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Street Sex Work: Re/Constructing Discourse from Margin to Center

Jill McCracken

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*“She’s a prostitute, addict, and abuser, but she’s a mom
and he misses her”*

“Prostitution wrecks neighborhood”

“Casualties of the Street”

“A Way Out for Prostitutes”

*[Headlines from newspaper articles about
prostitution/street sex work]*

Newspaper media create interpretations of marginalized groups that require rhetorical analysis so that we can better understand these representations. This article focuses on how newspaper articles create interpretations of sex work that affect both the marginalized and mainstream communities. My ethnographic case study argues that the material conditions of many street sex workers—the physical environments they live in and their effects on the workers’ bodies, identities, and spirits—are represented, reproduced, and entrenched in the language surrounding their work. The signs and symbols that make up these “material conditions” can be rhetorically analyzed in order to better understand how interests, goals, and ideologies are represented and implemented through language. Locating the street sex workers’ voices at its center, my analysis reveals that journalists include and omit words and themes that serve to highlight particular material conditions related to street sex work that influences the reader’s perspective of sex work as a whole. I then offer suggestions for making different language choices that subvert these disempowering ideologies. ¹

whore, prostitute, sex worker,

sacred prostitute/new age priestess

Marginalized populations—those on the margins, the sidelines—serve to reinforce the acceptable mores of the mainstream. Examining how marginalized communities are constructed not only reveals the underlying beliefs that support these representations, but simultaneously illuminates what aspects of the mainstream are valued that in turn require the creation of the marginalized.

For those readers who are unfamiliar with the myriad types of “sex work,”² a quick overview of such categories may prove useful. Sex work is defined as any commercial sexual service performed in exchange for material compensation. This category includes activities that are both legal (exotic dancing, phone sex operators, burlesque performers, adult pornography) and illegal (any activity that involves a face-to-face direct exchange of stimulation for commercial gain). Street sex work is illegal in the United States and involves those persons who solicit sex on or near the street as opposed to using telephones, the Internet, or other referral systems.³

My research centers on the language surrounding what is commonly referred to as “prostitution” or street sex work, that is, people who exchange sex for money, drugs, or other gain. Because newspaper articles largely inform laypersons’ views on sex work, I examined this public discourse to gain a better understanding of how street sex workers and their related material conditions—the physical environments they live in and their effects on the workers’ bodies, identities, and spirits—are represented within the community. My analysis reveals that journalists include and omit words and themes, thereby highlighting particular material conditions and situations, which influence the reader to view street sex work as a problem of individual choice and responsibility.

I use an ideological rhetorical analysis, by which I mean, rhetorically—the study of how language shapes and is shaped by cultures, institutions, and the individuals within them, and ideologically—the identification and examination of the underlying belief systems contained within the language. Consider the words *whore*, *prostitute*, *sex worker*, or *sacred prostitute/new age priestess*. We can interrogate the ideologies and ethical systems found in these words in order to better understand how street sex workers’ identities are created and can be created differently. The word choice of *prostitute*, *sex worker*, or *victim of sexual exploitation* is continually debated, which ultimately reflects the speaker’s moral and political standpoint regarding the discourse subject’s agency and position in society.⁴

I draw on Barry Brummett’s concept of quotidian rhetoric in order to provide an alternative perspective on sex work. In *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, Brummett defines quotidian rhetoric as:

the public and personal meanings that affect everyday, even minute-to-minute decisions. This level of rhetoric is where decisions are guided that do not take the form of peak crises [...] but do involve long-term concerns as well as the momentary choices that people must make to get through the day. [...] People are constantly surrounded by signs that influence them, or signs that they use to influence others, in ongoing, mundane, and nonexigent yet important ways. (41)

Brummett argues that the function of quotidian rhetoric is carried out through appropriational manifestations of rhetoric, or that which is most appropriate in a given situation. Therefore, people, in general, are relatively

“less consciously aware that the management of shared meanings is underway,” which means they are “less likely to take or assign responsibility for a rhetorical effort” (42). Because appropriational rhetoric is participation in as much as it is the production of the management of meaning, ultimately, individual responsibility for both is less clear. Examining sex worker identities and their surrounding material conditions through this lens offers insights into how these representations influence attitudes about sex work while contributing to the growing body of knowledge that is examining the rhetoric of the “everyday.”

