
Sex Workers in the Maritimes Talk Back

Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald

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UBCPress · Vancouver · Toronto

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15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on ancient-forest-free paper (100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free, with vegetable-based inks.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Jeffrey, Leslie Ann, 1967-

Sex workers in the Maritimes talk back / Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7748-1331-0

ISBN-10: 0-7748-1331-8

1. Prostitutes – New Brunswick. 2. Prostitutes – Nova Scotia. I. MacDonald, Gayle Michelle, 1957- II. Title.

HQ149.M37J43 2006 305.9'3067409715 C2006-904281-0

Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and of 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 Aid to Scholarly Publications Programme, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

UBC Press
The University of British Columbia
2029 West Mall
Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2
604-822-5959 / Fax: 604-822-6083
www.ubcpres.ca

*To Kim Grant, who wanted her name in this book,
and to all sex workers in the Maritimes who “talked back.”
Thank you for sharing your stories.
Your words are not in vain.*

*And to Malcolm (Mackie) MacDonald (1932-2002),
who gave most of his life to social justice causes
and community work, and who supported this work
despite his conservative politics, rest in peace.*

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Preface

This book began as a conversation in 1999. Or rather, the research that led to this book began as a conversation. This conversation took place after a lecture by Leslie Jeffrey to a class that Gayle MacDonald was teaching. Gayle was then an associate professor, Leslie a doctoral fellow at the same university. Leslie had spoken on sex work in Thailand, the topic of her dissertation and eventual book.¹ She was interested, however, in bringing the research home, and Gayle was interested in bringing together some of her work on socio-legal and sexuality issues. Very little research had been done on sex work in the Maritime provinces and the voices of sex workers from that region had rarely been heard in the Canadian literature. The conversation became a promise, a commitment to meet on the topic, which eventually led to a small Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Aid to Small Universities grant, which led to a pilot study and many, many talks with colleagues from academia and the community and, finally, to a Standard Research Grant entitled "Perceptions and Attitudes towards Prostitutes in the Maritimes," in April 2001. The study took three long years to complete, and writing the manuscript took another.

But this is the story of what has led to the writing of this book. The true story is what we found out in talking to sex workers and, indeed, what the reader will find in these pages: a story of the spirit, courage, tenacity, despair, and silencing of a group of women and men who make their living mostly in the sex trade in the Maritimes. These women and men, whom we feel privileged to have met and interviewed, have a critical analysis of society, life, and work that deserves to be heard. They resist the same economic marginalization and movements as do many other workers in the Maritimes, fight back against violence, and laugh at the hypocrisy they see around them. They are the true storytellers, the backbone of this book. As grateful as we are to all community groups, leaders, police, and health workers who talked to us during the research for this book, in the end, it is the sex worker

her/himself who stands out. She or he speaks to us in a clear voice, “talking back” to all who would relegate her/him to the margins of the social world. It is to each and every sex worker in Fredericton, Saint John, Moncton, and Halifax that we dedicate this work.

Acknowledgments

The two or so names printed on the cover of a book do not reveal the many hands that were involved in that piece of writing. We'd like to name, acknowledge their contribution, and sincerely thank them here for their contributions: to the many research assistants who aided in both the research and the preparation for this book – Jason Doherty, Katie Daley, Erinor Jacobs, Meagan Cameron, Luanne Efford, Julie Leggett, Mike Fleming, and, most especially, Mary-Ellen Green – a heartfelt thanks for all of the meetings, emails, correspondence, and contact with community groups. A thank you, as well, to research assistant Patti Wheatley for assisting with editing in the final stages of the manuscript, and for finding all of the “last-minute” errors. To Anita Saunders and Anna Moran, secretaries extraordinaire, for all of the support and for aiding with the final editing of the manuscript, a sincere thanks. To Ann Macklem, UBC Press production editor, Judy Phillips, the meticulous copy editor, and, especially, the patient and determined senior editor at UBC Press, Emily Andrew: thank you. We'd also like to thank the many anonymous reviewers for their many suggestions and edits. Thanks also to Dr. JoAnn Majerovich for reading the health chapter in its infancy.

We'd also particularly like to thank the organizations and their staffs that hosted the interview process and were invaluable in carrying out the research for this book: Stepping Stone (Halifax), AIDS Nova Scotia, Coverdale (Saint John), and the Moncton Sexual Health Centre. And again, a thank you to all the people who took the time to be interviewed for this project.

We are indebted to the Research and Financial Offices of St. Thomas University, Fredericton, and the University of New Brunswick at Saint John for their support and management of this project.

We would like to acknowledge the contribution and support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (grant #410-2001-0330).

On a more personal level, Gayle MacDonald would like to acknowledge the support of some dear friends and colleagues, including Jeannette Gaudet,

Lori Beaman, and Rebecca Johnson, for their words of encouragement when the project looked too daunting. And to Jonathan Rahn, for great meals, for shared parenting of our children, and for supporting the work through some difficult years of illness, death, and separation, my gratitude. To Eris and Breagh MacDonald-Rahn, for celebrating the work when Mom needed it most, thanks, chickens. To Jo Lang, for bringing her lightness of being, her love of life and order, into the chaos that is the life of an academic, thanks will never be enough.

Leslie would like to thank Greg Cook for his continuing support (and many hours of editing and feedback).

Sex Workers in the Maritimes Talk Back

Introduction

I mean, yourself, you're a professor. I got grade eight education. And you know what? I don't care. I'm happy, you're happy. It's not what you learn in school. My fiancé, I'm telling ya, he's got so much up here, and my sister, brains? But for someone so smart, they're so fucking stupid. When it comes to street smart and stuff, I'm like, holy God! (Dana, Halifax)

The object of this book is to feature sex workers in a marginalized region talking back to the powers that shape their lives and the world around them.¹ In particular, it focuses on sex workers' analysis of, and resistance to, common interpretations of their lives. Sex workers as subjects of study serve as the objects of a great deal of professional interpretation – by academics, policy makers, police, health professionals, and the media. Sex workers and sex work are the putative basis of some feminist theories, psychological frameworks, and criminological discourses, yet their own analyses of their lives are often missing. It is frequently assumed that sex workers cannot be knowers in the sense of being able to present a critical analysis of their lives. It is this silencing of their critical consciousness that lies at the base of their greatest oppression. This silencing has denied sex workers full citizenship and full humanity. In this book, we hope to at least begin to acknowledge and reveal sex workers, not only as agents but as critical analysts, who comment on their lives while laying bare the structures of power that affect all of us.

The book is based on research formulated from interviews with sixty sex workers (forty-eight women, ten men, two transgendered persons) ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-two years (the mean was thirty-two years) in three cities in the Canadian Maritime provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.² In a series of half-hour to hour-long interviews, we asked these workers about their issues, what was good and bad about the job, what their concerns were, and what they would like to say to society at large. We used

their responses to structure the issue areas that would be addressed in each chapter, and as such, each chapter represents, in descending order, the most salient concerns of the sex workers. We draw on their analyses of the issue at hand and sometimes contrast their understandings with the dominant voices of society, such as journalists, police, health workers and policy makers, whom we also interviewed. Thus, we have tried to frame the issue in what we understood to be sex workers' perspectives, while providing an analysis of these dominant frameworks.

This privileging of the sex worker "voice" is not completely unique. While there has been some acceptance of sex workers as agents and as speakers, this acceptance is generally limited to a few sex workers who are pictured as more high class and more liberated; that is, those who are not constrained by poverty or otherwise marginalized. Alternatively, the voices of the most exploited sex workers are occasionally used to illustrate the evils of the trade, but not to present a fuller picture. As a relatively poor and marginalized part of Canada, the Maritimes – like other economically marginalized regions of the world – may be expected to house some of the more oppressive conditions of sex work – poverty, unemployment, addictions, as well as a conservative and judgmental culture. On the basis of this stereotypical picture of the Maritimes, sex workers here should be among the most oppressed and least liberated of those working in the trade.³ Indeed, many assume that sex workers here should be seen on a different level from sex workers in the major centres of Toronto or Montreal, for instance, where they are considered to be more likely to have chosen their profession. The intimation of this particular reading of sex workers in the Maritimes is that they are unable to speak for themselves – or more appropriately, to understand for themselves – as other sex workers may be able to do. Someone else, a journalist, a policy maker, or police – it is assumed – must interpret for them the meaning of their lives. On the rare occasion that sex workers in the Maritimes are quoted or invited to speak, therefore, the most frequent focus is on the most negative aspects of their lives, as exemplars of the supposed reality of sex work in the region. That is, the framework is already determined by those asking the questions. However, this denies those who are more constrained by circumstance the ability to interpret their own lives. Such an approach also implies that "the rest of us" are both liberated and somehow more knowledgeable. Granted, many of the sex workers we interviewed were mostly working on the street (although this is a flexible concept); some had addictions and most struggled with the options of low-waged work or unemployment. Despite these potential difficulties in their lives and work, the men and women we spoke with were undoubtedly agents – in the sense that they were making choices and reflecting on those choices in a clear-eyed manner. They had much to tell us about the way the world works.

Knowledge about sex workers, particularly those who are marginalized by region, race, or economic circumstance, is often produced by so-called straight society, which seeks to reinforce its position of authority as both knower and (therefore) decision maker. We as authors of this book are not immune to this charge.⁴ We are both academics, from outside the trade, who are trained to produce supposedly authoritative interpretations. As such, we have been trained to talk about sex work in theoretical terms and to think methodologically about how we ask questions, of whom, and how to interpret the answers we receive. It is just as difficult for us to step back and listen to sex workers as it is for any other professional hearing their words. We have no doubt influenced the framing of information in ways that make sense to us. Certainly, the questions that we asked determined the answers that we received. Our purpose was neither to find out why people became involved in the sex trade nor to determine an overall demographic picture. Rather, we asked questions designed to evoke a sex worker's own prioritization, and understanding, of issues. In particular, we wanted them to tell us what they thought about the society around them. To counterbalance our interpretation as much as possible, we have included some rather large portions of interviews so that readers may make their own interpretations, and so that the sex worker speaking can be more clearly heard in her/his own voice. And we have tried to include those voices that challenge or contradict our own line of reasoning. Overall, the selections of interviews that we present here try to show sex workers analyzing and evaluating: thinking through options and meanings and talking back – or resisting common interpretations and stereotypes. And, as much as possible, we try to follow their analyses. Of course, only books written by a wide variety of sex workers can fully accomplish this task, and we hope more of these books will be written.⁵ In the end, we hope that, through this presentation of sex workers' voices, we at least open up the possibility of following Chandra Mohanty's charge: "It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."⁶ The resistance by sex workers that we document is a resistance to the dominant voices that represent them.

The methods in literature that correspond most closely to what we attempt to do here are Michel Foucault's understandings of knowledge and power, as well as critical qualitative analysis.⁷ We hesitate to describe this work as ethnography, despite the ethnographic nature of sex workers' descriptions of their lives, as ethnography often includes a greater sense of physical space and context than we allow in this writing. Community action research techniques,⁸ post-colonial theory,⁹ and critical geography¹⁰ have all informed this work. Last, but not least, we owe a debt to feminist analysis¹¹ in the reading of sex workers' lives, as most interviewees were

women (although we did interview men and transgendered persons) living in less than ideal social circumstances – although we say this with caution. Not all feminists have always understood, empathized, or supported sex workers and sex work. As one of our interviewees eloquently put it:

There are a lot of middle-class women that knows, when their husbands ain't home, where they're at. They're not at work, right? But they're not the ones that judge ya. But then there are women, if you ever talk to one face to face, she gonna have nothing bad to say about ya, right? Because she knows. But when they all get together, that's when it all comes out. Like a bullying thing. (Denise, Halifax)

Indeed, there are many divisions among feminist thinkers, all of whom would claim to have sex workers' best interests at the centre of their analyses. We document some of these theoretical struggles in later sections of this chapter. These struggles are premised on different understandings of sex work and, more specifically, on different understandings of who a sex worker is. We begin with this question in the next section.

Sex Worker, Prostitute, Whore?

Throughout this book, we use the term “sex worker” to refer to people who work in the sex trade or in commercial sex. We include in this skin work (strip or exotic dance) as well as erotic massage, escort, and street-based sex work. We have grouped the skin trade in with sex work (despite the differences and divisions between these types of work) mostly because we wanted to capture the broadest possible group of interviewees, and a few exotic dancers and strip workers did share their stories with us. For simplicity's sake, we have referred throughout this book to “sex work” as including exotic dance and strip.

Overall, we have chosen to use the term “sex work” rather than “prostitution” because we recognize what many of the women and men who spoke with us recognize: that this activity is, indeed, work. It is a way of making a living, sometimes a very good living, no matter how people judge it. The useful term “survival sex work” has been introduced by the sex-worker-run Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education (PACE) Society to distinguish those for whom there is less control over working conditions because, for example, of heavy addictions.¹² The term acknowledges that sex work is still work and that workers would all benefit from better conditions, but emphasizes that, for some, the job is more problematic than it is for others. Not all of our interviewees used the term “sex work”; in particular, those outside the larger centre of Halifax, where sex workers have their own outreach centre, did not use this term. In other cities, such as Saint John,

terms such as “street girls” were still in use among the workers. But when researchers used the term “sex worker,” there was a positive reception. As one young woman said, “‘Sex worker’: I like that.”¹³ However, we also want to make it clear that the men and women we spoke with are not only and not always sex workers. As another woman in the trade pointed out: “It’s a job, not a person.” More than almost any other group, sex workers seem to be understood only in that role. This is a gross simplification of their lives into one activity or one aspect of their lives. We use the term “sex worker” to refer to our interviewees who work or have worked in the trade, but we caution readers that this is merely shorthand. We sometimes use the terms “person who works in the trade” and “worker” and “wo/men” to remind readers of this.¹⁴

Above all, the usual terminology used to refer to sex work – for example, “prostitution” – is laden with meanings and overtones that reflect dominant society’s agendas rather than any reality experienced by sex workers. Here, we need to distinguish between the concept of “the Prostitute” and the actual “prostitute.” As Wendy Chapkis has made so plain in her work, “the Prostitute” is a social construction that reflects the meanings and understandings imposed by outside agents. “There is,” she argues, “no such thing as ‘the Prostitute’” – only the meanings attached to her/him by others.¹⁵ The “reality” of sex work is flexible rather than fixed, and it depends on the meaning attached to it by those who experience it. Thus, one’s experience of sex work can vary according to age, social location, gender, and even personality or mood. The term “prostitute,” as used by others, however, carries with it an imposed meaning and an assumed knowledge about that lived reality. The concept of knowledge that the term “prostitute” is assumed to carry is precisely what we seek to challenge here. That is, the knowledge implicit in the term is an external reference. This means that the concept of understanding associated with “prostitute” comes not from the sex worker her/himself. It is an externalized, generalized understanding or social construction. We see this social construction in a series of portraits of sex workers emanating from a number of sources, including: the media, the police, neighbourhood associations, and health care workers. The sex workers we spoke with, though, show us other portraits of the sex worker: as sister, mother, wife, friend, and ally in time of need; and as people with great insight, humour, courage, and stamina.

