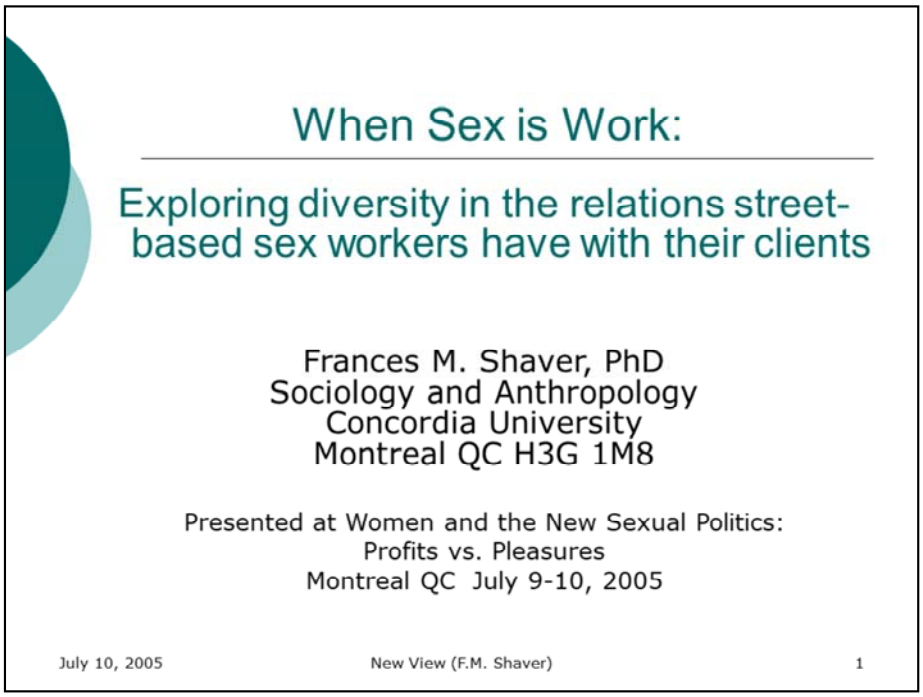


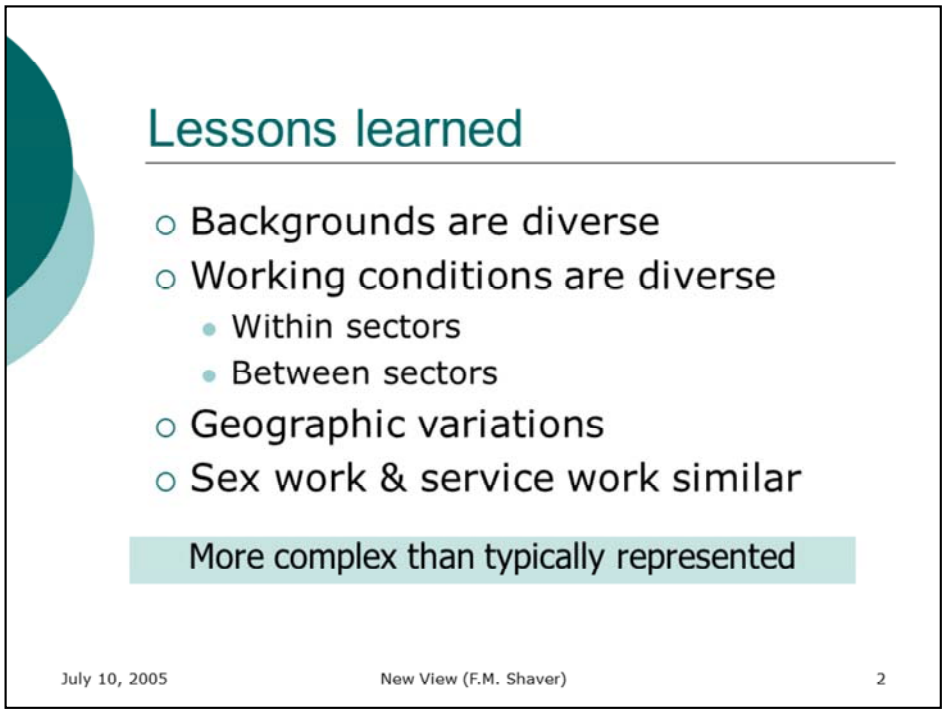

# When Sex is Work:

## Exploring diversity in the relations street-based sex workers have with their clients

ABSTRACT: In an earlier study examining the sexuality of street-based sex workers, my colleagues and I found that women were less likely than men to enjoy sexual activities with their clients and much less likely to experience orgasm. No such differences were found in sexual pleasure in the personal lives of these women and men (Weinberg, Shaver & Williams 1999). But, sexuality is more complex than the physical enjoyment of hand-jobs or giving and receiving oral sex — it also includes emotional and relational elements. Thus, along with the gender difference regarding sexual enjoyment with clients, there is likely to be much diversity within gender categories in the way sex workers relate sexually and otherwise with their clients. Drawing on a study of 107 sex workers (women & men) conducted in Montreal and Toronto in 1993 & 1994, this paper will explore the extent and nature of this diversity.

( I have copies of the slides.)

**Introduction:** I have been conducting research on sex work for 20 years. In the process I've interviewed over 400 women, men, and transgender workers involved in various types of sex work. I've learned some important lessons.

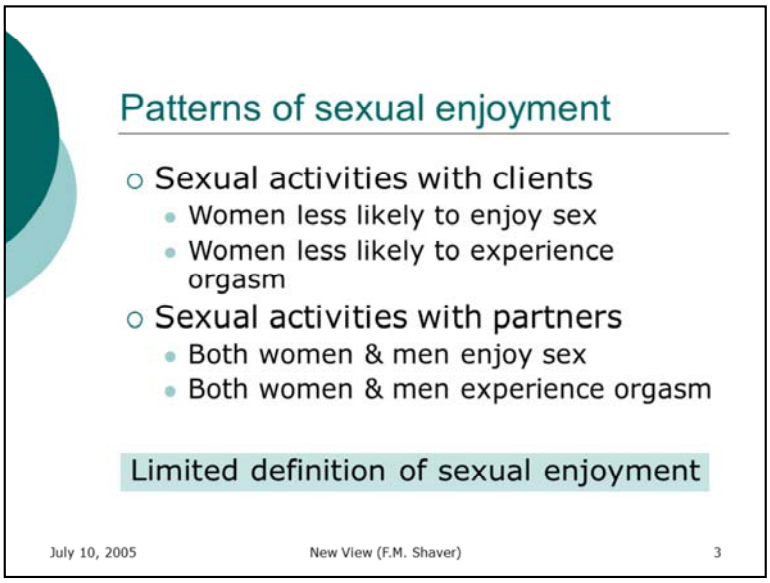



**Lessons learned**

- Backgrounds are diverse
- Working conditions are diverse
  - Diversity within sectors
  - Diversity between sectors
- Geographic variations
- Sex work & service work similar

- **Sex work is more complex than typically represented.**

When we looked at sexuality in the commercial and personal lives of sex workers in the late 1990s, we also found some interesting patterns with respect sexual enjoyment (Weinberg, Shaver & Williams 1999).




