

Risks of Prostitution: When the Person Is the Product

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ABSTRACT In the traditional model of consumer risk, the product that is consumed is understood to be the agent that is imbued with risks. In prostitution, it is the woman who is being consumed as a commodity who is at great risk, in spite of the fact that prostitution is sometimes (erroneously) described as “sex between consenting adults.” Prostitution occurs because the person being consumed as product would not consent to sex with the buyer unless he paid for it. Thus, the notion that it is the consumer who is at risk for harm via consumption of a product is sometimes inappropriate and the model itself needs to be reframed. This is the case with prostitution, where the prostituted person is at far greater risk than the sex buyer or the pimp.

A sex buyer in a research interview explained that “*Being with a prostitute is like having a cup of coffee, when you’re done, you throw it out.*”
—Farley et al. (2015, 13)

In the traditional model of consumer risk, the product that is consumed is understood to be the agent that is imbued with risks. Tobacco is a well-known example of a product associated with risk to its consumers. Because of tobacco companies’ withholding of research evidence regarding the risks of morbidity and mortality, many people suffered from tobacco-related harms. Decades ago no one would have guessed that Big Tobacco would pay \$368 billion in health-related damages from smoking. In a just world, damages will also be directed to those people who have been subject to damages from the risks inherent to prostitution and other segments of the sex trade.

In prostitution, it is the woman¹ who is used for sex who is at risk, despite the businessmen’s description of prostitution as “sex between consenting adults.” Prostitution occurs because the person being sold for sex would not agree to have sex with the buyer unless he paid for it. Understanding that desperate people consent to grievous harms, the 2000 Palermo Protocol, an international law signed and agreed to by the United States, states that consent is irrelevant to whether or not trafficking (coerced prostitution) has occurred. The Palermo Protocol specifically states that money is a means of coercion in prostitution (Raymond 2002). Thus the assumption that it is the *consumer* who is at risk for harm via consumption of a product is sometimes inappropriate and the model itself needs to be reframed.

This is the case with prostitution, where the prostituted person is at far greater risk for harm than the sex buyer or the pimp/trafficker.

RISKS OF PROSTITUTION

You just give them what they want and pray they don’t kill you. (Dalla, Xia, and Kennedy 2003, 1367)

There are thousands of books and classes that provide women with information on self-defense and rape “avoidance” strategies. Some of the basic lessons they teach us are not to walk alone at night on dark deserted streets, not to get into cars with strange men, not to pick up guys in a bar, not to even let a delivery man into your home when you’re by yourself. Yet this is what the “job” of prostitution requires; that women put themselves in jeopardy every time they turn a trick. And then we ask, “How do you prevent it from leading to danger?” The answer is, you can’t. Count the bodies. (Giobbe 1991b, 34)²

Prostitution is a gendered survival strategy that requires the person in it to assume unreasonable risks (Dworkin 1997). These well-documented risks include sexual harassment, rape, and rape without a condom (Silbert, Pines, and

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1. Those in prostitution include women, men, transwomen, and children. We use the term *women* to include all of these people.
2. See also Giobbe (1990, 67, 76).

Lynch 1982). As a prostituting woman in Vancouver explained, “what rape is to others is normal to us” (Farley, Lynne, and Cotton 2005, 254). As a result of the frequency of rape in prostitution, prostituted people have the highest HIV rate of any population studied. One study found an HIV prevalence rate of 93% (Ward and Day 2006). Risks of prostitution also include domestic violence, physical assault, and psychological sequelae of these traumatic stressors: posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative disorders, depression, eating disorders, suicide attempts and successful suicides, and substance abuse. Most people would not be willing to assume these risks. For most of the world’s prostituted women, prostitution is the experience of being hunted, dominated, harassed, assaulted, and battered. Despite the fact that money is paid, sexual assault remains most women’s experience of prostitution. Women are prostituted because they are vulnerable as a result of their poverty, a lack of educational options, lack of employment opportunities, and as a result of previous physical, sexual, and emotional harms. They are purchased on the basis of race as well as sex stereotypes. These social harms and prejudices put poor women of color especially at risk for the physical and psychological harms addressed here. Prostitution formalizes women’s subordination by sex, race, and class (Dworkin 1997).

