

# **COMMODIFICATION OF SEXUAL LABOR**



**COMMODIFICATION OF SEXUAL LABOR:  
THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERNET  
COMMUNITIES TO PROSTITUTION REFORM**

by

**Jeffrey R. Young**

DISSERTATION.COM



Boca Raton

*Commodification of Sexual Labor:  
The Contribution of Internet Communities to Prostitution Reform*

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Dissertation.com  
Boca Raton, Florida  
USA • 2015

ISBN-10: 1-61233-415-6  
ISBN-13: 978-1-61233-415-8

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the entire Comparative Studies faculty and Women's Studies Center for making an investigation like this possible, and especially my dissertation committee for supporting me in this controversial project: my dissertation chair, Mary Cameron for her expert ethnographic guidance; Robin Fiore for pushing me in the right direction; and Christine Scordari who has been a helpful instructor and advisor to me since my Master's thesis studies. I would also like to acknowledge Mike Budd for encouraging me to start on my graduate school adventure. Of course, this study would not have been possible if not for all who contributed to the board; or nearly as rewarding, if not for those who befriended me there. Sincere appreciation also goes to Buffy and Fernando Gandon for offering their beautiful farm and resort as a writing retreat. I would like to acknowledge my children, Ryan and Isabella, for their understanding when I was unavailable, and hope that my efforts may serve as encouragement to them as they pursue their intellectual potential. Finally, I would like express my deepest gratitude to Shereen Siddiqui, my dearest companion, who has been a part of this project from the beginning, for her frequent suggestions, encouragement, and inspiration.

## **Dedication**

*This manuscript is dedicated to my parents,  
Lois and Richard Young, for providing me  
the foundation to pursue a higher education.*

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

### Overview of Problem

Most feminists agree that successful prostitution reform requires that prostitutes be respected by their clients, peers, and the community. Although respect is not the only criterion necessary for acceptable reform, many feminists believe that the absence of stigma would be a sufficiently fundamental improvement to merit the reconsideration of policies that severely restrict prostitution. The aim of this study is to show that certain online prostitution venues contribute to acceptable prostitution reform by fostering trust and respect between the participants. My hypothesis is that when commercial sex is conducted in an open atmosphere of respect and mutual understanding, within certain economic parameters, beliefs and practices that stigmatize prostitutes and prostitution are potentially neutralized. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide evidence that prostitution can be facilitated online with trust and respect, identify the social and economic variables that contribute to these attitudes, and explain this phenomenon with a useful social science model.

Prostitution refers to two intricately related phenomena: the performance of a sexual act for money or material gain, and the stigma attached to devoting one's talents to an unworthy cause. The first characteristic is objective and commodifiable; the second is subjective and socially constructed. Selling sex is a paradox under patriarchy. The female prostitute is at the same time desired by men for her promiscuity and despised for it. Since she exists to serve the sexual desires of men, one might think she would be celebrated by them. But instead, she holds

one of the most reviled positions in society, disdained by both men and women. Not only is the social stigma a burden to her, but it is a burden that indirectly restricts the sexual freedom of all women. The prostitute is the “bad woman” in a binary system that bestows honor only to women who submit their bodies to a single man for free.

Prostitution as it is currently practiced is often degrading, exploitative, coercive, and stigmatizing. In addition, it is often the most economically and racially marginalized women who are forced by economic desperation to endure the worst of it. While feminists agree that prostitution under these conditions is unacceptable and legal changes are necessary to disrupt this type of treatment, there is sharp disagreement about how this can be accomplished. Despite the illegality of prostitution in all but several counties in Nevada, it is estimated that over 500,000 women living in the United States have worked illegally in the multi-billion dollar US sex industry as streetwalkers, hookers, escorts, and call girls (Reynolds 5, Meretrix 7, Miller 304). Many question the efficacy of existing laws in improving the conditions for prostitutes. Beyond concealing the visible aspects of prostitution on the street, there is substantial agreement that existing prohibitions make conditions worse for individual prostitutes by placing them outside protection of the law and making them more vulnerable to predators, in addition to compounding the social stigma against them.

