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Labouring in the Sex Industry: A Conversation with Sex Workers on Consent and Exploitation

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Abstract: Sex work in all its forms is an occupation that belongs to the service industry, and like any other work, sexual labour is open to exploitation. However, the reason why sex work is seen to be different from other forms of labour is that it betrays the socially accepted rules of love and intimacy and is exercised within a criminalised environment. As a cultural symbol, sex work remains steadfastly linked to aberration and dangerousness. This article juxtaposes the legal and lay definitions of consent and exploitation based on conversations with fourteen Canadian sex workers. The objective of this exploratory article is to delve within two ill-defined and highly contested notions related to the sex industry—consent and exploitation.

Keywords: labour; sex work; exploitation; vulnerability; consent



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1. Introduction

Is that what they call a vocation, what you do with joy as if you had fire in your heart, the devil in your body?

Josephine Baker in James Hillman's *The Soul's Code* (Hillman 1996).

Writing about sex work and sex workers did not come naturally to me. In fact, it took a few years of soul searching to be comfortable with the idea of researching and writing about the industry. It is not because one has been in the industry that the rest of one's scholarly life should be spent writing about it. As Hammond and Kingston (2014) discovered, academics conducting research on sex work risk stigma by association, and for me, a retired sex worker, scholar, and activist, I am running the risk of being reduced to my biography. Then so be it! I will not resist my daemon, my path; I will grab the chance to conduct yet another research inquiry concerning the industry and join my voice with people labouring in it.

Sexual services are the newest form of work (Solé 1993), meaning that the sex industry, which is the term being used, is not ahistorical (Parent 1994, p. 392; Carpenter 1992, p. 48); in fact, referring to sexual services as the oldest profession makes it abstract. Yet, it is important to revisit this past. The birth of the sex industry, as Tremblay (2020) and Solé (1993) both observe, occurred within an environment created by war, sanitary conditions, and a moral panic. Beginning around the mid-1800s, amid the declaration of Britain's Contagious Disease Act and the subsequent Social Purity movement, what had originated as an informal, non-organised exchange gradually became an industry. Thus, born in a specific socio-sanitary political-legal environment, irregularly paid sexual exchanges shifted into a form of labour and, as with any other work, sexual labour is open to economic exploitation. However, sex work is different from other forms of paid human labour in that it betrays the social norms of love and intimacy. Often sex work generates reactions of disgust in some, as well as perceptions that such perversity and depravity must be controlled. Thus perceived, the result is that the exchange of sex for a fee must be restricted and thus far these restrictions have been exercised using criminal law. Even in places where the industry has been legalised, sex work is encased in a yoke of stigma and immorality that affects working conditions (Benoit et al. 2018a). As a cultural symbol, sex work remains steadfastly

linked to aberration and dangerousness because it is associated with the tenacious representation of predator/victim (van der Meulen 2012). Since the mid-1800s, the sex industry has been connected with the criminal world that often victimises women for profit. This link continues to have significant ramifications for sex workers' working conditions.

As a teacher and activist, I am always asked the same questions: Why are sex workers denied protection? Why is sex work criminalised? I always give the same answer—sexuality. To this day, to paraphrase Colette Parent (2001), once everything has been de-canted, what we are left with is women's sexuality; it is about controlling women's sexuality, what is considered acceptable/normal or not (Hallgrímsdóttir et al. 2008). Any further discussion on sexuality and women's bodies would take the present work in an entirely different direction; therefore, as Doezema (1998), Agustín (2003), Peng (2005), Berg (2013, 2014) and Tremblay (2020, p. 156) have done, this exploratory research endeavour bypasses the sexual debate completely and enters the world of labour—the right to work as described in the Employment Policy Convention (1964, No. 122), adopted by the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation in 1964.

Beginning in 1979, guided by Carol Leigh's expression—sex work, sex workers' organisations struggled for recognition and demanded that all forms of sexual services be seen as work. After more than forty years of activism, Canadian sex workers' insistence on the right to work in a safe environment protected by labour laws is still denied. In 2014, the Canadian government adopted The Protection of Communities and Exploited Person's Act (PCEPA), a new bill that undeniably reinforced the predator/victim dichotomy and, by doing so, explicitly demonstrated how the last fragments of autonomy for sex workers vanished. As argued by sex worker organisations and even Kathleen Barry, a well-known prohibitionist (Valverde 2018, p. 248), the PCEPA is the latest attempt in Canada to ban buying sex and making sex work illegal for the first time in Canada. By refusing sex workers the choice to use bodyguards and trusted drivers, the PCEPA has further endangered sex workers, and added another level of uncertainty to their line of work.

Bill C-36, as it is known, was adopted on 6 November 2014 and treats all sexual services as a form of sexual exploitation that aims to protect women and communities by cutting off sex workers' client base. The new criminal law regime seeks to protect the dignity and equality of all Canadians by denouncing and prohibiting the purchase of sexual services, the exploitation of the prostitution of others, the development of economic interests in the sexual exploitation of others, and the institutionalisation of prostitution through commercial enterprises, such as strip clubs, massage parlours, and escort agencies that offer sexual services for sale. It also seeks to encourage victims to report incidents of violence to the police and to leave prostitution. Toward that end, CAD 20 million in new funding was dedicated to assisting individuals to exit prostitution.

Certainly, definitions of consent and exploitation are varied and, on occasion, even hotly contested. Although I have never examined these two concepts in-depth, I agree with Stebbins that these notions include "elements worth discovering" (Stebbins 2001, p. 6). Hence, this exploratory article concentrates on how sex workers define these terms and how their voices must inform labour rights, as well as the health and safety regulations regarding their work (Benoit and Unsworth 2020). The ensuing investigation offers an overview of the notion of exploitation within and outside the sex industry; it explores, what constitutes consent and, finally, what occupational health in the sex industry entails. Interviews conducted with fourteen sex workers shed some light on these neglected dimensions in sex work: consent and exploitation.

2. Literature Review

This section addresses the ongoing debate surrounding the legal definitions of consent, exploitation of labour, and occupational health.

2.1. Consent

To make sense of consent is like entering a dark tunnel with a small dim light at the end; that is, with a tentative definition: affirmative consent (Beres 2020; Alabi 2019). Sexual consent, although extensively discussed, is “often ill-defined” (Shumlich and Fisher 2018, p. 249), but one element that seems to recur is communication.

Shumlich and Fisher state that sexual consent includes “a combination of complex, indirect, direct, verbal, and non-verbal strategies.” These authors explore the psychological state of the individual and stress the willingness for an act, the agreement to something, and the behaviours that the other person will interpret as willingness (Shumlich and Fisher 2018, p. 249). This last point, which relies on interpretation, opens the proverbial can of worms. Regarding sexuality and consent, I would argue that Alabi’s definition (2019, p. 71) and Shumlich and Fisher’s interpretation would never guarantee permission. Defining consent is still a guessing game and reading Shumlich and Fisher confirms this position. Somewhere in that maze of definitions, one appears to be valid, that is, the notion of affirmative sexual consent. This definition of consent is direct, unambiguous, and demands a constant confirmation that one clearly agrees on and repeats during the ongoing sexual act; further, consent can be revoked at any time (Shumlich and Fisher 2018; Alabi 2019). However, consent may run into extremely grey areas when sexual services include physical and emotional pain—how can one consent to what is culturally considered abusive? Here lies a central area of contention.