**Patterns of sexual enjoyment** :

•Sexual activities with clients: **We discovered** that women sex workers handled their clients as expeditiously as possible, without regard to their own sexual satisfaction. This was evident because :

- •Women were less likely than men to report sexual enjoyment with clients (this was significant in 4 of the 7activities (hand jobs, having breasts fondled, giving and receiving oral sex))
- •Women were less likely to experience orgasm

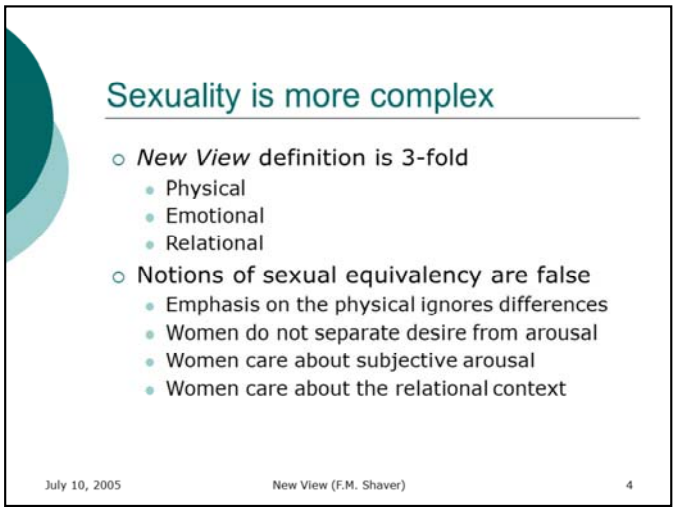
•Sexual activities with partners: **We also analyzed** the relationship between gender and sexual enjoyment with partners in their personal lives. In this case we found *fewer* gender differences:

- •Women & men reported similar levels of enjoyment in their personal lives (but more enjoyment in 1 of the 7 activities (breast fondling))
- •There were no significant orgasmic differences

•**However**, these data focused on a **very limited definition** of sexual enjoyment. *Hardly appropriate at this conference since it* relies entirely on physical activities involving the genitals (i.e., "having sex") and "foreplay" (i.e., the kissing and touching of breasts).

Sexuality is much more complex……

(Note: The sexual activities we listed in the interview included: hand jobs, giving oral sex, receiving oral sex, receptive anal intercourse, vaginal intercourse (activities popularly referred to as "having sex") as well as kissing & having breasts fondled (activities generally referred to as foreplay).



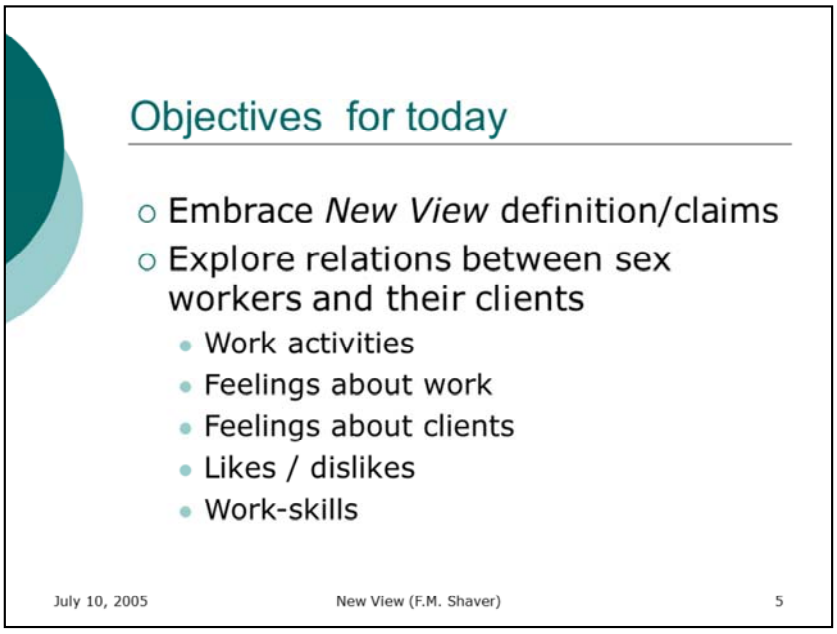

Clearly, **sexuality is more complex**

•In keeping with the broad definition adopted in the *New View Manifesto*, it includes at least 3 elements:

- •Physical
- •Emotional and
- •Relational aspects of sexual experience

•According to the *New View Manifesto*, notions of sexual equivalency between women and men are false:

- •Emphasis on the **physical** ignores differences (in gender, class, ethnicity, & sexual orientation etc.)
- •**Emotional responses are gendered:**
  - Women generally do not separate desire from arousal
  - Women care more about subjective arousal than physical arousal
- •The **relational** context is important to women (sex is more than the specific physical activities)




**Objectives for today**

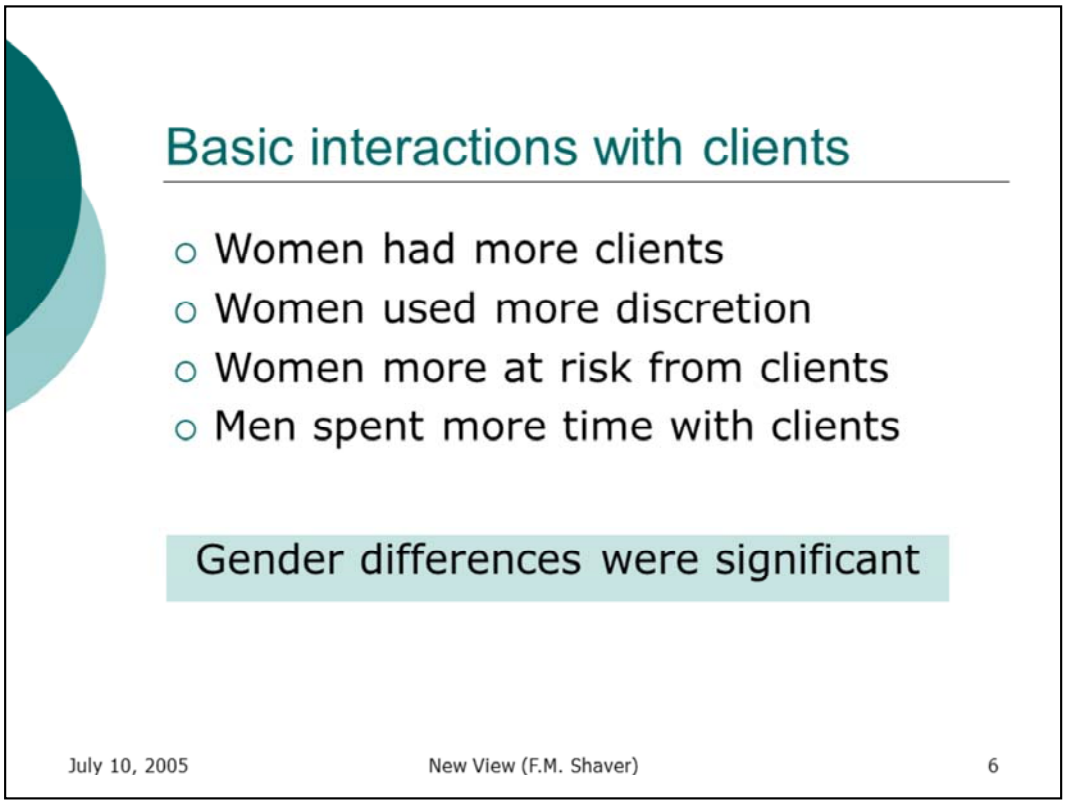
- Embrace the New View definition & claims about sexuality
- Use them to explore relations street-based sex workers have with their clients

This involved taking a closer look at my interviews with a sample of street-based sex workers conducted a decade ago in Montreal & Toronto (1993-94). At the time, I asked a series of open-ended questions about their work activities, and how they perceived and managed the sexual nature of their work. The themes included:

- A full description of the activities associated with their work.
- Feelings about their work: especially the potentially unpleasant aspects (bad breath, sweat, sexual fluids) and what they do if unhappy about it.
- Feelings about most of their clients.
- Their likes / dislikes about their work.
- Their work-skills in comparison to other sex workers.

