Going 'round Again: The Persistence of Prostitution-Related Stigma

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[*Pre-publication version*. Published as Lewis, J., F.M. Shaver and E. Maticka-Tyndale (2013) Going 'round Again: The Persistence of Prostitution-Related Stigma. Pp. 198-208 in *Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada*, eds. Emily van der Meulen, Elya M. Durisin and Victoria Love. UBC Press.]

> As a social process, stigma operates by producing and reproducing social structures of power, hierarchy, class, and exclusion and by transforming difference into social inequality. (Tempalski, Friedman, Keem, Cooper & Friedman 2007, 1252)

Although sex work is a lawful, revenue-generating activity in Canada, the stigmatization and marginalization of the sex industry and people working in it is pervasive (Jeffrey & MacDonald 2006a; Shaver, Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale 2011). Even in settings where sex work has been decriminalized such as New Zealand (Abel & Fitzgerald 2010; Jordan 2005) and parts of Australia (Jeffreys & Sullivan 2009; Jeffreys, Mathews & Thomas 2010), stigmatization and marginalization persist. The perpetuation of negative perceptions of the sex industry and people working in it is often grounded in an incomplete and misleading portrait of sex work that ultimately threatens the health, safety, well-being and rights of workers (Shaver 2005; Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver & Gillies 2005; Shaver, Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale 2011). In this chapter we explore how the stigmatization of sex workers in Canada interferes with the ability of people working in the sex industry (PWSI) to attain full citizenship rights and the recognition of their work as labour even in the face of progressive legislative change.

Erving Goffman (1963) is credited with drawing the concept of stigma to the attention of academics and non-academics alike. According to Goffman (1963, 3), stigma "refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting" that is interpreted as a symptom of an underlying moral

failing and/or a failure to live up to an agreed upon social norm or value. It affects how an individual is viewed and treated by other members of society and is often used to justify prejudicial treatment or marginalization by family and friends, employers and co-workers, health care professionals, government workers and policy makers. It also results in the self-denigration among many who are stigmatized. In an effort to enhance the explanatory power of Goffman's conception of stigma, Parker and Aggleton (2003) recently combined Goffman's work on stigma with Foucault's (1978) work on "the cultural production of difference in the service of power" (Parker and Aggleton 2003, 17). This combined model produces a better understanding of how stigmatization serves to maintain entrenched differentials in power (i.e., to maintain the status quo). Parker and Aggleton (2003) argue that we need to examine the role of power structures in the application of stigma, whereby the mark of significant difference, or stigmatization, is used to draw distinctions between groups of people, and insert them into structures of power. Thus, those individuals perceived to be aligned with culturally preferred norms are deemed 'worthy' and afforded full rights and powers of citizenship. Those who resist or challenge such alignment are culturally defined as deviant and therefore deemed 'unworthy'. They note,

> Stigma and stigmatization function, quite literally, at the point of intersection between *culture*, *power* and *difference* – and it is only by exploring the relationships between these different categories that it becomes possible to understand stigma and stigmatization not merely as an isolated phenomenon, or expressions of individual attitudes or cultural values, but as central to the constitution of social order (Parker & Aggleton 2003, 17).

It is this conceptualization of stigma that we will apply to sex work and PWSI.

Harm & Stigma

Research on sex work, including our own[1], has illustrated the impact of stigma and its management on a diverse array of workers' lives (street-based, escorts, masseuses, dancers, men, women and transsexual/transgender [TS/TG] workers)[2]. As Jeffrey and MacDonald (2006, 127) note "stigmatizing attitudes that paint sex workers as backward, victims, uneducated, addicted, and whores … contribute to the climate of violence and marginalization that sex workers face." For PWSI, stigma plays a persistent role in their everyday reality. It is felt at the individual level on the job in response to the daily treatment they experience from customers and the public. Stigma is manifested at the structural level in the reflection and reinforcement of stigmatizing notions in the policies and practices of governments and social institutions that control aspects of sex work. It is the persistence and pervasiveness of this stigma - across time and social spheres and in the face of evidence that refutes the assumptions and beliefs upon which it is based - that serve to maintain workers' marginalization and justify their continued discriminatory treatment. Even when on the brink of the implementation of progressive policy change, efforts to maintain or reinforce the status quo and the established social order regarding the position of PWSI in society are readily apparent.