In this study, as in any on sex workers, it is important to uncover what the dominant or prevalent concepts are that are used to describe sex work. Those are the concepts that people assume they know and understand implicitly – the concepts used most frequently in common language and in the media. Common perceptions are that the sex worker is a deviant who sells her/his body, who has no morals, who is a victim of abuse, who is probably poor,

and who is most likely drug addicted. Even the most sympathetic portraits of sex workers portray them as victims. As a mode of explanation, this works quite well for most people, because it is only by understanding the sex worker as a victim that any “thinking, respectable” middle-class person believes s/he can make sense out of sex work. Another portrait of the sex worker depicts her as an agent in her own miserable demise, her pitiful life a result of poor choices, a legitimate target for abuse, ridicule, derision, and apathy. After all, the story goes, she made these bad choices, and now she has to live with them. An even more common theme is that she willingly participates in a risky life with drastic and violent consequences.

These strikingly different assumptions about the “prostitute” lie uncomfortably together. How can they be true? Is she at once a victim of exploitation and a person with very bad judgment? Is she a morally derisive character or an addict to be pitied? Is she to be rescued or further accused? Saved or left to reap the consequences of her behaviour? Is this lifestyle a choice or a habit?

It is important to recognize that these understandings are based less on knowledge than on presuppositions about proper sexual behaviour. These presuppositions are part of the gender structure that disciplines female behaviour in particular. The madonna/whore structure divides women into those who deserve respect and those who do not on the basis of their sexual behaviour. Men are not similarly judged (unless they engage in homosexual behaviour, in which case they lose their status as well). Those who recognize the unfairness of this double moral standard but do not wish to give up their madonna status tend to view the sex worker as a victim. Those who uphold the divide as correct see the sex worker as a whore and an agent in her own demise. This approach denies any responsibility on the part of the public. And it does not involve accountability on the part of the political process. It holds the “prostitute” in a particular kind of cocoon or vacuum, as if s/he is isolated in the social atmosphere, without clients, without interaction with others, and without identity beyond the label.

Perhaps even more important to the discussion is not the correctness of these portraits but an examination of the power these stereotypes hold.¹⁶ Because these images of the sex worker are repeatedly reinforced to the public, for example, through the media, it is difficult to counter them with other portraits. As either a hyperbolized victim or an exaggerated provocateur, the Prostitute serves as an othered category, a deviantized symbol of all that is wrong, distasteful, or repugnant to the social world about human sexuality. S/he serves, as Chapkis outlines, as a symbolic mirror of what society generally knows about itself, but of which it really does not want to be reminded. As such a mirror, the Prostitute reflects all that is contradictory, counterintuitive, and rule-defying about our lived sexualities. The existence of prostitution services demands explanation – it forces us to realize that we

would rather think we are served well enough through marriages, relationships, and love. Our overly romantic and sentimentalized view of love, always laced with its erotic, darker opposite, sexuality, prevents us from seeing that neither view (the romantic or the erotic) completely meets all sexual needs. The sex worker is a reminder of that irony. S/he stands as a testament to all that has gone wrong, according to the moral right. She is the whore that all women will become if they fail to be madonnas. S/he is godless, unattached, and available to all. S/he marks her days in the servicing of others and she is little more than a slave, by most accounts. Even when she is constructed alternatively, not as slave but as agent, she stands in the same spot: vilified for daring to do what social structure has failed to do, by servicing the social and sexual demands of a significant portion of men who are willing to pay for the service. For this, she stands as moral outrage, a damned spot to be cleansed from the public psyche, a non-woman who is, at the same time, Everywoman. She is unmarriageable, incapable of mothering, and not the least bit responsible for her actions.

At least that is what these portraits would like us to believe. However, it is important to remember what these images do *not* do. They do not present the sex worker as an agent *within* social structures. That is, they both see agency in black and white terms: either one has it or one does not. One is either completely free or completely exploited. Both deny any resistance on the part of the sex worker to the powerful structures that shape all our lives. The sex workers speaking in this book reject such a simplified view. They recognize the constraints, barriers, and power structures of society and they fight against them. Thus, in this work, we examine the nature and definition of these portraits in order to cast them in a different light, an illumination that comes from the very words of the wo/men themselves. Sex workers “talk back” to the dominant discourses and understandings of their lives by resisting the weight of stereotype and stigma with their words and in their actions.

Power and Knowledge

In this section, we explore discourse as a concept that includes the everyday talk, or use of language, that is dominant in the social world. The reason for this examination is twofold: to expose the language of dominance that surrounds the sex worker and to determine how this language is used to oppress her/him. Discourse, as Foucault tells us, is the site of the production of power. Discourse creates the world around us in ways that serve power and enable dominance and oppression. To call sex workers whores, victims, or criminals does little to help understand the lives or words of sex workers. If anything, the portraits of sex workers as victims, or as blameworthy, may in fact help perpetuate violence and stigma against sex workers. To understand the type of language used to describe the sex worker is to understand

the power of words (discourse) and that power's relationship to sexuality generally.

The principal features of the relationship between power and sexuality, as Foucault tells us, may be summarized as: 1. The negative relation: Where sex and pleasure are concerned, power can *do* nothing but say no to them. What this produces, if anything, is absences and gaps; it overlooks elements, introduces discontinuities, separates what is joined, and marks off boundaries. Its effects take the general form of limit and lack. 2. The insistence of the rule: Power is essentially what dictates its law to sex. Sex is placed by power in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden. 3. The cycle of prohibition: Thou shalt not go near, thou shalt not touch, thou shalt not consume, thou shalt not experience pleasure, thou shalt not speak, thou shalt not show thyself; ultimately, thou shalt not exist, except in darkness and secrecy. To deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a power of prohibition. 4. The logic of censorship: This interdiction is thought to take three forms: affirming that such a thing is not permitted, preventing the thing from being said, and denying that the thing exists. 5. The uniformity of the apparatus: Power over sex is exercised through a legislative power on the one side and an obedient subject on the other.¹⁷

All of these interdictions can be applied to the existence of the sex worker. For example, we find the negative relation of sex and pleasure as "limit and lack" in the legal proscriptions against sex work. All serve to limit sexual contact of this nature, regardless of whether or not those engaged in the act are consenting adults. The second interdiction, the insistence of the rule, is apparent in the social regulation of sexuality, in the determination of which types of sex are permitted (within heterosexual marriage) and which are forbidden (all other types of sex). The third relationship of power and sexuality, the cycle of prohibition, represents the uneasy relationship most of the public has with sex: it is omnipresent yet secret. Sex is all over the media, yet not to be publicly experienced in any way(s). The fourth interdiction, the logic of censorship, helps us understand most public policy on sex work. Denying the sex worker voice in the media representation of the sex trade is yet another example of this censorship.

Finally, as Foucault understands it, power over sex is exercised the same way as are other forms of power: with the law on the one hand and the obedient subject on the other. The sex worker is, at the end of the day, a licit subject with illicit agency. In other words, in Canadian law, she is a legal entity that cannot act, because to do anything that invites, solicits, arranges, or communicates for the purposes of prostitution is to be subject to legal charge. However, she is subject to language that affirms her work as her identity and that locates her as an addict or as a criminal. The label "prostitute," for all it connotes, denies her the right to voice her own ideas or analysis or to talk to the very institutions that oppress her. This denial is

part of what it is to have little power in the social world.

Yet, as Foucault also indicates, discourses are not only a site of power but also a point of resistance: “Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.”¹⁸ We agree with Foucault’s assertion that discourse “transmits and produces power” yet “undermines it and exposes it” at the same time. Dominant scripts, or stories, of the Prostitute are everywhere we look in this research: in the literature, in the words of professionals, sometimes in the words of sex workers themselves. The scripts we uncovered in interviews with social control agents, such as police and probation officers, vary little from the vacillating discourse between victim and criminal that we see elsewhere. But to buy into the commonplace narrative of the Prostitute is to misunderstand how resistance to narrative is just as easily present. Sex workers talk back to the storying of their lives in a poignant, angry, and declarative fashion. They resist stereotyping, violence, definition, and assimilation, and do so every day and night of their working lives. To do otherwise is to submit to dominant discourse, and to submit may cost them their lives. This is more than a game of words, and sex workers know it.

Agency, Resistance, and Feminist Theorizing

Despite all this denial and repression, there remains the possibility, indeed the necessity, of agency and resistance. Feminist theorists should be at the forefront of defending sex workers’ agency and championing their resistance because feminists recognize that the relationship between power and sexuality is powerfully gendered. Nevertheless, many feminists have a great deal of difficulty with sex worker agency.

Much feminist theorizing of sex work has focused on the sex worker as victim. Radical feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon, Sheila Jeffreys, and Kathleen Barry, insist on a feminism that renders sex workers passive victims. This type of feminism locates the sex worker body in a totalizing patriarchy, one that blames men for exploiting women’s sexuality. Sex workers are victims and, therefore, unable to act or negotiate sex acts for themselves. Such perceptions of sex workers have increased criminalization in Sweden, for example.¹⁹ In that country, claims that prostitution is simply exploitation have led directly to policies that further criminalize sex work. This strategy, it should be noted, has been tried in many countries and has yet to be proved effective. As Noah Zatz notes, “legal regimes ... play an important role in suppressing sex workers’ attempts to articulate their practices as a

form of work and promote its interpretation as fundamentally a sexual act.”²⁰ That is, feminist theorizing and politics of this type may actually contribute to the power structure that can indeed oppress sex workers, a power structure of which middle-class academic feminists are a part. As one analyst of migrant sex work has put it, “There is a growing tendency to victimise poor people, weak people, uneducated people and migrant people. The trend, which began as a way of drawing attention to specific forms of violence committed against women, has now become a way of describing everyone on the lower rungs of power. Routinely, supporters position them as victims in order to claim rights for them, but this move also turns them into victims, and victims need help, need saving – which gives a primary role to supporters.”²¹ When sex workers refuse to play the victim role, they are quickly accused of selling out and giving in to the patriarchy. As Linda LeMoncheck points out, “Sex workers complain that they are doubly stigmatized; as morally incorrect by conservatives for their sexual license and permissiveness, and as politically incorrect by feminists for making sexual transactions with sexists and for taking advantage of a capitalist enterprise that profits from women’s sexuality.”²²

A second feminist position, pro-rights feminism, views the sex worker as a worker first and foremost. Sex work is viewed as a choice made by women and men within more or less constraining circumstances. That is, pro-rights feminism is concerned with the individual’s right to make her/his own choices, not having choices made for her/him (which radical feminism tends to do).²³ However, this position is not easily reduced to a liberal or libertarian form of feminism, where the only problematic barrier is in the state’s interference with individual freedom. Pro-rights feminism recognizes that sex workers, like most individuals, are making choices within the constraining power structures of race, class, sexuality, and gender but, for pro-rights feminists, these structures are neither inevitable nor unchanging. Rather, they can be challenged and resisted through political organizing (among both non-sex workers and sex workers) and changed through political action. That is, breaking down the structures that constrain individuals requires recognizing the agency and individual freedom of sex workers. For pro-rights feminists, while sex work in its current form may be oppressive and exploitative for some, these conditions can be changed if sex workers’ political agency is recognized and supported, for example, through the creation of rights-based movements or unions that lobby for and uphold good working conditions. Sex work, therefore, can be made at least safer and less exploitative for all and, ultimately, a freer choice.

A third feminist position on sex work, sex radicalism, builds on the second but it emphasizes the identity politics of sex work and the role of discursive power. This third position draws on postmodernist feminism and queer theory.²⁴ It views the sex worker as a resistant identity that exposes the

suppression of women's sexuality and the exploitation of her labour. That is, sex radicalism emphasizes the radical potential of sex work in exploding and expanding the boundaries of sexuality and gender. According to Corina McKay, queer theory, for example, enables us to view the sex worker as a performer who challenges dominant arrangements of power. In this view, the sex worker "inverts the 'male gaze' by creating what the male gaze desires but on the sex worker's own terms."²⁵ Further, sex workers' negotiation over what sex acts will be performed for how much makes visible the absence of such overt negotiation in so-called hetero-normative relationships – despite the actual exchange of, for example, buying dinner for sex. Without being overtly negotiated, such relationships may, in fact, grant much more access to women's bodies than sex work.²⁶ Critics often accuse sex radicals of being overly "celebratory" in their focus on the empowered "out-law whore" and their potential neglect of the structures that can make sex work a daily grind rather than a liberating experience. As Wendy Chapkis argues, however, not all sex radicals are of the libertarian perspective where sex is free from the constraints of power, rather, many view sex as a "terrain of struggle."²⁷ Sex radicals seek to recognize the potential in sex work for resistance to and subversion of the current sexual order even as they acknowledge the potential for oppression and exploitation. Sex radicalism allows us to see the importance of discursive power, the power to determine meaning, as one of the key arenas of political struggle over sex work.

In this book we emphasize sex workers' resistance not only to the material forces of work, law, and violence but, importantly, their discursive resistance to the social constructions that make such conditions of work, acts of law, and acts of violence possible. Acknowledging the discursive challenges made by sex workers to these interpretations of sex work as well as sexuality and gender, for example, is key to empowering sex workers and liberating sex work from oppressive conditions. That is, acknowledging and challenging discursive power does not disable progressive political change, rather, *it makes such change possible*. For example, viewing sex work as work rather than sexual exploitation or moral debauchery enables political approaches that recognize and support sex workers as rights-bearing political and social agents rather than objects of intervention and control. It also allows policy responses that are more likely to address sex workers' concerns and a politics based on solidarity rather than saving. Thus, in this book, we draw on these combined insights of sex radicalism and pro-rights feminism to enable us to hear sex workers' resistance to the discursive and material power relations that surround them.

Dangerous People: Sex Workers and Resistance

Resistance is a concept that enables us to think about agency within structure, about how people fight back and attempt to establish or retain control

even within difficult circumstances. Sex workers resist both economic and sexual power structures in their everyday lives by negotiating with clients and bosses, by shifting job locations, or by fighting against restrictive rules and unfair treatment. Sex workers also resist discursive power structures – the way they are constructed by experts and policy makers and feminists and the very real effects those constructions have. Sex workers recognize this discursive power – this refusal by others to hear and accept sex workers' own interpretations of their lives as valid and trustworthy – and they, in turn, refuse to internalize the dominant discourse. They continue to insist on their ability to describe their own reality in the face of this expert interpretation. We call this process of discursive resistance “talking back.”

