

# Sex Work

## Rethinking the Job, Respecting the Workers

COLETTE PARENT, CHRIS BRUCKERT,  
PATRICE CORRIVEAU, MARIA NENGEH MENSAH,  
and LOUISE TOUPIN

Translated by Käthe Roth



Sample Material © 2013 UBC Press

## **Sexuality Studies Series**

This series focuses on original, provocative, scholarly research examining from a range of perspectives the complexity of human sexual practice, identity, community, and desire. Books in the series explore how sexuality interacts with other aspects of society, such as law, education, feminism, racial diversity, the family, policing, sport, government, religion, mass media, medicine, and employment. The series provides a broad public venue for nurturing debate, cultivating talent, and expanding knowledge of human sexual expression, past and present.

Other volumes in the series are:

*Masculinities without Men? Female Masculinity in Twentieth-Century Fictions*, by Jean Bobby Noble

*Every Inch a Woman: Phallic Possession, Femininity, and the Text*,  
by Carellin Brooks

*Queer Youth in the Province of the “Severely Normal,”* by Gloria Filax  
*The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada*, by Christopher Dummitt

*Sexing the Teacher: School Sex Scandals and Queer Pedagogies*, by Sheila L. Cavanagh

*Undercurrents: Queer Culture and Postcolonial Hong Kong*, by Helen Hok-Sze Leung

*Sapphistries: A Global History of Love between Women*, by Leila J. Rupp  
*The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*,  
by Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile

*Awfully Devoted Women: Lesbian Lives in Canada, 1900-65*, by Cameron Duder

*Judging Homosexuals: A History of Gay Persecution in Quebec and France*,  
by Patrice Corriveau

*Selling Sex: Experience, Advocacy, and Research on Sex Work in Canada*,  
edited by Emily van der Meulen, Elya M. Durisin, and Victoria Love

# Contents

Abbreviations / ix

Introduction / 1

Colette Parent, Chris Bruckert, Patrice Corriveau, Maria Nengeh Mensah, and Louise Toupin

**1** The Current Debate on Sex Work / 9

Colette Parent and Chris Bruckert

**2** Regulating Sex Work: Between Victimization and Freedom  
to Choose / 31

Patrice Corriveau

**3** The *Work* of Sex Work / 57

Chris Bruckert and Colette Parent

**4** The Idea of Community and Collective Action: Reflections  
on Forum XXX / 81

Maria Nengeh Mensah

**5** Clandestine Migrations by Women and the Risk of Trafficking / 111  
Louise Toupin

Biographies / 137

Index / 141

## **Abbreviations**

CATW	Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (formerly International Feminist Network Against Sexual Slavery and Trafficking in Women)
CEDREF	Centre d'enseignement, de documentation et de recherches pour les études féministes
CORP	Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes
COYOTE	Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics
CRI-VIFF	Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la violence familiale et la violence faite aux femmes
DMSC	Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee
FPT Working Group	Federal/Provincial/Territorial Working Group on Prostitution
GAATW	Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-governmental organization

x *Abbreviations*

NOW	National Organization for Women
OIM	Organisation internationale pour les migrations
PAFR	Programme des aides familiaux résidants
PROS	Providers and Resources Offering Services to Sex Workers
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
TAMPEP	European Network for HIV/STI Prevention and Health Promotion among Migrant Sex Workers
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
US GAO	US Government Accountability Office

# Introduction

COLETTE PARENT, CHRIS BRUCKERT, PATRICE CORRIVEAU,  
MARIA NENGEH MENSAH, and LOUISE TOUPIN

Canadian media and justice spokespeople have called Port Coquitlam farmer Robert Pickton the worst serial killer in the country's history: in 2007, he was found guilty of murdering six women and feeding their cadavers to his pigs, and charged with twenty other murders. Pickton admitted to having killed forty-nine women to an undercover agent sharing his prison cell. Most of his victims were "prostitutes" who performed sex work in the east-end neighbourhood of Vancouver, British Columbia.