Research Site & Methods

From 2005 through 2007, I researched women⁵ who work on or near the street in primarily heterosexual work environments exchanging sex for money or drugs in an undisclosed city in the Southwest. “Jemez”⁶ has a metropolitan population of approximately 1,000,000, and, because Jemez is located relatively close to the border of Mexico, illegal immigration and trafficking issues are also prevalent. Similar to many other cities throughout the country, Jemez is a “typical” environment for prostitution. The initial questions that led me to this study were:

1. How are women who exchange sex for money or drugs represented in the newspaper media surrounding street sex work in Jemez?
2. What tropes recur in these representations?
3. What ideologies are embedded in these texts about these women and their work?

This article presents a portion of my analysis surrounding community literacy and newspaper media representations.

Drawing on the three primary newspapers in the Jemez community—*The Jemez Daily*, *The Jemez Weekly*, and *The State’s Daily News*—I analyzed 10 years of newspaper articles in order to offer the most comprehensive viewpoint of how sex work is framed and represented. My initial library search for terms commonly associated with sex work—sex work, sex worker(s), prostitute(s), and prostitution—led me to scan/read approximately thirteen hundred (1300) articles. Because my goal was to examine how local sex work, specifically street sex work, is represented and discussed in the community, throughout my searches and subsequent analysis I included only the articles that specifically mentioned local sex work and issues related to sex work in the community. Within my corpus there were a total of 490 articles that mentioned or were specifically about local sex work.

Sex Work vs. Street Sex Work

Once I had determined if an article dealt with sex work, I then placed it in one of three categories: street sex work, non-street sex work, or illegal sex work in general. This delineation between street and non-street sex work is also one that many researchers make (see Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts*; Leigh, “Prostitution”; Nagle, *Whores*; Porter and Bonilla, “Drug Use”; Weitzer, *Sex for Sale*). The third

category, illegal sex work in general, was created to include articles related to all illegal sex work that don't mention street sex work specifically.

Within these three categories, 91% (444) of the articles focused on street sex work, 8% (39) focused on non-street sex work, and 1% (seven) of the articles focused on the laws and penalties relating to illegal sex work in general. Based on this simple categorization, it is easy to see why the picture most commonly considered by the layperson is that of street sex work. The increased emphasis in the media on human sex trafficking—a commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such acts has not reached eighteen years of age—is also increasingly conflated with street prostitution and the material conditions of exploitation, another reason why the public is more likely to picture street sex work when sex work is mentioned in any context (Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000).

Material Conditions and Street Sex Work

After searching, compiling, reading, coding, and categorizing all of the articles according to the themes that I saw emerging from the articles, I then analyzed these articles as they related to the material conditions of sex workers' lives. As I explain above, I define material conditions as the physical environments surrounding street workers and their effects on the workers' bodies, identities, and spirits. For example, material conditions would include the aspects commonly associated with street sex work, such as drug use and sexually transmitted diseases, and they would also include how these conditions shape both the experiences of street workers and the perceptions of street workers by the general public. The material conditions of street prostitutes' lives cannot be mapped out in their entirety as they differ substantially based on location and personal circumstances, but some of the primary considerations include social status, control and power over and within working conditions, experiences of and adjustment to the work, arrests, drug use and risk of HIV/AIDS, and resident issues with and responses to prostitution. I borrow from Wendy Chapkis' categories in her article "Power and Control in the Commercial Sex Trade," expanding on her categories based on my own analysis of the central issues most publications deal with surrounding street sex work. The above categorizations also interact to cause more oppression of and difficulty in the lives of women and men who exchange sex for drugs or money.