Resistance is generally conceptualized, following James C. Scott, as a “weapon of the weak” – it is often individualized and easily ignored or misinterpreted as submission, and there are often heavy costs associated with its practice (although less heavy than with outright rebellion).²⁸ It is not seen as the kind of political agency that achieves major changes, rather, it slows down and complicates the processes of power or provides temporary relief from exploitation. Resistance affirms the agency of less powerful political actors and it also lays bare the difficulty for marginalized groups to achieve political change. Discursive resistance, however – talking back and telling one's own stories – has the potential for collective political empowerment. Much as consciousness-raising worked in the early days of feminism, telling one's own story has been the starting point of many sex worker organizations fighting for political change. Chris Bruckert points to this process of collective resistance among exotic dancers in informally constructing a “shared meaning” that becomes “an ideological and personal resource that legitimates collective action and shapes the strategies employed.”²⁹ That is, they themselves become the basis of political action. However, we also take heed of Sherry Ortner's warning that resistance should not be romanticized and that the politics among marginalized actors should be recognized.³⁰ And indeed, not all sex workers agree or share interpretations of their experience and we try to make this visible in our selection of interview material. However, most share a common will to resist the way they are perceived.

It is not just the elite of the sex trade who push these boundaries and challenge hetero-normative codes. Studies of migrant sex work or sex work in the developing world, for example, have also begun to recognize this resistant identity.³¹ It was plain during our interviews that the women and men we were talking to – *even those who were also poor or addicted* – were intelligent, witty, articulate, independent, and willing to push the boundaries of “normal” or “acceptable” behaviour on many fronts. Indeed, the more marginalized people seemed to be, the more they seemed willing to articulate their resistance. For example, while only a handful of the workers we

spoke with were racialized women, outsiders to not only the sexual and class order but to the racial order, they were often the most outspoken in their critiques of mainstream society. Thus, the resistance of the sex worker to societal norms and her/his challenge to mainstream readings of sex work are very audible in our conversations with sex workers in the Maritimes. They have what one analyst of sex work in Thailand has called the “spirit of a fighter” – always willing to challenge the strictures on them.

Personally, I very much valued the spirit of struggle and the relatively independent and defying attitudes of the prostitutes I know which I rarely found in women who are not of their kind. They are women who have the spirit of a fighter – in sexual relations and others. While their middle-class sisters are being repressed by conservative values and the sexual double standards, they seem to have more autonomy in their personal and sexual lives ... Having marked themselves as whores, they have come out of their place – having broken so many repressive rules of good women, and developed the spirit of a fighter for survival and better living.³²

Sex workers not only break the rules of “proper” sexual and gender behaviour, they break *all* the rules. The sex workers we spoke with displayed their agency and resistance in terms of not only challenging sexual codes but also resisting the constraints of neo-liberalism and global capitalism – by refusing demeaning minimum-wage work. They also refused and resisted the disciplinary mechanisms of the welfare state and critiqued its restructuring. And they challenged the interventionism of health experts and the heavy hand of punishment meted out by the law that criminalizes sex work and sex workers. Resistance is literally a way of life for sex workers.

Above all, the sex workers we spoke with resist the discourses that circumscribe their lives. They recognize the power of discourse, of the whore stigma, of being represented rather than being allowed to represent themselves. They “talk back” to these discourses and representations, and they refused to “hear” the stigmatizing and disrespectful talk of so-called experts, police, and agents of the state. Resistance, as a strategy of survival and of opposition to a dominant order that erases, ignores, vilifies, and marginalizes the existence of sex workers, is perhaps the most useful strategy of all in the arsenal of street sex workers. And, as this brief discussion outlines, sex workers have greater agency than might be assumed. Such agency is twisted by police officers as manipulative ploys for arrest, is misunderstood by feminists as subsuming to patriarchal order, and is controlled by capitalism through the appropriation of labour or of public space. Despite all of these incursions into her day or night of work, the sex worker lives on. We must be prepared, in the end, to listen to these voices that challenge the very self-perceptions of the dominant class. It is those who

practise “forbidden sex” who point out the hypocrisies of us all. As Anne McClintock has observed:

It is, therefore, not surprising that prostitutes are traditionally associated with challenges to rule, with figures of rebellion, revolt, insurrection and the criminal appropriation of property. The scandal of the whorearchy amounts to flagrant female interference in male contests over property and power. Not for nothing did Parisian public health official Parent-Duchatelet call prostitutes “the most dangerous people in society.”³³

A Note on Method

As mentioned above, our research is based on a series of qualitative, open-ended interviews with sixty people working in the sex trade in Halifax, Moncton, and Saint John – as well as many others who work in outreach, policing, politics, law, and health. People working in the sex trade were contacted through local community agencies in Halifax, Moncton, and Saint John. We asked the community agencies, with which sex workers interact, to partner with us. These partner agencies examined our research proposal and questioned us, asking us what we would do with the results. They advertised our research to the sex workers, explained a bit of its purpose, and allowed us to use their premises for interviews. The agencies are Stepping Stone in Halifax, the only outreach agency for sex workers in the Atlantic provinces; AIDS Nova Scotia in Halifax; Coverdale Services for Women in Saint John, New Brunswick, an outreach centre for low income and criminalized women; and Moncton Sexual Health Centre, also in New Brunswick. The agencies established interview schedules, and the co-authors of this book travelled to all three centres to interview study participants. From the research grant, we paid the sex workers a flat rate for their interviews. The agencies’ staff provided debriefing if participants were upset or needed to talk about the interview process. This service was provided to the interviewers as well. The purpose of the interviews and the guidelines on ethics were explained to the participants by the researchers.³⁴ Participants were also given the purpose and the ethics claims in writing. The interviews were taped and transcribed by trained transcribers, which included one departmental assistant and three research assistants. All research assistants were instructed in the confidentiality and professional ethics in obtaining, storing, citing, and keeping confidential the words of the participants.

Other interviews were conducted with three groups of participants, all loosely categorized as agents of social control, social advocacy, or socio-politics. This group included police officers (regional and RCMP forces); probation officers; staff of community outreach agencies, AIDS organizations, and needle exchanges; health care providers, staff of health care clinics, and municipal and provincial politicians. Most of these interviews were obtained

through either cold calls or by word of mouth. An interesting feature of the Maritime provinces is that the urban areas are so small, by city standards, that most of the professionals in various agencies knew each other, and we garnered many interview possibilities from a single source. With few exceptions, all those contacted granted interviews, for which we are grateful.

The interviews were transcribed and the texts were analyzed using a critical political analysis. The loosely structured, open-ended interview process allowed some patterns to emerge while giving plenty of room for sex workers simply to tell us what was on their minds and what they wanted to say to the world. We did ask, for example, what was best and worst about sex work; what sex workers thought of the groups with which they came into contact, such as police, health services, and government agencies, as well as society at large (that is, public attitudes toward sex workers) and the media. We also asked what sex workers would like to see change about their lives and work, and what services, groups, or programs were most helpful to them. Such a method of inquiry and analysis requires reading and rereading of interview text many times over to ascertain subversive and resistant strategies. In doing so, we followed the advice of Wendy Chapkis in interpreting the story or stories being told:

There is no one overriding narrative spoken by prostitutes on prostitution. There are instead competing and sometimes conflicting stories, each with its own integrity. Accounts of sex work ... are often contradictory, without one being "true" and the other "false." Discussions of sex – commercial and otherwise – necessarily reveal both victimization and agency, exploitation and engaged complicity; in short, both the violence and wild defiance of sex ... We need to develop the capacity to listen to these stories without reducing them to competitors for the status of Truth. We need to listen for meaning rather than just "fact," to ask why a story is told in this way, how the location of speaker shapes the tale, how the position of the audience affects what is heard, and to carefully consider what is at stake politically, personally, and strategically in invoking this particular version at this moment in this context.³⁵

In this book we present as many voices as we can so that the readers may read and analyze these various stories for themselves.

The Book's Structure

As mentioned above, the chapters are arranged in order of the responses, issues, and concerns raised by the sex workers we spoke with. That is, we have tried to follow their ordering of issues of importance in terms of what is good about the trade and what they would like to see redressed or responded to in some way.

We begin, therefore, in Chapter 1, with money – the nearly universal answer to what was good or what the people we spoke with liked about working in the trade. In following their analysis of money, Chapter 1 argues that sex work is not simply a response to poverty. It is also a resistant mode of work, in that many sex workers are actively refusing the disciplinary and frequently humiliating conditions of minimum-wage work and social assistance. Sex work is a fairly independent mode of work that allows for some individual control not only over money but over one's time. The sex worker is her/his own boss to a large degree. What we examine here, therefore, is how the sex workers we spoke with weighed their choices between different forms of work and different forms of sex work in response to the constrictions of a neo-liberal economic age. And we document how they critique the economic system in which we live.

In Chapter 2, we bring together sex workers' understandings of what is positive about sex work with the issue that sex workers felt – again nearly universally – was the most pressing: violence. A number of sex workers whom we interviewed mentioned things about the work that they enjoyed or liked or appreciated beyond the money that could be made. They talked about good clients as well as about the independence and freedom from society's rules and restrictions that sex work could give them. Thus, they resisted the easy classification of sex work as simply violent by presenting a careful analysis of violence and interaction with clients more generally. They pointed to specific sources of violence – particular clients rather than the trade itself – and the social context of that violence, particularly the general stigmatization and dehumanization of the sex worker by society at large. Further, sex workers gave us many examples of how they fought back against this violence and resisted these processes of dehumanization.

In Chapter 3, we address another issue that our interviewees raised as problematic – the potential conflict with the law that so many sex workers face daily. In this chapter, we look at sex workers' experience and analysis of their interactions with the personal face of the law that criminalizes sex work in Canada – police. And we deconstruct the discourse of police officers whom we have interviewed on their understanding of sex work and sex workers.

Chapter 4 explores sex workers' complaints about the burden of stigma – particularly given the difficulty of anonymity in the relatively small centres of the Maritimes. Importantly, rather than accepting the general reading of sex workers as suffering from low self-esteem, the women and men we spoke with frequently reversed the gaze of mainstream society by pointing to stigma and not some personality flaw of sex workers as the source of low self-esteem. Further, they identify the media as an important (re)producer of stigmatized images of sex work and sex workers. Taking their lead, we explore the images of sex work produced in the Maritimes' largest newspaper, the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, since the mid-1980s.

In Chapter 5, we look at what outside experts often put heavy emphasis on, but which we found sex workers saw in a very different way: issues of health. For sex workers, health needs to be understood within the much broader context of working conditions, safety from violence, and socio-economic determinants of health. Sex workers also challenged health experts' understandings of the risk of sexually transmitted disease and the problem of addictions. Sex workers positioned themselves as sexual health experts and called attention to the much wider problems of addictions in the general society, challenging their supposed deviantization on this score. They critique and resist attempts to download blame onto individual sex workers for their "failure" to maintain their health and, instead, point the finger back at the wider system that determines their health.

Finally, Chapter 6 examines the politics of and policies on sex work in the Maritimes, and in Canada more broadly. Here, we see sex workers as willing participants in policy debates and negotiations on how to make sex work safe for everyone. We also hear from residents and policy makers and try to figure out what the barriers are to making more sensible policy on sex work in Canada. Most of the sex workers we spoke with were seeking some form of decriminalization of the trade – or "a safe, dry place to work" – and yet Canadian society as a whole has remained resistant to such a change. Here we explore the suggestions for change put forward by sex workers and their advocates.

In the end, however, we cannot cover all the important issues related to sex work in this book. Certainly, we tried to remain true to those issues that the sex workers we spoke with raised as most important to them. However, the study did focus on a small group of workers and, like many studies, overrepresents those who work mainly on the street and, therefore, the findings should not be too quickly assumed to be more widely applicable, particularly among the much larger but less researched group of indoor workers. Further, for reasons of time and resources, we were not able to include clients among our interviewees, which means that this large and critical gap in the research remains unaddressed. Finally, while we did try in some way to redress the researcher/researched power imbalance through the use of open-ended interviewing techniques, we recognize that such techniques only provide a small measure of balance. Overall, we view this study as a "first project," as Jacqueline Lewis and Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale describe it, one that helps build the rapport needed between sex workers and researchers for more inclusive and collaborative research in the future.³⁶ As a step in this direction, this book presents the voices of sex workers in the Maritimes "talking back" on economics, work, law, health, media, and politics and challenging those who would interpret their lives for them.

1

It's the Money, Honey

One of the first questions we asked when interviewing people working in the sex trade was: “What is the best part of the job?” What we were trying to invoke was sex workers’ perceptions of their lives in the trade, without assuming that everything about the trade was necessarily problematic. As Wendy Rickard maintains, “Life history interpretation and analysis is governed by the questions that researchers ask.”¹ And as sex work activist Carol Queen has said, “If a researcher or therapist only encourages someone to look at the down and difficult side of sex work, without asking any questions about what feels healthy and vibrant and alive about it to you, they’re going to get a very partial story.”² The nearly universal answer to the question of what was the best part of working in the sex trade was, understandably, money. For many of our interviewees, sex work’s most important attribute was its potential for generating fairly large amounts of money in a relatively short period. It may not always have lived up to this potential, but the potential was always there. Sex work made sense to many of our interviewees as an income-generating strategy first and foremost; however, “money,” understood simply as income, is not the whole picture. Sex work was for many a way to preserve a sense of self-respect and independence in the face of more limiting and oppressive choices, such as minimum-wage work and social assistance. That is, while “money” may have been the quick answer to what was good about sex work among our interviewees, this answer did not imply that these women and men were simply pushed into the trade by economic forces. Rather, as we shall see, they often made careful decisions about the economic choices available to them – such as minimum-wage work and welfare, and indoor and street-based sex work – decisions based not just on money but also on the amount of independence each option offered. Thus, our interviewees were no different than most Maritimers who, in an economy marked by un- and underemployment, cobble together a living among the options available but do not accept attempts to marginalize them.

Money also plays a symbolic role: its generation is part of the construction of social identity in modern society, an identity that gives people social and political, rather than simply economic, power.³ Thus, the tag line “honey” carries this symbolic message of social wisdom or empowerment. It is meant to indicate that the speaker will not be talked down to as though s/he is a child or an innocent. Indeed, as the next chapter outlines, most of our interviewees did not talk about sex work as unrelentingly degrading or uniformly unpleasant, even though the majority of our interviewees worked mainly in the street trade rather than the more comfortable indoor trade. Some indicated that money is not the only benefit to be had from work in the sex trade. Respondents talked about the pleasures of good clients, of learning about oneself and becoming more self-confident, of travel and adventure – upsides outsiders rarely think about as part of the sex trade. While some may interpret this as denial or putting on a brave face, it is precisely the politics of representation that is at issue here. What some sex workers find degrading about the trade are the attitudes and perceptions of others toward the trade and those who work within it, as we will see in a later chapter. Emphasizing the positive aspects of the work is not denial; it is resistance to the disempowering discourse of mainstream society. Indeed, all of our respondents were able to quickly point out the various downsides of the trade, particularly under criminalized conditions, but they resisted a simple reading of the trade itself as necessarily and completely negative. Rather, they were often at pains to express the wide variety of possible experiences and the complexities of their lives more generally. What we want to emphasize here is that even if sex work comes about as a response to poverty or addiction, the women and men we spoke with showed great strength of character and a will to resist what life had served up to them both economically and socially. Like most people, they have indeed been constrained by life circumstances, in some instances more than most, but they were also – again, some more than most – in no way willing to accept those constraints.