Today, Pickton is behind bars, sentenced to life in prison with no possibility of parole for twenty-five years. Nevertheless, our collective memory remains shaken by this sordid affair, which highlighted not only the physical violence that an individual may perpetrate on marginalized people, but also the violence of prejudices against female sex workers. These prejudices still threaten to surface and provide fodder for the argument against sex work. This is so true that we actually hesitated to mention the Pickton affair in this introduction, for fear of reviving repressive attitudes or perpetuating a generalized dominant discourse that reduces female sex workers to victims, without pointing out their strengths and legitimacy or recognizing their activism.

In fact, since the 1990s, sex work has figured in the Canadian political and media arenas mainly through two *victimizing* portrayals of this

form of work: first, a focus on trafficking in women for the purposes of “prostitution”; second, a highlighting of the physical vulnerability of female sex workers, brought to light by the Pickton affair. The people most responsible for promulgating this attitude promote a vision that is predominant around the world, that of prohibitionists and the “morals police,” including many feminists who object to “the prostitution of women by men.”

With regard to trafficking in women for the purposes of “prostitution,” Canada quickly fell in line with the international community by adopting laws to combat what has been defined as a problem of exploitation of individuals rather than the unauthorized migration of workers. Very few female sex workers in Canada are known to have been victims of human trafficking. In a number of countries, however, migrant women looking for work are regularly confronted with obstacles to their mobility: they are not allowed to travel alone, without the approval of their fathers or husbands, or they are unable to obtain a passport or travel visa. These women face prejudices, restrictive – even racist – immigration policies, or the outright closing of borders.

The other issue that has surfaced in Canada since the 1990s is the portrayal of sex work through the lens of the vulnerability of female sex workers. Behind the tragedy represented by serial killers, there is the tragedy of a society that harbours the idea that female sex workers “ask for it” when men, psychopaths or not, rape or kill them because they are perceived to have exposed themselves to danger. In New Zealand, where sex work has been decriminalized, working conditions have clearly become safer. So why does Canada let these tragedies take place among the most vulnerable female sex workers, those who labour in precarious working conditions such as the street?

The person who may have been Pickton’s first victim disappeared in the early 1990s; it took until 2002 for the net to tighten around him. Only in 2005 did the Parliament of Canada, at the request of MP Libby Davis, form the Subcommittee on Solicitation Laws of the Standing Committee on Justice, Human Rights, Public Security, and Emergency Preparedness. Dissolved when a federal election was called, the subcommittee was re-formed in 2006, but its deliberations resulted in no change

to the law that might have better protected the physical integrity of female sex workers.

Today, it seems that the rights of female sex workers to life and the possibility of earning a living are no longer of interest to public decision makers in Canada, although three courageous female sex workers recently mounted a legal challenge in Ontario Superior Court in an attempt to invalidate the provisions of the *Criminal Code* related to “prostitution.”<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, these provisions are still in force; governmental authorities support initiatives aimed at stamping out “prostitution” and renew statutes that, once again, penalize female sex workers.

To keep these workers’ voices and the defence of their rights and interests from being obscured again, we decided to produce this book on sex work. Between the five of us, we have accumulated many years of activism, and our respective writings have contributed to the development of scholarship on sex work on a number of levels.

On the theoretical level, in a chapter in *Traité des problèmes sociaux* published in 1994, Colette Parent emphasized the need to think of the question of “prostitution” from within the world of female sex workers. This article broke new ground by addressing the subject in the French Canadian scholarly field in the 1990s. Parent asserted the need for the fields of criminology, feminist studies, and sociology to revise analyses and come up with solutions in collaboration with the principals concerned, and her work inspired a number of studies. On the ethnographic level, Chris Bruckert’s research has unveiled the complexity of women’s work in the world of professional strippers. Bruckert had been a sex worker, and she shed light, from a feminist standpoint, on the fact that the female sex worker is in fact the author and not the “object” of her experience.<sup>2</sup> On the level of Canadian governmental interventions, Patrice Corriveau has played a key role as a senior analyst of criminal policies in the Department of Justice Canada. In this role, among others, he has developed a keen comprehension of the field of criminal policies within governmental agencies and acquired solid knowledge of the specific issues related to the question of sex work in each Canadian province.<sup>3</sup> Maria Nengeh Mensah has collaborated closely with groups of sex workers in Canada and elsewhere since 1998.<sup>4</sup> In particular, she

has participated in setting up numerous community initiatives the goal of which is to dismantle some of the dynamics of social exclusion that sex workers face, including the training of social workers regarding the issue. Finally, on the international level, Louise Toupin has discussed conventions on trafficking in women and the resulting forms of feminist intervention. Her analyses are aligned with the critical reversals in this field of activity, which reformulate the problems of “prostitution” and human trafficking in terms of the right to mobility and the right to work from the point of view of those experiencing them.<sup>5</sup>

It is thus from these respective fields of expertise that we share with readers our vision of sex work. To date, no book considering “prostitution” as a form of work has been published in a French Canadian context. This is the point of view that we put forward in this book.

