



A General Overview of Theoretical Approaches on Sex Work: Heating Debates among Various Strands

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical and frequently political context of sexual exploitation and sex work among women is hotly disputed among academic and legal scholars alike. The majority of theoretical writing in this field is on the macro perspective. Sex work as a bad profession and sex workers as disposable victims are deeply rooted in our cultural imaginations. Sex labor is heavily stigmatized and frequently misunderstood as a form of employment. The stigma associated with sex workers led to widespread discrimination like eviction from rented apartments, family rejection, bullying of their children in school and their girls being viewed as unmarriageable. The phenomenon of sex work is quite complex. Even though sex work is frowned upon and regarded as a sin in society, it is expanding at an alarming rate. Sexual workers experience a great deal of antagonism, harassment, violence, as well as several social, psychological and physical issues. Due to legal repercussions for exposure and related shame, it is challenging to collect specific information on sex workers. A very accurate and complete image of female sex work is not available due to the profession's secrecy. Theoretically, sex work and sexual exploitation of women are hotly contested topic. The adoption of theoretical techniques to comprehend the social, economic, cultural and political context of sex work is the primary goal of this essay. This article addresses the ensuing debates in the topic while providing a thorough account of the philosophical, legal, and political perspectives on the sexual exploitation of females and girls and based on secondary data.

Keywords: Sex workers, Stigma, Theoretical perspective and Sexual exploitation

I. INTRODUCTION

Prostitutes, often known as sex workers, have held an odd place in society that can be traced to all human civilizations. People have used the act of having sex in exchange for money throughout history to combat poverty, give oneself a fighting chance against bleak circumstances and subvert social norms. Sex work is performed by people of all sexes, backgrounds and socio-economic levels for a variety of illogical and occult reasons. People who are in need and facing poverty often turn into sex worker because of discrimination, sexual orientation inequality, societal prohibition, racism, imperialism, imbalanced socio-economic conditions and oppression. In our cultural image, sex work is strongly associated with being unwanted and sex workers with being disposable victims. In our society, providing sexual services is extremely stigmatized.

The phrase "sex worker" was first used in 1978 by Californian sex workers campaigner Carol Leigh. After the release of "Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry" in 1987, the term "sex workers" became widely used. The phrase "sex work" is used to disassociate prostitution from its negative connotations and to acknowledge the freedom of the individual. Prostitution has been linguistically homogenized as "commercial sex work." The term "Commercial Sex Workers" was coined by the World Bank. Because it portrays sexual activity as a sort of labor that can be exploited and preferred to prostitution. It highlights that performing sex acts for profit is an activity, not a way of life. It diverts attention away from moral judgments and focuses on concrete issues like hazardous and unjust working conditions. Regardless of gender, commercial sex workers are those who perform sexual services in return for financial rewards. Due of the blurry gender lines, sex workers may be transgender, male or female.



Around 90% of those who work in commercial sex are females, 10% are males and less than 1% are transgender (McGuire and Gruter, 2003).

Sex work has constantly been assigned a gender because it is typically associated with women. When the term "sex worker" is used, it is typically in reference to female sex workers. Frequently, descriptions of sex work conjure up the thoughts of coercion, desperation, poverty and lack of agency (Weitzer 2010). Although this choice is a direct result of the lack of economic options, it is difficult to justify why women choose to engage in sex work on a voluntary basis. Even voluntary sex work is not portrayed in anti-trafficking narratives as a vocation that could be fulfilling, enjoyable, or empowering. Due to tight social constraints on sexual activity, it might be argued that sex work is stigmatized even more in India than in the majority of other countries. Sex workers frequently get criticism, harsh social condemnation and preferential treatment because they are perceived as "bad women." Depending on their circumstances, sex workers engage in this labor voluntarily or involuntarily. Involuntarily because of trade, compulsion and cultural practices; voluntarily because of poverty, husband illness, breadwinner death, domestic abuse, an unhappy marriage, poor widow status, a lack of job options, etc. Due to a lack of employment options, poor women turned to sex work as a source of income. The most important component of sex job is money. Due to their lack of marketable employment skills, individuals are unable to find a lawful source of income outside of this trade.

