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“I Feel Like This is the Best Thing I'm Good At”- Butter: Exploring Vulnerabilities to Sex Work
Through YouTube

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in Criminal Justice

Bridgewater State University

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Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Literature Review	6
State: Massachusetts' Female Sex Worker Population	6
Risks and Vulnerabilities of Sex Work	7
Theoretical Framework	8
Methodology Approach and Research Design	12
Data Collection/ Themes and Codes	133
Findings	188
Conclusion	200
References	212

Abstract

Sex work is a misunderstood occupation riddled with stereotypes and stigmas. Those who participate in the sex work industry, throughout the duration of their career, have been exposed to various magnitudes of violence. This study specifically focuses on female sex workers (FSWs) and delves into why these women would continue engaging in a field as dangerous as sex work. Applying feminist theories and the victim/offender overlap, this study explores the complexities of the sex work industry, along with the violence and stigma that sex workers experience daily, through content analysis of interviews with FSW from a YouTube docuseries. Findings suggest that larger societal structures are the root causes for how a vast number of women are ushered into exchanging sexual services for money or other goods. To truly comprehend the reason why these women continue to participate in this industry, one must also acknowledge the substantial criminological and societal systems that perpetuate the cycle of gendered crime and poverty.

Keywords: Female Sex Workers, FSWs, Feminist Theories, Victim/Offender overlap, qualitative content analysis, YouTube, societal structures

Introduction

The subject of sex work is regarded with distaste by many, but must be brought into general conversation to better understand why and how an individual can exchange sexual services for money. A majority of sex workers can be viewed as victims of an unstable home environment and life experiences. As a result of the disadvantages that many sex workers may have experienced in their lives whether it may stem from cultural or economic injustices, several female sex workers are not motivated to be involved in sex work. They are, instead, led to participate in this occupation as a result of their environment and life experiences. The sex “industry”, similar to other institutions, is systematic. There are clients, “employees”, and procurers or pimps who supply the clients’ needs, and handle the payment for services. However, it is an industry marked by high levels of violence, typically, directed at the employee. Sex workers face an array of client-based violence, ranging from sexual (rape, sexual harassment, sexual assault); physical (beatings, attacks with weapons); and emotional abuse. Therefore, stating that sex workers “voluntarily engage” in sex work hides the complexities of what leads them down this road.

The basic human rights of sex workers are frequently violated, and they have little hope of legal redress. There is an immense amount of stigma centering on the sex work industry and those who participate in it. Workers are humiliated and looked upon as lesser; primarily due to the job they are, oftentimes, led to engaging in. In modern society, there is an increased whorephobia associated with female sex workers which stem from America’s already conservative principles surrounding all things sex. Therefore, such derogatory terms as “hoe”, “slut”, and “dirty” are utilized to undermine the work that female sex workers do, without realizing that such a popular service is only successful and exchanged for the money that the mass amount of male clients provide. Men are the primary clients, subscribers, or “johns” who

pay for sexual services and single handily fuel the sex work industry, and yet the negative attention remains on the women. To further stigmatize this invisible population, social and criminological forces portray sex work and its employees in simplistic terms; as a one-dimensional occupation, engaged in for the “easy money.”

Reducing motives for sex work into mere economic terms ignores the powerful criminological and social structures that push women into such work and continues to minimize their rationale for staying within it. The voice of the female sex worker is silenced or ignored, and they have little way of speaking out against the stigma and mythology by which society judges them. This study strives to add to the discussion of the misperceptions of female sex workers (hereafter FSW) by destigmatizing the ideas of sex work that continued to affect FSWs in brutal ways. The central question that this study will explore is, despite the violence, societal disgrace, and isolation associated with the work, why do FSWs exchange sexual services?

To answer this question, the study begins with a literature review, exploring the current status of sex workers and factors contributing to involvement in sex work. This is followed by an examination of criminological and feminist theories related to sex work. Along with theory, a qualitative methodology will be utilized to showcase the voice of the FSW, often hard to obtain. Unsurprisingly, “[R]esearchers have to confront hostile and volatile environments that need to be managed with care,” and skilled in “negotiation, conflict management, role-playing and keeping quiet an essential part of the fieldwork tool kit” (Sander, 2019, p. 105). However difficult, primary research on sex work is vital in providing an identity to those whose lifestyles are undermined by social and criminal prejudice. The essence of this study is to project the silenced voice of the female sex worker to learn about how this path was paved for her, her beliefs, and her strengths in the face of violence and insecurity.

