COVID-19 AS CATALYST FOR SEX WORKER COUNTER NARRATIVES

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Sincerely,

Heather L Austin

Abstract

Harmful master narratives of sex work rooted in historical stigma, marginalization, and violence tangibly affect how sex workers have been navigating the COVID-19 crisis. Narratives that paint sex workers as inherent victims have manifested in generalizations and legislation that make it exceptionally difficult for them to access social assistance and the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (Canada, 2021). Additionally, discourses that portray sex workers as vectors of disease and moral malaise make it easier to justify repressive policing practices and scapegoating. This thesis examines the self-produced social media discourse of Canadian sex workers, advocates, and allies that counter harmful narratives of sex work through the COVID-19 crisis. It examines how social media was leveraged to manage identity and reshape meanings though the lenses of social constructionist, feminist, queer, social movement, and media theory to illuminate how a marginalized group used the political opportunity of the pandemic to counter harmful narratives that so often culminate in oppression and violence.

Keywords: Sex work, COVID-19, counter narratives, social media, stigma

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The meaning of the COVID-19 crisis (and any crisis for that matter) is vastly different depending on who you talk to. The discourse produced from the point of view of sex workers, their advocates and allies reveals a unique and marginalized meaning of the COVID-19 crisis. Through this discourse we can see how disruptions to the "normal" functioning of society highlight and amplify inequalities and draw out alternative definitions of the situation. Through the analysis of alternative discourses produced through sex work communities and networks, I examine how the COVID-19 crisis shaped meaning and identity by looking at these changes as expressed through social media discourse.

Research Questions:

Because of lockdown measures, the power and utility of online communication has necessarily increased – i.e., in person human contact is discouraged and social media has become a place where people find community and maintain support systems. *What is the relationship of social media discourse to shaping meaning and identity in the time of COVID-19?*

How can this relationship be interpreted through the lenses of Foucauldian and feminist discourse theory and theory which studies media as an arena of social change?

How do popularly held beliefs about "correct" sexuality, stigmas that attribute negative qualities to a person because of one part of their identity, and narratives that are circulated and shared in media and social life shape policy and practice and subvert or enhance just social outcomes?

How has the COVID-19 crisis created opportunities for new counter narratives to discourse that stigmatizes sex work?

In the interest of providing context, I first outline a brief history of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus upon how it was handled by the Canadian government.

The COVID-19 virus (SARS-CoV-2) a variant of the family of coronaviruses, first appeared in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China on December 31, 2019, and on March, 11 2020 the World Health Organization declared a pandemic (IPAC Canada, n.d.). The virus spread rapidly on a global scale generating unprecedented disruption and change to the social and economic wellbeing of the global community (Rutty, 2022). As of March, 2022 434 million cases ha(d) been reported worldwide with a death toll of 5.9 million. (Rutty, 2022). 3.2 million of these cases and 36,000 deaths occurred in the Canadian context, the first Canadian case being reported on the 25th of January, 2020 (Rutty, 2022).

The rapid spread of the virus was followed by a domino effect of lockdown measures and restrictions on the gathering of people in large crowds to prevent the spread, including the closure of businesses and the extreme isolation of individuals from professional and social interactions. Governments took drastic measures to prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19 including aforementioned restrictions and closures, and prolific public service announcements dictating people wear protective masks and wash their hands regularly when interacting with others to obtain essential goods and services. Many governments introduced supportive measures for workers stuck at home and thus unable to earn money to financially support themselves due to pandemic restrictions. The Canadian government introduced the Canadian Economic Recovery Benefit; "Applicants (to the fund) received $2,000 for a 4-week period (the same as $500 a week), between March 15 and September 26, 2020" (Canada Revenue Agency, 2021).

For clarity I define how I have operationalized the term "sex work" for the purpose of my research. The term "sex work" will be used throughout my thesis as an umbrella term that is

meant to generally encompass all forms of exchange of sexual services for money (including stripping and pornographic acting), unless otherwise indicated contextually (Maginn & Cooper, 2020). There is a good deal of boundary work (Gieryn, 1983) done between the different factions of sex work: i.e. street work, brothel work, in-calls, lap-dancing, web-camming and pornography (Maginn & Cooper, 2020). Many strippers are keen to demarcate their job as qualitatively different from those performing actual sex acts (Orchard, Farr, Macphail, Wender, & Young, 2013). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this research, they will all be considered as sex workers in that they involve the relationship between sexual arousal and monetary remuneration. While acknowledging that intersectionality has a large role to play in terms of wide variations of the experience of conducting sex work, I am herein primarily concerned with stigmas which surround the work in general. That stated, it is important to relate the overrepresentation of Indigenous women in street-based sex work in Canada due to the ongoing effects of colonialism (Sayers in Durisin & Bruckert, 2018). In examining the online discourse of Canadian sex workers this thesis may underrepresent the voices of street workers (many of whom are Indigenous) without regular access to the internet.

From a social constructionist viewpoint, public discourse can be conceptualized as a sort of tug-of-war wherein power struggles are waged over meaning making. This power struggle is by no means equitable in opportunity or outcome and is underlined always by hegemonic dichotomous categories of sex, sexuality, and gender and thus should always be studied with the underlying "understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, situational, partial, and complexly intersectional" (Lorber, 2006, p. 452). The meanings which gain popular acceptance come to change and hold immense power over the things or people they purport to explain, which means social constructions can bear tangible effects. Although it is arguable to what

extent something is “real” or “socially constructed” (Walby, 2015. p. 14), it is undeniable that the socially-held ideas about something are influential. Refuting popular conceptions of ideas throughout history has emancipated marginalized people. It is freedom from stigma that sex working communities seek and examining counter-hegemonic discourse created by advocacy and outreach groups through the pandemic provides a fruitful case study of alternative narratives to ideas of sex workers as vectors of disease and moral depravity (Hallgrímsdóttir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008; Nova, 2016; Roth, Hogan, & Zivi, 1998; Scambler, Peswani, Renton, & Scambler, 1990; Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019; Walkowitz, 1980). Changing harmful ideas about sex and sex work is paramount to sex workers’ gaining rights and wellbeing. That is, society’s interpretation and understanding is thereby complexified and deepened, translating into legislation that considers the perspectives of the marginalized communities it subsequently polices.

Over time, sexuality (at least in Western and Christian influenced contexts) has become increasingly discursive as the state, church, and medical establishment attempt to decipher and control it (Foucault, 1978). Feminist theory has made room for discourse to be conceptualized as something that may be shaped and changed; something people engage with and alter rather than simply subscribe to (Mills, 2004). Sex workers are keenly aware of how society views them and the stigma which exists around the work they perform (Chateauvert, 2013). As a group, they engage in intensely contentious “meaning work – the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings” (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 613) related to the conceptualization of sex work, Sex workers “thus emerge as important historical actors, as women who made their own history” (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 9). The contentious nature of the discursive battle is due to society’s rejection of sex work as real work or sex workers as people

worthy of respect and rights. Sex workers, their advocates and allies promote counter narratives through activism and outreach – accompanying discourse promotes a narrative of sex work as potentially empowering and sex workers as responsible, caring people (*FIRST: Decriminalize Sex Work Now!*; Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project; PACE Society; Peers Victoria; POWER Ottawa; Safe Harbour Outreach Project; Sex Workers' Action Program Hamilton (SWAP); SWAN Waterloo; Triple-X Workers' Solidarity Association of British Columbia).

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, sex workers were struggling to support themselves due to complications with receiving government issued relief funding: Many sex workers do not file taxes out of fear of being "outed" and stigmatized socially and professionally (should they perform sex work as an additional occupation to a day job, career, or educational pursuits). Therefore, many were not able to apply for Canada's Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (Canada, 2021) a benefit that was introduced by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in April of 2020 as a relief measure for Canadian citizens forced to be absent from their work due to public health measures implemented to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. As a result of the difficulties faced by sex workers in accessing these funds, many sex workers were forced to continue working despite the inherent risks (Amnesty International Canada, 2020; Benoit & Unsworth, 2021; Wright, 2020a). Thus, the pandemic has acted as a catalyst through which to push the s*ex work as work* narrative, as sex workers have been excluded from help extended to most other workers in Canada. Historically, sex workers have performed the additional work of reframing ideas around sexuality.

The purpose of this thesis is to (1) acknowledge, record, and analyse counter narrative efforts made by a marginalized group during a global health crisis, and (2) to examine how sex workers manage identity through countering negative narratives while still maintaining other

master narratives of women as givers of love and sexual pleasure, cleanliness, and care (Andrews, Molly, Bamberg p. 362, 2004). Working from feminist, queer, social constructionist, media studies, and social movements theory, I qualitatively examine a cross-section of sex worker produced media in Canada during the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand how sex work communities assert counter narratives to dominant discourses and to what end. These groups of theories complement one another to holistically assess the meaning making activity seen in the discourse of advocacy groups. Feminist theory highlights the highly gendered aspect of sex work and issues thereof. Sex work is of course not restricted to women, although it is predominantly a female and woman-identified occupation (Benoit & Shumka, 2021). Queer theory casts a critical eye on how sexual deviance in general becomes a catalyst for discrimination and scapegoating and to draw similarities between the experiences of sex working communities, the queer community, and those who possess and/or express what society considers alternative sexualities. Theory about queer social politics is uniquely positioned to analyze sex work discourse as an expression of the experience shared by those whom society deems sexually deviant. Media studies is important for highlighting how the use of social media specifically impacts the messages and activism and the relationship of media to communication and discourse more generally. Social constructionist theory asserts and analyses the power of discourse in shaping social and political life and acknowledges the importance of the way in which we speak of things in shaping said things. Social movements theory helps acknowledge these discursive activities as part of a larger, ongoing social movement to fight for the rights of and respect for sex workers.

First, I examine the nature of master narratives historically associated with sex work to provide context and set up the problem being addressed through counter narratives. Secondly, I

also offer an overview of existing literature on the topic of sex worker identity management and counter narratives. Thirdly, I review and apply media studies and social movement literature pertaining to the relationship of media to social change through examining the COVID-19 specific social media of a marginalized group. Social constructionist theory will provide a lens through which to examine the inherent influence of idea construction on tangible realities, and a feminist lens will emphasize how the use of social media here is highly gendered (in terms of women and alternative genders having the safety to express themselves in an online space). Investigating the nature of counter narratives offered through the voices of sex workers and their allies during a global health crisis revealed invaluable and radical insights into raw and real conceptions of modern sexuality.

The social contexts of the pandemic are ripe for social engagement as people reach out to one another for support through tumultuous times, with a renewed sense of humanity's interconnectedness laid bare through the reality of COVID-19 spread. Thus, this thesis contributes to the burgeoning literature which examines the pandemic as a critical social event (Alfaro, 2021; Li, Shin, Sun, Kim, Qu, & Yang, 2021; Pleyers, 2020; Stoddart, Ramos, Foster & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Walby, 2021; Wood, 2020). It may be of particular significance to communications and social movement studies in its examination of how uses of communication tools were amplified and changed as a result of public health measures which required the isolation of human bodies from one another.

The Master Narratives

Historically, sex workers have been labelled and scapegoated as vectors of disease, and as a source of moral malaise on society, as their lifestyle does not fit with Victorian and Christian derived ideals of sexuality restricted to marriage (both heavily influential within the Canadian

social context) (Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019). Victorian England was known for its strict sexual ethos that was intimately tied to the prized sexually restrictive lifestyle promoted through religious (Christian) doctrine (Walkowitz, 1980). This culture of restrictive sexuality immigrated to the new world, transferring the social sanctions which necessarily accompany it and creating a stigmatizing atmosphere for Canadian sex workers (Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019). These master narratives rise and fall in potency and prevalence in tandem and accordance with social issues and historical contexts. Stigmas surrounding the work have a direct effect on how sex working communities are treated through crises (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021). Canada promotes a nationalist idea of morality that is decidedly English, but which also employs its own unique brand of purity; one created to the end of uniting and differentiating the nation of Canada by romanticizing and narrativizing its unique settlement patterns and explorative, new world image (Valverde, 2019). As Canada envisioned its prosperous future, the vision was born through a keenness on religious morality (Strange & Loo, 1997), and this paved the way for a morally stringent society wherein sex workers would be considered a hinderance to the creation and maintenance of this national image. Ideas of purity could also reflect a desire to differentiate white settlers from Indigenous populations; yet another way the concept of purity was utilized to justify oppressive acts of the state.

The history of how morality was constructed in Canada has direct effects on how issues purported to be related to sex work are dealt with socially and policed in the modern context. Historical context will be examined as part of the literature review, as it is pertinent to understanding the current need to counter narratives which paint sex workers as less than, which necessarily leads to their mistreatment.

The Current (COVID-19) Situation

Issues arising from harmful notions of sex workers as vectors of disease and moral malaise are currently manifesting themselves through the over-policing of vulnerable populations, e.g., people in sex work ("policing the pandemic") (Amnesty International Canada, 2020; Lam, 2020; UNAIDS, 2020; Wright, 2020b). Additionally, abolitionist, "carceral" feminists are using the crisis to bolster efforts to abolish sex work and pornography, i.e., attempts at permanently shuttering sex work establishments and endeavouring to shut down websites that host sex work content (namely the websites Pornhub.com and OnlyFans.com) (Clamen, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021). Sex workers and their advocates and allies offer counter narratives to fight the ideas behind these concrete actions (*FIRST: Decriminalize Sex Work Now!*; Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project; PACE Society; Peers Victoria; POWER Ottawa; Safe Harbour Outreach Project; Sex Workers' Action Program Hamilton (SWAP); SWAN Waterloo; Triple-X Workers' Solidarity Association of British Columbia). As the world panics about its physical health, moral causes are drawn out in tandem: A nostalgia for traditional morality resulting in a demand for stricter moral regulation is often born of stress caused by largescale threats to societal safety (Thompson, 1998). Society is currently ascribing moral worth in relation to people's willingness to "social distance" and keep others safe. Because "physical distancing" is not a viable option for many vulnerable populations, there is an additional moral burden being placed upon the most vulnerable, including those sex workers who have no choice but to continue working:

> Most of us want to do the right thing. And we want others to do the right thing. There is a real sense of a shared challenge right now. However, our individualist moral framework can make our belief in distancing and enforcement tactics evangelical and fundamentalist. Like the Protestant Ethic that infuses capitalism, we evaluate our moral worth on our commitment to physical distancing (Wood, 2020, p. 2).

Human rights organizations have reported increasing rates of abuse and fines to sex workers throughout COVID-19: "NSWP and UNAIDS are furthermore concerned at reports of punitive crackdowns against sex workers, resulting in the raiding of homes, compulsory COVID-19 testing, arrest and threatened deportation of migrant sex workers" (UNAIDS, 2020). Sex workers become targets of over-policing as law enforcement officers make a flagrant show of enforcing "social distancing" protocols. As in the AIDS era, these practices are largely punitive and discriminatory:

> Most of these policies do not serve the needs of women with HIV or those most at risk for HIV. For instance, mandatory-testing laws aimed at [sex workers] do not provide for any economic alternatives (. . .) Rather than reducing HIV transmission to criminal behaviour, policy should focus on programs that will give women the necessary tools to reduce the spread of disease as part of the counseling and testing process (Ethier, Ickovics, & Rodin, 1996, p. 215).

Over-policing is addressed in the social media discourse of sex work communities through the pandemic as a discriminatory issue and a practical thing to consider while working through COVID-19. A similar situation occurred in the AIDS era when "(t)he women who (were) most vulnerable to involuntary testing (were) those arrested for prostitution or drug possession" (Ethier et al., 1996, p. 213). Social media is used as a tool for communicating safety and legal information, as well as a tool of identity management for sex workers. Social media may serve as an especially powerful tool for sex workers as they are often concerned with protecting identity insofar as it provides a safe space for expression and sharing of resources and information. It functions as an invaluable tool for empowering and connecting those in a marginalized community through a crisis which demands even more isolation from an already marginalized and largely voiceless group.

My methodology is qualitative in nature. Beginning with discourse created/disseminated on or after the day Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced an expansion of the CERB benefit

to help the general working population (Government of Canada, 2020), I looked at sex work discourses from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador over the subsequent four months following this date (April 15 through July 15, 2020). From these provinces, I selected prominent sex work advocacy groups and examined discourses born of the pandemic using content from social media platforms. A cross section of data was selected for closer, qualitative analysis. I decided on qualitatively examining screenshots from advocacy organizations in British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. I coded the data using an inductive approach, which involved identifying themes organically rather than seeking out particular patterns using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a guiding framework. Upon more detailed inspection I recognized a pattern of identity management and counter narratives that worked to maintain solidarity and strength amongst sex working communities in the specific and unique contextual circumstances of a global pandemic as it was experienced by Canadian sex workers. Specifically, the codes for sex workers as vector of disease, and sex positivity emerged from the data, revealing a pattern of offering alternative rhetoric to master narratives of sex workers as spreading disease and moral malaise throughout society.

This chapter has introduced the reader to the complexity of sex work stigma, and the pertinence of drawing attention to the harms it can and does inflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated these issues and simultaneously provided a catalyst and political opportunity through which sex workers are illustrating their marginalization. The thesis will proceed by first reviewing relevant literature (chapter 2) and outlining methodological details (chapter 3), followed by two chapters which present the results of the study (chapters 4 and 5). This is followed by a concluding chapter (chapter 6), which sums up and suggests avenues for further research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework/Lit Review

In this chapter I review literature that lends historical and holistic theoretical context to sex work discourse (media and public discourse about sex work) through the first months of the pandemic, looking first at research literature that is especially relevant to the substantive topic at hand to outline and indicate how my research will add to the existing repertoire. First, I outline substantive literature that directly addresses the relationship of sex work to different forms of media, and media related strategies used by sex work advocacy and outreach organizations. Secondly, I explore Michel Foucault's theory of discourse in relation to how the nature of discourse about sex, sex education, and the regulation of human sexuality is affected by moral panics and the tangible effects this consequent discourse has on the lives of sex workers. Acknowledging counter narratives as legitimate acts of rebellion and social change through a constructivist, Foucauldian lens, I draw on his concepts of controlling sexual discourse from his *The History of Sexuality* and *The Archeology of Knowledge* discourse analysis theory. I examine historical factors particular to the Canadian context that have formed the framing of sex work across the country, looking at the ideas and institutions that promote the idea of sexual purity as virtuous and a deviation from said purity as physically and morally dangerous. I also examine how sex work, in particular, has been framed through historical literature and media, especially in terms of how sex workers have been socially constructed as vectors of disease and moral malaise.

I explore how stigma and ideals about sexuality have become incorporated into legislation and policing practices, and the roots of state intervention into the lives of the poor in relation to public health. Furthermore, it is illuminating to examine how similar stigmas informed the way in which the AIDS epidemic was framed and policed through targeting and

scapegoating marginalized sexualities in relation to the spread e.g., queers and sex workers. Coupling queer theory with communications studies is useful for examining the media's role in socially constructing alternative sexualities in relation to the spread of communicable disease. These pieces inform an analysis of how historical and social factors have manifested through the pandemic, especially how sex work has been conceptualized and policed in relation to COVID-19.

I then examine literature relevant to how sex workers have formulated and offered counter narratives to hegemonic ideas of sex work through the unique political opportunity of the pandemic, including, but not limited to how the pandemic is being used to push the "sex work as work" narrative as worker inequalities are exacerbated and highlighted, and how COVID-19 created opportunities to reframe online sex work and pornography. Lastly, I review scholarship that looks at the social movement aspect of sex work activism, especially in the realm of social media i.e., the COVID-19 crisis as a caveat for unique social discourse, resistance, and change. Media studies informs the social media aspect of the analysis, as social media posts form the bulk of my dataset. Social constructionist theory pairs well with communications in examining and acknowledging the ways in which discourse has a real effect on the people and things it addresses.

Corresponding Sex Work Research

Sociological work to date has examined the communication styles of Canadian sex work advocacy organizations in terms of best practices and general trends (Duke, Sitter, & Boggan, 2018). This research found that most sex work advocacy groups use myriad social media networks (rather than static sites) to engage with the sex working community, facilitating posting of information by followers, as well as "integrating postings across platforms for efficiency,

developing and maintaining safe spaces online, and focusing on channels that support multilogue communication (Duke, Sitter, & Boggan, 2018. p.49). Scholars have done excellent and compelling work comparing mainstream media in Victoria, BC, with the voices of lived experience, both past and present, and ascertaining that sex work stigma changes with contextual factors as seen through media representation:

> Media representations of the sex industry are one arena in which social risk and dangers are reflected on and examined: here, people who work in the sex industry, and the places in which their activities occur, function as tropes for a range of purported social dangers (criminality, addiction, sexually transmitted infections, and moral malaise) and as vectors by which dangers are transmitted (Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, & Benoit, 2008, p. 134).

This work did not account, however, for the self-produced media of advocacy groups (Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2008). Oselin and Weitzer studied thirty-seven direct service groups in the U.S. *and* Canada, examining the various activities of the organizations in terms of their primary functions, strategies and goals, similarities and differences in ideologies and services, as well as any social action they may be involved in to advocate for the workers' and human rights of sex workers (2013). The authors looked exclusively at organizations that did not have a service aspect. Drawing from website content, twenty-one in-depth interviews with staff members, and secondary sources, they developed four typological categories of service-oriented sex work organizations: Radical Feminist, Sex Work, Youth Oriented, and Neutral, and outlined their corresponding goals, actions, and strategies. The authors found that "PSOs' (Prostitute-serving Organizations) core beliefs and principles regarding sex work are universalistic rather than contextually determined" (Oselin and Weitzer, 2013, p.463) as the data indicated, no matter the geographical context, the organizations shared basically the same goals (in alignment with their particular feminist faction).

Sex work is represented in myriad forms of media, from the theatrical to the practical. These representations affect the lives and livelihoods of sex workers in various ways by socially constructing the occupation from vastly different angles and vantage points.

Socially Constructing Sex

Michel Foucault presents the fascinating argument that *speaking* of sex became a means by which to control it. That is, if something so decidedly enigmatic and idiosyncratic were to be regulated to the end of functioning primarily to reproduce the workforce or to serve the state, it must first be fully divulged and interpreted (Foucault, 1978). So, it is through *talking* about sex that people form what it is, how it is done, with and between whom:

> Through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness; from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined and all the possible deviations were carefully described; pedagogical controls and medical treatments were organized; around the least fantasies, moralists, but especially doctors, brandished the whole emphatic vocabulary of abomination (Foucault, 1978, p. 36).

In order to control something, you must first define it in specific ways. Once polite society demarcates what it deems proper sexuality, the state may then determine how and if it should be policed: "In the eighteenth century, sex became a 'police' matter in the full and strict sense given the term at the time: not the repression of disorder, but an ordered maximization of collective and individual forces" (Foucault, 1978, pp. 24-25). Foucault was interested in how society became obsessed with defining and talking about sexuality: "Between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it" (Foucault, 1978, p. 26). This is especially true in religious and consequently educational institutions as the two were traditionally intertwined. Nuns and priests were often teachers, and this was reflected not only in sex education, but

education in general, as explained by Newfoundland actor and writer Andy Jones in the 1998 documentary Rain, Drizzle, and Fog:

> I feel that I had much the same education that Chaucer had. I'm sure y'know the same-that same world view. Uhm, and, because everything because the church um-because the Christian brothers ran every classroom and – and the nuns ran all the classrooms for the girls, ah that-even when you were doing math class you were dealing with religious issues all the time y'know I mean, number of angels on the head of a pin-type math questions (TheNewfoundlandMafia, 2016).

Christianity is veritably obsessed with sexuality; indeed, its control and suppression is a major focus of the faith. Religion has played a pinnacle role in socially constructing ideas of sexuality in a restrictive sense.