Before we go on, we want to clarify our use of certain concepts. First, readers will already have noticed that we use the word “prostitution” in quotation marks. It is a term that we feel is stigmatizing, and we have decided to put it in quotation marks to distance ourselves from that stigma. We prefer the terms “sex work,” “work in the sex industry,” and “work in erotic establishments,” which do not bear this moral weight.

Second, the notions of abolitionism and neo-abolitionism have very particular significance in the field of “prostitution.” Commonly, when the concept of abolitionism is evoked, we think of abolition of slavery or of the death penalty. During the second half of the nineteenth century in the West, however, this term was used in the debate over criminal policies with regard to “prostitution.” This debate was kept in the public eye due to government concerns, and abolition was one of the issues on the moral reform platform that emerged late in that century. In this context, the definition of the word changed.

As a point of departure, in both the United States and England,<sup>6</sup> feminists fought to abolish the regulation of “prostitution” and eventually to abolish the sex trade by raising the moral values of all citizens. But by the end of the nineteenth century, when the question of regulation was no longer on the political agenda, abolitionists were demanding the elimination of “prostitution” as such. Reformers, including feminists, advocated the use of laws that would affect all “prostitution” activities by targeting every facet of the trade and all the actors involved,

including female “prostitutes.” This moral reform movement was active in a number of Western countries, including Canada, until between 1917 and 1920.

The neo-abolitionist movement emerged during the first two decades of the twentieth century in the wake of the globalization of markets and increased migration of workers, including female sex workers, to other countries in search of a living. These migrants, the vast majority without papers, were vulnerable to different forms of exploitation and human trafficking. The issue raised interest and indignation in numerous countries, and the League of Nations was mobilized to fight the problem. It was in this context that the neo-abolitionists defined “prostitution” as a form of violence and demanded that it be stamped out. Casting female sex workers as victims, the neo-abolitionists wanted to remove them from the criminal system and proposed criminalization of other facets of “prostitution” activities, targeting in particular the customers and pimps.

We want to convey the vision of “prostitution” as work, respect the voices of female sex workers, and oppose the neo-abolitionist message that presents sex workers as victims of pimps or of their own false consciousness. Our book addresses the main elements of the debate in five chapters.

In the first chapter, Colette Parent and Chris Bruckert present the current debate on sex work. After giving a brief overview of the historical background of the debate, they summarize the main ideas behind the two dominant positions and hold them up to the evidence of empirical research and the voices of female sex workers. In the second chapter, Patrice Corriveau presents the various legal models for controlling “prostitution” and their limitations. He advocates decriminalization of sex work and deconstructs the arguments advanced by proponents of a repressive approach. The third chapter addresses the organization of labour in certain sectors of the sex industry (street work, massage parlours, erotic establishments). Chris Bruckert and Colette Parent describe the skills needed to practise the trade and the challenges that female sex workers face on a daily basis, thus opening the door to an analysis of the social stigmatization of and impact of laws on this type of work. The fourth chapter, by Maria Nengeh Mensah, gives an overall view of

the activism and initiatives of female sex workers in a number of countries, taking as a point of departure Forum XXX on sex work, held in Montreal in 2005. Mensah highlights the main demands of different groups, the recognition and legitimacy of associations advocating for better working conditions, and the potential for alliances between female sex workers and other groups. She demonstrates once again the importance of working on this issue with those who are most concerned. In the final chapter, Louise Toupin takes inspiration from a series of empirical studies conducted with migrant women since the 1990s and answers a number of common questions about the phenomenon of “trafficking” or “trade” in women. Often confused in the media with illegal migration by women for the purpose of sex work, this dominant discourse has harmful consequences for all migrant women, in addition to providing fodder for anti-migration policies. Toupin deconstructs certain received ideas on this issue and highlights some practices promoted by organizations of female sex workers working directly with the migrant women affected.