There is a common tendency, however, to read sex work simply as a product of poverty and to then interpret this to mean that sex workers lack any real choice – otherwise they would not go into this line of work. While this interpretation appears to make sense at an abstract level – of course, for those who are not independently wealthy, there are various degrees of limitation on our economic choices – the problem of this quick read of sex work is that it denies agency both to the poor and to sex workers, and it encourages patronizing and disempowering responses. That is, simply reading sex workers as “victims of poverty” fails to investigate the precise role that material and economic factors have in shaping sex work experiences and how these larger forces are resisted (and, therefore, how they can be changed). Indeed, as Noah Zatz has argued, sex work itself, by explicitly requiring payment for the “sex/affective” or emotional labour that has traditionally been used to

justify women's cheap labour, challenges "some of the structural conditions that narrow women's options in the first place." It is the criminalization of that labour that "helps patrol the boundary between the sex/affective labor routinely assigned to and expected of women and practices deserving of the financial status and rewards of 'work.'" ⁴ That is, sex work can itself be read as a resistant mode of female labour, a form of resistance that is constrained by the laws and social meanings that shape it, not by the work itself. Indeed, the analyses that sex workers put forward in this chapter make it plain that, for them, sex work offers a way of resisting the limitations of minimum wage, service-sector work, and social assistance. For these workers, sex work potentially provides both substantial income and independence in one's work. By understanding sex work as a resistant form of labour, rather than simply as a survival mechanism, we both see the lives of sex workers more clearly from their perspective and make room for a politics that includes them as agents of change rather than objects of intervention.

Feminist Theory, Economic Determinism, and Sex Work

The above discussion provides some insight into the problem of much feminist theorizing about the sex trade that emphasizes the role of structural constraints, such as women's poverty, in explaining women's, or youth's, entry into the trade. Certainly, because sex work is primarily an income-generating strategy for most workers, background economic conditions are central to analyzing sex work. This is even more the case in economically depressed regions such as the Maritimes. The Maritimes are most frequently referred to, in economic terms, as have-not provinces. The Maritimes as a whole are characterized by higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of economic growth than is the rest of Canada, resulting in higher transfer, or equalization, payments from the federal government – as well as higher rates of out-migration as Maritimers go "down the road" to seek economic opportunities elsewhere. The economy is also gendered in the Maritimes, where the gender/income gap is greater than that in other regions, and the median income of women is lower. ⁵ Not to account for the economic conditions under which sex work takes place in the Maritimes, therefore, would be to ignore an important reality of life in the Maritimes. But it is important to remember that these conditions affect many more people than sex workers in the Maritimes, that not all sex workers face these conditions to an equal degree, and that a context of relative poverty does not mean that all these people are simply victims without a sense of agency. What it does tell us is that conditions of work and rates of pay in most areas in the Maritimes – whether they are in call centres, fish plants, or the sex trade – are generally poor and need to be addressed.

Much mainstream Canadian feminist, as well as bureaucratic, discussion of the sex trade, however, has fallen into the structuralist trap; indeed, the

emphasis on socioeconomic conditions (as opposed to male sexual power) is perhaps what distinguishes Canadian feminist readings from their American counterparts.⁶ In one example of (admittedly strong) structural determinism, Kari Fedec argues that

a more critical theoretical understanding of the sex trade would fall in line with various incarnations of feminist theory, including socialist feminism and Marxist feminism. These critical feminist orientations hold that power exists on the basis of race, class, gender and age, and that the sex trade industry is built on the framework of power distinctions ... For example, since women and children, in general occupy subordinate economic positions in patriarchal, capitalist societies, the hierarchical structure of society defines and creates a certain type of criminality for women and children, often based on imputed sexual morality. For most prostitutes, then, selling sex is a survival mechanism. The seller's decision to engage in prostitution-related activities is not usually a choice made by the sex trade worker based on free will. Deciding to do sex work is more often a way of getting necessary food and shelter.⁷

Such an approach, first, suffers from the problem of abstraction, which has been so hotly debated in feminist political economy circles.⁸ That is, it abstractly designates a role for "race, class, gender and age" in shaping the industry and from that deduces the experience of women rather than investigating precisely how that role is played out in concrete historical circumstances. The importance of careful, grounded historical analysis is obvious when the results of field studies are compared to official data or common assumptions. Frances Shaver, for example, has frequently referred to the way in which traditional views, as well as official data, distort the extent of women's involvement in the trade and the conditions of work, and exaggerate the socioeconomic background of sex workers (which is more likely to be comfortable than impoverished).⁹ Indeed, there is a tendency to universalize a wide variety of experiences. Even though the sex workers speaking here tend to represent a marginalized segment of workers (i.e., they were contacted through outreach groups that work with those experiencing some form of difficulty rather than with the larger number of mostly indoor workers who have no need for such supports), their economic background and experiences varied widely, from those who were indeed struggling to find food and shelter to those who found sex work an agreeable economic choice among a number of options.

Second, Fedec's approach also suffers from the essentialism referred to by post-colonial critics of socialist feminism.¹⁰ Socialist feminist analyses tend to assume an already constituted group, such as "women" or "sex workers," that is (within the theoretical framework) by definition impoverished and

victimized by capitalism and patriarchy rather than investigating the ways in which people are constituted as “women” or “sex workers” so that their labour is “*made cheap*,” for example.¹¹ That is, it grants what capitalist patriarchy is trying to make true, that women or sex workers are victims, rather than seeing the ways in which this process is contested. Such approaches also frequently determine the meaning of the experience for the subjects rather than investigating it. Such approaches render feminists “expert” readers who are the only ones capable of understanding the problem and the only ones capable of creating change. It is no surprise then that the state should also find such a reading a useful tool for reinscribing its power; indeed, readings of sex workers as victims of poverty or, more recently, victims of addictions, are common in government literature.¹² If sex workers are simply victims of economic circumstances, then only the state or other experts can possibly know and prescribe what is good for them and what needs to be changed. (It is no coincidence that Fedec consistently uses the phrase “women and children” as if they can be simply lumped together, effectively giving women the political status of children.) By contrast, it is important that the sex workers speaking here interpret their experience not as victimization but as a process of resistance, as a way of refusing the dull compulsion of poverty or minimum-wage work and maximizing both one’s income and one’s independence. Indeed, it is precisely the dominant mode of representation of sex workers – as victims requiring aid rather than as workers and citizens demanding rights – that these workers resist. That is, what the sex workers speaking here identified as problematic was not some abstract notion of poverty but the way they were treated both in the workplace and by government assistance programs that limited their independence and options – these are the ways their labour was made “cheap” and exploitable.

The problems of structurally determinist readings of the sex trade also lead to a misreading of the problems at hand. At an abstract level, one could argue that almost all work in today’s world is a product of, or shaped by, capitalist and, often, patriarchal and racist structures. But to argue for the elimination of work because of these structures is to confuse labour per se with the particular conditions of labour, particularly the exploitation of labour. As many feminist theorists have noted, both work and sex can be liberating or exploitative, depending on the conditions under which they are carried out. This is no less true when the two activities are combined. As Frances Shaver has remarked, “It is not prostitution which is unsavory or undesirable. It is the broader socio-economic conditions that support and maintain it *in its present form*.”¹³ Indeed, research conducted with and by sex workers is careful to focus on the ways in which poverty among some women in the trade can make them more vulnerable to economic exploitation *within*

the trade and therefore points us to the need to address these conditions, rather than eliminating the trade altogether.¹⁴ Paying attention to workers' analyses of their experiences shows us that what can make sex work problematic are the conditions of illegality and disdain under which many sex workers operate (see the discussion in Chapters 3 and 6 regarding the legal status of prostitution in Canada, wherein prostitution itself is not illegal but all activities around it [communicating for the purposes of, and living on the avails of] *are*.) The sex workers speaking here were sometimes boxed in within the trade because they could not rely on legal protections against violence on the street, for example, nor on legal guarantees of working conditions off the street. Addressing these conditions would address many of the concerns expressed by sex workers.

Analyses that avoid structurally determinist readings of sex work and instead investigate the social constructions of women as workers or sex workers and the concrete consequences of these constructions in particular historical locations can engender a much greater understanding of the potential sites of political change. Women and sex workers are no longer assumed to be victims of the economic order. Rather, the ways in which the economic and social order in a particular historical location tries to render them cheap labour, for example, are investigated, as are the ways in which this process is resisted. In this study, we see that sex workers unequivocally identify the ways in which social discourses and socioeconomic processes attempt to render them cheap labour or exploitable labour – both within and outside sex work – and the ways in which they resist these attempts. Understanding sex work as resistance to economic exploitation allows us to engage in a politics that supports workers' efforts at maximizing their independence and control, a goal that lies at the heart of feminism itself.

Fast Cash and Easy Money: Sex Work as an Income-Generating Strategy

I don't need money every day; I just prefer to have it. (Megan, Halifax)

Yeah, all my money goes to them [my two kids] and if I have anything left over I'll buy myself a nice outfit, buy myself a lobster or something. But I mean, you walk into my kids' rooms and people look and say, "How many kids do you have?" Only two. I have enough toys for five kids, they've got toys, like toys, and there's four beds in the bedroom. They've got two sets of bunk beds for when they have friends over and they've got their little vanity. I've got two of everything 'cause they fight if you don't. (Patricia, Saint John)

It's easy money. The only time I ever do it is when I absolutely need it. So that's the only reason I ever do it.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that is useful about the job?

Um, no. Because, anything I need, like food or cigarettes, if I need it I just go out and get it, or a place to sleep. A lot of times I would do it for a place to sleep. (Marc, Moncton)

The problem of simply viewing sex workers as victims of poverty was obvious from our respondents' explanations of their work. Our interviewees were in no way uniform in their economic circumstances. For some, sex work was a matter of survival; for others, it was a means of generating a regular, or supplemental, income. While it is true that a number of sex workers share backgrounds of low educational attainment and low incomes, one must consider that many Canadian women share these characteristics (along with histories of sexual abuse), that many sex workers do not share all or any of these characteristics, and that studies of sex work tend to over-represent those workers who are more likely to have these backgrounds (i.e., those in the more visible street-level trade.) Many recent studies, however, point to the heterogeneous socioeconomic background of sex workers and the heterogeneous reasons (beyond food and shelter) for entering the trade – including acquisition of consumer goods and explorations of sexual identity.¹⁵ More concrete studies, therefore, render the reading of “prostitution as a product of poverty” problematic. Sex work may generally be about money, but what that means precisely needs to be investigated rather than assumed. In our discussions with sex workers, it was clear that sex work was a means of generating sometimes quite a bit of income while being able to maintain a fair amount of control over one's work.¹⁶ Indeed, more sensitive socialist feminist analyses of sex work, such as Eileen McLeod's much earlier work in Britain in co-operation with the Programme for the Reform of the Law on Solicitation (PROS), the sex workers' rights organization, indicated similar findings of sex work as part of feminized labour under capitalist conditions. As McLeod argues, sex work “can bring comparatively substantial financial returns. There are also the attractions of its compatibility with the demands of childcare and domestic labour – still seen primarily as women's work. An enjoyable degree of ‘workers' control' can also exist.”¹⁷

Indeed, sex industry work is a fairly reliable income-generating strategy in that sex work – both indoor and on the street – and exotic dancing hold out the possibility of making a fair amount of money in a comparatively short period. Sex workers working the street in New Brunswick can expect between \$20 and \$50 per client. Incomes, of course, depend on how many clients a worker can get in any given week and how well each pays. Workers in Saint John reported nightly incomes of \$30 (on a bad night) to \$300 on

a particularly good night. All reported also receiving some kind of income assistance, ranging from \$264 to \$558 per month. In Halifax, where most of our respondents worked on the street, incomes range from \$40 to \$300 per night. The highest weekly income reported was \$5,000 to \$6,000 in a very good week. The same respondent admitted, though, that, in low weeks, it is closer to \$50 to \$100. The general perception among workers was that not a lot of money could be made on the street and that incomes from street-level work are declining. Furthermore, the amount that can be generated varies widely, resulting in regular shifting between various types of sex work and exotic dancing in an effort to find the formula that maximizes income. However, a number told of instances of having hit the jackpot with certain clients. And, given that over 60 percent of women in Atlantic Canada had annual incomes under \$13,786 and that the median income for women in the Atlantic provinces is \$11,235, a sex worker would only have to bring in approximately \$200 a week if she were receiving some assistance, or \$300 if she were not, to be above that average.¹⁸ As an income-generating strategy, therefore, sex work is not a bad option.