Sex workers endure harsh trade-related effects and persists psychological and physical problems. Sex work has an impact on the females who are directly involved, females in general, men who pay for sex services and civilizations. One of the oldest professions, sex work has a rich history that spans cultures and touches on social, political, psychological, and health issues (Sawyer & Mentz, 2009). The psychological well-being, sexuality and self-respect of women suffer greatly from the unneeded and frequent sex. Alcohol consumption and drug pill use both significantly increase excessive sex. Sex work is not only harmful to one's health, but it is also strongly linked to violence against sex workers. They are exposed by the shame and criminality associated with sex trade. Their physical health is ruined by the sex industry, which causes bruises, broken bones, unintended pregnancies, black eyes, concussions and, more specifically, sexually transmitted illnesses like HIV/AIDS, Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, Cervical

Cancer, and Syphilis. Sex workers are seen as both the active transmitter and the recipient of STDs.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEX WORK

At the social level, there are different and rich theoretical explanations for sex work and sexual exploitation, but these explanations are few and incomplete at the individual level. The divisive theoretical and moral disputes among macro-level perspectives affect whether a woman would ever decide to trade sex for money. In their writings and lectures, academic and legal researchers alike incorporate competing theoretical ideas, such as the utilization of sex labor vs. sexual exploitation. On the other hand, micro-level theories make attempts to explain the victimization, entry and escape from sexual exploitation and sex work but lack strong empirical backing. In light of this, the article's goal is to examine various philosophical, legal and political viewpoints on the sexual exploitation of women and girls as well as to discuss any future debates in the area. The sociological perspectives offer more general insights of sex work to explain why individual women and men are more likely than others to pay for sex or to receive pay for sex. The major theoretical perspectives related to sex work and sex workers are -

Structural - Functional Perspective: The functional view of sociology holds that all facets of society are interrelated and contribute to the stability and smooth operation of society as a whole. It helps keep society as a whole stable to have some degree of deviance. The writings of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and R.K. Merton are the main proponents of this viewpoint. They believe that the existence of sex work is due to the fact that it fulfills a number of crucial social needs. For many women who might not otherwise have a career, it serves as their main source of income. It opens up a tax revenue stream for the government. Sex work, according to Kingsley Davis (1937), even lowers the divorce rate. For single or married guys who are dissatisfied with their sex lives, it offers a sexual option. Unlike extramarital affairs, which pose a threat to the marital union, sex work is often impersonal. Davis added that sex work probably reduces rapes and sexual assaults by giving jobs to persons with little formal education and work experiences.

According to Parsons, the term "structural-functionalism" refers to a broad "action system" that encompasses the social system, behavioral



organism, cultural system and personality system. A relationship between the social system and the actors is how the social system is regarded (Ritzer, 2011). It determined the direct association between the various components, while other ones are shown to have an indirect relationship (e.g. socio-cultural, educational, economic and political). Similar to this, there is an interdependency and link between the person and the entire societal systems in sex work that influences whether women engage in sex trade voluntarily or not. Examples include poverty, career possibilities, the loss of a male partner and other factors.

In "Anomie (weakening of moral relations)," by Emile Durkheim (1897), the social conditions of sex workers are highlighted. Anomie is the term used to describe situations in which people struggle to adjust with changing norms or fail to internalize the communal norms. The established codes of conduct are challenged rather than being replaced. People's understanding of how to handle their life's challenges deteriorates. In the lack of explicit moral principles, people feel anxious, aimless, purposeless and disoriented. Their desires are no longer constrained by social norms and hence cannot be realized. Dissatisfaction, disagreement and deviation are caused by changing circumstances and life adjustments. People voluntarily take action to satisfy their desires in an immoral and illegal manner, as through sex work. Individual interests have taken the place of collective conscience in society. In a similar vein, family dysfunction and social disarray encourage women to pursue career as sex worker. It comprises of drug abuse, damaged families, marital abuse and child abuse.

Conflict Perspective: The classic writings of Karl Marx can be used to trace the beginnings of conflict viewpoint. The conflict perspective sees society as being made up of various interests and organizations vying for control over resources. Sex work, from a conflict viewpoint, emphasizes the connection of disparities among various social system components (Basirico, 2014). It displays the social and economic disparities. In a patriarchal society, sex work results from the use of women as sexual objects for the pleasure of males. Because they have no other way to get money, many low-income women feel forced to work as sex workers. A surge in sex work in the second half of the nineteenth century provides interesting historical evidence in favor of this viewpoint. Many women were left impoverished after losing their husbands and partners in the wars. Women were forced to become sex workers to support their families and themselves due to a lack

of formal education and a society that provided few job opportunities for women. According to Basirico (2014), conflicts don't always end in violence, it can be regarded as struggle occurring day after day as people try to maintain and improve their position in life including selling their body to have some type of income.

