers” (p. 279). Instead of grouping all workers into an undifferentiated prostitution category, the evidence points to significant differences among those who sell sex. Plumridge and Abel (2001) have called prostitution a “segmented market,” and Harcourt and Donovan (2005) have described what they call “the many faces of sex work.” In fact, “empirical analyses demonstrate a remarkable diversity of activities that fall under the term *prostitution* and a remarkable diversity of experiences among participants” (Monto 2004, p. 164).

Victimization is one area in which unwarranted generalizations are frequently made. Oppression writers often claim that extremely high percentages (80–100%) of

⁸ For example, according to Farley (2004), violence is “the norm for women in all types of prostitution” (p. 1,094). A Chicago study (Raphael and Shapiro, 2004) has claimed that “violence was prevalent across both outdoor and indoor prostitution venues” (p. 133)—yet the authors collapsed figures on victimization at work and outside of work (by their domestic partners and others), thus artificially inflating victimization rates at work and allowing the authors to falsely claim that violence was prevalent in indoor prostitution venues. A high percentage of the violence was meted out by domestic partners.

prostitutes are assaulted, robbed, raped, and otherwise victimized (Farley et al. 2003; Raphael and Shapiro 2004). These victimization figures are typically much higher than those reported by mainstream researchers (e.g., Church et al. 2001; Kurtz et al. 2004; Lowman and Fraser 1995; Perkins and Lovejoy 2007; Prostitution Law Review Committee 2008; Seib et al. 2009; Whittaker and Hart 1996).

In fact, it is impossible to definitively document the frequency or seriousness of victimization in such hidden populations. Random sampling of sex workers is impossible because a full listing of workers (in any jurisdiction) is not available, and there is no way of knowing the parameters of either the prostitute or customer population. Coupled with this difficulty is the problem of gaining access to and cooperation from those involved in sexual commerce. All reported victimization rates are vulnerable to selection bias: The most desperate segment of the prostitute population or those who are most frequently or seriously victimized may be especially likely to contact service providers or agree to interviews. Generalizing from prostitutes in custody to the population of prostitutes in general is inherently flawed, just as is drawing general conclusions from other types of incarcerated offenders.

Absent a random sample, the best that can be hoped for is a strategy of interviewing people in various geographical locations and in different types of prostitution, in a rigorous and impartial manner. Researchers must strive to create samples that draw from multiple locations and types of workers and that are not skewed toward any particular subgroup. This procedure is known as purposive sampling. Well-constructed comparative studies (e.g., Lever and Dolnick 2010; Lowman and Fraser 1995; PLRC 2008; Seib et al. 2009; Shaver 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Weitzer 2009b) have tended to find significant, and sometimes huge, differences between street and indoor prostitutes in occupational practices, job satisfaction, self-esteem, physical and psychological health, and several types of victimization. As Cusick (2006) has concluded, “When sex markets are directly compared, the harms introduced by sex work are overwhelmingly concentrated in street sex markets” (p. 4). Many indoor sex workers report little or no victimization (Lucas 2005; Perkins and Lovejoy 2007; Sanders and Campbell 2007; Whittaker and Hart 1996).

Given the impossibility of random sampling, it is imperative that researchers qualify their conclusions properly and avoid drawing generalizations about prostitution: Workers vary tremendously, and prostitution takes rather different forms. Conclusions should be limited to the discrete sample studied, which may or may not reflect the larger population from which the sample is drawn. Prohibitionist writers, however, often fail to mention the

sampling limitations of their studies and frequently generalize from small convenience samples. Their conclusions typically go well beyond their data.

Writers who adopt the oppression paradigm also tend to distort or selectively present their own findings. The following example is illustrative of a problem that pervades the oppression literature: The Poppy Project's (2008) report on indoor prostitution in London, *Big Brothel*, contains a page of sound-bite headlines, such as the following:

- “Full sex available for fifteen quid [£].”
- “Kissing, oral, or anal sex without a condom for an extra tenner [£10].”

Elsewhere, the Poppy Project's report refers to “the ubiquity of dangerous and discounted services” (p. 29). Yet, only one of the 921 brothels offered full sex for £15, and only 19 brothels offered “full sex or anal sex” without a condom (Poppy Project, pp. 33, 34), and although the authors claimed to have identified 921 brothels in the Greater London area, the average number of workers per brothel was two, indicating that many of these supposed brothels were actually single providers working in private premises rather than brothels (Poppy Project, p. 5). Distortion is also illustrated in the claim that brothels have invaded otherwise tranquil areas: “85 percent of London's brothels operate in residential areas” (Poppy Project, p. 4), and a September 4, 2008 press release⁹ by the Poppy Project declared, “It has been said that we are never more than six feet away from a rat in London. Apparently, something similar applies to brothels...This research shows the disturbing prevalence of the sex industry in every corner of London.” In these and other ways, findings are skewed for dramatic effect. Ubiquitous so-called brothels in residential areas may be more disturbing to the public than independent operators.