2.2. Exploitation

The first illusion I would like to dispense with is freedom—most of us are not free to leave the negotiation table when the terms of employment do not suit our taste. As Nussbaum (1998) posits, choice is a luxury, and like so many other concepts, incorrectly defined (Burchardt et al. 2015). Some people may be able to quit a job they do not like and find a more suitable one. Yes, this counts as freedom. However, this freedom comes with having capital—economic, social, or cultural—or, as Pulliam (2019) calls it, bargaining power. The capacity to negotiate and choose rests on many variables, but it is the pervasive structurally unjust environment that weighs on marginalised people and restrains their options (Benoit 2020; Brodie 2018, p. 4; Fudge 2018, p. 74; Galbally 2016, p. 13; Burchardt et al. 2015; Gourevitch 2013, p. 602). In the sex industry, the exploitation concept becomes even more complicated according to MacKinnon and Dworkin (1985), due to its link to something that should never be commercialised: sexual relationships. It is at this point that the definition of exploitation becomes contested. According to Barry (1979), MacKinnon (1987), Geadah (2003), Listerborn (2003), Poulin (2003, 2004, 2006), and Banyard (2016), when it comes to the sex industry, people are always victims of violence and exploited, regardless of their education, race and economic capital. Consent is prearranged between equals, and women, under men’s laws, are not equal. Unequal to their clients, sex workers are treated as minors; hence, not legally able to consent. These transactions are, for MacKinnon, exploitative, and at worst, they constitute rape (Cawston 2019). Therefore, how can sex workers accept exploitation and abuse? The idea that this is possible is a contradiction in terms.

A Kantian analysis is central to MacKinnon’s argument (Nussbaum 1995; Tremblay 2020). According to Kant, sexual desire is a powerful force that prompts people to treat each other as “tools for the satisfaction of one’s own desire” (Kant 1963). MacKinnon argues that instrumentality, denial of autonomy, and subjectivity, which were Kant’s concerns, are intrinsic to the sex industry. Thus, retaining Nussbaum’s definition of objectification, it is not a stretch to imagine that for MacKinnon, instrumentality could lead to other conditions of objectification. For MacKinnon, the sex industry transforms women into things to be used, abused, and thrown away. To accuse someone of exploitation suggests a severe moral violation (Kim 2018); therefore, the use of this word must be precise. I also stress the importance of a proper definition before accusing someone of labour exploitation.

How should we define exploitation of labour? I fear that, like so many terms, its common usage confuses and distorts its meaning. I want to proceed as Mark Pulliam does from a society based on individual liberty, limited state intervention, and policies that safeguard private property (2019, p. 411). In this context, the ideal arrangement is a consensual economic exchange, free from threats of harm (Kim 2018; Corvino 2019), and not coerced (Müller 2019); one willingly accepts the transaction. Once this is established, Pulliam echoes Kim (2018, p. 34), stating that “no one has the ‘right’ to interfere with or prevent consensual exchanges by others on terms that are agreeable to them” (Pulliam 2019, p. 411); to intervene would be unfair. With this quote, we enter the murky waters of consent and exploitation of labour; that is, both a legal and a phenomenological world. What appears unpalatable and repugnant to some will be acceptable to others (Pulliam 2019). As we will see later, the legal definition of consent is far from being well-defined. Moreover, when researchers compare their descriptions of exploitation and consent with their respondent’s definitions, the philosophical or academic meanings often clash with people’s reality (Benoit and Unsworth 2020).

Exploitation involves some unfair benefits and rights violations (Corvino 2019; Pulliam 2019; Müller 2019; Kim 2018). A transaction becomes exploitative when the employer violates the employees’ rights, usually involving both micro and macro aspects. Müller (2019) distinguishes between two accounts of exploitation—transactional (micro) and structural (macro) accounts. Corvino (2019), further differentiates exploitation from interpersonal domination. Kim (2018) offers us the mere Means account—a Kantian test, while Miklos argues that employers can take advantage of an “underlying injustice” (2019, p. 59). Lastly, exploitation occurs when people take advantage of another person’s vulnerability (Müller 2019; Mo 2018; Cusick 2006). Even a brief perusal of the literature exposes the complexity of the term.

2.3. Levels of Exploitation: Transactional and Structural

In homes and brothels around the world, migrant women are selling a unique commodity: care (Gutiérrez Garza 2019, p. 3).

A transactional version of exploitation depends on the terms agreed by the persons involved in the transaction, and it becomes exploitative when there is a violation of the conditions. In a market economy, people exchange something they own; it can be a product, their labour-power, or a service. If the exchange is done freely, the transaction is as it should be under terms agreed on. On a microlevel, “the only relevant moral consideration is whether the way in which the parties interact violates some moral standard internal to the transaction” (Müller 2019, p. 843). Here lies the entry into a phenomenological world, one that creates confusion for the bystander. No one has the right to restrict or stop consensual exchanges, even if the terms appear unacceptable to observers (Pulliam 2019). Next, Müller attaches another dimension that shares the transaction elements, but she adds a structural dimension to the definition including a notion of power. This power dimension affects the ex-ante situation of negotiators, or what is at stake for the negotiators, a condition that refers to a person’s vulnerability. Müller (2019) suggests that some persons will be more susceptible to exploitation, and this susceptibility is a function of structural exploitation, and here she is not alone, since others (Rueckert 2019; Miklos 2019; Mo 2018; Corvino 2019; Franck and Anderson 2019; Dewey et al. 2017) also draw this conclusion.

Structural exploitation investigates abuse “as a systemic relationship between two groups that are embedded in the structure of society” (Müller 2019, p. 844). As Müller’s article concentrates on gender-specific exploitation, her main argument revolves around the male–female relationship. However, Gutiérrez Garza in *Care for Sale* (2019) and Rueckert (2019) both make it clear that migrant workers also suffer hardship at women employers’ hands. Already vulnerable because of dislocation, a migrant may be even more vulnerable because of what Miklos (2019) calls underlying injustices. However, Corvino (2019, p. 108) posits that exploitation is not the same as interpersonal domination. The vulnerability caused by structural inequality opens the door to interpersonal relations

of domination that Müller calls the ex-ante situation. People born in structurally unjust situations are often without any marketable assets apart from their labour-power, but these situations are not automatically interpersonal domination. The inability to leave abusive situations is what Corvino defines as interpersonal domination. It is not a stretch to argue that entire populations are subject to this kind of dominance.