Symbolic Interactionism: Early sociologists and philosophers like George Simmel, Charles Cooley, G.H. Mead and Erving Goffman had a significant impact on symbolic interactionism, which reflects the micro-sociological approach. It highlights how definitions and meanings are generated and maintained through symbolic contact with others and how this influences human behavior. It investigates how sex workers and their clients typically perceive the behavior of each other. These insights support both of them in defending their actions. When offering their clients with companionship in addition to sex, sexual service providers may feel that they are assisting their clients (Weitzer, 2009).

The ideologies of symbolic interactionists about women in sex work are varied. This viewpoint held that symbols that determine what and who people are seen in society. Its main focus is on how meaning and symbols affect human behavior and interaction. They contend that society still views sex workers as "immoral" people and that this notion permeates our culture.

The "**Stigma**" theory by **Erving Goffman** (1963), applies on sex workers. According to Goffman's traditional definition, stigma is "an attribute that is severely disparaging." Intentionally and unintentionally, sex workers reinforce the stigma associated with their line of employment. Their social, economic and working conditions are significantly impacted, along with their loss of reputation. Stigmas have been demonstrated to have a negative effect on sex workers' self-concept and identity formation, according to Link & Phelan (2006). It led to varying degrees of social isolation, from difficulty partaking in typical social interactions due to shame and concealment to outright discrediting or exclusion by others. Sex workers are portrayed by society as "vectors of disease" and "morally repugnant." Stigmatization has a detrimental impact on sex workers' quality of life, including social isolation, employment opportunities and financial security. The social interaction described as "courtesy stigma" (stigma by association) places sex workers in the public eye. Social rights afforded by other people are routinely denied to sex workers, who are also frequently portrayed as abnormal "others" (Vanwesenbeeck,



2001). The research finds that societal norms concerning gender and sexuality are the root cause of the stigma associated with sex employment.

Feminist Perspective: In the 1960s, sex work became a hot topic in feminist circles. Conflict theory is specifically applied in feminist perspectives. Instead of the class disparity that Marx and Engels emphasize, gender inequality is the source of conflict in this instance. Feminist theories come in a variety of forms, but they always emphasize the fact that there is widespread gender inequality in society, making women the inferior sex in many spheres of social, political, and economic life. Feminist theory is a broad, interdisciplinary viewpoint that seeks to comprehend how gender affects people's roles, experiences, and ideals (Miriam, 2005). Feminist thought frequently sees sex work as the necessary condition of what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society (Scoular, 2004 p.343). The most prevalent example of feminism in action is the framing of intimate partner abuse as a crime based on gender, which supports the institutionalized subjugation of women around the world. The feminist poses the question of whether sex work or any other sexual exchange for something of value is or may be voluntary with reference to sexual exploitation (Nichols, 2013). There are typically two opposed theoretical positions of sexual exploitation or sex labor. The feminist sex wars are a common term for the current sex work controversies among feminists (Hollibaugh, 2000). The first strand emphasizes the fact that sex work is inherently exploitative and that sex workers are coerced victims; the second strand supports the empowerment and liberation of sex workers.

Neo-abolitionist Perspectives: Radical and Marxist Feminism: Neo-abolitionist feminists, notably radical and Marxist ones, argue that sex work is never fully voluntary and cannot be considered as such (Tiefenbrun, 2002). Since sexism persists to preserve male privilege and the patriarchal social order, radical feminism is based on the idea that society is essentially patriarchal. They assert that violence against women is a systematic form of men's dominance and social control over women was initially articulated by Dobash and Dobash (1979). As a result, assaults happen mostly because men feel they have a right to use violence against women due to entrenched male privilege. The rampant sexism that is accepted in society as a result of the patriarchal structure of both government and society has excluded women from the public sector, higher education, structural labor

forces, and religious institutions (Loue, 2001). Radical feminists see sex work as part of the patriarchal system that oppresses women (Oselin & Weitzer, 2013, p.446).