Escort work, while not without its drawbacks, is where some of the big money is made:

I remember one time when I was a prostitute for one of the escort services, I made \$2,000 in one night. Two thousand dollars in one night! And almost the whole time I was at this guy's house, all we did, it was like I was shooting the shit with one of my girlfriends. We watched movies, we drank, we smoked some dope, we just talked, and he had a wife, and he had problems of course, you gotta pretend like you really give a crap, and listen, you just kind of suck it up, and think, "Oh well, whatever," and you drink his drink and you smoke his dope, whatever, it's all free, so you figure what the hell, and you're there, getting paid a hundred bucks an hour, just to be there, to watch these movies. So yeah, I'll listen to your wife's problems, and he had me there all night. (Colleen, Moncton)

Incomes for indoor workers (escort and massage work) range from \$50 to \$80 an hour plus tips. One receptionist at a massage parlour explained:

They say that usually on a ten-day stint they make somewhere between \$2,000 and \$5,000 ... in ten days ... For a half hour it's \$80, of which the girl receives \$35. For an hour it's \$115, \$50 for the woman. For a Turkish bath, which is those Jacuzzi, man jumps in, she jumps in with him [and] gives him a sponge bath – still the same hour: it's \$150; she gets \$75 ... For outcall it's \$100 plus cab fare, for an hour. (Ashley, Fredericton)

These charges remained fairly standard across Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, perhaps because of the domination of the industry by two major owners. One escort worker, however, said that she made much better money in Moncton than in Saint John but, even so, in Saint John she prefers escort to street work for its safety:

In Moncton the money was really good. Moncton you could make five, six, seven, eight, nine hundred dollars a night. Down here [in Saint John] you're lucky if you make \$200 a week. It's a big difference unless you go on the streets; and I've got children, so I try to do the careful thing. I have a ... my daughter, her father is my ex-pimp. He killed himself, so I stay away from those people [pimps]. (Patricia, Saint John)

While the formalized indoor trade is common in the Maritimes, there are also more informal arrangements that do not correspond to either working on the street or organized escort or massage work and that can generate a fairly good income. Several of our respondents, particularly those who had worked in the trade for some time, had regulars who came to their homes, or to whom they made calls; some put advertisements in the local paper for in-call/out-call services; and a number combine these activities along with street work. These workers operate independently and have control over their working conditions and rates, which are often competitive with escort-service rates. One explained: "I found out that on the street I used to have to charge less at times. And I was desperate, too." Now she works out of her home with regulars or those who respond to an advertisement:

I have a set rate and generally it's \$50 to \$150, depending. A sleep, or intercourse, is generally up to \$150. And that's good money because a lot of the times, they don't last more than twenty minutes. (Angela, Halifax)

For one woman, the money that could be generated by an occasional job arranged by a friend was enough to overcome her initial apprehensions:

A friend of mine called me one night and asked me if I wanted to make \$200. I'm thinking, Yeah! But it was to go with these two guys that were in from out of town at this motel room. I'm just thinking, "I can't do this," not that I think I'm any better than those girls, but I thought to myself, "Don't do this." That's as low as it goes, you know what I mean. But anyways, she said, it was the sex thing. I didn't want to have sex with anybody, to me that's ... but anyway, give them a blow job or whatever. I didn't seem like it was as bad, so I said, "Okay, I'll go with ya." So that's all that we did or whatever, and we each made \$200 and we drank and whatever ... So I'm thinking, "Jeez, this isn't too bad" ... So I guess that's

what got me started. And she's called a couple of times after that and these same two guys and whatever ... So we've kinda gotten to know them and it's kinda gotten to be this [regular thing]. (Kendra, Saint John)

On another occasion she made \$250 when the client turned out to be an old friend who then just gave her the money after sitting around eating and telling stories.

Exotic dancing is another area in which fairly large incomes can be generated, and into which some of our respondents had moved from escort or street work. Incomes in strip clubs in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick range from \$50 to \$700 per night. The low end was reported by one woman who danced only on amateur night and another who indicated that "new girls" were limited in what they could earn (\$100 to \$300). A dancer with more experience reported being able to make up to \$700 per night on a particularly good night.¹⁹ Private dances were the most lucrative, at \$12 a dance, with \$2 of that going to the house. As Chris Bruckert's research demonstrates, how much a dancer can make is determined by a series of income maximization strategies – refusing free stage shows or keeping a private dance client as long as possible – that often take time to learn and perfect.²⁰ As one woman who switched out of sex work and into exotic dancing after having a condom break remarked, often money could be made by means of little physical (although quite a bit of emotional) labour:

After I had that condom break, that's when I really, I was like, I'm gonna have to do something else, and I mean, I still wanted to be a part of easy money, so I decided to dance instead.

There was a few times you know, you'd walk out with six, or seven hundred dollars in one night. And you just give them [management] a dollar per dance, that's not including your tips, or your drinks, or you know, some customer hands you a little piece of pot, "Here you go" ... And you never had to do anything. Like I had a lot of really nice customers, where, there was this one man, he is a very professional man. He works actually downtown in one of the bigger high-class buildings. And he was kind of a little scrawny old man, really kind of loser-looking type, but he always wore like these golf clothes, like the stupid-looking sweaters, and shorts and stuff, and the colourful bright shirts. But the guy was so made out of money. He would show up to the bar, and he was a regular customer of mine. He would come by at least once or twice every week, and if he didn't come by once or twice every week, he made sure he came on rent week. The week rent was due, he'd show up, and how it [worked] was, even though the dances were ten bucks a dance, he'd give me twenty. What you'd do is sit there. And I remember, it was an every week thing, we'd sit there for about three or four hours, and we'd just sit there and

drink. This was the deal with him. He said, "I realize you could make money, mingling, and stuff, with the other customers, but I want you to myself, and if I can have you to myself, then it will be more than worth your while." So by the end of the night I had about \$700 from him, including the dances and the tips. Because every dance was \$10, he'd give me \$20, plus he'd fork me over about an extra \$25 every half an hour or so, just for talking to him. And then he'd buy you your drinks all night. (Colleen, Moncton)

Money was not the only factor involved in our respondents' decisions to work in the sex industry. Occasionally, our interviewees referred to sex work as "easy" money or "fast" money. While the reference to sex work as easy money by pundits is generally a put-down that suggests that no real work is involved, in this case the ease has to do with the speed with which relatively large amounts of cash can be generated. This is so much the case in sex work that some found it almost addictive:

I'm not addicted [to substances]. I'm used to the money and you know ... the lifestyle. You know, you're used to having so much money for the day to use or whatever, and now you don't have it no more and you're drawn back out ... And the men know too, like I mean a lot of times I haven't been working, just walking down the street and they haul in and they see you and they kind of connect, they know about you just as well as I know you're a trick, they know that I'm a working girl, even when you're not working, like going to get your groceries. It's hard to pass up the money sometimes when someone is offering you \$100 and you're really broke, I guess that's why I grab it. (Valerie, Halifax)

The need for fast cash is generally shared among those without substantial savings or credit. Recently, in fact, there has been a rapid growth of rent-to-own furniture stores, telephone renewal services, cheque-cashing services, and other forms of fringe banking in the Maritimes, which speaks to the problems of survival on minimum or less than minimum wages or welfare.²¹ While some of those we spoke with did indicate that the need for fast cash was linked to the need for drugs or alcohol, this was certainly not always the case. Those with dependants were quick to point to the expenses of raising children – prescription glasses, clothes, and so on. Others pointed to the costs of rent and utilities, and security payments on these.²² All of this must be considered against the background of un- or underemployment and the generally low levels of social assistance provided in the Maritimes. When people have no savings to fall back on, sudden large expenses require fast cash. Since sex work, even on the street, can generate up to \$300 for a few hours' work, it is an obvious way to meet this need. At the same time, sex

work as fast cash can also be read not as the response to an immediate need but as resistance to the long and demanding hours of straight work, as we shall see below. That is, sex work can give workers control over the pace of their work – something usually reserved only for those in the professions.

Income and Resistance within the Sex Industry

While the sex industry is viewed by many of our respondents as a place where they can generate income while avoiding the debilitating limitations of service-sector work and the patronizing positioning of social assistance, the industry itself can be problematic. Income can vary widely, based on a whole series of factors, including region, gender, age, and racial distinctions. As well, the lack of safety on the streets can drive workers indoors, where they face disciplinary work structures without the protection of unions or workplace standards. However, sex industry workers continue to resist the restrictions on their income and independence by shifting work locations and talking back to clients and managers, among other modes of resistance.

How much money is made is, of course, highly variable, and depends on the type of work (indoor or street), what kind of day it is (in terms of clients, their demands, and their willingness to pay), and a sex worker's ability to hustle a client:

There's some nights you don't make nothing. Then there's some nights, some times the guys try to rip you off. Like, excuse me, like you say a certain price, "Yeah, no problem, no problem," like, "I'll give you that." Then they try to beat you down lower ... 'Cause normally I wouldn't go any lower than twenty-five, thirty, forty dollars, you know. (Alison, Halifax)

Another explained that rates can go down over time, because of age and because of the relationships between clients and workers:

I'll tell you what I find. When I first started, and I met a lot of men, it was like, and I don't know if it's 'cause we allow it or not, they're good to ya. And after a while, it sort of gets so that it's like they expect it and they, it's like one day you meet them and it's \$20 and the next day, "Well, I only have \$10." Then sometimes it's, can you do it for me tonight and I'll pay ya [later], and you get a lot of that after a while because they figure ... I think they figure you owe them. I get a lot of that now. (Brianna, Saint John)

One sex worker in Saint John confirmed that clients are constantly trying to lower the rates:

Sometimes now, on cheque day or what do you call it, disability day or whatever, some guys only want to give you \$10 or \$5. (Deanna, Saint John)

In these instances, income is highly dependent on sex workers' willingness and ability to negotiate with clients. This ability is a product of both skill and structural factors. Indeed, the men and women we spoke with have a wide variety of techniques of resistance – hustling, negotiation, and arguing with clients; refusing clients; or voting with their feet by changing venues – for example, from street to escort or vice versa – that makes viewing them as victims of poverty an oversimplification.

When clients do not pay properly, remedial action sometimes has to be taken:

I've been in the car before, too, when their pants are down around their ankles [and I've] reached for their wallet and stuff like that because, like, "Hey, I'm giving a blow job. You're giving me more than twenty bucks." (Robert, Moncton)

The partner of the sex worker quoted above confirmed that sometimes things have to be taken into the sex workers' own hands:

The one time – actually, I did it twice – but the one time, the first time I ever did that though [take a client's wallet], the guy was an asshole to me. And he also lied to me and said that he had no money. I opened up his wallet and there was \$140 in his wallet ... I felt bad for doing it. (Eric, Moncton)

On the streets, a few may opt to get around complicated negotiations with clients by combining petty crime with sex work. One respondent reported that she had shifted to escort work because "you can't make no kind of money on the streets unless you're into robbing people" (Tamara, Halifax). For a few sex workers, petty crime – taking clients' wallets or bank cards and PINs – has become an important source of supplemental income: "I'd – they'd be drunk – take them to the bank, whatever. Take the PIN number, take the card and do my thing" (Kisha, Halifax). Like many other techniques of resistance, this one had its drawbacks, not in the potential for arrest, since clients are often too embarrassed to report such incidents to police, but in the possibility of clients' seeking revenge. Several violent incidents of clients going after sex workers in revenge for being stiffed were reported during our field work in Saint John. Nonetheless, workers' willingness to take what they viewed as rightfully theirs if it was not forthcoming speaks to their resistance to being victimized.

Indeed, it is often assumed that, of all sex workers, those on the streets have the least negotiating power and are the most exploited and victimized by economic circumstance. Street-based workers are viewed as being forced onto the street and into remaining on the street by their poverty. However, we found that sex workers often make unmistakable choices between street and indoor work, and many move between types of sex industry work as another mechanism of resistance when conditions or income in one type of work prove inadequate.²³ In moving back and forth between different types of sex trade work, workers make choices based not only on income but on the conditions of work and the independence granted to workers in determining these conditions and incomes. Street-level work, contrary to general belief, is sometimes considered the best in terms of independence of work and ability to generate income.²⁴ Indoor work – in escort services or massage parlours – can mean higher incomes and greater safety to sex workers, but it also means entering into an employee-employer relationship that can be unduly constraining and can actually limit or fix potential incomes. It is the constraints of workplace discipline – the attempt to render the worker a passive bearer of the rules and regulations of the workplace – and, most importantly, the ability of management to constrain sex workers' income and determine the amount of work that will be done for what price that some workers feel is too high a cost in exchange for the relative safety of indoor work. Some of the sex workers we spoke with choose to work on the street because of these limitations in indoor work:

Working the street is better money than working in an escort service ... Because who in their right mind is going to have sex for a half hour for thirty bucks? (Megan, Halifax)

Another confirmed:

I mean, inside you're a little bit safe, and so I would prefer that, the safety aspect. But the streets: you have more control over everything and it's more money ... Now with the services, there are so many things set in place where this one cost is for this, and you have to give this service, and you can't ask extra. On the street it's like ya can get forty bucks and [then say], "Well, oh no; that's another twenty." "Well, that's another twenty." And you just keep getting up there and up there. Well, you can't do that in the services. There's not as much money to be made. (Katie, Halifax)

Indoor work, therefore, can limit the potential of these income-maximizing strategies since prices are set by management and income is more dependent

on the number of clients than it is on the street. As a receptionist at a massage parlour commented,

I've seen them make anywhere from – jeez, one day a girl, the last day she worked she didn't make anything. She had no trick whatsoever. There were only four calls in the entire day, and the other girl did them. And other days I've seen them make \$600. (Ashley, Fredericton)

Generating extra tips for indoor work depends on the clients and the workers' willingness to risk being disciplined by management if they are caught – for they would have made the sex for exchange overt, which management desperately wants to avoid in order to ensure that it cannot be charged with “keeping a common bawdy house.”²⁵ As another indoor worker explained:

You can manipulate some of them, but if they're regulars and they know – you know what I mean? [If] they tip you, that's bad ... We're not supposed to ask for tips but ... well, we do ask 'cause how else are you really going to get your money, right? Of course you're going to hustle the men to get your money, right? But we had to sign a piece of paper stating that we know we're not allowed because therefore it's on the big boss man's head. So, as long as that's clear, if the police ever did happen – they don't 'cause most of them go there [as clients] – so if it happens it wouldn't be on their [the owners'] heads. It would be our own responsibility. (Bonnie, Moncton)²⁶

Sex workers, therefore, have to trade off income maximization and independence for decreased risk of arrest and, as we shall see in the next chapter, of violence.

There is money to be made in the sex trade and exotic dancing, money that can be generated relatively quickly and as needed. At one level, we can see that, in relative terms, it is better money than many people, particularly women, in the Maritimes can make. There are, however, limitations on this money, and it is by no means guaranteed. As we saw above, these incomes are highly variable and subject to the whims of clients (although sex workers' negotiation skills mediate this). There are other potential limitations. Indoor workers, in particular, face a series of managerial constraints on their money-making ability, and a number of the workers we spoke with struggled with addictions that sometimes shifted their relationship to the work and their ability to keep or control their money. The variability in income within the trade can generate a great deal of stress, but it is balanced against the hope that larger rather than smaller amounts can be generated, and against the flexibility of the work itself.²⁷ Indeed, security of income is directly traded for independence, as women switch to work in strip clubs or

escort services, where there is at least a perception of higher possible income and a reality of stronger workplace discipline.