“It is argued that prostitution is one form of women’s struggle to get paid for housework—by getting paid for the sexual services that all women are expected to give for free” (Truong 51). A woman’s sexual power consists of both reproductive and erotic power. The hegemony of patriarchy rests in commandeering these powers. Unlike men who gain economic and social power from most of their labor, the erotic and reproductive activities of women produce little exchange value for them. Although a woman’s sexual powers have traditionally had exchange value among men, these powers are, for the most part, forbidden from being used for explicit gain by women themselves. Neither reproductive nor erotic power is considered appropriate for legitimate market exchange. Although modern technology makes the commodification of erotic power and surrogacy quite feasible, we are reluctant to put a monetary value on these efforts. Consequently, because women spend a considerable amount of uncompensated time

involved in these activities compared to men, they end up with less economic power.

The stigma of prostitution is a byproduct of the Madonna/whore dichotomy used to usurp women's reproductive power. The effort to control a woman's reproductive power puts her at odds with her erotic power; a woman cannot be both chaste and sexually fulfilled—these qualities are mutually exclusive. She must choose between the life of the Madonna or the whore: sexual oppression or social outcast. A woman's opportunity cost for choosing to “mother” is the potential value of erotic power she forfeits. However, patriarchy squelches the social value of women's erotic power by denying it legitimate exchange value. Although the motivations for mothering and prostitution are, no doubt, quite different (even though many mothers are prostitutes), the physical resources for erotic and reproductive labor are surprisingly similar. Both require the same sexual endowments; youth is highly valued; both are considered “unskilled” labor; and the physical activity is the same. In this way, the resources for mothers and prostitutes compete with one another. A woman who chooses to mother forfeits what she could earn as a prostitute. Mothering and reproductive labor (which is priceless) is undervalued because its economic substitute (prostitution) is dishonorable, stigmatized, and often forbidden.

Devaluation of reproductive labor is at the core of the inequality between men and women. The responsibilities of child rearing and mothering occur at a crucial time in the career of a professional woman, who must leave the paid workforce to have children. Economic opportunities lost to mothers are often forfeited to men. The inability of women to prosper from the time and effort demanded by reproductive labor and mothering puts them at an economic disadvantage compared to men who do not have the burden of this uncompensated responsibility.

Criminalizing prostitution institutionalizes the “good girl/bad girl” dichotomy. Prostitution as a clandestine activity supports patriarchy. It fosters a belief that promotes a sexual double standard, proscribing the sexual freedom of women. The promiscuous activity of women is immoral under patriarchy because it undermines the roles of a good wife and mother (Schwarzenbach 118). While the physical act of sex-for-money is not necessarily any different than sex in any other context between consenting adults, it is still considered dishonorable. It is

not intrinsically immoral (such as murder), harmful (such as smoking), exploitative (such as wage labor), or oppressive (such as slavery). What is “wrong” with the concept of prostitution is not the physical act, but what it means—its social implications. Prostitution as an overt activity threatens the status quo. Acknowledging it as a legitimate occupation would diminish its stigma. According to many, “[d]ecriminalizing sex work supports the aim to break the power of patriarchy to divide [women] into good girls and bad girls, for not being able to divide [women] into good and bad girls can help free [them] from sex role stereotyping” (O’Neill).

Most feminists agree that the current practice of prostitution symbolizes gender inequality and that prostitutes should not be treated as criminals. However, there is sharp disagreement on whether the prostitute is a passive victim of patriarchy or a potential agent of social change, and whether to support prostitutes who want to be acknowledged as legitimate laborers. The problem is that individually, prostitution may be liberating for some women but may encode “meanings that are harmful to women as a class” (Fraser 179). While there is substantial agreement that decriminalization would benefit prostitutes, feminists are divided on how to decriminalize it, on the impact of decriminalization on its commodification, and on how such a policy might affect the majority of women who are not prostitutes. Their concern is about what increasing the commodification of sexual labor would mean to women generally. Many fear that legitimizing prostitution will simply make it easier for men to gain sexual access to women and exacerbate an already established practice of oppressive sexual domination.

