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Undergraduate

# Social Identities, Self-Perception, and the Stigmatization of Female Prostitutes

By Jaboa Lake

## **Abstract**

This literature review focuses on exploring the psychological and social effects that female prostitutes endure from their identification with a stigmatized group. The prostitute label implies a number of stereotypes that lead to the negative treatment and regard of these individuals. Female prostitutes are often identified as victims, criminals, and deviants, but many members are becoming more active in fighting these associations and rather making a more positive name for themselves by identifying as businesswomen, feminists, and activists. In this way they are fighting for their own civil rights and liberties, social treatment, safety of work environment, and quality of life.

## **Introduction**

Debate, stigmas, and negative views are some of the primary associations when prostitution and sex-work come to attention. Over more recent years, the voices of female prostitutes from around the world have been brought into the open to give an alternative,

first-hand look at the sex-work industry and the perceptions of identity that female prostitutes assume, both professionally and personally. Social movements, collective policies made within groups of sex workers, and literature on the topic have been on the rise to improve the working and social conditions of female prostitutes. Prostitutes have begun discussion on the psychological and social effects of the stigmas they face from their occupation. Research has been collected to better explain the sex-work industry and the prostitute's role in order to more truthfully define the workers' sense of professionalism and work identity as opposed to the social assumptions from the general public, and the separation of this identity from their personal lives. Though there are many restrictions on group association, many female prostitutes are self-proclaimed feminists, supporting and encouraging classic feminist views and values by redefining their work as promoting female empowerment, discouraging the notion that the regulation of the sex-industry is male dominated, and taking control in the sex industry and its working conditions.

Similar to other historically degraded groups, sex workers have long endured belittlement, corruption, and maltreatment based on misconceptions of the morality and nature of their work. There are many groups and societies that have formed, such as the Female Coalition Against Prostitution (FCAP), with goals that include rehabilitating sex workers from their lifestyles and discouraging workers from their careers. But these programs can reinforce the negative social reproach of prostitution and its affiliates by enforcing feelings of shame, discredit, scandal, and humiliation. Many voices make supporting arguments about the harm and danger in sex work, physically and socially, and support the spread of the movement against such work. Though this is a popular

view, once first-hand accounts of the nature of sex by prostitutes are taken into account, a much different picture is revealed. In many cases it is not the actual nature of the work that is an issue or causes harm, but the physical, emotional, and social danger that comes from these social stigmas. Sex-workers have been taking action by forming activist groups in protection of their rights and in defense and support of their occupations, such as International Prostitutes Collective, Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), and the International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education. These and similar groups focus on issues that deal with law, sensitivity training, and the protection of the rights and quality of life of sex workers. When stigmas against female prostitutes are removed or she chooses to continue her work without internalizing the negative influences, not only does her work become safer, but she also develops a better sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

What needs to be removed from public opinion are the negative notions and attitudes about prostitutes and their work, and the authentic statements from prostitutes on these social and personal identity issues need to become the primary source on this profession. This literature review aims to explore the self-perception of the identities of female sex workers and the traits associated with these identities in contrast to their socially stigmatized perception from the general population. More specifically, I am going to examine the ways in which women who chose prostitution as a career make their way around their workplace environments and the discrimination they face as a result of their prostitute identity. From this, a better analysis of what needs to be changed socially can be done in order to improve the psychological health of women in this profession.

## **Social Stigmatization, Identity, and Mental Health**

Adopting a social identity is inevitable. Our association with these identities can change the way others view us by encouraging either positive or negative notions. There is a close relationship with self-identity, self-esteem, and mental health, and individuals who are identified as part of a stigmatized group often suffer from the negative consequences of stereotypes they may be associated with (Chen & Wang, 2004; Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991). Social stigmatization threatens positive self-representation, and have many negative effects on the self, though stigmatization is ultimately a social, not an individual, problem (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006; Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991).

Social Identity Theory recognizes the collective identity assumed by group membership, and the social view of these associated groups has a very high impact on an individual's self-esteem (Avriam & Rosenfeld, 2002). Being labeled with a group or identity that has been stigmatized, one often becomes more aware of the anticipated devaluing and rejection they may experience from others (Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991). Stigma becomes internalized when one starts to believe that negative stereotypes are applicable to their personal self, causing psychological stress (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013; Mak, Poon, Pun, & Chueng, 2007). For a person dealing with being identified with a stigmatized group distressed is increased by the anticipated stigma and negative treatment they will receive caused by the stereotypes of their identity. This has been found to be expected even if the individual has never previously experienced social devaluing from this identity. This shows that just the identification, outside of what the person may have yet to experience, is a strong predictor of psychological distress—especially depression and anxiety (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). These anticipations often

come to life through experiencing overt discrimination or enacted stigma, which can be as subtle as social avoidance, distancing, and devaluing (Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013).