2.4. *Exploitation as a Violation of Rights*

Kim (2018) calls rights violations the micro fairness account. Canadian labour law stipulates that a breach of rights would include employers hiding potential dangers intrinsic to the job. The environment must be safe, including the equipment and sanitation. Workers have the right to know about potentially dangerous and unsafe situations and can ask questions regarding their health and safety and that of co-workers. A level of exploitation is acceptable and allowed if workers tolerate some transgressions, and this acceptance is voluntary (Kim 2018). However, unacceptable violations of these rights can not only lead to exploitation, which is one dimension of the issue, but can also lead to interpersonal domination (Corvino 2019). The inability to say no, the inability to interrupt the relationship with the employer even if the worker absorbs the cost, all of these are examples of interpersonal domination (Corvino 2019, p. 114). Kim (2018, p. 35) makes the last argument we need to present; that is, the mere means account: a Kantian Test.

2.5. *The Mere Means Account*

Labour laws apply to every worker. According to Kim, unethical exploitation is using others as a mere means, which is a Kantian premise. As we have demonstrated, labour exploitation is not always humiliating and degrading; however, some situations within the work environment are shameful and demeaning. Let us complete our definition of labour exploitation with this fourth element, a Kantian approach.

For Kant, a person is a rational being capable of autonomy and deliberation, leading to moral and practical decisions or to a set of ethical and practical ends (Kim 2018, p. 35). A symbolic interactionist would reinforce these decisions as a pragmatic solution to a problem. Lastly, Kim posits the stipulation of a Kantian test that decision makers not interfere with people's reasonable choices. Again, this point can be linked to Pulliam (2019) and to John Stuart Mill (1859), whose classic liberalism approach to liberty states that power can only be exercised over people against their will to prevent harm to others. Legal power should not be used to control people for their own good, either physical or moral. Of course, these choices and decisions are to be made without coercion and deception. Employers are responsible for offering workers the means to live above mere survival (Kim 2018); a minimum wage is not enough. Indeed, according to Carpenter, the "most obvious aspect of exploitation is the fact that the wages are often insufficient to meet basic needs" (Carpenter 2018, p. 78). What workers need are a living wage, safety, and a respectful environment (Kim 2018, p. 36), and this is linked to people's wellbeing (Maynard and Stuart 2018).

2.6. *Research Process: Cogitation and a New Venture*

Saying "sex work is work" is not a claim, it is a lived reality and a practice, and it is a shift in how people understand work (Jenn Clamen in Tremblay 2020, p. 136).

The present reflection began when I was introduced to Heather Berg's (2014, 2013) and Holley Lewis' (2016) work while completing *Organising for Sex Workers' Rights in Montréal* (Tremblay 2020). Jenn Clamen had kindly accepted to turn a conversation on the state of the debate post PCEPA into a chapter for the book. We talked about the issue of sexuality one more time (Tremblay 2020, pp. 145–54), and following Clamen's lead, I decided to leave behind, at least for a while, what Wendy Chapkis (1997) calls "sex wars" and what Halperin and Hoppe (2017) identify as a war on sex, and instead join the discussion on sex work as a legitimate form of labour. Anyone who has researched sex work can attest that debates get trapped in two dimensions—consent and exploitation.

According to Phoenix and Oerton, the debate becomes reified to the point of becoming the explanation “women enter and stay in [the sex industry] because they are victims” (Phoenix and Oerton 2005, p. 97).

2.7. *Designing the Project: Bringing My Initial Thoughts into Focus*

The seeds for the present research were planted in 2017 during a conference on violence against women at Concordia University, Canada. The panel included three prohibitionists: Cherry Smiley, co-founder of Indigenous Women Against the Sex Industry; Trisha Baptie, founder of formerly Exploited Voices Now Educating (EVE); Sherene Razack, a UCLA professor. I listened carefully and respectfully and then tried to engage in dialogue, but to no avail. Why can we not listen to each other? The following year, I began reaching out to sex workers, retired and active, to initiate discussions over mobilisation strategies. I met with Chris Bruckert, and according to her, framing sexual services as work is not attracting allies; it is not mobilising. Repeated discussions with Frances Shaver about what the next steps should be made it clear that I was heading in a new direction; still, I was unsure what to do next. Finally, my collaboration with Jenn Clamen (2020, pp. 115–44) convinced me that making the case to recognise labour rights had to be my next venture.

2.8. *Research Framework*

Researchers make epistemological choices in attempting to persuade their readers about their research’s veracity (Warren and Karner 2005; Knowles 1996; Atkinson 1990). The same is true for qualitative or quantitative methods, since both aim to “account for the social world” (Giroux and Tremblay 2002, p. 22), “and even the most ‘scientific’ of accounts depend upon rhetorical, persuasive features” (Atkinson 1990, p. 2). Research is a series of beliefs, values, and perspectives (Duperré 2002, p. 101). Researchers structure their project within a paradigm that represents a particular way of perceiving and experiencing the world and its individuals. Three forms of interrogation frame this paradigm (Duperré 2002). These include the nature of reality, the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and lastly, data collection. The questions asked and the data collection methods are linked to the research paradigm (Melucci 1995, p. 55). The following subsections explain these choices.

2.9. *The Weight of Reality*

The present inquiry is outlined within a social constructionist paradigm (Galbin 2014). This structure requires acknowledging the existence of certain events and their influence on legal, medical, and academic perceptions of sex workers and the sex industry. Moreover, these events continue to influence sex workers’ willingness to experience themselves as workers. For this reason, although it would be preposterous to compare the socio-political context of the Contagious Disease Act and White Slavery of the 1800s with today’s reality, it is legitimate to argue that ghosts of the past, such as deadly infectious diseases and trafficking concerns, are kept alive despite the lack of rigorous and supportive data collection (Tremblay 2020; Engle Merry 2016; Agustín 2002). These historical markers remain “our main weapon against naturalisation and its consequences,” what Bourdieu calls historicisation (Tremblay 2020, p. 20). Sex workers still live with the costs of having been conceptualised as victims of male vice, or even worse, as criminals unworthy of protection (Laite 2006). Similarly, I posit that sex workers remain the social “other”, the ones who are still standing at the edge of the social; they are not recognised, which Axel Honneth (1995) calls the social death.

2.10. *Meaning and Its Construction: The Relationship between Researcher and Researched*

My position during this research was twofold: scholar and retired sex worker. Conscious of the rigour imposed by the scientific method, I recognise that I must always be aware of the danger and benefits my position entails. One of the pitfalls is to be seduced by self-importance and fall into the role of “the expert” (Melucci 1996, p. 388; 1995, p. 58),

or as [Hammond and Kingston \(2014, p. 332\)](#) suggest: self-indulgence. Therefore, I must stress the importance of emotional reflexivity; that is, the capacity to become conscious of one's feelings while conducting research ([King 2006](#)), and to be able to consider "the effects emotions have on reflecting, which will also be influenced by the temporal and spatial distance from the research" ([McKenzie 2017, p. 1.5](#)). As Caroline [Knowles \(1996\)](#) once said, "we need to come clean"; I never hid the fact that I am an activist and a retired sex worker with twenty years in the industry. As a result, I recognise my capacity to reach out to sex workers despite minimal resources; that is, I lack funds to place ads for recruitment and have a limited capacity for honorariums. As a result, I rely on strong ties to people in the industry.