Many contend that this fear would be diminished if the social attitudes and beliefs regarding prostitution were neutralized or “normalized” (Kuo 111, Anderson 749). Normalizing prostitution involves treating commercial sexual exchanges like other forms of personal-service-oriented labor. The first step toward normalization is decriminalization, so it can be freely exchanged in the market. Gayle Rubin suggests that “sex negativity” is a “dangerous, destructive, negative force” in opposition to normalization (278). She claims that most “[s]exual acts are burdened with an excess of significance” in Western cultures (279), and are particularly derogatory in regard to women. Because of these beliefs, actions that are associated with sex or sexuality are unjustly treated with special emphasis and

caution. Since, in most cultures, women are closely associated with sexual behavior, they are also treated as a “special case” of persons. Lenore Kuo writes that “sexuality and reproduction constitute one of the most important sources of and focuses of women’s oppression” (Kuo 112). She believes that this undue regard contributes to women’s oppression, and efforts to reduce the amount of attention given to sexual activities would benefit women. The commitment to normalize women’s sexuality underlies the efforts to de-mystify women’s bodies, exemplified in feminist works such as Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*.

However, according to many feminists who believe in reform, successful prostitution reform requires more than legal measures. Legal reforms must be accompanied by changes in attitudes and practices that surround the current practice of prostitution. In order for prostitution reform to be successful, attitudes toward sex and women must be normalized. Kuo argues that “women will never be normalized until sex is normalized, and sex will never be normalized until prostitution is normalized” (2). Normalizing prostitution “would involve elimination of both stigma and mystification while requiring only that sexual activity be consensual, mutually respectful, and demonstrate a genuine concern for the well-being and pleasure of others” (117).

Unfortunately, what makes sense in theory does not always work in practice. The problem is that there is little empirical evidence to support those who advocate normalization because decriminalizing prostitution rarely results in free market exchange of sexual labor. Since the unregulated exchange of sex for money does not exist (because free exchange cannot exist in an environment in which sexual providers are stigmatized), no one knows for sure what to expect from a *laissez-faire* environment under conditions comparable to those under which other personal services are exchanged. Attempts to decriminalize prostitution have resulted in “legalized” prostitution, not open exchange. While legalized prostitution, as found in state-sponsored brothels, often results in some benefit to prostitutes over criminalized regimes, sex workers have little control over their working conditions or pay. State-regulated brothels are operated in ways that are degrading, humiliating, and exploitative to women. This is evidenced by the fact that legalized brothels in the United States have difficulty getting any women to work for them. Many prostitutes find the risks of working illegally more attractive

than the safety of working legally. Although there is almost uniform agreement that the social stigma against prostitutes both reflects and reinforces the ideology most responsible for the oppression of women under patriarchy, and that criminalization regimes do more harm than good to prostitutes, reforming prostitution policy alone has proven unsuccessful.

## **The Subjects**

The personal circumstances of prostitutes differ greatly. A woman who has the power to choose who she sees, what she will do (or not do), when she works, and how much she will charge may see prostitution as a more attractive option than a woman who has little control over these variables. Compare a runaway teenager supporting her boyfriend's drug habit with little choice about who she sees, to the college student working from a private condominium seeing clients through trusted referrals and free to refuse any offer (Satz 65). The former has few alternatives, benefiting from only a small portion of her earnings, feeling trapped, exploited and ashamed of how she must live; the latter may earn more than her peers and have a more flexible work schedule. Although many contend that no woman could ever "choose" prostitution as a career any more than a parent would wish it for his or her daughter, some prostitutes have much more control and agency than others.

Electronic technology has brought prostitution from the margins of society to the middle class. The mobility afforded by pagers and cell phones liberated prostitutes from brothels, while anonymity and low cost internet marketing emancipated prostitutes from pimps and police. These changes have made prostitution a viable option for many young, middle class women who would not have considered it before. Nowadays, it is not only more accessible to a larger number of middle class men, but it has adopted middle class values and a sense of justice in the way it is practiced. These factors allow prostitutes to have more control over who they see, what they do, and where they do it.

This investigation is limited to exchanges voluntarily negotiated between consenting heterosexual adults. It does not apply to sexual services performed by a

child or anyone forced or tricked into performing sexual services. These acts constitute sexual abuse. In addition, cases in which someone is held against her will, or put in a position where she feel she has no alternative but to prostitute herself, constitute slavery. Prostitution, sexual abuse, and slavery exist independently of each other. In order to study prostitution as a distinct social practice, it is necessary to try to isolate it from situations that include sexual abuse or slavery, to the extent possible, as well as from collateral practices such as criminal activities, that also exist independently. While it may not be possible to study prostitution independent of patriarchy except in the mind's eye, it can be observed away from some of these other harmful social practices.

