

**SOC 3290 Deviance**  
**Lecture 24: Prostitution 2**

Now that we have reviewed types of prostitutes, the world of prostitution, the subculture of prostitution, other participants in prostitution, social reaction to prostitution, and considered prostitution in a global perspective, we will continue our discussion of this topic. Today we will consider the complex problem of defining prostitution, various misconceptions about prostitution, its extent in Canadian society, discuss a profile of Canadian prostitutes, entry into prostitution, and conclude by looking at various theoretical explanations for this persistent phenomenon.

**Defining prostitution:**

Prostitution is not an easily defined behavior. Most Canadians (90% according to the 1985 Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution) see it as a simple exchange of sexual services for money. But what about people who exchange other material benefits or goods in exchange for sex? Again, according to the survey, many (57%) would agree. Would that mean that people who engage in sex in return for a ride home, for drugs, for a place to sleep - even for food to survive - are prostitutes? What about “gold-diggers,” people who marry for the money? More fairly, what about people who live in “marriages of convenience” - who marry not for love but simply for financial security? What about people in arranged marriages, where money or other goods are passed from one family to the other as dowries? What about people who arrange to marry so that they can get their landed immigrant status or green card? What I’m saying here is - where do you draw the line?

For most Canadians, the exchange of sex solely for material gain fails to meet their moral standards - 62% feel that exchanging sex for money is indecent, improper, and worthy of disapproval. Fewer (53%) believe that sex in return for material goods other than money is also wrong. Clearly, Canadians disagree on what constitutes prostitution and on how objectionable the practice is.

While a consensus on a definition of prostitution is impossible, most sociologists agree on several points: (1) it is sexual in nature, and the reward for performing the sexual act is either money or other material goods exchanged at or near the time of the act; (2) the relationship between the provider and the recipient of sexual services involves neither love nor affection; (3) because there is an exchange of services for material reward, prostitution is either a full or part time vocation. Furthermore, prostitutes are not necessarily female nor adult: male and female prostitutes of various ages provide sexual services for both the opposite and the same sex.

**Misconceptions about prostitution:**

Always a subject of both curiosity and controversy, it was almost inevitable that stereotypes and misconceptions would arise. Inaccurate depictions in both the news and the

entertainment media encourage popular misconceptions about the sex trade. For example, many believe that pimps force large numbers of women into prostitution through a combination of threats, violence and drugs. Canadian research, however, suggests that this is relatively rare: about half of all prostitutes enter “the life” without any outside encouragement, let alone coercion.

However, force does seem to play a role in the recruitment of teenage runaways. Still, while more youth than adults may be coerced, this means of entry is uncommon even for them. The rarity of forced teenage prostitution is underscored by the 1984 Badgley Committee’s report that stated 50% of young prostitutes interviewed couldn’t identify a key person who got them into the trade. Moreover, of those who could name such a person, only 1% of males and 10% of females identified the person as a pimp. Moreover, since not all pimps are violent, physical coercion into prostitution appears uncommon.

60% of Canadians surveyed by a national opinion poll (SCPP) believed that most prostitutes work for pimps. However, many prostitutes report that they are self-employed. Again, 60% of Canadians believe that organized crime controls much of Canada’s sex trade. Research also disputes this, finding relatively few links between prostitution and Canadian organized crime.

The widespread belief that many people take up prostitution to support their addiction to drugs is another misconception. Of course, like others, some Canadian prostitutes do use drugs, but the extent of their addiction and drug trafficking doesn’t appear to be great. Although most prostitutes do have criminal records, these mostly involve relatively minor crimes as well as offences related to prostitution itself.

Many Canadians (69%) believe that prostitution is prominent in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Common sense views about how prostitutes perform sex acts and people spread STD’s are at the root of this view. Yet, the extent to which prostitutes contribute to the spread of STD’s is exaggerated. Prostitutes in Canada and the US transmit STD’s no more, and perhaps less often, than other sexually active people who have many partners. Since the introduction of the pill in the early 1960's, the number of people engaging in sexual acts with more than 1 partner has risen dramatically. More important, however, is the fact that most female prostitutes insist on using a condom while performing vaginal, anal and oral sex acts. Recent Canadian research shows that over 90% of adult female prostitutes use condoms extensively; the same is true for 30-40% of male hustlers. The recent publicity regarding HIV transmission among homosexual males and the public campaign for safer sexual practices make it likely that condom use among male prostitutes will increase.