The Data: Rhetorical and Ideological Analysis

After the initial categorizations between sex work in general and street sex work, I further categorized the articles according to their individual subject matter. These subcategories are outlined in the table below:

Subcategory	Articles
Historical perspectives on sex work	7
Violence against street sex workers	8
Disease transmission via sexual contact or intravenous drug use	8
In-depth coverage of sex work	12
Legal cases peripherally involving street sex workers	38
Arrests of sex workers and their clients	43
Articles about the local community where street sex work was mentioned but was not the central focus	328

Table 1: Categorization of newspaper articles by individual subject matter from 1997-2006.

Within this article I analyze the underlying assumptions and ideological frameworks contained in the twelve articles within the ten-year period examined whose stated purpose is to provide an in-depth exploration of street prostitution, including its causes, consequences, and possible solutions. I then draw conclusions based on comparisons of this analysis and offer suggestions for a re-construction of the problems and solutions that surround street sex work. Comprising slightly more than 15,000 words, these articles include nine full articles (written by newspaper reporters), two letters to the editor, and one editorial written by a newspaper columnist.

Who Gets to Speak?

One way to understand how street sex workers are presented to the public is to examine each article's focus and who is given a voice within each one.⁷ As outlined in the table below, I divided these articles into categories based on who gets to speak within them.

Seven of the twelve articles focus on penalties for prostitution, plans to decrease prostitution, and a planned diversion program for men and women arrested for prostitution.⁸ None of these articles include interviews with or mention of specific prostitutes or johns. They do include the voices of city councilmen and women, police officers, attorneys, residents, neighborhood association leaders, business owners, activists in the sex-worker movement, senators involved in the proposed and contested bills regarding penalties for prostitution, the governor, and program directors (of programs designed to help prostitutes and provide diversion services) along with statistics regarding the number of women in street prostitution, number of arrests both locally and

in other areas, proposed laws, and research from nationally known researchers involving street prostitution.

The remaining five articles are in-depth explorations of street prostitution and organizations that work with women on the street. They include interviews with and information about specific street sex workers or prostitutes. Specifically, ten women who are or were actively working as prostitutes are quoted directly, paraphrased, or discussed in some detail. Of these ten women, three are dead, purportedly as a result of being prostitutes, three are—at the time of publication, at least—current prostitutes, and four were former prostitutes who had changed their lives, are actively involved in helping others to remove themselves from prostitution and their lives on the street, and are represented as role models for those still working in prostitution. Of these former prostitutes, one had become the director of a diversion program in another city for women arrested for prostitution. All ten of the women were cited by either their real or street names. Only one of these five articles includes interviews with and specific information about the johns or clients who employ street prostitutes—one who is famous and not local and two who are local and anonymous.

Article's Focal Point	Voices Included	Information Included
Penalties Diversion Programs Strategies to decrease prostitution	City councilmen and women Police Attorneys Residents Neighborhood association leaders Business owners Activists	Statistics Number of Arrests Research
In-depth exploration of street prostitution	Three women who have died Three women who are currently exchanging sex at the time of publication Four women who are former "prostitutes" who are currently helping others to leave prostitution One male solicitor who is famous and from out of town Two male solicitors who are local and anonymous	Personal information Quotations Descriptions of experiences

Table 2: Who Gets to Speak? Article's focal point based on twelve articles that focus on Street Sex Work from 1997-2006.

Based on this subset of articles, when looking at proposed solutions and penalties regarding street prostitution, the public hears from lawmakers, enforcers, and the general public, but not those who are directly participating in these crimes and are subject to these laws, ordinances, and penalties. In one article that addresses proposed penalties on owners of places where prostitution

occurs, the owners are interviewed and given a voice in order to express how this proposed ordinance would potentially affect them, but again, those directly participating in prostitution are not included. From this perspective, a reader might conclude that it is only necessary to hear from those on the law-making and enforcement side of the policy—in terms of how it will affect a neighborhood and its residents, and in some cases the business owners—because these are the only people who are given a voice in terms of proposed plans and solutions. The men and women who participate in acts of prostitution are directly or indirectly silenced when matters of policy are discussed and are only given a voice when the subject matter of the article is an in-depth look at prostitution and the programs created to “help” prostitutes.

