

**A “PERVERSION” OF CHOICE:
SEX WORK OFFERS *JUST ENOUGH* IN CHICAGO’S URBAN GHETTO**

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ABSTRACT

In an apartment building on Chicago's Southside, fifty of the seventy-five residents are sex workers. Our study uses in-depth interviews and participant observation of Chicago's sex work economy to argue that sex work is one constituent part of an overall low-wage, off-the-books economy of resource exchange among individuals in a bounded geographic setting. To an outsider, the decision to be a sex worker seems irrational; in this paper we argue that specific localized conditions invert this decision and render it entirely rational. For the men and women in our study, sex work acts as a short-term solution that satisfies the demands of persistent poverty and instability, and it provides a meaningful option in the quest for a job that provides autonomy and personal fulfillment.

Keywords: Sex work . Prostitution . Informal economy . Low-wage labor. Ethnography .

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the ways in which sex work has become a solution to the employment needs of the urban poor. We argue that sex work is a constituent part of an overall low-wage economy. Individual decisions to participate in sex work are framed in relation to other economic opportunities—including legal and off-the-books work. The data for the study is based on in-depth interviews and participant observation of Chicago’s sex work economy over a year-long period.

What makes someone turn to sex work? To an outsider, the decision to be a sex worker in the ghetto may seem irrational, particularly given the nature of the work, the risks and stigma associated with it, and the low rate of remuneration (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006; Venkatesh 2006, Miller 1986). We suggest that in specific social contexts of limited labor market opportunities, this decision can be rational. For the men and women in our study, sex work offers a viable solution to the problem of income generation. Many view this segment of the underground economy as both a survival mechanism and as preferable relative to other available opportunities to earn income.

Our inquiry into sex work proceeds from the vantage point of low-wage labor. We do not see sex work as only a social problem that begs enforcement, policy, advocacy, and so on. Sex workers in the ghetto are certainly in need of assistance—many are impoverished, homeless, drug addicted, and involved in other dangerous activities. The challenge, however, is to see sex workers as more than simply victims—an outcome of the social problems approach. Our aim is to document the ways in which sex workers’ choices are framed by a context of opportunities for earnings and self-efficacious behavior.

The women and men we studied have not been not forced into sex work, at least not overtly, and they do not have pimps. And, over the course of a month or year, they will

move back and forth from sex work to other employment. We seek to understand the factors that push them into sex work. The men and women explained to us that sex work offers *just enough* money, stability, autonomy, and professional satisfaction. In other words, it meets a basic level of satisfaction of needs.

In the struggle to make ends meet, compromises must be made; sex work – although risky in many ways – is an attractive option because it allows sex workers to provide for themselves and their families in a situation of limited resources and job opportunities. We will argue that the sex work offers just enough money and flexibility to make the job worthwhile, and just enough autonomy and professional satisfaction to make it more attractive than other options.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for the study was gathered over the course of 12 months. We adopted several qualitative research techniques. At the core, the study is an ethnography of sex work in a bounded geographic fieldsite. One of the authors (Venkatesh) has been conducting participant observation in the Southside of Chicago for nearly two decades. The focus on sex work emerged out of his overall study of underground economies.

For this project, both authors conducted participant observation in the immediate residential facility in which the sex workers live and operate (see below for a description of the Parkside building). For two years, we observed the interactional styles and customs of those in our sample, trying to gain trust and establish confidence. It was also during this time that we identified the initial sample, and after that point, we continued to observe their behavior in the neighborhood-- their relationships with police, their use of service providers, their work in the legitimate labor market, etc.

Alongside the participant observation, we conducted formal one-on-one interviews. Our interview sample consists of 38 subjects, 7 of whom are male, 31 female. All are African American. The ages of the men and women in our sample range from 21 to 56, with a median and average age of 35. We note this age composition because the findings from this research may be different than those studies that have focused on runaways, teenagers, and other youth-based populations who encounter the sex work economy (Bagley 1997; Barret 1998; Bell 1998; Brown 1978, Halldorson, 1987; Inciardi 1989; McIntyre 1999, Silbert 1982).

We chose men and women who had established their residence in a low-income apartment building-- the Parkside-- in the community of Washington Park, in the city's Southside. Some paid rent, others slept in hallways, or in another resident's apartment; all conducted their trade in and around the building. In the Parkside building itself, there are forty apartment units spread over three floors. Seventy-five people live there (although there are more who are not reported on the lease). We conducted a survey of families and determined that while the listed rent is between \$320 to \$525, most people paid either \$380 per month or \$460 per month, depending on the size of their apartment. We note that fifty of the seventy-five men and women in the building report currently practicing sex work. Thus we were not able to interview every sex worker in the building. Moreover, we are not able, through our methods, to establish with certainty that our sample is similar in all respects to those who we failed to interview. However, we do not believe that many significant differences exist.

The Washington Park community area, in which the Parkside building is based, contains 14,146 residents, 97.5 percent of whom are black (non-Latino). The median yearly household income of Washington Park is \$15,215 for the total population or \$14,944 for

Blacks; compared to \$38,625 total or 29,086 for Blacks in all of Chicago. The percentage of Black children who live in single-mother households (of those who live in households with related guardians) is 60.2%, compared to 45.60% in the city of Chicago. Only 22.3% of Black children (of those who live in households with related guardians) live in a “married-couple family.” According to the Chicago Police Department Report, in 2004 there were 3204 arrests of prostitution, 950 of which were solicitors, the rest were sex workers.