Many people also believe that prostitution is extremely distasteful and unpleasant work and that prostitutes are miserable, guilt ridden, and dislike their clients. Because of the severely limited number of legitimate jobs available to many of those who enter the trade, prostitution presents itself as a relatively forthright way to earn a living. Little formal education, inadequate

vocational training, and a lack of experience in the labour force routinely translate into low status, part-time, low paying menial work - or unemployment. This situation is especially common for many young women during economic downturns.

Yet the emotional and psychological costs of prostitution are not as great as many commonly assume. Like others who provide services to customers, prostitutes find some customers likable, some not, and most nondescript. The image of female prostitutes as man-haters or lesbians is incorrect. Most male and female prostitutes are heterosexual and many have enjoyable sex lives with those whom they love.

### **Extent of Canadian Prostitution:**

Determining the extent of prostitution in Canada is hard. Using official crime statistics is virtually impossible since a given prostitute may be arrested either once, occasionally, or frequently: hence the number of charges does not represent the actual number of prostitutes. Moreover, prostitutes may be arrested for offences other than communicating or soliciting, such as vagrancy and public indecency. In such cases, officials underestimate both the incidence of prostitution and the number of prostitutes. Also, since higher status prostitutes don't work the street - and hence are far less likely to be arrested - their numbers remain unknown. As well, since prostitution is an illicit activity without an angry victim willing to come forward, it is less likely to be reported to or recorded by the police. Finally, prostitution routinely generates crackdowns resulting in many charges being laid in short periods of time. These appear to show an increase in the number of prostitutes, but this artificial spike in the numbers is really due to police activity.

Only a little better than official figures are estimates of the number of prostitutes made by the police. In several Canadian cities, as part of the research for the SCPP Report, police officers were asked to estimate the numbers of working prostitutes in their cities. Many factors, including transience, contaminate estimates of this type. While some would argue that these data are among the best available, the counts they produce are highly speculative - educated guesses at best. Not surprisingly, appraisals by police officers in the same city often vary quite a bit.

According to the SCPP Police data, eastern Canada in the 1980's had relatively few prostitutes. In the relatively populous cities such as St. John's, Halifax, Saint John and Moncton there were very modest levels of prostitution. In the smaller cities such as Gander, Dartmouth, Charlottetown and Summerside, commercial sex was virtually nonexistent. Quebec City police estimated their population of prostitutes at around 400 - most of whom worked out of clubs (35%), agencies (28%), or through advertisements (25%). Street prostitution, however, was relatively nonexistent. Not surprisingly, the Committee found that Canada's largest cities had the most prostitutes. Police in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver reported that between 500-600 prostitutes were active in each of these cities. The inclusion of temporary and occasional prostitutes increased those numbers by 2 to 6 times. As might be expected, mid-sized cities like Ottawa, Winnipeg, Saskatoon and Calgary had fewer (1-400) prostitutes, while smaller

municipalities such as Windsor, St. Catherines, and Niagara Falls had the least (20-100).

### **A Profile of Canadian Prostitutes:**

Canadian prostitutes surveyed by the Badgley Committee and the SCPP (Fraser Committee) ranged from 14-56 years of age, though most were between 22-25. Most began their careers while still in their teens. Since their earning power is directly related to physical attractiveness, most careers last less than 10 years. On average, most Canadian prostitutes begin working around 16 and “retire” around age 26. Those working on the street tend to be younger, since liquor laws restrict access to bars. For the same reason, escort agencies usually won’t hire youth. As a result, off the street prostitution is largely the domain of adults; the street of youth.

Males have a shorter career than women because they tend to lose their youthful appearance earlier. Most men exit the ranks around age 21, while many women remain until age 30. As women age, they lose their competitive edge and become downwardly mobile in the profession. Prostitutes visibly beyond their physical prime are forced to work in less desirable locations, both on the street and in bars. They also find that they must increasingly offer their services for discount prices.