The belief that meaning can be apprehended without considering the research-researcher relationship variable is still attractive. However, to think that way is to reject the undeniable social nature of data collection procedures ([Speer 2002, p. 798](#); [Bourdieu 2004, p. 94](#); [1999, p. 608](#)). Meaning is always a collaboration between the researcher and the researched ([Melucci 1996, p. 388](#); [1995, pp. 387–97](#)). Thus, I concur with [Warren and Karner \(2005, p. 6\)](#), [Duperré \(2002, p. 102\)](#), [McKenzie \(2017\)](#), and [Poupart and Couvrette \(2018, p. 209\)](#) that it is impossible to relate to an unmediated reality because the results and our analyses are always intersubjective. Our values and beliefs are carried into our analysis and are revealed in how we make sense of the data. Therefore, reality is always mediated, even though the myth of objectivity remains precious to many in academia ([McKenzie 2017, p. 1.2](#)). The meaning at the end is mediated between the theory, participants' narratives, and my analysis. For the present endeavour, this is a crucial statement.

To have access to sex workers' voices is an honour based on mutual trust. I agree with [Shaver \(2005\)](#) and [Benoit et al. \(2020\)](#) that sex workers are challenging to reach because of the fear of being outed; however, another element to consider is that despite participating in research projects for over thirty years, to date, legally nothing has changed. I have observed that there is resistance from seasoned sex workers to answer the same repetitive questions, especially when those in a position to effect change do not respect their voices unless they identify as victims ([Galbally 2016](#); [Wijers 2015](#)). I received the same comments for the current project.

2.11. Conversation Procedures

The conversations presented here were launched at the height of COVID-19, a situation that made in-person meetings too challenging to organise safely. Participants were former students who came out to me during classes or close friends and fellow activists. More information would threaten the confidentiality of people who have agreed to be part of this process. Everyone was aware that these conversations were destined to be published in an academic journal, so for their time, I offered CAD 50 for their participation. Money was the same for a meeting of five or thirty minutes. Three close friends gave hours of their time to the present endeavour. Lastly, all are between 25 and 50 and, except for two participants, are still active. Former students are from South America, Asia, United States, close friends are English and French Canadian. Once I explained the goal of these exchanges, each person involved chose their pseudonym.

To frame this research properly, I must restate the questions that triggered this endeavour: (1) How do you define exploitation? Given your definition, do you think that you were exploited during your career? If yes, please give me some examples of when and how you felt exploited. (2) How do you define/understand consent? When you consent to a transaction, what does this involve? Please give me some examples.

The conversations were made on Zoom for three participants, but all answered via emails and texting. I used a personal email address for privacy. Some questions and the definitions required multiple conversations. The results are included verbatim—the words are from those who accepted to participate. Lastly, each contributor was able to validate their answers and see how I incorporated them into my analysis. One person asked me to modify her answers; I did not include her entire conversation.

For this exploratory research, conversations were initiated while I was acquainting myself with the literature on consent and exploitation. Due to my close relationship with three participants, the initial questions and continuing probes served as a guide for further comments. Moreover, I had extended virtual face-to-face conversations with the same three persons and one in-person discussion. These moments allowed me to grasp the industry's latest movements: changes in services, Internet communications, and agencies located in Toronto and Montréal, Canada.

2.12. Thematic Analysis

My analysis relies mainly on the process, i.e., the steps identified by Warren and Karner (2005), Duperré (2002), and Lofland and Lofland (1984). Therefore, for this research, I first created a file for each conversation; next, I transferred each conversation to a Word document. I began to colour code patterns and similarities; last, I started what Markovic calls thematic analysis (Markovic 2006, p. 416). I concentrated on shared experiences, conclusions, and perceptions. When performing a thematic analysis, the most common method is to identify recurring statements within and across narratives (Markovic 2006, p. 416). As my inquiry consisted of two main concepts, consent and exploitation, my task was twofold. First, to make sense of how sex workers define consent and exploitation, and second, understand how they were exploited. From the very first reading, it was clear that all had experienced exploitation, and this is the concept that produced the richest data. Recurrent themes and experiences were colour coded and divided into subsections. Probes and clarifications were added and attached to the main ideas.

The next step will be to illustrate the three main themes emerging from qualitative analysis guided by the initial two questions: (1) How do you define exploitation? (2) How do you define/understand consent? These themes are consent, exploitation, and vulnerability. The name of each participant has been removed to protect their identities and replaced by pseudonym of their own choice.

3. Results

Consent

For my interviewees, consent is linked to a transaction.

Ching's reply is straightforward:

"One side is willing to pay, and the other side is willing to sell. This is the deal between two persons. Other people should not involve and judge. The law should not intervene. Consent is, you know, what you are offering, and you are not forced to do anything. In the transaction, it includes what is being agreed, including the type of service, time. Selling sex does not mean the clients can do whatever they want. I may see if I am willing and able to do it. It is wrong to assume sex workers cannot consent".

With Ava, the key terms are clients and services, which indicate a transaction: "when I consent to a transaction that means that the terms of what the client wants have been set, the terms of what I have to offer have been set, and the fee has been agreed upon and paid." Some areas of the sex industry make this even more explicit, in the context of escorting, as Ava adds: "this was easier because I had a website that laid out my services." As for Nikko B, a porn actor, to consent is:

related to those activities or actions that take place upon mutual agreement. For example, if my partner or partners want to tie me up in bed, this could be possible if they communicate their idea with me. Within this context—the plateau, I would explicitly have to agree to their idea or suggestion. I was never forced into the industry. I sought to work in it.

For Cora, consent is linked to safety: "For me, it is very important that I feel safe enough in my place of work in order to be able to say no to something I don't want to perform."

For Elizabeth, an independent companion, consent is defined as:

one or more individuals being informed about what is to occur and the knowledge that any party can withdraw their consent/willingness to participate at any time. When I consent to a date/transaction I am consenting to provide my time and company. That is all. I am always checking in with my clients to see if they like the way my touch feels. If at any time I don't like theirs I tell them and they stop, or I show them how I like it.

Then Elizabeth continues with something interesting and worthy of a probe: "if a client doesn't listen that would be a violation of my consent, only when I don't tell them do I feel exploited or taken advantage of. Thankfully all my clients have listened when I informed them that I didn't like something." So, I asked Elizabeth to expand on this last comment:

I would have to say that thankfully [not stating my boundaries] isn't something I've struggled much with since going independent. But starting off with agencies where the review culture is very present you always feel like you need to live up to the standards the boards set. [. . .]. As in any type of labour, some days are more difficult than others. Fatigue may cause sex workers to take chances, transgress their own rules about consent and lose control of the situation.