For female prostitutes, having a stigmatized social identity is deeply imbedded, and even encouraged by the law, which lump-categorizes their status, encourages discrepancies between their working and personal identities, and deprives these individuals from civil liberties that unnecessarily increase danger (Kong, 2006; Roces, 2009; Pheterson, 1993). In places where prostitution has become legalized, such as the Nevada Brothel Industry, in-depth interviews with the women involved speaking out about their exploitation from the “whore stigma” and the effects this has on their control of work conditions and danger of sexual violence (Brents & Hausenbeck, 2006).

However, many female prostitutes are working against internalizing negative attitudes about sex and sex work in order to raise the self-esteem of these stigmatized individuals (Queen, 1997). They aim to change social thought and the effect on their working conditions in order to remove ideas that the sex trade is inherently abusive, poor, inexperienced, and full of despair (Pheterson, 1993). They strive to make a clear separation between their working and personal identities so that they are able to “make space” to live their personal lives outside of and disassociated from the stigmas of their work and working identity (Kong, 2006).

Members of stigmatized groups try to build and maintain self-esteem by encouraging positive views of the group and its members (Avriam & Rosenfeld, 2002). In the case of prostitution, presenting and viewing oneself and other prostitutes positively and favorably increases motivation and optimizes work performance (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006). When female prostitutes can successfully separate themselves from the

stigmas they endure they gain a more positive self-image and higher levels of self-esteem (De Meis, 2008). These higher levels are also found when prostitutes are working in kinder environments. Even just hiding one's identity, if it is stigmatized, has negative effects: it can make one feel socially excluded, which leads them to perform sub-optimally (Ellemers & Barreto, 2006).

These implications support the notion that the negative social and psychological effects that female prostitutes face are closely related to their identification with a stigmatized group, and not necessarily from the nature of their work.

## **Prostitute Identities**

### *Professional Identities*

#### *I. Businesswomen*

Women who choose prostitution as a career struggle against labels of incompetent, submissive to male domination, individuals without viable options. Instead, many push to be recognized as strategic businesswomen. These women identify as "rational economic agents" (Phoenix, 2000, pp. 43) in that they take care to weigh costs and benefits within the aspects of their work and trade, are aware of the financial and social costs, and take efforts to maximize income while simultaneously reducing social criticism and exploitation. These strategies are implications of the intellect and assertion needed to become successful in this branch of the sex-trade market. Some groups of women have formed union-type structures to regulate their trade. These groups have set up rules within themselves in order to achieve this, such as establishing no personal or intimate relationships with customers and not being naïve to the manipulations they may face from customers while on the job (Phoenix, 2000).

These efforts are just some of the attempts that female prostitutes take in order to protect the professional status of their work. By separating business from their personal lives, they disassociate their internal selves from the imputations of their identities that they face. There is a push for this profession to be looked at as a matter of work, not as a matter of personal sexuality (Sullivan, 1995). Because of the perceived lack of separation of work and pleasure and stigmatized view by those outside this working community, it is harder for female prostitutes to handle their job at times, often leading them to repress and hide their identification as a prostitute in order to avoid social shaming and criticism (Kong, 2006). But, those who choose to openly identify as prostitutes and fight against these stigmas apply extra exertion to demonstrate that their profession can have female power and agency, and that the workers can have more control over their business decisions and personal fate than others imply (Chen-Juei, 2000).

## ***II. Actors***

In work one needs to know how to conduct their profession in a way that is most beneficial financially. Female prostitutes have found it more successful to play the part of women who desire male customers sexually. Most prostitutes, because of their chosen separation between their job and clientele and personal lives, are not attracted to their clients, but they understand the importance of feigning this attraction. This is a common business strategy that benefits the worker by increasing customer satisfaction and retention. Because of this, many female prostitutes have identified themselves as actors within their careers (Sanders, 2004).

Just as a manager of a business may assume a more assertive personality than what is natural for them, female prostitutes consciously assume the personality and



characteristics of what others may expect a prostitute to have (Sanders, 2004). This may include acting more outgoing, friendly, or submissive. Some female prostitutes have describe their job as just a game, in which they are a player, and that prostitution is just their job, but not an identity within themselves (De Meis, 2008; Pheterson, 1993). As actors, some prostitutes even choose to specialize, whether the specialization is in different kinks or kinds of sexual acts. They use these roles to build a certain clientele base or have their services become more in demand in their competitive markets (Pheterson, 1993).