The voices of the men and women engaged in these acts are silenced further still when concerned citizens who are only marginally involved in sex work issues are nonetheless asked to offer their opinions for print. This trend is also consistent within the hundreds of articles contained in the larger corpus of articles. In very few cases were the women and men who were directly involved in exchanging sex asked to express their opinions about the laws and penalties surrounding street prostitution.

These choices have implications for the reader’s perception of street workers and street prostitution as a whole. By removing the reader from the lived experiences of those participating in these activities when their political, legislative, and criminal attributes are discussed, while simultaneously providing an up-close and personal understanding of street workers’ lived experience when the issues of personal choice and experience are explored, creates a distinction whereby the responsibility lies in the hands of the individual making these choices, rather than in the community that is responding to these issues systemically and legislatively.

Representations of Prostitutes and Johns

The types of questions that are asked of those interviewed in the articles construct and constrain the answers that are given. In order to better understand what type of information was elicited and how the individuals are thereby constructed, I analyzed the types of questions asked of both the women/prostitutes and men/johns. From this analysis, I created several categories to help track the types of information solicited from those interviewed and include them in Table 3 below.

I briefly outline the following categories and then explain how these categories relate to the representations of prostitutes and johns in the corpus as a whole. The categories include whether the interview participant is anonymous or named in the article; their current relationship status with significant others and children; their reasons for and length of time participating in prostitution; their reasons for, types, length of time, and treatment for the use of illegal substances; the length of time and/or cause of incarceration; their status as a victim of

physical or sexual assault; and the presence of a physical description specifically related to drug use.

Information Solicited	Women/ Prostitutes	Men/ Johns
Source is anonymous; Interviewee was not asked or did not provide name		x
Current relationship status (married, significant other, live-in, etc.)		x
Children currently live with participant		x
Children are removed from the home	x	
Reasons for participating in prostitution	x	x
Length of time participating in prostitution	x	
Description of drugs used and patterns of drug use	x	
Length of time using drugs and/or treatment for drug addiction	x	
Length of time and cause for jail/incarceration	x	
Physical and/or sexual assault status	x	
Physical description based on drug use	x	

Table 3: Representations of Prostitutes and Johns. Information Solicited from Women/Prostitutes and Men/Johns based on twelve articles that focus on Street Sex Work from 1997-2006.

The Men/Johns.

Within this corpus, only one article focused on the men or johns who chose to participate in prostitution. Within this one article, two men are interviewed and quoted. Mike is a “lonely” man because his marriage ended over ten years ago, but he never thought his “search for comfort” would land him in jail.⁹ He is described as “just wanting to talk” and “to be with somebody for a little bit.” Mike states that he’s “not just a pervert.” The second man quoted in the article is Tommy, a mechanic who “lives with his girlfriend and their year-old daughter” who says he’s “satisfied with his love life.” Nonetheless, he stopped to proposition a woman standing on the side of the road, although he says he doesn’t know why. Later, Tommy suggests that his choice has “probably something to do with men.” These are the only two examples of men who purchase sex the reader sees within this corpus. Although the men are definitely portrayed as responsible for their

actions and are obviously choosing to participate in acts of prostitution, they are also portrayed as somewhat confused and pathetic.

The Women/Prostitutes.

The descriptions of the women are quite different from those of the men. For example, Rebecca is “tired of working the streets”—as her “harsh history” includes six years as a prostitute and twice as long as a heroin addict. She says she was “looking for a legitimate job, but didn’t have any luck.” She doesn’t know if it’s her past, but “it’s hard to get a job.” She goes on to say, “I’m trying as hard as I can.” Similarly, Sandy was “dragged under by drugs and knows of no way out.” She thinks of trying to create a new life for herself, but she “doesn’t know where to begin.” And again, “life on the streets and on drugs is all that she has known for several years.” Both of these women are described as long-time drug users who are trying to get out of street work but aren’t able to due to their circumstances.