Constructing alternative sexual rhetoric can also work to change the way we educate children about their sexuality: "Sex education has been systematically destabilized in the United States through moral panics" (Herdt, 2009, p. 2). As Cara Kulwicki (2019) argues, sex education that teaches only the basics about reproductive, heterosexual sex is discriminatory toward any student who isn't straight and male as "in discussing intercourse and pregnancy, you can't escape the male orgasm", excluding the notion of pleasurable sex for women (between men and women or between women and women), or men who engage in sex with men (pp. 306-307). Kulwicki (2019) also emphasizes how learning about the pleasurable aspect of sex is pertinent to learning the meaning of consent, as consent necessarily implicates the pleasurable, arousal aspect of sexuality. That is, one cannot consent to sex if they are unaware of what it means to both mentally and physically desire a sexual encounter. Learning about sex as something normal and varied can help one understand sexual boundaries and how to relate these boundaries to their personal experiences, feelings, and desires (Kulwicki in Friedman & Valenti, 2019).

What "rules of formation" has sex work discourse been subjected to as a direct result of the pandemic, and what are potential outcomes of the resulting discursive formations (Foucault, 1969)? From a Foucauldian viewpoint, the social construction of the *concept* of sex work necessarily constructs sex work itself (Foucault, 1969). The current precarity of sex workers is the result of societal definitions of sex, sexuality, and work entrenched in law, public policy, and social norms. Specifically, the relationship of sex to work, that is the selling of sexual services, makes the stigma of sex workers distinct from non-sex working women and what are generally considered alternatively sexed or sexualized bodies (queer and transexual for example). These uniquely combined perceptions operate in tandem to create a powerful stigma that indeed acts as a tangible roadblock to the equal treatment of this particular group of legal workers.

Sex, being traditionally constructed in problematic ways through education and otherwise, has necessarily led to a heavy stigma surrounding sex work – a stigma that is routinely challenged by sex working and sex positive people. The manner in which the moral groundwork of sexuality was laid paved the way for a longstanding and crippling stigma associated with economically disadvantaged women, and thus, many sex workers.

Socially Constructing Sex - Canadian Perspectives

The ideal of purity has been tightly woven into the nationalist fabric of Canada as a unifying factor that historically emphasized a differentiation from the United States as well as Britain (Valverde, 2019). That is to say, the othering of impurity is a notable aspect of Canadian-ness:

> With Laurier's election in 1896, Canada looked optimistically towards the twentieth century as a period of unrivalled prosperity and national development. At the same time a spirit of religious reform and secular progressivism inspired campaigns to shape progress along moral lines. Several branches of the Protestant churches were particularly visible in

> this movement, and an alliance between Methodists and Presbyterians became the most influential lobbying bloc on matters as wide-ranging as marriage, alcohol, seduction, and gambling. Through organizations such as the Lord's Day Alliance, powerful Christians assumed a central role in the campaign to make good citizens (Strange & Loo, 1997, p. 146).

So, while ideas held by advocates and allies around sex work may be "universalistic rather than contextually determined" as suggested by Oselin and Weitzer (2013, p.463) regulatory frameworks and legislation are certainly contextually driven, and thus relevant when exploring sex work discourse in a particular context, in this case, the Canadian context through the COVID-19 pandemic.

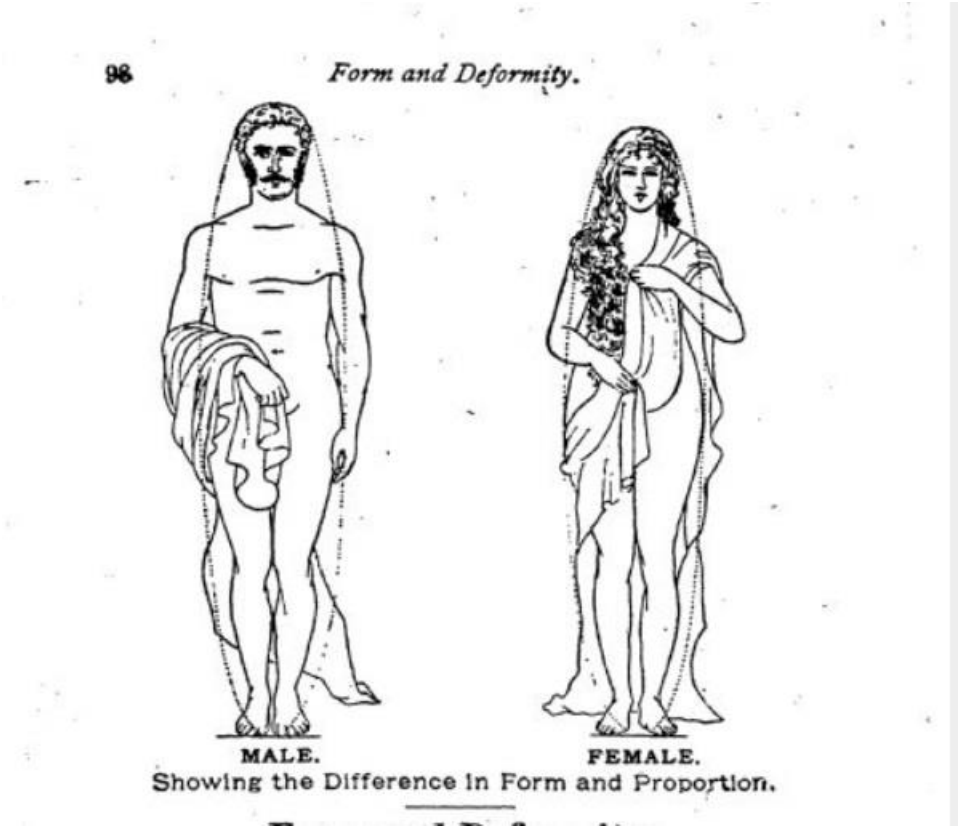
Canadian nationalism is intermingled with religious ideals of purity and of shaping a nation in accordance with these ideals:

> In 1895, a Canadian clergyman speaking at an important Purity Congress in Baltimore described "social purity work in Canada" as including the following issues: prostitution, divorce, illegitimacy, "Indians and Chinese," public education, suppression of obscene literature, prevention (of prostitution) and rescue of fallen women, and shelters for women and children. (. . .) (C)ampaign(ing) to educate the next generation in the purity ideals fitting to "this age of light and water and soap" (Valverde, 2019, p. 17).

The two following figures are taken from a book entitled *Search lights on health, light on dark corners - a complete sexual science and a guide to purity and physical manhood, advice to maiden, wife and mother, love, courtship and marriage* by Jefferis & Nichols 1894, published in Toronto, and visually demonstrate the prescribed morality of the day – a morality that has formed our nation's laws and society:

Figure 2.1

Page 98 from Search lights on health, Jefferis & Nichols, 1894



These diagrammatic portrayals of the male and female form found in an "educational" book are draped in a white cloth of modesty, covering any parts of the human body considered sexual. This portrayal of the body reveals much about ideas of sexuality held by those with the power to shape ideals. The concept of purity is a dangerous one (Friedman & Valenti, 2019) in that it functions to exclude and demonize those who do not fit within its strict definition. The diagram pictures the typification of the ideal white, pure, heterosexual body; either perfectly male, or perfectly female. Through these diagrams we see purity visually defined as consisting of two neat, modest, and strict categories of sex and gender.

Figure 2.2

Page 31 from Search lights on health, Jefferis & Nichols, 1894

Personal Purity.

"Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
These three alone lead life to sovereign power."—TENNYSON.

1. **Words of the Great Teacher.**—Mark the words of the Great Teacher: "If thy right hand or foot cause thee to fall, cut it off and cast it from thee. If thy right eye cause thee to fall, pluck it out. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed and halt, than having two eyes to be cast into hell-fire, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

2. **A Melancholy Fact.**—It is a melancholy fact, in human experience, that the noblest gifts which men possess are constantly prostituted to other purposes than those for which they are designed. The most valuable and useful organs of the body are those which are capable of the greatest dishonor, abuse, and corruption. What a snare the wonderful organism of the eye may become, when used to read corrupt books, or to look upon licentious pictures, or vulgar theater scenes, or when used to meet the fascinating gaze of the harlot! What an instrument for depraving the whole man may be found in the matchless powers of the brain, the hand, the mouth, or the tongue! What potent instruments may these become in accomplishing the ruin of the whole being, for time and eternity!

Presumably the "Great Teacher" mentioned in the excerpt in figure 2.2 is the Christian figure of Jesus Christ. The fact that this is implicit clearly points to the religious source of this moral superiority lesson. The message being sent to the audience of this literature is essentially that if one is not in complete control of one's sexual body parts than those body parts should be removed (hopefully metaphorically), or at least severely controlled. The body is seen as a

potential source of total corruption if it is used for pleasurable purposes, as in the eye "when used to meet the fascinating gaze of the harlot" (Jefferis & Nichols, 1894, p. 98)! The image of the sex worker is used in the aforementioned text as a sort of touchstone for what is considered "bad", and as something the authors of the text believed everyone should agree needed policing and a general sorting out: "Prostitution in all its forms was the one 'social problem' guaranteed to unify the diverse constituencies - feminists, right-wing evangelicals, doctors, social reformers - of the social purity coalition; and 'sex hygiene,' or purity education, was one of the main positive remedies promoted" (Valverde, 2019, p. 18).

Concrete beginnings of regulating sex work in Canada are found in the "Nova Scotia Act of 1759 (. . .) (s)imply put, the purpose of the law was to provide police with the power to get sex workers off the street when necessary as well as to alleviate land use conflicts and problems of public order with the operation of brothels" (Jochelson & Gacek, 2019, p. 60). Christian churches, federal and provincial law, and social sanctions derived from these regulatory bodies were the sources of moral regulation in Canadian society (Strange & Loo, 1997). Moral order was something taken into the hands of the law in Canada, and was associated with economic success, class, and gender:

> In 1850 the law addressed the problem of vice according to the values of social conservatism and patriarchy. Those who had made and administered Canada's criminal law in its pioneer phase tended to be men who entertained a determinist view of class relations, believing that the immorality of the poor was endemic. Poor females were considered to be especially `loose' in their sexual appetites and habits (McLaren, 1992, p.526).

The policing of poverty, then, naturally feeds into policing sexuality, especially that of economically disadvantaged women.

Policing Purity & Communicable Disease

The regulation of sex work in Canada finds its roots in "British legal tradition" (Jochelson & Gacek, 2019, p. 60). The Contagious Disease Acts of Victorian England (late 1860s), "(a)lthough specifically directed to women (. . .) also reflected a new enthusiasm for state intervention into the lives of the poor on medical and sanitary grounds. The mid-century sanitary movement *created a close identification of public order and public health*" (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 71, emphasis added). These acts allowed policing of sex work under several areas of the law including "the medical clauses of the Poor Law, Common Lodging House Act, vagrancy statutes, and the new Vaccination Acts – to justify the sanitary supervision of" sex workers and a general policing of the poor (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 71). Poverty, then, became imbricated with sexual impurity. Thus the figure of the female sex worker becomes the perfect symbol of a fall from grace, and an exemplification of broken morality endemic to the conditions of poverty. Female sexuality was alluded to directly in moralistic propaganda of the day; the sex worker as vector of disease narrative was made "explicit in an 1882 pamphlet on *The Social Evil with Suggestions for its Suppression and Revelations of the Working of the Contagious Diseases Act*" (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 81).

The trepidation felt by sex workers in times of upheaval is well-founded as history has shown in times of panic the most vulnerable are often scapegoated. The Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 in mid-Victorian England were specifically instituted to control the spread of venereal disease in naval personnel but presented a clear double standard in not testing the men (as they refused on grounds of dignity) (Walkowitz, 1980). The acts' objectives were purported to be objectively controlling the spread of disease, but they "were in fact fused with, and at the same time undermined by, a set of moral and ideological assumptions (. . .)

reinforce(ing) a double standard of sexual morality" (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 3). Harkening back to old ideas and regulations - a sort of regulatory nostalgia for the alleged superior morality of the past in uncertain circumstances is commonplace, and this manifested itself in the AIDS era: "Prosecutors dug up old laws designed to regulate [[[sex workers] and prevent the spread of communicable and venereal disease, along with mid-century anti-terrorism statutes that criminalized the possession of 'infectious' agents" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 106). Sex workers were policed and harassed as people of poor moral character who spread disease (Chateauvert, 2013).

Scapegoating and policing the "other" when what was considered "normal" societal function was disrupted is not a new phenomenon. Stigmas morph via their temporal and geographical context and can "be treated analytically as structurally disbursed and ecologically embedded cultural objects that reflect and refract contemporaneous concerns" (Hallgrímsdóttir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008, p. 122). Narratives and stigmas of alleged spread of disease and moral malaise vary with contextual factors:

> Prominent historical continuity is the emphasis on sex industry workers as conduits of infection. However, the nature of that infection shifts somewhat, with historical narrators focusing more on a moral kind of contagion, while the later news stories focus on how workers are by and large 'vectors of disease' (Hallgrímsdóttir et al., 2008, p. 131).

Regardless of how they vary, however, stigmas never seem to fail to provide a concoction of reasons for policing sex workers in a way which demonizes them. General deviance is ascribed to vulnerable and easily targeted sectors of society in times of uncertainty, and sex workers fight back with discourse that challenges and checks the re-emergence of those retrograde and inaccurate ideas about sex work which feed into oppressive policing practices.

AIDS and Stigmatizing Sexual Minorities

In recent history, the AIDS epidemic scapegoated queers and sex workers in the spread of HIV paired with a heavy morally stigmatizing component that was not devoid of religious and political influence:

> This AIDS-related backlash focused on controlling sexuality by demonizing targeted risk groups, particularly gay men and (sex workers), and warning of the dangers of unrestrained sexual impulse, especially among adolescents. Conservative organizations and their spokespeople effectively and strategically exaggerated the risk of transmission and contagion among gay people, promoting the view of HIV/AIDS as just retribution and a sign of God's wrath for the sexual depravity produced by the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s (Herdt, 2009, p. 71).

People often morally panic in times of upheaval and uncertainty, with panic about sexuality often corresponding with an uptick in disease morbidity (Thompson, 1998). Accompanying narratives often encompass sweeping generalizations about sex workers, with a heavy moral component accompanying the vectors of disease narrative. Moralistic narratives surrounding the spread of disease were especially highlighted during the AIDS era – namely moral panic surrounding what is considered sexually deviant (promiscuity and homosexuality): "The politics of being a whore do not differ markedly from the politics of any other sexually despised group" (Queen in Nagle, 1997, p. 134). There is a tendency for society to lean toward the abjection of individuals who are painted as somehow deserving of contracting illness in association with what is perceived as weaker moral character, and this is something that has been noted as a pattern by those who study societal reactions to the spread of disease:

> Their rights are infringed upon in the name of public safety (. . .) These regulatory practices, coupled with representations of people as guilty, immoral, and impure function to produce social order and identity. But it is an order and identity that is tenuous, as it is often undergirded by fear of both physical and moral contagion, ignorance and prejudice (Zivi in Roth & Hogan, 1998, p. 37).

The unsettled dust of the moral panic surrounding the AIDs epidemic was top of mind for sex workers and affiliate outreach and advocacy organizations, as they anticipated a moral panic to accompany the pandemic – a moral panic that could be used to justify oppressive acts from the state:

> From very early on in the history of the epidemic, Aids has been mobilised to a prior agenda of issues concerning the kind of society we wish to inhabit (. . .) Aids is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to "justify" calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable (Watney, 1988, p. 3).

As Wood (2020) explains, a similarly heavy moral component accompanies COVID-19 protocols, especially "social distancing". Those who are not able to socially distance are considered undisciplined and irresponsible. This moral burden is obviously felt most keenly by those who are not able to social distance due to necessity and lack of resources, feeding into the pattern of blaming the most marginalized populations in society for the spread of disease, and ascribing a lack of discipline or morals to the objective fact of disease spread. Jenn Clamen of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform explains how this is fundamentally harmful to "sex workers who occupy public space (as they) are not able to physically distance in public space and are also dependant on community for safety on the streets. As a result, sex workers are oversurveilled and trying their best to avoid law enforcement, which often leads to increased isolation and distance from much needed supports" (Amnesty International Canada, 2020).

The tendency toward pegging responsibility for the spread of disease on the "other" has often led to misinformed medical rhetoric and research that focused on social ills and "risk groups" more than practical, unbiased information about the nature of spread:

> Had a public-health education initiative begun then, openly talking about condoms, sterile needles, safter sex, and taking steps to overcome resistance to their use – as sex workers started telling each other and their clients in 1983 – an untold number of deaths

> and HIV infections could have been prevented. Instead, CDC researchers and political leaders continued to focus on risk groups. They warned citizens about AIDS amongst homosexuals, heroin users, Haitians, hemophiliacs, and hookers, the '4-H Club'" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 85).

Stigma stands in the way of unbiased research and practical solutions. As Chateauvert (2013) argues, people were reluctant to seriously consider the all too often silenced voices of lived experience in terms of AIDS precautions, as sex workers are severely stigmatized and not seen as legitimate sources of practical information.

Gay men and sex workers in the AIDS era were painted as "guilty victims", i.e., people who can and do contract the AIDS virus through what is perceived as their immoral and irresponsible actions (Watney, 1988, p. 33). The moral component to the objective fact of spreading a virus tends to stick to whom society already deems depraved. Katie Hogan (1998) demonstrates how the nature of a woman's sexual activity justifies punishment and can be used to imply an individual somehow deserves the contraction of disease. By looking at the difference in how the media painted a sex worker in comparison with how they portrayed a non-sex working women who contracted the AIDS virus Hogan highlights precisely what Friedman and Valenti (2019) points out is dangerous about the myth of purity, and how it is manifested in popular culture and media:

> Cover was a sex worker who, after performing fellatio on an undercover agent, was legally charged with attempted murder (. . .) (E)ven though there is no evidence of a man getting AIDs as a consequence of fellatio with a woman (Corea, 173-175). The judge hearing the case declared Helen Cover's medical problem as a risk to the community . . . Middle class, white Kimberly Bergalis, on the other hand, was presented by the media as an innocent victim, a virgin who contracted HIV through her infected gay dentist. It was recently discovered that Bergalis was not a "virgin," a fact that was intentionally downplayed by Bergalis's lawyer and family, and by the media (Gorna, 45) (Hogan, 1998, pp. 168-169).

The use of the concept and identification of Bergalis's virginity is problematic, and points to the fact that society sees sexually active women as more deserving of contracting the virus. Notably, the media also highlighted the dentist's homosexuality as a pertinent detail.

It is theoretically useful in this instance to examine sex work as less of an issue conceptualized through gender and feminist lenses and more of an issue with how society regards general deviation from what it deems normative sexuality. That is, those who possess what is considered deviant sexuality are often grouped together in terms of being scapegoated for disease spread. Eva Pendleton, in her book chapter *Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality* in "Whores and Other Feminists" (Nagle, 1997, p. 73), looks at how sex work is fruitfully interpreted through queer theory, insofar as queerness and sex work diverge from and challenge heteronormativity. For both, the 'othering' of diverse and alternative sexualities works to control said sexualities and the people who possess and express them (Foucault, 1978). Problematizing definitive categories of sexuality and gender is essential to breaking down stigmas: "New affiliations between bodies, sex, and power remind us that the categories of being that seemed to specify and define human nature over one hundred years ago have quickly become rather inadequate placeholders for identity" (Hamberstam, 2012, p. 67). Accepting the messiness and diversity of human sexuality paves the way for inclusive societies and laws.

The frowned upon process of receiving remuneration for sexual services converges with the experience of the disabled in terms of how society perceives and labels their sexuality as deviant, and in terms of how legislation which criminalizes sex work clients criminalizes access to sexual services for those who find conventional intimacy challenging due to sexual stigmas regarding disabled bodies:

> Despite claiming to operate in support of 'victimized' sex workers, the criminalization of clients employs many older stigmatizing conceptions of sex workers and the sex industry (. . .) Whether defined in terms of the spread of disease or of genetic degeneration, these eugenic conceptions enabled state regulation of and violence towards disabled and sex working bodies (Fritsch, Heynen, Ross & Meulen, 2016, p. 88).

These stigmatizing definitions of acceptable sexual desire and alleged disease spread feed into damaging legislation which harms sex workers and the disabled alike. Tracy De Boer addresses a similar theme in her paper "Disability and Sexual Exclusion" as she offers a corrective narrative to a previous publication by Sheila Jeffreys's entitled "Disability and the Male", which paints the employment of sex workers by disabled men as an act of domination over sex workers (De Boer, 2015). De Boer reframes the issue to argue that the disabled are a group who are often sexually excluded from society, and this can be profoundly harmful:

> I have offered what I deem to be a better way to think about issues of commercial sex—that is, with definitions of good sexuality and inferior sexuality, as well as a concept of sexual inclusion. I maintain that in many cases, a disabled man may seek commercial sex in order to be affirmed as a sexual being, as well as to experience the goods of sex (De Boer, 2015, p. 79).

An overlap in the sex workers and disability rights movements is also examined by Giulia Garofalo Geymonat, who looked specifically at the connection in the European context (2019). Geymonat examined "practices and approaches developed by a grassroots group of sexual assistants and their allies, including disabled rights activists and clients, based in Switzerland, who offer training, peer supervision and non-profit intermediation with clients" (2019, p.224). Having sexually deviant stigma in common, the sex work and disabled movements formed a unique alliance. This coalition makes an argument for the decriminalization of sex work and also the validation of the disabled as sexual beings with needs and desires the same as able-bodied persons (Geymonat, 2019). Alternative and socially excluded sexualities find community and identity together: "In queer community, I found a place to belong and abandoned my desire to be

a hermit. Among crips, I learned how to embrace my strong, spastic body (. . .) I pulled desire to the surface, gave it room to breathe" (Clare, 2015, p. 155).

Is there a process of "othering" disease by pinning responsibility for its spread on already stigmatized and "deviant" populations? The epidemic/pandemic context acts as a sort of host to discrimination against stigmatized groups – a manifestation of the need to clearly demarcate the sick from the well, the right from the wrong, the deviant from the normal: "It is within such a context of social change, anxiety and tension that moral entrepreneurs are able to promote a discourse about alleged threats to what is 'normal', 'natural' and moral with regard to sexuality" (Thompson, 1998, p. 84). This demarcation has certainly manifested through racial prejudice, as well as discrimination against other alternative sexualities:

> One influential interpretation of queer studies' appearance in the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s is that the AIDS crisis necessitated a profound rethinking of the relationship between sexuality, identity, and the public sphere (. . .) This new "queer" politics, (was) based on an array of oppositions to "heteronormative" social oppression rather than a set of protections for special kinds of minorities that were vulnerable to discrimination (. . .) (Stryker, 2006, p. 7).

Thus, criticizing and questioning a general discrimination against whatever and whomever grates against heteronormativity is generally helpful in creating a just society, and this would extend to the sex working community.

The concept of purity and the way it is used varies with historical and cultural contexts. COVID-19 and its accompanying discourse is no exception, as social distancing, sexual abstinence, and cleanliness become emphasised as virtuous in relation to the spread of the virus (Wood, 2020). The encouragement of social distancing and sanitizing protocols shape discourse throughout the pandemic and function to symbolically separate the clean from the filthy, and allegedly the good from the bad.

Policing and Socially Regulating Sex

Morally motivated policing often sidelines the rights of sex workers. Much the same as in the AIDs era, sex workers, allies and advocates know that times of social upheaval are occasions when their rights are called into question and often squeezed: "After a decade of work for decriminalization, they (COYOTE - Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) did not want the human rights of sex workers sacrificed in the name of public health" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 87). Sexual "morality" is not just something found in public discourse or contained to personal matters but has been inscribed in and solidified by law. Melinda Chateauvert (2013) in, Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk, quotes the U.S. Supreme Court's "moral" argument for the prohibition of prostitution in 1908 (Richards, 1979) which outlined how "the lives and example of such persons (sex workers) are in hostility to the idea of the family as constituting in and springing from the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony; the sure foundation of all that is stable and noble in our civilization" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 51). The stigma, then, is decidedly official: "Sex workers are historically and currently targeted by the public, law enforcement and government in the context of infectious diseases, so many workers legitimately fear discrimination and are therefore avoiding contact with government and social services in the current context" – Jenn Clamen (Amnesty International, 2020).

