

Drivers of Socioeconomic Conditions and Health Disparities Among Sex Workers in NYC Using Marxist Feminist and Precarious Employment Theory

Amanda Pierz, MSc





Conflict of Interest

- N/A

Background

- Many people indicated that they entered the sex industry in New York City due to a financial crisis or ongoing financial instability¹
 - 87% of the sex workers in the sample indicated that they had unstable housing situations
 - 70% reported having children and/or dependents
 - There were a high level of respondents that were interested in doing other work, but they indicated “unlivable wages in other work”
- Reported that they have exhausted employment options in low- and medium-wage careers before seeking employment in the sex industry
- They did not find work that offer a living wage and/or flexible working conditions²

Background

- Within capitalist American society, economic conditions force or coerce workers to enter the sex industry as a means of survival³
- Understanding the ways in which socioeconomic factors contribute to the violence and stigma that sex workers is paramount to the recognition that sex work is inherently an exploitative system of labor as it currently exists, even for those that voluntarily enter the sex industry
- However, it is important to recognize that most sex workers are still living under capitalist restraints, with the need to survive within the socioeconomic environment in which they exist



Research Significance

- Rise of policies criminalizing full-service, outdoor sex workers and trends of online networks banning sex workers from advertising and offering their services in the US
- Has led to a significant impact on the occupational health and safety among sex workers
 - Reduced economic opportunities
 - Reduced access to health and social services
 - Reduced opportunities for community resources

Methods: Reconciling a Marxism theoretical perspectives on sex work

Traditional Marxist feminists perspectives⁴⁻⁷

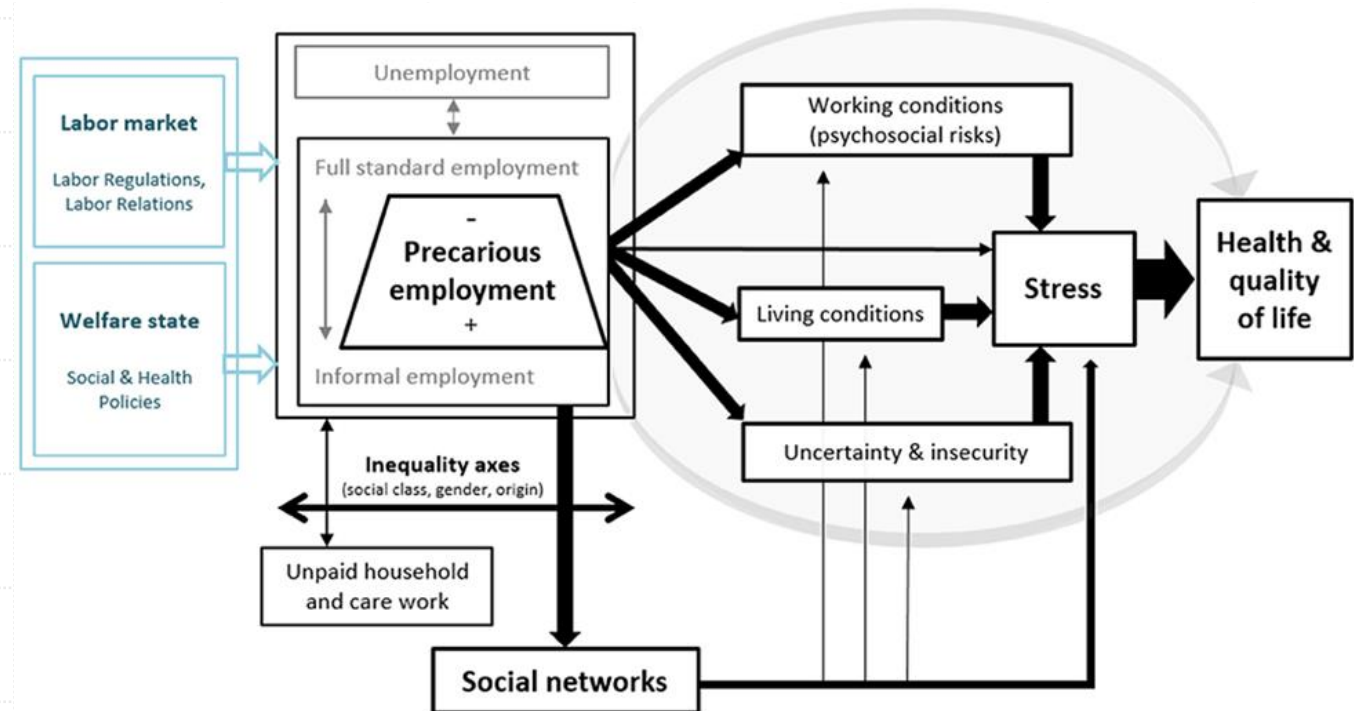
- Argue that sex work cannot be considered work because it is an inherently violent and exploitative industry
- Institutionalization of male oppression and dominance over sexual and reproductive labor
- Cannot “unionize” the violence out from the sex industry
- The only possibility is to abolish the system in place
- Marx viewed sex work as “prostitution is only a particular expression of the universal prostitution of the worker”