Childhood abuse is such a common precursor to prostitution that it is considered by most experts to be a necessary if not sufficient risk factor for prostitution (Tyler et al. 2000). Survivors link physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as children to later prostitution. Seventy percent of the adult women in prostitution in one study stated that childhood sexual assault was responsible for their entry into prostitution (Silbert and Pines 1981, 1983). Family abuse and neglect not only caused direct physical and emotional harm, but also created a cycle of victimization that affected their futures. Familial sexual abuse functions as a training ground for prostitution. One young woman said, “I started turning tricks to show my father what he made me” (Silbert and Pines 1982, 488). Dworkin (1997, 143) described sexual abuse of children as “boot camp” for prostitution. Adolescence is the most frequently reported age of entry into any type of prostitution. Boyer and colleagues (1993) interviewed 60 women prostituting in escort, street, strip club, phone sex, and massage brothels in Seattle, Washington. All of them began prostituting between the ages of 12 and 14.

Sex buyers’ fantasies about prostitution drive the real lives of prostituted women. From the moment of sale, the

purchased or rented person is measured against the buyer’s fantasies—for example, his fantasy of “the prostitute who loves to have sex with strangers.” Today sex buyers often seek a “girlfriend experience” in which prostituted women are paid to mimic a love relationship. The performance is required to be one that fools the sex buyer. Failure to live up to these fantasies led to brutal violence by sex buyers, one of whom rationalized,

When there is violence, it is mostly the prostitute’s fault. See, I am going to buy something. If I am satisfied with what I am buying, then why should I be violent? I will be violent when I am cheated, when I am offered a substandard service. . . . Sometimes violence is because the prostitute wants the client to use condoms. They force it on the client. He will naturally be disgruntled and there will be altercations. (O’Connell-Davidson 2003, 58)

The risks for experiencing physical violence in prostitution are very high. An occupational survey noted that 99% of women in prostitution were victims of violence, with more frequent injuries “than workers in [those] occupations considered . . . most dangerous, like mining, forestry and fire fighting” (Gibbs, Sydie, and Krull 2000, 47). Two factors have been associated with greater violence in prostitution. The greater the woman’s poverty, the greater the violence she experiences, and the longer she is in prostitution, the more likely she is to experience violence (Giobbe 1991a; Vanwesenbeeck 1994). A number of authors have described and summarized the sexual and physical violence that is the norm for women in prostitution (Oselin and Blasyak 2013; Argento et al. 2014). In a study of Vancouver women in prostitution, 75% had suffered physical injuries from the violence in prostitution. These included stabbings and beatings, concussions and broken bones (broken jaws, ribs, collarbones, fingers, spinal injuries, and a fractured skull), cuts, and black eyes. Fifty percent of these women had head injuries resulting from violent assaults with, for example, baseball bats and crowbars. Many had their heads slammed against walls and against car dashboards. Sex buyers and pimps regularly subjected them to extreme violence when they refused to perform a specific sex act (Farley et al. 2005). Because of its extreme violence, the risks of prostitution include multiple adverse health consequences (Church et al. 2001; Oram et al. 2012). Impacts of prostitution’s violence include more severe health problems such as exhaustion, cervical cancer, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and human immuno-

deficiency virus (HIV), undiagnosed pelvic pain, complications from abortions, traumatic brain injury, headaches, high fevers, broken bones, cardiovascular symptoms, respiratory symptoms, gastrointestinal problems, and immune system compromise (Farley and Kelly 2000; Dalla 2002; Vanwesenbeeck 2005; Zimmerman et al. 2006).

Silbert and Pines (1981, 1982) reported that 70% of women suffered rape in prostitution with 65% having been physically assaulted by sex buyers and 66% assaulted by pimps. The Council for Prostitution Alternatives in Portland reported that prostituted women were raped an average of once a week (Hunter 1994). In the Netherlands, 60% of prostituted women suffered physical assaults; 70% experienced verbal threats of physical assault; 40% experienced sexual violence; and 40% had been forced into prostitution and/or sexual abuse by acquaintances (Vanwesenbeeck 1994). Most young women in prostitution were abused or beaten by pimps as well as sex buyers (Barry 1979, 1995; Hoigard and Finstad 1986; MacKinnon and Dworkin 1997). Eighty-five percent of prostituting women in Minnesota had been raped in prostitution (Parriott 1994). Of 854 people in prostitution in nine countries (Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, United States, and Zambia), 71% had experienced physical assaults in prostitution and 62% had been raped in prostitution. Eighty-nine percent of those people stated that they wished to leave prostitution but did not have other options (Farley et al. 2003). In another study, 94% of those in prostitution had experienced sexual assault and 75% had been raped by one or more sex buyers (Miller and Schwartz 1995).³