In addition to not knowing how to get out, the women are also described as becoming involved in prostitution due to their desperation or as a way of taking care of themselves. For example: “Desperate for cash and with little forethought other than getting well, she turned her first trick—selling her body for quick money”; “Prostitution was her method of survival”; and “I didn’t consider it prostitution. I was taking care of myself—I didn’t have to beg or steal or depend on someone else.” Within this corpus, women become involved in prostitution because they are leaving abusive home lives, either as children or adults, and/or due to their involvement with drugs.

In general, the rhetoric related to prostitution and drugs consists of either 1) the women get hooked on drugs and then end up selling themselves in order to support their habit, or 2) they turn to drugs or their drug use escalates in order to provide a mental escape from prostitution. Within these articles, prostitution was their means of supporting themselves and is portrayed as a “choice” these women make to survive.

Based on the above analysis, I present the following comparisons: The johns commented on their relationship status and why they participated in prostitution, whereas the prostitutes were not asked about or did not discuss their relationship status. The women were asked how long they had worked as a prostitute, whereas the men were not asked how long they had been paying for prostitutes. The women were asked about the length of time and treatment for their use of drugs, whereas the men weren’t asked if they had used, were currently using, or had been treated for drug addiction. The women discussed their length of time in jail or prison, whereas the same information was not provided about the men, except for the fact that both men were experiencing their first arrest for prostitution. The men were asked questions that focused on their reasons for participating in prostitution: There is no overriding narrative about the men’s lives related specifically to prostitution, drugs, or jail/prison.

And finally, the women were asked if they had been victims of physical or sexual abuse or assaults, whereas the men were not asked if they had been victims of or had victimized others sexually or physically. The articles also included physical descriptions of the women's skin due to drug use ("arms showing scars of track marks left by needles"; "her face is pocked because, while under the influence of drugs, she picked at imaginary bugs"; and "pock marks scar her shoulders where she punched needles into her skin"¹⁰). Based on the information provided, the reader envisions the physical description of the women/prostitutes but not necessarily the men/johns.

There is a much greater focus on the negative aspects of the women's/prostitutes' lives than the men's/johns' lives. While the women are depicted as having lives ravaged by addiction, abuse, and social ostracism, the men are depicted as lonely or unfulfilled, but essentially harmless to both themselves and their community. They are regular, everyday guys who don't wear the signs of exchanging sex for money or drugs on their skin for everyone to see. Unlike the sex workers themselves who are physically marked and clearly identified, their clients are anonymous, both in name and appearance. The women/prostitutes and their paths are revealed and made public, while the men/johns remain unknown. The women/prostitutes are also much more in the spotlight in terms of their actions, both past and present, that led them to participate in prostitution, whereas the men's/john's motives and history are vague.

Available Paths: Past and Future

According to the newspaper media in Jemez, the pathways the street workers have traveled as well as those paths available to them in the future are limited. As I stated above, five of the twelve articles are in-depth explorations of street prostitution and organizations that work with women on the street. All of these articles focus on women who are currently using or have a history of using drugs, have been sexually and physically abused as children or as adults by johns, have been in jail/prison on charges ranging from drug paraphernalia to manslaughter, and are vulnerable to diseases and general violence. These women include those who currently work as street prostitutes and want to leave, had previously worked and were victims of violent crimes resulting in their death, and those who left prostitution and offer a message of hope to others.

Four of these articles focus on street prostitutes who have since left this environment and now work with and inspire others to leave street prostitution. Through personal strength and programmatic support, four women found their way out of prostitution and are now active role models and work to help others who are involved with drugs and prostitution. One article focuses on Casa Segura,¹¹ a program that works with street prostitutes, and two women are interviewed and describe their current status in detail. The first woman is unsure of her options, wants to leave prostitution and drugs, but is not sure if she'll be able to. The second street worker talks about her history of prostitution and now works with Casa Segura in order to help others get out of prostitution. Only one

of the five articles includes the voices of street workers who are currently working as prostitutes, and these women are unhappy and want to leave this work. This same article also includes the stories of three prostitutes who were found beaten and killed—violence that was attributed to their work as street workers.