The atmosphere in the Parkside is not unlike a college dorm. A walk up the stairs finds people chatting, sharing stories, drinking beer and dealing drugs in the stairwell. Everyone seems to have a basic level of familiarity with each other. Worn and weathered green doors frame each tenant’s apartment; long hallways are interrupted by these studio apartments and bathrooms. Across the street is a large park where the sex workers can find customers. In addition to their rooms, stairwells and hidden areas of the building, an alleyway in the back of the building hosts illicit trading that includes sex work, gambling, and drug trafficking as well as car repair and the sale of food, clothing and stolen goods.

A range of people from the wider Washington Park community will show up at the Parkside to traffic in sex and drugs. James, a 53 year-old man who has never lived in the building, but comes regularly for “business,” by which he means to meet clients and sell sex, explains his impression of the building:

“Every female that you see walking by here, and some guys, are prostitutes.”

“So this is a spot where people meet each other, even if they don’t live in the building?”

“Yeah, this is a happy spot...this place is ‘off the chain’, that’s slang language for ‘that’s wild.’”

THE LITERATURE: THE MOTIVATION BEHIND SEX WORK

Prostitution has been a widely studied field of interest. Feminists have theorized the philosophical implications of “selling one’s body” and debated the implications of sex work for women (Barry 1979, 1995; Bernstein 2001; Chapkis 1997; Dworkin 1987; Klinger 2003; MacKinnon 1987; Satz 1995). Policymakers have debated the legal issues of sex work and prostitution (Alexander 1979; Decker 1979; Delacoste and Alexander, 1998; Farley 2004; McLaren and Lowman 1990). More recently, sex workers themselves have been included in the conversation about their work (Bell 1987; Delacoste and Alexander 1998; Nagle 1997; Pheterson 1986).

Scholars have offered many explanations for why women and men turn to sex work. A commonly cited factor is psychological. Several studies argue that sexual abuse makes women more “susceptible” to sex work because they have learned to separate their emotions from their sexual activity (James and Meyerding 1977; Miller 1986). Thus, they are more easily able to earn a living using their bodies. The Center for Impact Research conducted a study in which 57 percent of women working as prostitutes in the state reported they were sexually abused as children (Raphael and Shapiro 2004). Other findings from this study suggest that over 90 percent experienced their first sexual encounter through assault, and 70 percent linked being sexually abused as children to their subsequent entrance into sex work. Similarly, a study by the National Criminal Justice Reference Service found that people who were sexually abused as children are 27.7 times more likely than others to be arrested for prostitution (Scott 2001). We should note, however, that there are comparatively fewer studies that argue that there is no direct causal relationship between sexual abuse and prostitution—for example, two groups of scholars posit that the link lies instead between runaways and sex work (Nandon et al. 1998; Simons and Whitbeck 1991).

We acknowledge that there are complex psychological motivations for entering sex work. Some of the men and women in our study did experience sexual abuse as children, and this may have been a factor in their turn to sex work. However, in the interviews they did not place considerable emphasis on this part of their biography and so, we hope to supplement the psychological view—even challenging it on occasion—by looking at various social structural elements that inform their decisions. We note that we are interested in the subjective decision-making making process.

There are some studies suggesting that drug use forms the basis for a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty and sex work (Hwang 2004; Scott 2001). These researchers identify a vicious cycle whereby the need for drugs forces individuals to turn to sex work—either to acquire money to buy drugs or to trade sexual favors directly for narcotics. In one study, drugs disempowered the sex workers by making them feel unworthy of doing much of anything else (Hwang 2004). This theory is particularly relevant to our study, as drug use seems to be a significant impediment to finding a job in the formal economy for the men and women in our sample. As we will show below, drug use, like sex work, can also be interpreted as a symptom of larger issues that plague marginal populations in inner cities.

One strand of feminism has removed much of the agency from sex workers, emphasizing their role as victims, even while claiming to fight for women’s rights. This radical feminist perspective claims that violence, exploitation, victimization, and gender subordination run through all forms of prostitution (Barry 1995; Dworkin 1982; MacKinnon, 1987). Adherents to this view use terms such as “*prostituted women*”, “*Sex slaves*”, or “*survivors*” (Jeffreys 1997, 330). These authors tend to underplay the possibility for agency and self-efficacy on the part of the sex worker. Prostitution is something that happens *to* them; women do not choose to be sex workers. In the extreme case, prostitution

is equated with rape (Giobbe 1991), or “paid rape” (Raymond 1998). This viewpoint also tends to ignore the opinions of women who, in accordance with Zatz’s finding, say that they have chosen the work “out of satisfaction with the control it gives them over their sexual interactions” (1997, 291).

Others have critiqued the radical feminist perspective for having little empirical substantiation (Weitzer 2005, 212; Monto 2004). And in reaction, third wave feminists have tried to advance an entirely different view of sexuality. That is, for women to be liberated sexually, they must be able to live as they choose, to break out of narrow ideas of sexuality imposed upon them by others. Thus, feminism and sex work are not mutually exclusive. In this perspective, choice is key: women need to have the right and freedom to choose how to live their lives as sexual beings, which includes prostitution (Klinger 2003, 16). Scholars adhering to this view make an important distinction between adult women who *freely* choose sex work, and those women and girls who are forced into it through trafficking or kidnapping or other methods. This distinction is relevant to our study, as the subjects in our sample are over eighteen, state that they were not forced into sex work,¹ and work independently of a manager or pimp.