Literature Review

State: Massachusetts' Female Sex Worker Population

In the literature addressing different female sex worker populations throughout the U.S, there is a gap in the precise number of total FSWs in Massachusetts, where sex work is criminalized. This is in comparison to states that have decriminalized sex work such as Nevada or New York, which have extensive data on the female sex worker population throughout their cities. However, the extent of FSW populations in Massachusetts' data is primarily based on arrests that stem from prostitution, which does not reflect the entire FSW population.

Massachusetts has a set of general laws specifying the illegalization of sex work, which range from MGL (Massachusetts General Law) c.272 §2 “enticing away a person for prostitution or sexual intercourse” to MGL c.272 §7, also known as the pimping law, that prohibits anyone from benefiting or utilizing the “...sharing, earnings of a prostitute” (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2021, n.p). Similar to other occurrences of crime, despite government implemented laws, sex work is still prominent in various locations in Massachusetts.

Several cities, specifically, are “hot spots” for sex work: Worcester, Boston, Lawrence, and New Bedford are a few of the communities that consist of over 60% of the FSW population in Massachusetts (Shively et al., 2012). Boston falling under the cities considered “hot spots” can be due to its tourist attractions and its plethora of bars. In various locations that are “magnets” for sex work, the location is frequently an area comprised of low-income individuals or families.

The most common type of sex work in Massachusetts is prostitution and/or escort. For some of these workers, the main way they attract business is through online postings or on websites such as YesBackpage or Craigslist. Additionally, due to sex workers transitioning to working online rather than exchanging services on the street, websites, such as OnlyFans (2016) have become new ways of promoting sex exchange services. Sex workers interact with

“subscribers,” who pay monthly fees to gain access to sexual content. While prostitution and escorting remain the primary methods of sex work in MA, the shift towards using the internet has changed the game, providing a sense of anonymity for those paying for sexual services.

Unfortunately, the literature on FSWs in MA has gaps in specific demographics of this population in Boston. However, research concerning female offenders, in general, typically illustrates women who engage in this criminal behavior as those who; “live in poverty, does poorly in school, and is alienated from it—may drop out, has a family characterized by lack of parental warmth...and harsh discipline” (Giordano et al., 2006, p. 20). It can be inferred that some, perhaps many, women who engage in sex work in MA, fall under one or more of the categories that drive them towards this line of work: poverty, lack of education, etc.

It is essential to consider the lack of information about FSWs in MA, outside of what is detailed in police arrest reports; however, the life experiences that lead several women into engaging in sex work can be easily tied to what continues to guide millions of other sex workers in the United States and in the world. Essentially a hidden population, this research might help to make these women more visible, as it may lead to correlating what pushes FSWs to enter and stay in the sex work industry, despite its perils.

Risks and Vulnerabilities of Sex Work

Sex workers withstand a high risk of danger, suffer vulnerabilities, and routinely have their human rights violated, and thus the research behind why they continue to take on such work must be further examined. Comprehensive and long-ranging social structures have a part in steering workers, or employees, into enduring the difficult dangerous circumstances involved in sex work.

There are numerous reports from FSWs about being assaulted by a client or forced into a sexual act they do not wish to engage in. Statistics gathered in Arizona and Illinois indicate that 20-30% of FSWs have reported being sexually assaulted or harassed. One in five police reports about sexual assault usually came from an FSW (Sawicki et al., 2019). Statistics gathered in Florida indicate that over 80% of physically violent acts were conducted against FSWs (Sawicki et al., 2019). Even with online platforms, FSWs continue to endure emotional and psychological violence and abuse by clients who have no issue belittling sex workers due to their dehumanization of them.

Moreover, FSWs have little recourse to law enforcement without being arrested. Where sex work is criminalized, if a woman is hurt on the job or a victim of violence, she cannot call on or rely on authorities (Dugan & Castro, 2006, p. 172). This is exacerbated by an enormous vulnerability of lack of protection. Unlike other kinds of work, sex work has no Human Resources department to protect the rights and security of FSWs. If a FSW is hurt on the job she has no health benefits, thus forcing FSWs to network with themselves to provide protection from aggressive clients and provide resources if a woman is hurt. Clearly, the act of exchanging sex for money is extremely dangerous, and therefore the money that the woman earns is made with a great deal of sacrifice and suffering.

Theoretical Framework

There are many factors contributing to involvement in sex work. However, some are rooted in past experiences of victimization, or the environment in which the woman grew up. Several theories provide a framework for understanding what leads to involvement in sex work, including feminist criminology and concepts centering on victimization.