In all of the above stories, the women who are working on the street want to leave prostitution. Of course, the reader doesn't hear from those who are dead, but it can be assumed that these women would prefer to be alive over being beaten, raped, and killed because of their choice to be involved with prostitution. In four out of the five articles (80%), the reader is offered a message of hope that individual street workers are able to remove themselves from street prostitution and work to help others do the same. Only in two cases does the reader see women working as prostitutes who do not necessarily plan on leaving prostitution, but who say they would like to leave and are worried about their futures. And because these messages saturate the newspaper media, the public associates these stories with all women who work in street prostitution, and most likely all people who work in sex work in general.

Solutions: Personal Choice and Responsibility

One of the stated purposes of the in-depth articles is to explore potential solutions to the “problem” of prostitution. By emphasizing the personal choices made by the women involved in prostitution, the newspaper articles construct the individuals as the source of the problem, which constrains the potential solutions. When we reframe the problem, we see different solutions.

Ironically, the story is one of “escape” that hinges on personal choice. The women are portrayed as becoming involved in prostitution because they are desperate—to escape from an abusive home life, to support a drug habit, or to support themselves in general. And yet once involved in prostitution, it is up to the individual women to choose to remove themselves from this “lifestyle.” As stated in the articles: it is up to them to “choose drugs on the street over a new lifestyle;” there are “options that exist to help prostitutes break their cycle of danger and despair, but the choice is up to them whether they will change their lifestyle;” and “it is up to them if they want to change their lifestyle.” Within these statements lies the assumption these women should choose to change their lifestyle, that there are programs out there to help them change their lifestyle, but ultimately it is their personal choice to change or not.

This construction simultaneously positions the women as prisoners or captives of the drug and prostitution lifestyle while also agents of their own change. The focus is on the individual—individuals make choices, they escape prostitution and drugs, and they become role models and provide hope, both for those who are still in prostitution and want to find their way out and for the general community who wants to find solutions to prostitution. This focus on the individual encourages the public to view prostitution as an individual's problem, rather than one that society as a whole might be responsible for.

This framework is one that makes sense in the United States where individualism, self-reliance, and the ideology of “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps” pervade mass culture. And yet this focus becomes ironic and contradictory in an analysis of the newspaper rhetoric concerning street sex workers: prostitutes shoulder the harshest blame for the evils of sex work, while johns are allowed to shirk their collusion in the same transactions; prostitutes are celebrated for their eventual choice to leave prostitution, but no celebratory voice is ever given to their initial (and in many cases, life-saving) choice to enter into prostitution; and prostitutes are commended for their strong will in leaving the sex trade while virtually ignoring the deep and damaging socio-economic roots that make prostitution a viable option for desperate women in the first place. The newspaper articles do not focus this much attention on the men who have chosen to purchase sex—they are assumed to be nowhere near as desperate as the women, perhaps because they are paying rather than receiving money for sex. But readers never learn their histories as intimately as they do the prostitutes’, nor are they considered the primary problem. Within this corpus the problem is framed as one that primarily involves drug use and focuses on the women who choose to participate in these activities. The reader’s attention is not brought to focus on the cycle of abuse, both as children and as women, that many of these women have been subject to, nor the perceived need for drugs that many of these women feel, nor the issues of poverty and difficulty supporting oneself and perhaps one’s children also. This framing of the intimate details of these women’s lives accompanied by the message of personal choice and responsibility then encourages the public to view the prostitution “problem” as one that can be solved by the individual, and, more specifically, by the individual prostitute.

Conclusions: Language and Systemic Responsibility

Based on these articles, first and foremost, when prostitution is mentioned, it is street sex work that is primarily the focus of the attention. Within the subset of my corpus that specifically gives voice to prostitutes and johns, I found that when an in-depth look at prostitution is offered, the participants in the trade are included, but when penalties, laws, and plans to decrease prostitution are discussed, neither the prostitutes’ nor the johns’ perspectives are included; instead, the reader hears only from police, social service agency leaders, lawyers, and legislators.