"It's like domestic violence taken to the extreme," explained a prostitution survivor (Leone 2001, A1). Prostitution can be lethal (Dalla et al. 2003; Potterat et al. 2004; Quinet 2011). Women in prostitution are seen as body parts or fake girlfriends whose feelings are irrelevant. They are not considered fully human and as a result, women in prostitution are murdered at a higher rate than any other group of women ever studied. A Canadian commission found that the death rate of women in prostitution was 40 times higher than that of the general population (Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution 1985). A study of Vancouver prostitution reported a 36% incidence of attempted murder (Cler-Cunningham and Christenson 2001). A Dallas police officer told the author in 2009 that it was the policy of the Dallas PD to take DNA samples from

women arrested for soliciting prostitution. He explained that so many prostituted women are murdered in Dallas that if a body or bones are found, police can do a DNA match and offer comfort to the victim's family.

The emotional consequences of prostitution are the same in widely varying cultures whether it's high class or low class, legal or illegal, in a brothel, a strip club, a massage parlor, or the street.⁴ The emotional assault on women and on their sexuality in prostitution is overwhelming, yet invisible to most people. Survivors describe prostitution as a process whereby they are turned into objects into which men masturbate causing great psychological harm to the woman acting as receptacle (Hoigard and Finstad 1986). Dissociation is a response to overwhelming and uncontrollable traumatic events in which the mind detaches from one's current emotional or physical state. Dissociation occurs during extreme stress among prisoners of war who are tortured, among children who are being sexually assaulted, and among women being battered, raped, or prostituted (Herman 1992; Schwartz 2000). Dissociative disorders, depression, and other mood disorders are common among prostituted women in street, escort, and strip club prostitution (Ross et al. 1990). Dissociation in prostitution results from both childhood sexual violence and sexual violence in adult prostitution. The dissociation necessary to survive rape in prostitution is much like the dissociation that enables a victim to endure familial sexual assault (Giobbe 1991a). Vanwesenbeeck (1994, 107) alleged that a dissociative proficiency contributed to what she described as "professional attitudes" among women in prostitution in the Netherlands. A Thai woman said, "You make yourself empty inside" (Bishop and Robinson 1997, 47). Symptoms of emotional distress in all forms of prostitution are off the charts: depression, suicidality, posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociation, and substance abuse (Brody et al. 2005; Ling et al. 2007; Pedersen et al. 2016). Two-thirds of women, men, and the transgendered in prostitution in nine countries met diagnostic criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder. This level of extreme emotional distress is the same as in the most emotionally traumatized people ever studied by psychologists—battered women, raped women, combat veterans, and torture survivors. PTSD is characterized by

3. For a list of articles that provide additional empirical data, see Farley (2006, 2009, 2013).

4. We have discovered that although many researchers differentiate street prostitution from other types of prostitution (brothel, strip club, massage parlor, escort, etc.) in fact women move from one physical location to another for the purpose of prostitution. Women are described as "street prostitutes" primarily because that is where the researcher encountered them. See Kramer (2003).

anxiety, anhedonia, depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing, and hypervigilance. In nine countries researchers found that 68% of those in prostitution met criteria for a diagnosis of PTSD, a prevalence that was comparable to battered women seeking shelter, rape survivors seeking treatment, and survivors of state-sponsored torture. Across widely varying cultures on five continents, the traumatic consequences of prostitution were similar (Farley et al. 2003). Two studies of prostituted Korean women reflect the women's intense psychological distress with PTSD prevalence rates of 78% and 80% (cited in Farley and Seo 2006). Pornography of women in prostitution increased their vulnerability and their emotional distress (Farley 2007a).

Although sex buyers tend to have an awareness of the risks of prostitution, they rarely reveal what they know. After hundreds of anonymous interviews with men who buy sex, we found that most have a nuanced understanding of both risks and harms of prostitution (Farley 2007a; Farley, Bindel, and Golding 2009; Farley, Macleod, et al. 2011; Farley, Schuckman, et al. 2011; Farley et al. 2012, 2015). As a sex buyer who participated in a research study explained,

They use sex to get money because they don't believe in themselves. They have very low self-confidence. I think they're very disturbed. I think a lot of times they feel degraded. They feel like they've been used. They feel useless. I mean the ones I know have no self confidence, so they feel less than a person, and more like a commodity. (Farley, Schuckman, et al. 2011, 21)

Another man described prostitution this way:

At one time I used to think that it helped a woman get self esteem. But I've changed my views on that. Now I think it helps to eliminate your self esteem. (Farley, Schuckman, et al. 2011, 21)