An idea arising from feminist theory that can explain FSWs' engagement in such a dangerous profession considers such women's relationship with men. The United States is a male-dominated society and the power dynamic between women and men can be seen in the relationships the FSWs have with their clients, their procurers, and the men in their personal lives. In typical heterosexual interactions, the man oftentimes dominates over the woman, and "negative and/or coercive relationships with males provide an important social context within which girls' delinquency often unfolds" (Giordano et al., 2006, p. 21). Therefore, societal forces such as the occurring patterns of negative male domination that are witnessed and understood during their adolescent years can be a stressor that enables women to participate in an industry that primarily caters to men.

Engagement in sex work can stem from being sexually abused by a male relative. Though the young woman may run away, her experiences may drive her toward other males who will encourage her participation in sex work (Giordano, et al., 2006, p. 22). There is seemingly a pipeline between girls who have been sexually abused who wind up working in the sex industry, which is created by negative power dynamics and gender inequalities that the young woman has already and continues to experience.

Such feminist approaches ties in with life course theories, which further explain how the FSW's victimization correlates with larger relational forces. The life course approach refers to the way victimization experiences "can unfold over time and across relationships" (Kruttschmidt et al., 2006, p, 140). As stated above, the unstable power dynamic between women and men is a catalyst of male privilege. The violence arising from such relationships can influence motivations for women to commit offenses, including, of course, sex work. The patterns of relational violence, and/or a history of sexual abuse, are triggers to women entering sex work, in an attempt of self-preservation. The life course approach also illustrates how despite the

victimization of FSWs, many of them remain in the industry not just for the money, but because of specific behaviors stemming from their experiences with male domination and male privileges in their lives.

Feminist perspectives delve into the effects of poverty, another societal force that drives women into sex work. For instance, the “feminization of poverty,” conveys the larger social and economic structures that hinder women. The asymmetry of power in the United States is a direct result of its patriarchal society. Such a society produces a surplus of gendered inequalities, such as the gender wage gap, which is another trigger for women entering sex work and that is where the feminization of poverty comes into play. “Feminization of poverty” refers to the gender gap between males’ and females’ risks of falling into poverty (Heimer et al., 2006, p. 121), which still exists despite more and more women entering the workforce. This economic marginalization leads women to become sex workers. Of course, their prime objective is to make money, but this objective is created, whether they realize it or not, from gender inequality: women making less money than men and therefore being at a greater risk of facing poverty (Gerassi, 2015).

Moreover, other concepts centering on victimization can also be key in understanding the deeper social and relational ideologies that drive women into entering and staying in sex work. Criminologists utilize the victim/offender overlap to address the links between how those who have experienced prior victimization may be led towards engaging in delinquency and committing offenses. Regarding FSWs, the origin of many FSWs journeys toward sex work began with multiple instances of sexual or physical abuse throughout their childhood and early adolescence. Within the narratives, it is showcased how a number of women who eventually entered and remained in this occupation, were sexually abused before the age of sixteen. According to Jennings et al., who conducted a study delving into the pipeline between sexual victimization and sex offending, “victims of abusive sexual contact and victims of sexual

assault/rape prior to age 16 were significantly more likely to be sex offenders” (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 10). Factors such as sexual abuse, lack of familial nurturing, and unstable environments play a large role in ushering women into entering sex work.

Several FSWs express how they “entered” into this occupation during their early childhood or adolescence, but they were more so trafficked than given a choice to engage in sex work. Concerning the victim/offender overlap, “victims of abusive sexual contact and victims of sexual assault/rape prior to age 16 were significantly more likely to be sex offenders” (Jennings et al., 2014, p.10). Experiencing such horrific experiences, while also dealing with disadvantaged environments, catalyzes a victim of sexual physical, or emotional abuse into becoming offenders. Sex work is still criminalized in a majority of states in the United States, therefore FSWs are unfortunately considered sex offenders, despite the critical idea that sex work is a legitimate form of work (Sanders, 2019). Female sex workers or other “individuals who demonstrated this sexual victimization–offending overlap” illustrate how experiencing “neglect, lack of parental supervision, etc.,” (Jennings et al., 2014, p. 4) can lead them into a life of offending and dealing with the criminal justice system that is insensitive towards female offenders.