Although these themes did not focus specifically on the 3-fold definition of sexuality, there was information relevant to it in their replies. Given the *New View* definition and claims, I expect to find differences in the way women & men relate—not only physically—but also emotionally & relationally with their clients.

Using the techniques of qualitative analysis (N5), we used the detailed discussion of these themes to give us some clues about sex workers' relations with their clients using the broader 3-fold definition of sexuality (physical, emotional, relational).



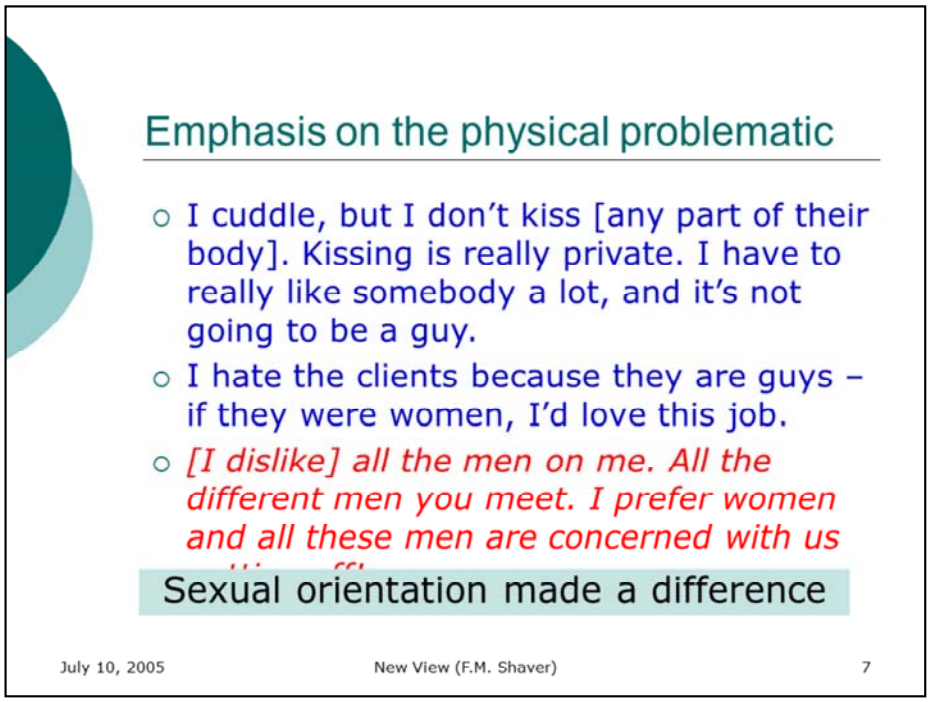

**Basic interactions sex workers have with their clients**

First, lets take a quick look at the basic interactions sex workers had with their clients:

- Women had more clients
- Women used more discretion when selecting clients (i.e. they refused more clients)
- Women were more at risk from clients BUT
- Men spent more time with clients

**•Gender differences were significant**

Next few slides present some preliminary analysis of the data using the *themes* identified in the *New View Manifesto.*




**The emphasis on the physical is problematic**:

[from p.2] Quite a few men (who said they were heterosexual) and a couple of women (who said they preferred being with women) mentioned their sexual orientation made it quasi-impossible to enjoy sex with men. It also dictated what kinds of services they were willing to offer.

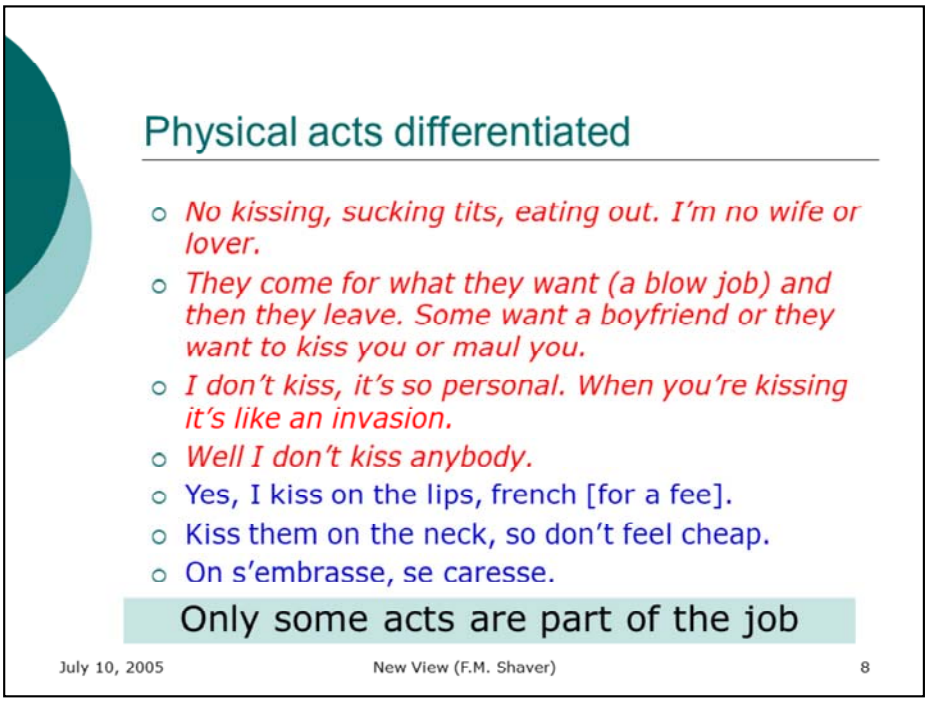
Some quotes: blue=men / red italics =women

•I cuddle, but I don't kiss [any part of their body]. Kissing is really private. I have to really like somebody a lot, and it's not going to be a guy.

•I hate the clients because they are guys – if they were women, I'd love this job.

•*[I dislike] all the men on me. All the different men you meet. I prefer women, and all these men are concerned with us getting off!*

**•Sexual orientation made a difference**




**Physical acts are differentiated:**

[pp. 10-11] The sex workers considered the acts of kissing and breast fondling off-limits to the clients. Most felt it was too intimate.