And a third said,

I think prostitutes turn into bad people from being prostitutes. . . bad things happen like rape, beatings, just being looked at as a commodity, having to con men out of money. . . you turn into a criminal. (Farley, Schuckman, et al. 2011, 21)

Two-thirds of a group of 100 US sex buyers opined that a majority are lured, tricked or trafficked into prostitution. Many of the men understood the economic coercion and

the lack of alternatives in women's entry into prostitution. A man who chose not to buy sex explained,

The women who are prostitutes, they're single moms, it's not so cut and dry. It's not a conscious choice for them. While they're not literally forced into it, through socioeconomic circumstances they are partially forced into it. And the purchaser is inexorably tied to the bad and the wrong things that go into it. He's not just a harmless customer. (Farley, Schuckman, et al. 2011, 23)

Research studies and nongovernmental agencies' reports have shown that trafficking (third-party control) is prevalent in all forms of prostitution. Anderson and O'Connell Davidson (2003) reported that 77% of sex buyers in Japan were aware of risks of trafficking to women who were prostituting. Dragomirescu, Necula, and Simion (2009) interviewed sex buyers, women in prostitution, pimps, and police officers in Romania, all of whom agreed that sex buyers did not particularly care whether or not the women were trafficked.

IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM RISKS CAUSED BY COMMODIFICATION IN PROSTITUTION

The truth is that a lot of deep marketing-thought goes into the sex industry, whether the entity being sold is an independent escort's companionship or couples' porn. . . . Mainstream ad agencies deal with versions of this problem all the time as they market brands and lifestyles, but sex workers tangle with it in a different way, because *the thing on the market block is them*. (Ray 2007, 178)

She is just a biological object that charges for services. (Farley et al. 2011, 5)

Prostitution is the sale of a sex act or the exchange of a sex act for goods such as food, shelter, or drugs. In order for such a sale or exchange to occur, there must be an objectified, dehumanized, and commodified class of women, usually poor and most frequently ethnically marginalized, who are sold for sex to men who are more privileged than they. Commodification requires objectification, a process that transforms people into objects with economic value (Sharp 2000). A pimp explained commodification at its most basic: "I took the kind of girl no one would miss so when they

were resold, no one would look for them. It is as if I sold a kilo of bread” (Crumley, Simmons, and Schoenthal 1993, 46). Those who are commodified as products in the prostitution transaction become entrenched as part of a subordinated class of humans.⁵

Once a person is turned into an object, then exploitation and abuse are irrelevant; the abuse seems almost reasonable.

The transformation of a human being into property may be termed commoditization. . . . The commoditized person is *used* to achieve the commoditizer’s objectives and is stripped of free will, self-determination, and selfhood. The commoditized person’s body, skills, abilities, labor, and even reproductive capacity are no longer under his/her own control, but rather are controlled (i.e., owned or possessed) by the commoditizer. (Hirschman and Hill 2000, 469–70)

Sex buyers do not acknowledge the humanity of the women they use for sex, thus the processes of dehumanization, objectification, and commodification place those in prostitution at great risk for psychological and physical harms. Sex buyers in different cultures provided chilling examples of objectification and commodification. Prostitution was understood by one man as “renting an organ for ten minutes” (Farley 2007a, 144). In Phnom Penh, prostitution was understood this way: “We men are the buyer, sex workers are goods, and the brothel owner is a vendor” (Farley et al. 2012, 3). A woman who had prostituted in Vancouver for 19 years explained prostitution the same way that sex buyers did, “They own you for that half hour or that twenty minutes or that hour. They are buying you. They have no attachments, you’re not a person, you’re a thing to be used” (Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution 1985, 387).

Comparing the institutions of slavery and prostitution may shed light on the profound risks to the person who is considered a product. Many are able to understand the risks of dehumanization and commodification based on race in slavery but find it more difficult to understand the risks

5. Also noting that the poor and disempowered are likely to engage in what they call “desperation exchanges,” Radin and Sunder (2005, 12) pointed out that “it is unacceptable for society to embrace commodification of aspects of the self when it is in practice the only avenue of survival for the powerless.” When a person herself becomes a product, some critical questions arise that are relevant to the risks assumed by or inflicted upon her. Who controls the sale and who is the person who is sold as a commodity? (Radin and Sunder 2005, 8).

of dehumanization and commodification based on sex in prostitution. Sex buyers and pimps are the commoditizers in prostitution, and slave owners and slave traders are the commoditizers in slavery. The enslaved and the prostituted are degraded in culturally tolerated rituals that conceal deadly violations of basic human rights. Over time, the deliberate humiliation and degradation produce a core sense of incapacitating self-loathing in the enslaved or prostituted person. These are risks that may only appear after some time in prostitution or slavery.