The report received sensationalized publicity in the British media, with such headlines as “Brothel industry is ‘spreading’” (BBC World News 2008) and “Sex can be bought for just £15, new survey reveals” (*Daily Mail* 2008). The report was criticized by 27 university researchers, including the present author, whose critique was reported in the press (Lipsett 2008).

Opaque and Biased Data Collection

Some studies are remarkably frank about their biases. A Chicago study (Raphael and Shapiro 2004) began from the premise that prostitution is harmful: “This research project was designed within a framework of prostitution as a form of violence against women and not prostitution as a legitimate industry” (p. 132). The 12 interviewees were former

⁹ Hard copy in possession of the author.

prostitutes who shared that view: They were “survivors of prostitution who did not see their own [prior prostitution] experiences as ‘work’ or a choice” (Raphael and Shapiro 2002, p. 9; 2004, p. 129), and the authors acknowledged the “bias of the surveyors” (Raphael and Shapiro 2002, p. 33). If the interviewers were biased, it appears that the respondents were far from representative. The authors gave little indication of how the respondents were located, except to say that they were already known to the interviewers: They were “women with whom they worked while previously in prostitution, and women referred by those interviewed” (Raphael and Shapiro 2004, p. 132).

The authors acknowledged that, because of these procedures, “it is likely that this sample is more representative of women who do want to leave prostitution” (Raphael and Shapiro 2004, p. 132). Furthermore, “The survey questions and administration were likely biased to some degree by working within this [oppression] framework and by employing surveyors who had left prostitution” (Raphael and Shapiro, p. 132) and who interviewed prior associates who may have been like minded. This study is a good example of a prescientific research design. As Vanwesenbeeck (2001) has pointed out:

When researchers have difficulty understanding rational, not to mention positive, reasons for choosing sex work and find it easier to think of prostitutes as victims, it is understandable that the sex workers [interviewed] will stress their victim status and negative motivations for working. (p. 259)

Biased procedures yield warped conclusions.

Data collection procedures in studies based on the oppression paradigm are often either invisible or problematic. Common problems include a failure to provide sufficient detail about the sampling methods or to disclose the questions asked of respondents. As anyone involved in survey research knows, question-wording can make a huge difference in the responses obtained, and standard practice is to provide the reader with the most important items verbatim, especially on sensitive topics. This procedure is seldom used in prohibitionist-driven research. For example, Farley (2008), who has authored several studies based on her surveys, has stated that “only qualified individuals” (p. 48) would be allowed to see the questions, and they would have to contact her directly. This baffling statement might be interpreted as an attempt to resist full disclosure of research procedures, violating the scientific canon of transparency.

Some of these studies rely on deception of the subjects and thus raise ethical questions. In the Poppy Project's (2008) examination of brothels in London, male researchers made cold calls to phone numbers listed in newspaper advertisements and asked a series of questions of the person

who answered the phone, usually a receptionist. The men posed as prospective customers inquiring about the age, ethnicity, and number of workers employed, sexual services and fees, condom policy, and so forth.

This procedure is fraught with problems, for two reasons: Firstly, because the callers did not make an effort to build rapport with the receptionists (something that takes time and arguably depends on face-to-face conversation), it is likely that at least some of the receptionists became suspicious of the caller. Secondly, because receptionists had an interest in enticing the caller to visit the establishment, they may have told the men what they wanted to hear, including citing services that were not available, to get them in the door. The Poppy Project's (2008) report revealed, “In some cases, potential participants were unwilling to disclose information, through lack of inclination, lack of time, or suspicion” (p. 15). Yet, the report does not disclose how often this scenario occurred, and it treats the information gathered as factual.

Sampling procedures are sometimes entirely invisible. For example, Farley et al. (1998) interviewed workers in some unusual situations: In Turkey, they interviewed women whom police brought to a hospital for the purpose of venereal disease checks; in Thailand, respondents were interviewed on the street, in a beauty parlor, and in an organization offering support services; in Zambia, the researchers interviewed women at an organization that offers support services to prostitutes; in South Africa, people were interviewed on the street, in brothels, and at a drop-in center. The authors provided no information about how these locations were selected, nor did they comment on the distortion that may result from such convenience sampling. People contacted at service-providing agencies, as well as those who have been apprehended by the police, are likely to be unrepresentative of the larger population of sex workers.

