

**SOC 3290 Deviance**  
**Lecture 23: Prostitution 1**

Today we will begin our look at what has been called the “oldest profession in the world” (which would be inaccurate, since the “oldest profession” is the priesthood). We will begin our discussion of this topic by reviewing: types of prostitutes, the world of prostitution, the subculture of prostitution, other participants in prostitution, social reaction to prostitution, and consider prostitution in a global perspective. Next class, we will follow this up by considering the complex problem of defining prostitution, misconceptions about prostitution, its extent in Canadian society, discuss a profile of Canadian prostitutes, and conclude by considering theories of prostitution.

**Types of Prostitutes:**

There is a great variety among prostitutes, but we only need discuss the more common types: streetwalkers, child and adolescent prostitutes, house prostitutes and call girls. Such sex workers are employed in a highly stratified occupation, and this is reflected in their status, price, and working conditions. Basically, status, price and quality of life rises as one goes from streetwalkers to call girls.

Streetwalkers are generally less educated, more likely to shoot drugs and get AIDS, and more often arrested by the police. As the name suggests, they generally solicit clients on the street (e.g. "Want a date"), particularly passing motorists. Most render their services in the car, usually oral sex (vs. vaginal sex if both go to a hotel). Most streetwalkers are not paid as well as other prostitutes and thus strive to complete their business ASAP (particularly in the car jobs which vary from 4-5 minutes vs. 15-30 in hotels). Many men aren't happy about this "quick service").

Traditionally streetwalkers operate in lower-class areas where they can afford to solicit more openly without as much fear of police harassment. But in many suburban areas streetwalkers are more careful to avoid arrest. This makes it harder for customers to identify them, so prostitutes alternate between soliciting and blending in to the shadows if police are seen. This, many stand near bus stops, pay phones, or entrances to public buildings. The prospect of arrest isn't their only problem. Many streetwalkers are abused by customers, pimps and the police (e.g. robbery, forced, kinky sex, beatings, etc.) Young streetwalkers are most likely to be so victimized; older ones are more street smart and thus better able to protect themselves.

The next category consists of child and adolescent prostitutes (as low as 8-12 years old). These are often called "baby pros" who have been brought up in poor and chaotic families, often being accustomed to seeing their mothers and older sisters engaged in sex with different men, involved in pornography or prostitution. Many have suffered physical or sexual abuse. Thus, when first approached by a man with money for sex, they are more "ready" to accept. Still too young, though, they continue to live with their parents and attend school, working only on a part-time basis.

Somewhat older than these children are adolescent prostitutes, aged 13-17. Most have also been brought up in disorganized families, suffering physical or sexual abuse in childhood. Unlike their younger peers, however, many have run away from home and become heavy drug users. The need to support themselves, intensified by the craving for drugs, is the most common motivation for them to enter the profession. Often a pimp plays a significant role as well, who frequently seeks for new prey to entice or force into prostitution.

Yet being forced into the trade is relatively rare in North America compared to poorer countries where far greater numbers are forced or tricked into the trade (e.g. Thailand, Brazil, Eastern Europe). Poverty isn't the only driving force behind the prevalence of adolescent and child prostitution in such countries. A great demand for this type of prostitution is another driving factor, particularly given the popular belief that very young sex partners are less likely to have AIDS. This has been reflected in sex tourism to countries where offenders are unlikely to be prosecuted.

The third category is that of house prostitutes. Essentially, a brothel is a place where prostitutes meet their customers and share their earnings with its operator - the madam. These used to be much more common, but have been increasingly shut down since the 40's. In Canada, it is an offense to operate such "a common bawdy house." Yet, in some jurisdictions where open prostitution is legal (e.g. Nevada, the Netherlands), sex workers are generally fingerprinted, carry ID cards, and required to have frequent medical checkups.

Generally, customers enter the house and are directed to a young woman by the madam. More often now, brothels encourage clients to use condoms. In jurisdictions where brothels are operating illegally underground, the madam attempts in various ways to ensure that the potential client isn't a member of the vice squad, but readily admits regular customers. Some prostitutes wait in the brothel, some may work out of their apartments and pay a kickback to the madam. Since clients often look for variety, house prostitutes usually don't work in a brothel for an extended period - 4-5 years at max. To minimize the risk of arrest, many houses simply operate as escort agencies.

Most house prostitutes find that they have a distinct advantage over streetwalkers: safety and security, regular contact/friendship with other women. Yet there are disadvantages as well. They are not free to set their own hours and must give a part of their earnings to the house (e.g. 50/50). House prostitutes who work as escorts seem to have the best deal (e.g. the potential for fat tips). Yet they may also be very vulnerable in the client's room, where their control over the situation may be less.