By becoming actors in the workplace and assuming a working identity female prostitutes have been better able to separate their work from their personal life, taking away some of the emotional labor involved in their profession (Sanders, 2004). This provides for a healthier emotional environment by adding humor and a sense of belonging and group membership, along with increasing the worker's self-esteem by becoming part of the collective identity as actors within their field (Sanders, 2004).

## **Social Identities**

### ***I. Victims***

Whether or not consent is present, many laws view prostitutes as victims, attaching shame to the "victimized" (Roces, 2009). Radical feminists argue that consent to prostitution is impossible, and others see prostitutes as blameless, irresponsible individuals who are not in control of what happens in their lives (Phoenix, 2000; Sullivan, 1995). Some women do identify as a victim in the past and turn to prostitution because all they know is "how to be used and abused" (Phoenix, 2000, pp. 50).

There is, of course, a large community of female prostitutes globally who are victims of the sex trade and have little choice in their participation as a prostitute. Countless narratives tell the stories of women who have been forced into the sex trade by kidnapping, threats to their being, or having been born into brothels. These are often the women that come to mind when the topic of prostitution is referred to. These women, who are tragic victims, serve as the poster prostitute, shaping our construction of what it means to be a prostitute and giving fuel to the anti-sex work conservative feminist movement.

Other women who have made the conscious choice to participate in this profession work to remove the shame associated with victim statuses, whether this identification is by self, society, or law, calling this association “patronizing and condescending” (St James, 1987, pp. 84). They say that prostitution, rape, sex, sexuality, domestic violence, etc. are “hidden behind a veil of silence” (Roces, 2009, pp. 279). The issue with female prostitutes embracing or being given the victim status should be about consent, an important question that would re-categorize prostitutes and bring to attention that many women are not victims, but that they choose their career, and that victimization should only be used to describe those forced into their situation (Roces, 2009; Sullivan, 1995). Re-categorizing prostitutes would distinguish whether or not a worker is experiencing violence or if she willingly chooses her work. The first addresses issues of violence against women and male dominance and patriarchy, while the second regards victimization of prostitutes as a labor issue (Roces, 2009). Others choose both, to identify as a victim of past violence and as a worker who has chosen the sex trade (Phoenix,

2000). These women are in a different struggle to find balance between their perception of their personal and professional selves.

## ***II. Deviants and Criminals***

Projects such as the Prostitution Rehabilitation Program (PRP) directly aim to remove the female prostitute from her “deviant identity” and create a new identity for her to live by (Oselin, 2009). The law describes prostitution as dishonorable, and uses this connotation to justify the wrong committed in this profession (Pheterson, 1993). The PRP and other programs use the criminal and deviant labels on prostitutes to justify the need to rehabilitate former prostitutes and integrate them back into society as what they deem functioning participants. The PRP’s rehabilitating strategies include implementing identity transformation in former prostitutes by altering their personality, social standing, social networks, careers, education, and, ultimately, their identities (Oselin, 2009).

Though programs such as these may help a number of women remove themselves from harmful situations and provide temporary security and routine, the goals of such programs encourage the ideas that the prostitute is incapable of functioning capably on her own and is in need of assistance to learn how to desire and embrace what Oselin (2009) describes as “the ideal American middle-class lifestyle” (pp. 387). These labels identify prostitutes as wrongdoers, deviants, and criminals. However, many have realized that these labels are inappropriate for the women who choose prostitution as a career. The concept of prostitution as a victimless crime stemmed from these realizations, but they are still often not seen as willing participants in their profession and are identified negatively.

A number of female prostitutes have collaborated to form coalitions in defense of the social identity of the prostitute and to remove her from deviant status in order to be an individual who has assumed a “multifaceted and potentially strategic identity...struggling to survive in a complex web of power and domination” (Kong, 2006, pp. 413). These women are part of a growing group of activists who bring to attention the harmful mislabeling of these workers by disputing the stigma of being a prostitute and provoking discussion about these labels that are argued to encourage the gendered hierarchy (Kong, 2006).