Survey data from the two committee reports suggest that the ratio of male to female prostitutes is about 4:1. Most, especially males, are single, but 20% of females are married. A minority of prostitutes support and care for dependent children. In terms of family backgrounds, Badgley report that 49% of child and teenage prostitutes come from broken homes. Similarly, 43% of adult prostitutes surveyed by Crook (1984) in Atlantic Canada, and 56% of Vancouver prostitutes surveyed by Lowman (1984) came from disrupted families.

Both the Fraser and Badgley reports indicate that the socioeconomic backgrounds of Canadian prostitutes vary widely. Most come from lower-middle or middle-class backgrounds, while a few come from affluent families. Most - particularly those working the street - are poorly educated. In Vancouver, 70% hadn’t completed high school. For the Prairies, Quebec and the Maritimes, the figures were 77, 68 and 84% respectively. In Ontario, Fleishman (1984) attempted to check education levels of prostitutes against the type of prostitution they were engaged in. He found that, for street prostitutes, females tended to have completed only the early years of high school, while males were more likely to have completed higher grades or to have graduated. Not surprisingly, call girls report higher levels of education: most had at least a post-secondary education of some sort.

Another trait commonly reported by prostitutes is childhood abuse at the hands of a male. 25% of boys and 33% of girls interviewed for the Badgley Committee had suffered physical assault. 7% of the boys and 21% of the girls reported being the victim of some form of sexual assault. Among Vancouver prostitutes, Lowman found that 67% were physically assaulted in the family context. 72% had been attacked in settings outside the family. Similarly, Crook reports that 40% and 28% of her sample of prostitutes in Atlantic Canada had suffered physical and

sexual assault, respectively. In Quebec, 44% of prostitutes questioned had been sexually assaulted by some member of the family and 33% had been raped.

The backgrounds of many Canadian prostitutes, then, appear to be a combination of humble origins and physical and sexual abuse. Although generally consistent with investigations of prostitution in other countries, one must remain cautious in assuming that these traits are precipitators of prostitution. The studies from which these findings were taken necessarily focused on the lower echelons of prostitution. Streetwalkers do tend to have lower-class backgrounds, but so do auto-workers and secretaries. In contrast, call girls, like female teachers and bank managers, tend to come from middle-class backgrounds.

As well, to establish a clear link between abuse and entry into prostitution, it would have to be shown that far more streetwalkers were physically and sexually attacked during childhood than were other persons who are not prostitutes, but who share the same social and economic backgrounds. Thus, while many street prostitutes report being physically and sexually abused during childhood, information is severely limited on how many lower-class children in general suffer such abuse. Moreover, prostitutes may exaggerate the extent of their victimization to portray themselves as innocent victims not entirely responsible for their morally stigmatized actions. In reference to the impact of prior abuse, Badgley goes so far as to conclude that children and youth who become prostitutes are no more likely to have been abused than those children and youth who do not. Lowman, however, argues that closer examination of the committee's data suggests that juvenile prostitutes are twice as likely as non-prostitutes to have been the victim of sexual assault involving threats or actual force. The real answer to this question remains unclear, and we must remain cautious about buying into stereotypes in this regard.

### **Entry into Prostitution:**

Lautt (1984) has documented three entry points into prostitution: exploitation, recruitment by a big-sister figure, and the independent, pragmatic decision. The former is most likely associated with teenage runaways who are approached by exploitative pimps at bus stations, etc., offered food, and then later convinced or coerced into paid sex. The second category, recruitment by a "big sister" figure, usually involves sexually active youth who hang together, party together, and offer each other support for adventure and excitement. After receiving occasional remuneration for partying, sex for fun gradually becomes sex for profit. Those in the group already accepting money for sex convince newcomers to redefine the meaning of their sexual activity. The third entry point involves more mature individuals, 18-24, who make a pragmatic decision to enter the profession based on economic necessity: given a poor job market and limited skills, they can simply make more money that way. In addition to these points of entry, some people also take up prostitution because they are emotionally attached to someone - a "friend" or "lover" that encourages them to take up the trade. Of course, once entered, a career as a prostitute can be hard to leave behind. One has gained no marketable job skills and it may be hard to explain a big gap in your resume to a prospective employer.