As Cora recalled:

Even so, I had times when consent was not respected. Once I was very tired, It was the end of the day and this man came to see me. He insisted in doing sex without a condom. [. . .] Because I was off and tired that day I didn't have the strength to state clear boundaries [. . .]. So I stopped the session and started crying. I sent him out and cried. It was a bad day at work. [. . .] But in the end I need to remind myself that a big part of my work is always to be in control and keep boundaries up. This is constitutive of my labour. If I noticed the client was not going to respect the agreement he was out instantaneously. Also, I decided to not work when I was feeling tired or in a bad mood.

As Cora sees herself as a worker, she adds, "At the end of the day I'm a professional [. . .] I think consent is like a dance, but my role there during the session is to keep clear limits, practice compassion."

There is a specific time within the industry when consent became distorted and this is related to stripping. Beginning in the early 1980s, table dancing, followed by lap-dancing, changed the strip bar environment entirely. What once could have caused strippers to be arrested now became legal (Jochelson and Kramar 2011). Arguably, consent required a shift in what was acceptable to workers.

Dancers were required to give their consent to closer physical contact with clients. However, what did this mean? What were the parameters of such contacts? The dancers were left to negotiate this new proximity, which in the past had been punishable by law, i.e., a hefty fine and possible jail time.¹ Ava describes this ambiguous situation:

I was stripping when lap-dancing came around so this made consent more nebulous. Clients wouldn't be sure if you were offering touch services and would awkwardly grab you, others would think this was their right and when you refused, things would become heated. Negotiations were often fraught. I found it difficult to state outright to a client that I didn't offer lap-dancing (and by extension hand-jobs, full service etc.) because they would simply refuse to have you dance. It all felt very shifty and uncertain.

For many dancers, this was an area of contention where direct bodily contact, touching, and at times providing almost brothel-like services became mandatory to make money. For the next two interviewees, who came to the industry after the shift from stage dancing

¹ The law was 3416 and led dancers straight to court.

to lap-dancing, consent is linked to this new situation. There was no transition period and, therefore, less clarity. In this new environment, the mindset was geared towards negotiating the services deemed acceptable. For Kaya, a dancer and porn actress, “consent simply means both parties agree to a specific act, preferably through a verbal agreement and not just in terms of body language. In the context of the club, I usually state my boundaries when someone tries to do something I’m not comfortable with, I tell them. However, I have the right to refuse clients if I want to, which is really great! I am never forced to do anything I do not want to, which is really nice.” Therefore, with Kaya we can add a verbal agreement to Ava’s price list. Verbally or in writing via a price list on a website, some clarity must indicate consent—a service transaction. Lastly, Marie, a dancer who, by her admission, was never totally comfortable within the industry, defines consent as “taking action as a means to an end, to reach a goal. The transaction is the consensual exchange between two people, in this case, the action of service in exchange for money or goods.” Veronique’s language clearly states a transaction:

Consenting to a transaction usually starts with agreeing on a base rate and general activities that take place during a session, in accordance with the amount of time we plan to spend together. If the client wants something different halfway through, we pause and discuss how much more money I want to perform it. Once we come to an agreement, I demand the money upfront and only continue once I have it.

Veronique and Ava’s words are significant—transaction, base rate, client and price list suggest an exchange of service, a well-defined business deal. However, Ava adds, “this is not to say that consent was always respected or ever renegotiated, but more often than not, I knew what I was going into.” This last statement also seems to be something that Veronique and Kaya both report, that is, ongoing consensual moments.

Before leaving this section, it is crucial to allow Rose’s voice to come through because she shows us the blurry side of consent. For Rose, “consent must be free and informed to be valid. For it to be truly an informed choice, [women] must also know the worst sides of prostitution and be aware that it takes a certain privilege to be a winner in practicing it and to get out of it easily.” Rose sheds light on the reality of some less fortunate women who have to deal with what Michel Parazelli calls *choix constraints*, or forced choices, and what Dewey et al. (2017) refer to as the degree of agency. Lastly, Marie has this to say: “I came in [the sex industry] because of lack of resources, lack of choices.” This last point will take us to the last section—exploitation.

4. Exploitation

My interviewees were quick to respond to the question about exploitation, and the biggest culprits are agencies and bar owners. Elizabeth remembers how she was exploited while new in the industry, before becoming independent “having an agency take 60% of my money per booking and then on another occasion having 1000\$ promised to me if I’d join an agency, only to be informed after the photos were taken that I must make them 3k first. I never received the money.” Rose also mentions agency and salon owners as exploiters “who always take too much for the little they do in my opinion.” During these conversations, Rose was not the only one who criticised and denounced the agencies that “make their money on the backs of women,” and she adds “women have to pay a lot for services such as transport and once they do find work, the bar tab.”

Except for porn studios, the industry does not even give a salary anymore. This Elizabeth considers exploitation “labouring without pay or having large sums of the profits taken from them and told this is the norm is exploitative”. As someone who always worked with a base salary, I still find it deplorable that very few people in the industry benefit from a basic salary. Ava mentioned that the salary was removed circa the early 1990s, and for those who had received a salary, this added to the frustration. Indeed, after the loss of salary, the fees workers were forced to pay in order to work increased substantially. In the past, strip bars where dancers doubled as paid waitresses, service bar, busboy, and DJ,

the fees were minimal and fixed. In strip bars and out-of-town brothels, gratuities came from sex workers for extra services such as references for good clients and protection. With Veronique, it became clear that work has changed for dancers, as she says:

While I have worked at strip clubs, the owners use their position of access to a space that strippers need to do work, the strippers, who are the only reason for the establishment's success, are not paid for stages, have to pay a fee to work without promise of leaving with any money. I believe this to be a way I've been exploited as a worker. Some clubs even demand a cut of your earnings on top of the bar fee. [. . .] I have also had a doorman threaten not to let me work unless I tipped him (which is not policy).

Ava, who lived through the transition of losing the basic pay, having to deal with such fees just added another level of what I think Kaya and Veronique will later label as exploitation.

In some clubs I worked in, you were not paid an hourly wage, you just worked for your tips. The removal of salary was of course, sometimes offset by the fact that you could come into work whenever you wanted. Doormen at a certain point began extracting large tips from dancers to recommend them to a group or a private booth in the strip-club, thereby turning themselves into de facto pimps. I did not agree to have a pimp, so this was annoying. If you didn't pay them off, you wouldn't get the high rollers. The club would also take a cut of any money you made off credit cards and this casino chip system they had set up. You were just expected to accept this fact because . . . you were a whore?