Sex workers have historically resisted the idea that the work is inherently wrong and have been attempting to reshape this dominant narrative for centuries. From a social constructionist point of view, this discursive resistance has resulted in tangible changes to social perceptions as well as legislation (McLaren, 1992). Drawing attention to problematic perceptions of sex work offers an alternative way to conceptualize what has been traditionally framed as "dangerous" to

the detriment of those who fall outside the status quo of sexuality, nudging society toward voting in favour of legislation that provides justice for all. If a definition of sex work that incorporates sexual liberation and healthy exploration of sexual desire (including for unmarried female and marginalized bodies) became more prevalent, legislation might consequently be passed that protects the rights of folks who engage in sex work as democratic legislation reflects the opinions of John Q public. Idyllic conceptualizations of female sexuality arguably feed into rape culture by perpetuating "(t)he purity myth":

> (T)he lie that sexuality defines how 'good' women are, and that women's moral compasses are inextricable from their bodies – is an integral part of rape culture. Under the purity myth, any sexuality that deviates from a strict (generally straight, male-defined) norm is punishable by violence (Friedman & Valenti, 2019, p. 299).

Resisting the idea that sexual purity defines a person's worth is paramount to the safety of sex workers, women, and alternative sexual orientations.

The societal expectation of female purity is reflected in laws which police sex work and by extension, female sexuality. The purity myth is arguably inherent to the nature of bill C-51, the Nordic Model of sex work regulation currently in effect under Canadian legislation which allegedly punishes clients rather than sex workers. This legislation moves the idea of sex worker from the realm of criminality to that of victimhood in a way which causes harm by not acknowledging the complex and extremely varied experiences of performing sex work. The Nordic Model perpetuates the notion that women who are engaging in sex work are being exploited as the idea of sex work being a choice breaks with the "myth of purity" (Friedman & Valenti, 2019). A general "othering" of those who do not fit into heteronormative scripts of "pure" sexual expression feeds into discriminatory policing of the public sphere. Constructing sexualities and personages as other creates fertile ground for discrimination when it comes to

policing pandemics, as responsibility for the spread of disease is often pegged on the already marginalized.

Chateuvert's statement that "science can only be as rational as social discourse permits" (2013, p. 90) speaks to the ways in which societal opinion fuels justification for scientific inquiry and funding for said inquiries. This statement can be extended to law enforcement and legislation as well – that is, the law and its enforcement (in a democratic society) are supposed to reflect and enforce what the general public considers to be "right" and "wrong". As long as the public views sex workers as less than, not as real workers but as people who degrade themselves for money, they will be scapegoated for societal ills: "Sex-worker activists understood that public leaders historically blamed 'undesirables' for disease and social problems" (Chateuvert, 2013, p. 95). In the case of COVID-19, social discourse about sex workers as vectors of disease may have fed into a rationalization to abolish the trade altogether as sex workers working through the pandemic were framed as a direct threat to public health and policed accordingly:

> An Edmonton city councillor wants the city to consider keeping body rub centres closed permanently, even when public health orders allow them to reopen (. . .) Coun. Jon Dziadyk - "I'm wondering if this is the most sensible time to have that serious conversation versus to have them reopen only to have them close permanently some time in the future" (Omstead, 2020).

Seizing the opportunity of a pandemic to push the idea that sex work establishments have no place in society generally points to the tendency for notions of moral superiority to pop up through crisis (Thompson, 1998).

During a public health crisis, policing sex workers who are working due to the government's failure to provide equitable assistance to every citizen employs an end of the line strategy of solving social problems that is often imposed upon the vulnerable: "Most strikingly, instead of receiving various types of support, migrant sex workers are instead continuing to be

targeted by law enforcement officers" (Lam, 2020a). Instead of addressing systemic issues and root problems of legislation and stigma, the police function to "clean up" the inevitable outcomes of a failure on the part of the government to be socially proactive:

> Ironically, the extensionists systematically avoided discussing the real 'bread and butter' issues relating to prostitution - the economic and social discrimination that forced women into prostitution in the first place. They concentrated instead on the medical impediments to female penitence, assuming indeed that it was females who needed to be penitent and ignoring all other material factors that might keep women in prostitution (Walkowitz, 1980, p. 85, emphasis in original).

Policing sex work is in essence policing poverty and morality: "(B)y 1869, the Contagious Diseases Acts had been extended well beyond their initially defined limits (. . .) They broke new ground as domestic social measures, creating (. . .) new precedents for police and medical supervision of the lives of the poor" (Walkowitz, 1980, p.88). Policing sex work through COVID-19 essentially harkens back to pre-Bedford legislation I.e., sex work is essentially recriminalized under COVID-19 restrictions. Because sex work is not completely decriminalized and highly stigmatized, many sex workers do not file taxes for fear of being "outed" to family members, friends, and/or colleagues. Thus, many were unable or unwilling to apply for the CERB benefit leaving them in a precarious financial situation through the pandemic, and many were forced to continue in-person work to support themselves and/or their dependants. Jenn Clamen of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform describes the effects of stigma on sex workers' unique situation through the COVID-19 pandemic as such: "Many sex workers would be equally unable to access lower-threshold government supports because of their social location and fear of the consequences of disclosing their name, whether because their income is criminalized and/or because they are undocumented and/or migrant" (Amnesty International, 2020). Oppressive measures are justified through COVID-19 because: "(i)f something is considered to be a threat to the existence of the state or society, then the state is legitimated to

use a level of coercion and force that would otherwise not be acceptable" (Walby, 2015, p. 17). Sex workers are thus squeezed into an awfully precarious situation wherein they are being policed for continuing work while being deprived of low barrier government support they need to adhere to state sanctioned "social distancing" protocols: "The goal is to limit the spread of COVID-19, but the choice to provide the resources for police enforcement (. . .) while neglecting the most vulnerable reveals the ways that state strategies reflect longstanding inequalities. Our identities and networks offer different pandemic experiences" (Wood, 2020). Lesley Wood offers a critique on the way in which government officials in Toronto allotted resources through the pandemic to favour a carceral approach to limiting the spread of a virus that unfairly targets marginalized populations (2020).

When unjust policing practices occur (unjust practices that are justified by master narratives of sex workers as vectors of disease and moral malaise) it spurs discussion, counter narratives, and occasionally social action amongst sex working communities: "The use of coercion, aggression and violence increases the visibility of the relations of dominance in a society, thereby increasing the potential for systemic change" (Walby, 2015, p. 16). It is concrete occurrences of policing sex workers through the pandemic, and the unique social and legal position they occupy which opens arenas (Jasper & Duvenyak, 2015) for rebuttal, discursive and otherwise.

Manifestations Through COVID-19

Concrete contextual conditions socially manifest in many ways, including through sexual expression: "What lies at the heart of sociological understandings of sexuality is the notion that social change shapes sexual identity and conduct" (Jochelson & Gacek, 2019, p. 58). Looking at the nature of sexuality through the contextual lens of the COVID-19 pandemic is uniquely

valuable in examining how "social change shapes sexual identity and conduct" (Jochelson & Gacek, 2019, p. 58), especially as the nature of human contact has been so fundamentally and dramatically altered through this particular crisis. Sex workers are located on the front lines of sexuality, so to speak. They are intimately aware of society's current sexual appetite and demand. Their dialogue and understanding regarding sexuality offer an invaluable perspective on current sexual conditions. Through their self-produced discourse, sex workers actively contribute to meaning making (Benford & Snow, 2000) through re-framing ways to look at sex, sex work, and sex workers through COVID-19. Master narratives of sex work drawn out through the pandemic and the rebuttals of sex workers are at odds ideologically but ultimately culminate into some form of general social understanding of an issue through an interactive process: "(C)onstructionists have pointed out that identities, both personal and collective, are *products* of social interaction" (Hunt and Benford, 1994, p. 510-511, emphasis in original). Comparing societal ideals with the understandings of reality as seen through the discourse of sex workers allows one to qualitatively measure and thus better understand the gap.

Counter Narratives and COVID-19

The nature of sex work narratives shifts with changes in social and political contexts. At the mercy of circumstance sex workers nonetheless actively participate in constructing their identities and the ideas society holds of the occupation (Chateauvert, 2013). Benoit et al. interviewed sex workers about managing identity and found that many outright rejected dominant narratives of sex work and/or employed reframing techniques to maintain a desirable self-identity which rejects hegemonic ideas around sex workers:

> Reframing is the opposite of internalisation and involves emphasising the personal benefits of being a sex worker and of the sex work occupation for society at large. Reframing responses included making connections between sex work and empowering

> outcomes in participants' lives or pointing to elements of sex work that are useful for society at large (2019, p. 89).

The nature of the counter narratives varies quite a bit, "some challenge the dominant paradigm, some stretch and bend rather than subvert it (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 172).

The structure of sex worker counter narratives in terms of narratology may be categorized as homodiegetic, heterodiegetic, as well as at times, a combination of the two:

> The narrator who is present in the story he tells is "homodiegetic"; the narrator who is absent (invisible) or who tells at a higher level a narrative from which he himself is absent is "heterodiegetic." Among homodiegetic narrators, we can distinguish in terms of the degree of presence: some homodiegetic narrators tell a story in which they are the main character (in which case they are "autodiegetic"), while other homodiegetic narrators are merely witnesses (Bal & Lewin, 1983, pp. 237-238).

That is, the social media posts examined were written in a variety of narrative levels; some of them relate a first-person narrative in which the sex worker refers to her or himself in relation to an event or circumstance they experienced personally (homo/autodiegetic), some relate the stories of others (heterodiegetic), and some posts relate the stories of others while also offering a personal perspective or a perspective which links a foreign experience to a Canadian one (homo/heterodiegetic combination) (Bal & Lewin, 1983). Many posts, although authored by an individual, speak to the audience as "we". The implication in the "we" is sometimes referring to the organization, and sometimes sex workers as a community. In either case, the discourse positions itself as coming from a place of solidarity, activism, and helpfulness on behalf of the struggles inherent to being a sex worker in the time of COVID-19.

Canadian history on sex work includes many counter narratives: "Notions of goodness were contested, perpetually being made and unmade in the moral dominion (of Canada)" (Strange & Loo, 1997, p. 151). That is, although hegemonic ideas manifested themselves in repressive and discriminatory legislation, there has always been a resistance to these ideas:

> Moral discourse on prostitution was never uncontested during this period. In Foucauldian terms, it spawned discourses of resistance. There were important counter-arguments or alternative strategies raised in opposition to, or in substitution for, the moral discourse and its legal agenda. Some of these had a decidedly subversive effect on the law in action (McLaren, 1992, p. 524).

In the midst of pandemic panic, a frightened mainstream society will find scapegoats for spreading the virus, and as in the past, sex workers will likely be highlighted as being vectors of disease and inflictors of moral malaise on a physically sick global society. This is made manifest through the actions of government officials and policing agencies toward sex workers and sex work related issues through the pandemic (Clamen, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021; Lam, 2020; Thompson, 1998; UNAIDS, 2020).

Geoffrey Pleyers in, "The Pandemic is a battlefield: Social movements in the COVID-19 lockdown", points to the tendency for society to target underprivileged populations for the spread of the virus: "Racism has surged in all regions of the world since the beginning of the pandemic. It targets (. . .) refugees, minorities and poor people accused of spreading the pandemic" (2020, p. 306). Judging from the historical tendency for the spread of disease to cause morally motivated finger pointing (see section entitled "Disease and Moral Panic – Scapegoating Sex Workers and Sexual Minorities") sex workers and allies expended a considerable amount of energy distributing counter narratives amongst themselves and their social media followers as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world in fear to curate an alternative discourse which empowered and protected sex workers from damaging discrimination. Through the catalyst of the pandemic, we can see an ongoing discursive battle unfolding as a "dynamic, evolving (. . .) (and) contentious" process of meaning-making (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 614). Sex worker counter narratives offer rebuttals to problematically framed, historically informed master narratives, thus participating in the process of meaning-making (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Identity work is a decidedly important aspect of sex work due to the intense stigma associated with the job, and this identity work is partially achieved by feeling as if one is part of a sex work community; a community which stands together and asserts their worth as human beings and their rights as members of the public. The pandemic can be understood as an "acute critical event" that has the potential to "alter the expectations and perceptions of opportunities and threats and as a result engender the emergence of new frames of understanding, new political tactics, or even new social movements" (Stoddart, Ramos, Foster, and Ylä-Anttila, p.3, 2021). We see the intense need for connectedness and identity work manifest through how activist and advocacy groups managed sex worker identity through social media discourse throughout the first months of the pandemic. The social media discourse examined herein certainly demonstrates strong examples of "identity talk" (Hunt & Benford, 1994, p. 492), discourse that asserts the worth of sex workers, refutes negative narratives, and works to construct the collective identity of a particularly hard-hit group in a global health crisis.

Pleyers outlined five roles performed by activists in response to the pandemic, all five of which sex work advocacy groups participated in, to some degree:

> (*P)rotests* (that re-emerged in some countries despite sanitary risks); *defending workers' rights*; *mutual aid and solidarity*; *monitoring policymakers* and *popular education*. These five roles performed by movements during the pandemic combine concrete practices and arguments with a cognitive dimension by which they interpret the crisis and provide particular meanings to it" (2020, p. 296, emphasis in original).

As I demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, sex workers and their allies offered alternative narratives about sex work to counter how it is popularly conceptualized through each of these avenues. Pleyers found that although in-person protest was less common, "less visible activities" of organizations and collectives were well-used and adaptable to the COVID-19 context (2020, p. 307). In my dataset, these less visible activities can be seen in the form of online workshops for

transitioning to sex work in a web-based setting, posting information on knowing your rights in a pandemic, sharing stories relating sex worker struggles and adaptive strategies to a global community, critiquing policing and lawmaking, and otherwise offering support both material and spiritual. I focus particularly on the ways in which the political opportunity was used to counter popular narratives through social media discourse. That is, the discursive component of sex work activism.

An important function of the "less visible" (Pleyers, 2020) activity of producing online discourse is fostering solidarity through insisting on alternative narratives that paint sex work in a positive light. Sex workers and advocates have worked hard to change society's idea of sex workers from "reservoirs of infection and as vectors of disease" to "potential 'sex experts' who could serve as frontline educators to a hard-to-reach adult population that kn(o)w little about safer sex" (Chateuvert, 2013, p. 101). The counter narrative of sex workers' practicing safe sex is complemented also by a humanization of both giving and receiving the services provided by sex workers i.e., sex as a positive and healthy thing in people's lives. Sex positive thinkers push for the reframing of sexual intimacy - something which has been traditionally framed as shameful and secretive, into something natural and good that enhances human connection and health.

Appropriating narratives of traditional femininity into positive narratives of sex work reclaims the right to one's femininity (should one decide that is a part of female identity they wish to be associated with). Even if appropriated narratives don't fit the traditional combinatory formulation of traits that are so commonly and traditionally lumped in with society's idea of "femininity" such as being chaste and monogamous, sex worker counter narratives reclaim the right to it:

> Thus, theorists who have attempted to counter some of these negative views of femininity have only managed to do so by revaluing feminine characteristics (. . .). Femininity does not have a single meaning, but depends on a wide range of contextual features, such as perceived power relations, for its interpretation and effect (Mills, 2007, pp.87-88).

Certainly not all sex workers identify with traditional femininity. However, those who *do* work to reclaim their right to it, as society's conceptualization of sex work often robs them of this right: "While (Feminist Critical Discourse) analysis includes overtly expressed meanings in communication, it is also attentive to less obvious, nuanced, implicit meanings to get at the subtle and complex renderings of ideological assumptions and power relations in contemporary modern societies" (Lazar, 2007, p. 151). Because sex work is by its very nature commercial and sexual, sex work discourse that offers counter narratives to harmful generalizations still employs what some feminists would find an objectional use of an attractive female body as a marketing tool, and sex appeal as a powerful and desirable aspect of femininity. In discussing a feminist critical discourse analysis of advertising, Lazar problematizes choice vocabulary used to market women's products which emphasize sex appeal as power:

> Advertising is notorious for using (hetero)sex(uality) to sell virtually anything. It is not surprising, therefore, to find the overlexicalization of such words as 'seduce'/ 'seduction'/'seductive', 'intoxicating', 'tantalizing', 'magnetic', 'provocative', and 'sexy' (Dior, 20 February, 2004; Elizabeth Arden, 20 August, 2004) in advertisements, which seem to perpetuate age-old stereotypes of women's sexual appeal (Lazar, 2007, p. 156).

Those who advocate for sex work often use narratives of sex workers as overtly feminine and sexually attractive, but this discourse must be read and considered within the specific context of feminism that is pro sex work. Rather than advocating for the abolishment of gender constructs, sex workers and advocates work hard to change society's idea of sex work and sexual "deviance" more generally. Through the discursive opportunity of COVID-19 they work to counter negative stereotypes of sex workers as vectors of disease and moral malaise, while still working within what Lazar labels "age-old stereotypes" (2007, p. 156). The COVID-19 crisis has

presented a unique opportunity for analyzing how catastrophe shapes, changes, and emphasizes particular aspects of the self and one's positionality in society – in this case, how the specific femininity of sex work manifests itself through discourse related to the position of sex workers in society as it adapts to the realities of living with COVID-19.

Sex workers manage identity through countering negative narratives while maintaining other master narratives of women as givers of love and sexual pleasure, cleanliness, and motherhood: "Speakers never totally step outside the dominating framework of the master narrative, but always remain somewhat complicit and work with components and parts of the existent frame from within" (Andrews, Molly & Bamberg, 2004, p. 363). So, while sex workers are countering master narratives that paint them as vectors of disease and moral malaise, they often remain within and even lean heavily on master frames associated with womanhood and femininity when forming and maintaining identity i.e., the role of giving care and comfort, and even protection. Sex workers counter master narratives of sex work as morally wrong and physically harmful by defiantly expressing professional pride in providing a legitimate service that brings care and joy to others. Many take a pridefully proactive stance on sexual health and sex education and incorporate this educator role into their identity management repertoire (Chateauvert, 2013): "(S)ome workers define their work as educational or as socially valuable in other ways, which informs and underpins the ways in which they manage and construct their personal and professional identities" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 174). This educational notion fits into the category of caregiver, not only for clients and society, but also strongly for one another: "Such women may also act as a mentor to their staff in more than simple work terms — Barlow herself helps her colleagues with domestic arrangements, support and counselling" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 175).

I would be remiss not to note the self-reflexive nature of the counter narrative work being performed by sex workers through the pandemic. Much of the social media audience are likely sex workers themselves. So, while the intention of countering may be to divert or change dominant narratives for a wider audience, this intention simultaneously functions as identity management. I look specifically at how sex workers have countered narratives in relation to how sex work has been painted and viewed through the COVID-19 pandemic – that is, as people blame the marginalized for COVID-19 spread, sex workers highlight and offer rebuttals to the problematic notion that they are vectors of disease, and that sex work is a dispensable and despicable occupation. Sex workers work to construct their identity "(. . .) in accordance with group-specific norms and (it is) reproduced continuously in light of new definitions and situations" (Hunt & Benford, 1994, p. 492). "(P)ersonal and collective identity alignment at times is discussed in terms of what the individual and group *are not*" (Hunt and Benford, 1994, p. 495, emphasis added): Sex workers assert through counter narratives to hegemonic thought that they are not vectors of disease, and not the moral pariahs society paints them as.

Beyond the immediately practical and instrumental counter narratives there are narratives of the sex worker as givers of healing and love that align with notions of the "holy whore": "The *hora* leads us to the root of the word 'whore,' and to my pride in that noble title (. . .) Sacred prostitution was extensive throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean civilizations, as well as in Meso-America and much of Asia" (Fabian in Nagle, 1997, p.46). This is a framing of overt female sexuality that is in decidedly stark contrast with the image of the downtrodden prostitute and may exemplify the roots of questioning this conceptualization. The sex worker is framed here as someone to be adored instead of scorned - it is the marriage of what is, in many contexts, considered sexually impure, with notions of the divine, and womanhood. It is a

departure from the master narrative of sexually active women as less-than and forms the basis for counter narratives that refute the coupling of virginity and virtue that feeds into the "myth of purity" (Friedman & Valenti, 2019).

Sex Work as Work

Sex workers are, in objective terms, people who have sex with other people for money. Through a Foucauldian lens, there is nothing inherently "bad" about these paid sex acts. Instead, it is society's *construction* of having sex with people for money that problematizes them, and thus marginalizes the people who perform them. Selling sex for money is problematized by ideas society holds about sexuality: "What makes the job difficult is not the work itself but the crap that society throws toward people who engage in it. Sucking cock for cash is easy; it's the moralistic judgements for doing so that create bigger problems and can be harmful for sex workers" (Redwood in van der Meulen, 2013, p. 57). Sex workers consistently challenge these perceptions with counter narratives. How does the political opportunity of a global pandemic contribute to the discursive development of what people conceptualize as a sex worker? To what "rules of formation" have sex work discourses been subjected as a direct result of the pandemic? How have sex workers worked within the contextual constraints of the pandemic to question re-emerging discursive formations (Foucault, 1969) about sex workers spreading disease and moral malaise? Sex workers are using the context of COVID-19 and the current pitfalls in the Canadian social welfare system to situate their work within the realm of "real work", and sex work advocacy groups are using the COVID-19 crisis as a means to present discourses on women's/sex worker's issues more generally.

Sex workers engage in the "byproductive labour" (Whitney, 2018) of providing intimacy to those who find it hard to come by. This is a service that acts as surrogate to those in society

who are sexually discriminated against, or those who find it difficult to participate in the conventional dating world due to mental or physical issues that prevent them from having the necessary social skills or physical ability. Sex work, then, can be categorized as care work – something historically undervalued, underpaid, and allotted to those in marginalized positions in society (Tronto, 2013). Joan Tronto (2013) makes the argument that undervaluing care work is fundamentally problematic, and the undervaluing of sex work can be usefully interpreted through her perspective. Reframing sex work as something that provides care and that is a job someone might choose to engage in for this reason is an important part of ending the stigma.

"Byproductive labour" – that is, labour which inevitably produces a byproduct of change within the subjectivity of the worker, is traditionally undervalued, and the phenomenon is found predominantly within the domain of gendered, female work (Whitney, 2018). Sex work has been especially undervalued as a legitimate form of labour, in much the same way as many types of emotional labour (such as care and art) in which "byproductive labour" (Whitney, 2018) is rarely accounted and compensated for, as well as not being conceptualized and recognized as "hard" work by most of society. Through the catalyst of the pandemic, the need and desire for human companionship and physical touch are emphasized and re-examined as something paramount to the health of human beings. Sex workers are using COVID-19 to assert their value and to push a reconceptualization of sex work as real labour that is "byproductive" (Whitney, 2018) and otherwise productive. Sex workers use reframing techniques to draw attention to positive aspects of their work (Benoit et al., 2019), sometimes emphasizing a therapeutic aspect akin to other helping professions like nursing (Koken, Bimbi, Parsons, Perry, & Halkitis, 2004). Benoit, Smith, Jansson, Healey, & Magnuson found that part of the job satisfaction experienced by sex workers is attributed to the perceived helping and healing roles they play in the lives of their

clients. As one of their participants notes, “I like one-on-one personal reactions. [. . .] I like the psychological aspects of sex work, I like the therapy aspects. I have several clients I know I’ve saved their life and I know I’ve changed their lives. And so, that’s really valuable from a psychology/therapy point of view” - Adeline (2021, p.246).