Various elements of the indoor trade can eat into a worker's earnings. Strippers pay fees at some clubs, and escorts face fines at some agencies. An escort worker can be charged \$25 for refusing a client or for failing to punch her time card. There are also fines for lateness, and a deposit (sometimes as much as \$500) has to be made with the service when a worker starts her ten-day shift. The work days at massage parlours are very long. Workers need to be on the premises from 11 or 11:30 AM to 5 AM. However, most workers don't return to duty for another four to six weeks. Workers also face the problems of any of those serving in an informal and largely illegal trade. For example, they can be taken advantage of by employers or other staff:

The new girl, the one who just arrived the day before I did, she – I was positive – she gave the manager \$1,900 to put in the safe deposit box. That's the number that was in my head after watching her count the money ... but I was off all week, until my next shift. And as the shift ended on Sunday, they had to give her her deposit and money and stuff. So [the manager] gave it to her, and then the manager left. And she pulled out her money and she was counting it, and she had \$1,060. She didn't say anything and I turned to her and said, "Didn't you have \$1,900?" And she's like, "Oh my God, is that the number you thought too?" I said, "I was sure of it actually, that's the only number that jumps in my head, plus your deposit, plus this, plus that – \$1,900." And she had no record of it, so she couldn't prove it. So it was like she was sucking and fucking for free. Nasty, nasty circumstance. What can you do? (Ashley, Fredericton)

One interviewee quit an escort agency for similar reasons:

Yes, I have worked escort. It was three years ago I worked escort for as long as eight months and then I got out of it ... because the girl I was working for was crooked and started ripping people off and I just didn't want any part of that. (Brianna, Saint John)

This kind of exploitation is not unique to the sex trade, although the illegality of the trade contributes to the non- or minimal regulation of employment so that workers have little chance of taking employers to court or launching complaints with unions. Stories of companies that fold in the night and leave workers unpaid are legion. One interviewee who had tried to leave the streets through a job in construction related:

In Calgary I gave up doing the streets for two weeks and I was insulating condominiums. And I was getting paid ten bucks an hour ... and I wasn't

using, wasn't on the street. I said, "I'm gonna get out [of the sex trade]. I'll start off with a room. I'll get the things, the material things I need and that, then I'll get an apartment and this is the end of 'er, right here." Yeah, and it went by ... the first week [I] didn't get paid, okay. The second week [I] don't get paid. So anyway, I'm there, pacing, pacing, and waiting for my pay; and the man didn't even show up. Nobody ever, ever seen him since. Then I said, "I'm back on the streets." (Juliana, Saint John)

Costs can also be high while the workers are indoors:

I know that one girl that had been there for ten days spent over \$700 just on takeout; and one girl spent probably about \$200. [She] spent at least \$50 in delivery one day alone, just looking for this, looking for that, looking for this, looking for that. 'Cause once you get in there, and you're in that environment, like, there is no concept of reality, there really isn't. (Ashley, Fredericton)

These problems are not seen as inherent to indoor work so much as a function of bad management or a failure to understand the reality of women's lives when setting up the conditions of work. One escort worker, for example, laid out practical steps she would take, if she were manager, to rectify some of these issues:

I would supply the food for the girls because if you're in a booking for ten days most of your money is going to go towards food, you know, and stuff like that – shampoo, conditioner, soap, you know, makeup, condoms ... Yeah, I would supply that, therefore, they have no worries about ... they don't have enough money. 'Cause most girls have children to feed, that's why they do most of what they do, because of their children. So you have to take into consideration for that. And I wouldn't [charge a deposit], because if you're on a booking you have to pay up to \$500 in deposit. (Bonnie, Moncton)

However, several workers were clear that bosses in the sex trade, even in the potentially restrictive escort and massage industry, face a certain labour resistance – that the workers can and do negotiate conditions to a certain degree. As one escort worker described one of the owners, whom she did not particularly care for:

Like, he is lenient to a certain extent because if he disrespects the girls – you know what I mean – if he's not lenient to a certain extent, they're not going to work for him and he'll lose all his good girls. (Bonnie, Moncton)

Another stated that she is careful in choosing which escort services she works for, to ensure that she has maximum control. In particular, she avoids those that penalize workers for, for example, refusing clients:

I go with the services that's not going to get mad at me for nothing, 'cause I'm the woman, I'm the person who's out there making my money and you're not taking it for any other reason. If I want to work, I'm going to work; if I don't want to work, I'm not going to work, and no one's going to control that. (Patricia, Saint John)

Even within the more constraining field of indoor work, sex workers maintain a sense of their ability to negotiate and resist working conditions.

Indeed, the ability to be one's own boss in the sex trade is a major bonus of the job for some of our respondents, which speaks to their often independent and capable character. One identified working in the Maritimes as better than working in central Canada because it offers more independence:

You're your own boss, you set your own hours, your own rates. You don't have someone telling ya, "You get out there and make this amount, or you're gonna get your legs broken," stuff like that. 'Cause I know that's what they do in Ontario. They didn't get me, but I knew some girls that were working for some guys, and they wanted me to, and I wouldn't. I wouldn't do that. (Violet, Saint John)

Pimping was not viewed as a major issue by our interviewees, as we shall see in the next chapter.²⁸

Further, the income in the sex trade in the Atlantic provinces does not compare to the kind of money that can be made in the larger centres such as Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, and even Ottawa. A number of our respondents had taken part in the Maritime tradition of "going down the road" or making their way to central or western Canada to make money and to seek the bright lights of the big city. Indeed, while the appearance of young Nova Scotian women in Toronto in the mid-1990s sparked a panic among the general public over trafficking between Toronto and the Maritimes, in fact, many of the women and young men we spoke with referred to this movement as simply part of a traditional migration pattern. Some travelled more frequently and widely – partly to work and partly simply to travel. It was understood by those who had worked outside the Maritimes that it was harder to make money in the Maritimes. This seemed to be particularly true for the male respondents. One male worker reported being able to bring in \$10,000 a month in Montreal, while his highest income in Halifax was \$2,000 a week.²⁹ Another explained that the better income was in part a product of the larger client base in the bigger cities:

In Ottawa, you're done one client and you're right out to another one. You're done one, you go home for like ten minutes, fifteen minutes, you clean up and whatever, and you're out again. Sometimes you come back with one thousand, two thousand dollars a night. (Jason, Moncton)

His income in escort in Ottawa was

\$250 an hour and then \$30 for the guy that I'm working for, and \$20 for the driver. So I walk out with \$200 in my pocket ... Like, here in Moncton I have tried ... and all they were going to give me is \$50. Fifty dollars an hour ... Fuck that. I could stay home and make more money than that. (Jason, Moncton)

Yet another compared his street income in Toronto to that in Moncton (where he had returned after being mugged on the job in Toronto):

Moncton is very small and there is really not much of anything out there. You would get maybe twenty bucks now, and in Toronto, anything goes for eighty. A client in Toronto would be starting out at \$80 and moving up. And in Toronto, it's a lot bigger. (Marc, Moncton)

Women also reported lower earnings in the Maritimes than elsewhere. One worker who had worked in Alberta reported:

Like here, \$20 is the most that johns will pay for any type of deal. Out there [Calgary], sometimes, he'd set up dates [and] it'd be \$500 between the two of us that we'd split, me and the other girl, \$250 [each]. (Jill, Saint John)

According to one exotic dancer, the working arrangements in the clubs are more exploitative in the Maritimes:

Working in the strip clubs down in Dallas and in New York and Saint Louis, all them, like it's a lot better because when you're dancing on stage they can throw money on the stage, they can stick it in your bra, stick it in your panties. You keep it. But when you're on stage up here in Moncton, no, you don't get paid. You don't get paid anything for being on the stage. And you have to dance for everybody, you dance for one person but everybody else is seeing it you know? (Alexis, Moncton)

These free stage shows minimize a worker's opportunity for the lucrative private dances. But the Maritimes is home for many of our respondents and, as for many Maritimers in other forms of work, stints of work elsewhere are

seen as temporary; life in the Maritimes is preferable because of the support of family and friends. A number of the women were mothers who wanted to stay close to their children. Others had elderly parents in the region and so had decided to work in the Maritimes despite the loss of income. Some racialized women also complained that young white women had an advantage in attracting clients and, therefore, in generating income. However, white privilege is not unique to the sex industry.³⁰

Where workers do see a problem unique to the sex industry is in the stigma attached to the trade, which contributes to violence and mistreatment, most importantly (as we shall see in the next chapter), but also to difficulty leaving the trade should the worker so desire. For example, there is the difficulty of moving into straight jobs when there is a gap in a worker's resumé because s/he was working only in the sex trade.³¹ In the small cities of the Maritimes, a reputation that follows former sex workers is often an impediment:

My life is kinda still hard, my name is still out there, and everywhere that I've went to apply for ... I've went to apply for two jobs, as soon as I said my name, they said, "You're an addict aren't you? You're a prostitute." I went for apartments not too long ago, which really frustrates me sometimes, 'cause I feel like giving up and just going back to that life. At least I felt I belonged with the other girls. Now it's like, I'm an outcast and I went to get an apartment and I told her my name and she gave me the apartment and everything else and I left, and she gave a call to my friend that I gave her the number and said, "She's a prostitute isn't she? She's into drugs." And he said, "Not anymore, she's been clean eighteen months." And she said, "We can't take the chance of her wrecking this place or stealing or taking stuff out of here." So it took me a long time to get the apartment that I have. (Beth, Saint John)

The continuing stigma of the trade is considered to be a barrier to moving into other work and the straight social world:

Yeah, it's just, you know, all that, you start to lose your self-esteem after a while, you really do. You start to lose your self-esteem like that's all you deserve and that's all you're good enough to do. That's all, and then when you do try to get a regular job and they check out your history, once they see something like that on your record [prostitution charges], your chances are very slim of getting into any kind of job anyway. (Valerie, Halifax)

Another interviewee, on the other hand, pointed to the stigma attached to transsexualism as a barrier to straight jobs, a barrier she could transcend in sex work:

To be very honest with you, I'm very proud of being a hooker and I mean I've had some amazing jobs in my life. I've been very lucky and, ah, I love this job. See, when I became "Susy," then with all my papers and certificates and everything that I had, it didn't mean anything. It was my face that meant ... I was a transsexual. So I totally gave up trying to get a job because, you know, after a while, getting your, ah, resumé's thrown in your face and stuff like this you say what the hell ... so that's basically what I did. (April, Halifax)

But for a few who had left the trade, particularly youth, straight work was more appealing. As one young man stated:

When I look back on it now, even if we [my partner and I] were to ever break up and I was to be in [financial trouble], I don't think I would ever do it again. I don't think I would ever step back on the street. (Robert, Moncton)

His partner, who had also worked in the trade, concurred:

I'd rather work for twelve hours a day than go out stand for an hour in the cold. It's degrading. (Eric, Moncton)

Others recognized that full-time legitimate work could offer the advantage of benefits and union protections. But even for those who found the work degrading, there was grim humour about the reality of most service jobs available for women, especially the domestic work that has become the lot of a number of Afro-Canadian women in Halifax:

Interviewer: Okay, so what I should ask you first is, how long have you been working in the trade?

Yeah, too many years. Twenty some years.

Interviewer: Okay, so you've got a good long view of what's been going on.

Oh yeah, real good long view. Front row centre.

Interviewer: So over those twenty years, what have been the best things about the job?

The money. That's it. There's no other upsides to it. I don't see them. The worst part is dealing with them people, them jerks, them dicks. Nasty people. I don't know. Some of them are okay but it's just, I don't know, I just don't like the job itself. To me it's a job. It's like going out and cleaning somebody's toilet. You know, seriously. It's a job. It's a dirty job and somebody has to do it, but that's the way I look at it, it's a job. I don't know too many people that like their cleaning job. (Heidi, Halifax)

Thus, for many sex industry workers, the drawbacks and barriers experienced in the industry are similar to those experienced in other types of work, though the advantages of the work in terms of pay and independence can outweigh those potential problems. Addressing these problems means addressing the conditions of work within the trade, rather than simply pushing women out of the work itself. Sex workers' own words in analyzing their situations shows us how they resist the constraints on them and talk back to those who would treat them as undeserving.

Addictions, Money, and Sex Work

In recent years, addictions rather than poverty have become the most commonly understood reason people enter the trade. But discussions of the role of addictions often fall into the same traps as discussions of the role of poverty. Indeed, there is an increasingly problematic conflation of addictions and sex work that indicates a need for more careful analysis of the relationship between the two. The meaning and role of addictions, like those of poverty, have often been assumed rather than investigated, and yet, careful analysis once again warns us that these assumptions might be problematic. Certainly, studies differ as to the extent of addictions among sex workers, reflecting differential sources of data (e.g., police versus self-reporting, street-focus versus indoor).³² Shaver observes that substance use varies by region, with workers in the Maritimes reporting higher usage than do workers elsewhere in Canada.³³ And, certainly, the relationship between addictions and sex work cannot be deduced from the mere presence of addictions among some sex workers. A number of our interviewees talked about having addictions or struggling with them in the past, but, again, our sample is likely over-representative in this regard. At the same time, these interviewees made it clear that the relationship between sex work and addictions is often less one of cause than of overlap, and sometimes less problematic than it might first appear. Indeed, addictions are not viewed as necessarily meaning a loss of control or income; rather, addictions are frequently managed in such a way as to ensure that control is maintained, and only the loss of that control – not the addiction itself – is seen as problematic, which, as several pointed out, is a condition they share with many other Canadians, including professionals and the wealthy. Overall, sex workers resist the too easy conflation of addictions, sex work, and lack of control.

Certainly, addictions can mean that, despite the relatively large sums being earned, workers have little to show in terms of savings. And for some of those who are heavily addicted to a substance before entering the trade, the issue is perhaps best understood as sex for exchange (i.e., drugs or drug money), not sex work per se:

When I first started, my head was ... you get very numb from that stuff, from crack. I never ever thought of, that you weren't allowed to do it. It never ever crossed my mind that I could be picked up for prostitution. To me, I wasn't doing anything wrong. And I've seen me in the run of a night, get \$800, and every penny of it went to the crack. (Beth, Saint John)

For this respondent, as for others, addictions and sex work were fused and only by exiting both was she able to regain a sense of control.

For others still, the relationship between sex work and addictions was much less determined. Importantly, in line with sex workers' general sense of independence, it is the loss of control over one's work and money, and not the addiction itself, that is seen as the problem – when a worker becomes, in the eyes of others, “a crack whore.” As one woman said:

Like I do crack, but I ain't no crack whore. Some guy said to me, “You give me some pussy and I'll fucking smoke a fucking half a gram with ya.” I said, “Excuse me, you give me a gram and I'll fucking do it for ya. Because I ain't doing it for half a gram.” (Megan, Halifax)

Her continued ability to negotiate the terms of her work was what she considered most important. Addictions per se are not the problem, but the potential loss of control is. Others explained that their use of some of their money from their trade for drugs does not mean they exchange sex for drug money only:

Just because we are working the street, right ... some girls, yeah, they all are about the crack, and the alcohol, and whatever, right? Yeah, I work and, yeah, I buy fucking about fifty dollars' worth of crack a day or maybe about thirty dollars' worth of Dilaudids. That ain't nothing. That's one day. With the rest I just really sit down eat, have fun, just ... I just have fun. (Megan, Halifax)

Indeed, many manage their substance use so that it does not interfere with their work (for example, by using only when they are not working).

There certainly seemed to be self-esteem issues for those who found that they could not control their money because of addictions. When this happened, workers felt much less in control of their lives, had much less self-respect, and were much unhappier with being involved in the trade. But they also pointed out that they were similarly unhappy when, for example, bureaucratic strictures made them unable to control their income:

See, I don't like giving nobody my money; it's bad enough I gotta give dope dealers my money. If I could take my money and go buy groceries,

instead of waiting for my welfare cheque, my disability cheque, no problem. I don't want to give nobody my money. That's my money. I'm out there blowin' or suckin' or whatever. That's my money. (Tara, Halifax)

For this sex worker, waiting for the cheque is as bad as having drug dealers take her money; that is, it is her lack of control over her money, whether because of drugs or red tape, that is the source of frustration.