Theoretical frameworks are necessary to explore the numerous aspects behind the motives of FSWs. Nevertheless, to eventually create and implement effective policies and programs that will benefit this invisible community, understanding their journeys and how the act of providing sexual services for money is far more complex than the outsider may conceive, is critical. The “outsider” needs to understand that the violence involved with sex work is not only based on the individuals (the FSW and the client), but on society and how certain forces impel the woman to turn to and stay in such dangerous work. This study intends not only to explore the factors contributing to sex work, but to bring awareness of its dangers. FSWs deserve

assistance, support, and sympathy from those who do not understand the complexities of the industry and the women who work in it.

Methodology Approach and Research Design

The primary purpose of this study is to shine a light on the various underlying reasons as to why many women, varying in age, participate in the sex work industry, despite the overwhelming vulnerabilities and risks.

Qualitative Design

The methodology in this study consists of a qualitative content analysis. The use of this research method is essential to making inferences based on the coding and analysis of audiovisual texts that center on female sex workers and how they entered into the world of sex work. This qualitative research technique allows for a deeper interpretation of the contexts and sub contexts of the content being examined.

While there are various approaches to conducting this research method, this study will be using directed content analysis to “validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory” (Hsieh et al., 2005, p. 1281). Through the use of audiovisual media narratives, a content analysis will be generated by first identifying key variables and themes as coding categories. Then by summarizing each narrative, along with recognizing central themes and variables, this study will then do a rational analysis to analyze the relationship between concepts, seen in the audiovisual media narratives and the theoretical framework previously discussed.

Qualitative Sampling Process and Process for Selecting Participants:

The unit of analysis will be seven short interviews ranging from ten to twenty minutes, to code data to identify the key themes surrounding FSWs and what pushed them to sex work. This

study utilizes purposive selection when choosing seven narratives. The shortest interviews were examined, as this study is not done long enough to analyze narratives over twenty minutes.

A content analysis is necessary for this study, as it is difficult to spot and communicate with these groups of women. Additionally, in past sex work research, researchers have expressed that the “demands of emotional labor on the researcher are complex and intense” and that the challenges surrounding the work on this demographic can be challenging, even if the knowledge that may stem from it can be essential in reducing stigma and advancing the understandings surrounding sex work (Sanders, 2019, p.105). Therefore, the primary methodology in this study will center on a content analysis from Mark Laita’s YouTube Channel, *Soft White Underbelly* (2016). Qualitative content analysis allows for this study to capture the themes and patterns, while also emphasizing what was discussed in the theoretical framework, on the reasonings as to how one enters into sex work.

The relevance of using these narratives focuses on how they will provide valuable insight from real people who have dealt with uncomfortable experiences throughout their lives that push them into participating in this industry. The advantage of conducting a content analysis is that by coding and summarizing qualitative narrative data, this study is able to dissect and take a deeper look into the lives of female sex workers; a demographic of individuals who are harder to access and interact with directly.

Data Collection/ Themes and Codes

The YouTube Channel creator, Mark Laita, constructed *Soft White Underbelly*, a docu-series interviewing “individuals who society has turned their backs on” (Laita, 2016). Hence the name of the channel, which addresses the vulnerable spots (or in this case marginalized communities) in society. The purpose of this channel is to change viewers’ biased ideas

surrounding vulnerable populations, while also teaching the importance of empathy. This specific channel was selected for this study's content analysis since it correlates with the purposes of this research project: adding more knowledge surrounding invisible communities such as FSWs and amplifying their voices and experiences that led them towards participating in sex work.

In coding the seven interviews, four themes were evident: 1. inadequate family performance, 2. early childhood-adolescence abuse, 3. introduction to sex work, and 4. mental health. These themes were dominant throughout the interviews and were decided for this study as they showcased the similar trajectory many of these women had in eventually ending up in sex work, along with its harmful impact on their mental health. Following are the names of the women whose narratives were examined and details on the content analysis by theme, or "category".