Lena Näre and Anastasia Diatlova draw similarities between other types of care work or “intimate labour”: “(C)are work and sex work are similar in that they are both holistic and highly heterogeneous forms of labour which involve emotional and bodily contact and intimacy between the worker and the client or care receiver” (2020, p. 4). Another characteristic they note as similar is the priviness of care workers/sex workers to personal details of a client’s private life (Näre & Diatlova, 2020), which fits with Whitney’s notion of “byproductive labour” (2018) in that the labour does not end with the transaction but instead has residual responsibilities and effects on the sex worker. Confidentiality and care are required even in the basic logistics of sex work. Some argue sex work also has healing potential, especially for those who have experienced sexual trauma or have a permanent disability which excludes them from conventional avenues of sexual exploration. Sex work can thus take place as part of therapy and is covered under disability benefits in the Netherlands. And although “(s)urrogate partners differentiate themselves from sex workers in that they are referred from therapists and follow a plan to focus on intimacy and connection more than sexual acts themselves” (McCarty, 2017) buying sex for therapeutic purposes certainly points to the healing potential of sexual services in general. This also brings into consideration the non-sexual, intimate services offered by some sex workers when providing “the girlfriend experience”, in which the sex worker gives the client companionship and poses as an intimate partner, sometimes, but not always with a sexual component.

Feminist Porn and the Pandemic

The "byproductive" (Whitney, 2018) nature of sex work changes with the relative amount of power and control sex workers have over the work they perform. While online services do not provide the same sort of intimate, in-person experience, they can certainly be one-on-one. Online and pornographic sex work come with unique challenges and precautions in terms of privacy, but these forms of sex work can be controlled in ways not available to in-person workers. The byproductive aspect is still present but is shifted to a different type of vulnerability and emotional labour. Having more control over how online sex work is performed and the nature of pornography production can help empower workers. One way to create more autonomy and respect is through changing the narrative of pornographic sex work, which can be achieved through workers taking control of the means of production. This type of change also carries the potential for changing the meaning of sex work. For example, producing porn that embraces diverse sexualities and races:

> (I)f I were to label who I am today, I would call myself a black feminist pornographer. Instead of accepting work merely to ensure the bills get paid, I purposefully work for directors and companies the portray black female sexuality in ways that I feel are expansive, progressive, and interesting" (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 103).
>
> I praise those who aim to dismantle racism and melt heteropatriarchy with their art, their porn. I am bored by normativity. I believe that sexuality breathes life into the revolution. I celebrate queer, antiracist, and feminist images that reflect the diverse realities of sexualities and bodies, and that serve as models for what our bodies can do and be" (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 139).

We see here a rather dramatic flipping of the narrative that paints all sex work as exploitative; a dangerous generalization that leaves those who participate in the production of pornography devoid of the agency to freely explore and share sexuality without judgement and inherent pity.

If the narrative changes to one of choice, and pornography to an instrument of free sexual expression, it is more likely to expand into areas and power relations that are based in equality.

The same can be extended to the dynamics of in-person sex work. While pornography is often framed as purely and predominantly exploitative, the argument here is that it can be used as a tool of empowerment when the means of production are placed in the hands of women and feminist producers that work consciously to break the mold of heteronormative sexuality:

> (A) continuous resistance in the face of (gender and sexual) hierarchies. This is the agency and empowerment for which this film culture may provide new conditions. Through the collective and repeated resistance to oppression, the queer, feminist, and lesbian porn film culture adds courage, agency, and, importantly, pleasure to the everyday fight" (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 151).

This is a sex positive take on pornography that empowers all actors involved and views it as something open and agentic. While sex work and pornography have the potential to be exploitative, they also have the potential to be powerfully freeing and rewarding, both physically and emotionally. Pornography will likely always be met with a healthy skepticism toward its merits and potential for exploitation:

> With the emergence of new technologies that allow more people than ever to both create and consume pornography, the moral-panic driven fears of porn are ratcheted up once again. Society's dread of women who own their desire, and use it in ways that confound expectations of proper female sexuality, persists (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 14).

That said, technological advances allow a more diverse group of pornographers access to the means of production, thus facilitating a sex positive and more equal playing ground and environment for producing illicit materials. Feminist pornography, then, makes space to create sex positive narratives. A move toward pornography that empowers the sexuality of all actors and viewers is revolutionary and communicates an alternative narrative about sexual openness.

Moral panics around pornography and sex work rise and fall in tandem with contextual factors. The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been no exception (see Chapter 5). As folks began to consume pornography as a means of sexual release through lockdown, anti-porn crusaders took the opportunity to assert a narrative of inherent victimhood in the pornography

industry. The pandemic may have contributed to an uptick in porn consumption and an increasing destigmatization and acceptance thereof by society (Döring, 2020). Anti-porn advocates became vigilant through the pandemic as people were stuck at home and consuming more pornography than usual, as indicated through media representation: "During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has increasingly been the case, at least that is what the narrative of more pornography use circulating in the media claims: 'Corona makes porn purchases explode' was the headline of Germany's largest daily newspaper" (Döring & Walter, 2020). Porn was a popular topic through the pandemic. The video hosting website Pornhub.com even offered free month-long subscriptions to the site framing the promotion as a practical way to "flatten the curve" making worldwide headlines and associating porn consumption with good citizenship during a pandemic (Döring, 2020). Solo sexuality (i.e. masturbation) was even encouraged by the state in some cases as a means to control the spread of the virus, relating it to the now virtuous act of isolating oneself from human contact as a means to protect oneself and one another from contracting COVID-19 (Döring, 2020). It is only natural, then, that those who advocate for the abolishment of pornography were especially vigilant and panicked about society's sudden increase in and acceptance of what they view as deplorable.

In this section I provide the reader with the context necessary to understand the current circumstances specific to COVID-19 and pornography. Censorship of pornography is stringent and backed by a heavy moral component that is often arguably alarmist. For example, senate Bill S. 1521 assumes that pornography leads to rape, abuse, and murder "although even the Meese Commission had not been able to find evidence of a causal connection" (Taylor in Nagle, 1997, p. 257). Challenging society's ideas about sex work (including pornographic work) is a powerful

and practical way to influence quantifiable change, as it encourages the public to turn a constructive and scrutinizing eye to existing conditions and laws:

> (A)n abject and uniformed populist sentiment is a barrier to law's malleability (…). An uninformed populace believes in ill-perceived danger (…) even in the absence of empirical evidence. Indeed, the belief in this danger undermines civil liberties, as it quashes public scrutiny of state intervention and obviates the need for substantial and progressive changes in the law (Jochelson et al., in Jochelson and Gacek, 2019, p. 13).

While narratives and studies propose alleged connections between the viewing of pornographic imagery and the perpetration of violence, they are mostly speculative:

> In other words, the relationship between PPU and IPV perpetration may be indirect and moderated by a number of personal and sociocultural variables that are beyond the scope of the present study. Nonetheless, these preliminary findings provide a basis for future research to examine intrapersonal and contextual factors that may attenuate the pornography-IPV link (Brem, Garner, Grigorian, Florimbio, Wolford-Clevenger, Shorey, & Stuart, pp.13-14, 2018).

Counter narratives here become paramount in checking overly conservative values, and a healthy skepticism against limiting what sort of content people watch to keep sexual urges within conventional ideals. Porn actors, sex workers, advocates, and allies met generalizations about the ills of porn consumption with counter narratives which asserted the panic is unfounded and potentially harmful to those who work in the industry, especially with sex workers who normally work in person turning to online platforms as an alternative stream of income (see Chapter 5). Sex workers redefine and challenge popular conceptions of what and how society traditionally thinks sex should be, filling in the silences with alternative interpretations and expressions of sexuality. Herein, I examine how sex workers/porn actors have countered narratives within the specific contextual circumstances of the pandemic, and how COVID-19 specific counter narratives are unique appropriations of longstanding alternative rhetoric surrounding the work.

Historically and within the current context of the pandemic moralists attempt to control attitudes about sexual liberation as well as the dissemination and viewing of explicit material:

"The porn wars (also known as the sex wars) emerged out of a debate between feminists about the role of sexualized representation in society and grew into a full-scale divide that has lasted over three decades" (Taormino, Shimizu, Penley, & Miller-Young, 2013, p. 10). The fear of explicit materials is part and parcel of a general fear of alleged societal ills, violence, and spread of disease ascribed to sexual deviance: "The voices raised against pornography take their place among the many and various worries about family breakdown, infidelity, rising STI (sexually transmitted infection) rates, AIDS, teenage pregnancies, abortion, promiscuous sex, gay marriage, and more generalized fears of homosexuality" (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 44).

Definitions of sexual violence are highly subjective and arguably it is not easily determined what consent looks like in relation to what may be perceived as violent acts. That is not to say that sexual violence does not exist, and that it is not highly problematic. Radical and abolitionist feminists do not think sex work can ever be empowering or a choice but instead is always necessarily exploitative, while many sex working women and men disagree. Sexual freedom is a specific type of freedom to be sure. Offering alternative views and insisting on the right to consensual intimacy in any way that people choose to express and experience it is really at the root of basic freedoms:

> As a group called Women Against Pornography (WAP) began to organize in earnest to ban obscenity across the nation, other feminists (. . .) became vocal critics of what they viewed as WAP's ill-conceived collusion with a sexually conservative Reagan administration and Christian Right, and their warping of feminist activism into a moral hygiene or public decency movement (Taormino, et al., 2013, p. 10).

Legislation regarding sexuality is often based in unfounded moral panics and conservative values. Sex workers serve the important purpose of pushing the boundaries of prudish tradition, questioning laws and perceptions that hinder sexual liberation. Through offering alternative

narratives surrounding the morality of sex work and pornography, sex workers, advocates, and allies work to reconstruct society's idea of sex in general.

The 1980s was an especially tough decade for negativity surrounding sex work and pornography. The promotion of "'straight' family values' eroded sex positive images and arguments for decriminalization – activists began to respond by critically countering retrograde media narratives" (Chateauvert, 2013. p. 187), in much the same manner as they are currently (in the context of the pandemic) offering counter narratives to popular stigmas. This religiously inspired conservative uptick accompanied the Reagan administration and also saw attempts at morally policing controversial cultural phenomenon like music and video games. The moral panic around gangster rap, for example, became a prime example of how meaning-making around criminality generally labels marginalized communities as threats to the hegemonic social order (McCann, 2017). Correspondingly, this moral panic saw attempts at passing legislation based on the apparently unfounded narratives that pornography leads to sexual abuse, and sweeping generalizations that are not always backed in real evidence:

> We decided to call ourselves Feminists for Free Expression (FFE) and begin by being an ad hoc committee whose sole purpose was to oppose the passage of the proposed Pornography Victims Compensation Act, Senate Bill S. 1521 (. . .). It assumed without citing any grounds for the assumption that 'hardcore pornographic material' causes sexual abuse, rape, and murder, although even the Meese Commission had not been able to find evidence of such a causal connection (Taylor in Nagle, 1997, p. 257).

Bills of this nature provide opportunities for counter narratives and social action. As conservative institutions attempt to cleanse society of explicit sexuality, sex workers push back with rebuttals based in fact and real-world experience, repeatedly insisting upon the fact that intimacy that does not adhere to traditional ideals of monogamous, vanilla sex can be positive and healing.

Sex worker produced representations of sex work are socially sanctioned and censored in ways that keep sex workers and their points of view in the shadows. Carol Jacobsen describes her experience of being censored in the context of an art exhibit that addressed issues of prostitution:

> Finally, I stood up in the audience and tried to register my protest, but was booed and shouted down. Condemned as pornographic, and "threatening the safety" of anonymous persons, seven noncommercial, socially motivated, feminist art works were dismantled and erased from view (Jacobsen, 1993, p. 136).

In this situation, the line between art and pornography was somewhat arbitrarily drawn, and Jacobsen's artistic expression regarding sex work was pushed back into silence. Nonetheless, she continues to counter the narrative through her published writing, using the art exhibit example as a stigmatizing case in point. The fact that the voices of lived experience are still silenced within feminist communities is deeply problematic, and points to the necessity of producing and disseminating counter narratives (which may certainly come in the form of artistic expression and agentic pornographic imagery). The silencing of sex workers speaks directly to the divisive nature of much feminist thought. Jacobsen describes the same type of discrimination against the voices of lived experience being censored at a feminist conference in Rotterdam:

> At the conference itself, Barry (also one of the speakers at Michigan) forbade (sex workers) from speaking. Her excuse for silencing the sex workers was that their histories of abuse, their poverty, and their social "irresponsibility" rendered them incapable of speaking objectively (Jacobsen, 1993, p. 138).

Agency is symbolically and literally taken from sex workers routinely, even amongst feminist circles. Sexual agency is taken from women through socially constructing female sexuality as something to be controlled by society and legislation: "Because whether it's sexualized pop culture or abstinence class, the message is one and the same: Women's sexuality is to be defined (and policed) by educators, legislators, and media makers, *not* by women" (Friedman & Valenti,

2019. P. 300, emphasis in original). The current political and legal climate around sex work points directly to the aforementioned tendency to police and regulate sexuality, especially that of women who are painted as non-agents in their choice to engage in sex work. This rhetoric feeds back into the assumption that sex workers are passive recipients of disease and people who lack the moral compass or common sense to look out for themselves and their clients.

The Voices of Sex Workers in Media

Visibility and contributions to dominant discourses is unequally afforded as it is highly dependent upon social status. In the case of sex work, the choice to be silent and secretive can be very personal, as familial, and public constraints make sex workers wary of "outing" themselves. A useful discussion of the issue of societal silences associated with sexuality and how they are unequally distributed is illustrated through Kimberley Manning's study of the different experiences of the parents of transgendered children, some of whom lack the resources to engage in dominant discourse: "Publicly tackling transphobia is only possible for those who can afford the costs of time, labour, finances and risk" (Manning, 2017. p. 584). Inequality plays a big part in deciding whose voices will be heard and amplified.

Although the voices of sex workers are all too often silenced, the pandemic created an opportunity to highlight the specific inequalities amplified through this unprecedented situation. Through it, sex workers made an admirable effort to draw society's attention to their unique struggles at a time when we all felt a little off axis and perhaps a little more open to alternative narratives. Canadian workers were relieved by government relief funding (CERB), which allowed them to stay home from work and protect themselves and their families while still being able to afford to shelter and other necessities. However, this funding was not low barrier and functioned to highlight how sex workers, legally working in this country are once again showing

up on the list of persons the government's actions demonstrate it considers expendable. The pandemic served as the perfect example of how our government and Canadian society is failing to protect sex workers. The gravity and severity of the social and economic situation provided a political and social moment to relate a case in point.

The Independent, a local Newspaper in NL, published a piece written by sex workers who volunteer with the Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP) describing the situation of sex workers in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador through the challenges of COVID-19 entitled *How Sex Workers Take Care of Each Other*. The following excerpts illustrate how the pandemic has highlighted the need for low barrier support for sex workers:

> Many sex workers applying to the fund have said they feel forgotten, afraid for their futures, and that the government and society at large still don't seem to care enough about them to offer support they can actually access. It was critical to create an emergency fund that was easy to apply to, based on our lived experience and the knowledge at SHOP. We knew that easy access for sex workers would mean allowing people to apply, directly and without referral, with whatever name they felt comfortable using and without requiring any government identification. We did this because we know sex workers often learn, from experience, not to trust institutions (Hamilton & Webber, 2020).

The article also directly references the idea of stigmatizing narratives held by society and how said narratives directly feed into their oppression:

> Sex workers are regularly stereotyped in one of two ways: in need of being rescued—sometimes by force—by police, social workers, or non-profit groups; or as immoral, criminal, public nuisances that need to be displaced from our communities. These harmful narratives erase the long history the sex workers' rights movement has (. . .) (Hamilton & Webber, 2020).

The counter narrative here is that rather than helpless victims, sex workers are powerful activists with an important role to play in changing harmful ideas about alternative sexualities.

Elene Lam, PhD candidate at McMaster University and immigrant sex worker who co-founded the Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network (Global Network of Sex

Work Projects, 2015) published a piece applauding and explaining sex worker resilience within their communities in supporting and upholding one another through COVID-19 in *International Social Work* (2020b). Lam also wrote about the intersectional discriminatory issues specific to migrant sex workers in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* (2020a) which emphasized the compounded effects of racism and prejudice against sex working people through the pandemic. She has published a report through Butterfly Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network with recommendations to government on how to best support sex workers, and a report authored specifically for the legal safety information of sex workers who are working through the pandemic (Lam, 2020c).

Jenn Clamen was interviewed by Amnesty International in an article entitled The Rights of Sex Workers are Being Ignored in the COVID-19 Response: In Conversation with Jenn Clamen of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform, in which she explains the reality of the position of sex workers through the pandemic in relation to their human rights (Amnesty International Canada, 2020). She and Jelena Vermilion (executive director of Sex Workers' Action Program -SWAP Hamilton), were interviewed by CBC for a piece entitled Stop Enforcing Sex Work Laws During COVID-19, Amnesty, Sex worker Advocates Say, advocating for the cessation of prostitution laws through the pandemic as they argue the laws create a clear barrier to sex workers receiving the financial support offered other working Canadians: "While they continue to push for more direct financial aid, Amnesty International Canada, the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform and other rights advocates say halting the enforcement of the laws that criminalize their lives would do much more" (Wright, 2020b). Valerie Scott (Sex Professionals of Canada, Toronto), Rachel Peters (Peers Victoria), Kit Rothschild (violence prevention co-ordinator for the Pace Society in downtown Vancouver), Vermilion, and Clamen

were interviewed in a piece published in The Globe and Mail entitled Sex Workers say They're at Risk, Have Been Left out of Canada's COVID-19 Response (Wright, 2020a). Clamen participated in a heated parliamentary debate regarding access to information, privacy and ethics (Clamen, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021) (see chapter 4). She and other sex working activists (namely Melissa Lukings and Sandra Wesley) were invited to speak after they insisted their voices be heard in regard to the legal decisions being made surrounding the enforcement of anti-trafficking legislation; the debate being spurred by an uptick in porn consumption on online platforms with some concerns of child pornography being circulated through the platform Pornhub.com (Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021).

The voices of sex workers are being heard as the stark reality they are facing as Canadian workers through the pandemic are difficult to ignore and make compelling news stories. That is, the recognition that sex work is real work is the political opportunity used to draw attention to the injustices they are experiencing. More candid, day-to-day concerns and counter narrative rhetoric are expressed through social media platforms which serve as arenas (Jasper & Duvenyak, 2015) in which marginalized voices can be heard, and a sense of community solidarity strengthened.

Counter Narratives and Online Discourse

Social media has become a powerful tool for social action and reform – a means of mass communication that has been studied in relation to collective action (Earl & Kimport, 2011, Mattoni, 2017). For example, during the Arab Spring social media were used as a tool for rousing supporters for direct social action (Jamali 2014). Sex work advocacy and outreach organizations receive decidedly inadequate funding for the immensity and complexity of the activities they are taxed with, an aspect of which is the empowerment of those who work in the

sex trade (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021), thus making social media a free and powerful tool for sharing alternative discourse which empowers sex workers and offers alternative narratives of sex work: "Power is primarily exercised by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication enacted in global/local multimedia networks of mass communication, including mass self-communication" (Castells, 2011, p. 416).

Sociological work to date has examined the communication styles of Canadian sex work advocacy organizations in a general fashion, i.e., best practices and general trends (Duke, Sitter, & Boggan, 2018), but do not qualitatively delve into meaning-making and identity management. Social media as a tool for identity management and counter narratives has not been so closely examined by scholars mostly interested in the more "concrete" results of social media or its general usage patterns amongst non-profits rather than its potential for fostering and enhancing a sense of community and collective identity: "The organization first reaches out and brings awareness of the organization's cause to current and potential supporters. Once a constituency is built, the next step is to sustain the constituency and keep alive the flame of passion among supporters" (Guo & Saxton, 2014, p. 70).

Large scale analysis seems to be the norm as social scientists try and decipher mostly macro patterns of non-profit social media usage. Waters and Jamal (2011) offer a quantitative analysis which accounts for the general ways social media is used by non-profits. In another relatively large-scale study, Lovejoy and Saxton studied the Twitter practices of the "100 largest nonprofit organizations in the United States" finding that the three main communicative functions fulfilled through social media discourse were posts related to "information, community and action" (2012). Scholars offer instructions for best practices for non-profit utilization of social media, suggesting use of a myriad of platforms to reach a diverse audience, using social

media to dialogue with followers, and using platforms that fit with the specific objectives of your organization (Kervin, 2014). Ella McPherson examined how advocacy organizations understand and evaluate activism through considering the online aspect of activism dialogue (2014). McPherson's study looked at how advocacy organizations use social media information and engagement as a way to evaluate the current landscape of social issues, unrest, and activism (2014). She encourages researchers to be mindful of the digital and literacy divide, and additional barriers to pluralism in relation to the democratic potential of social media communication when examining evaluative practices (McPherson, 2014). Li, Shin, Sun, Kim, Qu & Yang looked at how COVID-19 shaped and changed network formation and communication between organizations using Issue Niche Theory (INT), and touches on how NGOs used social media through COVID-19 to "strategically express their unique identities" (2021, p. 2). Li et al. did not delve far into the relationship between social constructionism and social media use through COVID-19 but did mention how "communication helps issue stakeholders construct realities that define the issues at hand" in a general "sensemaking" manner (2021, p. 2). They acknowledge the ways in which social media provides an environment in which to make sense of one's relation to current issues or crises, especially in a subcultural context. Identity management and counter narratives are a less quantifiable, yet equally important aspect of how social media is used in advocacy, especially in the case of a group so heavily stigmatized as sex workers.

The online aspect of feminism has been emphasized and heavily utilized through the circumstances of the pandemic, as seen through the example of virtual sex work advocacy: "In the face of the COVID-19 self-isolation restrictions and embodying one of the most characteristic elements of the 4th feminist wave, women's collectives and civil societies have

adapted their fight to the virtual world" (Alfaro, 2020, p. 85). The fourth wave of feminism began circa 2012 and is characterized by a focus on (but not limitation to) intersectionality, body shaming, rape culture, and a strong online aspect (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.):

> Although some may argue that the exercise of rights now takes place quite at the expense of bodies on the street, claiming that Twitter and other virtual technologies have led to a disembodiment of the public sphere, I would disagree in part (. . .). (U)nder conditions in which those with cameras or Internet are imprisoned or tortured or deported (or quarantined), the use of the technology effectively implicates the body (Butler, 2018, p. 94).

Although Butler does not mention quarantine in particular, I believe it may easily be appended to the list of circumstances in which "the use of the technology effectively implicates the body". It is likely Butler did not include quarantine due to having not yet lived through a global pandemic. That is to say, the unprecedented nature of the current global crisis was not something social scientists would have considered in their general and current scope of isolating factors that change the use of the internet as a means of communication in the Western world.

Online communication networks and identity management may be uniquely relevant to the lives of sex workers insofar as sex workers often manage two separate identities in their personal and work lives, and online spaces are especially conducive to fostering more than one identity:

> (A)nother prominent topic in the study of online social environments has been identity play. This interest stems from observations that people using text-based environments have often exploited the potential for representing themselves in ways quite different form their offline personae (Hine, 2000, p. 19).

Hine describes the study of online communities as viewing the internet as one of two things: as a culture or as a cultural artifact (2000). Viewing cyberspace as a *space* rather than a cultural artefact where "people do things, we can start to study just exactly what it is they do and why, in their terms, they do it" (Hine, 2000, p. 21). It is worth noting as a caveat, however, that this

space is not available to many sex workers who do not have access to online communication and the sense of community and alternative streams of income it provides: "Another interviewee, Casey stated: 'We learned really quickly how having tech and the capacity to be involved in the technical world is a privilege that many, many we support don't have'" (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021. p. 5). Although the internet is increasingly prolific in the everyday lives of many people notable digital divides persist in access according to age, literacy, geographical region, and urban versus rural (Hine, 2015). That said, the internet has become a powerful tool for promoting the curation of sex worker identity politics.