•*No kissing, sucking tits, eating out. I'm no wife or lover.*

•*They come for what they want (a blow job) and then they leave. Some want a boyfriend or they want to kiss you or maul you.*

•*I don't kiss, it's so personal. When you're kissing it's like an invasion.*

•*Well I don't kiss anybody.*

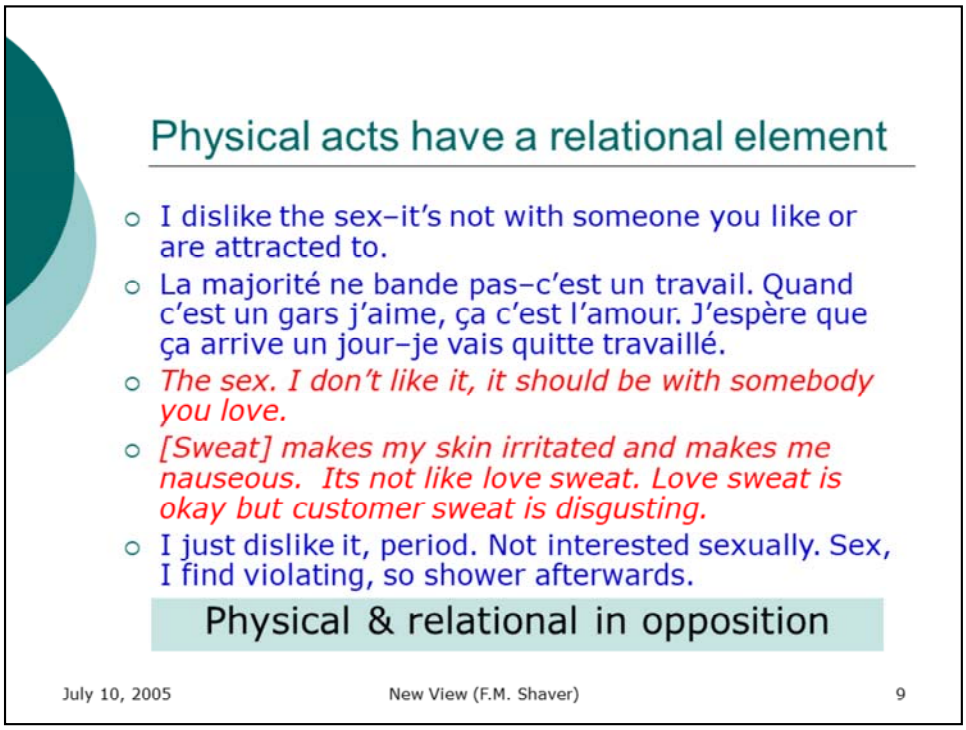
A few men said that they did kiss their clients if asked, but usually for an extra fee:

•Yes, I kiss on the lips, french [for a fee].

•Kiss them on the neck, so don't feel cheap.

•On s'embrasse, se caresse.

**•Thus, only some sex acts are part of the job**




**Physical acts also have a relational element:**

[p.2] Some sex workers spoke of the emotional barriers that kept them detached from clients. Their personal beliefs with regards to sex contributed to the lack of enjoyment of sexual activities with clients. We heard similar responses from women & men:

•I dislike the sex – it's not with someone you like or are attracted to.

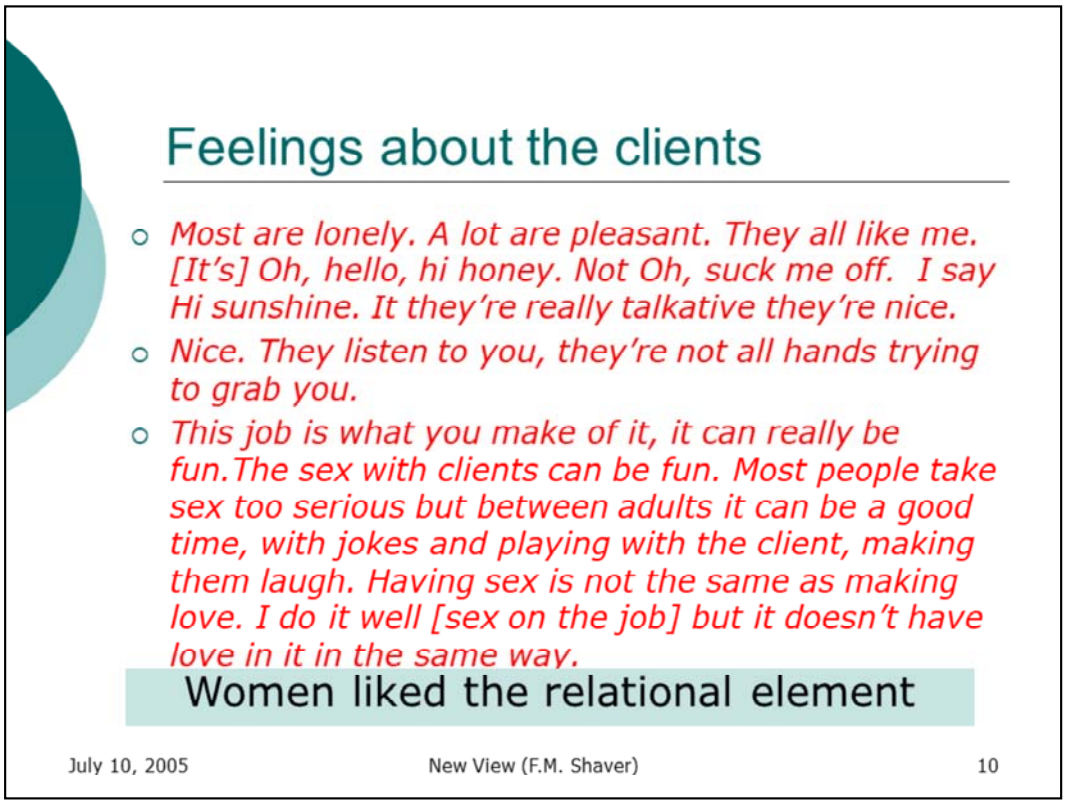
•La majorité ne bande pas – c'est un travail. Quand c'est un gars j'aime, ça c'est l'amour. J'espère que ça arrive un jour – je vais quitte travaillé.

•*The sex. I don't like it, it should be with somebody you love.*

•*[Sweat] makes my skin irritated and makes me nauseous. Its not like love sweat. Love sweat is okay but customer sweat is disgusting.*

•I just dislike it, period. Not interested sexually. Sex, I find violating, so shower afterwards.

**•Within the commercial encounter, the notions of physical enjoyment and relational enjoyment seem to be in opposition.**




**Feelings about the clients**

[p.3] When asked how they felt about their clients, women reported that client encounters were much more pleasant and positive if they were nice, non-aggressive, talkative, appreciative, and respectful toward them.

