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Sex Work in Humboldt County

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The sex work industry is one that most people partake in regularly as either providers of sexual services and entertainment or consumers of it. Despite this, there is a lack of critical discussion in our community and at Humboldt State University about the prevalence of sex work and the urgent issues of violence and criminalization sex workers face in our communities. Conversations about sex work in Humboldt County have been dominated by law enforcement via journalism. This article challenges the dominant narrative of sex workers in the community by deconstructing the discourse through which sex work in Humboldt county has been discussed thus far. Further, it addresses the problematics of the way that sex workers have been talked about by allowing sex workers in Humboldt County to speak for themselves through anonymous interviews. This research is done through a critical geography approach, emphasizing discourse analysis, activism, and challenging structural dynamics of inequality.

Terminology

Sex work is a broad term that includes many types of work, some illegal and some not. Those who work as strippers, cam girls, sugar babies, peepshow performers, phone sex operators, dominatricies, and pornographic actors are considered within the sphere of sex work. Sex workers who engage in sex for money are considered full-service sex workers (FSSWers). FSSWers are typically referred to as "prostitutes," "hookers," or "whores." However, these terms have been used as slurs to delegitimize and stigmatize full-service sex workers, and should no longer be used by non-FSSWers.

When discussing the definition of sex work, it is necessary to outline the distinctions between sex work and sex trafficking and why they are markedly different. Sex trafficking is sexual exploitation of minors or adults against their will. Sex work is adults consenting to sexual acts or performances in exchange for money from other consenting adults (Figure 1). Sex work being conflated with sex trafficking is harmful to both sex workers and sex trafficking victims; it denies that sex work is a valid profession in which sex workers have autonomy over their own bodies and deserve safe working conditions, and it hinders sex workers' effort to be allies and advocate to end sexual exploitation. Because of sex workers' proximity to the market of buying and selling sex, they have the ability to help guide victims of sex trafficking to safety. However, criminalization of sex work often prevents sex workers from being able to do so without outing themselves in the process, leading to legal consequences.

History

The earliest record of sex work found in the Humboldt Room Special Collections (a historical archive strictly for Humboldt County) is dated 1916, and it is a newspaper clipping discussing a "Red Light Abatement Act." This legislation allowed business owners in the "red light district," an area of Eureka on 2rd and 3rd Streets that had numerous brothels and bordellos where sex was bought and sold to be prosecuted if they used their property for "immoral purposes" (Suit Under Red Light Law).

While this is the first of newspaper clippings in the archives to report on sex work in Humboldt County, it is likely that the sex work industry was

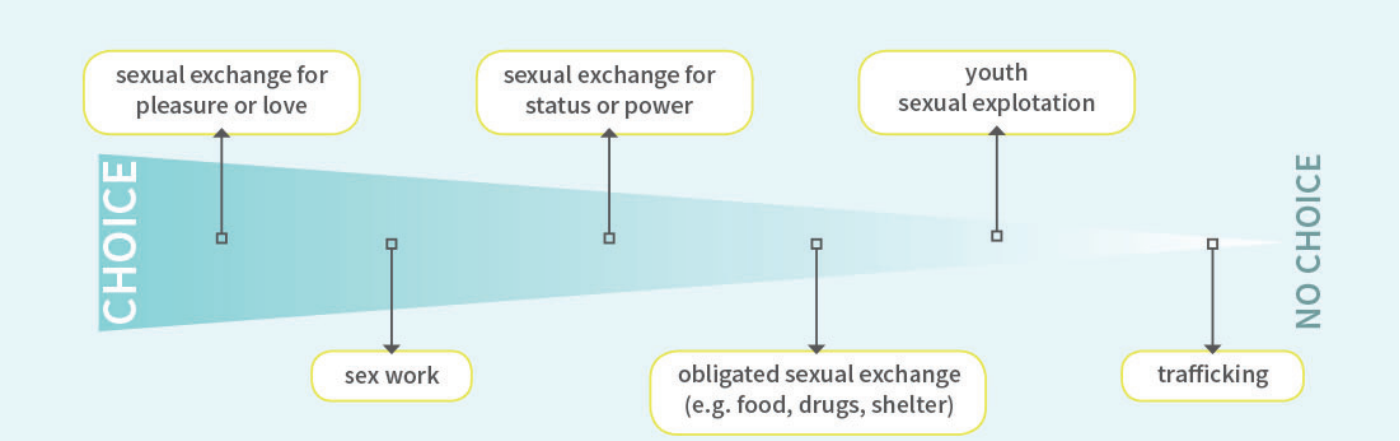

Figure 1. "Spectrum of Sexual Exchange" shows how sexual exchanges occur on a spectrum from personal choice and empowerment to coercion and exploitation (source: Living in Community).

present since colonial settlement in Humboldt. Historically, sex work has been a profession that has thrived in places where industry was prevalent, as women provide sexual services to immigrant laborers who are most always single men (Russell 2010, 102). In Humboldt County, the Gold Rush, the construction of railroads, and the lumber industry all brought a large influx of immigrant laborers to Humboldt County in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century that made for a flourishing sex work industry.