Therefore, when the public does hear from these women, it is only in response to in-depth articles about prostitution rather than about neighborhood plans to rid the area of or penalties for prostitution. When the articles focus on policy and programs for women involved in prostitution, the women are silent, as are their customers. They aren’t interviewed, asked what they think of the programs and penalties, and how these programs or penalties might affect their lives. Readers hear from those working to implement the programs and policies, such as city council leaders, police officers, attorneys, and neighborhood association leaders. They hear from researchers about the problems associated

with prostitution, residents and workers who live and work in the areas where prostitution is more visible, and local business owners and neighborhood association leaders who believe prostitution is decreasing the value of their properties and businesses. In two articles, sex worker activists and sex worker activist organizations are also mentioned—in one article briefly as an aside, and in another a more in-depth description of the organization and the issues surrounding sex work activism.¹² As a whole, the johns receive the least amount of attention in terms of biographical detail and the reasons for their participation in prostitution, while the prostitutes receive the greatest amount of exposure, especially about their drug use, criminal past, jail time, and status as victims of violence.

Finally, the “problem” of prostitution is represented largely as one of personal choice and responsibility. Although the women may have entered prostitution due to desperation and the need for survival, the articles focus on women who have made choices to get “help,” change their “lifestyle,” and are no longer involved in prostitution. These women are represented as heroes and role models for others who are still involved in prostitution. This same attention is not paid to the johns who are no longer involved in purchasing sex. The framework of personal choice and responsibility encourages the public to focus on the individual, and specifically on individual women, as the solution to the “problem”; larger systems of poverty, abuse, and violence are not considered.

Within these articles a number of messages about street prostitution are clear. The focus on the individual woman prostitute both diverts attention from and maintains mainstream systems of hierarchy and power. When the individual street worker is presented in the spotlight, her role is to show how other individuals can take responsibility for themselves and make a change—on an individual basis. The systems (poverty, abuse, violence) that have contributed to these problems are not questioned, nor is attention placed on the individual man/customer who also perpetuates and maintains this system. These relationships between the men and women, the selling of sex, the state’s role in that sale, its status as illegal, and the advantages of selling sex over other choices—none of these issues are questioned, critiqued, or even acknowledged. The construction of the woman and her role in the “problem” of prostitution maintain the system in which prostitution exists—or even thrives—by placing the public’s attention on the individual and the choices it expects her to make.

Not only applicable to street workers, this construction of the individual nature of street prostitution contributes to the public’s understanding of other marginalized groups. How can we as readers of our newspapers, teachers, citizens in our communities, and perhaps advocates for social justice “read” these literacy practices? Not only must we demand more realistic community representations, but these representations must include the voices from the community—most specifically those that are most directly impacted by the legislation, policies, and movements toward the eradication of this “problem.”

We must also consider these issues from alternative perspectives. How might the women and men who sell sex be experts—working with legislators,

neighborhood association leaders, social service agents, etc.—to resolve community conflicts, share resources, and address individual needs? One example of an organization that does indeed draw on the expertise of sex workers is the Sex Industry Worker Safety Action Group (SIWAG) in Vancouver, Canada, a collaborative action group that “connects police, sex industry workers, and community organizations to address the safety concerns of sex workers” (“SISWAG-Outline”). See online site “Community Resources for Sex Work and Public Policy” for additional resources (http://www.stpt.usf.edu/mccracken/research/sexwork/community_resources).

And finally, we need to implement systemic changes that would prevent individuals from being in a position where this “choice” is the only available one. If the spotlight were placed on the system—what responsibilities and choices would be revealed? Rather than constructing the individual worker and even her customer as those on the margins and thereby responsible for creating change, the discursive and practical emphasis should be placed on the systems that are not successfully providing support for members of our communities.

Let’s review the headlines quoted at the beginning of this article, all of which were found in local papers. Consider how they might be re-written to shift the focus from the individual to systemic issues, including the voices and perspectives of those who are the primary subjects of the articles.

Original Headline	Revised Headline
She’s a Prostitute, Addict, and Abuser, but She’s a Mom and He Misses Her	Poverty, Abuse, and Inequality Fail Woman, Leaving her Son Without a Mother
Prostitution Wrecks Neighborhood	Women and Men on the Street Offer Solutions for Improved Neighborhood Safety
Casualties of the Street	Poverty, Unemployment, and Violence Create Casualties, Leaving Them on the Street
A Way Out for Prostitutes	Women and Men Shed Light on Complicated Subjects: Sex Work and Society

Table 4: Newspaper article headlines revised to shift the emphasis from the individual to the system.