Regarding the so-called freedom of coming "into work whenever you wanted," when asked, the owner of one of Montréal's oldest strip bars told me that this was something that women wanted in exchange for the freedom to come and go as they wish. This is not true, because as Angie, a dancer, told me, "if I refuse a shift, I may have to pass a few turns before the bar takes me back, or if I come late the fees are exorbitant." Listening to sex workers enumerating the multiple fees that they must pay on top of having very little work security and not even a base salary, I am inclined to label this as Kaya, Charlotte, and Veronique did—exploitation. Kaya defines exploitation as "being used in unfair ways and under poor conditions for someone else's gain"; as for Veronique, it "is when someone in a position of power uses their position to benefit from the work of someone else in an imbalanced exchange." For Charlotte, exploitation is "anything that feels inequitable, unjust or unfair in any industry; [in the sex industry] this particularly applies to undocumented woman who work in brothels and are not paid fair wages, then threatened with deportation by law enforcement after seeking assistance." Elizabeth further defines exploitation "as labouring in a way that one has no choice about the environment or those they interact with." The industry is entirely left at the discretion of bar owners and agencies, which opens the door to labour rights abuse. There seems to be no labour rights specific to the sex industry. A situation that for Nikko B, a porn actor, encourages exploitation:

Had the industry been regulated by pertinent labour laws, I would surely not have gone through anxiety thinking of the possibility of my accorded salary being reduced in case my body did not perform or respond according to the expectations. Male performers in adult films are expected to respond in accordance to the sexual fantasies of the audiences they cater to. [. . .] As a result of pressure, stress or distracting factors on the movie set to name a few, sometimes actors are unable to perform in accordance to those expectations. If this is the case, oftentimes their salaries are reduced on the spot. Modifying a porn actor's salary is not uncommon since they are often paid cash.

The porn industry is legitimate employment, legalised and taxable, yet, according to Nikko B seems to lack laws to protect its employees. In his words, "no employment contract allows adult performers to earn royalties from the movies they make, let alone have ownership of their image represented in posters, movie cases, and in paraphernalia.

[...] nor do they have the right to halt or limit the appearance of their image in any production or promotion of video content in sex fairs, magazines, events, or websites." As for Ava:

In the context of all work, I would define it as the ability for a boss to underpay you without consequence, to receive more profit off your labour than you do, to take a cut of the money you've earned for no reason other than they can, to not provide a safe and clean work environment, and to control and/or reduce your hours if you complain. I have also had experiences where I felt unprotected when clients became predatory. [...] I would never think to call the police [...] and I would be reluctant to go to the club with [my concern], because what would they do? This I would define as exploitation too, or at least a complex and intentional set of conditions where exploitation is permitted to take place.

In terms of protection, Kaya seems to agree with Ava and Nikko B: "as a dancer, we keep the clubs running, yet the owners of the club do nothing but take from us and do not offer us any type of rights or adequate protection for the most part."

For Ching, exploitation is complicated and can be understood from different angles. Exploitation exists in many industries. "Under capitalism," she says, "almost everyone in the society is exploited. People should not say sex work is exploitation. Sex workers, like other workers, may face exploitation and they may not. Compared to people who work in farming, factories or restaurants, sex workers are less exploited." Concerning third-party involvement, Ching notes "sex workers are willing to pay the others to work for us. This is not exploitation; they are working for us." To this, Kaya adds, "[exploitation] occurs in pretty much all fields, but there are varying degrees of exploitation." However, one redeeming quality of the industry for Kaya is a sense of control that she experiences and compares to working in a clothing store where she felt more exploited. She adds, "I received 12\$ an hour to be verbally abused by customers daily, as well as forced to smile when I was dying on the inside. It was an exploitation of the emotions and was even more painful than anything endured as a sex worker. There is a reason I am still a sex worker. It gives me more control, despite the different issues."

The creation and adoption in 2014 of *The Protection of Communities and Exploited Person's Act* (PCEPA) placed the sex industry under constant surveillance. Under the pretext of protecting neighbourhoods and women, everyone around the sex worker is in potential danger. Advertising agencies, chauffeurs, and bodyguards—that is, third parties—are under the constant threat of being arrested. Moreover, as Nina, a massage worker says, "places where women can work more safely, such as massage parlours, and hotels are raided under the pretences of being trafficking nests." Not having a bodyguard or chauffeur waiting for you outside your place of work can have disastrous consequences as Diane, who works as a chambermaid at a motel, recalled: "two sex workers were robbed, one lost the money for the service and the other her entire day's work." The situation above is about money, which is essential, but sometimes as we have seen too often, sex workers are badly hurt or worse, they lose their lives.

Experiencing the ravages of poverty daily places some sex workers in a vulnerable situation (Benoit 2020). This situation is illustrated by Suffie who was obligated to enter the sex industry because of constant money problems and never felt safe: "exploitation is when people who have power took advantage of my vulnerability and deprived me of my fundamental rights and also endangered my life and my health [...] agencies gave me a false sense of security; I was never safe." These comments by Suffie lead us to the last theme—vulnerability.

5. Vulnerability

As Tremblay (2020) argues, the absence of a minimum wage plus a slow day may potentially leave sex workers vulnerable to exploitation. It is a situation experienced by dancers and escorts, some of whom are, by their own admission, more vulnerable than others. Rose explains: "I consider that I was exploited by several clients who, suspecting

my difficult financial situation, negotiated my services and prices and exceeded the limits I had set, particularly at times when people with children and financial difficulties are the most vulnerable (end of the month, back to school, Christmas).” The same is true for a sex worker who does not suffer from a quasi-permanent situation of vulnerability, but experiences slow days. For example, Veronique explains: “I have also felt exploited when clients notice that it’s a slow day and take it as an opportunity to try and get me to loosen my boundaries on giving extras for them to pay me.” Always running after money makes someone vulnerable to exploitation. For Elizabeth, she became open to exploitation “because of a lack of community, [lack of] knowledge on how the industry works and at times being desperate for money” and for Nikko B “this situation is the ultimate paradise for any employer. This is how they exploit poverty.”

Poverty makes all people more vulnerable. As with Suffie, and illustrated by Rose, those who are obligated to enter the sex industry because of constant money problems rarely felt safe in the industry. Again, working on the margins in a highly criminalised environment allows owners and managers to exploit people’s vulnerabilities. Elizabeth also made it clear that agencies offered no security. As a beginner in the industry, she recalls: “being left on the side of a road at 3 am in the winter and told to take a cab home [. . .]. One of the reasons exploitation happens is because of a lack of knowledge and community for those voluntarily entering the industry.”

Moreover, according to Elizabeth, some agencies disregard the lack of experience. When she revealed during her first visit to an agency that it was her first time working in the industry, the manager’s reply was: “oh I prefer new girls, they’re not as set in their ways as the older more experienced ones—I now know what he meant by this.” At this point, I would like to return to something that Elizabeth mentioned earlier about the review board. Again, she has this to say, “I forgot to mention how these review board guys actively work to harass some of us and force down our rates.” Of course, this is very pertinent because anything that forces the price down opens the door to unfair practices and negative labour conditions. The role of community is also something that Cora mentioned: “For most of my career (working full time for six years as a full-service sex worker), I have been very lucky to have a community to support me. I also acknowledge my privilege of properly screening clients and refusing to see clients when I don’t feel them to be safe.” This is an important point, since being alone without someone to “watch your back” as we say in the industry makes you more vulnerable. As Elizabeth mentioned—“some agencies just love the novice.”