Shift in framing from “sex work is work” to “sex workers are laborers”

- Sex workers exist within the restraints and realities of a capitalist society, and need to survive within the current sociopolitical climate
- Highlight the goal of uniting sex workers rather than expressing interest in legitimizing the sex industry
- We seek to unify the traditionally binary approaches of sex work advocacy using socialist techniques of organizing workers:
 - Removal of the social conditions that require people seek careers in sex work
 - Making the conditions of sex workers safer and more equitable

Methods: Precarious Employment Theory⁸

- Higher levels of job insecurity and an overall erosion of workers' employment and working conditions⁹
 - Serve as a social determinant of health for the precariously employed
 - An employment condition affecting the health of workers, their families and communities
- In this model, the most economically vulnerable workers are hired with little to no bargaining power in the workplace economy¹⁰
- Precarious work is considered a long-term structural element of contemporary capitalism¹¹
- Sex work has been described as the "ultimate form of precarious labor"¹²



Bolibar et al., 2021

Methodological Aims

- To explore sociopolitical and economic issues that impact New York City sex workers
- To understand the context-specific drivers and social processes which lead to disparities in health-related outcomes
- This analysis focuses on New York City sex workers post-Giuliani legislature of the late 1990s
 - To assess how these policies and cultural shifts have impacted the health and well-being of sex workers from 2000 to the time of writing (2021).





Drivers of health disparities among sex workers in New York City, USA

- *police violence* originating with “broken windows policing” policies in public spaces targeted for redevelopment and tourism and policy-induced breakdowns that have contributed to the prevalence of police violence against sex workers, particularly trans people and/or people of color
- *structural and political violence* through legislation and corporate tactics to restrict the visibility of street-based sex workers and sex workers on Internet platforms as well as limiting the ability for sex workers to screen clients prior to meeting
- *occupational- and financial-related stress* under precarious labor conditions which subjects sex workers to high rates of discrimination, violence, and rejection related to their work

Recommendations & Conclusions

- To reconcile, binary approaches to sex work advocacy, we suggest that all advocacy aspires to equally engage in policy and practice in three proposed policy levels
 - *transformative approaches* that aim to remove the socioeconomic conditions that serve as a push factor for people to enter sex work,
 - *restorative approaches* to remove current harms that exist in policy and policing practices against sex workers and
 - *harm reduction approaches* to improve the current economic, occupational and safety conditions of current sex workers
- All these approaches can work in tandem with one another to integrate different concerns and viewpoints of the sex industry and how best to address the needs of potential, current and former sex workers.



References

1. Thukral J & Ditmore M. *Revolving Door: An Analysis of Street-Based Prostitution in New York City*. New York: The Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, 2003.
2. Open Society Foundations. *Understanding sex work*. Available at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/explainers/understanding-sex-work-open-society>. Accessed 6 November 2021.
3. Bhattacharya M. Neither 'Free' nor 'Equal' Work: A Marxist-Feminist Perspective on Prostitution. *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*. 2016;1(1):82-92. doi:10.1177/2455632716637914
4. Marx K. *Economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959. ISBN 10- 9780879754464
5. Dobash RE & Dobash R. *Violence against wives: A case against the patriarchy*. New York: Free Press; 1979. ISBN 0029078105.
6. Weitzer R. The social construction of sex trafficking: Ideology and institutionalization of a moral crusade. *Politics & Society*. 2007;35(3):447–475. doi: 10.1177/0032329207304319.
7. Farley M. Prostitution harms women even if indoors: Reply to Weitzer. *Violence against Women*. 2005;11(7):950–964. doi: 10.1177/1077801205276987.
8. Benach J, Vives A, Amable M, Vanroelen C, Tarafa G, Muntaner C. Precarious Employment: Understanding an Emerging Social Determinant of Health. *Annu. Rev. Public Health* 2014;35:229–53. doi: 10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182500
9. Burgess J, Connell J, Winterton J. Vulnerable workers, precarious work and the role of trade unions and HRM. *Int J Hum Res Man* 2013;22:4083-4093. doi: 10.1080/09585192.2013.845420.
10. Bolibar M, Belvis FX, Joda P, Vives A, Méndez F, Batroll-Roca X, Pozo OJ, Gomez-Gomez A, Padrosa E, Benach J, Julià M. Precarious Employment and Stress: The Biomedical Embodiment of Social Factors. *PRESSED Project Study Protocol*. *Front Public Health* 2021. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2021.649447.
11. Betti E. Precarious Work: Norm or Exception of Capitalism? Historicizing a Contemporary Debate: a Global Gendered Perspective. In: *The Power of the Norm: Fragile Rules and Significant Exceptions*, ed. E. Betti, K. Miller, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences 2016;35. Available at https://files.iwm.at/jvfc/35_2_Betti.pdf. Accessed 16 November 2021.
12. Sanders T & Hardy K. Sex work: the ultimate precarious labour? *Criminal Justice Matters* 2013;93:16-17doi: 10.1080/09627251.2013.833760

Thank you!