The dehumanization and objectification intrinsic to enslavement and to prostitution result in what Patterson (1982) has described as social death, which could also be described as complex posttraumatic stress disorder. A prostituted Costa Rican 16-year-old girl said, “Prostitution makes me feel like I am nothing, nothing at all” (Varney 2000, A1). The acts perpetrated on women in prostitution define her as a degraded object, as “cunt,” as “filthy whore.” She is reduced to vagina, anus, breasts, and mouth. She acts the part of the thing men want her to be (Dworkin 1997, 146). The only “plausible line in the . . . film *Pretty Woman*,” said a prostituted woman, “is when Richard Gere, playing a client, asks Julia Roberts, playing a prostitute, what her name is, and she replies, ‘Anything you want it to be’” (O’Connell Davidson 1998, 109). As Frederick Douglass wrote, enslaved people at auction said what they thought the slave traders and the slave buyers wanted to hear (quoted in Johnson 1999). Over time, even though she knows that the humiliation is cruelly unjust, nonetheless these systematic attacks on her humanity take a devastating toll on her self-esteem. The commodification that exists in the mind of slave traders, pimps, sex buyers, and slave buyers is ultimately incorporated into the identity of the woman who is prostituted or enslaved. Internalized commodification causes symptoms of complex posttraumatic stress disorder in which there are seismic shifts in the meaning of self and self-in-relation to others. A woman in strip club prostitution explained this process:

You start changing yourself to fit a fantasy role of what they think a woman should be. In the real world, these women don’t exist. They stare at you with this starving hunger. It sucks you dry; you become this empty shell. They’re not really looking at you. You’re not you. You’re not even there. (Farley et al. 2003, 263)

The hallmark of slavery and of prostitution is that the enslaved or prostituted are subject to domination and to

the arbitrary will of another person (Balkin and Levinson 2012) whether that person is the slave owner or slave seller, sex buyer, or pimp/trafficker. Yet many fail to understand that most women in prostitution are coerced; instead, women are assumed to be making an occupational choice. A woman in a Nevada legal brothel explained, “No one really enjoys being sold. It’s like you sign a contract to be raped” (Farley 2007b, 34). Another woman characterized Dutch prostitution as “volunteer slavery” (Vanwesenbeeck 1994, 149). According to estimates from 18 sources, on average 84% of adult women in prostitution are pimped or trafficked (Farley, Franzblau, and Kennedy 2014).⁶ Two research studies found that while 89%–90% of women wanted to escape prostitution, they did not feel free to exit because of a lack of alternatives for survival (Elizabeth Fry Society 1987; Farley et al. 2003). It usually requires multiple attempts before women can escape prostitution (Benoit and Millar 2001).

When there is a failure to understand lack of choice, the poor have been blamed for not attending good schools, slaves have been blamed for their own enslavement, Jews have been blamed for not escaping Nazi death camps, and women in prostitution are blamed for having made the choice to be prostituted. Prostitution is “the choice made by those who have no choice” (Wichterich 2000, 63). One man explained,

I don’t think prostitution is quite the same as rape. Rape is worse. But it’s close to the rape end of the spectrum. It’s not rape, because there is superficial consent. . . . On the face of it, the prostitute is agreeing to it. But deeper down, you can see that life circumstances have kind of forced her into that. . . . *It’s like someone jumping from a burning building—you could say they made their choice to jump, but you could also say they had no choice.* (Farley et al. 2011, 2015, 3614)

RISKS OF PROSTITUTION INCURRED BY THE SEX BUYER

Risks that are incurred by the consumer of prostitution include arrest where prostitution is illegal, social stigma, and health risks from STD. Although at first glance, the public health attention to risk of HIV or other STD includes the prostituted woman herself; on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that the overarching concern is for the health of

6. See Dempsey (2017) for a discussion of the need to expand rather than constrict the legal definition of trafficking.

the sex buyer: to decrease his exposure to disease. In spite of extensive documentation that HIV is overwhelmingly transmitted via male-to-female vaginal and anal intercourse, not vice versa, one of the misogynist myths about prostitution is that she is the vector of disease (Farley and Kelly 2000). The social stigma against prostitution is not simply a general moral disapproval of the activity, but in the case of men who buy sex, a stigmatizing view of them as losers, unethical, or desperate men who are unable to find a female partner without payment (Farley et al. 2015).