This strand of third-wave feminism also tries to turn the subordination argument on its head, by arguing that sex work can paradoxically empower women: “the exchange [of sexual services] confirms and guarantees each time the man’s apparent economic mastery over the woman’s sexuality, work, and time... the moment of paying confirms precisely opposite: the man’s dependence on the woman’s sexual power and skill” (McClintock 1992, 72). In other words, women can exercise some agency in the sex work arrangement by

¹ This is not to say that poverty cannot act as a form of coercion; however, it is important to consider the aspect of choice in the profession.

controlling the service that is being offered. Furthermore, as Gail Pheterson has pointed out, most sex workers do not sleep with anyone and everyone – they select their clients based on a given set of criteria, whether that be money, appearance, type of work requested, or other (Pheterson 1993, 39).

The very use of the term “sex work” may be seen as a means by which to provide agency to those in the trade. It is an alternative to “prostitution,” which carries various pejorative connotations, stigma, and expectations. In 1987, Alexander and Delacoste edited and published *Sex Work*, one of the first anthologies that included writing by sex workers themselves, legitimizing their work as employment. *Sex Work*, “sought to create a space where “prostitution” was not automatically associated with exploitation; in fact, after publication of *Sex Work*, “sex work” became the preferred term – among progressive feminists, academics, and the workers themselves” (Alexander and Delacoste 1998, 11). This definition emphasizes that sex work – when freely chosen -- is employment like any other job and many sex workers prefer the terms: “Sex worker” and “working woman” to prostitution (Kurtz et al. 2004, 359). Margo St James, founder of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), a Sex Workers Union claims that there is a “profound misconception that people have about prostitution is that it is ‘sex for sale,’ or that a prostitute is selling her body. In reality, a prostitute is being paid for her time and skill” (St. James and Alexander 1977).

Furthermore, for many men and women, sex work is not only a legitimate form of employment, but it can be a career. A recent study by Murphy and Venkatesh shows that as a result of the crack-down on the sex industry in New York city under Giuliani, a large number of sex workers moved indoors and subsequently began to think much more of sex

work as a long term vocation, offering mobility opportunities similar to other fields (Murphy and Venkatesh 2006).

Another set of studies focuses on financial incentive as the primary motivation for women to enter sex work. (Miller 1986; Brown 1979; James and Meyerding 1976; Laner 1974). Financial necessity leads women and men to take the job most readily available which, for those living in the inner city, is often sex work. Delacoste and Alexander assert that sex work is consistently available to women while other jobs are not (1998). One is reminded here of the phrase employed by Margo St. James: “a blow job is better than no job.”

Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein describe a common scenario identified in studies of employment and poverty, namely one wherein semi and un-skilled single mothers struggle to make ends meet, cycling between low-wage labor and welfare (Edin and Harris 1993; Harris and Edin 1996; Pavetti 1992). They find that mothers with jobs in the formal market spend twice as much a month on expenses like childcare, transportation, housing, and medical costs as mothers receiving welfare. In this context, one can imagine that some women might opt for a third possibility – i.e., a job outside the formal market that would allow them to continue receiving welfare. Our study argues that sex work is such an option. Here we point to Eleanor Miller’s work, which situates prostitution within the larger context of hustling and street life in her study of female hustlers in Milwaukee (Miller 1986, 1989). She argues that women who become sex workers can feel a sense of agency in that they are providing a service and earning a wage for it. Their perception of agency leads them both to ignore some of the disadvantages of sex work and to downplay the relative advantages of legal employment that might pay roughly the same wages.

In a study by Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006) entitled, “It’s the Money, Honey” -- conducted around the same time as our own -- the authors came similar conclusions for a

sample of sex workers in three maritime cities in Canada. They argue, that when faced with the choice between low-wage legitimate labor and informal labor such as sex work, the men and women in their study made choices, carefully weighing their options, based on such factors as money, independence, and flexibility. Within this context, sex work was simply a more feasible option. We apply this framework to our data. The sex workers in our sample overwhelmingly preferred sex work to a low-wage formal job, for reasons to be discussed in greater depth later on.

We hope to shift the debate concerning women's subordination through exploitative sex work toward a focus on explaining why poor men and women in Chicago turn to sex work instead of other low-wage labor markets, and what keeps them in this line of work. For our purposes, it is both appropriate and revelatory to discuss the genders together, although they face different circumstances in the economy.

Building on these observations, we suggest that when women and men cannot find work in the formal market, they turn to illegal pursuits.² The notion of "perverse integration"³ describes how structural forces marginalize certain peoples, rendering their decisions to enter the informal and criminal sectors paradoxically rational. In the case of the

² Numerous studies have pointed out that sex work is also at the bottom of the underground economy's social ladder (Miller, 1986; Venkatesh, forthcoming 2006). It is among the most dangerous of jobs in the informal labor market, and offers the least benefit. Thus, although women and men may enter in sex work because of the perceived financial benefits, in reality the financial benefits are not necessarily greater in the illicit market (Venkatesh 2006; Miller 1986; Brown 1979).