This study focuses on prostitutes referred to as “escorts.” Many escorts, or “call girls,” are middle class women who work for an agency that arranges appointments for them by advertising in the telephone book, Internet, local classified ads, and other media. In exchange for the agency providing “dates” and some measure of protection by screening clients and monitoring each girl's whereabouts, the women give about half of the money paid to them by their clients to the agency owners.

Independent escorts are self-employed. They do not split their earnings with an agency but keep all the revenue they earn for themselves. The independent escort is both a prostitute and a business owner. She is both the commodity and its manager, soliciting for business, collecting the money, and making arrangements to protect herself from harm. Because she is self-employed, the independent escort is likely to be the least exploited class of prostitute. She may also be the most cognizant because she must be persistent about all of the peripheral duties required to run a business that only someone with a serious commitment can do well for long. The typical escort has a high school education; some have college experience. She is selective about who she sees, she decides what kind of services she performs, and she may refuse to see anyone with whom she is not comfortable.

Many of the female participants in this study have previously worked for an escort agency, and some still do. Working for an agency is preferable for some women because it does not require the experience or commitment that an independent escort must have to be successful. In a Marxist sense, independent escorts are subject to less worker exploitation than women employed by an

agency. Although the working environment is usually identical, the independent escort has more control over who she sees, when she works, and what services she provides.

## **Organization of Study**

This is an ethnographic study of a self-regulated Internet site that facilitates illegal female prostitution in South Florida. The purpose is to identify the social and economic characteristics of the site that can contribute to acceptable prostitution reform. The members of the site appear to sustain an orderly and mutually respectful exchange of sexual services for money, suggesting that certain social and economic features of this form of transaction diminish barriers otherwise present in typical forms of contemporary prostitution exchange. The study is designed to evaluate the thesis that when commercial sex is conducted in an open atmosphere of respect and mutual understanding, within certain economic parameters, beliefs and practices that stigmatize prostitutes and prostitution are potentially neutralized. Evidence is generated through extensive observation of an online venue that appears to approximate what prostitution would be like if open market exchange in sexual labor did exist. These data are supplemented by interviews with prostitutes from the online community. Features of mutual respect and understanding, characteristically absent in traditional prostitution venues, appear to be part of an emerging community phenomenon that facilitates prostitution online. Thus, this study engages with the larger scholarly position that the normalization of sex work is necessary for successful prostitution reform.

This study examines a venue that more closely approximates *laissez-faire* conditions of sexual exchange than government-sponsored legalized regimes have been able to produce. It seeks to determine if the specific economic and social conditions under study can contribute positively to successful prostitution reform. Feminists are divided on whether to support prostitution as a legitimate form of work. It has been suggested that legal reforms are necessary for social reform to be successful, and that those forms of sexual commodification that encourage respect and mutual understanding may be effective.

The aim is to determine if any aspects of this community can be applied to a more just public policy.

This study applies knowledge and methods from several academic disciplines, including anthropology, economics, ethnography, law, philosophy, and women's studies. Each of these disciplines approach its subject from a unique perspective and provides valuable techniques for investigating phenomenon. Utilizing a variety of perspectives is especially valuable for studying prostitution because it is not a single practice, but one that can be practiced in a variety of ways, circumstances, and outcomes. An interdisciplinary approach can be more sensitive to the various dimensions of prostitution and is better equipped to acknowledge those insights that are most applicable to the problem at hand. Consequently, contributions from a number of academic perspectives are used to inform the study and analyze the data in an effort to discover the best approach to addressing this issue.

The research effort consists of two aspects, a theoretical discussion and an ethnographic study. Chapter one introduces the research problem. Chapter two frames the feminist debate regarding prostitution reform. Chapter three explains the grounded research methodology used to collect the data. Chapter four examines the social aspects of commodification and how it can affect both the participants and the objects of exchange in order to better understand the current legal and social justifications for prohibiting sexual commerce. It draws on legal, philosophical, and feminist scholars' writings on prostitution, as well as on the voices of current and former prostitutes who have expressed an interest in the political reform of prostitution policy in the United States. In doing so, it establishes a framework with a set of assumptions about why prostitution exists, who it serves, what types of behavior the current social environment promotes, and what an ideal prostitution policy might be. Four of the questions it attempts to answer are:

1. How does money transform the context of consensual sex from one of the most natural and pleasurable of activities into one that demands prohibition?
2. What are the social, economic, and legal justifications for prohibiting prostitution from free market exchange?