The efficacy of cyberfeminism and the social media aspect of activism in terms of identity building/management is illustrated in Rita Stephan's *Creating Solidarity in Cyberspace - The Case of Women's Solidarity Association United*: "Women who identify as Arab, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association United (AWSA United) is a pluralistic, transnational, and scholastic women's advocacy group that emerged in cyberspace in 1999" (2013, p. 81). The results of this qualitative study demonstrated that Arab women used the online space as somewhere they could build collective identity and "connectivity" (Stephan, 2013, p. 82). Also emphasizing an element of safety that might give insight into using social media to (more) safely dialogue about contentious issues from a feminist perspective. Stephan asserts that although of course online spaces aren't entirely safe they nonetheless "provide safety from direct violence and a greater geographical freedom" (2013, p. 83). One Arab woman Stephan interviewed expressed how the online community "provided a productive framework through which to see my own local activism as part of a more international struggle" (2013, p. 95). This is something I also saw in the data I collected insofar as sex worker groups shared a great deal of content that explained and spoke to international experiences of sex workers through COVID-19, creating a

sense of solidarity with sex workers globally. Social media was used by Arab women as a communication tool which circumvented "internal and external challenges" (Stephan, 2013, p. 97). The same can certainly be said of sex workers using social media as a safe space to express identity and discuss sex worker specific issues through COVID-19. Social media provides a space to validate identity-specific feelings, giving marginalized communities the courage and confidence to assert counter narratives *outside* cyberspace as well (Stephan, 2013). An interviewee in Stephan's study directly compares the favourability of online space to mainstream media (namely, AWSA in comparison to United the New York Times):

> I get articles and stories that I wouldn't naturally get otherwise and also get a sense of the opinions and thoughts of a group of women who I much respect but who aren't reflected in mainstream media... I look to the listserv to give me a better sense of what a diverse group of people (more diverse than the NY Times op-ed page) thinks about it (Stephan, 2013, p. 102).

Stephan makes the claim that her study "affirms the presence of cyberfeminism as a viable expression of power struggle" (Stephan, 2013, p. 105).

Elena Pavan looked at how social media is used in ways that go beyond what she claims most social movement scholars see as relevant pieces to study in relation to social action (i.e., the ways in which social media is used to coordinate collective action):

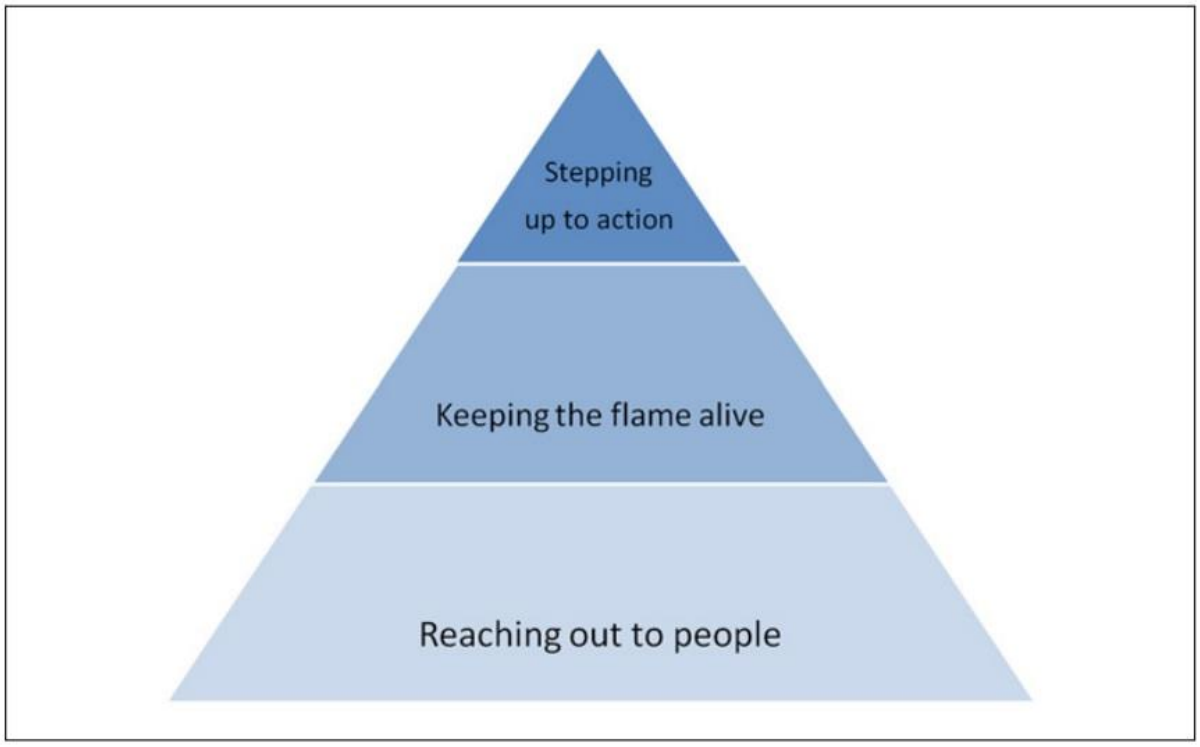
> Social media relevance lays precisely in their capacity of boosting the inherent relational nature of collective action through the provision of a ubiquitous technical infrastructure that sustains the rapid construction of (online communication networks) that expand and enrich the relational milieu grounding collective efforts (Pavan, 2017, p. 434).

While her study focused mainly on how social media is used in the process of social movements' institutionalization it highlights and emphasizes the missing aspects of social movement research in relation to social media more generally.

Guo and Saxton in their study examining the use of Twitter by non-profit organizations devised a pyramidal structure which illustrates the ways organizations tend to use social media to further their causes:

Figure 2.3

Twitter use in Social Movement Advocacy (Adapted from Guo and Saxton 2014)



Although there are certainly instances of "reaching out to people" and "stepping up to action" in the sex worker and advocate-produced social media discourse data I report on below, I am primarily interested in examining the identity management /counter narrative aspect of social media use, which would fit best with the "keeping the flame alive" part of the Guo and Saxton pyramid diagram. Through COVID-19, sex workers' process of "keeping the flame alive" is heavily associated with identity management and counter narratives as these are the ways in which they fight stigma and reassert their human worth (amongst themselves, and to the wider

public). As social isolation prevented in-person interaction, the online work of sex work advocates grew in importance as a tool for "reaching out to people" and "stepping up to action". It also fostered a way to reassure the community of their worth, and mentally support them through oppressive policing and lack of access to government funds. Thus, "keeping the flame alive" is multidimensional, and oftentimes heavily intertwined with personal identity. Here we see the "politics of recognition" as a strong aspect of sex worker advocacy (Fraser, 1995).

Collective identity is bolstered by the fact that technology "creates the opportunity to network with similarly affected communities in other geographical areas" (McNutt, 2018, p. 10). Many organizations' posts through COVID-19 shared information about the global experiences of sex workers through the pandemic. Sharing these experiences amongst themselves and their followers fosters solidarity with other parts of a global sex working community experiencing similar hardship due to COVID-19 risks and restrictions while informing non-sex working followers that the problems faced by sex workers are indeed global (see Figure 2.4):

Figure 2.4

FIRST: Decriminalize Sex Work Now! April 25, 2020

Social media is also utilized for matters closer to home by using it to address immediate needs and share relevant local information: "(M)utual aid groups produce and diffuse information about the virus, sanitary precautions, where to get help and how to organize at the neighbourhood level. Mutual aid networks are efficient alternative information networks" (Pleyers, 2020, p. 302). Many sex work advocacy groups offer services, and the communities were quick to come together to help sex workers in need due to decreased business in response to public health orders.

Media discourse is an undeniably potent tool for change in a "network society" (Castells, 2009). The ability and freedom to share alternative viewpoints thorough social media changes the nature of social movements and is an especially important tool in a network society experiencing a pandemic as folks are considerably isolated from one another, and in real need of connection and solidarity:

> (T)he possibilities created by the new multimodal, interactive communication system (networks of mass self-communication) extraordinarily reinforce the chances for new messages and new messengers to populate the communication networks of society at large (. . .) the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change (Castells, 2009, p. 414).

The media-focused activities of sex work advocacy groups, such as offering alternative perspectives to mainstream thought and the actions of law enforcement can be conceptualized as discursive weaponry aimed at dominant, stigma-inducing discourses surrounding sex work. That is, advocacy groups are always struggling to change, or reconstruct society's idea of sex work in a sort of discursive battle with mainstream media and hegemonic moral ideals. This resourceful infantry utilizes various forms of social media, with textual as wells as visual discourse, to communicate a more holistic picture of the lives and realities of sex working individuals. This process applies what Nancy Fraser has termed a "transformative remed(y) (. . .) aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the *underlying generative framework*" (Fraser, 1995, p. 82, emphasis added): The "underlying generative framework" in this case being the master narratives of sex workers as vectors of disease and moral malaise. The circumstances of COVID-19 provide a crucial time for presenting counter narratives because defining the situation through the hardships felt by sex workers through the pandemic works to highlight the need for general change in attitude and legislation toward sex work:

> Shaping a 'provisional consensus' on the narrative of the COVID-19 crisis is a major stake for social movements. The ability of social actors to highlight the questions spawned by the historical situation, and impose their interpretation of the crisis and its underlying vision of society and economic rationality may set the ground for new policies in economic, social and democratic matters (Pleyers, 2020, p. 304).

Summary

There are many lenses through which to view the phenomenon of creating and disseminating counter narratives from the perspective of sex workers through the COVID-19 crisis. I am drawing on feminist theory as it highlights the highly gendered aspect of sex work and issues thereof. Queer theory casts a critical eye upon how sexual deviance in general becomes a catalyst for discrimination and scapegoating and to draw similarities between the experiences of sex workers, the queer community, and those who possess and/or express what society understands as alternative sexualities. Media studies highlights how the use of social media specifically impacts messages and activism and the relationship of media to communication and discourse more generally. Social constructionist theory helps assert the power of discourse in shaping social and political life, and social movements theory acknowledges the ongoing discursive activities as part of a larger, ongoing social movement to fight for the rights and respect of sex workers.

Sex workers have historically been targets of stigma and discrimination. A variety of historical and cultural factors combine to socially construct sex work as society views and treats it currently (generally as a social ill) and, as I subsequently examine, through the pandemic. I have looked at literature reaching back to the roots of Canadian sex work stigma, moving through how the AIDS epidemic is a critical event in relation to sex work discourse and the spread of communicable disease, and highlighting similar discrimination enacted through the current COVID-19 situation. Having provided the reader with this historical and academic

foundation, a holistic context from which to understand the relevance of the new data herein, I now move into an examination of how sex workers have adapted to and challenged stigma through actions and discourse, and particularly, through social media and the catalyst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3: Methodology/Research Design

Overview

Scope

Beginning with discourse created/disseminated on or after the day Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced an expansion of the CERB benefit to help the general working population (Government of Canada, 2020), and the subsequent four months following this date (April 15 through July 15, 2020) I look at sex work discourses from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. From these provinces, I select prominent sex work advocacy groups and examined discourses born of the pandemic using content from social media platforms. Grounded theory is used as a guiding principle (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), although the caveat should be included that examining the data from my point of view is not completely grounded as I have previous education and biases toward the stigma and regulation of sex work.

A cross section of data is selected for closer, qualitative analysis. Social media posts from the first four months of the pandemic from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador that specifically reference changes and challenges due to the pandemic are screenshot, put into an NVivo file, and coded for themes. I have chosen to focus on how sex work discourse control acts as a discursive social movement as the public sphere is largely online due to COVID-19 restrictions. The restriction of movement on human bodies made online platforms more likely to be maintained and referenced, lending more power to the online world and its discourses.

Initially I gathered data from every Canadian province, as well as mainstream media sources that spoke to sex worker issues through the pandemic. Available resources led me to

simplify the sample to an analysis of three provinces that roughly represented the geographical spread of Canada. While a national Canadian culture is difficult to distill, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, and British Columbia are relatively evenly spread out over the physical expanse of the nation of Canada. A larger scale and more quantitative approach would certainly necessitate a more complete sampling process. As my study favours qualitative depth over sample size this is my rationale for choosing to focus on three locations for my analysis. The most notable absence is Quebec because of its considerably different culture and politics; not being bilingual certainly restricted my ability to examine data from Quebec and this is a deficiency in any Canada-wide social analysis where the researcher is unilingual. I focus the data portion of the analysis particularly on discourse produced by sex workers to take a deeper dive into the nature of the narratives presented therein and analyze them in relation to context and crisis. The entire dataset could be used for future analysis.

Internet Ethnography

I conducted what can be conceptualized as an internet ethnography (Hine, 2000) of organizational social media sites of outreach and advocacy groups from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. All organizations examined promote the sex work as work narrative and advocate for the decriminalization of the work, citing a flawed system and a misinformed and judgemental society for the problems and hardships experienced by sex workers as a social group. Social media discourse materials from the following organizations were coded for either sex positive rhetoric, or discourse which mentioned or emphasized the fastidious and careful sexual health and cleanliness of sex workers through the pandemic. The number of social media followers and likes were recorded on 2019/09/15.

British Columbia:

FIRST – Decriminalize Sex Work Now! - "(A) coalition of feminists who have come together to support the rights of sex industry workers and advocate for the decriminalization of adult sex work.[1] 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" (FIRST, 2007).

PACE Society – "PACE Society is a peer-driven organization located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver that provides support, advocacy, and education by, with, and for current and former sex workers of all genders" (PACE, 2016).

Peers Victoria – "(A) multi-service grassroots agency that was established by, with, and for sex workers in 1995. Through direct service delivery and community partnerships, Peers provides an array of outreach and drop-in harm reduction and support services alongside education and employment training for current and former sex workers" (Peers, n.d.).

Triple-X Workers' Solidarity Association of British Columbia – "The purposes of the society are: To enable Triple-X workers to make decisions about how to improve their lives. To combat discrimination faced by Triple-X workers. To increase remuneration for Triple-X workers. To enhance job satisfaction for Triple-X workers. To advocate for better jobs in the Triple-X industry" (Triple-X, 2012).

Ontario:

Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project – "The Toronto Sex Workers Action Project is an organization run for and by local sex workers. Our mission is to assist sex

workers in our efforts to live and work with safety and dignity. We are founded on the belief that in order to improve our circumstances, sex workers must control our own lives and destinies" (Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project, 2019).

Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist (POWER) – "(A) a bilingual, sex positive organization created by and for sex workers that works to further the rights of sex workers as workers and human beings" (POWER, n.d.).

SWAP Hamilton – "The Sex Workers' Action Program of Hamilton is a non-partisan group consisting of concerned individuals —including those with lived experience— agencies, and groups committed to assisting and supporting those working in the sex trade industry" (SWAP, 2021).

SWAN Waterloo – "The Sex Workers Action Network of Waterloo Region (SWAN) is a group committed to recognizing and honouring individuals working in sex work in Waterloo Region" (SWAN, 2020).

Newfoundland and Labrador:

Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP) – "The Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP) is the only sex worker advocacy program in Newfoundland and Labrador. Our mandate at SHOP is to advocate for the human rights of all women who have engaged in sex work across our city and province, both on an individual and collective level (. . .)" (Safe Harbour Outreach Project, n.d.).

Table 3.1

Advocacy/Outreach Organizations Social Media Particulars

Province	Advocacy/Outreach organization	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram
British Columbia	FIRST – Decriminalize Sex Work Now!	Followers: 5,539 / Likes: 5,358	Twitter Followers: 4,368	N/A
	PACE Society	Facebook Followers: 3,645 / Likes: N/A	Twitter Followers: 10.1K	Instagram Followers: 2,243
	Peers Victoria	Facebook Followers: 3,021 / Likes: 2,699	Twitter Followers: 1,948	Instagram Followers: 2, 539
	Triple-X Workers' Solidarity Association of British Columbia	Facebook Followers: 1,257 / Likes: 1,096	Twitter Followers: 1,767	Instagram Followers: 786
Ontario	Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project	Facebook Followers: 9,482 / Likes: 9,038	Twitter Followers: 5, 283	Instagram Followers: 9,944
	Prostitutes of Ottawa-Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist (POWER)	Facebook Followers: / Likes: N/A (1.1K members – private group)	Twitter Followers: 2,044	Instagram Followers: N/A
	SWAP Hamilton	Facebook Followers: 1,795 / Likes: 1,671	Twitter Followers: 1,314	Instagram Followers: 901
	SWAN Waterloo	Facebook Followers: 2,529 / Likes: 2,413	Twitter Followers: 557	Instagram Followers: N/A
Newfoundland & Labrador	Safe Harbour Outreach Project (SHOP)	Facebook Followers: 3,774 / Likes: N/A	Twitter Followers: 2,877	Instagram Followers: N/A

Coding and Analysing Social Media Discourse

I examine the messaging, themes and visuals sex work advocacy and outreach groups are using in social media discourse related to the pandemic (excluding content related to addiction, homelessness, homosexuality/trans and racial/policing politics). The analysis was achieved through importing media materials as PDF files into NVivo and coding them for themes and patterns.

I decided on qualitatively examining screenshots from advocacy organizations in British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. I coded the data using an inductive approach, which involved identifying themes organically rather than seeking out particular patterns using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a guiding framework. This approach, like any, had its pros and cons. Examining the data inductively has the advantage of letting interesting things emerge rather than seeking out information to back or disprove a hypothesis. On the other hand, the process was a bit lengthy and the analytical journey necessarily ambiguous at first. While grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is a useful method for organically discovering themes, it does not free the researcher from inherent biases. One of sociology's great challenges is that the measuring tool (the researcher) is measuring the habits and patterns of self-same creatures. Due to my volunteer work with Living in Community, St. John's and educational background as a sociology student, I am sensitized to the unique struggles of sex workers and thus become an imperfect measurement tool for their discourse.

Upon more detailed inspection I recognized a pattern of identity management and counter narratives that worked to maintain solidarity and strength amongst sex working communities in the specific and unique contextual circumstances of a global pandemic as it was experienced by Canadian sex workers. Codes and themes and the process of extracting them were discussed with

supervisors as the ideas developed. Every post from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador were coded for themes until an exhaustive variety of ways to express viewpoints relevant to counter narratives to sex workers causing harm to society and spreading disease were examined. Specifically, the codes for sex workers as vector of disease, and sex positivity emerged from the data, revealing a pattern of offering alternative rhetoric to master narratives of sex workers as spreading disease and moral malaise throughout society. Investigating these counter narratives in relation to historical factors as well as to the COVID-19 pandemic deepens understanding of the progression of stigma and sex worker rights as a social movement. As such, these codes and themes struck me as especially fruitful in qualitatively interpreting sex worker experiences of the pandemic through the self-produced media of sex workers, advocates, and allies (see Appendix A).

Chapter 4: Sex Workers as Vectors of Disease

Versus Sex Workers as Fastidiously Clean and Proactive in Their Sexual Health

"Sex workers are historically and currently targeted by the public, law enforcement and government in the context of infectious diseases, so many workers legitimately fear discrimination and are therefore avoiding contact with government and social services in the current context" - Jenn Clamen (Amnesty International, 2020).

My data shows that throughout the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic sex workers and their allies were keen to provide alternatives to narratives that have historically arisen in association with sex work and the spread of disease (Chateuvert, 2013; Hallgrimsdottir et al., 2008; Thompson, 1998; Walkowitz, 1980). Counter narratives were a response to abolitionists, law enforcement, and government officials who leveraged the circumstances of the pandemic, coupled with long-standing stigmas to justify policing and attempts to abolish sex work. This chapter analyses social media posts that pertain to how sex workers perceive discriminatory treatment and the ways in which they frame discursive rebuttals.

COVID-19 related social discourse about sex workers re-emphasized sex workers as vectors of disease. This line of rhetoric may have fed into a rationalization to abolish the trade altogether as sex workers working through the pandemic were framed as a direct threat to public health. Figure 4.1 demonstrates how the pandemic was used as an opportunity to paint sex workers as vectors of disease and concurrently, sex work as something generally "bad" that should be permanently abolished anyhow:

Figure 4.1

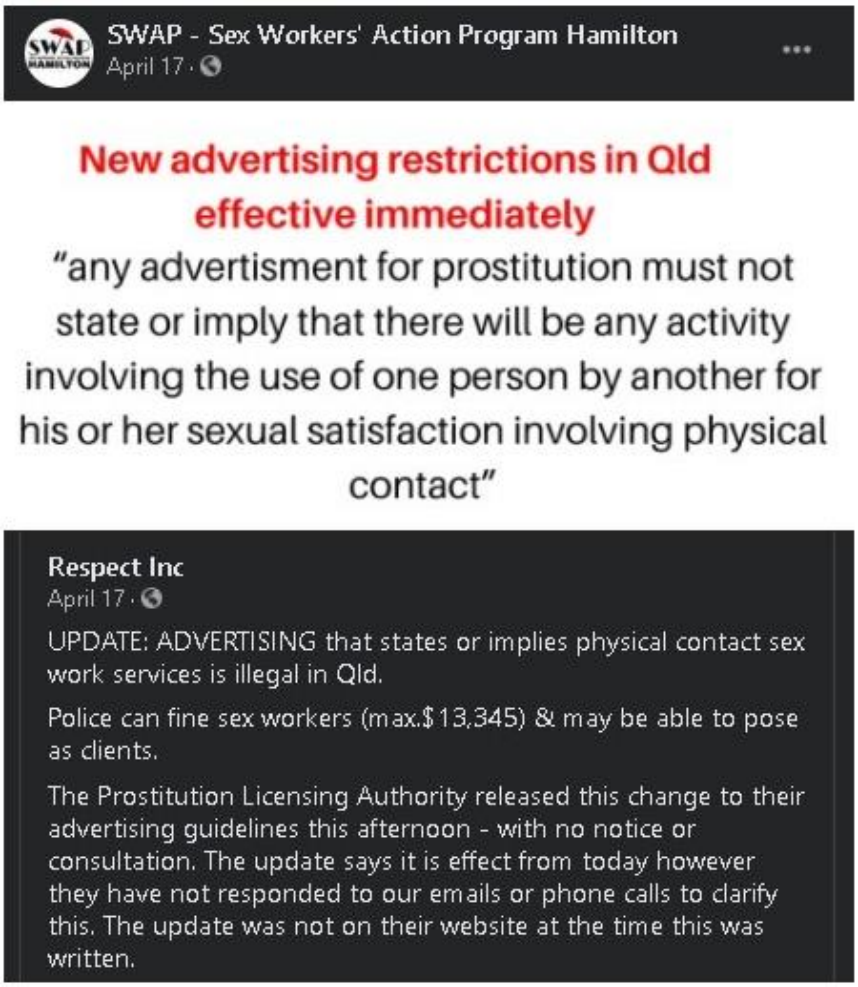
Pace Society Facebook Post, May 12, 2020

The "abolitionists" mentioned by the PACE author in Figure 4.1 refers to a faction of feminism which views sex work as inherently exploitative and works toward its complete cessation. This Edmontonian city councillor's decision to attempt to permanently close sex worker establishments through the social opportunity of fear stirred up by COVID-19 panic pins the responsibility for disease spread on the sex worker. The councillor's political move additionally punishes sex workers for the failure of social security in Canada through the pandemic to help all its citizens. Arguably (and playing devils advocate to the position that sex workers *are* vectors of disease) the onus of any alleged additional COVID-19 spread through active sex work falls onto

the Canadian government in their failure to support sex workers (Walby, 2021). The lack of support also paved the way for forceful policing practices through the pandemic. Thus, attempting to fix the inevitable end result of not providing low barrier support to sex working communities (their continuing to work through the pandemic) by policing their need to work:

Figure 4.2

SWAP Hamilton Facebook Post, April 17, 2020



Restricting sex work while not providing low barrier income support to people who do not have all their tax information officially recorded is essentially the government punishing them for its

own failure to provide an equitable, harm reduction support system through the pandemic. The discourse in Figure 4.2 demonstrates the immediate and drastic impacts legal decisions have on sex workers' lives, often without any consultation. Stigmatized individuals are not given agency or consultation, and are seemingly easily forgotten amongst the general public:

> OTTAWA -- Sex workers saw their incomes disappear overnight when the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread in Canada. Now many are in desperate situations: in need of food, rent, basic necessities. Some are now homeless and without any income.
>
> Some facing especially stark realities are continuing to work - even in the midst of the pandemic (. . .)
>
> For those who are still working, due to a lack of other options, they are now also being surveilled and policed more heavily than before, says Jelena Vermilion, executive director of SWAP (Sex Workers Action Program) Hamilton.
>
> Because they're forced to (work), whether indoors or on the street, what's going to happen is they're going to be policed even more and liable to the new fines and potential jail time with the social-distancing guidelines (Wright, 2020a).