A major deficiency in most studies of prostitution, including those by oppression theorists, is the absence of a control group. Samples of prostitutes are not compared with carefully matched samples of nonprostitutes, and samples of customers are not compared with men who have not paid for sex. Hence, it is impossible to tell whether the views and experiences of those sampled differ significantly from those of individuals not involved in the sex trade. The writers typically attribute their results to the effects of prostitution, with no consideration of whether victimization rates (e.g., of assault, robbery, rape) differ significantly from those of the wider population. As Shaver (2005) has pointed out, such comparative research is necessary to identify the problems that are “unique to sex work and [those] which are features of more general conditions, such as gender, ethnicity, educational opportunities, health status, and poverty....Comparisons of sex

workers with appropriate comparison groups often serve to falsify popular perceptions” (pp. 306, 307) insofar as they document similarities between prostitute and similarly situated nonprostitute populations (e.g., Nadon et al. 1998). The same conclusion appears to hold true for customers, who have been found to differ little from representative samples of other men, at least in the USA (Monto and McRee 2005).

Two recent and widely publicized studies of customers—reports by the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (Durchslag and Goswami 2008) and by Scotland's Women's Support Project (Macleod et al. 2008)—illustrate many of the methodological problems in this body of literature. (Farley was involved in both projects.) Despite their biased orientation toward the sex industry (documented previously), the groups present their research and findings as sound. Both reports are structured around a particular story line describing the myriad ways in which customers are deviant, with alarming quotations selected to fit the story line. Each report ends with recommendations for measures to suppress demand—john schools and increased punishment for customers—and each report received publicity in the local media.

The two studies are textbook examples of flawed and opaque data collection procedures. Firstly, there is no indication of whether the customers interviewed were informed about the objectives of the study or the orientation of the researchers and their sponsoring agency, if participants were given informed consent forms to sign, or whether the researchers followed other ethical protocols.¹⁰ Secondly, because the reports do not provide the interview questions, it is difficult to know what the men were responding to, and whether any of the questions were loaded. It is noteworthy that the authors provided only one quotation (invariably a disturbing one) to illustrate each so-called finding. Thirdly, both reports mentioned that the interviewers often felt contempt for the men interviewed. For example, the Chicago report stated:

Many of the interviewers felt the cruelty of the men's sexism not only against women bought by the men but against ourselves as well....The interviewers reported feeling skeptical about the men's professed ignorance about prostituted women, fearful about the possibility of being stalked by the interviewees, physically revolted, had flashbacks to their own

previous experiences of sexual violence, questioned some aspects of their own relationships with the men in their lives, and at times felt the inclination to dissociate or drink alcohol in order to numb painful emotional reactions to the interviews (Durchslag and Goswami 2008, p. 7).

Given these reactions during the interviews, one wonders how the interviewers were able to maintain a “nonjudgmental and friendly rapport” (Durchslag and Goswami, p. 7) with the men, as the report claimed.

Inconvenient Findings

In such studies, bias is also evident in a neglect of the scientific canon of falsifiability. If they comment at all on results that they did not expect, prohibitionist writers go to great lengths to discredit such findings. This discrediting includes downplaying or questioning the voices of sex workers themselves when they disagree with the author's opinions. For example, Raymond (2003) has written: “There is no doubt that a small number of women *say* they choose to be in prostitution, especially in public contexts orchestrated by the sex industry” (p. 325). By claiming that the number is small and by using the words *say* and *orchestrated*, Raymond clearly sought to cast doubt on the veracity of the women's testimony.

In Farley's (2007) interviews with some workers at eight of Nevada's 30 legal brothels, she stated, “I knew that they would minimize how bad it was” (p. 22). Respondents who did not acknowledge that working in a brothel was bad were considered to be in denial, and Farley sought to penetrate this barrier: “We were asking the women to briefly remove a mask that was crucial to their psychological survival” (p. 22). Farley also has asserted that most of the women working in the legal brothels had pimps, despite the fact that the women were “reluctant to admit that their boyfriends and husbands were pimping them” (p. 31). Farley found that “a surprisingly low percentage—33%—of our interviewees in the legal brothels reported sexual abuse in childhood” (p. 33), a percentage that “is lower than the likely actual incidence of sexual abuse because of symptoms of numbing, avoidance, and dissociation among these women” (p. 33), or discomfort discussing such experiences.