The self-positivity bias, also called the self-serving attributional bias, might be used to study risks of prostitution to the sex buyer. When someone exhibits the self-positivity bias, the person tends to assume the best possible outcome for themselves or to mistakenly assume that they are at lower risk than others (Mezulis et al. 2004). Decreasing this overly optimistic bias is one way of approaching risks associated with prostitution. Most sex buyers, for example, assume that their risk of arrest for soliciting prostitution is low. Similarly, people at risk for HIV or STD assume that they are less likely to contract the virus than others. Research on positivity bias has shown that when information is provided by individuals who are perceived as similar to oneself, the self-positivity bias is reduced (Raghubir and Menon 1998). Self-positivity biases in personal risk perceptions are important because they may hinder efforts to promote risk-reducing behaviors. In a discussion about reducing consumers’ self-positivity biases, Lin, Lin, and Raghubir (2003) note that the greater the perception of uncontrollability of a negative event (such as getting arrested, or becoming conditioned via prostitution to premature ejaculation with nonprostituting partners), the more likely the consumer is to reduce his optimistic bias and to have a more reasonable assessment of risk of negative outcomes. Research on self-positivity bias among sex buyers would be useful.

DENIAL OF THE RISKS OF PROSTITUTION TO THE PERSON WHO IS SOLD FOR SEX

Public misconceptions about the risks of prostitution stem from sex buyers’ and pimps’ cover narratives that attempt to hide the risks of violence against women in prostitution. Like public awareness regarding the risks of smoking tobacco, public awareness regarding the risks of prostitution is not good for business. Sex buyers blame the victim, viewing women in prostitution as intrinsically different from other women and as morally deficient. Sex buyers justify prostitution by telling us that she’s getting rich or that she’s sim-

ply doing an unpleasant but necessary job like factory work. Sex buyers and sex trade advocates may acknowledge a fraction of the risks for abuse and exploitation in prostitution, but adverse effects are minimized and the risks of abuse are justified because the women are alleged to make a lot of money. In a series of studies in 2009, Di Nicola and colleagues found that men who buy sex have witnessed and acknowledged exploitation, coercion, and trafficking but this does not affect their decision to buy women for sexual use. One of their interviewees said, “If I could differentiate between forced and voluntary, it would probably not influence my choice. Because if I like the girl, I would ask her to join me in the room” (Zaitch and Staring 2009, 109). Once paid for, the risks of prostitution—the exploitation, abuse, and rape—are disappeared.⁷ The payment releases the buyer from any obligation to treat the person he is buying as human. A Canadian prostitution tourist commented about women in Thai prostitution, “These girls gotta eat don’t they? I’m putting bread on their plate. I’m making a contribution. They’d starve to death unless they whored” (Moore 1991; Bishop and Robinson 1997, 168–69). A sex buyer described the rapes of a woman by her pimp. But, he said, the rapes happened only “once in a while, not every week” (Farley, Schuckman et al. 2011, 24). If men’s sexual expectations are unmet, rape and prostitution are assumed to be inevitable. Women who fail to provide the sex acts demanded by their partners are then blamed for their partners’ use of women in prostitution. “If my fiancé won’t give me anal, I know someone who will” (Farley, Schuckman et al. 2011, 3).

Words are crafted that appeal to these rationalizations or to the desire not to witness the cruelty of prostitution. These maneuvers to deny risk include words that conceal harms: *voluntary prostitution*, which implies that she consented when she had no survival alternatives; *forced trafficking*, which implies that somewhere there are women who volunteer to be trafficked into prostitution; *sex work*, which defines prostitution as a job rather than an act of violence. The term *migrant sex worker* disappears both prostitution and trafficking. Strip club prostitution has been reframed as *sexual expression* or *exotic dancing* or *freedom to express one’s sensuality*. Brothels are referred to as *massage parlors*, *saunas*, *nail parlors*, and *health clubs*. Older men who buy teenagers for sex in Seoul call it *compensated dating*. In the United States, it’s referred to as *dating*. In Tokyo prostitution is described as *assisted intercourse*. Men who buy women

7. Unlike other forms of violence against women such as incest, rape, or battering prostitution is paid for.

in prostitution are called *interested parties* or *hobbyists*, pimps are described as *managers*.⁸

The general public, despite glimmerings of discomfort, may consider the prostitution transaction a choice. Why this refusal to acknowledge risks? Why look away from the overwhelming power differential between the sex buyer and the prostituted? Much information about prostitution comes from sex trade advocates and profiteers who run campaigns of risk denial. Doubt is created via attacks on empirical research, appearances by “happy high-class escorts” on TV shows, and other carefully crafted pro-sex-trade propaganda. Pimps and sex trade entrepreneurs orchestrate denial that is much like the tobacco industry’s or the climate change denialists’ playbooks. The facts are turned upside down and fantasy replaces reality. In response to the avalanche of evidence demonstrating harms from smoking, tobacco manufacturers argued (a) that tobacco was not harmful to smokers, (b) that smokers’ cancer was caused by other factors, and (c) that smokers assumed the risk of cancer when they decided to smoke (Michon 2015).