While it remains unclear if sex work in Humboldt County was ever legal, archival sources center on criminalization, beginning with the 1916 article. Regardless, the changing of laws over time have resulted in shifting dynamics of the sex work industry in Humboldt County. Up until the 1940s, brothels and bordellos in Old Town Eureka were primarily where the buying and selling of sex took place. Madams would run the establishments, keeping girls sober, facilitating payment and providing them protection from clients. With the revocation of liquor licenses in Eureka in the 1950s resulting from a county wide crackdown, many brothels went out of business and indoor sex work took the new form of operating under the guise of coffee shops. As law enforcement caught on to this reiteration of brothels, they quickly shut them down as well. It was then in the mid-1950s when indoor sex work was forced outdoors, with outdoor sex work seemingly more heavily policed than indoor sex work.

Street-based sex work in Eureka has been referred to as a "plague," "unpleasant," "bad for business," and something that tourists "do not want to see." It is likely that the shift from indoor to outdoor sex work in part contributed to heavier policing and criminalization efforts because of the increased visibility of sex work and sex workers that otherwise would have been operating behind closed doors, making it less confrontational.

Another possible contribution to law enforcement's crackdown on outdoor sex work in the latter half of the twentieth century was Murl Harpham, who joined the Eureka Police Department (EPD) in 1958. Archival sources indicate that Harpham's efforts to catch and arrest sex workers were most prolific in the 1980s and '90s. Newspaper clippings describe his tactics of using undercover agents to catch both those who were selling sex and those were buying, of using specific language to ensure that sex workers incriminate themselves, and of using video cameras to catch people about to carry out the sexual act they agreed to pay for. Harpham has been vocal to the press about his persistent effort to criminalize sex workers and johns, of which the press took a "reporting" approach and did not challenge the idea of the unjustness of criminalization itself. Harpham was given a platform to speak on the history of his past efforts to arrest sex workers as recently as 2015 by the Humboldt Historical Society, even though he was retired from EPD at that point.

The historical documentation of sex work in Humboldt County detailed above has been consistently skewed and one-sided, lacking intersectional and critical approaches. This is why

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is it necessary to analyze not only the objective information documented about sex workers, but also the way that sex workers have been written about, acknowledging that history is always written with biases that can mute certain voices and narratives. Next this article will discuss the most important aspects of sex work to understand, according to sex workers. These emergent categories include criminalization, stigmatization, victimization, and community.

Criminalization

An appropriate place to begin when discussing sex work is the relationship between the sex work industry and legal systems. Because sex work is an umbrella term that encompasses so many types of jobs, the legality of it can be complicated, but is best summed up by the visual pyramid (Figure 2) of the hierarchies within sex work industry. The proximity to legality is reflective of the level of stigmatization, but it is important to remember that the law is not an adequate metric for what is right and wrong, especially within the US justice

Figure 2. "Hierarchy of Sex Work" visualizes the levels stigma between various job in the sex wok industry. The level of stigma also largely correlates to the intimacy of contact with clients and police, with more imtimate and criminalized sex work being at the bottom of the hierarchy (figure by author).

system which was founded on principles of racial capitalism and colonialism.

Further, violence against sex workers is carried out by police who work to sustain the very system that criminalized sex work in the first place. The criminalization of sex work goes beyond laws that make it illegal to trade sex for money, but rather is part of a larger apparatus of a settler-colonial state that functions from the construction of the "other" (Shumer-Smith and Hannam 1994, 74). Sex workers are designated as a social "other," as asserting bodily autonomy undermines patriarchal principles that uphold a system rooted in subjugation of the other and control over the body (McNay 1991, 131).

For these reasons, most sex workers are proponents of the decriminalization of sex work rather than the legalization of it. Legalization within an unjust system would exclude sex workers who are already marginalized, like people of color, disabled people, undocumented people or people who use drugs. Decriminalization would help to create safer working conditions because of a lessened fear of police violence and prosecution and it would improve access to health services as sex workers could seek safety and basic needs without the fear of being outed.

Stigmatization

The stigmatization of the sex industry is arguably just as harmful as the criminalization of it. Stigma produces harmful stereotypes of sex workers that dehumanize them, such as they are "dirty" or "diseased," they are drug users, or they are desperate for "degrading" themselves (Davidson 1987) (Relyea 1993). The idea that sex work is demeaning because it requires "selling your body," but other work like coal mining and farm work (workers whose bodies are literally degrading from working in toxic extractive industries) does not, is governed by stigma surrounding sex and sexuality.

It is necessary to situate sex work in the context of capitalism, in which all work is inherently exploitative because it is rooted in the idea that people only deserve to live if their bodies are profitable via labor. This means that sex workers are not responsible for

violence enacted towards them for doing a job to survive under capitalism (Figure 3). It also means that sex workers are not required to love their jobs or feel empowered by them.