This piece from The Globe and Mail centers the voices of those directly involved in sex work and advocacy communities. The perspective offered demonstrates how the experiences of sex workers highlight how the solution to COVID-19 spread must be socially democratic: "As a theory of society and justice, it understands the simultaneity of justice and efficiency, since if the infected are only supported in acute care, but not materially when asked to isolate, all are at risk of being infected" (Walby, 2021, p. 27). The discourse above also clearly demonstrates how the ill effects of the pandemic are felt in vastly different ways by marginalized groups (Wood, 2020). Policing sex workers through the pandemic further exacerbates inequalities and reinforces the stereotype that sex workers are vectors of disease:

Figure 4.3

Pace Society Facebook Post, May 3, 2020

Figure 4.4

SWAN Waterloo Twitter Post, May 12, 2020

Simon Watney (1988) examines how the AIDS epidemic was used as "justification" for the state cracking down on what is considered morally deviant. Working from this viewpoint, one can effectively contemplate how anti-sex work activist and police action toward sex work and pornography during the pandemic work to perpetuate the narrative that sex workers are vectors of disease and moral depravity. For example, this happens through government attempts to permanently shut down sex work establishments or attempting to "solve the prostitution problem" by effectively re-criminalizing sex work under COVID-19 restrictions, and through a general increase in moral regulation on (Clamen, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021) and offline (Lam, 2020; UNAIDS, 2020) regarding sex work and pornography (see figures 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, & 4.4). Sex workers counter these actions and narratives through dispelling misinformation and reinforcing a narrative of empowerment and the image of the sex worker as fastidiously cautious when it comes to hygiene and sexual health through the arena (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015) of social media platforms.

Counter narrative #1: Fastidious Cleanliness and Proactive Sexual Health

Nineteen social media posts from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador were coded for stressing counter narrative #1 – that is, the posts, authored by sex workers, advocates, and allies specifically referred to how sex workers practice *fastidious cleanliness and proactive sexual health*, especially within the context of the first four months of the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein details about transmission were still largely uncertain, and panic was high. Promoting these counter narratives gave agency to sex workers over their health and the health of their clients, as they used the pandemic as a political opportunity to counter the *sex worker as vector of disease* narrative. Many posts I examined shared the common underlying suggestion that sex workers exercise direct and well-informed agency over their health. Posts

advertised webinars that spoke directly to COVID-19 safety protocols. Most of these posts were not directly linked to government-imposed restrictions but instead those created *by* and *for* sex workers as the unique safety situation of the sex worker would not be included in most general preventative literature issued by the state, as there are indeed many additional factors to consider:

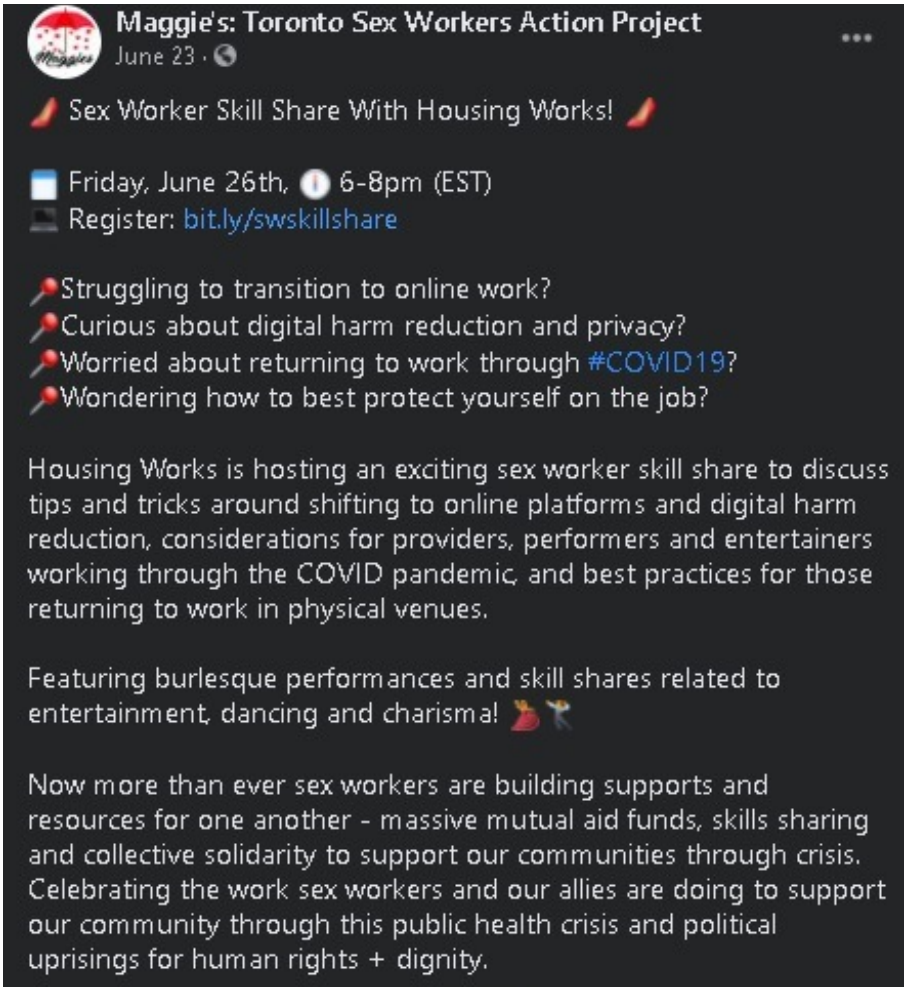
Figure 4.5

Maggie's Toronto Facebook Post, June 23, 2020, 1 of 2

Shared skills referenced in Figure 4.5 included "best practices for those returning to work in physical venues", as well as sex worker produced information regarding safely transitioning to *online* sex work (which comes with a unique set of privacy and safety concerns) in terms of "digital harm reduction and privacy" (Maggie's Sex Workers Action Project, 2020).

Figure 4.6

Maggie's Toronto Facebook Post, June 23, 2020, 2 of 2



It is notable that information sessions like the one advertised by Maggie's Toronto Sex Workers Action Project in Figure 4.6 emphasize collaboration rather than paternalistic imposition of safety measures. And instead of simply calling them "webinars" they were sometimes termed "skillshare" or "work group" (2020). It is also notable that the author maintains a fun, positive, and empowering tone. The possible danger and real troubles faced by sex workers is framed by the organization as something manageable through personal choice and empowerment through shared knowledge, as seen in Figures 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, & 4.10, below:

Figure 4.7

Pace Society Facebook Post, June 1, 2020

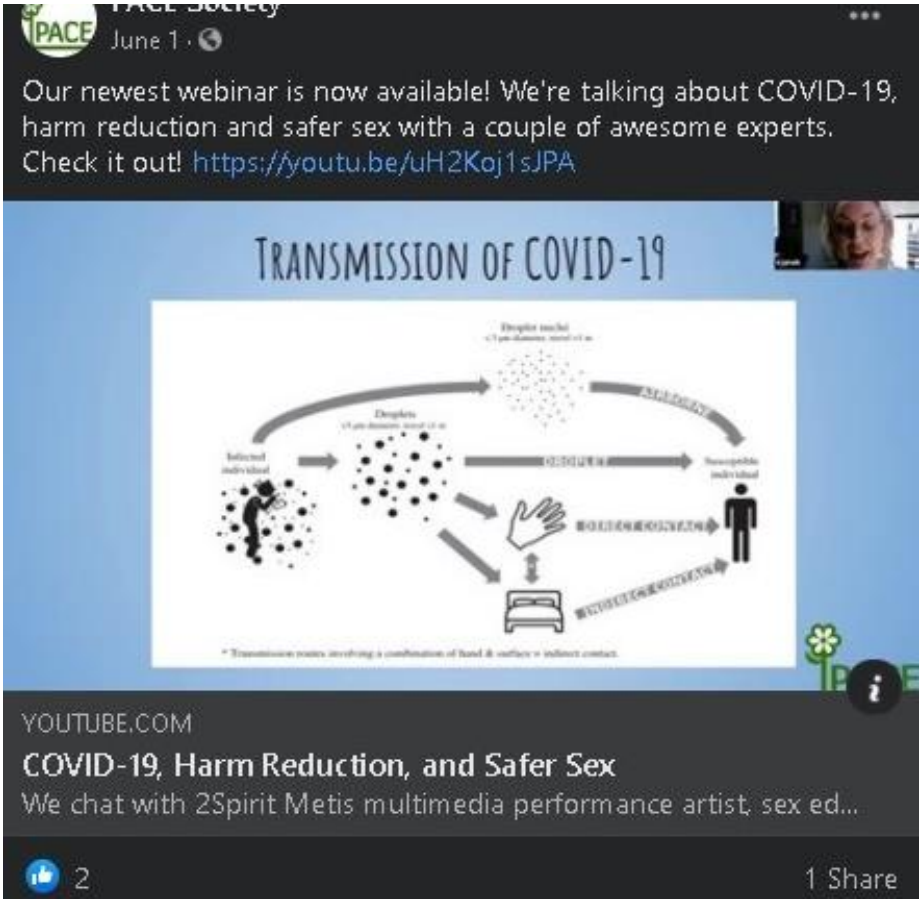


Figure 4.8

Maggie's Toronto Facebook Post, April 18, 2020

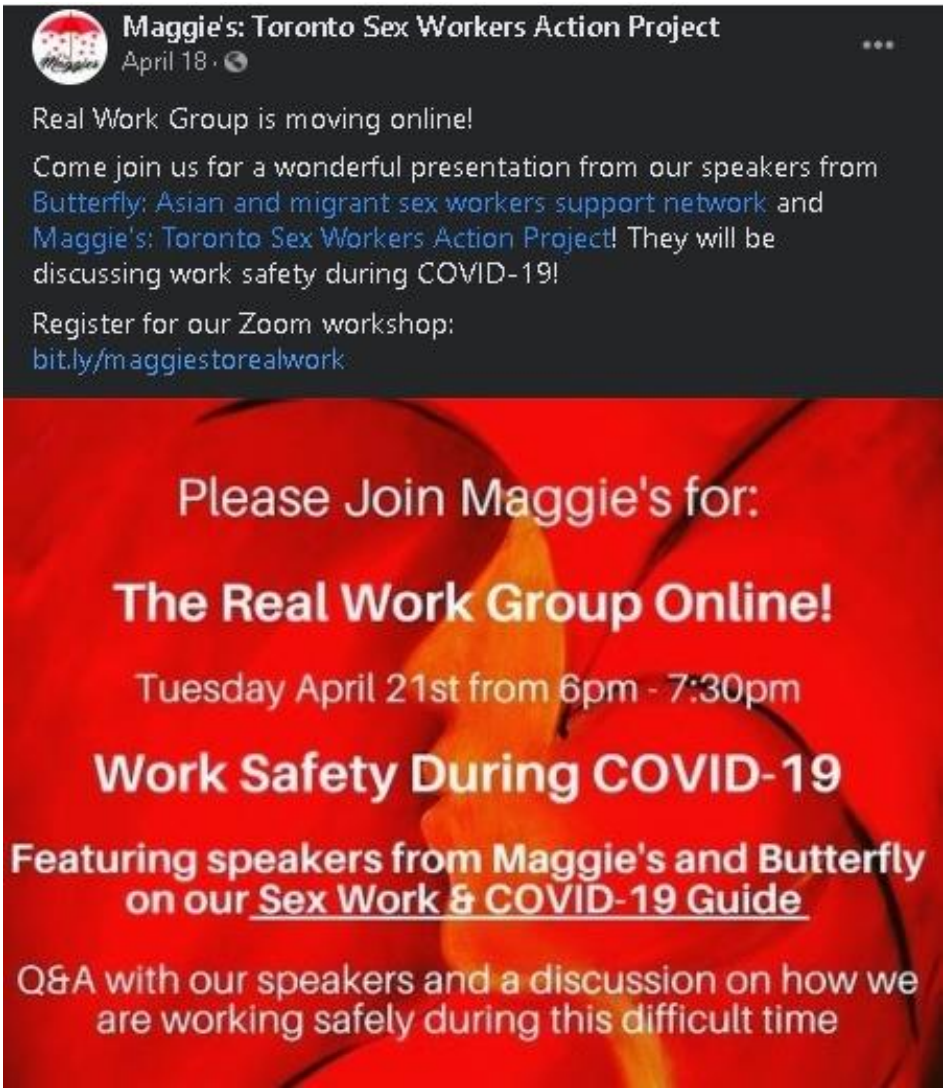


Figure 4.9

SWAP Hamilton Facebook Post, July 1, 2020

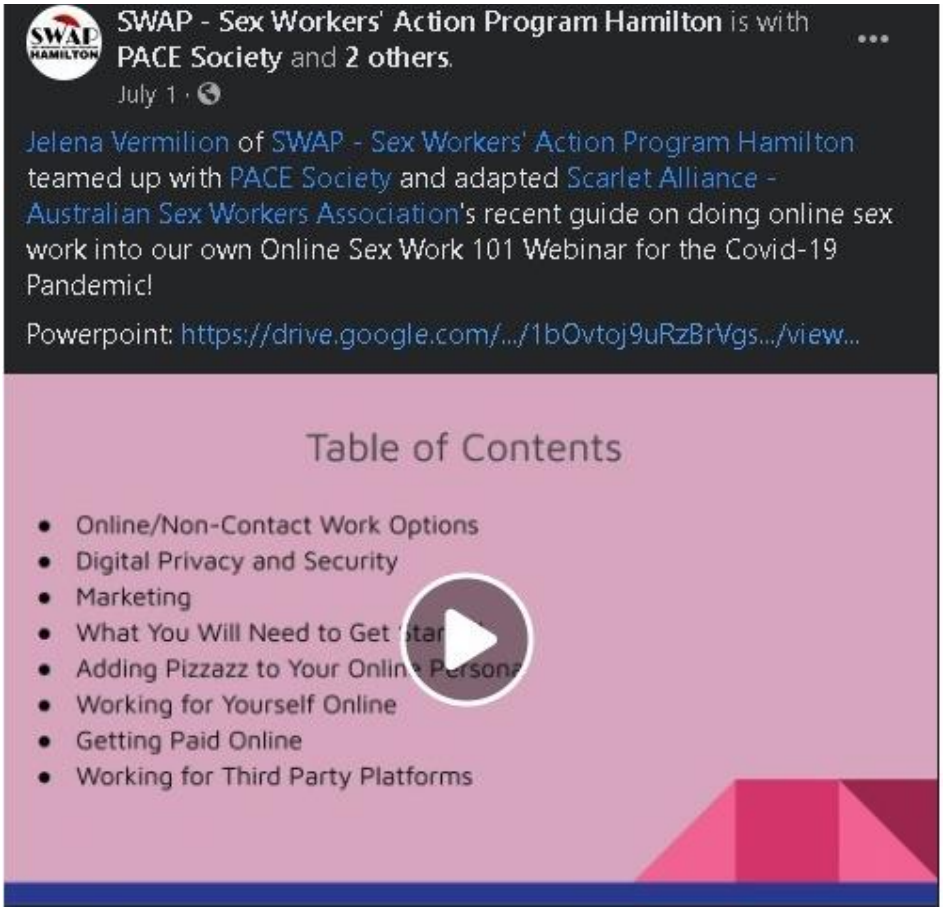
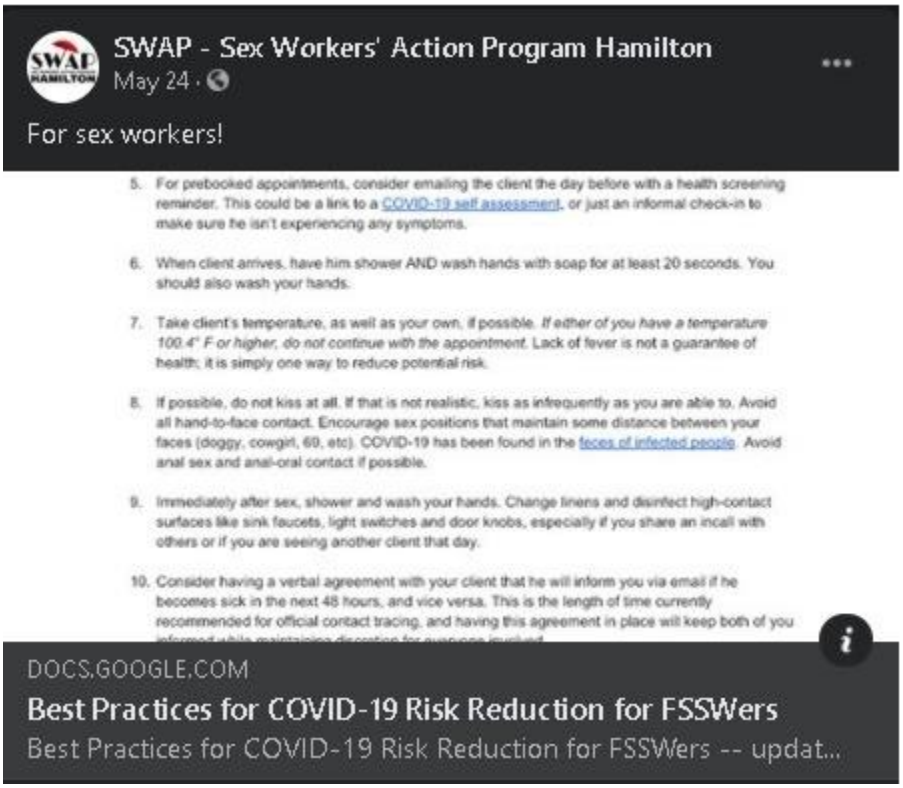


Figure 4.10

SWAP Hamilton Facebook Post, May 24, 2020



Authors sometimes aren't explicit in terms of how they present counter narratives in the discourse: abovementioned webinars (Figures 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, & 4.10) *imply* that sex workers are agentic and smart about their sexual health, which certainly functions as a counter narrative, whereas some posts worded the counter narrative *explicitly* as a direct rebuttal to longstanding stigmas that in some instances are shared with other marginalized communities:

> We are #resilient communities & continue to support each other during this #pandemic. We are often labelled as vectors of transmission. #Evidence/Data reflects this is not true. We are resilient! An informative webinar by @CATIEinfo. #Queer #Sexworkers #Gay #GBQMSM #Trans #ACB" (Maggie's Toronto, 2020).

The author of this post demonstrates the intersectional nature of disease spread scapegoating shared by those who are historically blamed for transmission in association with their deviant

sexualities, which was also manifested through the AIDS era (Brem et al., 2018; Chateauvert, 2013; Ethier, 1996; Herdt, 2009; Hogan, 1998; Watney, 1988). Going one step further, and strongly countering the narrative of sex workers as disease vectors, some post writers suggest that sex workers and porn industry workers can provide models of cleanliness to be followed by the wider public, setting an ideal example of how to best prevent the spread of COVID-19. This echoes the lament for society's not taking the practical advice of sex workers during the AIDS era (Chateauvert, 2013):

Figure 4.11

SWAP Hamilton Facebook Post, May 10, 2020

While the discourse in Figure 4.11 does work as a powerful way to counter the vector of disease narrative, it is notable that the article's language used by the author does not ascribe credit directly to porn actors but instead to the "porn industry". A trivial point perhaps, but not insignificant in relation to my analysis in that the agency of sex workers is often undermined, as mentioned above, echoing the lack of credence given to the advice of sex workers in relation to the spread of HIV (Chateauvert, 2013). This lack of agency is especially apparent in countries where sex work is regulated in accordance with the Nordic model of regulation (as in Canada) that paints sex workers as inherent victims of their clients (Amnesty International, 2020). The Nordic model makes it legal to sell sex but not to buy it – the logic thereof paints all sex workers as victims of exploitation and all johns as predators. This form of regulation is the solidification of generalizations regarding the lack of agency of sex workers, portraying them as inept and unable to think for themselves.

Summary

Despite some shortcomings of the mainstream media in their portrayals, the counter narratives examined in this chapter to sex worker as vector of disease are powerful and intelligent. Through these posts we see how sex workers are fighting a discursive battle alongside their material troubles and hardships through the pandemic and continue to stand up for their dignity and respect, insisting that their firsthand knowledge is valuable and stringent when it comes to the spread of communicable disease.

Chapter 5:

Sex Worker as Morally Depraved Versus

Sex Positivity / Sex Worker as Fulfilling Needs and Giving Care

Times of upheaval can amplify moral panics and incite finger pointing for societal ills (Thompson, 1998). The spread of disease has often been linked with a moral component which pins responsibility for spread on marginalized communities (Chateauvert, 2013; Herdt, 2009; Walkowitz, 1980). Because of the historical tendency for society to scapegoat sex workers for spreading disease through the catalyst of their alleged loose morals (Hallgrímsdóttir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008; Nova, 2016; Roth, Hogan, & Zivi, 1998; Scambler, Peswani, Renton, & Scambler, 1990; Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019; Walkowitz, 1980) sex workers were ready with rebuttals to this longstanding discriminative rhetoric that was sure to rear its head through the COVID-19 pandemic: "Sex workers sometimes say they'd rather be respected than legal, and focus their activism on challenging whorephobia and slut-shaming" (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 19).

This way of conceiving sex workers is dehumanizing and leads to justification for repressive policing tactics (UNAIDS, 2020; Wood, 2020). Offering counter narratives to harmful stigmas is important work and said counter narratives were offered through social media discourse produced by advocacy organizations in laying claim to sex work as something positive which offers care and fulfills the needs and desires of clients. Certainly, many people who access sexual services do not *need* to. That said, sex worker advocates present the service as something that meets a demand for intimacy for those who cannot access it through more conventional avenues due to mental or physical issues that society deems unattractive. One glaring example is

the fact that the disabled often access sex work services to fulfill intimacy needs due to society's conceptualizing them as asexual beings (Clare, 2015; De Boer, 2015; Fritsch et al., 2016; Geymonat, 2019).

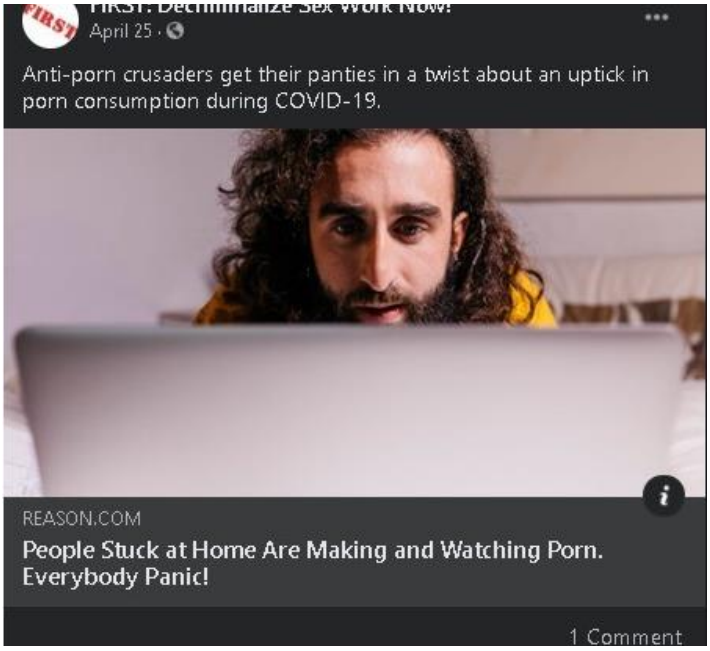
Counter Narrative #2 – Sex Positivity

Twenty-six social media posts from British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador were coded for stressing this counter narrative. The organizations' posts exemplify, allude to, or explicitly mention *sex positivity*, sex work as meeting a demand, and/or sex work as a service that provides intimacy and care to people. The sex positive narrative counters the notion that sex workers are morally depraved and threaten the moral fabric of society: "The stereotype about sex workers that says we're driven to this demeaning lifestyle by a damaged history must be exposed as the sex-negative and, yes, sexist crap it so often is" (Queen in Nagle, 1997, p. 133).