The final major category of prostitutes is the call girl. Occupying the highest status in the sex business, they usually charge much more (e.g. several hundred dollars and up). They can earn as much a year as a successful lawyer or doctor, are generally better educated or sophisticated than their lower status counterparts, and may even feel insulted if they are referred to as a prostitute.

It is typical for a call girl to wait for customers to call. Initially she may get a few referrals from others and ads, but eventually her satisfied clients may recommend her to their friends. Many don't use their personal phones, but have an answering service that they provide to clients. This arrangement serves two purposes: avoiding police tracing and maximizing the volume of business.

Compared to lower paid prostitutes, call girls tend to dress in good taste rather than garishly. They are skilled in making transactions appear non-commercial, acting like the client's girlfriend in public. They may adhere to a professional code of ethics, refusing, for example, to mention clients names, steal, let them overpay when drunk, etc. They may do their best to satisfy clients, even in problematic situations.

Most call girls claim that they fare much better than housewives and women with legitimate employment - making lots of money and living in style. They also claim that they have found fulfilment of their desire for independence in their profession (e.g. not being dependent on one man, who can always be replaced). While easy to accept their claim of making money and living well, it is harder to agree to this claim of independence - because they depend economically on their customers, meeting their needs, and, ultimately, must take orders. Indeed, even in the case of a masochistic client who likes to follow orders himself, the call girl still has to follow his in order to give him orders.

### **The World of Prostitution:**

Although they may be divided into several types, prostitutes as an occupation have basically similar social and working lives. Let's consider some aspects of their lives.

According to Perkins (1991), many studies give a distorted picture of prostitutes as child abuse victims, heavy drug users, victims of low self-esteem, or as being immature, disturbed, or abnormal in some way. Such studies are biased as they have focussed largely on adolescent streetwalkers, those who have been arrested, or those helped by social agencies. It is true these have more problems in their lives than others, but they represent a minority of prostitutes (5-30%). The prostitutes in Perkins' study, in contrast, are a reasonably representative sample of women in the sex business. She found that most prostitutes don't differ significantly from conventional women in their social and sexual backgrounds. For example, most have the same desire to be married and live a traditional family life, planning to stop working when their kids are old enough to catch on. They have about the same level of education and class backgrounds as the general population. Most are not without friends, lovers, or particularly "promiscuous" in their private lives - living with husbands, lovers or children, or sharing apartments with friends. Yet, because of the stigmatization associated with their work, they are much more likely than others to be raped.

When queried about their reasons for entering the business, the common myths didn't stand up (e.g. drug addiction, severe poverty, low self esteem and emotional problems). Again,

these are more relevant to teenage streetwalkers, but not prostitutes as a whole. Instead, the most common reasons for entering the profession were economic (e.g. wanting to make more money, being unemployed, supporting a family, paying for an education, an overseas trip, buying a car, or some other specific thing. Money, then, is the most important reason women chose to go into the sex business. This is no different from the reason that most other people have for working in conventional businesses.

Yet such economic reasons serve merely as a predisposing factor for entering the business. In order to find out about the business, acquaintances usually fill this gap, introducing otherwise predisposed women to the trade.

In terms of occupational hazards, the issue of AIDS and other STD's comes up. While more likely to be infected with AIDS, Western prostitutes don't have as high an incidence of AIDS as popularly believed. In a national survey of U.S. prostitutes in the early 1990's, the range was between 0 and 6.2%. However, the incidence was much higher among intravenous drug users (57%), which was most likely the source of their infection, not sex. Most other prostitutes don't get AIDS because they don't shoot up and practice safe sex.

The use of condoms is critical to prostitutes because women are 10 times more likely to get AIDS from men than men are from women. Yet in many poor countries where women are more oppressed, most men refuse to wear condoms. Hence, the percentage of prostitutes infected with AIDS are much higher. More recently, many prostitutes in poorer countries have begun to insist that their customers use condoms, and men that refuse can be sent away. As well, an increasing number of prostitutes in these countries have begun to use the female condom - rarely used in the West.

### **The Subculture of Prostitution:**

Like any other profession, prostitutes hold certain beliefs about themselves and their work. Many see themselves as morally superior as at least being honest about what they do (i.e. conventional women who marry in exchange for security and economic support do the same thing, but are dishonest about it). Prostitutes also see their so-called respectable customers as hypocrites - those who publicly denounce them but privately visit for sex, or who cheat on their wives. Hence, many prostitutes despise their customers and try to exploit them by maximizing their fee and minimizing the service provided. This latter view is particularly prominent among streetwalkers and those immersed in the prostitution subculture, but no so notable among call girls and higher priced prostitutes less alienated from conventional society.