In their study of six countries, Farley et al. (2003) found substantial support for legalization among sex workers: A majority (54%) of the prostitutes interviewed across the countries (and 56% in Colombia, 74% in Canada, 85% in Mexico) said that legalizing prostitution would make it safer. The authors presented these inconvenient figures in a table but made no mention of them in the text (where they simply stated that 46% of the total did not believe legalization would make prostitution safer). In a subsequent

¹⁰ In the Scottish study (Macleod et al. 2008), interviewees were recruited with a newspaper ad asking, “Ever been a client of a prostitute? International research team would like to hear your views.” In the Chicago study (Durchslag and Goswami 2008), the ad read, “Chicago based research organization is looking to interview men who have paid for commercial sex.” The advertisement did not reveal that the research organization in question was the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, information that might have reduced the response rate.

article, Farley (2005) discounted those workers who favored legalization: “Like everyone else, our interviewees minimized the harms of prostitution and they sometimes believed industry claims that legalization or decriminalization will somehow make them safer. Sadly, there is no evidence for their belief” (p. 954). If the workers favored legalization, Farley contends, they did not form this opinion on their own but must have been deceived by advocates. (In fact, as indicated subsequently, evidence exists that some systems of legalization provide a relatively safe working environment for sex workers.) In case after case, findings that are inconsistent with the oppression paradigm are discounted and reinterpreted in order to fit with the writer's presumptions—a clear example of prescientific reasoning.

Besides the presentation of new findings, scientific advancement also depends on researchers' due diligence in citing and grappling with other studies whose findings differ from their own. Standard practice is to situate a study within the related scholarly literature. However, those operating within the oppression paradigm often restrict their citations to writings of like-minded authors and ignore studies that reach conclusions inconsistent with their own—of which there are many, as reflected in several comprehensive literature reviews (Shaver 2005; Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Weitzer 2009b). In some writings, oppression theorists fail to cite any academic research whatsoever. This pattern is found, for example, in Sullivan and Jeffreys' (2002) attempt to build a case against legal prostitution, Raymond's (2004) report on customers, and Farley's (2006) article claiming that violence in prostitution is “normative” (pp. 104, 105).

When prohibitionists do cite other researchers' findings, they sometimes distort the results and assert the exact opposite of what the cited researchers found. For example, Farley (2008) claimed that regular customers “strongly endorsed rape myths” (p. 43), and she cited a study by Monto and Hotaling (2001) to support this statement. Monto and Hotaling reported only that repeat customers were more likely than other customers to accept rape myths, not that they strongly endorsed them, and Farley failed to mention the most important finding of this study—that clients as a whole were not inclined to endorse rape myths: Monto and Hotaling found “low levels of rape myth acceptance” (p. 275) among the large sample of clients studied.

In trying to make the case that indoor prostitution victimizes women to the same extent as street prostitution, Farley (2006) reported that a British study by Church et al. (2001) found that workers in indoor venues (private residences, saunas) reported more attempted rapes than street workers. In fact, the Church study reported the opposite: that 28% of street workers said they had ever experienced an attempted rape, compared with 17% of indoor workers. Moreover, Farley failed to mention that street prostitutes were 11 times more likely to have actually

been raped: According to Church et al., 22% of the street sample compared with only 2% of the indoor sample had ever been raped while at work. This example is a clear case of both inverting and ignoring findings that contradict one's arguments.

Prohibitionists also tend to downplay other researchers' results. When asked about studies of the clients of prostitutes, Raymond (2008b) remarked that “what we've seen in some of the studies, Monto's studies, for example, where he has interviewed buyers, is that a lot of guys fake the truth” (pp. 60–61). Monto has made no such suggestion in his publications (see Monto 2004, 2010). Moreover, Raymond's claim assumes not only that she knows what the truth is but also that she has evidence that the men are making false statements. Farley (2007) cited findings by Brents and Hausbeck (2005) that women working in Nevada's legal brothels feel safe at work, but she casts doubt on this finding by arguing that “safety is relative, given that all prostitution is associated with a high likelihood of violence” (Farley, p. 20). This move, again, is reflective of a tendency throughout the oppression literature to discount evidence that contradicts its central tenets.

I now turn to a final issue that has received much attention from those who work within the oppression paradigm—the effects of legalization.