Anti-porn advocates became vigilant through the pandemic as people were stuck at home and consuming more pornography than usual (Döring & Walter, 2020). In response to anti-porn advocates leveraging the upswing in porn consumption to reinforce their cause, porn actors and sex workers were quick to counter the moral panic by sharing sex positive and neutralizing rhetoric:

Figure 5.1

FIRST Facebook Post, April 25, 2020



The implication made through the caption authored by FIRST in Figure 5.1 is that anti-porn activists are uptight and irrationally upset about porn consumption. The tone is a mocking one (suggesting they have their "panties in a twist" alludes to someone being fussy or irritated in a condescending tone), and questions what many sex workers believe is an unreasonable fear and stigma surrounding the industry. The author also adds a hint of humour to the phrasing; another way sex workers deal with society's attitude toward sex work by making light of something that is all too often and easily labelled "bad". This not to say that sexual exploitation in the porn industry or sex work industry does not occur, or that it is not a serious issue, but too often *all* commercial sexual activity is lumped into the category of "bad" and it is this confounding of sex and sexual exploitation that is dangerous for sex workers as it ignores complexity and variety of sexual interactions, not to mention any sense of agency. The author's use of humour reminds the

audience that it is in fact "just sex" when it is consensual and non-exploitative – i.e., poking fun at uptight society's view of sexual interactions. Humour is also used by the author of the post below (Figure 5.2), as the PACE society chimes in on people's humorous comments regarding the candidness of the New York Department of Health in recommending New York citizens use "glory holes" for safer promiscuity through the pandemic:

Figure 5.2

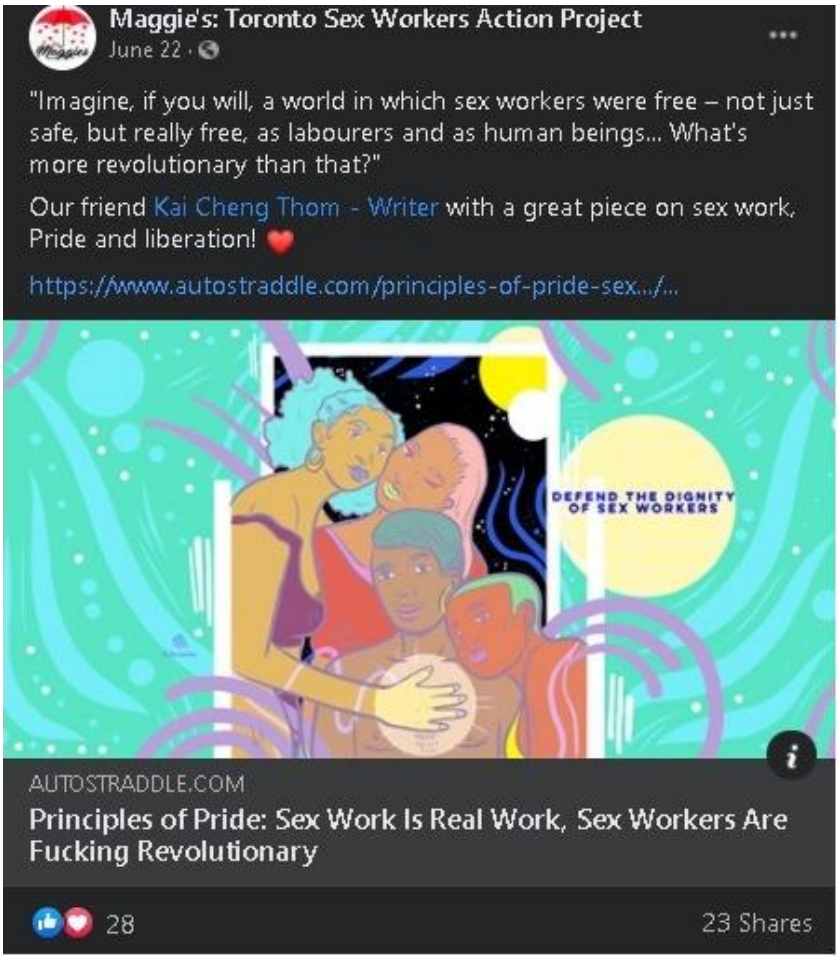
PACE Society Facebook Post, June 10, 2020

The author of this post doesn't specifically reference sex work, but PACE has shared it because it fits with their framing of sex as something fun and sometimes funny.

Figure 5.3 links to sex positive content describing imagined visions of a future where sex workers are accepted and embraced by society. This perspective paints a picture of sex work as a leverage point for revolutionary equality and society's acceptance of all its people:

Figure 5.3

Maggie's Toronto Facebook Post, June 22, 2020



On the other hand, illustrating the direct and negative effects that sex negativity and stigma has on individual sex workers, the post below (Figure 5.4) pictures an individual who was "slut-shamed" when she publicly (through a TikTok account) lamented her loss of online sex work income through the platform OnlyFans. OnlyFans became flooded with sexual content created

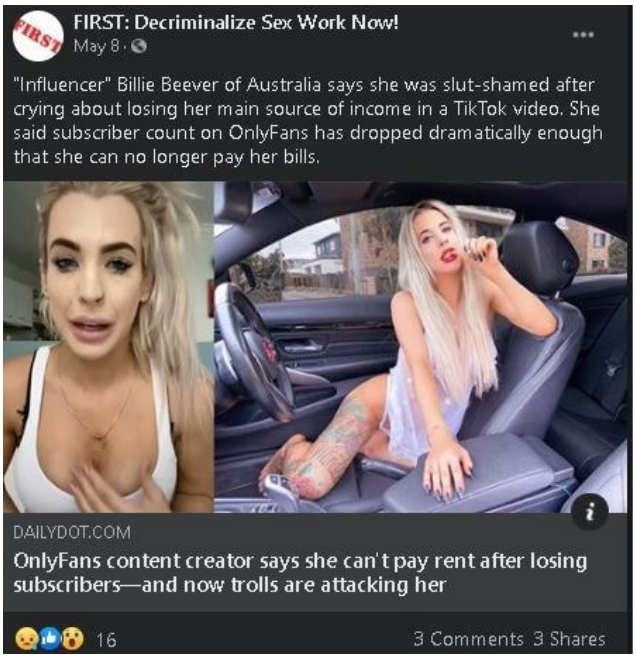
by newcomers stuck at home through the pandemic and this caused problems for sex workers who had utilized it previous to the pandemic-induced influx:

> The increase in popularity of OnlyFans during the COVID-19 pandemic is mirrored by the growth of the gig economy more generally. With the pandemic hitting other forms of part-time and casual work, the attraction of the income-earning activities provided by digital platforms has increased (Thampapillai & Steele, 2021).

The lack of respect for the reality of this woman's situation demonstrates the stigma and abuse faced by sex working individuals:

Figure 5.4

FIRST Facebook Post, May 8, 2020



While the author of this post does not directly counter the sex worker as morally depraved narrative, they offer a clear reason to by clearly indicating how stigma hurts people; the visual aspect of the post inviting you to look into her face.

Challenging "whorephobia" inherently challenges the restriction of sexual activity and is something sex work activists often engage in:

> COYOTE (Call off Your old Tired Ethics) was more than a dissident voice; its services and programs for 'loose women' rejected the idea that sex was evil. It encouraged women to be angry about whore stigma and slut-shaming for pursuing sexual pleasure or trading sex for money (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 49).

Changing the narrative that women should be virgins and sexually restrained to be considered feminine is paramount to women's rights and safety: The "myth of purity" feeds into a dangerous dichotomy between women who are virginal and dress modestly being worthy of protection and respect, and those who are sexually active, and dress provocatively are more deserving of abuse and rape as they allegedly "ask for it" through their dress and demeanour (Friedman & Valenti, 2019). Talking back to this problematic master narrative is paramount to furthering gender equality and asserting that women do not need to be sexually repressed to be worthy of respect and care.

Countering whorephobia also comes in the form of offering practical and candid advice on successfully navigating the OnlyFans platform, and online sex work in general – being candid about it implies that it is nothing to be ashamed of and in fact, online sex work is something that one should try and be smart and strategic about. The author of the post below (Figure 4.5) offers instruction for capitalizing on fetishistic sexual preferences in exchange for money, and mentions a video component to "Sultry Miss Em's" sex work:

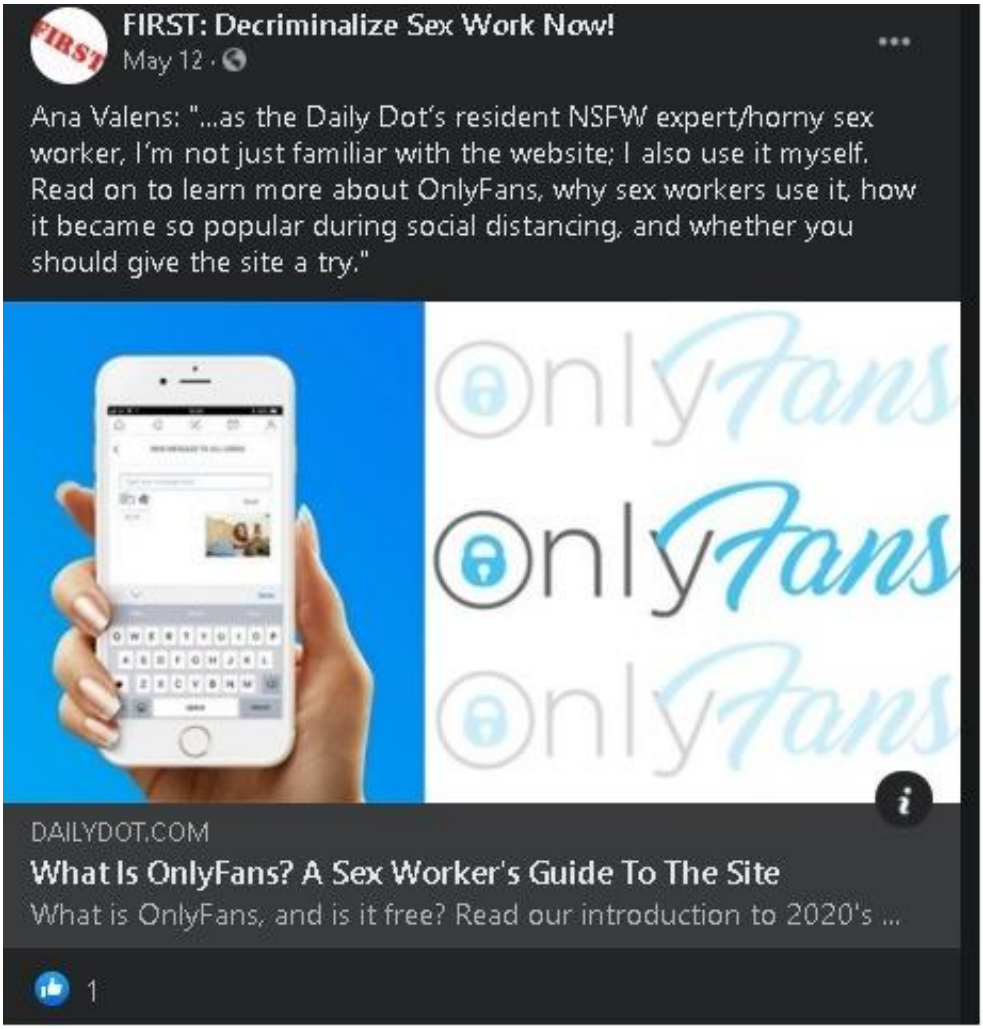
Figure 5.5

FIRST Facebook Post, July 12, 2020

Again, the candid practicality of the post below (Figure 5.6) exudes a sex positive attitude and message. Self-identifying as a "horny sex worker" is a narrative flipping technique – owning the label and making it something worn with defiant pride inherently asserts that being openly desirous as a woman is not something to be ashamed of:

Figure 5.6

FIRST Facebook Post, May 12, 2020



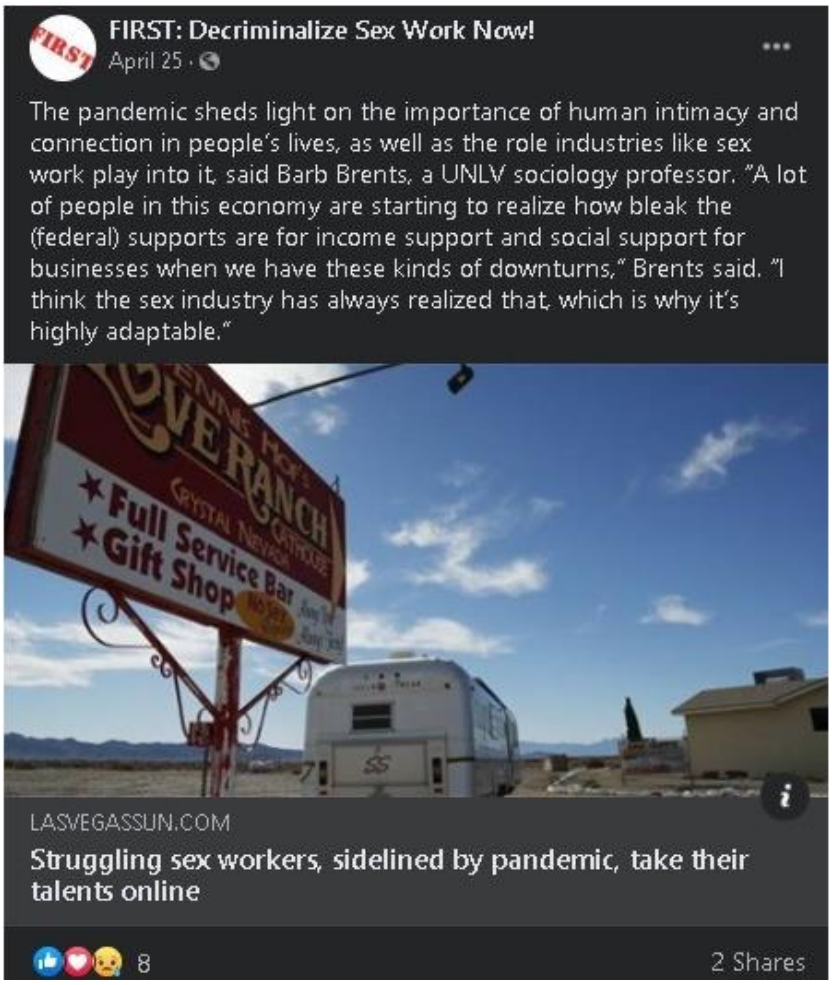
The counter narrative to slut-shaming certainly bring to mind the activism of Heather Jarvis (Program Coordinator of St. John's' Safe Harbour Outreach Project) in her part in creating "Slutwalk" in response to Toronto Constable Michael Sanguinetti who publicly placed the onus on scantily-clad women for their own sexual abuse suggesting "women should avoid dressing like sluts" in order to not be sexually assaulted (TorontoHashMob, 2011). An ostentatious display of flippant sluttery flies in the face of conservative ethics and revolutionizes female

sexuality. The idea behind Slutwalk is to claim the right to be a slut without being raped, and again emphasizes how the "myth of purity" is a dangerous one in terms of rape culture (Friedman & Valenti, 2019). Dressing "slutty" then, is reframed as an act of resistance to the idea that men are unable to sexually control themselves, and a rebuttal to victim blaming. Dressing scantily is a symbol of female freedom and the right to be sexy without being raped:

> Photojournalists in Toronto focused especially on two young white women at the start of the walk of thousands: Sierra 'Chevy' Harris in knee-high black boots and Magdalena 'Maggie' Ivaseko, wearing 'see-through, waist-high net stockings over white panties,' carrying the signs 'Proud Slut' and 'Sluts Say Yes' (Chateauvert, 2013, p. 208).

Figure 5.7

FIRST Facebook Post, April 25, 2020

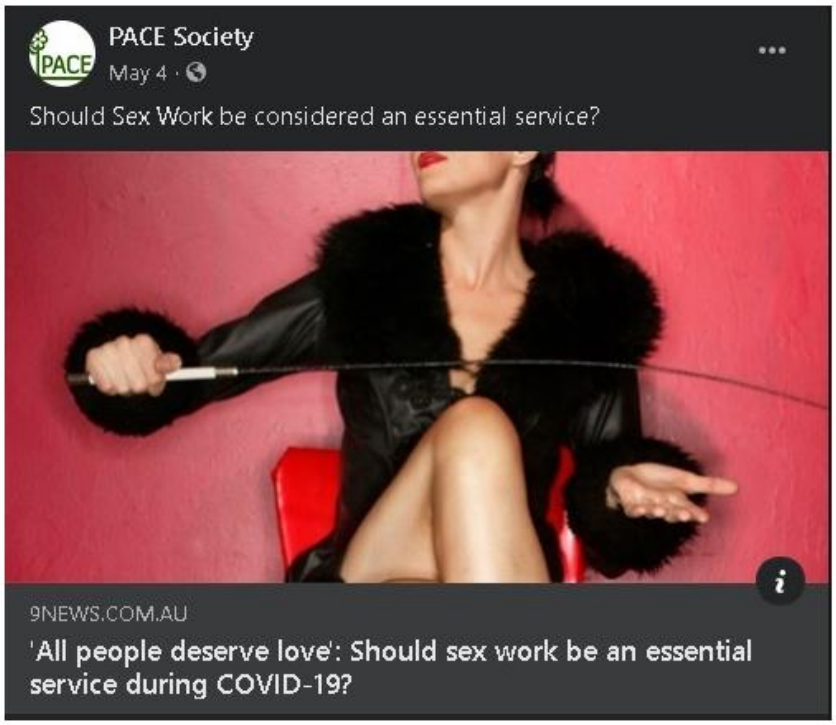


The above post (Figure 5.7) reiterates the sentiment expressed by sociology professor Barb Brents, that "(t)he pandemic sheds light on the importance of human intimacy and connection in people's lives, as well as the role industries like sex work play into it" (FIRST, 2020). This is a sex positive message which suggests sex work is an affirmative and constructive endeavour.

It is important and interesting to note that master narratives of sex workers as morally depraved are being countered while staying inside the parameters of other master narratives (Andrews, Molly, & Bamberg, 2004) of what society deems typically female behaviour; that is, givers of love and intimacy. So, while counter narratives refute some generalizations, they do so through fitting sex work into other acceptable and traditional categories of womanhood. In this way, sex workers assert the right to include themselves in the positive narratives associated with womanhood: "I have no apologies for finding pleasure in arousing male lust, as I have returned the pleasure and asked them to share it with their partners. For those men without partners, I help them get through another night alone" (Hartley in Nagle, p. 64, 1997). This quote indicates a complete lack of shame in "arousing male lust" and a pride in taking on a teaching role in terms of sexual pleasure (something that this sex worker sees as being helpful to their client's non-commercial sex life), as well as a pride in alleviating someone's loneliness.

Figure 5.8

PACE Facebook Post, May 4, 2020



Pushing the envelope one step further, the PACE author of the Facebook post above (Figure 5.8) suggests that not only is sex work deserving of decriminalization and respect, but it could also be considered an essential service through the tumultuous and lonely time of COVID-19. This idea manifests a radically sex positive message that sex workers bring healing and love to their clients. This can certainly be related to Tracy De Boer's suggestion that the employment of sex workers by disabled people can be viewed as something that helps them validate themselves as sexual beings (2015). Because society often labels the disabled as asexual, they are mostly excluded from intimacy through traditional avenues (2015). Garofalo Geymonat looked at how "sexual assistants" in Switzerland frame sexual services to the disabled as therapy (2019, p.224). Sex work can thus take place as part of therapy and is even covered under disability benefits in

the Netherlands. Emily McCarty suggests sexual services can function as legitimate forms of therapy for trauma and anxiety issues (2017). Asking whether sex work should be considered essential (figure 5.8) isn't such a stretch when one considers these perspectives.

Sex work is sometimes framed as spiritual therapy, and something nurturing to the heart in addition to the body:

> Guided by Bolen's idea of the Aphroditic woman as the guardian and inspiration of the poetic soul, I talk to my clients about their dreams, their lost creative pleasures. I encourage them in their talents and receive the depths of their wounds. I surround us both with beauty: rich hangings, icons, art, and opera. I access the soul through the senses, using the mind as a pathway (Fabian in Nagle, 1997, p. 51)

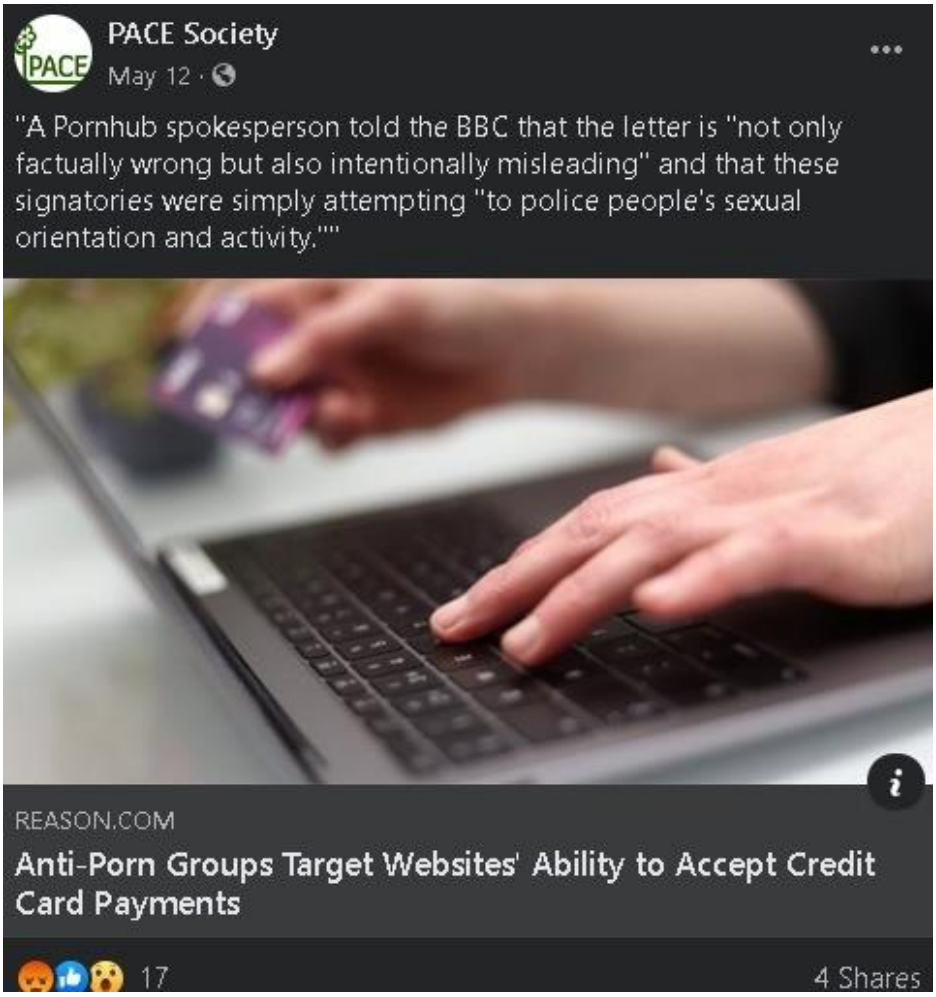
An almost dream-like and divine picture is painted through this quote, framing sex work as something therapeutic and spiritual. Society does not currently consider sex to be something essential to happiness, but rather some sort of vice. The post in Figure 5.8 asks society to consider an alternative interpretation and meaning of the role of sexual intimacy in people's lives.