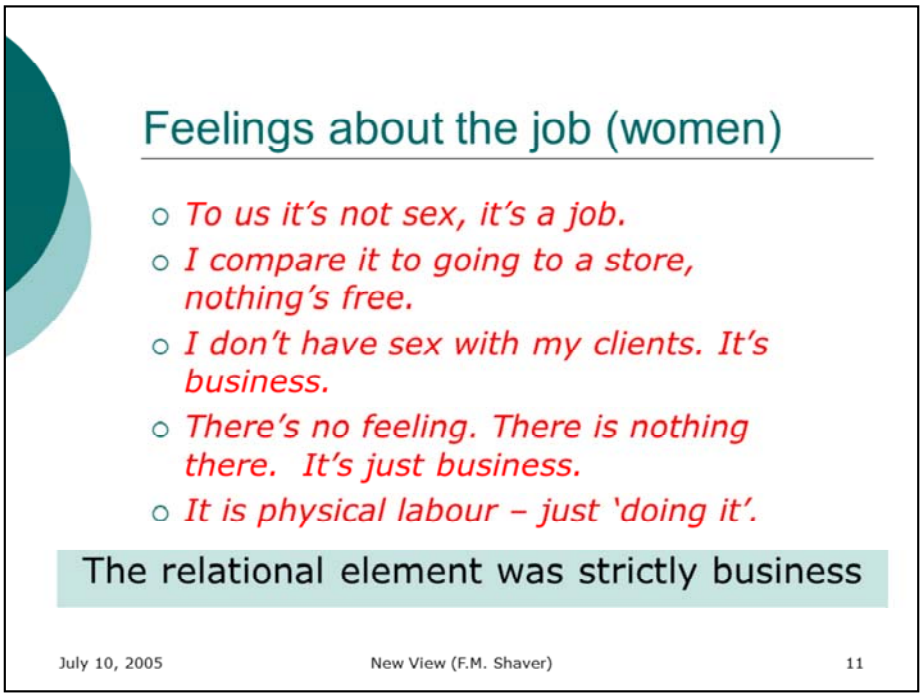
•*Most are lonely. A lot are pleasant. They all like me. [It's] Oh, hello, hi honey. Not Oh, suck me off. I say Hi sunshine. It they're really talkative they're nice.*

•*Nice. They listen to you, they're not all hands trying to grab you.*

•*This job is what you make of it, it can really be fun.The sex with clients can be fun. Most people take sex too serious but between adults it can be a good time, with jokes and playing with the client, making them laugh. Having sex is not the same as making love. I do it well [sex on the job] but it doesn't have love in it in the same way.*

Men were relatively silent on this issue

**•Women liked the relational element of their encounters with clients**




**Feelings about the job (women):**

[p.5] Many sex workers—particularly women working in Montreal—pinpointed the importance of treating commercial sex as 'work' and considered sex acts with clients as part of the job description. They were offering a service, and sex acts were seen to be part of the service.

•*To us it's not sex, it's a job.*

•*I compare it to going to a store, nothing's free.*

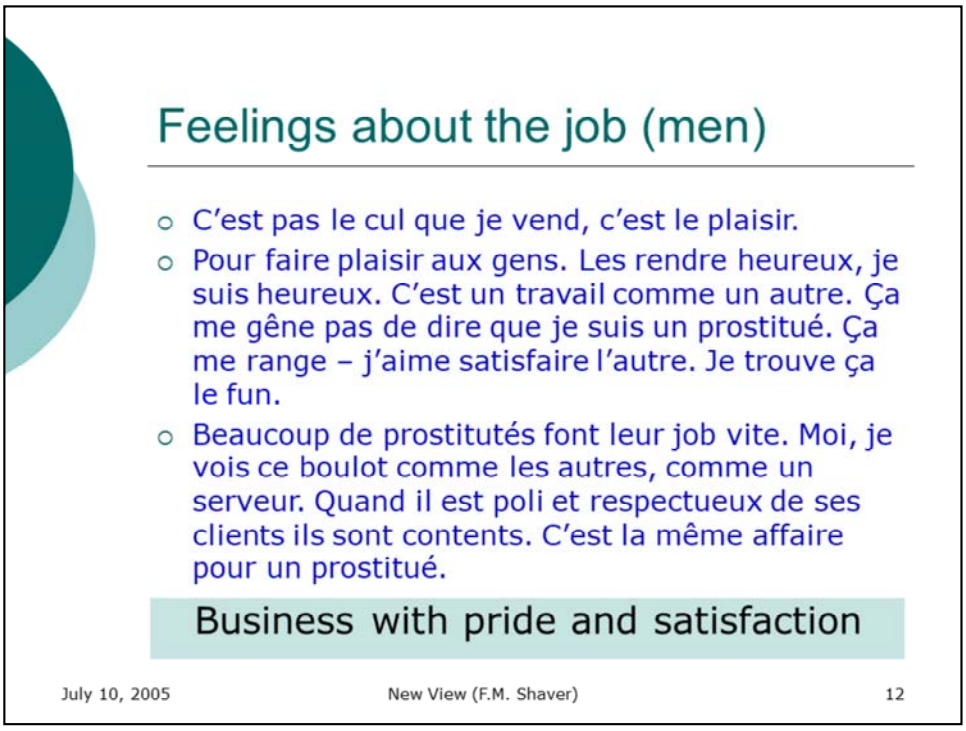
•*I don't have sex with my clients. It's business.*

•*There's no feeling. There is nothing there. It's just business.*

When discussing her feelings about the job, one women referred to the activities with her clients in a way that seems to sum up the previous statements.

•*It is physical labour – just 'doing it'.*

**•For women, the relational element, though important, was strictly a business one.**




**Feelings about the job (men)**

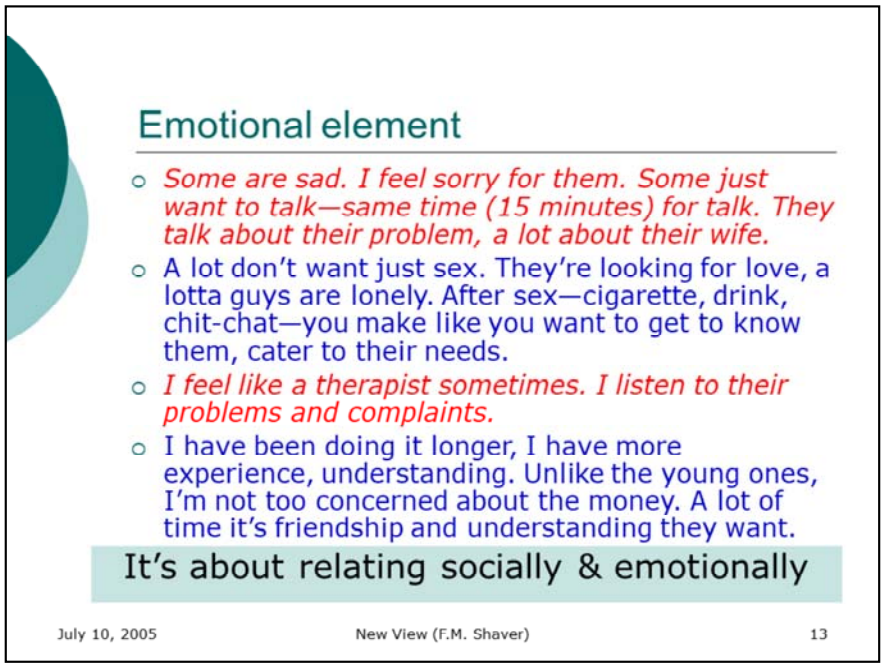
[p.6] Men tended to speak of the business of sex work in a somewhat different manner. Some spoke of just wanting to "get it over with," but others prided themselves on providing a service of quality and said that they themselves got a lot of satisfaction from providing enjoyment to their clients.

•C'est pas le cul que je vend, c'est le plaisir.