³ *Perverse integration* is a term coined by Manuel Castells in his book *The Rise of the Fourth World*. The Fourth world is not a geographic location, but the group of people who are marginalized in all societies, forced to earn a living in the informal or "criminal" economy.

sex workers in our study, it may seem that men and women take enormous risks, but they do so for two understandable reasons which we will discuss below.

THE PERVERSION OF CHOICE

In this section, we explore how the choice of sex work becomes a viable option in this community. We highlight three main factors: the structural factor of a tight job market, particularly for poor inner-city African-Americans; the community context which legitimizes the decision to turn to sex work; and most importantly, the ways in which sex work emerges as a *better* option relative to others available, satisficing the needs of the sex workers by providing them with *just enough*.

Our notion of decision-making, which we call the *just enough* explanation, attempts to place agency at the center. When outside factors come into play – such as limited resources, education, information, or limited time – pure rationality is not possible, and so individuals makes decisions using “bounded rationality,” producing quick solutions in the immediate, local environment that enables them to solve a problem or choose among alternatives, even though the solution or choice is not necessarily optimal or desirable in the abstract. The solution or choice, to utilize the active phrasing, “satisfices.”⁴ With this idea of bounded rationality, we argue that the men and women in our sample turn to sex work as a means of satisficing the problems and challenges posed by their position in the labor market. Sex work offers *just enough* to meet their requirements for a job; it offers them some money, some stability, a certain amount of autonomy, and even some sense of self-worth.

⁴ Here we draw on a concept developed by Herbert Simon, that of “satisficing”; the word is a combination of “satisfy” and “suffice.”

Jobs in the ghetto

In his book, *When Work Disappears*, William Julius Wilson discusses the disappearance of employment opportunities for poor black men and women in the inner city. The disappearance of work in many inner-city neighborhoods is in part related to the nationwide decline in the fortunes of low-skilled workers. Changes in the class, racial, and demographic composition of inner-city neighborhoods contributed to the high percentage of jobless adults who continue to live there. Wilson paints a picture of “the new urban poverty” (Wilson 1996, 19) referring to poor segregated neighborhoods where the majority of working-aged individuals are unemployed or are not part of the formal labor force. He emphasizes social psychological factors in addition to the cultural and social structural factors in explaining the current situation of inner-city joblessness and poverty. “The problems reported by the residents of poor Chicago neighborhoods are not a consequence of poverty alone. Something far more devastating has happened that can only be attributed to the emergence of concentrated and persistent joblessness and its crippling effects on neighborhoods, families, and individuals” (Wilson 1996, 17).⁵

The testimonies of the men and women in our sample confirm their exclusion from the mainstream job market. Ricky, a 32 year-old man states: “If I could do it differently I would have finished school, gone on to more school, probably gone on to college. Without

⁵ Although the unemployment rate in Chicago seems to be on the decline in recent years, it exceeds the national average. The general African-American population as well as the population of Washington Park are hit especially hard. In Chicago, 10% of those in the labor force are unemployed, and 55% of those unemployed are Black. In Washington Park, 24.60% of the labor force is unemployed. All statistics are from the 2000 census. See appendix for more statistics.

an education I cant really do nothing. If I could have a job in the office, but make the same money, I'd take the job.” Many of the sex workers in our study have concrete ideas about what kind of job they would want if they had the opportunity. In response to the question, ““If you could stop [sex work] right now what would you do?” Sherry says, “I would start my own hair business.” “What’s keeping you from getting a job in the hair business?” “I haven’t been to school. I have an ID problem. I don’t have ID. You need ID to get ID. What kind of fucked up shit is that.” Tracy says, “I have felonies and it’s hard for me to find work. If I get my background expunged than maybe I can find work.”

Where jobs are not readily available, Wilson suggests that the urban poor become used to unemployment, such that joblessness becomes a mindset (see Wilson 1996, 52-53). People no longer have much hope when they look for work in venues where they, their parents, and their peers have been rejected so many times. They stop looking altogether—a common state for the men and women in our sample, many of whom state that they will experience weeks or months without actively searching for work.

Community context legitimizes sex work

The personal accounts of the sex workers in our sample indicate the importance of peer influence on their own individual choice. That is, when the time comes for them to start earning money, they look at role models and peers to see what their options are. Here are two statements below, the first is from Tracy, a 46 year-old woman who has two grown children and has lived with her fiancé for 17 years, whom she met first as a client. The second is from Amber, a 21 year-old woman who used to work at MacDonald’s, and plans to stop doing sex work when she has a husband and children.

I had friends. I saw them doing it. Also, I have people in my family who did it so hustling has been around me. People in my family did it, I just never did. I had aunts who did it. They never talked about it to me directly, but I heard them talking about it. They know that I do it. My kids know. It's not hard to talk about. They know they have to eat, they know I gotta put food on the table.

I started when I was 17. I wasn't nervous or anything, I just wanted the money. I'm a strong person. The job didn't intimidate me, I was just doing it for the money. I saw what everyone else was doing, and I thought that I needed money. So I started.