Not only does the criminalization and deviantization of the prostitute identity make it harder for the women involved to succeed in their careers, it can cause harm to these women by becoming a self-fulfilled prophecy. Labeling theory has been found to have very strong effects on a person’s likeliness to later become deviant. Previously non-deviant individuals who had negative social labels and association with stigmatized identities applied to them displayed heightened future deviant behavior (Warren, 1974). But, those labeled aren’t necessarily transformed from non-deviants to deviants by labeling theory. As Hayes (2010) describes, the individual goes through a number of in-between transformations after repeated labeling episodes before they self-perceive themselves as a social deviant. The repeated labeling can increase an individual’s self-awareness, leading to eventual self-labeling (Hayes, 2010).

The implication of social attitudes towards prostitution and labeling theory show that these can have a negative impact on the way an individual perceives themselves. Telling a woman who has chosen prostitution as a career that she is bad in the social eye can have detrimental effects on her self-esteem. If she internalizes these labels, she may

unintentionally come to support these ideas and ease on the amount of control she believes she has over herself and her profession.

### ***III. Feminists***

The female prostitutes that have become activists regarding legal and social issues relevant to their trade have been identifying themselves more as feminist, challenging those who say they are not. Many prostitute feminists feel rejected by radical feminists and have adopted the identity of a “feminist in exile,” “excluded from a rightful place in the feminist movement” (Kesler, 2002, pp. 220). Though, true feminists do not shun or exclude entire groups of women based on judgments. Anti-sex work feminists see prostitutes as victims, not legitimized businesswomen (Kesler, 2002; Overall, 1992). Feminist prostitutes have become active in moving away from assumptions that they have no agency in their choices and are powerless targets of pity or rescue work, instead demanding respect for their work (Overall, 1992).

Pro-sex work feminist acknowledge that making prostitution illegal created gender stigma, consciously separating the “good girls” from the “bad girls”. But, the activists on the issue are working to discredit and fight these stigmas to create a healthier, safer, and better workplace (Chuen-Juei Ho, 2000; St. James, 1987). Pro-sex work feminist are making a statement about what it really means to be a feminist. Though sex workers are constantly accused of succumbing to patriarchy, pro-sex work feminists defend their identity as a feminist by stating that sex is not intrinsically male-dominated. Prostitutes are not completely powerless in their work, but they share the important values that allows them to identify as feminists, such as encouraging female independence, financial autonomy, sexual self-determination, personal strength, and

female bonding (Kong, 2006; Kesler, 2002). A speaker at the Second World Whore's Congress in 1986 stated that "Prostitutes reject support that requires them to leave prostitution; they object to being treated as symbols of oppression and demand recognition as workers" (Overall, 1992, pp.707). Anti-sex work feminists encourage viewing the sex industry as disregarding female decision and power, but some female prostitutes explain that their work can actually be self-empowering (Chuen-Juei Ho, 2000). Pro-sex work feminists acknowledge the negative effects of this separation of feminists groups, agreeing that by breaking down this binary between women would finally allow for collaboration needed to attack real, deep feminist issues (Kesler, 2002).

"In private the whore has power. She is in charge, setting the terms for the sexual exchange. In public, of course, she has absolutely no rights – no civil rights, no human rights. Prostitution laws are how women are controlled in this society." (St. James, 1987; 82). This view, expressed by women's rights activist Margot St. James, explains the true agency in women that choose prostitution as a career and addresses the consequences of stigmas in the field and the effects it has on workers. It would be false to support the anti-sex work feminist view that all prostitutes are powerless victims. Feminist prostitutes explain that they actually have greater sexual freedom than radical feminist because they have rules and regulations, and are not giving in to the patriarchal opinion that women should repress their sexuality (Queen, 1997). To further investigate this divide between feminist views, further dialogue is needed between anti-sex work feminist and the growing group of feminists that are encouraging a more legitimized view of sex work.

## **Conclusion**

Whether a prostitute chooses to identify as a victim, a businesswoman, a deviant, a feminist, or an activist, they will still have to face the negative consequences of what it means to be identified as a sex worker. These stigmas and negative consequences are inevitable, though the participant can take action in reducing these effects by regarding oneself and their identity more openly. It can be understood why one would hesitate with openly and proudly identifying with a group that is not regarded in positive light, but that milestone would assist in creating a better working and personal environment. Though female prostitutes can take steps to become proactive in defending themselves against the stigma and stereotypes, becoming an activist and fighting the societal presumptions takes extra effort to become successful. More recent general sex-positive and sexuality empowerment movements may compliment these efforts to make the social changes needed. It is important that female prostitutes who have the courage to challenge social thought about their identity continue to push for their voices, experiences, and opinions to be heard and become mainstream in order to reduce the social issues that are affecting their personal and social lives, and their psychological well-being.

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