As Ava makes clear, because most sex workers work within a criminalised and stigmatised environment, it leaves them open to exploitation: “as an escort I sometimes found the rate to rent space overpriced. The fact that I couldn’t necessarily just work out of home and needed to rent a hotel or book a space and that even then there was a fear of the staff and/or neighbours catching on or deciding that day to catch on and calling the cops [. . .]. With clients, [exploitation] would be when they deliberately waste your time with no intention of paying, and the ability, because of laws and stigma, for them to do so without reprisal.” According to Ava, “the constant state of controlled uncertainty is exploitative and makes for an exploitative environment.” She adds:

“I felt exploited by the City of Toronto when I had to purchase a license to strip in that city that was nothing more than a way of the police keeping a record of sex workers. The last thing any sex worker needs is more police presence in her life. Now having said all this, I will say that I agreed to most of this exploitation, in the same way and under the same circumstances that I have agreed to exploitative working conditions in all the jobs I’ve had, because I need money and I will do what it takes to get it.”

Ching also noted regarding forms of exploitation and vulnerability due to working in a criminalised environment:

I feel exploited when I pay a lot of interest when I borrowed the money. I feel exploited when I was issued a lot of tickets and having heavy fines. I feel

exploited when I must pay a lot of rent because the landlord knows I am working in sex industry. I feel exploited when the client comes to take advantage and not paying me.

When it comes to labour rights, unless sex workers do independent work, they will be at the mercy of an industry that operates in an unregulated and highly criminalised space. This makes the perfect recipe for exploitation. According to Elizabeth, another phenomenon creates an exploitive environment, and this one is within the industry itself—advertisement platforms. She explains:

Sex Workers pay to advertise [on these platforms], and clients can create free accounts to participate in the forums to leave reviews about their experiences with us. Some leave very detailed accounts, and clients expect the same services [. . .] creating standards for services that many aren't comfortable with. They have yearly competitions where they nominate the best rookie [. . .]. Clients also go on there to discuss rates, services [. . .] talk about us like products. Review boards create competition so you feel like you need to compete with the standards for service they create. Since moving away from them I feel better, and I've moved more towards providing and creating an experience not servicing a laundry list of pre-ordered services on a menu.

Some sex workers are more vulnerable because of work permit restrictions, and this is the case for Cora who migrated to Canada from Latin America:

I felt exploited once when I only had an open work permit in Canada (the work permits now don't allow work in the sex trade) and no massage place would accept me because of trouble with immigration officers visiting establishments from time to time. [So] I started working for this 23-year-old woman who assumed a role of "pimp" for me. The environment was dirty and people working at the place were not emotionally stable, so I decided to leave. She then threatened to call the immigration on me and convinced me to stay one more month. I left after 2 weeks and went to another woman who accepted me to work in her private massage place."

In closing the section on exploitation, I want to leave the last words to Ava, who highlight an ethical concern, and caution us to listen to women on both sides of the debate:

When I think about consent in the context of sex work, I also think about how many times anti-sex work advocates have violated my consent. How many times they have told me and other sex workers that our yes actually means no, that we live with a false consciousness, that we can't possibly consent to this work, that it is not work but mere exploitation (in my experience all work I have performed is exploitative. Why do I have to argue that sex work is any different?) I consider this the most exploitative relationship I have in sex work. I do not consent to having a relationship with sex work prohibitionists and anti-sex work lawmakers, yet there it is always, controlling how and where I get to work, how and where I get to advertise, how the laws define me, and so on (Ava).

For Ava, she thinks: "it's highly exploitative that people are allowed to make films, photographs, paintings, theses, articles, laws, television shows, plays, musicals, clothing brands and so on about sex workers yet sex workers are criminalised." Ava signals a quandary that calls for a lot more reflection than it has been allocated thus far.

6. Discussion

" . . . non-recognition shows not just a lack of respect. It inflicts wounds, saddling its victims with crippling self-hatred. Recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (Taylor 1994, p. 26). This article's objective has been to delve into two ill-defined and highly contested notions related to the sex industry—consent and exploitation. As Andrew Sayer posits, the task to clarify confusing concepts involves attempts "to preserve and strengthen usages and conceptual links that seem to be successful

while cutting those that do not" (Sayer 2005, p. 72). With this in mind, sex workers were asked to define these concepts and share their experiences related to the issues of consent and exploitation. The results brought us into the phenomenological world of sex workers, how they transact sexual services, negotiating and consenting to specific services, and how they experience exploitative situations. Often ridiculed and accused of false-consciousness, at least two sex workers expressed frustration with claims that disregard their reality. Sex workers have been participating in debates and different commissions for almost fifty years; therefore, their knowledge and reality must be considered—if you ask sex workers to define consent and exploitation, listen to their answers and believe them!

Following Alabi's (2019, p. 71) consent guidelines, seven of my interviewees univocally negotiated consent through words or actions. Rose and Marie had a more ambiguous relationship with consent. Their approach is what Parazelli (2000) has termed *choix constraint* and, as Nussbaum points out, practised by women with limited choices (Tremblay 2020). Without overt threats, transactions negotiated through the constant fear of not being able to get what one needs to live a decent life stretches the concept of consent to the point of being consensual in theory only. Therefore, cognisant of the ambiguous road leading to consent by three of my respondents, all negotiated services met Alabi's three requirements. First, the transaction occurred within a situation where communication was clear. If it was not clear at one point, it was clarified as the service was delivered; second, there were no restrictions or manipulations other than some situations where clients try to get workers to lower their fees. Third, my interviewees are of legal age to consent. Again, three of my interviewees were limited in their choices. David Borman (2019) acknowledges that Honneth's early work, recognised:

an impoverished worker who demands a "right to work," a means of enabling her family to survive, cannot without cynicism be taken as thereby reflectively endorsing the liberal theory of the freedom of contract. She may well continue to regard herself as forced to take employment by her circumstances and by the background injustice of her society; she may regard capitalists' control over access to the means of production as a form of coercion (2019, p. 117).

Perhaps no other classical theorist has shown as much sensitivity to the issue of money and its connection to commodification as Simmel (1976), when he illustrates the constraint imposed on all workers, and in fact, on all individuals who are inevitably part of the process of commodification. The fact that we all need money, regardless of what we must sometimes do to obtain it, stretches the notion of consent and constraint to its outer limits.

By being the equivalent to all the manifold things in one and the same way, money becomes the most frightful leveller. For money expresses all qualitative differences of things in terms of "how much?" Money, with all its colourlessness and indifference, becomes the common denominator of all values; irreparably it hollows out the core of things, their individuality, their specific value, and their incomparability (Simmel 1976, p. 414).