These two women told us that they realized sex work was an option at a young age, and they were constantly encountering other women who viewed hustling on the streets as an acceptable way to make ends meet. The result was sex work seemed feasible as an employment choice. Furthermore, many women and men in our sample stated that before they began doing sex work, they were propositioned by passers-by on the street. This repeated propositioning eventually led them to consider the trade. For example, Jo, 34 year-old woman with three children at home, recounts what led to her first experience doing sex work:

I'm walking down the street one day, you know, smoking...and a car pulled over, and I'm like, damn, you know, for sensual, for, you know [sex]... "Do you think it often happens that way?" I'm not gonna say a hundred percent, but I believe it's a lot of times when females be walking down the street when they first get started...

It is interesting to note that the men and women in our sample do not often express being in dire situations when they began sex work. Sherry, a 44 year-old woman who does not have children, explains how she entered the trade:

I've been doing it all my life. It first started on my 21st birthday. I just tried it. I was just curious. You know if I'm curious about something I'll try it out. I was just curious. The first time it was nothing. I didn't know what I was looking for. I wasn't nervous. I don't know if I liked it, I didn't know what to look for. On my 22nd birthday I tried it again.

Sherry and Priscilla did not engage in sex work out of desperation, which is in sharp contrast to conventional academic and popular wisdom. Sherry needed money—not unusual for young persons—which pushed her to look for work. Sex work was among the options readily available to her in the community. She knew of many others around her sold sexual services. In this way, sex work became a plausible option. Nearly all of the men and women in the sample point out similar circumstances in their personal histories.

Sex work satisfices: job flexibility and autonomy

For some, sex work is a *better* option than others that are available. It is useful to briefly consider one of the other readily available occupations open to men and women in this community, namely the fast food industry. Newman's work on low income New Yorkers sheds light on the job situation for men and women in the inner city. She discusses the stigma attached to the fast-food industry, and argues that: "Even though we honor the gainfully employed over the unemployed, all jobs are not created equal. Fast food jobs, in particular, are notoriously stigmatized and denigrated" (Newman 1999, 89). The men and

women in our sample confirmed that the nature of fast food work renders it highly distasteful. Ricky described his experience at the fast-food restaurant.

I tried working at Popeyes, it was difficult. Because I was a man they expected me to do all this stuff ... The money wasn't even that good. I worked there for four months. I don't like people being in charge of me. That's what I like about this job, I'm in charge of myself, nobody is my boss. If I want to take a day off, I can, I can take a day off. I don't need to call anybody or anything like that. When you know the money is good you work [doing sex work], at Popeye's I was making minimum wage.

Ricky suggests that minimum wage was simply not sufficient to justify the work that he was doing at Popeye's. Tom, a 36 year-old father of eight, also explains that his old job waiting tables "was pretty frustrating, I had to deal with big crowds of people who were rude."

The men and women in our sample tend to live at a basic level of sustenance. When asked what was the primary benefit one can derive from sex work, the answer most often given was "the money." The workers in our sample reported earning somewhere between 10 and 50 dollars per client (for about 30 minutes with the customer), the majority earned in the 20 – 30 dollar range. If they see about 10 clients a week on average, they can earn about 200 – 300 dollars a week. From a middle class standard, this is not a substantial amount of money. However, this amount must be compared to other viable employment opportunities for low-income workers. For example, these wages from sex work are substantially higher (per hour) than a formal low-wage job such as McDonalds—and to earn at this rate, the men and women work far fewer hours. They are earning just enough to support themselves, the same amount of money as they would in a formal job. But combined with the *flexibility* that

sex work allows them, sex work satisfies their practical need for income in a way that a formal job would not.

The flexibility that sex work offers is important for the urban poor because they may not have a permanent residence and their households are constantly under economic pressure. Therefore they look for work that allows for the erratic and unstable nature of their daily lives. In fact, for many it was the flexibility of sex work that propelled them into the trade. Ricky explains:

I was about 15 when I started hustling. I've been doing this continuously since I started. I started hustling on the street...When I first started it was once in a while. When I got older, and I started needing stuff, I knew this was the quickest way I could get it. So it became like a regular routine, it became a job. It started feeling like that not after long. I was making money, I was saving money, paying bills. I left school in my senior year cause I was making so much money. I'd go to school, do my work, then go out and hustle.

Certainly, given that the men and women in the sample are predominantly poor, there is an aspect of desperation and survival that color their work choices. However, we have found that men and women say that sex work is the preferred low-income employment option—one that sustains them while offering them flexibility to develop other parts of their life.

This level of flexibility also means that there is time for other commitments and obligations. In our sample, the women in particular have children or relatives to care for in addition to partners and spouses who move in and out of their apartments. About 64 percent of the sex workers in our sample have children. In many cases, the children live with the parent, but sometimes the children live with a grandparent, or have been placed in foster

homes by the state. For some men and women, sex work allows a parent to vacillate between working and free time, affording them the flexibility to go visit their children at a relative's house for periods of time. Also, there are often extended family members who move in and out of the homes of the subjects, and who experience their own ups and downs in the job market. Therefore, the number of people that live with a sex worker and for whom she is responsible – both financially and otherwise – is constantly in flux. Many say that because of these added responsibilities, it is not feasible to be working a regular, full-time shift. For example, Barbara, a 38 year-old mother of eight, explained that she used to work at MacDonald's, but was fired because she often had to stay home and care for her children.