Pornography

The consumption of pornography has become a battleground through the pandemic as anti-porn groups fight to lessen consumption by targeting websites that host the content. This further marginalizes sex workers in an already exceptionally difficult context. Sweeping generalizations that end in drastic moves to abolish online platforms is harmful and clearly prioritizes the lives and opinions of alarmist conservative and religiously inspired activism over those of sex working individuals. Figure 5.9 points out the underlying framework of controlling sexuality rather than helping victims:

Figure 5.9

PACE Society Facebook Post, May 12, 2020



The proposed abolishment of online pornography websites led to parliamentary proceedings on the matter. The proceedings predominantly silenced the voices of sex workers and functioned to conflate sex work and sex trafficking issues by not allowing another perspective to complicate and diversify the discourse, which is so often painted in black and white. Muffling the voices of sex workers to avoid introducing an ambiguity into the picture painted by those who wish to win votes prevents a holistic picture from entering the realm of televised political discourse. This works to maintain a neat division between what is considered sexually wholesome and sexually

deviant (which is more useful to bold political moves). The politics involved are not insignificant – the race to appease a morally panicked public is clearly demonstrated through conservative politicians chastising liberal leaders on their practices and lawmaking regarding human trafficking and child sexual exploitation: Shannon Stubbs of the Canadian conservative party clearly took the opportunity to make the issue explicitly political when she chastises the honorable Bill Blair about the liberal government's failure to enforce what is on paper, a very "robust" set of legislation regarding child sexual exploitation: "(H)ow will *you* actually ensure that, justice is done for those victims, aaand, um, these crimes are cracked down on, and the perpetrators are held to account" (Stubbs, Meeting No. 29 ETHI, 2021)? In the first session of the debate Liberal member of Parliament, Francesco Sorbara, attempted to steer the conversation to address the effects that outright banning online platforms from hosting sexually explicit content would have on sex workers; his comments were abruptly cut short by moderator Chris Warkentin (much to the openly verbal dismay of Sorbara). The direct effect that the ban would have on sex workers was not further discussed in this session. When sex workers were finally invited to comment in the second round of debates (after advocates repeatedly insisted their voices be included) they took the opportunity to be powerfully articulate on the matter:

Addressing the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics:

> Targeting internet sex work during a pandemic is such an aggressive and violent move on your part, and on the part of everybody who's considering regulation right now. The internet has been a safe haven, for so many workers who are unable to face th-the conditions of COVID-19 like so many other workers - sex workers. Some sex workers but not all have moved online and have been able to support themselves this way so it is important now more than ever to protect these spaces, and to ensure sex workers can continue to work without violence and exploitation. So if you want to know how to protect people on platforms like Pornhub, create a committee, sit down with people who actually post their content on Pornhub, sit down with sex workers and talk to us (Clamen, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021).

The gravity of the situation for sex workers was emphasized by Sandra Wesley (Executive Director of Stella Montreal):

> I want to be very clear, ah-this committee's hostility toward sex workers *will* contribute to violence against us. Ah the act-the actions so far of this committee, have been hostile and have contributed to harming sex workers. And any further repressive actions toward sex workers, will absolutely kill many of us. Ahm, this is the level of seriousness that this is for us (Wesley, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021).

Sex workers jumped fiercely into this debate, asserting a very different perspective and changing the discursive formations (Foucault, 1972) that were being used to blanket all online content as exploitative. Interestingly, it seems the debate itself was spurred on by a piece of journalistic discourse by opinion columnist Nicholas Kristof entitled "The Children of Pornhub" published in the New York Times: "Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada calls himself a feminist and has been proud of his government's efforts to empower women worldwide. So a question for Trudeau and all Canadians: Why does Canada host a company that inflicts rape videos on the world" (Kristof, 2020). Kristof's commentary does not make room for the complexity of content hosted by Pornhub, and instead points only to the most problematic aspect. Jenn Clamen of the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Reform emphasizes how Kristof's word was taken more seriously than testimony from people with lived experience and expertise regarding sex work law: "The discrediting is a very common tactic. We had three people come and present and the first thing that Mr. Viersen does is not ask a question of clarification or show any interest in anything we said, but completely discredit all of our testimony and presentation by heralding Nicholas Kristof as some god and also conflating all of the issues" (openparliament.ca, 2021). I would venture to guess that most if not all sex workers would disagree with the online publishing of pornography featuring children. This is indeed a serious issue that must be addressed and that the company should be held accountable for. That said, not acknowledging the fact that many

sex workers make a living from selling online content makes them invisible, paints them as non-human due to their choice of work, and encourages a decision that could indeed push many sex workers into poverty, and back into the street.

Sex workers assert a counter narrative to the black and white assumption that all sex work and pornography is inherently exploitative. This is important to the safety of those working in the sex industry as conflating sexual exploitation and sex work makes it easier for society to generalize about all commercial sexual activity, lumping it all into the simple category of "bad" business, thus allowing uninformed and repressive laws that do not make room for this complexity to pass and/or stay in place. Many of these laws cause much more harm than good in perpetuating the idea that all sex workers are victims of sexual exploitation, robbing them of agency, perpetuating the "myth of purity" (Friedman & Valenti, 2019) or the narrative that women should be sexually chaste to be considered worthy of police and government protection when they do encounter exploitative and abusive situations.

Summary

This chapter examined concrete examples of how sex workers used the political opportunity of the pandemic to counter stigmatizing narratives of sex workers as conduits of moral malaise. The dangers of conflating sexual exploitation with sex work are laid bare through the ongoing Pornhub controversy, and by comments and rebuttals throughout the parliamentary debate made by sex worker advocates Jenn Clamen of the Canadian Alliance for Sex work Law Reform, and Sandra Wesley (Executive Director of Stella Montreal). These women articulated just how grave the consequent violence and marginalization can be by sending the message that all sex work is exploitative and all sex workers victims. That is, that it perpetuates violence against sex workers by abusers who hear the message that sex workers are wretches in need of

rescue (Wesley, Meeting No. 31 ETHI, 2021). Taking power back by countering these generalizations and insisting on the value of the work is paramount to fighting the stigma and sex workers gaining the workers' and human rights needed to protect them from violence.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In response to the sex work specific concerns, challenges, and injustices that presented themselves through the COVID-19 crisis, sex workers used social media to keep one another physically and mentally safe by offering help to their communities in myriad forms. While sharing resources and information regarding the physical safety and wellbeing of sex workers is paramount, equally as important are the ways in which they help each other feel connected and understood. A feeling of connection is important in marginalized and often ostracized communities at the best of times, and especially through times of social and physical isolation.

The data gathered and analyzed herein contributes to burgeoning literature addressing social struggles and movements specific to the COVID-19 pandemic (Alfaro, 2021; Li, Shin, Sun, Kim, Qu, & Yang, 2021; Pleyers, 2020; Stoddart, Ramos, Foster, & Ylä-Anttila, 2021; Walby, 2021; Wood, 2020). It also furthers communications studies that look particularly at social media as a tool of resistance in relation to social movements (Jamali 2014; Stephan, 2013), and as a tool used by sex workers in particular in their efforts to gain rights and respect (Duke, Sitter, & Boggan, 2018). It also contributes to the sociological study of the risks and struggles unique to sex working folk in Canada through COVID-19 who were forced to continue working despite the inherent risks (Amnesty International Canada, 2020; Benoit & Unsworth, 2021; Wright, 2020a). Lack of low barrier supports through the pandemic exacerbates the tangible effects of stigmatizing sex workers. Sex workers' self-produced discourse is a valuable cultural artefact for understanding the way sex workers, their advocates and allies experience and understand their positionality in Canadian society.

Although reliable technological connections are not equally available to all sex workers (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021), social media functions as an important tool for fostering collective

identity, especially for marginalized women who may not have the option of being publicly vocal about their struggles (Stephan, 2013; Hine, 2000). Sharing content that questions and offers rebuttals to discriminatory treatment by law enforcement (Wright, 2020a) and society keeps up morale and sustains the feeling of community so important to mental health through the stress and social disconnection of COVID-19. In the case of Canadian sex workers, the "connection between identity and movement participation" (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 631) is strong. It is important to note, however, that not all sex workers identify themselves as part of a social movement, or necessarily identify with either category of counter narrative.

Counter narratives grate against the history of stigma in the sex work industry. Although they work to check some popular master narratives, sex workers tend to appropriate other master narratives of femininity into their counter narratives (Andrews, Molly, & Bamberg p. 362, 2004) due to the inherent commercial and sexual nature of the industry, and out of a desire to reclaim parts of femininity often denied them by society in light of their unconventional sexuality. Counter narratives often embrace what many feminists might consider a stereotypical, overtly sexualized image of womanhood (Lazar, 2007). But in this unique rehashing of favourable feminine traits, sex workers flip the narrative from one of exploitation to one of empowerment that is rooted in powerful sexuality. Sex workers who conspicuously choose to embrace the personal image of a powerful, sexy woman are effectively taking back the right to a positive femininity that is traditionally associated with virginity and purity (Friedman & Valenti, 2019), asserting that one can be a caring, nurturing woman while simultaneously being overtly sexual. Feminine constructs, then, can be viewed as two separate but related concepts. One is the positive sexual aspect of femininity, and the other the symbol of the mother and the nurturer. Both are something reclaimed simultaneously through sex work activism and counter narratives.

Sex work, then, is undervalued in the context of a pandemic in relation to this two-pronged definition: that is, sex workers are discriminated against and left out of government supports because they are considered less than due to their overt sexuality, and because care work (traditionally, predominantly allotted to the female sex) is fundamentally undervalued (Näre & Diatlova, 2020).

Counter narratives are varied and are adapted in accordance with contextual factors. Through COVID-19, they function to maintain a sense of collective identity and solidarity by challenging negative generalizations that often arise in tandem with disease outbreak (Thompson, 1998) in relation to sex workers. The counter narratives I examined were not wholly unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. That is, the pandemic amplified problems experienced by sex workers and altered the nature of communication, but these inequalities and discursive formations (Foucault, 1972) existed before COVID-19. Rather, the counter narratives were emphasized and reshaped in response to the specific contextual circumstances of sex workers, the spread of a potentially deadly and highly contagious virus, and the increased human isolation inherent to public health measures demanding quarantine and physical distancing. In alignment with the research findings of Oselin and Weitzer (2013) I found no significant disparity between regions in terms organizational goals. All three provinces presented similar counter narratives to harmful discourse surrounding sex work and COVID-19.

The first COVID-19 counter narrative I found was a rebuttal to the master narrative and commonly held ideas about sex workers as vectors of disease (Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019; Nova, 2016; Walkowitz, 1980; Scambler, Peswani, Renton, & Scambler, 1990; Roth, Hogan, & Zivi, 1998; Hallgrímsdóttir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008). This counter narrative asserted that sex workers are fastidiously clean and proactive about their sexual health, and in

fact can set a keen example of best practices for hygiene through the pandemic (Figure 4.11). Scapegoating marginalized folks for the spread of disease has indeed been a historical trend, and one that manifested itself most recently through the AIDS epidemic by pinning responsibility on groups who were viewed as generally deviant in their sexuality and/or drug use for the spread of the virus (Brem et al., 2018; Ethier, 1996; Hogan, 1998; Herdt, 2009; Watney, 1988; Chateauvert, 2013). I examined similarities and overlap between queer and disabled movements and society's perspective on their alleged "deviant" sexualities (Fritsch, Heynen, Ross & Meulen, 2016; De Boer, 2015). I delved into historical aspects of the idea of purity as it relates to ideology and Canadian nationalism, and how this is rooted in Victorian prudishness and religiosity (Friedman & Valenti, 2019; Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019; Walkowitz 1980, respectively). These perspectives informed an analysis of how sex workers produced and disseminated rhetoric which runs counter to the master narrative of sex workers as vectors of disease through the pandemic (see Chapter 4: Sex Workers as Vectors of Disease Versus Sex Workers as Fastidiously Clean and Proactive in Their Sexual Health).

The second counter narrative which emerged from my dataset runs counter to the popular narrative of the sex worker as someone who is morally depraved and spreads moral malaise through sexually deviant behaviour (Hallgrímsdóttir, Phillips, Benoit, & Walby, 2008; Nova, 2016; Roth, Hogan, & Zivi, 1998; Scambler, Peswani, Renton, & Scambler, 1990; Strange & Loo, 1997; Valverde, 2019; Walkowitz, 1980). I qualitatively examined the counter narrative of sex positivity; social media discourse which implied or explicitly stated that sex work, and sex in general, is something positive and healing, and sex workers fulfill needs and provide various forms of care to their clients. Sex workers re-emphasized (Figure 5.8) the importance of their roles as givers of pleasure and intimacy (Hartley in Nagle & Fabian in Nagle, 1997) in a time

when human contact is exceptionally complicated due to public health measures and the fear of spreading COVID-19. This isolation provided the political opportunity to assert that the "care work" aspect of sex work is often discredited or ignored much like many other types of female-dominated, care-based work in society (Näre & Diatlova, 2020). Society hesitates to place any value on sex work due to deeply entrenched stigmas about the relationship between sexuality and femininity, and the generalization that all sex workers are inherent victims of patriarchal domination. Sex workers counter this narrative by insisting on the value of their work and reframing the act of being a whore as something revolutionary (Chateauvert, 2013; Taormino, et al., 2013), agentic, and even sacred (Fabian in Nagle, 1997).

Social media is used as a tool for conveying counter narratives. The online media component of sex work and associated advocacy/outreach was significant through the pandemic as people were physically isolated from one another due to public health measures and social pressure to quarantine. Online sex work platforms, such as OnlyFans and Pornhub, necessarily grew in prevalence due to COVID-19 disconnect and restrictions (Döring & Walter, 2020) and cyberfeminism executed through social media creates safe, relatively anonymous spaces for dissenting voices (Stephan, 2013). Social media is an ideal tool for sex worker communication and community as many sex workers fear being outed. Online spaces are a safe(r) alternative to discussing issues pertaining to their work, and narratives related to their personal and collective identities (Hine, 2000).

Throughout the pandemic, sex workers, advocates, and allies have utilized social media as a tool for spreading information about safety and aid, building community and identity, and expressing dissatisfaction regarding a lack of accommodation for their specific legal and social position in terms of how government aid (such as CERB) was allotted and distributed. These

online activities can be read as forms of resistance to dominant discourses (Foucault, 1969) and ideologies, as well as repressive laws and policing practices (Wright, 2020a) that stem from stigma surrounding the work. The activities also demonstrate the unique resilience and solidarity found in sex working communities that have had to concoct ways to protect themselves and each other with little help from law enforcement or government. Geoffrey Pleyers found that, although in-person protest was less common, "less visible activities" of organizations and collectives were quite active and adaptable (Pleyers, 2020, p. 307). In my dataset, these less visible activities can be seen in the form of online workshops for transitioning to sex work in a web-based setting, posting information on knowing your legal rights in a pandemic, sharing stories relating sex worker struggles and adaptive strategies to a global community, critiquing policing and lawmaking, and otherwise offering support both material and spiritual.

The pandemic has been difficult in a myriad of ways for virtually everyone on Earth, with the effects being more severe for those who were already socially marginalized. COVID-19 and its consequent social circumstances presented a unique opportunity to evaluate sex worker counter narratives as they draw out how the effects of COVID-19 were felt and distributed unevenly (Wood, 2020), as well as the tendency for members of the public, media discourse, and government to target underprivileged populations for the spread of the virus (Pleyers, 2020). Although the crisis is still ongoing, it is important to examine how people reacted through the first months as this was before we all adjusted (at least somewhat) to a "new normal". It is important to look critically and attentively at discourse arising from the pandemic because listening to and amplifying alternative definitions of the situation shapes how policy and practices are formed and conducted going forward. The way something is socially constructed has real consequences for how it is addressed socially and politically:

> Making social democracy visible in social theory allows for a better theorisation of the COVID crisis and its alternative outcomes. It allows for a better grasp of multiple intersecting inequalities within social theory, especially when combined with a complex systems approach to society. This social democratic perspective contests the neoliberal restructuring of society (Walby, 2021, p. 25).

Crises are singular opportunities to study discourse as they may be conceptualized as "critical events" that alter the terrain of communications insofar as they have the power to restrict and/or facilitate opportunities for alternative perspectives and discourse (Stoddart et al., 2021). Thus, the study of social media-based counter narratives may be of particular significance to media studies in its examination of how uses of communication tools were amplified and changed as a result of public health measures which required the isolation of human bodies from one another. Social media is an invaluable tool to sex workers as it facilitates practical and symbolic connection while allowing for a certain amount of anonymity. This anonymity coupled with a disconnect from in-person communication made social media an important tool for sex workers through the contextual constraints of the pandemic.

Through COVID-19/sex work discourse we can see how "identities are reflections of worldviews and interpretations of extant conditions" (Hunt and Benford, 1994, p. 512). Hunt and Benford emphasize the value of "(f)uture research (which) examine(s) how personal and collective identity talk varies from one period to the next, looking at changes in perceived conditions and the emergence of new worldviews" (Hunt and Benford, 1994, p. 512). Both categories of counter narrative--sex workers as fulfilling needs and giving care, and sex workers as fastidiously clean and proactive in their sexual health -- are not entirely new but were reshaped and re-asserted through the unique situation presented by COVID-19 restrictions. Sex workers, advocates, and allies anticipated historical stigmas would once again come to the fore,

and thus a contextually driven, current, and COVID-19-specific sex work discourse was produced in response.

Limitations

This thesis has several limitations. I qualitatively examined two counter narratives that characterize social media posts from sex work advocacy organizations operating in the provinces of British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador through the first months of the pandemic (April through July 2020). While this sample illuminates patterns of counter narratives and discourse through the first months of the pandemic, it represents only a fraction of time in a particular country. The analysis is incomplete in terms of geography and organizations. While the sample roughly represents the cultural diversity of Canada, each province is decidedly unique. So, while British Columbia, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador arguably roughly represent the diversity of Canada, the analysis would certainly be enriched by including all provinces and territories. The most notable absence is Quebec, a predominantly French-speaking province with a distinct culture and politics. Not being bilingual certainly restricted my ability to examine data from Quebec and this is a deficiency in any Canada-wide social analysis. The sample and study also do not account for Indigenous interpretations of the experience of sex workers through the pandemic. Studies comparing social media use by sex workers through the pandemic globally would also be valuable in terms of media, feminist, and social movement studies through crises. Additionally, marginalized groups in general (as opposed to specifically sex working communities) would be interesting and fruitful to study in terms of their social media use through COVID-19.

The digital divide is considerable in terms of the results of the study, as many sex workers who work on the street or who are especially economically disadvantaged may not have

access to the internet. Experiences and opinions of those who were able to participate in the online aspect of sex work outreach and advocacy through the pandemic does not represent the sex working community in its entirety. Thus, I cannot claim that the opinions and myriad voices and experiences of *all* Canadian sex workers are represented in this analysis. Saocial media discourse produced through advocacy and outreach groups does purport to represent the interests of all sex working folks. That said, not all sex workers consider themselves part of a social movement and the accompanying performative and strategized aspects thereof.

Additionally, qualitative interviews with sex workers and advocates would have offered firsthand perspectives on how social media was useful (or not) to them personally and/or organizationally, and rounded the analysis out with in-depth, detailed perspectives. Although this would have enriched the analysis considerably, it is unlikely that I would have gotten ethics approval to interview members of a marginalized group through a global crisis. Other research touched on the mixed opinions of advocacy and outreach groups regarding the use of social media to supplement their services through the pandemic in qualitative interviews (Benoit & Unsworth, 2021). Benoit and Unsworth's analysis is helpful in acknowledging the missing part of my research, which are the hidden opinions of those who do not use social media to find community, identity, or offer counter narratives through the pandemic.

Future research could examine the social aspects of the spread of disease, various social and cultural responses to public health emergencies, and the role that stigma plays in terms of popular discourse, media and otherwise. It is also pertinent to examine how inequalities are exacerbated through crises, and the ways in which governments allot emergency resources as an indicator of said inequalities: "It is dehumanizing for sex workers, migrant workers, and other informal workers to be told that their lives don't matter and that their labour isn't recognized.

Providing income support to only part of the population continues to send the message that only certain lives matter" – Jenn Clamen (Amnesty International Canada, 2020). The sex worker situation through COVID-19 highlights the ways society and the government fail marginalized communities in crisis, and everyday. It is worth noting that if basic income had been implemented in Canada the problems faced by sex workers and those who were unable to apply for CERB would be significantly lessened. Inequalities exacerbated through COVID-19 highlight and emphasize crucial gaps in Canadian democracy. Studying these phenomenon checks governmental and societal discrimination and asks them both to do better. Dissenting and incredibly resilient voices that inform a more just tomorrow are ever-present. That is, if society chooses to listen.

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Appendix A. Codebook

Name	Description	Files	References
Celebrity		3	3
Community		432	806
non-profit_NGO_advocacy work		308	356
protest_civil unrest_activism		70	71
sex work community		253	281
Counter narratives_reframing		64	77
fastidious cleanliness_proactive sexual health		19	19
resilience		6	6
Sex positivity		26	26
Feminism		43	47
Abolitionism		8	9
Frames		0	0
Global_International experience		296	300
Government		294	380
Law_criminalization_regulations_policy		248	297
Policing the pandemic		59	64
Religion		3	3
Universal basic income		6	7
Image		622	1496
Academic_Government_authority figure pictured		21	21

Name	Description	Files	References
Celebrity		1	1
Charitable_Religious figure		5	5
Client_voyeur		23	23
diagram_informational		11	11
Faceless women_sex workers		160	160
Homosexuality_transexuality		9	9
Neutral imagery		19	19
police		4	4
Pre-covid		14	14
sex positive		8	8
sex work as work		23	23
sex work community icon		9	9
sex work iconography		82	83
sex worker_person_showing face		128	128
sex workers as parents		2	2
sex workers_people in pandemic masks		56	56
suggests abandonment_shutdown		47	48
Suggests drug use		4	4
Suggests empowerment_resilience		183	183
Suggests online sex work		45	45
Suggests precarity_vulnerablility		223	224
Suggests romantic relationship		6	6

Name	Description	Files	References
Suggests sexual activity		190	190
Suggests social action_unrest		75	75
sex work rights		4	4
Suggests solidarity		143	145
Intersectionality		121	136
Johns_clients		97	140
COVID safety protocols_in need_vulnerable		22	35
COVID safety_empowerment		17	18
online work_empowerment_resiliance		10	10
online work_in need_vulnerable		10	10
paying less_abusive_in need_vulnerable		12	16
scarce or absent during COVID		22	26
Online sex work		99	104
Rights		178	226
Human rights		53	55
Legal rights		13	14
Workers rights		90	98
Sex work as work		157	164
Differentiation between trafficking_exploitation and sex work		12	12
Sex Worker empowerment_resilience_agency		250	269

Name	Description	Files	References
Sex workers and disease		140	197
Sex workers and drug use		7	13
Sex workers as parents		23	27
Sex Workers in need_vulnerable_precarity		591	687
Sex worker as victim narrative		23	27
Sex working student		4	4
Sex_dating_relationships and covid		101	105
Sociology_Academic perspective		43	48
Stigma_discrimination_marginalization		273	326
Transgendered_alternative sexualities_genders		44	44
Voice of sex worker centred		117	129