3. What is it about the open exchange of sex for money that makes it bad or wrong, especially for women?
4. What would constitute prostitution reform for those who believe that prostitution reform is possible?

The second part is an ethnographic account of the site using a grounded theory approach. The purpose of chapter five is to present empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that when commercial sex is conducted in an open atmosphere of respect and mutual understanding, within certain economic parameters, beliefs and practices that stigmatize prostitutes and prostitution are potentially neutralized. The methods employed to collect the data include participant and non-participant observation (lurking, posting, emailing, and chatting) and face-to-face interviews to describe and study the community of participants who come together at Indygirls.com. (The website of the subject venue has been changed, as well as the names of all participants and locations.) The data consists primarily of discussion threads posted at the Internet site in addition to data collected from personal interviews and observations. This data is presented in terms of a number of themes outlined in the table of contents that describe the social structure: communication, risk management, initiative, personal agency and goals, money and commodification, and hobbyist's attitudes. The goal is to sketch a picture of this community and its participants as both buyers and sellers, as individual men and women, and to identify how this community is able to maintain a safe and orderly environment for commercial sex, which has been difficult to achieve by intentional legalized regimes.

Chapter six discusses the data and attempts to model the interactions using game theory in order to show how the themes identified contribute to the unique and admirable characteristics of the sexual exchanges that take place among the community members. This analysis reveals the presence of a non-legal enforcement mechanism at the site, describes how it encourages good behavior through trust and respect, and explains why it is dependent on open communication and the absence of coercion, (based on principles of game and signaling theory used by social scientists and animal behaviorists' to model human and animal interactions). The model presented is helpful for understanding why this particular

social formation results in the attitudes and behaviors found at the site that tend to minimize mistrust, disrespect, and stigmatization and why legal regimes that prohibit or severely proscribe prostitution have the opposite effect.

Chapter seven summarizes the study's findings by answering the research questions below, discusses the study's application to prostitution reform as well as its limitations, and sets out a heuristic trajectory for further research. In particular, it addresses the questions:

1. What are the social and economic mechanisms that appear to make the venue unique?
2. Are the transactions as orderly and mutually respectful as they appear? Are the beliefs and practices that stigmatize prostitutes absent at the site? And do the conditions at Indygirls.com approximate a free market?
3. Do the exchanges facilitated at Indygirls.com constitute reform acceptable to those feminists who believe that prostitution reform is possible?
4. Can the findings be applied to other prostitution venues in order to advance prostitution reform policy?



## Chapter II

# Literature Review and Theoretical Background

### Historical Context of Prostitution

Prostitution exists in every patriarchal society. A written record of it goes back over 2500 years. In ancient Greece, prostitution was legal and accepted as a legitimate sexual outlet, and men had no reason to feel ashamed about it. According to Hamel, prostitutes in Greece provided a necessary service because unmarried men had few other options for intimate relations with women. For the most part, respectable women of ancient Greece were confined to their home, and even there, were permitted very little contact with males who were not their relatives. Other than slaves and homosexual men, the unmarried man of Greece had few alternatives to prostitutes and although prostitutes were highly stigmatized, the practice that men enjoyed was generally “sanctioned by popular opinion” (Hamel 13–14). In ancient Greece, there was no mystery about who prostitutes and their clients were, or what motivated them, because prostitution was not considered a deviant behavior, but a necessary alternative for many men and unfortunate women.

Street prostitutes in designated areas of the city painted their faces and dressed in provocative clothes to attract the attention of potential customers. Some, who were often slaves, even wore shoes with soles that left an imprint in the dusty streets spelling out erotic messages such as “follow me.” “A man who *did* follow might be led to some out-of-the-way place outdoors—an alleyway, for example, or some other semi-private location—where for a small sum his hired girl would quickly take care of him” (Hamel 5). Nearby, other women worked in