

Introduction to the *Culture, Health & Sexuality* Virtual Special Issue on sex, sexuality and sex work

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an editorial introduction to a virtual special issue on sex work and prostitution. It offers a brief history of sex work studies as published in the journal *Culture, Health & Sexuality*; reflects on the breadth and scope of papers the journal has published; considers the contribution of the journal's papers to the wellbeing and sexuality of people who sell sex; and envisions future areas of inquiry for sex work studies. As authors, we identify major themes within the journal's archive, including activism, agency, context, discourse, hazard, health, legalisation, love, place, power, race, relationships, stigma and vulnerabilities. In particular, we reflect on how HIV has created an environment in which issues of culture, health and sexuality have come to be disentangled from the moral agendas of earlier years. As a venue for the dissemination of a reinvigorated scholarship, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* provides a platform for a community of often like-minded, rigorous thinkers, to provide new and established perspectives, methods and voices and to present important developments in studies of sex, sexuality and sex work.

KEYWORDS

Culture; international perspectives; prostitution; sexuality; sex work

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People sell sex the world over. Some do so because they choose to or because they want to; others because they have limited options; still others because they are forced to do so. Historically, people who sold sex were labelled 'prostitutes.' Today, increasingly, they are known as sex workers or people who sell sex.

The selling of sex and its history varies by culture and by sexualities relative to culture, evolving over time. The health of sex workers, their clients, families and intimate partners, and the risks to the wellbeing of those who engage in the sex industry, has evolved as well, in particular with the advent of HIV and AIDS. HIV has directly or indirectly created many of the current day contexts in which sex workers confront some of the most challenging health risks than have faced them at any other time in history. Paradoxically the HIV and AIDS pandemics of the late-twentieth century and early-twenty-first century have created environments in which the intricacies of culture, health and sexuality come to be disentangled from the moral quagmire of earlier eras – epochs in which sex as sin and sex as vice coalesced with its commercialisation.

Culture, Health & Sexuality was launched at a key moment in the history of sex work. In 1999, when the journal published its first issue, rational discussions of sex work from the perspective of health and wellbeing, and the social and structural barriers that were acting to increase and in some cases drive new forms of risk and harm for those embedded within or consumers of sex industries, had begun to be developed. As Peter Aggleton (1999) noted in the editorial to the first issue of the journal, while HIV and AIDS triggered much of the shift in focus regarding some of the contradictions that limited rational consideration, they did so with new influences, 'emerging discourses of health and human rights, of sexual and reproductive rights, of the rights of sexual minorities including lesbians and gay men, of the rights of sex workers' (2). These new influences acted to reinvigorate and in many ways change the kinds of work and writing that scholars of sexual marketplaces were engaging in. Sex work studies were further catapulted forward with the publication of a two volume *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work* (Ditmore 2006) and by new concentrations in the literature on sex 'slavery,' trafficking and rescue (Agustín 2007).

As a venue for the dissemination of this reinvigorated scholarship, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* has provided a platform for new approaches, perspectives, methods and voices to present important developments in sex work studies. In time, established as well as new researchers came to the journal with their manuscripts, recognising in their collectivity that *Culture, Health & Sexuality* was not just another journal in the pantheon of published scholarly literature, but in some ways a community of often like-minded, rigorous thinkers.

Aided by its Founding Editors, its International Editorial Board and a legion of anonymous reviewers, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* evolved not only to attract some of the very best work in contemporary sex work studies thus far, but has acted as a venue in which promising work could find the expertise and the skill in editorial and publication know-how to achieve excellence. This excellence is a principal reason why a Virtual Special Issue on sex work studies is both possible and merited. This excellence is also a reason why the 16 papers highlighted in this Virtual Special Issue are individually – and in combination – so remarkable.

Over the years, *Culture, Health & Sexuality* has published many dozens of manuscripts highlighting elements of culture, health and sexuality relative to prostitution and sex work. The manuscripts selected for this Special Issue are not necessarily better than others submitted by the journal, rather they reflect the kind of work the journal has published: in geographic diversity, in attention to population and context and in the focus on established and emerging discourses that have been developed, transformed and applied from continent and country, to institution and author.

The papers

In preparing this Virtual Special Issue we have combed through the archives of *Culture, Health & Sexuality* to identify a number of the journal's most impactful papers on sex work. To accomplish this, impact was operationalised as papers that, through available metrics, were among the most read, the most highly cited and the most frequently downloaded.

The 16 articles included here explore manifestations of sex work across the globe, and include papers from Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, China, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, the USA and Zimbabwe. These articles represent in their diversity both how widespread and universal some aspects

of sex work are, and yet how local and conditional issues pertaining to sex work can be, as manifest in different regions of the globe.

The 16 papers included here are organized into four parts. There are papers that consider power, agency, race and place (Part 1); papers that approach subjects of love, legalisation, health access and stigma (Part 2); papers that focus on hazards, context and vulnerability for men and trans people (Part 3); and papers that contribute to understandings of sex, relationships, activism and discourse (Part 4). Whether considering sex work studies from on high or from below, each paper's authors, in their own way, ask of ourselves, the readers – and in some cases challenge us – to focus beyond the intercourses of sex and commerce to approach the subject and study of sex work in the context of culture, health and sexuality from multiple angles.