The above headline revisions should reflect a new focus within each article that would shift the perspective, the questions asked and answered, and the voices included, which would provide a re-vision of how the problems and solutions are constructed and understood.

This shift will require collaborations with the people who are trained to create these kinds of texts. Given the current state of newspaper decline and as the definition of what a newspaper is continues to evolve, now is the perfect time to affect this type of change. Community and social justice advocates can assist in conversations between these marginalized groups and newspaper reporters/

writers/editorial boards to develop means for more realistic community representations that, based in the voices of the marginalized groups, provide more just interpretations and frameworks through which to view the material conditions that surround these people's lives.

Endnotes

1. This study received IRB approval, a Department of Health and Human Services Confidentiality Certificate and meets the CCCC "Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies." I want to thank Julie Armstrong and Morgan Gresham, who provided substantial feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, as well as my anonymous CLJ reviewers, who pushed me to make my argument and examples stronger.

2. I call attention to the terms commonly used to describe the activities of exchanging sex for drugs or money, such as "sex work" and "prostitution" by placing them in quotations in order to show that these terms are political and place the people who practice these activities in predetermined places, often based on the political and moral stance of the speaker. For readability, I place the words in quotations when I first use them. Throughout this article I use the term sex work to describe these activities based on my own perspective that these activities are forms of labor that people perform for remuneration.

3. In undertaking this research, my primary concern is not about justifying a particular view of people who exchange sex for money or drugs in terms of decriminalization, legalization, AIDS, health issues, violence, racism, sexism, or any of the other myriad issues that are involved with and are products of these types of transactions.

4. For example, those people who tend to position themselves in opposition to sex work use the words prostitutes and victims of sexual exploitation to refer to women who exchange sex for money or drugs. Their choice of language underscores their own belief and argument that these women are victims rather than agents making an occupational choice. And then there are sex workers and sex worker advocates who believe that many sex workers are agents who freely choose this occupation and use the term sex work/er to reflect this belief and argument. Although complicated by many scholars, the "victim" versus "agent" status of the subject of the discourse holds fast in many debates, yet neither "victim" nor "agent" does the person justice. This dichotomy is far too simplistic to define any one individual or group of people in general, especially when it comes to people who are working in an area so fraught with the moral and political ideologies surrounding sexuality, gender roles, commerce, and social relationships. See Chapkis, Farley, and Weitzer for examples and explanations of these terms.

5. Analyzing issues surrounding male and transgendered sex workers and alternatively identified sexualities in sex work is beyond the scope of this project. These issues are extremely important to consider in an analysis of sex work, and yet trying to include them in this analysis would complicate the study

by involving those ideologies and discriminations that arise when concepts of gender and sexuality beyond the “mainstream” are involved.

6. Not its real name. In order to maintain anonymity of the people I interviewed for other parts of my research, I am not at liberty to reveal the location of my research site. Therefore, any indicators of personal identities or geographic locales—including the titles of local newspapers—have been changed.

7. Rather than continuing to use my language of choice, at this point I use the actual language included in the articles in order to provide the reader with a more seamless picture of the language and context found in the corpus.

8. Within these articles all of the people who exchange sex are women and all of the people who purchase sex are men. There is no mention of men who exchange sex or women who purchase sex. Although men also exchange sex on the street for both male and female clients, there is no mention of these transactions in this corpus.

9. This quotation is a paraphrase of the actual quote in order to maintain anonymity, but the key terms such as comfort and loneliness are those actually used in the article.

10. These excerpts are not exact quotations from the newspaper articles in order to preserve anonymity, but they are written very closely to the actual language used.

11. In order to maintain anonymity of my research site, the name of this organization has been changed.

12. In order to maintain anonymity of the people I interviewed for other parts of my research, I am not at liberty to reveal the names of the organizations mentioned in these articles.

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