Waking up to the reality of the costs of drug addiction can be a motivator for change. One worker explained how she kicked a crack addiction:

I knew I had an income tax cheque coming for \$1,700 and I knew I had a choice. I could either sign the cheque and give it to the dope dealer, or I can go buy stuff for my house. 'Cause there's no point pretending I'm only gonna spend a hundred there. So, I know the money's coming but it's not here yet. There's a four-day wait to decide what am I gonna do. I made that decision [and] I went and bought myself some weed, and beer. And I had some groceries, and I locked myself in my house for four days. I wouldn't do a job or nothing, 'cause if I had the cash I'd go and buy the dope. After four days I had my cheque come, and I said to my girlfriend, "I want you to come with me, 'cause if I go myself, and I've even got \$20 change, I'm gonna buy another stone." I spent every penny on my house, right down to toilet paper. And I never had 50¢ to buy a 50¢ ticket. That's the only thing I knew. I wasn't giving that \$1,700 cash all in one lump. 'Cause when it come a hundred here and a hundred there, it doesn't look so bad. But a lump of seventeen \$100 bills and I know it's gonna be gone in one day. I'm gonna have nothing to show for it. I couldn't do it to myself. And I haven't smoked since. (Belinda, Halifax)

Some argued that the easier access to, and different kinds of, drugs on the streets has undercut prices and professionalism in the sex trade, but they also indicated that the problem is in part a lack of management that coincided with the end of the pimping era:

It's got better and worse on two levels. Now, when there was a lot of pimps out there – now there's not any out there – it was kind of rough. But now it's worse, because most of them that don't have pimps they might ... They did better with the pimps, 'cause at least they [were] handed out \$20 a day. Now all they're doing is running crack ... [There's] a lot of drug dealers today. It's more about drugs now. It's not about buying a car or doing this job. It's about getting high now ... The whole concept has changed. You know, twenty years ago, when we went out, you could never find a hooker after twelve o'clock. Really. And that's, you know, I

think that's the part that really got you hooked. 'Cause you could go in at seven o'clock and be gone by eleven o'clock with five or six hundred dollars every night if you didn't lollygag and fool around fighting the cops. But now it's three and four o'clock in the morning and you're still trying to get a hundred bucks. Like what is that bullshit? ... But the industry, as far as money goes, has dropped substantially; because there're a lot of them out there that don't care. Twenty bucks and they don't care. Ten bucks ... I don't know. That causes a lot of problems, right? But that's life, you know. (Heidi, Halifax)

One escort worker used this technique to manage her money from an escort agency while she was addicted:

Well, I'll tell you, for me what I used to do and being addicted, you know, I didn't use for that full two weeks [at the escort service] because I'll tell ya, there are only a couple [of customers] that you can get away with using. The other ones are pretty particular, you know, and the customer's everything. Okay, now I have two weeks of money stored up. So I'd call ahead and make a reservation at a hotel, okay, for my own safety. I had an account that my mom was on one end and I was on the other. My mom had the bank card and I just made a deposit. Because, I mean, that way my mom, who knows I'm an addict – you know, I've been an addict since I was thirteen – so my mom would kind of regulate. So, you know, she'd be my daily limit. 'Cause there's ways to get around that ... So I kind a set up my little safety net there. (Dana, Halifax)

Alcohol abuse can be a problem for exotic dancers, since workers are sometimes encouraged to drink with clients.³⁴ One former exotic dancer explained that to make money in dance requires careful management with or without addictions:

Well, the main reason why I quit dancing [was addiction] ... I mean, mind you, I'd probably go back now if it weren't for my husband. Except this time I would really use my head. This time I would put the money in the bank account. I would leave the damn stuff in the bank account. Not touch it. I would actually not drink, just pretend I was – tell the bartender right out. (Colleen, Moncton)

Addictions may cost indoor sex workers and exotic dancers their jobs when management cracks down on drug or alcohol use. On the other hand, some sex workers on the street reported that those with addictions may actually make more money than do those without.

I made more money when I was smoking cocaine than I can now, and it don't make sense. They should do a study on that. Watch one girl that's all dirty and you can tell they haven't been clean in days. And put someone else out there that looks nice and cleaned up. [The former will] make double her money. Don't ask me why, I don't know. When I was on cocaine I could get a date, go buy a twenty stone, go smoke it back there. I'd come out, get another date, and go down, get another stone, smoke it, come out, get another date. Now if I needed money to go pay the rent I'd stand there all night long, lucky to get a date or two. I don't know why. Ask any girl that you know [who] doesn't smoke and they'll tell you the same thing. The ones that smoke, just like that. And you can stand there and watch them go and it just sickens ya 'cause you know what they're gonna do with that money. They're just ... I have no idea why, I can't fathom it myself ... You just watch the young girls. They could be old, a hundred years old with a cane. If they do a hit of crack they can go make money. I don't know if it's the look of desperation or whatever it is, but believe me you are very enthused to get more money 'cause you want that high ... I can't explain it. (Belinda, Halifax)

The very availability of large amounts of money in sex work can be part of the problem:

The money's crazy, but then the money gets to ya. Once you have so much money, you don't know what to do with it ... And my problem was – why I got out of it when I was out there – because I was smoking too much and I was smoking too much crack. The money got to me, because I'd go to a client and I'd get the money, and I'd go right to my dealer. I'd spend all the money and I'd just be waiting, you know, edging to go again. That was my problem. (Jason, Moncton)

But, as the same respondent commented, the “waste” of the money may also reflect the illegality of the trade and not the tendency of the trade to generate drug addiction:

[Revenue Canada is] ... coming back saying where are you getting your money? And you can't tell them you're a sex worker 'cause that's all under the table. Then they're going to take it all from you. They're going to seize it, 'cause they're going to think it's the profit of narcotics. Seriously, it comes right down to it. So what else are you going to spend your money on? What else? If you're going to buy that stuff, you're going to get busted for it. What's the sense of doing it? Why not spend your money on drugs? Is that a good point? Is this not a good point? When you're listening to

that tape, you can add that in there, because that's a good point. (Jason, Moncton)

Again it must be noted that addictions can be a problem in other professions and walks of life. As one respondent pointed out:

I mean, there's doctors and lawyers that do drugs and they make the money to do it, you know what I mean? And if they were to lose their jobs, what would they be doing for it? It's true. I know a lawyer in X that probably spends his whole friggin' week's wealth on it. (Kendra, Saint John)

Clearly, the relationship between addictions and sex work is much more complicated than cause and effect, but it is also true that addictions can mean that the money disappears quickly. Again, not only is this not unique to sex work, but a number of sex workers we spoke with had found ways to overcome this potential barrier. One of the main concerns addicted sex workers have is for the loss of control over their work. That is, many sex workers do not view addictions and sex work as necessarily intertwined; rather, they see addiction as a factor that can affect conditions of work by making it more difficult for a worker to control her income and pace of work.

Minimum Wage and Service-Sector Work

You work your butt off for minimum wage, \$6 an hour, you know what I mean? That's crazy. (Kendra, Saint John)

Certainly, there are caveats to the good money that can be made in sex work. However, many of these caveats apply to other forms of work as well. Most of our interviewees had weighed sex work and its advantages and disadvantages against other forms of work and found that sex work, overall, was an optimal work choice. Maybe it was not what they had originally intended to do or what they would ultimately like to be doing (although it certainly was for some), but, upon careful consideration and experience of other options, it was the best choice in the circumstances. What most of the workers we talked to faced, as an alternative means of generating income, was work in the growing service-oriented, minimum-wage sector, which carries many of the costs and few of the benefits of sex work. In particular, what many sex workers disliked about minimum-wage work was, along with the low pay, the workplace discipline and control that limited their independence and attempted to force them into the straitjacket of cheap labour. Many explained how, given that the downsides of sex work were likely to be experienced in other service-sector and minimum-wage jobs, their most likely

other route, sex work, was the more lucrative option. Even more importantly, many of those who had worked in the service-sector and minimum-wage economy found the way they were treated in these jobs and the constraints placed on them unacceptable. Sex work, on the other hand, provided relative independence. That is, what the women and men whom we spoke with were resisting were the attempts to render them passive labourers and, therefore, impoverished labourers, in the capitalist system.

Many of the interviewees reported working in other jobs either in the past or currently, simultaneously with sex work, and many were familiar with the possible incomes that could be generated through straight jobs in the Maritimes economy, including service-sector and personal-service jobs, manual labour, and clerical work. As this sex worker states:

Oh, Christ. I worked at a bakery once and let me tell ya, three and a half months ... and I'm not anyone special, but I'd never want a straight job again. I worked for minimum wage to be bossed around and in the end I said to her [the boss], "You know how much money I'm fuckin' missing sitting here with you. You're paying me five something an hour to sit here and listen to your fucking ignorance." Those were my exact words, I know I'm quitting anyway. "You can't fire me 'cause I'm quitting." And then they didn't want you to leave on the lunch break, I figured you get a fifteen-minute break in the morning, a half-hour lunch, and a fifteen-minute break in the afternoon. I'm thinking, okay, I can set my dates up during lunch, that gives me an hour. Oh, no, no, no, no. You have to take a fifteen here, and a fifteen and half hour, and you can't leave the place.

Three and a half months, that's all I could handle it. I missed three hundred and some dollars every two weeks. When they gave out the paycheque I thought they were missing a one on the front. I didn't realize how much it was, I said, "Oh, fuck. Oh, no, no, no, no." Three and a half months, I couldn't do it no more, I tried, I tried. I can't do it. If it was children or something like that, and they paid me good, I'd love it. I love kids or animals or elderly people, that I could handle, if the pay was good – but not for five something an hour. I couldn't live on that. Well, by the time I pay my rent and do everything else, I'd rather sit on welfare 'cause at least with that I get \$251 to spend after my rent's paid. Oh, no, no, no. I don't want no job, I don't want no job. (Belinda, Halifax)

Several of our interviewees had worked in service-sector jobs such as fast-food counter and kitchen help, waiting on tables, sales, homecare, and elder care. That sex work is a rational income-generating strategy becomes apparent when these other options are examined. Half of the women working in Nova Scotia, for example, are employed in the clerical/sales/service sector,

the lowest paying of all categories.³⁵ The average income of women in sales or service is \$17,261 (or \$330 a week) and, in clerical, \$23,763 (or \$457 a week) before taxes.³⁶ Take-home pay would of course be lower. Once again, sex workers, under the right conditions, could potentially make this kind of money much more quickly.

Many of the jobs available to women and youth in the Maritimes are minimum- or just above minimum-wage jobs. It is these jobs to which most of those in the Maritimes without post-secondary education (and even some of those with such education) can aspire. While many of the sex workers we interviewed had not completed high school, this does not make them an unusual group in the Maritimes.³⁷ Rates of non-completion of high school are high in the Maritimes. In the 1990s, about one-third of Saint Johners and Haligonians had less than a grade twelve education, according to the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD).³⁸ One response to the growing rate of unemployment and the decline of the primary sector, on which the Maritimes has traditionally depended, is the move toward a knowledge-based economy, championed most significantly by the McKenna government in New Brunswick. Government grants and tax relief to private investors has resulted in the mushrooming of call centres and service sector industries that have become primary employers even for university graduates. These are, however, among the lowest paid industries, most likely to be non-unionized, part-time, and low or minimum wage. As one ex-stripper/sex worker related:

There's one woman at my work [a call centre], she's a psychology major, she has her Master's. And she's working at a call centre for \$8.00 an hour. I think she's making a little bit more now 'cause she's been there for a long time. I think she's making \$8.40 an hour. Like, still, you spent \$50,000 on university, to make \$8.40 an hour? (Colleen, Moncton)

Or, as the university-graduate receptionist in a massage parlour, who makes \$7.50 an hour, put it:

What's weird for me personally is that every time that I'm in that environment, I can't help but to think, why not? You know, it's ten days, \$3,000 to \$5,000. It's such a plausible way to make money. Then I go home that night, and I'll be like, "I sat there for the same amount of time as they did, I made \$60; and they made \$500." I can't help but to consider it. (Ashley, Fredericton)

Given the low level of wages in the Maritimes, sex work is a comparably good work choice. In New Brunswick, according to Ken Battle's study, the minimum wage hovers just under \$6.00 an hour (in 2002 dollars), the

fourth lowest rate in Canada. Nova Scotia pays its minimum-wage workers even less at \$5.85 an hour.³⁹ However, minimum-wage workers are over-represented in New Brunswick, which has the second highest incidence of minimum-wage workers (6 percent) in Canada, most of whom (61 percent) are women.⁴⁰ Further, as Thom Workman's study shows, not only are minimum wages low in Atlantic Canada, they are declining in real terms, that is, once inflation is accounted for.⁴¹ The income of single persons living on minimum wage is sufficient to meet only about three-quarters of their living expenses.⁴² And, as Thom Workman points out, this is the "best case scenario," where a worker is supporting only her/himself and not a child or children (and, we might add, is working full time).⁴³ Women, who are most likely to be caring for children, are also most likely to remain in jobs that are minimum wage or close to minimum wage longer than do their male counterparts.⁴⁴ As Workman details:

A disproportionate number of women work at rates close to the minimum wage in all four Atlantic provinces. Moreover, the median hourly wage for women in each province was never more than \$5.40 above the minimum wage ... It is not merely the case that the average wages of women are lower than those of their male counterparts, but rather that so many female workers throughout the region are working in the low end, low wage jobs ... The conclusion that women disproportionately bear the burden of low wage work in Atlantic Canada is inescapable.⁴⁵

Workers' resistance to this neo-liberal age of unlivable minimum wages is often to refuse the work altogether. As Workman observes, there are indeed minimum-wage jobs that go unfilled in Atlantic Canada, but "working people know that low wages often do not go far enough. And when one factors in the bad hours, the child care problems, the workplace harassment and so forth, it just isn't worth it."⁴⁶ Many of the sex workers we spoke with had recognized this reality and opted for a more entrepreneurial method of survival.

Sex work also provides that other key ingredient: flexibility. It is important to remember that, for women in particular, it is the combination of time constraints and minimum wages that makes for particular economic hardship. According to one recent study, "For a single mother with one child in the workforce, it takes 73 hours of work per week at the minimum wage to reach the LICO [low income cut-off]."⁴⁷ Women throughout Canada have often turned to, or been forced into, part-time work – with its low pay and lack of benefits – in order to cope with the demands of family. In New Brunswick, women make up the majority of part-time workers at over 72 percent.⁴⁸ Similarly, self-employment (or "self-account" work) has increasingly become a strategy of Canadian women faced with double days,

the burden of which only increases as the welfare state shrinks.⁴⁹ According to Karen Hadley's research, women in the Atlantic provinces in non-standard – that is, not full-time/full-year – work were more likely than anyone else in Canada to have income below the LICO.⁵⁰

Sex work, on the other hand, provides both the required flexibility and potentially higher incomes. Many of our respondents have children (although they are not necessarily living with them), and a number took care of sick or elderly parents. One woman explained how she was the primary caregiver for her ailing mother:

Interviewer: Is she dependent on you?