Prostitution risk denialists’ arguments are comparable to arguments made by climate change denialists (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Klein 2014). See table 1. Climate change denialists and prostitution risk denialists both tend to oppose any form of regulation of their businesses. A free-market approach to extracting resources enacts the dominance-based business philosophy that everything is—and should be—for sale. Advocacy of the commodification and unrestricted sale of human beings as prostitutes is the same anti-regulatory approach to expanding prostitution markets as that used to expand fossil fuel markets.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND THE EVOLUTION OF PROGRESSIVE PROSTITUTION POLICY

Prostitution is the business of sexual exploitation. Well-documented risks of harm to the person used as product in the sex trade are ignored or denied. Pimps, traffickers, and sex buyers exploit the vulnerabilities of a dehumanized, devalued, and commodified class of women who have been set aside for men’s sexual use. Anyone who is familiar with the daily life of those in prostitution understands that safety in prostitution is a pipe dream. Advocates of legal and decriminalized prostitution understand this but rarely admit it. Still, evidence exists. For example legalizing pros-

8. Pimps employ thugs named *catchers* who prevent women from escaping.

Table 1. Climate Change Denial and Prostitution Risk Denial Playbooks

| <i>Climate change denial playbook</i> (Oreskes and Conway 2011) | <i>Prostitution risk denial playbook</i> (Farley) |
|---|--|
| 1. Science is unsettled; there is no consensus. | 1. Much research on prostitution is controversial; researchers disagree. |
| 2. The uncertainties are very great. ^a | 2. We can't be certain about the harms of prostitution. Even peer-reviewed studies of risks of prostitution are biased. ^a |
| 3. There are so many causes of the alleged phenomenon that we don't know what the true cause is. ^a | 3. There are many complex causes of violence in prostitution, such as poverty. Until we eliminate those, leave prostitution in place. ^a |
| 4. Fixing the problem would be too expensive, would kill jobs, and would wreck the economy. | 4. Sex work is necessary for women's economic survival. |
| 5. Fixing the problem would undermine personal freedom. We are defending the free market from government intrusion. Government regulation is a slippery slope leading to communism. | 5. Sex workers have the right to do what they want with their bodies. It's their choice. The sex trade slogan "get the government off my body" opposes government regulation from the neoliberal Left. |
| 6. In any case global warming is good for you; it's nice weather. | 6. Prostitution is an inevitable if unpleasant aspect of society. It meets men's needs for sex and prevents rape. Boys will be boys. It's the oldest profession. |
| 7. Therefore nothing can and nothing should be done. | 7. Leave sex workers alone. We can take care of ourselves, with the help of our business managers. Don't call them pimps or traffickers; they're managers. |

^a There is a failure, possibly deliberate, to understand the process of scientific query, including a failure to understand that statistical associations and probability are strong evidence even when it is not possible to claim causal relationships. "You can't be 100% certain of that finding, can you?" is asked. Doubt is created." See Oreskes and Conway (2011).

titution in Australia resulted in prostitution's being seen as a normal job. However the Australian governmental agency responsible for worker safety recommended hostage negotiation training for those entering prostitution. This reflected the government's awareness of prostitution's dangers, contradicting the notion of prostitution as a job like any other. In South Africa, the Sex Workers' Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT) distributed a list of safety tips including the recommendation that while undressing, the prostituting individual should "accidentally" kick a shoe under the bed, and while retrieving it, should check for knives, handcuffs, or rope. The SWEAT flyer noted that fluffing up the pillow on the bed would permit an additional weapons search (Farley 2004). A Dutch legal pimp who also understood the everyday violence directed at women in prostitution, explained, "You don't want a pillow in the [brothel's] room. It's a murder weapon" (Daley 2001). A San Francisco sex trade advocacy group advised, "be aware of exits and avoid letting your customer block access to those exits," and "shoes should come off easily or be appropriate for run-

ning in," and "avoid necklaces, scarves, across-the-body shoulder bags or anything else that can accidentally or intentionally be tightened around your throat" (St. James Infirmary 2004, 172). Panic buttons in legal brothels make as little sense as panic buttons in the homes of battered women; they can never be answered quickly enough to prevent violence.