Many sex workers take advantage of the flexibility of sex work by combining it with other jobs – either in the formal market, or other forms of hustling. Sherry explains how sex work is intertwined with other kinds of work to provide a flexible solution for income.

See, I'm an outgoing person. I'm a people person. As far as hustling, see, when I go do house cleaning that's a way of hustling... See I'm a hustler and a helper. So if I can help people I like that. But also, I like to have a job where I can get something out of it. I'm an excellent housekeeper and sometimes housekeeping and hustling, the two mix." "Do you have any regulars?" "I have a few, not many. Let me tell you this. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't do it. To tell you the truth, it's not like I'm out there everyday all the time.

For Sherry, sex work can be used to make ends meet as necessary. From her perspective, it is; a practical solution.

The perception of job autonomy contributes to the feeling that sex work is a better option. At numerous points in the encounter sex workers exercise choice in terms of when and where a trick occurs, for how much, and under what conditions. This kind of highly bounded self-efficacy leads to a sense of autonomy and feelings of pride. Karen says, “I like it. I do it because I feel free. It depends on the day and what I feel like doing.” They also can decide which clients they will take, and which they will refuse. If they don’t like the look of someone, if they think the person might not have the money to pay them, or if simply if the person smells bad or gives them a bad feeling, they do not have to accept the offer. Robin says,

I'm not afraid of my neighborhood. But you know, whatever happens is going to happen. You can't trust everybody. You always have to have your guard up. I make my choice about whether or not to go with somebody based on how they look, how they dress, how they smell, how they talk to me. If the respect isn't there, I'll say, 'I'll see you later.'

Robin frames her decision making in terms of preserving her self-respect. She sets limits about what she will do with a client and where she will go. She says: “I can’t take the risk of working in a car, I still have a little respect. If he wants something he has to realize that I want something too, we have to meet half-way.” This aspect of control is extremely important in giving the sex workers a sense of autonomy. Although there may be other factors that have a role in whether or not they take a client, they can and do exercise choice in clients. Laura explains how she maintains her control through a sense of professionalism:

I know what I want and I won't sell it for nothing less it's- the way you act, the way you carry yourself- you know all the men can walk in and they know you demand more money- the way you look, your appearance and everything, because I don't' know where it says that you have to be a

filthy bug to be a working girl- that's not true. I brush my teeth everyday, I shower, I do my hair, I stay clean- and it's okay, a lot of people, you know, certain individuals I don't date because, you know, they don't look right. You know, and I can be sick as hell and need some money, but you know, hey, that's where I draw the line. All money ain't good money.

Laura draws clear lines in the way that she offers her services; her ability to do this contributes to her positive feelings about her work.

Men in particular seem to have a great deal of choice. Some of the men in our sample saw both male and female clients, while others saw either only female or only male clients. James, a 57 year-old man who sees only female clients, professed very specific preferences and criteria for his clients. "I've been approached many times by male clients...but I just don't get down like that." Here, again, we see disdain for the way that other sex workers operate, and pride in his own choices. "If you don't have boundaries, you don't have nothin'." For example, James chose not to accept female clients who were overweight. He says,

I don't date fat women, I don't date big women. I don't. I like small women. Cause I don't wanna be hasselin' with all that and I don't care how much money you got I just ain't doin' it, and a lot of times I be approached by big women and I'm like damn. I can't do it. ...it's just how I am, I'm real with myself, so if I'm real with myself it, it ain't happenin'.

For James, "keeping it real" with himself (staying true to his personal preferences and principles) was a matter of self-respect. And if is with a client who makes him uncomfortable, he removes himself from the situation:

...I don't get down like that. I have had people that transform on me, become a whole nother species of people, I be like damn, you didn't tell me you was like this. And so I'm gonna get the hell away from you cause, this is getting outta wack and in order to keep respect of myself and you, I'm gonna leave. And the best thing I can do is I'm gonna go.

Sex workers in our sample also controlled the acts they would perform with a client. Some preferred oral sex to penetration, while other preferred the opposite. Some preferred as little contact as possible, while others had few limitations. Jo explains what she would not do with a client: “I don’t have sex with guys, I give em head, but sex is something that I cherish so I don’t have sex so much with these guys, know what I’m sayin, I turn sex down a lot, so I don’t care how much money they got, because, I dunno, it’s something about my body, it just means something to me...” In this way, Jo separates her work with clients from the sexual experiences in her personal life. Similarly, Sherry sets her own limits:

I prefer doing stuff with feet, you know there're a lot of people out there who are into that kind of stuff. But as far as that goes I prefer posing, where there's no touching. No contact. I prefer that. Those are the kind of people I mostly deal with, people who just want me to pose. If they try to touch me, shoot, I'll leave. I'll do what I want to do, they can't pressure me into doing stuff like that.

Sherry and other sex workers suggest that in almost all cases, their clients accept the limits that are set.

In most cases, the sex workers in our sample negotiated their own wages with clients. When asked: “How do you determine what you charge them?” Jim responded: “I do it based on what we’re going to do. I tell him what I charge for whatever he wants.” Sherry says, “I [decide the prices]. If they don’t like it—tough.” Many sex workers also explained that they even charged on a sliding scale. Sherry explains: “But see it depends on how much each girl

[sex worker] wants. I charge \$10-\$15, whatever they have on them. If I think they have a lot of money I charge more. I don't really care whether or not they have a lot of money.”