The Ontario Superior Court judgment by Justice Himel (28 September 2010) quashed several sections of the *Canadian Criminal Code* that apply to sex work (***Bedford v. Canada***

[1] Shaver, Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale 2011; Lewis & Shaver 2011; Lewis, 2010; Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver & Schramm 2005; Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver & Gillies 2005; Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale 2000, 1998; Shaver 2005, 1996,1994, 1993; Shaver, Lewis & Maticka-Tyndale 2011; STAR 2006; STAR 2004.

[2] All the TS/TG workers in our own work were male-to-female (MTF). They present themselves as women and most live full-time as women. They may or may not have had sex reassignment surgery.

(Attorney General), 2010 ONCA 4264). Her ruling highlighted the many efforts aimed at keeping PWSI 'in their place' and officially recognized the harms associated with some of the prostitution-related sections of the *Criminal Code*: the role stigma, marginalization and discrimination play in the continued victimization of PWSI (e.g., the Pickton murders[3] and the murders on the "highway of tears"[4]) and the denial of their Charter rights. The harm-reduction and rights-based discourse echoed in Justice Himel's judgment adds powerful support to the worker, activist and academic voices that have long been calling for policy change.

Concerns with Canadian prostitution laws, including the harm they cause workers, have been repeatedly voiced by witnesses who have appeared before government committees struck on the issue since the 1980s (e.g., the Badgley Committee 1984, the Fraser Committee 1985, the Federal, Provincial, Territorial Working Group on Prostitution 1998, the Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws [SSLR] 2006). It was the most recent of these, the SSLR hearings, that offered the greatest hope for change since, for the first time, PWSI were officially invited as witnesses and were included as members of research teams - including our own (Lewis, Maticka-Tyndale, Shaver and Gillies 2005) - to testify about the effects of Canadian law and policy on their lives. If workers' voices were finally heard, if the damage resulting from the silencing of this segment of the population was made evident, if the harms tied to the current prohibitionist policy were clear (e.g., the Pickton murders which were the impetus for the SSLR hearings), then perhaps the

[3] In 2007 Robert Pickton was sentenced to life imprisonment for the second-degree murder of six women. He was also charged in the deaths of an additional twenty women. Many of these women were sex workers and/or drug users from downtown east side Vancouver. The arrest and charging of Pickton was part of an ongoing criminal investigation into the disappearance of at least 60 women from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside since the early1980s.

[4] The "Highway of Tears" refers to a series of unsolved murders and disappearances of young (mostly aboriginal) women along an 800 km section of Highway 16 that runs between Prince Rupurt and Prince George, British Columbia. Although the exact number of women involved is not known, estimates range between 32 and 43.

government would be forced to enact harm-reduction oriented policy change. However, before the SSLR could finalize and release their report, the Liberal government was defeated by the Conservatives in the January 23 2006 federal election. This party change likely influenced both the committee's final report and the subsequent failure of the Canadian government to enact policy change.

After the 2006 election, the SSLR was reconstituted to include more members from the Conservative party and fewer members from the opposition parties. The result of this change was readily apparent in the Subcommittee's report. The report failed "to call for amendments to the *Criminal Code* provisions which have been demonstrated to increase the health and safety threats faced by sex workers" (Mar & Betteridge 2007, 15). One of the few points receiving unanimous agreement among committee members and across parties was that "the status quo was not acceptable" (SSLR 2006, 86).[5] Although on the surface this acknowledgement sounded promising, the discourse used to detail this conclusion is problematic due to its reliance on concepts such as 'preventing prostitution', 'exploitation' and 'harm to communities'. Despite views from members of all three opposition parties (Liberal, New Democratic, and Bloc Québécois) that "sexual activities between consenting adults that do not harm others … should not be prohibited by the state" (SSLR 2006, 90), the framing of what needs to be done contained in the unanimous points of agreement reinforced the continued use of criminal law to control sex work, and the division between 'us' and 'them'. The division - between the members of 'decent' society and those who are seen to be a threat to the moral order - reinforces and maintains the