The activities of sex buyers and distributors/traffickers—the commoditizers—are predatory in the extreme. Those who profit from selling women in prostitution know of the risks just as surely as tobacco companies knew of the risks of smoking. As a nod to these risks, some have proposed harm or risk reduction based on the assumption that people will inevitably continue to engage in prostitution. Risk reduction interventions therefore aim to reduce *but not eliminate* risk of harm. At its extreme, a harm reduction approach becomes a laissez-faire ideology more concerned with protecting individual rights to certain behaviors, no matter how risky, than with protecting the health of these same individuals, their families, and the public. Harm reduction approaches to

prostitution (such as male condom distribution) may have some benefits but fail to address the roots of the problem. A risk reduction–only approach is dismissive of the alternatives for risk elimination: not entering prostitution, or helping individuals to completely avoid these highly risky activities (Green, Farley, and Herling-Ruark 2009).

The complicity of governments sustains prostitution. When the sex trade expands, women are less likely to compete with men for jobs. When prostitution is incorporated into states' economies, governments are relieved of the necessity of finding employment for women. Blood taxes are collected by the state-as-pimp in legal and decriminalized prostitution. Banks, airlines, internet providers, hotels, travel agencies, and all media are integral to the exploitation and abuse of women in prostitution tourism, make huge profits, and are solidified as part of a country's economy.

The existence of prostitution anywhere is society's betrayal of women, especially those who are marginalized and vulnerable because of their sex, their ethnicity, their poverty, and their history of abuse and neglect. Our goal should be to abolish prostitution, not to fix or regulate it. Decriminalized prostitution as a public health response to HIV is not warranted, given the current empirical evidence (Rothman 2017). The social and ethical challenges to those who promote legalized (or decriminalized) prostitution are overwhelming. Until vulnerability is removed and equality is in place, women will continue to enter prostitution as a last-ditch survival maneuver. This perspective has been elaborated in the Palermo Protocol, an international legal agreement signed by the United States that makes consent to prostitution irrelevant with respect to whether or not trafficking (pimping) has occurred (Raymond 2002). Another ethical issue is poverty and the financial inducement that compels people into prostitution (MacKinnon 2011), for example to pay for a tank of gas (Hardin 2011) or food (Bradenton 2012). Until income and sex equality exist, poor women will be vulnerable to prostitution. And finally, since legalization of prostitution has been associated with increased trafficking (Cho, Dreher, Neumayer 2013), those most vulnerable are at increased risk for harm (Rothman 2017).

The voices and analyses of exited survivors—those who are no longer under pimp or sex trade control—direct us to the obvious legal solutions. Men who buy sex must be held accountable for their predatory aggression. Given the psychological and physical risks to the prostituted person who is consumed as a commodity in the prostitution transaction, it makes sense to *increase* the real and perceived risks to the sex buyer. Those in prostitution must be of-

fered real alternatives for survival, and never arrested. Pimps and traffickers must also be held accountable. Many countries have now passed legislation that shifts the legal focus to men who buy sex. A human-rights-based or abolitionist approach to prostitution would decrease risks to the prostituted and offer them alternatives. Those who are sold for sex in prostitution would not be arrested. Instead sex buyers would be penalized. In this legal approach, prostitution is understood as an institution imbued with risk for the person who is bought as sexual commodity. A number of countries have passed legislation that recognizes prostitution as sexual exploitation: Sweden (1999),⁹ South Korea (2004), Iceland, (2008), Norway (2009), Canada (2014), Northern Ireland (2015), France (2016), and Republic of Ireland (2017). In these abolitionist approaches to prostitution, sex buyers are penalized (as are pimps and traffickers) and people in prostitution are decriminalized and are also provided with exit services and job training. Once prostitution is understood as a form of violence against women, this legal approach makes sense.

But first we have to move past the pimps' and profiteers' deceptive narratives that deny the risks of prostitution to the person who is sold as product. Ultimately, it is necessary to look at the structural origins of race, sex, and economic inequality. Public education is needed regarding the humanity of those who are bought as products, the risks and the violence of the experience of being bought for sex, and the predatory criminality of the sex buyer.

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9. See the Swedish government's report regarding the implementation of the law against purchasing sexual services: https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/the_ban_against_the_purchase_of_sexual_services._an_evaluation_1999-2008_1.pdf.

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