Although we have found that the main incentive for engaging in sex work is the perception of job autonomy, it is important to remember that it is just that, a perception. Although sex workers pride themselves in the range of choices that they have in terms of who they take as clients, what acts they perform and what boundaries they set, and their ability to negotiate payment, these negotiations take place within a set of circumstances that constrain their choices. Stated differently, they have autonomy over their work conditions, but it is quite limited. They can decide which client to take, they can decide where to go with the client, they can decide when they want to work; but, only to the extent there actually is variation in the choices *and* that the sex worker does not need money immediately. The choice is limited by many outside factors that dictate the extent to which the sex worker is truly capable of making an informed decision. These factors include the specific power relations between the sex worker and his or her client—determined by race, gender, socio-economic background—and the fact that one party is using her body to perform a work-related task during the exchange. We can see that agency is therefore contingent, as it is negotiated according to the desires, intentions, and power of each interacting individual (Sanchez 545; Goffman 1967). These constraints do not render their choices and perceptions of autonomy irrelevant, but they do circumscribe them. They have just enough choice to make sex work a better job than the alternative. Just because it is *better* than the alternative doesn't mean it is *good* in itself, it merely satisfies.

Drug use and abuse

The issue of drug use further complicates motivations for women and men who engage in sex work. Sex workers like to control their use of drugs. Many of the men and

women in our sample are what we would call “functional users”; that is, they use drugs for recreational purposes, while maintaining control over their lives and stability for their families. When asked, “Do you have a problem with drugs that plays a role in your sex work?” Tracy, a 46 year-old woman who started doing sex work when she was 17 to support herself and her child, replied, “No. Sometimes I use drugs. I use drugs, drugs don’t use me.” Others separate their drug use from their professional activities. According to Sherry: “I think it’s better to not be high [on the job]...”

Some of the subjects in our study made the choice not to use drugs at all. James chooses not to do drugs and explains that he doesn’t like the way people around him act when they are high:

I don't like to go through the scratch part, I aint with that shit, I seen some of these girls, they do heroin...they scratch sores on them...I don't like getting stuck...The people that smoke this shit [crack] are transformers...that's what they become. Cocaine is the one...(mumbled) If you tell yourself you do stupid shit, stupid shit is what you do...People pop rocks through walls, and they go hidin' behind you puttin' a knife...and that's they sick ass that tell 'em to do that...and I see this a lot and I be talking to these people that do it and alright just don't do that shit in my face.

Although James looks down on those who do drugs, he is a heavy drinker. For him, drug and alcohol use are different: he feels that one can retain control over one’s body while drinking, but not while high.

In contrast, many of the sex workers in our sample feel that they need to be high in order to do the work. Jim, a 26 year-old man who sees both male and female clients, explains, “At the time [while working] I think about my addiction. If I was sober I’d be thinking about the consequences of what I’m doing. I can’t be in that mode though. I have

to be high to do it.” For Jim, being high allows him to disengage from a practice that he otherwise finds unpleasant. Robin, a 32 year-old woman who takes pride in “making ends meet” and not accepting money from the government, explains: “I got one main guy. He gives me money to support my drug habit. It’s not really like a relationship. I appreciate the things he does for me, but I’m not in love with him. He’s got some issues. If I wasn’t high I would not fuck with him. He’s verbally abusive. But he gives me some money.” She says she sometimes puts up with abuse because she is high and cannot make proper judgments..

Men and women are also quick to point out that sex work can act as band-aid, facilitating self-destructive behavior like drug addiction. Sex work is not a guaranteed, regular source of income, and it is not a labor option that enables them to develop human capital—unlike other kinds of underground income—e.g., making clothes or food and selling under the table, sex work is not viewed as possessing transferable skills. Few say that they learned how to become better businesspersons by participating in the sex work trade.

Drug use also impedes the sex worker from seeking, and holding onto, jobs. When asked, “What keeps you from going back?” Valerie responds, “I just have to make my mind up to do it. I need to be more focused on what I do. I’ve just gotta get away from drugs.” Valerie implies in this statement that the first step for her is getting off drugs, and the second is quitting sex work. When asked, “What’s the worst part about the job?” Valerie answers in a way that echoes others in the sample: “I’m getting high all the time. All this time I’m getting high. I can’t get away from it. I have to be high to be with a guy.” At the same time though, as we mentioned above, many find the drugs necessary in order to bear the emotional costs of sex work. If the drugs are necessary to withstand sex work, and there is a

need to sell sex in order to pay for the drugs, we can identify a self-perpetuating cycle.⁶ In Robert's words: "this business is addictive."

A unique characteristic of sex work – as opposed to jobs that require regular hours or high levels of concentration – is that it allows the men and women to earn an income while being users, as they are often unable to hold a steady job due to their habit. Money from sex work allows them to consume narcotics, with enough left over to continue paying rent and supporting their families. It also allows workers to use drugs on the job. In this way it is clear that sex work can act as a band-aid, enabling men and women to sustain their drug addiction and keeping them in unstable circumstances. Here, the idea of *just enough* represents the delicate balance between sex work, drugs, and satisfaction, and the contradiction that sex work sustains and is sustained by drug use.