[5] The Subcommittee's (2006, 85-87) unanimous recommendations included: (1) the commercial sexual exploitation of minors and trafficking in persons is unacceptable; (2) the status quo for prostituted persons in Canada is unacceptable; (3) Criminal laws pertaining to prostitution are unequally applied in Canada; (4) there is an urgent need for legislation and programs; and (5) there is a need for further research and data collection.

stigmatization of PWSI and their position on the margins of society. This limits their access to power and their ability to resist or challenge traditional cultural attitudes such as those reflected in the position of the Conservative party members of the SSLR:

> The Conservatives do not believe it is possible for the state to create isolated conditions in which the consensual provision of sex in exchange for money does not harm others… all prostitution has a social cost, and…any effort by the state to decriminalize prostitution would impoverish all Canadians - and Canadian women in particular - by signaling that the commodification and invasive exploitation of a woman's body is acceptable. (SSLR 2006, 90)

Since the release of this report, as was the case of prior committee reports, little has been done to improve the situation for PWSI. Instead, the report simply re-inscribed prostitution as the exploitation of persons (particularly women and children) and the supposed relationship between prostitution and a variety of social harms.

We saw something similar occurring shortly after the announcement of Justice Himel's judgment. An overview of media coverage reveals government efforts to provide alternative constructions of sex work and PWSI to those detailed in the judgment; constructions that reinforce mainstream cultural (mis-)understandings of sex work and echo common rationales used to support the structural inequality experienced by workers. Representatives of the federal government spoke out against the ruling and laid out their plans to appeal the decision. It is here that we see issues tied to culture, power and difference (Parker & Aggleton 2003) in action. For example, Federal Justice Minister Rob Nicholson asserted that "it is the government's prerogative to decide how best to protect prostitutes and the communities in which they ply their trade. The Government is very concerned about the [Ontario] Superior Court's decision" (Makin,

September 28 2010). In contrast to the empirical evidence that Justice Himel detailed in her judgment (*Bedford v. Canada* (Attorney General), 2010 ONCA 4264)), the discourse used by the government continues to reinforce the acceptability of the victimization and murder of workers. Of particular interest here is the language that was used and the cultural values cited in an effort to challenge a significant threat to existing cultural understandings of sex work. Prostitution is presented as harmful "because it is [seen to be] immoral and offensive and therefore threatening to moral order and the stability of Canadian society" (Lewis 2000a, 209).

In oppostion to calls for rights and harm-reduction for workers, what was heard from Conservative politicians leading up to the Ontario Court of Appeal hearing on November 23 2010 were claims of the harms that would result if the decision was not overturned. The harms were framed as threats to the wall that separates/isolates sex work and PWSI from 'respectable society' and which prevents the infiltration of the sex industry and its associated 'harms' (e.g., drugs, violence, exploitation, etc.) into communities. These claims served to elevate public concern and to reinforce the continued stigmatization of prostitution. Newspapers headlined federal positions in the following ways: "Ontario about to become hooker hub, feds warn" (Tibbetts November 18 2010); "Tory MP sees 'the nation as the pimp' if prostitution ruling stands" (Taber September 29 2010). In arguments to extend the stay past November 23 2010, Federal lawyer Michael Morris - echoing the Conservative government conclusions in the SSLR report - noted that "[Himel's decision] will create profound and immediate consequences upon communities, neighbourhoods and women engaged in prostitution" (Nguyen December 1 2010). Government lawyers argued that the decision would result in "irreparable harms to the public interest" (Tibbetts November 18 2010). The government of Ontario warned that the ruling could spark "vigilantism by residents who will begin to see an increase of street prostitution — and

other illegal activities associated with it — move into their neighbourhoods." (Nguyen November 23 2010). The general message that was sent was summed up by Prime Minister Stephen Harper:

> The government's position is very clear. There are laws on the books. The government supports those laws. The government is in court to encourage the court to uphold those laws….We believe that the prostitution trade is bad for society. That's a strong view held by our government and I think by most Canadians. (Nguyen Dec 3 2010)

Harper's comment restates the party stance regarding prostitution, a stance taken on other controversial social issues (e.g., marijuana policy, safer injection facilities [SIFs]). The Conservative Party has consistently positioned itself as the Party that supports the status quo - the social order that reinforces the divide between Canadians. This divide affords full citizen rights and powers to those on one side while denying or limiting those rights and powers to those on the other. It is achieved by creating and reinforcing a particular culture of 'knowledge' that privileges a pseudo-science founded on a moral ideology that ignores evidence founded in research that follows scientific methods (Weitzer 2010). Thus, evidence demonstrating harm to the health, well-being and civil liberties caused by marijuana prohibitions (Senate Special Committee on Illegal Drugs 2002) and evidence of the benefits of SIFs in eliminating overdose deaths and reducing injection-related transmission of HIV and HCV (Broadhead, Kerr, Grund & Altice 2002; Elliott 2008) are ignored. With respect to prostitution, rather than attending to the evidence of the harm resulting from the *Criminal Code* statutes and the arguments for harm reduction policy presented before the SSLR and all preceding commissions as well as in *Bedford v. Canada*, the Harper government continues to base their support of the existing policy on opinion grounded in a morality-based discourse of harm. Similar to Lewis' (2000a, 204) analysis

of the lap dancing ban in Ontario, the government discourse that followed Justice Himel's judgement was clearly an attempt to "elevate latent public fears and concerns regarding the threat posed by sex workers to public morality, health, safety and way of life." The use of such discourse, however, is in direct contrast with the Vienna Declaration of Human Rights which states that policy "should be based on evidence, not ideology" (www.viennadeclaration.com).

The rationale provided for the continued prohibition of prostitution and the maintenance of the status quo is one we have heard repeatedly. Under the guise of 'protecting' the family, women, children, neighbourhoods, the good of society and even PWSI, we are told it is necessary to maintain a prohibition on sex work related activities. This position rationalizes laws that perpetuate the harm experienced by workers as necessary for the protection of those very workers as well as of society in general. It privileges one segment of the population and vilifies another. In the case of the motion to stay the judgement of Justice Himel, the arguments made by the Attorney General privilege a claimed 'public interest' that involves protecting the public (and PWSI) from 'anticipated' harms that are expected to result from changes to the *Criminal Code* (*Bedford v. Canada* (Attorney General), 2010 ONCA 814). The well documented life-threatening 'actual' harms that result from criminal laws are given, at best, only minor consideration.

The ideology reflected in various court documents, such as the Attorney General's factum in *Bedford v. Canada*, and media statements by government officials, such as those cited above, frame the harm experienced by PWSI in a particular way and reassure the public that something is being done, that existing laws are working, and that 'the government knows best' how to deal with this 'problem'. The numerous government commissions add to the illusion that the government is taking action - despite the scant attention paid to their conclusions and

recommendations. By diverting the focus from the harms to PWSI caused by criminal laws, the status quo is maintained.

De-stigmatizing Sex Work & PWSI

Given the degree and persistence of stigma surrounding sex workers' lives the challenge is how to reduce it. The literature suggests that attitudinal change is difficult to achieve (Bobo, Kluegel & Smith 1997) and that there are limits to stigma reduction (Stryker 1980). However, there is hope! There is a history of disenfranchised groups (e.g., the disabilities rights, women's rights, civil rights, gay rights, People living with HIV and AIDS [PHA] rights) working to support and empower their members and advocate for change (Brown, Mcintyre & Trujillo 2003; Gussow & Tracy 1968; Lewis 2000b; Murray 1984; Parker & Aggleton 2003). In terms of PWSI, since the emergence of the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (1983) and Maggie's (1986), a growing number of grassroots community organizations and activists (e.g., Stella in Montreal, PEERS in Vancouver and Victoria, PACE in Vancouver, DERA and POWER in Ottawa, Stepping Stone in Halifax) have been challenging cultural conceptions of sex work, PWSI, and the laws used to control their work and lives.[6] The current Charter challenges in Ontario and British Columbia are being brought by sex workers. Education of the public to counter common myths and assumptions about PWSI as a strategy to reduce stigmatization has been adopted as a core objective of the recently formed group FIRST - Feminists Advocating for Rights and Equality of Sex Workers. FIRST released its first public service announcement on television and the internet (http://firstcoalition.blip.tv/) in late 2010, in which it counters the