The Question of Legalization

Committed to a strict prohibitionist policy, oppression theorists have been very critical of nations that have decriminalized sex work (removing it from the criminal law) or have adopted some type of legalization (e.g., government vetting and registration of business owners, licensing of workers, health requirements such as mandatory condom use, periodic brothel site visits by officials, zoning restrictions). The argument is that decriminalization and legalization will only make the situation worse than it is under a regime of criminalization. As Raymond (2003) has declared, “Instead of abandoning women in the sex industry to state-sponsored prostitution, laws should address the predation of men who buy women” (p. 326). For prohibitionists, legalization symbolically gives an official stamp of approval to a vile institution and creates what they call a prostitution culture, in which commercial sexual transactions are rendered acceptable:

When legal barriers disappear, so too do the social and ethical barriers to treating women as sexual merchandise. Legalization of prostitution sends the message to new generations of men and boys that women are sexual commodities and that prostitution is harmless fun. (Raymond, p. 322)

These moral objections to prostitution could easily be applied to commercial advertisements and to the entertainment industry more broadly, where sexual objectification of women is pervasive.

In addition to the growth of a prostitution culture that devalues women, prohibitionist authors identify a litany of specific problems that they associate with legal prostitution. I will review each of these claims below.

Claim 1 Levels of violence and exploitation inevitably increase in jurisdictions where prostitution has been legalized and regulated:

Legitimizing prostitution as work has simply worked to normalize the violence and sexual abuse that [workers] experience on a daily basis....Legalized prostitution is government-sanctioned abuse of women (Sullivan 2005, p. 23).

Sullivan has gone so far as to assert that “prostitution can never be made safe” (p. 18).

Such inevitabilism is an article of faith, not a conclusion from empirical evidence. In fact, there is evidence challenging this claim. A decade of research on legal brothels in Nevada (Brents and Hausbeck 2005) has concluded that the brothels “offer the safest environment available for women to sell consensual sex acts for money” (p. 289). An investigation by the Ministry of Justice in the Netherlands (Daalder 2004) found that the “vast majority” (p. 30) of workers in Dutch brothels and window units reported that they “often or always feel safe” (p. 30). Likewise, in Queensland, Australia, “There is no doubt that licensed brothels provide the safest working environment for sex workers....Legal brothels now operating in Queensland provide a sustainable paradigm for a healthy, crime-free, and safe legal licensed brothel industry” (Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004, p. 75; also see Sullivan 2008). Of the 101 Queensland brothel workers interviewed, 97% felt that an advantage of working in a legal brothel was its safety and security (Woodward et al. 2004). In each of these contexts, the brothels employ safety precautions (e.g., screening, surveillance, alarm systems, listening devices) that reduce the likelihood of abuse by customers, and legal status is intended to shift the role of the police to that of protective intervention in the event of trouble.

None of this evidence is meant to romanticize legal prostitution systems. Working in such a system does not affect the participants monolithically: Individuals differ in their feelings about the work, in the ratio of negative to positive experiences with customers and relations with managers, and in satisfaction with rules and regulations. Moreover, legal systems vary by national context, with brothels in developed countries diverging from those in the Third World. In the latter, legal establishments may have

fewer amenities and safety precautions than those in more developed countries. Even in the Third World, legal workers can experience enhanced self-esteem due to increased earnings, lack of police harassment, or other improvements relative to their prior life experiences. This effect has been documented in research in Mexico and the Caribbean (Kelly 2008; Martis 1999).

Claim 2 Legalization leads to a proliferation of prostitution. According to Raymond (2003), legalization “encourages men to buy women for sex” (p. 322) because it makes paid sex more socially acceptable. Such a claim is hard to substantiate, given the absence of solid data on patronage before and after legalization. However, an assessment of the amount of prostitution before and after legalization in New Zealand in 2003 found that “the number of sex workers in New Zealand has not increased as a result of passage of the PRA [Prostitution Reform Act, 2003]” (PLRC 2008, p. 29; see also Abel et al. 2009). Recognizing the difficulty of counting individuals involved in this trade, this official study nevertheless reported that the number of workers appears to have decreased since legalization—from approximately 5,932 in 2003 to 2,232 in 2007 (PLRC 2008). The central conclusion was that legalization does not inevitably lead to proliferation, as oppression theorists claim.

Raymond (2008b) has gone further, however, in claiming that legal prostitution increases the demand for illegal prostitution and for perverse sexual experiences:

A decriminalized system gives men more entitlement to go outside the country because they don’t want the regular garden variety legal sex that’s offered; they want the more transgressive sexual activities, sex with children, sex with others who they couldn’t get in the legal brothels....It promotes an entitlement for non-legal sex. (pp. 74–75)

There is no evidence to support this claim.