From "Soft White Underbelly" YT channel (audio-visual) narratives:

- Women from Narratives:
 - Faith
 - Butter
 - Paradise
 - Amber
 - Alysin
 - Kesha
 - El

Category #1: Inadequate Family Performance

- Codes:
 - Single parent household
 - Raised by relatives (not mom and dad)
 - Grew up in foster care

Category	Code	Meaning Units:
Inadequate Family Performance	Single Parent Household	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "[Interviewer]: your mom wasn't really watching you full time. [Paradise]: she didn't pay attention to me"- Paradise

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “my mom and my dad separated but, you know, my mom was a good mom. She did everything she could. She was a stripper for 20 years, so...” -Butter
	Raised by relatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ I grew up with my grandparents... my mom, she grew up on the streets, she got into drugs” -Amber
	Grew up in the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I grew up in and out of foster care and um I didn't establish a relationship with my mother again until 17 when she was dying of cancer” - Paradise

Category #2: Early Childhood- Adolescence Abuse

- Codes:
 - Sexual abuse from a male relative
 - Father
 - Uncle
 - Stepdad
 - Physical/Sexual violence from a male spouse (boyfriend, fling)

Category	Code	Meaning Unit:
Early Childhood-Adolescence Abuse	Sexual abuse from a male relative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “... my dad was in prison and he told my grandma to let me use his phone for my birthday. So, I was going through his pictures and I found a video and it was him raping me when I was four.” - Faith • “Well, I was molested, by my step daddy, he molested me when I was a child. I tried to tell everyone, but they did not want to believe it.” - Kesha • “I mean, when I was younger, my mom's...my mom's brother, I was molested when I was nine.” - EL
	Physical/Sexual violence from a male spouse (boyfriend, fling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “my problems that I encountered during my upbringing weren't so pro-male either.” -EL

Category #3: Introduction to Sex Work

- Codes:
 - Tricked and Deceived
 - Forced
 - Runaway/Needed money ASAP

Category	Code	Meaning Units:
Introduction to Sex Work	Tricked and Deceived	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Yeah I met some guy and basically, he was just taking care of me, like I thought he was taking care of me. ... [he was] grooming me and he took me to the nail shop at 70 [street name], and he took me to a place and he was like, "You need to get out and make some money to prove that you care for me." And that's where it all went down.” - Butter ● “Was 13 walking through a mall being fast, met a guy, he took my virginity and told me, look, you're gonna get on this corner, and you're gonna bust this date [get a John]. And, I don't know, I just, I didn't like...what I had to do for it [money]” -Amber ● “[Interviewer]: Do you think he [boyfriend] tricked you into that? Yeah... He did.” -Kesha
	Forced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “At 14 I was kidnapped. ...by a guy [name redacted]. [He] locked me in the closet and had people come pay him to rape me pretty much. That's how I got brought into this kind of life.” - Faith ● “All I knew was that I went to a friend's house, and we were studying, and she told me that her uncle was going to drop us back [home]. ...I'm telling the man ‘hey hey hey my house is that way’ and, he takes me another way... beats me, he drugs me and made me learn to love what I was about to do.” - Paradise
	Runaway/needed money ASAP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “I started working as a prostitute when I was 16, when I left my mom's house. I mean, I had to figure out how I was gonna get basic necessities.” -EL

Category #4: Mental Health

- Codes
 - Depression/ Hopelessness
 - PTSD
 - Anxiety
 - Addiction
 - Drugs
 - Addicted to the lifestyle

Category	Codes	Meaning Units:
Mental Health	Depression/ Hopelessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “my optimism is non-existent basically.” -EL ● “I feel more trapped than anything else” -EL ● “But now, like, after every day I wanna cry and all kinds of stuff…” -Faith
	PTSD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Because I suffer from major depression, bipolar depression, and PTSD.” -Faith
	Low Self Esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[Interviewer]: But there's no other options for you, is that what you feel? I feel like this is the best thing I'm good at.” -Butter ● “I feel like that was all I am able to be capable of” -Paradise
	Anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● [Interviewer] :What emotions does this lifestyle bring up in you? Anxiety, depression, anger? All the above and just anguish and loneliness.” -EL
	Addiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “[Interviewer]: Do you think you're addicted to it [the lifestyle]? Yeah, probably” - Butter ● “I'm thirsty for money” -Butter ● [Interviewer]: you think you're addicted to the fast money and all that Yes I know I am -Paradise ● “ I do ecstasy. I take ecstasy every day or every other day to keep going.” -Amber ● “It [Drugs] hasn't made it more difficult cause it's my coping mechanism now.” -Alysin

Findings

The theories surrounding how women are led into sex work are articulated in the narratives used in this study. The results from the qualitative content analysis illustrate how the cycles of poverty and sexual abuse trigger FSWs into entering and remaining in the sex industry. The feminization of poverty is prevalent in the lives of several female sex workers and is often one of the main factors for them engaging in sex work. For instance, “EL” a FSW in California said that one of the reasons she entered into the industry was because she “had to figure out how [she] was gonna get basic necessities” (Laita, 2021). Additionally, the pattern of poverty for these women exposes them to sexual deviancy.