Methods

In terms of the methods used, some clear patterns emerge out of this sample of manuscripts. One approach utilised by a number of authors was to gather and analyse survey or cohort-based quantitative data, or to conduct secondary analysis on such data sets (Wolffers et al. 1999; Lazarus et al. 2012; Ngugi et al. 2012; Syvertsen et al. 2013; Navani-Vazirani et al. 2015). Another common approach has been observational and ethnographic in character (Pauw and Brener 2003; Choi and Holroyd 2007; Infante, Sosa-Rubi, and Cuadra 2009; Mahdavi 2010; Bungay et al. 2011). Others have applied focus-group methodologies (Wolffers et al. 1999; Pauw and Brener 2003; Okal et al. 2009; Begum et al. 2013) and/or in-depth interviews, often conducted in the field (Wolffers et al. 1999; Pauw and Brener 2003; Choi and Holroyd 2007; Infante, Sosa-Rubi, and Cuadra 2009; Okal et al. 2009; Niccolai et al. 2013; Okanlawon, Adebowale, and Titilayo 2013; Scorgie et al. 2013; Syvertsen et al. 2013). Often, authors reported that their primary means of data collection was triangulated against other data sources, including elements of content, documentary and/or historical analysis (Wolffers et al. 1999; Bungay et al. 2011; Sultana 2015).

Defining sex work

Definitions of sex work, when provided, range as well. Begum et al. (2013) cite Quadara (2008) in defining sex work as 'the exchange of sexual services for money or other reward' (85), whereas in their secondary data analysis, Navani-Vazirani et al. (2015) inherit a more antiquated definition of sex work, 'defined as exchanging sexually related practices for goods, services and/or money' (255). Scorgie et al. (2013) cite UNAIDS (2000) in their definition of sex work as 'involvement in sexual commerce, specified as "any agreement between two or more persons in which the objective is exclusively limited to the sexual act and ends with that and which involves preliminary negotiations for a price"' (452). Alternatively, in their study of male sex workers in St. Petersburg, Russia, Niccolai et al. (2013) set eligibility criteria to include 'willingness to participate in a study seeking to recruit men who were engaged in sex work,' noting that the term sex work 'was not further defined' (482). In contrast, Okal et al. (2009) define a male sex worker 'as any man who "recently sold and/or is currently willing to sell sex to other men in exchange for money or goods"' (812).

Part 1: power, agency, race and place

This Virtual Special Issue is divided into four parts. In Part 1, Choi and Holroyd (2007) address the influence of power, poverty and agency in the negotiation of condom use for female sex workers in mainland China. The authors consider economic factors and forms of social hierarchies found in a variety of workplaces in which sex workers are employed, and the influence factors such as client violence and economic deprivation have on barriers to condom use.

Like Choi and Holyroyd, Bungay et al. (2011) explore the agency of sex workers, but within the context of indoor workplaces within the city of Vancouver, Canada. The authors draw on structure-agency theory to review both legal and media depictions of sex work, and complement this with an analysis of qualitative interview data. The authors reflect that it is within a complex interplay of structure and agency that we find how sex work is 'controlled, observed and influenced' (15).

From power and agency, Mahdavi (2010) shifts the discussion towards race and space, both perceived and enacted within the context of commercial sex settings in Dubai. Mahdavi shows how elements of Dubai's physical topography act to marginalise or alternately privilege different groups of sex workers, as well as how notions of trafficking may become embedded across that same topography.

Place is also central in the work of Navani-Vazirani et al. (2015). In their paper, the authors address the rapidly emerging mobile phone culture of South India within contexts of commercial sex. The focus here is on the use of cellular and mobile phones for the solicitation of clients, the geographical variability in workplace that cell phones can introduce and the shifting of norms regarding condom use brought about by new developments in communication technologies.

Part 2: love, legalisation, health access and stigma

Part 2 is represented by papers that explore themes of love, legalisation, the attainability of health (and of health services) and the forms of stigma that can act to prevent access to health services.

Syvertsen et al. (2013) begin Part 2 with a paper about what might be described as the physical-emotional continuum on the Mexico-US border for those that sell sex for commercial gain, and in particular the role of love and HIV risk within intimate, non-commercial partnerships. The authors highlight 'the range of love and emotional intensity' (543) and the impact of this on decisions around condom use and drug use within partnerships.

Begum et al. (2013) consider the influences of sex work legalisation in the context of state-sanctioned brothels in Melbourne, Australia. Here, the authors look beyond health alone, to consider the experiential aspects of sex work like social acceptability, financial rewards, social immobility (or entrapment) and empowerment. These authors highlight the lingering impacts of stigma and discrimination, even within contexts where sex work is legal and regulated.