In the pages that follow, we hope to deconstruct certain myths and prejudices and to argue convincingly that it is not only possible but necessary to defend the legitimacy of sex work while fighting violence against sex workers.

## Notes

- 1 In 2009, Terry-Jean Bedford and female sex workers Valerie Scott, fifty-one years old, and Amy Lebovitch, thirty years old, asked the Ontario Superior Court to void the provisions of the *Criminal Code* related to prostitution because they infringe on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. These women felt that they were forced to put their lives in danger because the law forbade the opening of brothels, which would enable female sex workers to work under much safer conditions.
- 2 See Bruckert (2002) and Bruckert and Parent (2007).
- 3 See Corriveau (2008).
- 4 See Mensah (2006)
- 5 See Toupin (2002).
- 6 For the United States, see Rosen (1982); for England, see Dubois and Gordon (1983) and Walkowitz (1991).

## References

- Bruckert, Chris. 2002. *Taking It Off, Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Bruckert, Chris, and Colette Parent. 2007. La danse érotique comme métier à l'ère de la vente de soi. *Cahiers de recherche sociologique* 43: 97-109.
- Bruckert, Chris, Colette Parent, and Daniel Pouliot. 2005. *Comment répondre aux besoins des travailleuses du sexe de rue dans la région de l'Outaouais*. Ottawa: Status of Women.
- Corriveau, Patrice. 2008. L'évolution de la gestion juridique des individus aux moeurs homoérotiques au Québec: l'influence des discours dominants. *Bulletin d'histoire politique* 16 (3): 33-42.
- Dubois, Ellen Carol, and Linda Gordon. 1983. Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought. *Feminist Studies* 9 (1): 7-25.
- McKeganey, Neil P., and Marina Barnard. 1996. *Sex Work on the Streets: Prostitutes and Their Clients*. London: Open University Press Buckingham.
- Mensah, Maria Nengeh. 2006. Débats féministes sur la prostitution au Québec, point de vue des travailleuses du sexe. *Revue canadienne de sociologie et d'anthropologie* 43 (3): 346-61.
- Parent, Colette. 1994. La "prostitution" ou le commerce des services sexuels. In *Traité des problèmes sociaux*, ed. Simon Langlois, Yves Martin, and Fernand Dumont, 393-407. Quebec City: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture.
- Rosen, Ruth. 1982. *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Toupin, Louise. 2002. La scission politique du féminisme international sur la question du "traffic des femmes": vers la "migration" d'un certain féminisme radical? *Recherches féministes* 15 (3/4): 9-40.
- Walkowitz, Judith R. 1991. Sexualités dangereuses. In *Histoires des femmes en Occident, Le xixe siècle*, ed. George Duby, Michelle Perrot, and Geneviève Fraisse, 389-418. Paris: Plon.

© UBC Press 2013

Originally published as *Mais oui c'est un travail! Penser le travail du sexe au-delà de la victimisation* © Les Presses de l'Université du Québec 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher.

---

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

**Mais oui c'est un travail! English**

Sex work : rethinking the job, respecting the workers / Colette Parent,  
Chris Bruckert, Patrice Corriveau, Maria Nengeh Mensah, and Louise Toupin ;  
translated by Käthe Roth.

(Sexuality studies series)

Translation of: *Mais oui c'est un travail!*

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2611-2 (bound).— ISBN 978-0-7748-2613-6 (pdf).—

ISBN 978-0-7748-2614-3 (epub).

1. Prostitution. 2. Victims of crimes. 3. Human trafficking. 4. Prostitutes – Civil rights. I. Parent, Colette, 1947-, author II. Title. III. Series: Sexuality studies series.

HQ118.M3413 2013

306.74

C2013-903399-8

C2013-903400-5

---

**Canada**

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada, through the National Translation Program for Book Publishing, for our translation activities.

UBC Press  
The University of British Columbia  
2029 West Mall  
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2  
[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)



Canada Council  
for the Arts  
Conseil des arts  
du Canada