The more positive aspect of the subculture is the belief that prostitution is good for society because it performs many important services (e.g. preventing sex crimes, contributing to marital success by allowing customers to talk about unhappy marital lives or sexual problems). This professional self-image, where prostitutes liken themselves to humanitarians, social workers or counsellors, has fuelled civil rights movements among Western prostitutes, who campaign

against anti-soliciting laws, form unions with the aim of decriminalizing prostitution, fight for better working conditions, etc. The most famous group in this regard is COYOTE, which fights for full decriminalization and the elimination of all legal restrictions on prostitution. The argument is that women have the right to sell sex just as they do to sell their brains to a law firm, creative work to a gallery, image to a photographer or body as a dancer. As such, arresting or jailing prostitutes violates their civil rights, and that sex work should be respected and promoted like other legitimate professions. Still, many feminists have rejected this argument, contending that prostitution is a form of sexual slavery. Moreover, COYOTE has failed to get public and legislative support.

### **Other Participants in Prostitution**

Aside from prostitutes themselves, there are three other kinds of people involved in prostitution: the madam, the pimp, and the customer.

The madam is the owner or manager of a brothel. Many are former prostitutes with much experience. They run their establishments as a business, except that they have to deal with problems related to the illegal nature of their trade. There are three kinds of activities the madam typically engages in, related to her employees, customers and the police.

The madam recruits her employees largely through her current staff, but also through pimps and other madams. She trains them to be clean, develop social skills, and observe customs like asking for payment up front, not getting emotionally involved or spending too much time with a client. The madam supervises employees work, keeps them happy, prevents quarrels, makes and enforces rules. The nature of her work is such that she usually functions as if she were the employees mother.

The madam is also responsible for finding customers. She keeps a "john book" containing customers' names and phone numbers, using it when there isn't much business. Yet, usually customers call her. Her main concern is to make the client happy so that he will become a regular visitor. This also means that she has to find and hire new women constantly, as customers seek variety.

To avoid arrest, the madam must also know how to deal with police. She is usually skilled at recognizing a disguised police officer. All the same, madams often have to work out some stable arrangement with the police (e.g. that they will "go through the motions of arresting her" once in a while to appease public opinion, but otherwise leave her alone). If this can't be done, she can ask employees to wait for calls at home, essentially running a "call house" or escort agency rather than a full fledged brothel.

Another player in the business is the pimp. Many prostitutes who don't work for a madam work for a pimp. While madams typically get half of her employees earnings, pimps generally get it all. Also, unlike a madam who has to find customers for her girls, the pimp simply tells them to

go out and solicit. The pimp is this not a panderer or procurer, but simply a man who lives off the entire proceeds of one or more prostitutes. Hence, many consider pimps to be the "scum of the earth."

Pimps may have anywhere from 1-20 women in their "stable," but most have 1 or 2. They live in a subculture that in many ways is the opposite of conventional culture. Men are extremely dominant, women extremely submissive, and the ideal union is seen as between one minority man and several white women. Pimps are obsessed with their own appearance (hair, clothes, jewelry), while their "wives in law" are the real economic providers. Paternity of the womens' children often comes from outside the group (i.e. clients). The pimps are expected to demonstrate great style and creativity. Women sleep in the day and work at night. Money is like God, and conspicuous consumption is the norm. Little thought goes to the future.

Pimps often resort to violence to control their women, and this is particularly effective. Indeed, one study indicated that over 50% of prostitutes who had been beaten by pimps accepted it as a way of life, felt they deserved it, or were flattered by it as a sign of caring. Another study found that a pimp's women generally worship him, investing all their hopes, dreams and goals for the future in him - and wearing his beatings proudly as signs of his love. Everything that he does to them is considered right, proper and honourable. In short, prostitutes are so emotionally entangled with their pimp that they cannot see themselves being emotionally controlled by him.

Finally, we come to the customer or "John." According to a national survey, men who have slept with different women are more likely than monogamous men to become a john. If such sexually active men can get sex with conventional women, why visit prostitutes? Feminists argue that this gives the man a chance to be a sexual master over a female servant. Men have other reasons as well. First and foremost, this is quick, easy sex. Ordinarily, finding a willing woman for sex requires time, effort or ability. There are men who don't have the time to find such a woman, particularly if too busy pursuing a career or if they are strangers in a city far away from their wives/girlfriends. There are also men who simply want sex - not conversation, companionship or love. For them, the dating ritual is just too much. There are yet other men who are too shy or otherwise lack the ability to attract and persuade a woman to go to bed. For them, a prostitute avoids the risk of rejection.