Once entered, novice prostitutes have to learn the subculture associated with the trade. This is often from other players such as madams, pimps, or more experienced prostitutes themselves. Sometimes a kickback or fee is charged for this assistance. Of course, given the relatively unskilled nature of the work, “training” is relatively short. For call girls, this training is more extensive since it involves more than the acquisition of skills and values, but the development of a client list and referrals to be utilized later (“a good book”). Various skills learned involve locating and initiating contact with clients, negotiating the type of service and fee, shielding oneself from disease, and protecting oneself from the hazards presented by customers, pimps, irate citizens, competitors claims on territory, and the police. Mastering solicitation is particularly important, as prostitutes, especially streetwalkers, need to advertise their services without being unduly pressing. Also, to make more money, street and bar prostitutes become skilled at getting paid up front and inducing orgasm ASAP to ensure the most money for the least work. Most prostitutes feel that processing 3-4 customers is a good day, one or no customers a bad one, and more than half a dozen is exceptional. Prostitutes also need to know the fee structure for various services in the area - because undercutting others can be dangerous. Also of great importance for prostitutes is to avoid customers with STD’s, and to check customers as best they can. Any hint that a prostitute or an area is associated with STD’s can hurt business. Prostitutes now generally insist on using condoms, and, if given a hassle, point out that the customer might not want to take anything home to his wife or lover. Since the person who poses the greatest danger to the prostitute is the customer, prostitutes learn to employ several techniques (e.g. avoid those behaving suspiciously, those known to be violent, or appear to be carrying weapons). Many prostitutes themselves carry a weapon. Occasionally they work together for safety, or refuse to provide services in isolated locations, with more than one client, or at a client’s home. As a rule, most prostitutes don’t use alcohol or drugs on the job, but reserve them for after work, often to cope with the stresses involved (being drunk or high on the job puts them at increased risk). They also learn to place themselves in a position that they can defend themselves if necessary.

Prostitutes must also learn more than job skills. They must acquire the proper subcultural values and occupational ideologies to foster good relations with others (e.g. not undercutting each other, not leaking information, exploiting clients). As well, they must learn to protect their self-concept from the extensive stigmatization facing them in our society (e.g. acquiring the ideology that they perform a vital social function, act as counsellors, minister to the needs of social outcasts, maintain family accord, act as “safety valves” preventing sexual assaults, that what they do is little different than what others do, but at least they realize and are “honest” about it, emphasizing clients’ hypocrisy, etc). The extent to which prostitutes actually embrace this occupational ideology, however, is unclear - but it is there to draw upon if needed.

The most common activities of prostitutes involve manual and oral sex. 60% of clients request oral sex. Next, for females, is intercourse. Male prostitutes also get asked for anal sex. However, research doesn’t support the idea that prostitutes will do anything with anyone. More exotic practices (e.g. S&M) are rare.

Finally, estimates of prostitutes incomes vary widely. In the 1980's, Crook estimated that working alone without a pimp, a female prostitute earned around \$28,000/year (\$8000 if pimped). Males made more than females (\$31,000). Other estimates have been made over the years, but it is instructive to look at escorts who make far more money. Crook (1984) reported that some escorts and call girls net up to \$144,000 a year! Of course, while the accuracy of various estimates is hard to assess, some trends are clear. Males earn more than females, and, in particular, more than females managed by pimps. Street prostitutes earn less than those working off the street, and juveniles less than adults.

### **Theories of Prostitution:**

There are at least three major theories about prostitution: functionalist, feminist and social-psychological. The first two focus on explaining why prostitution persists despite efforts to eradicate it; the latter focuses on the individual prostitute - explaining why some women are more likely than others to become prostitutes.

The functionalist theory, rooted in the work of Kingsley Davis (1971), asserts that there are two reasons why prostitution exists. First is the system of sexual morality that ostensibly condemns prostitution, but has the unintended consequence of encouraging it. This creates advantages for prostitution in two ways: dividing sex into "meaningful" (with one's spouse), and "meaningless" (with a prostitute). This has the effect of encouraging men to go to a prostitute if they want to have "meaningless" sex. Second, by defining certain sex acts like anal or oral sex as immoral, not to be indulged in with one's "moral" spouse, the moral order encourages men to turn to "immoral" women for these sex acts. The moral system, in effect, creates a demand for prostitution.