When asked "What are your feelings about the work that you do?" interviewees responded:

"It's funny because, if I tell people that I'm a sex worker—or they somehow find out—one of their first questions is "Do you like it?" or "Do you feel empowered?" or something like that. But, honestly, questions like that are annoying and ignorant to me. Would you ask someone who does retail or customer service or other jobs like that if they like their job or feel empowered by it? Probably not because that would be weird. Most likely if someone told you they did other types of service or care jobs—just to be clear sex work is service/care work—like worked in a nursing home or was a waitress or a nanny, you wouldn't respond by asking if their job is empowering, or if they have ever considered finding a different job, or if they feel forced to work in that job. You would probably just be like "Okay, cool." Everyone is just doing their thing. Everyone is getting paid to do what they're good at to get by and live their life. Some people just happen to be good at caring for people and bringing comfort through sex."

"It's not really about whether or not I like the work itself. I feel like for so many people they don't actually like what they do in their jobs—it's the pay or hours that helps them decide if they like it or not. I like my job as a sex worker because it's flexible and it pays well. I get to practically be a stay-at-home mom. I sometimes make more money in a month than my spouse, who has a degree and a full-time job, does. It doesn't really matter how I feel about the work. I like it because it helps me be present with my family and comfortably support myself and them."

"*I personally love my job. I've been doing it full time for seven years now, and I've been able to pay off all my debts, travel the world, and save up enough money to buy property soon. This job has opened up so many worlds to me that I never thought I could be a part of. But I don't want to glorify or idealize stripping—or sex work in general—my job has been difficult in every way. But when I talk to my friends and family who are students or who have more traditional careers, they are struggling too! Emotionally, mentally, physically. Every job can be taxing. I just personally think the difficulty of my job has paid off, when with many other types of work that's not the case."*

Figure 3. "Cycle of Stigma" shows the cycle that results from sex work stigma (source: Living in Community).

As is the case with other types of work, some sex workers love their job, some are neutral, and some hate it. Further, stigma results in sex workers not being able to be completely open about their jobs with friends, family, doctors, and therapists about their lives and experiences causing social isolation, and puts them at increased risk of mental and physical illness.

Victimization

Stigma can take a different shape than outright shaming and dehumanization—it also can also reveal itself as a savior complex in which there is an assertion that sex workers need "saving." This is often enacted by advocating for increased policing and criminalizing of clients rather than sex workers themselves, which is problematic for two main reasons. First, by viewing an adult who consents to participate in sexual activities for payment as a victim, it is assumed that the person should not be choosing how to use their body, denying their right to bodily autonomy. Second, redirecting policing toward clients upholds the stigma that paying for sexual engagement is wrong and shameful, which reinforces harmful beliefs about sex and sexuality. Sex workers provide the service of being able to engage in sexual desires and experimentation in controlled environments with mutually agreed upon boundaries. To victimize sex workers and demonize clients is to deny both the right to safe spaces to explore sex and sexuality.

Community

Who are the sex workers in our own community? They are students, parents, people with "normal" jobs. They have never ceased to exist in Humboldt County, but are most often forced to conceal an entire part of their life out of fear of violence, legal repercussions, or stigma that could cost them their "normal" job, enrollment in school, or custody of their children. Our community can help to support sex workers by deconstructing personal beliefs and conceptions about what sex work is and who sex workers are. Decriminalization is urgent, but stigma is a more powerful force as it is upheld through social constructs and institutions that are going to outlive criminalization.

Destigmatization is a process that needs to happen now at the basic level of community showing up and fighting for sex workers rights and validating their work. This can happen by supporting sex workers by purchasing their services or content, listening to sex workers and amplifying their voice when they speak on their experiences, speaking out against police violence and criminalization of sex workers, speaking out against journalism and other sources of news that perpetuate stigma, and engaging in discussion about sex work in personal conversations and in the classroom.

Conclusion

Within geography, space can be used as a critical tool for understanding the ways in which social constructions are materially produced. What is deemed appropriate within private and public spaces is dictated by social norms that help to reproduce inequalities imposed by structures of domination. Sex workers are most often excluded from private and public spaces, as sex work is used to distinguish a boundary of a "moral code" of which sex workers cross the line and are not welcome in these spaces.

One of the most prominent examples is sex workers who are students are not able to be out of fear of backlash from their institution or stigmatization from their peers and professors from the assumption that sex workers are not also academics. Similarly, parents are often not able to be out as sex workers because it is assumed that being a sex worker somehow compromises one's ability to be a good parent. Another example, within the sex work community itself, is when strippers shame people for being FSSWers in the club. Even in digital space sex workers are being excluded, the 2018 FOSTA/SESTA bill being the most responsible for this by banning content by sex workers, suspending their social media accounts and bank accounts and deplatforming them. Exclusion of sex workers from spaces or forcing them to conceal a part of their life to be able to access certain spaces demonstrates the importance of analyzing sex work through the lens of geography and the spatial aspects of social justice.

Beyond physical and digital spaces, sex work is excluded in conversations surrounding labor, economic and feminist geographies. Sex tourism, urban sex work, and the historical relationship between sex work and industry are all topics that are important for understanding global and local labor patterns and economic processes and are able to be examined through a geographic lens. The intersections of sex work and race/gender/class/sexuality/ability/the body provide many opportunities for crucial analysis. With such a broad scope to study sex work, it is time to bring sex work into geographic research and discussion.

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