A second major reason for going to a prostitute is to get untangled sex - avoiding any ties or emotional entanglements, pregnancies, and particularly women who want a relationship after sex. They don't want to risk breaking up a marriage - their own or another's. Essentially, they want sex free of the conventional strictures of responsibility. This kind of sex is characteristically available from the prostitute.

A third reason for patronizing prostitutes is the desire to get a variety of sexual experiences. There are men who want to have sex with a variety of women rather than just one; some may want to engage in certain practices that turn off their wives and girlfriends. All these needs can be easily met with a visit to prostitutes.

The majority of men who buy sex are occasional johns, while a few are habitual and compulsive. Occasional johns are psychologically normal, but habitual and compulsive johns less so (e.g. the former may get emotionally attached; the latter just can't stay away from "dirty" women and can't be sexually potent with others).

### **Societal Reaction to Prostitution:**

In ancient civilizations, prostitution was not condemned as evil. Indeed, it was even considered sacred by some religious sects such that only priestesses had the privilege to practice it. But today it is regarded as evil in most societies - but one that cannot be eradicated. Thus, one of two situations usually prevails: (1) prostitution is legal but public solicitation for it is not (Canada, many European and Asian countries); or (2) prostitution is illegal but the law against it is not strictly enforced (the U.S.).

If prostitution is so hard to wipe out, why bother to enforce the anti-prostitution laws? Conservatives over the years have come up with the following rationales: (1) prostitution often brings about mugging, robbery or assault; (2) prostitution provides a breeding ground for organized crime; (3) prostitution helps spread the AIDS virus and other STD's; prostitution often subjects innocent citizens to offensive public solicitation; and (5) prostitution is destructive to public morals, which enforcement of the laws helps to preserve. Some feminists add that prostitution is "female sexual slavery" controlled by pimps.

On the other hand, liberals have argued for the legalization of prostitution. They assert that most problems associated with prostitution stem largely from the laws themselves. Treated as criminals, prostitutes are bound to operate secretly and stay as far from the watchful eye of the law as possible. Thus, they and their customers are likely to commit crime against each other or transmit STD's. If prostitution is legalized, laws can be enacted to control prostitutes' activities (e.g. mandatory medical checks, limited work zones, no soliciting allowed on the street). Some liberals also contend that current laws don't uphold moral standards but encourage police corruption, moral hypocrisy, and disrespect for the law. Moreover, it costs too much to prosecute prostitutes and law enforcement efforts could be better employed elsewhere.

The general public favours the conservative position over the liberal one (a U.S. national survey found 72% opposing legalization of prostitution, and another one found a majority wanting the current laws strictly enforced). Yet, no matter how strictly the laws are enforced, prostitution cannot be eradicated because of the substantial demand.

### **Prostitution in Global Perspective:**

In recent years, prostitution has become a fast-growing global industry. Yet, sex workers in various countries suffer more than their Western counterparts.

Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, many unemployed women from the former East

Bloc have drifted to the more prosperous countries to sell their bodies. Many have chosen to enter the profession; others have been tricked or forced into it after arriving in foreign countries with promises of singing, dancing, modelling, or waitressing jobs.

Many more women from Asia have been lured to the West, Thailand, the Philippines and Japan with promises of legitimate jobs only to be sold to brothels. Indeed, in the U.S. some "nude modelling studios pay American servicemen to marry Korean women, bring them home, and divorce them so that they can be forced into brothels. There are also large groups of prostitutes in Thailand and the Philippines catering to both locals and "sex tourists." Many have come from poor villages to work in large cities after having been tricked or sold into brothels to serve as virtual sexual slaves.

Prostitution is far more prevalent in the developing world than in the West, and attempts have been made to explain this. One popular explanation is the abject poverty in the rural areas of developing countries which forced people into prostitution to survive. Marxists go further, blaming this poverty on neocolonialism. Western powers and multinationals have destroyed traditional agriculture, driving many peasants off their farms and causing widespread poverty.

Yet rural poverty alone can't explain why the overwhelming majority of prostitutes are women. Feminists reply that this is the result of gender inequality: being heavily dominated or oppressed by men, poor women are said to be forced to sell their bodies as commodities - and this is reinforced by socialization towards increased filial or family duty for daughters. The same patriarchal culture encourages young men to visit prostitutes as a way of confirming their manhood.

### **Conclusion:**

Today we began our discussion of this topic by reviewing: types of prostitutes, the world of prostitution, the subculture of prostitution, other participants in prostitution, social reaction to prostitution, and consider prostitution in a global perspective. Next class, we will continue by considering the difficulty of defining prostitution, various misconceptions about prostitution, its extent in Canadian society, discuss a profile of Canadian prostitutes, and conclude by considering various theories that seek to explain prostitution.