Marxist Feminism: All forms of sexual trade are viewed as forms of violence against women in the Marxist feminism movement. According to Marxist feminists, sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism—that which is most one's own but is taken away (MacKinnon, 1989). According to this theory, sexual labor and pornography are forms of class and sex oppression. Men who purchase or regulate the exchange of sexual services appropriate women's sexuality and sexual energy. The energy of sex workers is seized by capitalists for their own gains, which results in the alienation of one's physical capabilities and very physical existence.

Pro Sex Work Perspective: Sex

Positivism/Liberal feminist:- According to liberal feminists, sex work is a job just like any other and provides women a sense of autonomy. When discussing sex work with genuine sex workers, Weatherall & Priestley (2011) learned that some of these individuals sometimes felt in charge of the clients, which provided them a sense of authority in their line of work. Sex positivism sprang from earlier feminist schools of thought to support women's autonomy in their choice of sex work. This viewpoint's proponents contend that sexual activity, including paid relationships, is often consent-based and that women should have the autonomy to select the kind of employment they engage in. According to sex positivists, women should decide what constitutes intimacy and what behaviors or sexual acts are deemed intimate. For instance, former sex workers, activists and writers believe that numerous professions, such as nurses, gynecologists and child care providers can be characterized as intimate, and that all women, including sex workers and prostitutes, should be entitled to decide what is and is not intimate (Russell & Garcia, 2014). Person-centered service delivery models are changed by sex positivists. This demonstrates how sex workers experience greater control over their sexual relationships with their clients.

Intersectional Approach: The multifaceted idea of intersectionality theory describes how one's sense of self, viewpoints and aspirations are influenced by the intersecting experiences of several subordinating identities. It refers to a person's various social positions, some of which can concurrently cast them in the roles of the oppressed and the oppressor (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz & Sowbel, 2013, p.295). The idea of intersectionality theory was created to address the overlaps and intricacies of societal concerns. It



described the feminist perspectives to explain a woman's varied experiences based on her race, class, sexual orientation or another identity she holds in addition to her sex (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005). According to feminists working within an intersectional framework, a woman's oppression and exploitation cannot be understood just in terms of her gender. This small change allowed for the acknowledgement that women in many ways face unique hardships simply as a result of gender (Jani, Pierce, Ortiz & Sowbel, 2013).

Intersectionality theory in the course on sex helps in explaining the many social hardships that some women face in addition to having to make a living as sex workers. The issues of how race, socio-economic status, age and other factors can influence the experiences of women who are involved in sex work are extremely important. Some of their motives behind seeking mental health treatment may be compounded by the fact that they are trying to cope with various social stressors along with identifying as sex workers.

Social Exclusion Theory: Parkin got the idea for his social exclusion theory from the social closure theory of Weber. According to social exclusion theory, people are excluded from mainstream society on the basis of their ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, caste ancestry, gender, age, disability, HIV status, and immigration status or location of residence (Silver & Miller, 2003). As a result of their poverty, lack of education and poor living skills, some groups are pushed to the periphery and barred from fully participating. This process is known as social exclusion. Sex workers are marginalized by social and governmental structures. Poor health, uncontrollable behavior, homelessness, suicide, inadequate education for children exclusion brought on by sex work may affect the lives and wellbeing of sex workers. This knowledge aids in creating and choosing the best interventions for uplifting and a propensity to violence are all possible consequences. This idea presents the clear picture of living standard of sex workers.

II. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the majority of research and discussion revolves around structural and macro theories of causality and leaves individual and relationship-level theories significantly underdeveloped. The divisions within the legal systems that govern the various nations of the world have been substantially influenced by the contentious discussions of diverse feminist perspectives. At the macro level, there has been a lot

of theoretical and legal writing, but there hasn't been a lot of work that has been empirically tested. There is unlikely to be a clear consensus any time soon given the volume of comments from different academic or legal scholars to one another, frequently in opposition to or defense of their own unique frameworks. Although there is very little external factual backing, micro level perspectives help to understand the entry and exit processes for women and girls in sexual exploitation or sex industry. Despite the divergent bodies of work across macro and micro level theories, theoretical developments are crucial for comprehending female sexual exploitation and sex work as well as the current policies, services and interventions available to women.

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