The second reason for the existence of prostitution is also ironic: prostitution functions to strengthen sexual morality. This acts as a contrast or counterpoint that "keeps the wives as daughters or the respectable citizenry pure." The sex industry encourages men to go to prostitutes for premarital sex, extramarital sex, or other "immoral" sex so that they don't have to pressure or persuade "respectable" women to engage in the same "immoral" sex. By thus preserving the sexual morality of conventional women, constituting nearly half of humankind, the level of society's morality should be higher than if many women engage in the same sexual immoralities.

Hence, Davis' theory suggests that prostitution exists because the moral system paradoxically encourages it, and in turn serves the important function of "preserving feminine virtue." This runs counter to the common sense view. There is some evidence to support this theory. In traditional Asian societies where prostitution is prevalent, "respectable" women are relatively unlikely to engage in "immoral" sex, while in Modern, Western societies where prostitution is less common, "respectable" women are more likely to get involved in "immoral sex." Also, on university campuses, male students are more likely to think of sex with college women than with prostitutes, but the reverse is true in Thailand. Yet, there is a basic problem with functionalist theory: it defines sexual morality and feminine virtue in sexist terms, implying

that only women - particularly prostitutes - are immoral and virtue-less when committing "meaningless" or "immoral" sex. That's why functionalist theory doesn't regard sexually promiscuous men as a threat to the moral order.

The second theoretical approach to prostitution comes from social psychological theory. Under this view, a combination of social and psychological factors cause some women to become prostitutes. These include:

- \* Predisposing factors: struggling with parental promiscuity, parental neglect, child abuse, or other traumatic events;
- \* Attracting factors: the belief that "a woman can have an easy life or lots of money as a prostitute";
- \* Precipitating factors: being unemployed, meeting a prostitute friend, or being pressured by a pimp to sell sex.

Most psychologists and psychiatrists stress the predisposing factors, suggesting these lead to prostitution through feelings of loneliness, unworthiness, lack of self-control and inability to establish stable relations with others. Sociologists disagree with this assumption that prostitutes are abnormal - even if they have been abused. It seems largely a matter of emotional socialization through parental abuse that teaches one to be a normal prostitute able to detach herself emotionally from her johns - or anyone who treats her similarly as an object. With this emotional detachment, she may find it easier to enter into prostitution. In short, some women are more likely than others to become prostitutes not because they are abnormal, but because they are normal for being able to withhold affection from their customers in the same way as a normal child-abuse victim withholds affection from her parent. But this capacity for emotional detachment may only predispose a woman toward entering prostitution: it is not enough. She is more likely to begin selling sex if the attracting and precipitating factors (e.g. money and contacts) also appear in her experience, as has been suggested by the theory and some research (Perkins, 1991; Heyl, 1977).

The final theoretical approach comes from feminists. They argue that society maintains a sexist view that only "promiscuous" women are a threat to the moral order, and this is why prostitutes are far more likely to be arrested than their male customers. Why aren't such men considered a threat? Because the moral system reflects the larger, patriarchal, gender stratified system in which men dominate and exploit women.

Feminist theory asserts the patriarchal system encourages prostitution by creating both demand and supply for it. On the demand side, boys are socialized to be dominant over girls, and, when adults, to desire sexual domination of women - which can be easily realized through sex with prostitutes. If a young man doesn't want to go along, his peers will pressure him. On the supply side, girls are socialized to be submissive to boys, and, later as adults, to men in work,



play and sex. Simultaneously, women are relegated to predominantly low status employment - including prostitution. All this explains why prostitution is usually more prevalent in traditional societies marked by great gender inequality, when compared to more modern societies with less gender inequality.

Feminists assert that the patriarchal system encourages prostitution, while prostitution reinforced patriarchy. This is by perpetuating beliefs that oppress women in many domains of their lives. Hence, by selling their body as a commodity, prostitutes convey the message that women can be bought or used as an object - reinforcing the prevailing patriarchal notion that "all women have a price." Hence, many men continue to support the patriarchal structure of gender inequality, which in turn encourages prostitution.

### **Conclusion:**

Today we have concluded our discussion of prostitution. We noted the difficulty in defining this phenomenon, various misconceptions about prostitution, its extent in Canadian society, discussed a profile of Canadian prostitutes, their entry into prostitution, and concluded by looking at various theoretical explanations for this persistent phenomenon.