The tension between choice and exploitation

A final way in which sex work satisfies is in affording some sense of self-worth. Here, too, there is a tension between certain underlying feelings of exploitation and the simultaneous fulfillment that arises because one is developing close relationships with clients and providing them with a service. For sex workers, there is a tension between perceptions of being exploited and the feeling of fulfillment. Many sex workers in our sample report feelings of exploitation and degradation, as well as dissatisfaction with their situation. The nature of sex work – that is, using one's body – is not to be ignored. Many sex workers do express that this is difficult for them. Angie, a 56 year-old woman who has two grown children, has been a sex worker since age 18, and says:

⁶ It is important to note that not all the men and women in our sample fit the model of the cycle mentioned above. Some do not use drugs or use only moderately.

Giving up my body is the hardest part of this work. But you know, I just gotta grit my teeth and clench my fists. At my age it's difficult. I'm doing a lot less of it. The only reason I do is the money, it has nothing to do with any type of satisfaction...The worst job I've had is working on the streets, ain't nothing can catch that.

Many of the sex workers in our sample would like to be doing different work. Leslie is a 37 year-old woman who is planning to stop sex work when she moves out of state in a few months. She says “I don’t fuck for a living”—she sees it as a temporary solution only. She says:

The hardest thing is that I know I'm better than this, I know that I can do better, but based on the situation I'm in I gotta do what I gotta do. If I had another way, I'd do it. But right now it's the only thing I got. There isn't anything good about this, I never feel good about it. It doesn't make me happy. If I could something that was better for me I'd job to it.

Leslie is unhappy for two reasons. When she says, “I know I better than this,” she is expressing that fact that she does not see the work as morally valuable. But she is also unhappy on a more individual level. She feels that she personally could do better, and that a different job would help her do this.

Despite these negative feelings about sex work, many women and men (sometimes even the same ones who expressed certain feelings of exploitation) identified a certain satisfaction in the work. Audrey is 45 and has been a sex worker for 25 years. She has three kids, and sometimes feels uncomfortable about “catering to a specific person’s wants,” but she concentrates on sex work as a job and a means of earning money. She says: “prostitution is the best and worst job I’ve ever did. The money is great, the money is the best part. But

the worst thing is the stuff they make you do. You have to put yourself in degrading circumstances, that just make you feel degraded.” At the same time she remarks: “I would say that the money is good and that you’re providing a service for somebody, you know they say prostitution is the oldest profession in the world– it came before the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker. It’s just something that I got to do.” Many felt good about the personal service that they were providing to their clients. These positive feelings are often reflected in the terms that the sex workers used to describe their clients. For example, James refers to them not as “clients,” “tricks,” “customers,” or even “friends” the way many of his peers do, but as “lovers.” He professes, “love is the greatest gift god ever gave a human. Unconditional love. Now, you should be paid for it, because it’s a big difference between fuckin’, screwin’, and making love. I don’t fuck and I don’t screw. Everything I do is with passion.”

Since most of the workers in our sample dealt primarily with “regular” clients, they came to develop congenial relationships with them. When asked what advantages there were to sex work, Tony explained that “you meet interesting people,” and he forged important and valuable “social connections” with his clients. He also explained that grateful clients often cared for him in return. He believed that there was mutual respect, such that the regular clients saw him as more than a street hustler, that “some don’t care about the sex” as much as they do about the personal connection. These relationships become a source of satisfaction for the sex workers.

CONCLUSION: JUST ENOUGH

This paper has examined structure of the contemporary urban sex work trade from the vantage point of those toiling day-to-day. In economically depressed neighborhoods, sex work can turn out to be one of the few available means of subsistence—it is, alas, steady work. We began the paper by challenging the conventional picture often painted of sex workers, namely that they are primarily victims and otherwise passive agents who generally do not make active choices to better their lives. We find that sex workers are indeed saddled by impoverishment and limited socio-economic opportunity, but they are also quite active in making decisions about their future. The men and women in our sample certainly do not describe the sale of sexual services as their overall employment preference. Instead, they enter (and return to) sex work by weighing other options for income generation—legal and illegal. In the inner city, sex work can emerge as a preferable labor market choice when menial low wage work or other more dangerous forms of underground material gain are the options. And the decision to pursue sex work—whether to begin participating or return to the trade—quickly becomes a plausible means of solving pressing economic demands. As such, it may be viewed as a rational decision given their context of social mobility opportunities.

We have drawn on the concept of “satisficing” to suggest that the choices individuals make exhibits rational dimensions, while being constrained. True, sex work fulfills certain needs—monetary and emotional—but the concept of “satisficing” also helps us understand that women and men’s needs are only nominally fulfilled via sex work. Sex workers on the street never make enough money or attain enough security to move on with their lives in less dangerous, and more mainstream, economic arenas. They are trapped in worlds of low wage work. Nevertheless, individuals are attuned to some of the tangible benefits of sex work, such as flexibility and un-taxed cash. Notably, the perceptions of job autonomy in sex work

are without parallel in other available low wage professions. The stability is a ruse, if one takes a long term perspective. That is, the work offers men and women just enough to deter them from seeking another – perhaps less risky – job. The money is just enough to sustain a drug habit; some are able to functionally use while others spiral into instability. There is just enough room for choice to make them feel autonomous, while still being objectively rather constrained. In other words, although sex work is a better option, it is not necessarily a good option.

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