•Pour faire plaisir aux gens. Les rendre heureux, je suis heureux. C'est un travail comme un autre. Ça me gêne pas de dire que je suis un prostitué. Ça me range – j'aime satisfaire l'autre. Je trouve ça le fun.

•Beaucoup de prostitués font leur job vite. Moi, je vois ce boulot comme les autres, comme un serveur. Quand il est poli et respectueux de ses clients ils sont contents. C'est la même affaire pour un prostitué.

**•For men, business was conducted with pride and satisfaction**




**Emotional element:**

[pp 6-8] There was a split between those who made sure to keep the notions of work and emotions separate, and those who felt that catering to the emotional needs of clients was a necessary part of the transaction. Some sex workers mentioned having empathy/sympathy for the clients who came to them in search of solace and affection.

•*Some are sad. I feel sorry for them. Some just want to talk—same time (15 minutes) for talk. They talk about their problem, a lot about their wife.*

•A lot don't want just sex. They're looking for love, a lotta guys are lonely. After sex—cigarette, drink, chit-chat—you make like you want to get to know them, cater to their needs.

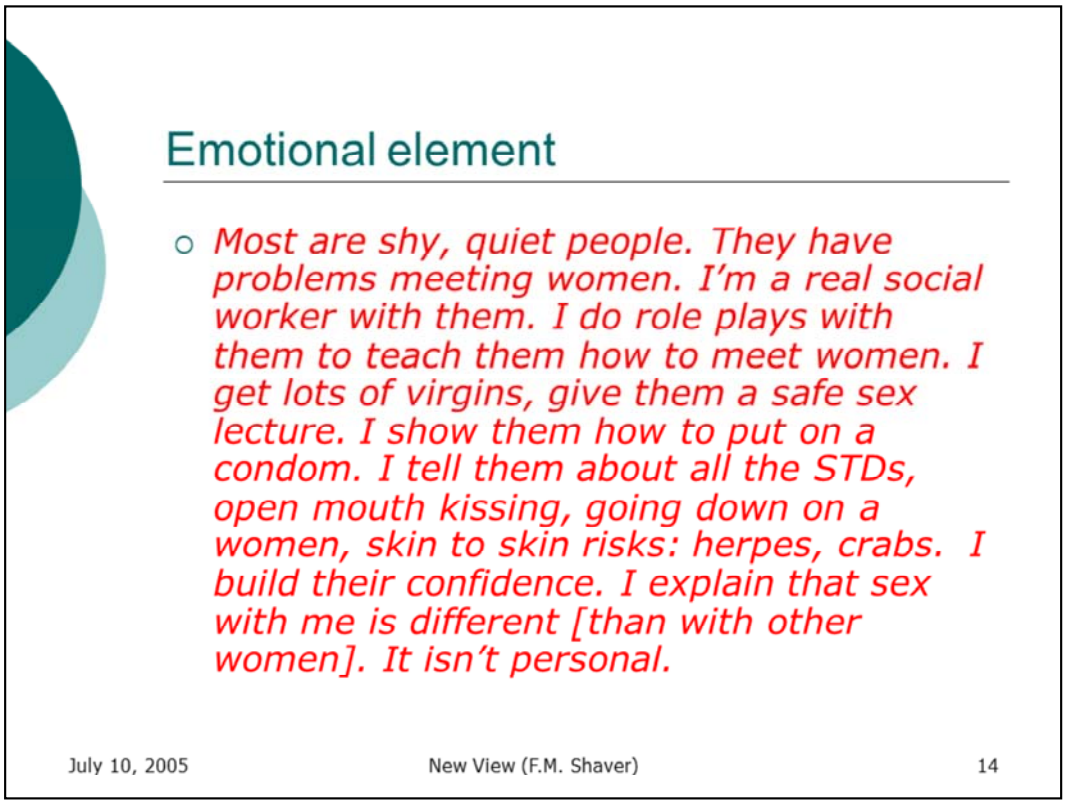
•*I feel like a therapist sometimes. I listen to their problems and complaints.*

•I have been doing it longer, I have more experience, understanding. Unlike the young ones, I'm not too concerned about the money. A lot of time it's friendship and understanding they want.

The work is more than sex:.

**•It's about relating socially and emotionally with the clients.**

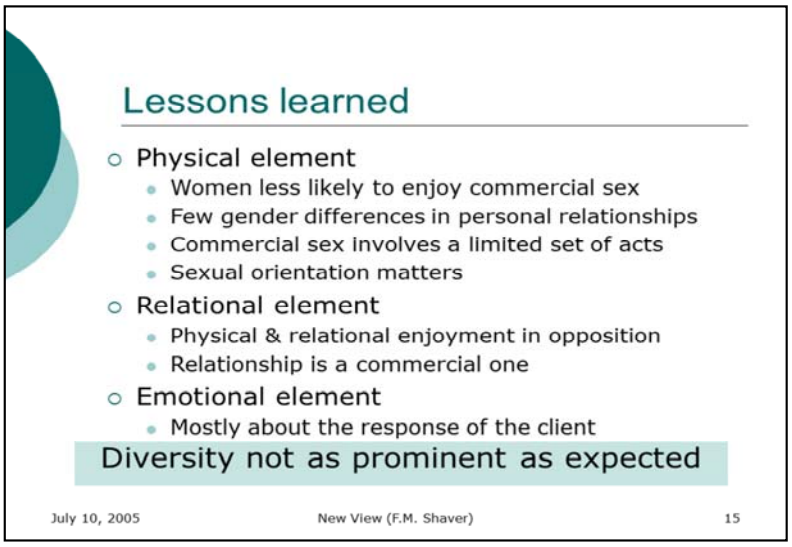
Interestingly, most of the stories were about the emotional needs of the clients (not the workers).




**Emotional element con't:**

This woman provided details on how she responded to her clients' emotional needs:

•*Most are shy, quiet people. They have problems meeting women. I'm a real social worker with them. I do role plays with them to teach them how to meet women. I get lots of virgins, give them a safe sex lecture. I show them how to put on a condom. I tell them about all the STDs, open mouth kissing, going down on a women, skin to skin risks: herpes, crabs. I build their confidence. I explain that sex with me is different [than with other women]. It isn't personal.*




**Lessons learned (what did we learn?)**

**•Physical element**

•Women were less likely than men to enjoy the sex activities & orgasm in commercial relationships.

Fewer differences in personal relationships.

This is in line with other research showing that, in general, men find it easier than women to enjoy sex outside of a personal relationship.

•Commercial sex involves a limited set of acts (true for both women and men)

Sexual orientation matters (true for both women and men)

This supports the *New View* claim that we must think beyond the physical

**•Relational element**

-Within the commercial encounter, notions of physical and relational enjoyment seem to be in opposition (true for many women & men).