Simmel's argument that money reduces all things to the same level is a valid one, but as my respondents have indicated, it is also a necessity. We have seen that some accept the conditions of sex work willingly, with money as their incentive, while others cannot reconcile themselves to it. To see oneself as a criminal and not deserving safety is what Anne-Marie Marshall refers to as legal consciousness; that is, understanding "law shapes how people make sense of their experiences" (Marshall 2016, p. 7). Sex workers' perception of self has been, in many ways, legally constructed as deserving marginalisation.

However, when it comes to consent, it is important to underline that all my respondents were aware of being exploited by managers, agencies, and bar owners. I would argue that the last point belongs to most occupations, which brings me to my second theme, exploitation.

All interviewees mentioned some form of exploitation, but none of those forms seem to be unique to the sex industry. As shown by Gutiérrez Garza (2019), Fudge (2018), and Lewis et al. (2015), exploitation is connected to vulnerability and clearly acknowledged by three of my respondents. The findings presented in the exploitation section illustrate what

Corvino (2019) and Pulliam (2019) label as unfair benefits, that is, fees levied by agencies and bar owners. Furthermore, as far as rights violations within the sex industry, this dimension is difficult to assess when someone works in a highly criminalised environment without labour laws. Moreover, I would argue that rights violations are similar to what Lewis et al. (2015) and Gutiérrez Garza (2019) describe in relation to immigrants.

Exploitation coupled with an almost constant state of vulnerability, as experienced by two of my interviewees, leads to what Vrousalis (2013) and Ligneul and Dreher (2017) call social dominance; that is, situations in which certain people can control and command actions. This situation, according to these authors, occurs mostly under tense competition. Starting in the mid-1980s, with the blurring of boundaries between direct contact and dancing, the sex industry's socio-economic situation has become much more competitive. As shown in a few of my respondent's interviews, price and services wars created the perfect niche for situations of exploitation and social dominance.

A transaction also becomes exploitative when employers can take advantage of what Miklos calls "underlying injustice" (2019, p. 59). This is evident in the situations for three of my respondents whose lack of cultural, social, and economic capital placed them in very precarious situations. Exploitation occurs when employers take advantage of another person's vulnerability. This injustice is made possible in part because of the lack of regulations in the sex industry. However, it is also true that some sex workers come into the industry with limited choices because their starting point is one of marginalisation (Brodie 2018, p. 4; Fudge 2018, p. 74; Galbally 2016, p. 13). As my research indicates, some sex workers cannot be said to have chosen this field, since their life conditions and their lack of social and economic capital severely constrained the available options.

On the other hand, several of my respondents emphasised that they had chosen to do this work and did not feel that the sex industry was more or less exploitative than any other type of work within a capitalist system. As reported by Benoit et al. in *The Relative Quality of Sex Work*, "[sex workers] are actors with agency within their structurally marginalised social context, as demonstrated by their tendency to prefer sex work over other precarious jobs" (2020, p. 4). To always refer to sex workers as victims is a moral violation. To deny people in the sex industry their autonomy is unethical. As mentioned at the onset of this research, to accuse someone of exploitation is a serious accusation (Kim 2018). This argument, along with consent, deserves further exploration and could provide the starting point for future research.

7. Conclusions

To have one's voice listened to and validated is, I would argue, the first step towards moral recognition and sex workers' demand for the erasure of what Hartman and Honneth (2006) call legal discrimination. Always having one's decisions and actions rejected is taxing. After years of close contact with sex workers, it has become clear to me that maintaining emotional integrity has become a tiring endeavour. To resist exploitation, demand the right to work in safety, and remain healthy people working in the sex industry, sex workers must feel that they matter. Sex workers' autonomy and safety must begin with the decriminalisation of all forms of sexual labour, followed by labour laws. Sex work is part of the service industry and, as with any other job, some workers do have a lot more control, i.e., the capacity to say no (Tremblay 2020). The distinction between free and forced prostitution has been acknowledged and debated at great length. However, the voices of sex workers are still challenged. They remain buried under the prohibitionist's narratives that deny the varied experiences of sex work and refuse to understand the structural conditions "within which women may enter sex work" (Galbally 2016, p. 12). To this, I will add the socio-economic conditions obliging people to remain in the industry.

This research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic; this tragic situation has led to illness and loss of life, but it also highlights the problem of labour precarity and the fragile state of the economy in previously unimaginable ways. This situation is incredibly real for sex workers. As reported by Benoit (2020), even though Trudeau's

pandemic strategic plan promise that no one would be left behind, many sex workers did not receive the CERB (Canadian Emergency Response Benefit). The result is catastrophic (Azam et al. 2020). Bars and clubs were forced to closed, often leaving these workers without income (Benoit 2020). Many were forced to continue working, endangering their lives and the safety of others.

Anonymity was essential for the present research, and it continues to be a pre-condition; still, as Benoit et al. state, “secrecy or selective disclosure can come with its own psychological and social burdens” (Benoit et al. 2018b, p. 70). Difficult to access, emotions remain an essential tool of analysis, even more so for marginalised populations. The emotional content of humiliation consists, to begin with, in a lowering of one’s feelings of self-worth (Tremblay 2020), and again I must insist, self-worth, next to economic capital, plays a role in fighting for labour rights.

In Canada, public policies continue to be focused on the notion of the sex worker as a victim. The outrage surrounding trafficking and child prostitution diminishes the concern for sex workers’ fight to legitimate the industry and bring in labour laws. Moreover, public policies contribute to violence (Johnson 2015). As Tremblay (2020) argues, when prohibitionists continue to refer to “sex workers as victims, or as minors without the legal right to make decisions on their own, they sustain a moral argument versus one that could lead to changes in the economic structure” (2020, p. 157). Laite (2006) is correct when stating that sex workers are still paying the price for laws created and amended since 1847. As noted above, Canada’s latest attempt to control the sex industry is the PCEPA. This law reinforces an environment auspicious to exploitation and threatens sex workers’ health (Benoit 2020). If, as Gostin (2007) posits, “the prime objective of public health is to pursue the highest possible level of physical and mental health in the population, consistent with the value of social justice” then I join Argento et al. (2020) and reiterate that the PCEPA did not allow sex work to be out of harm’s way. Regarding women’s safety, all women’s safety, the Canadian government has failed miserably.

This article tackles two polemical themes which make respectful debates impossible—consent and exploitation. From the start, sex workers cannot consent, are always exploited, and remain victims of males’ predatory nature. How do we get out of this impasse? Overall, these conversations offer some guidelines to further explore consent and exploitation. More conversations are needed where sex workers define and redefine these concepts. Paraphrasing Forrester (1999, p. 10), there is something beyond exploitation; that is, the absence of any exploitation—being useless in this technological world. Sex workers need to be safe, their labour protected by labour laws, and this will not happen until we truly listen to those that matter the most—the labourers.

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