Raymond (2003) has argued that legalization necessarily increases underage prostitution, but well-monitored systems offer counterevidence. In New Zealand, for example, a government evaluation (PLRC 2008) concluded that it “does not consider that the PRA [Prostitution Reform Act] has increased underage involvement in prostitution” (p. 102). Other legal systems (e.g., Holland, Australia) have both a minimum age requirement and a ban on having minors present in a venue where sex work is being performed. A recent government report on the Netherlands (Daalder 2007) concluded that “there seems to be hardly any prostitution by minors in the licensed sector” and “inspectors encounter underage prostitutes only very incidentally” (p. 86). Moreover, few of the current workers began selling sex as minors: Only 5% (out of a sample of 354 prostitutes) had done so when they were under 18 years of age.

Claim 3 Legalization facilitates and increases sex trafficking into the jurisdiction where prostitution is legal. Legalized prostitution is “one of the root causes of sex trafficking” (Raymond 2003, p. 317), and “wherever prostitution is legal, sex trafficking from other countries is significantly increased into both legal and illegal sex businesses in the region” (Farley 2007, p. 118). Farley’s (2007) report on legal prostitution in Nevada relies on hearsay to support this claim:

Women are trafficked from other countries into Nevada’s legal brothels....In Nevada, 27 percent of our 45 interviewees in the Nevada legal brothels *believed* that there were *undocumented immigrants* in the legal brothels. Another 11 percent said they were uncertain, thus as many as 38 percent of the women we interviewed *may have known* of internationally trafficked women in Nevada legal brothel prostitution. (pp. 118, 119, emphasis added)

Another way of reporting this so-called finding is that as many as 62% believed that women were *not* trafficked into the brothels, whereas the remainder either did not have an opinion or believed that brothels had undocumented immigrants, women who were not necessarily trafficked. Elsewhere in the report, Farley (2007) stated that some women in one brothel told her that women in another brothel had been trafficked from China. Instead of treating this information as hearsay, Farley presented it as factual and called the women who told her this story “witnesses,” lending their statements an aura of credibility.

Prostitution has been legal in Victoria, Australia since 1984. In their critique of the Victorian situation, Sullivan and Jeffreys (2002) have asserted that trafficking “appears to have exploded” (p. 1145), but then stated that this is purely anecdotal. There is no evidence to support the claim that legalization increases trafficking in Victoria or elsewhere in Australia. Furthermore, recent assessments by the Australian government (Parliamentary Joint Committee 2004) and by independent organizations have concluded that trafficking was not a significant problem in Australia. As one assessment reported,

Trafficking numbers are low primarily due to the geographical isolation of the country, combined with a very strict immigration and border control. There are legal channels for migration into the sex industry, which reduces the need for migrants to depend on organized crime syndicates or traffickers (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women 2007, p. 29).

For those who do migrate to Australia in search of work,

the majority of women know they will be working in the sex industry and often decide to come to Australia in the belief that they will be able to make a substantial amount

of money....Few of the women would ever consider themselves sex slaves (Meaker 2002, pp. 61, 63).

Similarly, the New Zealand government’s recent investigation (PLRC 2008) has reported that “no situations involving trafficking in the sex industry have been identified” (p. 167) by the immigration service, and that “there is no link between the sex industry and human trafficking” (p. 167) in the country. Prostitution is legal in New Zealand.

In fact, increased government regulation can diminish trafficking due to enhanced oversight of and transparency of the legal sex industry. In the Netherlands, a Ministry of Justice report (Daalder 2007) concluded that, since legalization in 2000, “it is likely trafficking in human beings has become more difficult, because the enforcement of the regulations has increased” (p. 84). Where prostitution is illegal, the obverse appears to be true:

Traffickers take advantage of the illegality of commercial sex work and migration, and are able to exert an undue amount of power and control over [migrants]....In such cases, it is the laws that prevent legal commercial sex work and immigration that form the major obstacles (Kempadoo 1998, p. 17).

Related to the trafficking claim is the argument that legalization increases organized crime involvement: “Organized crime is inherent across the industry” (Sullivan 2005, p. 4). Although organized crime can be a problem in any industry, the chances that organized crime will be screened out increases as a result of enhanced governmental oversight, such as criminal record checks of owners, periodic certification of businesses, and regular site visits by officials. In Queensland, Australia, a government evaluation (CMC 2004) concluded that organized crime had been largely eliminated in the legal brothels; in New Zealand, a government study (PLRC 2008) found no evidence of criminal involvement in prostitution. As Murray (1998) has pointed out, “It is the prohibition of prostitution and restrictions on travel which attract organized crime and create the possibilities for large profits, as well as creating the prostitutes’ need for protection and assistance” (p. 60). Organized crime thrives (and other harms are amplified) under conditions where vice is illegal and unregulated, such as drug and alcohol prohibition, gambling, and so forth.