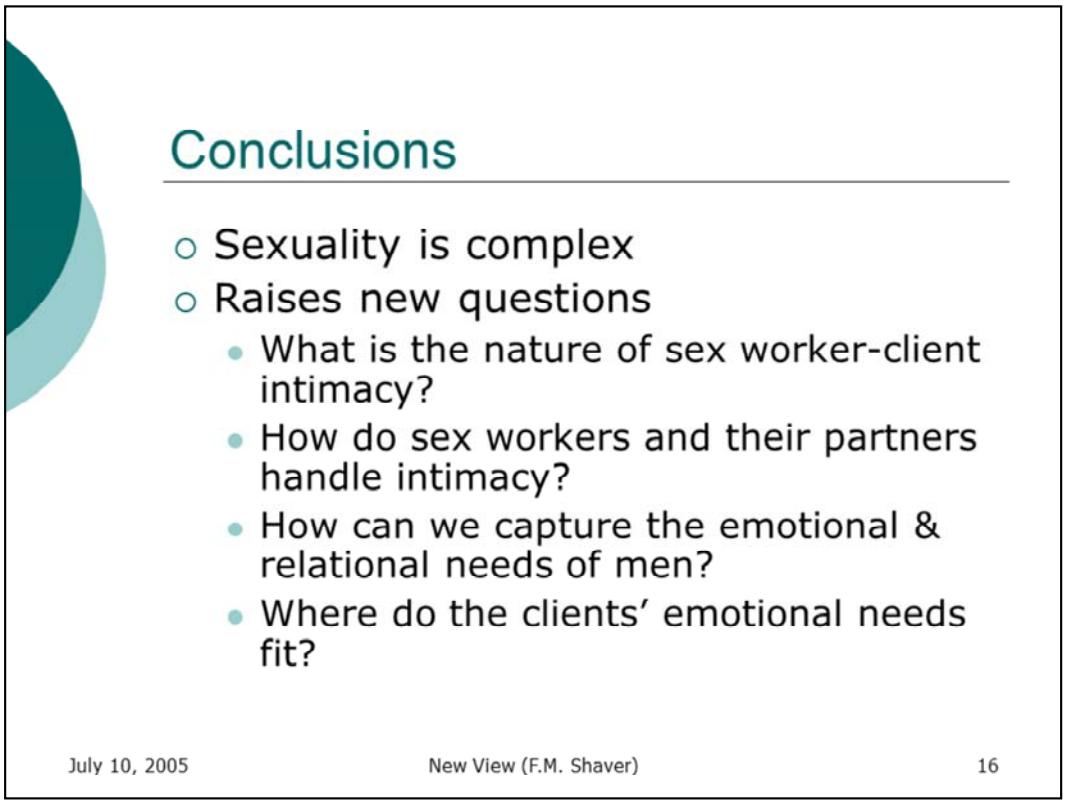
-The relationship is clearly a commercial one: it works best when both worker and client respect each other (said some women) and when the work is conducted with pride (said some men).

This fits well with the sex worker mantra: *It's been a business doing pleasure with you.*

**•Emotional element**

-Concerns seemed to be mostly about the needs of the clients and were expressed by both women and men.

**•Diversity not as prominent as expected:** there seemed to be many equivalencies between women and men sex workers. This suggests that men too care about the emotional and relational elements of sexuality—at least with respect to sex work.

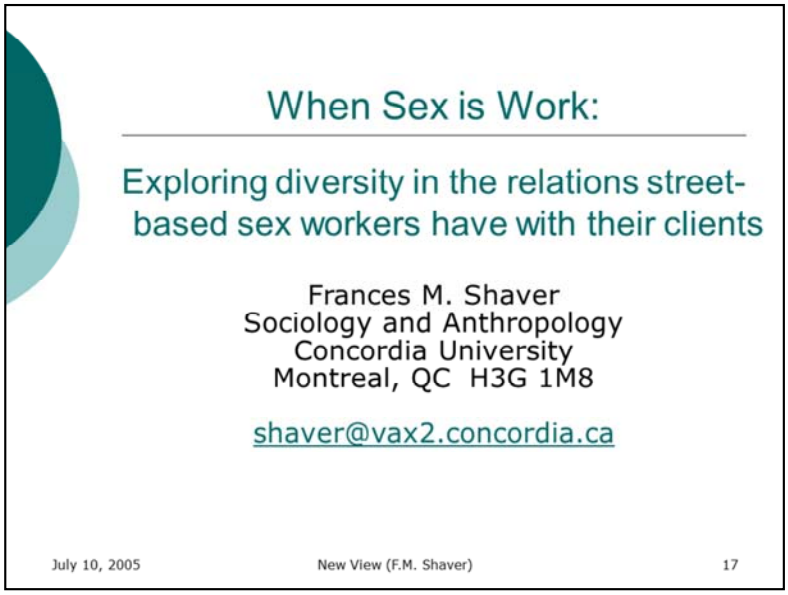



**Conclusions**

•Sexuality is complex (and better studied when adopting the 3-fold definition)

•The *New View* definition & these findings raise new questions to be studied.

- •What is the nature of sex worker-client intimacy?
- •How do sex workers and their partners handle intimacy?
- •What more can be learned about the emotional & relational need of men?
- •Where do the clients' emotional needs fit, if at all?

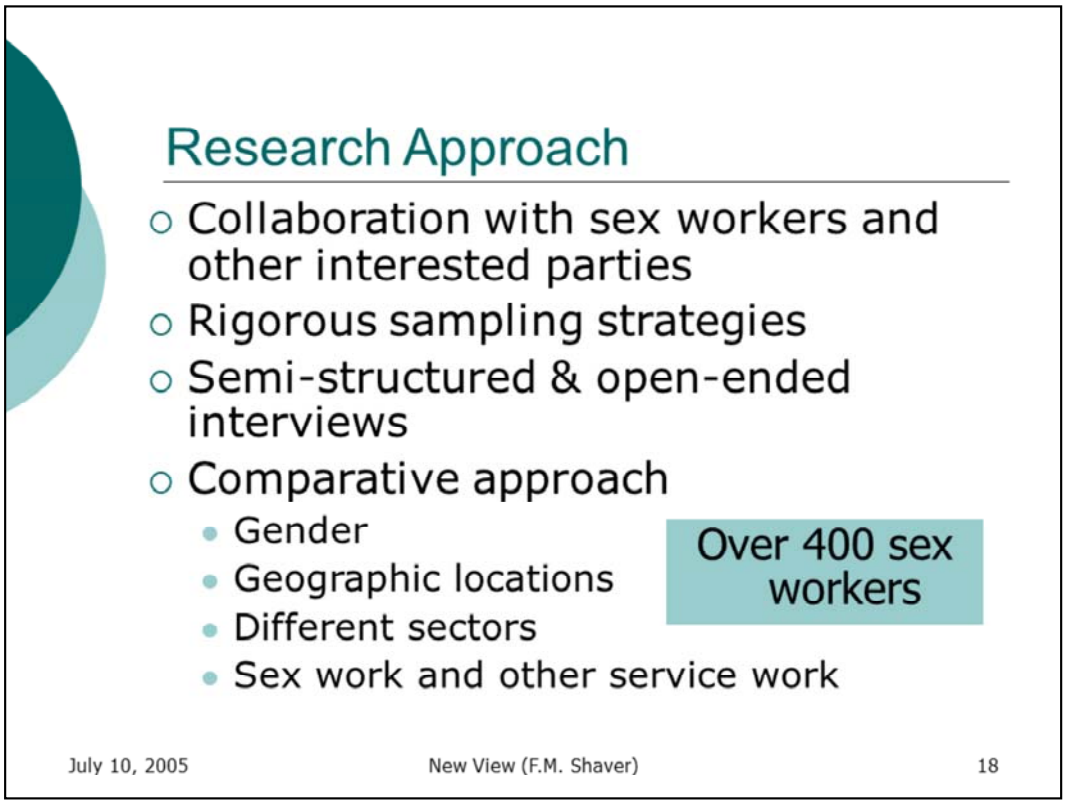



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I have been conducting research on the sex industry (sex work) for 20 years using a very straight forward fourfold approach. It involves:

•Collaboration with sex workers and other interested parties [police and other justice personnel, social service and health providers, community organizations, city officials]

•Rigorous sampling strategies

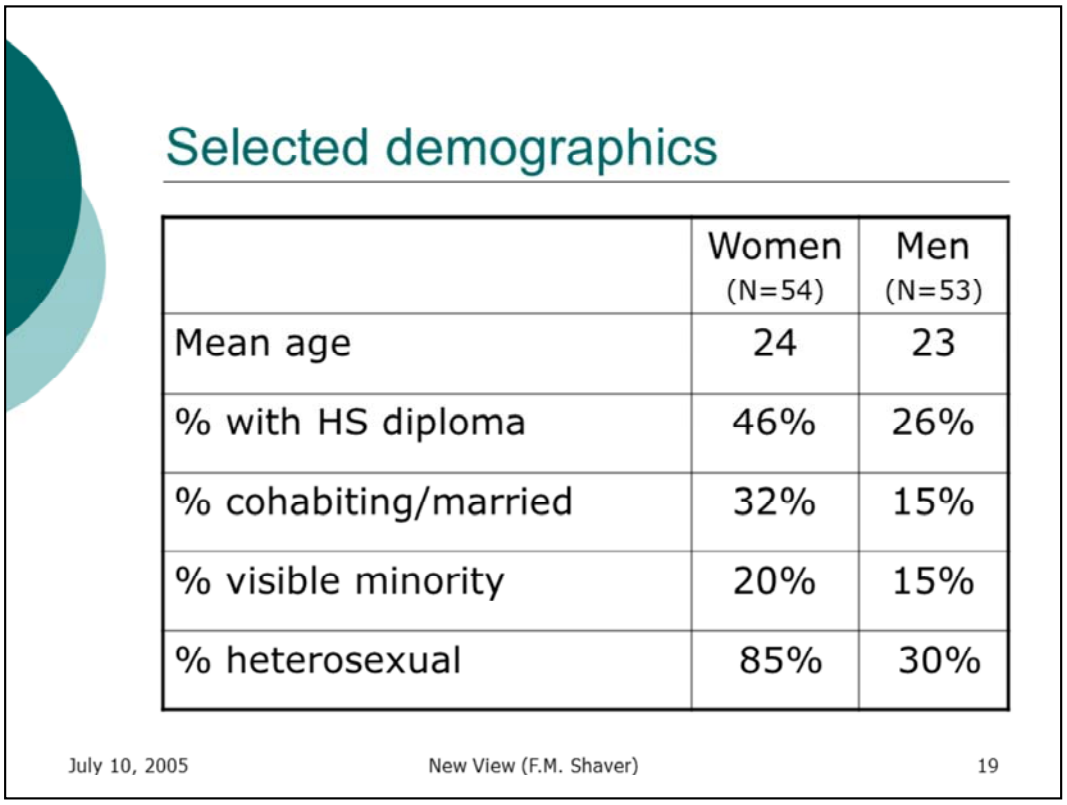
•Semi-structured & open-ended interviews

•Comparative approach

- •Gender
- •Geographic location (SF, Montreal (2), Toronto)
- •Different sectors of the sex trade
- •Sex work and other service work jobs

•Over 400 sex workers interviewed

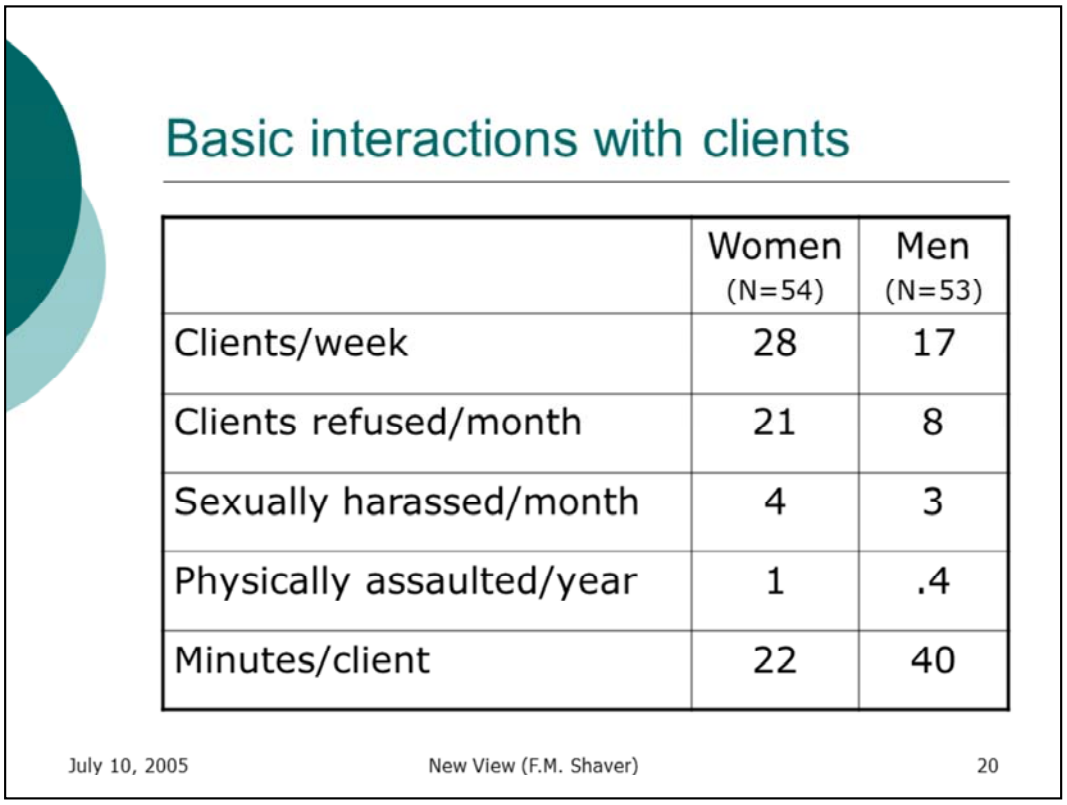
My findings have been particularly useful for identifying the diversity within the sex industry. We learned some very important lessons…..




**Selected Demographics of the 1993-1994 sample**:

We saw similar patterns to those from our earlier sample:

•Women were older (not sig)
•Women had more education (sig)
•Women were more likely to be cohabiting (sig)
•Some ethnic diversity (but the gender diff was not sig)
•Sexual orientation: women were more likely to be heterosexual (sig)




**Basic Interactions with clients**: We saw the same gender patterns that we did in our earlier sample:

- Women see more clients / night [check out per/week]
- Women refuse more clients / month
- Women more likely to be sexually harassed by their clients
- Women more likely to be beaten by their clients
- Men spend more time with their clients

NOTE: the mean differences were significant in the earlier sample & in this sample.