Lazarus et al. (2012) hone in on forms of occupational stigma associated with sex work and the relationships these have to health service access barriers, while Scorgie et al. (2013) in a paper entitled 'We are despised in the hospitals,' explore experiences and perceptions of sex workers' access to health care in four countries in east and southern Africa.

Part 3: hazard, context and vulnerability for men and trans people

Part 3 focuses on elements of culture, health and sexuality as experienced by men and trans people. In a paper from Nigeria, Okanlawon, Adebowale and Titilayo (2013) investigate the economic factors that can propel men into sex work, and the risks – both social and sexual – that contribute to men’s vulnerability.

Male and trans (transgender and transsexual) sex workers are the focus of Infante, Sosa-Rubi and Cuadra’s 2009 paper as well. The authors note how the risks of HIV characterise the working landscape in particular, rendering these sex workers among the most vulnerable of populations to HIV infection and transmission. They contrast this with the reflection that despite this, male and trans sex workers are frequently excluded from the design and deployment of prevention efforts that could help to reshape and render safer the diversity of relationships and interactions experienced within the sex work workplace.

Shifting to St. Petersburg, Russia, Niccolai et al. (2013) also describe HIV in the context of male sex work spaces, contributing insight into the diversity of exchanges involved in different manifestations of the occupation, from the exchange of sex for exotic vacations, to monetary gain to access to sustenance like food and shelter, as well as the variability in environments, virtual and otherwise, that can make up a sex work milieu.

Then, in a paper reflecting on male sex work in East Africa, Okal et al. (2009) highlight a soberly common finding: namely, that in a context of increasing HIV infections among male sex workers, prevention initiatives that specifically target this group and its potentially at-risk behaviours remain largely invisible.

Part 4: sex, relationships, activism and discourse

Part 4 consists of a series of papers that concern themselves with broader issues of sex and relationships and, in closing, a paper that considers the impact of activism and feminist discourse for sex workers in Bangladesh.

In their 2012 paper, Ngugi et al. explore some of the subtleties in partners of female sex workers in Nairobi. They do this by comparing women who sell sex with women working in other employment sectors, reflecting that sex workers who reported a romantic partner reported fewer partners than other sex workers, but fewer instances of condom use as well.

The earliest paper on sex work published in *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (published in the very first issue) is by Wolffers et al. (1999). In it, the authors explore the relationships with men reported by a sample of women sex workers in Indonesia. Like that of Ngugi et al., the Wolffers paper is focused on the different kinds of partners the women in their sample interact with. Unique in this paper, is consideration of the different attitudes to self-cleansing, risk perceptions and risk behaviours held by the women, and the ways that the multiple identities experienced by Indonesian sex workers influence perceptions of different kinds of partners. We learn from Wolffers et al. that ‘as female sex workers move from one identity to another, they are supported in doing so by certain rituals and codes’ (42) resulting in more protective behaviours when occupying some identities over others.

In a paper exploring barriers to safety among outdoor sex workers in Cape Town, Pauw and Brener (2003) report on findings that concur with the results of other papers discussed in Part 4. In addition, these authors discuss the ways in which clients may resist protective behaviours, and the impacts of violence by clients and by enforcement experienced by those

working in outdoor contexts. Here, the authors lay bare the challenges sex workers can experience when seeking to lead predictable, normative lives while occupying workplaces structured by forms of chaos and harm.

The final paper selected for this Virtual Special Issue contains a rarer kind of sex work studies argument. In it, Sultana (2015) approaches the subject, not from the perspective of applied research, but rather through a form of discourse analysis in which she considers through a historical lens, how narratives of HIV, feminist discourse and activism played out in Bangladesh following the 1991 expulsion of sex workers from brothels in red light areas of the city, and the social movement this ignited. Rather than summarise her original and insightful analysis, we encourage you to read it along with the other papers in this collection.

The future of sex work studies

As to the future of scholarly work addressing sex work in the context of *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, we anticipate contributions from new as well as established authors, and considerations not just of sex work as it may present and be experienced in different historical eras and geographical locations, but also new forms of sexual exchange rendered possible by these quickly changing technosexual times (Allman 2015), new perspectives on ethics and participation for research with sex workers (Ditmore and Allman 2011; Overs and Loff 2013) and considerations of the widening gaps in income and access to resources experienced by many women, men and trans people within sex work spaces and jurisdictions in many parts of the world.

Looking ahead, we await scholars of sex work studies to consider histories of past failures where culture, health and sexuality have coincided with sexual exchange (Kingori and Sariola 2015; Nguyen 2015). We expect the promises but also the complexities levied by advances in biomedical HIV prevention – most notably HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (Patton and Kim 2012; Kingori 2015) – to uncover a potential plethora of newly-manifest accessibilities to HIV prevention but also new forms of barriers and issues. These expectations are grounded in our studied and rational certainty that novel and evolving forms of sex in exchange for a range of goods, services and currencies will continue to be sought and sold in commercial workplaces the world over. With these developments we look forward to the new scholarship and new writing that will be brought to *Culture, Health & Sexuality* and shared with its readership.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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