Claim 4 Women who sell sex do not want prostitution to be decriminalized or legalized. Raymond (2003) has claimed that the workers do not want prostitution to be “considered legitimate work” (p. 325) and believe that “legalization would create more risks and harm for women from already violent customers and pimps” (p. 325). These claims are counterintuitive; why would workers not prefer their work to be legitimized and why would they believe that legalization

would increase the risk of harm? Moreover, the few studies that have asked sex workers about decriminalization or legalization (e.g., Farley et al. 2003) have found significant percentages supporting legal changes. As indicated earlier in this article, many of the sex workers in the study of Farley et al. favored legalization—results directly contradicting Raymond's aforementioned assertion.

Some sex workers do oppose certain types of legal controls, especially if they perceive those controls as interfering with their freedom (Weitzer 1999). However, others clearly view at least some types of regulation as serving their interests, including labor rights and empowerment to report crimes or code violations to the authorities. In New Zealand, the 2003 decriminalization law accorded workers numerous rights, increased their willingness to report problems to the police, and “increased confidence, well-being, and a sense of validation” (PLRC 2008, p. 50) because sex work was no longer illegal. A government study concluded that “decriminalizing prostitution made sex workers feel better about themselves and what they did” (PLRC, p. 49). Research in other contexts with legal prostitution, cited under Claim 1, provides evidence of sex workers' positive views of at least certain aspects of these legal regimes.

Apart from claiming that specific harms are inherent in legal prostitution, prohibitionists also reject legalization because of alleged fundamental flaws. Problems cannot be ameliorated, according to these writers, because they are inherent in prostitution. Sweeping indictments have been offered: “The experience of Victoria dispels the claim that legalization empowers women” (Sullivan and Jeffreys 2002, p. 1144). Raymond (2008a) has argued that “decriminalization of the prostitution sector is a failed policy” (p. 20), and seeks to challenge what she has described as a “popular fiction that all will be well in the world of prostitution once the sex industry is legalized” (Raymond 2003, p. 326). No serious scholar has claimed that all will be well under decriminalization, but studies cited previously have shown that decriminalization can foster harm reduction.

Policy Implications

Together, the problems identified in this article underscore many weaknesses in the oppression paradigm. Yet, despite these myriad problems, this paradigm has been surprisingly influential over the past decade in shaping public policies in the USA and elsewhere—a textbook example of an empirically unsupported framework successfully affecting state policy. In the following sections, I will provide a few examples of how the oppression paradigm has permeated

popular discourse and shaped recent public policy debates and outcomes (see also Agustin 2007; Stolz 2005; Weitzer 2007).

The media often report the results of studies by prohibitionists, usually uncritically and sometimes with sensational banner headlines. Farley's (2007) report on Nevada's legal brothels, for example, received widespread attention after *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert (2007a, b) wrote op-eds praising her work. One of his articles (2007b) referred to prostitution as a “horror show” and embraced many other myths about the sex trade. The Scottish study described previously (Macleod et al. 2008) garnered a headline in the *Daily Record* (Brown 2008) that read “Sex industry in Scotland: Inside the deluded minds of the punters,” as well as an alarmist article that stated, “The *Record* yesterday revealed a shocking survey which showed men were unaware of the harm they caused by buying sex....Labour [Party] justice spokeswoman Pauline McNeill urged the government not to rule out proposals to treat men caught using prostitutes as sex criminals” (Gardham 2008). These are just two examples of the favorable and sensationalized coverage given to studies highlighting the harms of prostitution.

Due to media reporting and intense lobbying by advocacy groups, prohibitionist claims often get a favorable hearing in government circles. The British government, for example, embraced the Poppy Project's (2008) *Big Brothel* report. The Minister for Women and Equality, Harriet Harman, stated: “Prostitution is the abuse and exploitation of women by men, and this important research highlights the sad realities of the so-called ‘off-street’ trade in the capital” (September 4, 2008, Poppy Project press release, in possession of the author). Prohibitionists have successfully lobbied legislators and other government officials throughout the world. For example, they were involved in passage of the 1999 Swedish law that unilaterally criminalized the customers of prostitutes, and they have pressed other governments to adopt the Swedish legislation (Scouler 2004), which is being seriously considered in the UK and elsewhere (Dodillet 2004; Kantola and Squires 2004; Outshoorn 2001).