[6] Such efforts have been supplemented by various research/policy groups/organizations (e.g., PIVOT (2004, 2006), Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, STAR).

stereotype that PWSI are profoundly and inherently different from 'ordinary' people. The group's position statement states, in part:

> We are guided by the fundamental principle that sex industry workers should have equal benefit of the human rights protections that are available to all members of Canadian society. To be a society that is truly committed to equality, freedom and human dignity, we must recognize the rights of sex industry workers to:
>
> - Live and work in conditions that are free from hate, violence and exploitation;
> - Have their dignity, autonomy and liberty respected, including the right to engage in consensual sex with other adults without being criminalized; and
> - Be treated as equal members of society, have equal protection and benefit of the law and not be subject to stigma, discrimination and social alienation.
>
> (www.firstadvocates.org)

Parker and Aggleton (2003) argue that, in addition to grassroots efforts for change, structural changes in the form of evidence-based policy reforms that focus on harm-reduction and human rights are essential. This requires a government that privileges empirical evidence, even when it runs counter to party ideology, and to protecting the rights of all of its citizens, including the most marginalized. Whether we are looking at the institutionalization of gay marriage, the legalization of marijuana, the recognition of minority group rights (e.g., women, gays, people of colour, people who are mentally or physically challenged), or the decriminalization of prostitution, policy change - especially policy that fosters equality and rights for all - can facilitate attitudinal and behavioral change and lessen stigma.[7] As noted by Parker

[7] An example is the recent initiative by the Irish Government to destigmatize mental illness called "See Change". In emphasizing the importance of the program, the Minister of Disability and Mental Health stated "Stigma has no place in Irish society today. It damages people's lives

and Aggleton (2003, 22), "judicial and policy interventions in many settings have shown real effectiveness in impeding the worst impact of…stigmatization and discrimination." As part of a package to stimulate change, governments can engage directly with disenfranchised communities to design and implement educational initiatives that supplement grassroots campaigns. In addition, although "we cannot ask [or expect] people to be totally free of the biases imbedded in the cultural cleavages that exist in …society" (Pescosoldio et al. 2007, 438) we should at least be able to look to the government to set an example regarding issues of social justice - rather than watching them persistently reinforce injustices. In this regard, governments should also institute policy that prohibits people from acting on their prejudices through ensuring there are penalties available and imposed for the mistreatment and/or violation of the rights of all citizens (Parker & Aggleton 2003; Pescosoldio et al. 2007).

In short, in order to avoid 'going 'round again'— using stigma to justify and perpetuate the division between 'decent' folks and 'prostitutes' and to maintain the status quo—it is imperative the government commit to (i) basing law and policy on empirical evidence; (ii) taking a social justice stance toward the sex industry; and (iii) actively promoting the development of a more evidence-based understanding of the sex industry and PWSI. Such changes will counteract the ideology-based thinking that contributes to stigmatization and further advance social justice and citizen rights for all Canadians. Although these commitments require political courage on the part of the government, a March 2011 Ekos survey suggests that such change may actually be in line with the attitudes and opinions of Canadians. The poll revealed that the Canadian public prefers a government whose policies are based on scientific evidence, rather than tradition and

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and can be deeply hurtful and isolating, and is one of the most significant problems encountered by people mental health problems" (Minister Moloney April 5 2010).

ideology (Graves 2011). In a pluralistic society such as ours, public policy cannot be built on pseudo-science founded on a particular type moral ideology; it can only be developed through emphasizing justice and science and by creating conditions where diversity is recognized, respected, and protected.

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