Being raised in a single-parent household, by relatives, or growing up in the system while dealing with poverty already limits a young girl’s opportunities. This is illustrated in stories such as Paradise’s, a FSW in California, where her mother’s addiction to drugs and prostitution led to her having an unsupervised childhood. That, then, unfortunately, led to Paradise being tricked by a friend’s uncle into being sex trafficked at age eleven (Laita, 2021). The lack of familial support and attention, along with the exposure to the consequences of growing up in poverty, diminished the chances women like Paradise had to escape such a life and, instead, pushed them into participating in it. Paradise’s story, much like other FSWs, is evidence of the victim/offender overlap and how one’s environment can escort them into sex offending.

Moreover, women also enter into the sex industry as a result of the unequal balance seen in heterosexual relationships. Feminist theories describe how the unequal power dynamic, especially if it was introduced during a woman’s adolescence, is oftentimes showcased in her adult relationships and interactions with men. For instance, several women in their narratives describe moments from their early childhood to adolescence when they experienced sexual abuse

from a male figure. Statistically, 1 out of 5 American women has been a victim of sexual violence with 82% of them being juveniles (RAINN, 2022). Experiences such as sexual or physical abuse from a male figure; whether it is a father, uncle, or boyfriend, are prominent in the lives of numerous women who end up becoming sex workers. One FSW, Faith, explained how her prior sexual victimization from her father and her kidnapping, in which she was sex trafficked, led to her life as a sex worker.

The cycle of abuse from their childhood is then continued in their adult relationships, where they find men who end up tricking or forcing these women into a life of sex work. One FSW, Keshia, stated that her boyfriend at the time ended up deceiving her into participating in sex work. These narratives demonstrate that there is a link between those who have been sexually abused by a male figure in their lives and their later involvement in sex work.

The recurrence of victimization that FSWs endure throughout both their childhoods and careers correlates with the theories that describe how environment and experiences direct FSWs toward entering and remaining in sex work. The substantial influence that society has on women is another critical element to consider in what leads them to this type of work. An immense number of women in the United States may flock to sex work, much like the ones in the narratives, because they are already experienced with interacting with men on a sexual basis; consensually or not, due to the power structure embedded in our patriarchal society. Also, the wage inequality between women and men drives women into industries where they can seize the opportunity for financial gains in less than ethical manners.

Aside from the fast income, several female sex workers are “addicted” to the lifestyle in spite of the overwhelming amount of violence towards them. Butter and Paradise, both FSWs from California, expressed that they are dependent on the effects of the industry: the chase for the money. The addictions of other FSWs do not only stem from the “glitz and glamor” of this

kind of life, but from the access to drugs. Additionally, larger societal factors such as society's negative response towards sex workers lower the esteem of these women, therefore dictating to them that they are not capable of doing anything else. Displays of low self-esteem are showcased throughout all the narratives this study covers, such as nervous fidgeting or labored breathing. However, it is outwardly expressed in ways of talking down about one's ability to find success. As seen with Butter, who, when asked if there were any other options for her outside of sex work, responded "I feel like this [prostituting] is the best thing I'm good at" (Laita, 2021).

The eventual mental breakdown of some FSWs, along with the plethora of mental health disorders from trauma, traps them in continuing sex work. The women throughout these narratives all showcase how sex work has negatively impacted their mental health. For instance, Faith describes how she, "after every day [wants to] cry and all kinds of stuff..." (Laita, 2021), or EL, who feels as if her "optimism is non-existent" and that she "feel[s] more trapped than anything else" (Laita, 2021). There is a dark side to sex work and the mental obstacles that these women endure are only a small fraction of the sacrifices they make in order to be economically sustainable.

Conclusion

Poverty, history of sexual or physical violence, and inadequate family structures are some of the various triggers that lead women into sex work. The narratives illustrate that there are dark events that, if changed, would have ultimately changed the course of so many of these women's lives. It is important to acknowledge female sex workers who participate in the industry for both the money and empowerment that comes with the occupation. However, a larger population of FSWs are led into it due to horrible life encounters and are repeatedly disregarded by the rest of society. This study aims to amplify the stories of female sex workers and showcase that they are

more than the stigma and stereotypes that have been attached to their profession. Exchanging sexual services for money is not as simplistic as people may think and the origins of their journeys to sex work are oftentimes a result of prior victimization. This invisible population of women deserves to not only be protected, but understood by the rest of society that has seemed to turn its back on them.

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