Proposals for decriminalizing prostitution have been met with stiff opposition. One recent example is Bulgaria, where the government's plan to legalize prostitution in 2007 was reversed after intense lobbying by antiprostitution forces (Kulish 2007). San Francisco's 2008 ballot measure (Proposition K), which would have decriminalized prostitution, encountered similar resistance and failed to win support. Such opposition is not always successful, as evidenced in New Zealand and Western Australia. In the parliamentary debates on these legalization bills, the opposition articulated key tenets of the oppression paradigm, with some members of parliament citing the writings

of leading prohibitionists by name, including Janice Raymond, Mary Sullivan, and Sheila Jeffreys (see Weitzer 2009a).

Legalization has been a polarizing issue not only in individual nation states but also for international political bodies. An example is a recent report submitted to the European Parliament by the parliamentary Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality, a product of lobbying by prohibitionist groups. The report reads:

For those who want to view prostitution as any other profession—how will you deal with these devastating health consequences? For those who want to see legalization as a way to protect the women selling sex, how are we to control the influx of victims of trafficking which is an immediate consequence of legalizing the demand? But most importantly how are we to deal with the biggest problem—that regardless of the legal status of the sex industry, the devastating health consequences for the women selling sex is inherent in the business as such....The sex industry, whether legalized or regulated, is in itself a systematic form of violence towards women—the violence is an integral part of the things prostituted women are expected to do in their everyday practice....To legalize prostitution is to legalize this systematic violence, and those countries that have legalized prostitution have thereby stimulated the demand and increased the market for trafficking (Carlshamre 2008).

During the Bush administration (2001–2008), the US government fully embraced the oppression paradigm (Soderlund 2005; Stolz 2005; Weitzer 2007). During those years, official publications and websites (of the US Department of State, of the US Department of Health and Human Services, etc.) cited and provided links to the writings of prohibitionist activists. Even the terminology was vetted by government agencies: The National Institutes of Health instructed officials and grant applicants not to use the term *sex work* (Epstein 2006), as did the US Department of State, which advised personnel to use the phrase “women used in prostitution” instead (Parameswaran 2006).

The Bush administration also dispersed generous grants to prohibitionist organizations and individuals to write reports and conduct research—including CATW, Janice Raymond, Donna Hughes, and Melissa Farley (Attorney General 2004, 2005). A US Government Accountability Office (2006) report raised questions about this funding, citing the State Department Inspector General's concern with “the credentials of the organizations and findings of the research that the Trafficking Office funded” (p. 25). At the same time, the government denied funding to organizations that refused to sign an antiprostitution pledge (Fisher

2005). A recent Request for Proposals by the US Department of Justice stipulated that all applicants for funding to research trafficking must certify that they do “not promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution” (National Institute of Justice 2007, p. 4).

The aforementioned examples are just a few of the ways in which the proponents of the oppression paradigm have successfully shaped public policy in recent years. The result is that prostitution policies are becoming increasingly divorced from sound research based on standard canons of scientific research. Prostitution policy is by no means unique in this regard; morality and dogma have also trumped science in recent policies on stem cells, HIV prevention, and needle-exchange programs (Buchanan et al. 2003; di Mauro and Joffe 2007; Epstein 2006). In the case of prostitution, however, policy has changed dramatically and in a short span of time, as a direct result of the lobbying efforts of activists and scholars who have adopted the oppression paradigm (Weitzer 2007).

Conclusion

The oppression paradigm is one-dimensional and essentialist. Although exploitation and other harms are certainly present in sex work, sufficient variation exists across time, place, and sector to demonstrate the fatal flaws of this paradigm. An alternative perspective, what I call the *polymorphous paradigm*, holds that a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences exists within the arena of paid sexual services and performances. This paradigm is sensitive to complexities and to the structural conditions resulting in the uneven distribution of agency and subordination (Cusick 2006; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Shaver 2005; Weitzer 2009b).

Within academia, a growing number of scholars are researching various dimensions of sex work, in different contexts, and their studies have documented substantial variation in how sex work is organized and experienced by workers, clients, and managers (see Weitzer 2009b, for a review). Such differences also are apparent in the writings of sex workers themselves, who contribute to online discussion forums. Together, these studies and supplementary writings help to undermine popular myths about prostitution and challenge those writers who embrace the monolithic oppression paradigm. Victimization, exploitation, choice, job satisfaction, self-esteem, and other dimensions should be treated as variables (not constants) that differ depending on type of sex work, geographical location, and other structural and organizational conditions.

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