Yeah, she is. She really is. It's like I'm the mother, she's the daughter. She didn't raise me, she put me in a foster home because of her MS and none of her family don't do nothing for her, so it's like, it's all on me. And that's another thing, if she doesn't have something in the house, and she needs it, I'll go and work and get it for her. So really, you might say she's my pimp, really, when you really break it down. (Katrina, Halifax)

Another (Valerie, Halifax) drove back and forth between Montreal and Halifax to care for her aging mother. Sex work, which can allow women to make relatively large amounts of money in relatively short periods of time and which can also be made to fit their schedules, provides a way around the constraints of minimum-wage work.

While incomes in sex work are unpredictable, so are incomes in minimum-wage shift-based service work. One sex worker who had done several jobs in the service industry complained: "I was supposed to be hired under full time, and I was only getting part-time hours" (Bonnie, Moncton). The prerogative of managers in, for example, assigning hours is a major source of complaint for many of those – particularly youth – who work in the service sector and who find that their hours and incomes can fluctuate wildly, depending, in part, on how well they can get in with managers.⁵¹ As a CCSD report has noted, "A growing number of young, involuntary part time workers face jobs that are organized into split shifts, for example, in fast food establishments where employees are called in for a few hours only around mealtimes. Such jobs typically have no benefits, no training beyond an initial orientation, and no means of advancing to better jobs. Even in more skilled sectors, the trend towards using contract and temporary staff grew over the 1990s."⁵²

The demands of minimum-wage work, in terms of its physical and emotional tolls, are also weighed against the possible benefits and costs of work in the sex industry. One young mother called moving from waitressing in a strip club to dancing as the "easy, lazy way out of waitressing" (Audrey, Fredericton). Another woman reported:

I've worked at McDonald's, I've worked at call centres, I've like, you know ... mowed lawns, shovelled driveways, type thing, you know what I mean.

Interviewer: You've done those minimum-wage McDonald's jobs, and if you had to weigh them one against the other, how do they compare?

Well, really, working at McDonald's is the perfect example. You still got all the [backbiting]. It's all younger people who know each other; it's even more immature because they're so much younger, so it's worse. Even the managers themselves – you know first-hand, 'cause she works with you, right, at McDonald's – some of them will talk behind your back, you know like ... You got to put up with customers' bullshit, and you only get paid minimum wage. Your feet are tired, your back. We [at the escort service] get to kick back in our lazy boy and watch soaps or something.
(Bonnie, Moncton)

While such backbiting can also be experienced in the escort setting, this respondent felt that the situation was easier to avoid in sex work (by hanging out with the receptionist or watching television). Arlie Hochschild's work on the emotional labour of service-sector workers, such as airline staff, is now a common reference point in the sex work literature. Her work shows that the presumed emotional burden of sex workers is shared across service industries, where workers are expected to appear to enjoy their work and their customers, despite what they might actually feel.⁵³ Thus, in terms of emotional or psychological stress, sex work and service work can be quite similar.

The physical burdens of sex work can also be similar to those of other industries. Frances Shaver has drawn out the similarities in the physical complaints of sex workers with those of other workers.⁵⁴ Some observers claim that the importance of youthfulness and good looks in the sex industry is problematic. Indeed, this is the case for some, particularly in the male trade and strip work. A thirty-four-year-old male sex worker reported that, while he could still make between \$50 and \$60 a night, his income had declined with age. As Chris Bruckert points out, work in exotic dancing (and, we could add, the sex trade) is parallel to that of many working-class jobs in that it demands physical labour that relies on youthfulness and has high health costs.⁵⁵ Hustling for tips as wait staff also becomes more difficult as workers get older. But attractiveness can be compensated for with skill in both the sex and service trades. And, certainly, it appears that, given the mean age (32) of our respondents, the amount of money one could make appeared to them to rely more on one's skills in managing clients so that they pay as much as possible, rather than on passive characteristics such as beauty or youthfulness. The tendency to dismiss sex workers as declining with age reflects society's general unwillingness to recognize the amount of labour and skill that goes into the work. Thus, the physical and

emotional burdens of sex work do not necessarily make it a less attractive form of work, given that physical and emotional stressors are common in other forms of work as well.

The authority structure of bosses and managers is also a source of dissatisfaction with straight jobs. Indeed, it is this frustration with the control exercised by management – particularly the more social disciplinary mechanisms, or having to “listen to [her] fucking ignorance,” as the former bakery worker put it – that epitomizes many sex workers’ frustration with straight work in general. A young male escort worker was unambiguous about his impatience with workplace authority:

I won't even work for anything under \$10 an hour, I won't. 'Cause what's the sense of busting my balls for that? And listen to somebody yelling at you, telling you what to do. 'Cause I can't take authority from nobody, I can't let nobody tell me what to do. This job [sex work], that's how it turned me. I'm kinda my own boss, and I get so much good money off it. No, it [a straight job] just won't work. (Jason, Moncton)

What sex workers are refusing in refusing straight work is not just the conditions of work but the disciplinary structures that attempt to control their work and render them passive and cheap labour.

Comparative Incomes: Social Assistance

The other source of income to which some of our interviewees – among whom poor women and youth were over-represented – could turn was social assistance. However, it too was seen as having many drawbacks, being insufficient to meet survival needs and demeaning at the same time. Once again, what many of our interviewees expressed was a resistance to being positioned as a vulnerable person, as someone who needs the guidance of policy experts and bureaucrats because of their inability to make or manage money and as someone who should be grateful for the help s/he receives. Most importantly, they resisted the way in which social assistance is designed to force them back into the labour market by keeping rates as low as possible – in the Maritimes, lower than the actual costs of living. They resisted this positioning most often by “talking back” to social workers and policy makers.

Most respondents reported receiving social assistance income that ranged from \$200 a month to \$535. This, however, reflects the bias of our sample, which was reached mostly through outreach services, so the respondents were most often women and youth who were already in contact with the system in various ways. For example, several of our respondents were receiving disability benefits for addictions. It should also be kept in mind that women are the majority of social assistance recipients in Nova Scotia, and,

in New Brunswick, female single parents are more likely to be receiving assistance. Given the work options outlined above, plus the likely burden of child care, it is obvious why this is the case.⁵⁶ However, among our respondents, older, more independent workers and some escort and strip workers, like the majority of indoor workers, maintained a living income without assistance.

Some respondents combined social assistance with sex work, even though social assistance levels in Atlantic Canada are very low. This should not be surprising because, for example, New Brunswick has the lowest social assistance rates in Canada. Single employables receive the lowest amount at \$264 a month.⁵⁷ Assistance rates throughout Atlantic Canada provide incomes that are well below the poverty line.⁵⁸ The gap between levels of income assistance and the poverty line is greatest for single persons, but there is also a gap of 30 to 40 percent for single parents, who are most likely to be women.⁵⁹ Workman argues that such low levels of income assistance are an attempt to drive Atlantic Canadians into accepting low-wage work that appears to provide an income that is at least higher than social assistance, but, as we have seen, in fact does not provide a living wage and adds further complications – such as child or elder care.⁶⁰

Social assistance rarely provides people, particularly women with dependants, with sufficient income to cover even basic necessities. One young mother began strip work in Saint John to cover the extra costs of having a child:

It's cash in my pocket. Welfare doesn't know. It gives my son better clothes, better food ... I spend all my money on him. (Jacqueline, Saint John)

One ex-sex worker in recovery from addiction reported:

I'm just on a disability. I get \$485 a month, which is really hard, because I have a one-bedroom apartment, [to be] close to my kids. It's walking distance for them, and I pay \$395, and I got \$65 left, and it's whether, do I buy food with it, or do I pay bills with it? (Beth, Saint John)

For youth, poverty and social assistance are major problems. According to the Canadian Council on Social Development, "The wage gap between young men and women is narrowing, mainly because young men's earnings have been falling ... Young men in their mid-20s earned approximately 20% less in the 1990s than those with equivalent education in the 1960s."⁶¹ Youth unemployment fell to only 15 percent, compared to 7 percent for adults, in the 1990s, and remains highest among the fifteen- to nineteen-year-old group at 20 percent.⁶² For the younger sex workers, those who started in sex work between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, the unavailability of

social assistance was a major barrier. When youth do receive assistance, it is likely to be at the lowest possible rates, since they are viewed as potential workers. One seventeen-year-old former dancer refused income assistance:

I have no income support at all. Welfare is a bitch ... They want to give me – because I'm seventeen years old – they want to give me \$300 a month to stay in school, and I'm allowed to make \$115 on the side. So altogether I'm only allowed to have \$415 a month – and that is not even my rent, not even my rent, period. And that doesn't include lights, heat, groceries, like hygiene stuff, nothing ... I was accepted for it [assistance] and everything and he was like, "Bring in your last pay stub from the last time that you worked and then we'll start sending you the cheques and you let us know if anything changes." I never called them back. It was \$415 a month. Who's gonna live off that? My cat wouldn't live off that.
(Alexis, Moncton)

It is widely acknowledged that social assistance incomes are insufficient to provide even minimal survival. As two young male former sex workers in Moncton commented, after the rent is paid, there is very little left for food or other necessities:

Robert: In Toronto at least I know the cost of living is higher but I mean you can still rent a room in Toronto for \$300 a month. But they give you \$675 if you're one person. And they break it down on your cheque: this month is January, you're going to need more money for this. So they give you more money in January. But here in Moncton, you get \$300 a month and that's it ... really, \$264. If you go in a rooming house you pay \$250, which gives you \$14 a month.

Eric: You're lucky to find one for \$200. The lowest rooming house I ever found was \$190 and the room was like ...

Robert: The size of this chair. (Robert and Eric, Moncton)

The Catch-22 of finding accommodation before Social Assistance will issue a cheque is often a problem. A young male sex worker who works in the trade for money to buy food and shelter commented:

And like, social assistance is retarded here because you have to have an address in order to get a cheque and if you don't have an address, you can't get a cheque. But you can't get an address unless you get money, and you can't get money unless you have an address. And it's retarded because if you have no place to stay, you're stuck, unless someone wants to let you move in without paying the money. It just doesn't happen very often, it's thirty years [out-of-date]. It's bullshit. It's horrible.

I had it before when I lived in Toronto. Like you get \$195 just living on the street and if you give that to a landlord they'll let you move in, and they'll sign ya the statement and they'll give you the full cheque, plus \$800 and plus you're entitled to a hundred bucks' transportation. It's so good, you can survive.

And here, once you get on social assistance, all you get is \$264 for a single person. You can afford a room maybe, a room is like \$250. You may have fourteen bucks left for the month to eat. There's two soup kitchens that open once a day at the same time and they are both really horrible. And the soup bus is horrible, like I'll go there sometimes, but I haven't all month. I'd rather not eat. (Marc, Moncton)

Another sex worker prefers earning her own money in the sex trade over enduring the public disgrace of food banks and social assistance:

I ate at soup kitchens, I went to food banks, I've done the whole, fight, fight, fight for whichever church gives the best stuff. And yeah, you could budget your money, you really could, but do you want to degrade yourself? I mean, personally, me: to go to soup kitchens and food banks? Yes, for some people that might be their cup of tea. To me, I'd rather go sell my ass in private, and have it discreet, and be able to buy my own stuff, than to go and ask for charity from a church all the time. Because nobody knows about you selling your ass on the side, sure you're degrading yourself a lot more than asking for a hand-out, but nobody knows about it. It's all private. It's confidential ... And you earned the money, even though you degraded yourself, you still earned that money. You're not asking for a friggin' hand-out. So yeah, you could budget your money, you really could, but do you really want to live like that? Going to soup kitchens every day, going to food banks every week, going to soup kitchens all the time, like do you really want to go cash that welfare cheque every month? (Colleen, Moncton)

Yet another respondent related how difficult it was to stay out of the trade when she had so little money to live on, despite her best budgeting efforts:

And I'm cheap when it comes to money. I don't like to spend money. I don't. Now if I get some things, like when I go grocery shopping for some things ... it has to be name brand, like ketchup ... Anything else I don't care if it's second name brand. Certain things I want the money for. But I want to save it for something else. Like toilet paper, no name brand. Ketchup, it's gotta be Heinz. I will splurge the 40¢ for Heinz or the extra 60¢ for Miracle Whip but other than that ... pop, Big 8. I'm not buying Pepsi. Like, you gotta save the money 'cause if not, when you're broke,

what are you gonna do? Right back up [to the stroll]. And I've only got another month for my probation. So, there's no way ... I hope to never have to go back up there, but when you only get \$251 per month, and you gotta pay your cable, and you gotta pay your lights, you've gotta pay your phone, and you've gotta eat. Like I said to the woman, "I gotta go to the gas station to get toilet paper to wipe my ass. I can't afford to buy it. Where am I gonna buy everything?"

When your money runs out, what option do I have? For a single person going to the food bank, they'll give you a bag the size of them little brown candy bags. "Here, take that." They gave me a bag with one can of tomato soup. You know what I said to her? "Dear, you keep that for someone else 'cause they're gonna need it. I don't need one can of tomato soup from whatever you got, no thank you." I'll take my chances on fish and chips, fuck that. Lord. (Belinda, Halifax)

Many of our interviewees who are struggling with poverty resist the sometimes patronizing charity of the system and the daily humiliations that receiving assistance can entail. Even those in the most straitened circumstances find charity difficult to take. One spoke of a Christian couple who buys her coffee and a doughnut every morning: "And lots of times I'll accept the coffee but I try not to accept the doughnut or anything like that, 'cause I guess it's pride, I don't know" (Juliana, Saint John). The spirit of a fighter that marks so many of those who work in the sex industry is also apparent in how they deal with poverty. That is, they refuse to internalize the image of themselves as undeserving that is key to turning them into obedient workers and subjects of the state.

Talking Back to the System: "My Opinion Is Going to Be Heard"

Our interviewees resist the patronizing attitudes of social assistance providers they often encounter, the bureaucratic runaround of the welfare system, and the expectation that they should simply be grateful for what little they receive. They are unafraid to talk back to those social assistance providers and others who do not treat the poor with respect. One respondent told the story of how she coped with a landlord who was demanding too much money:

I paid \$425 for a room downtown but I got there [and] the room looked like a pigpen. This room here [her new one], I didn't mind living in there. But a pigpen? No windows in it, no lock on my door; and buddy expects \$425? I told him, before I go in and sit down, "I'll bring CTV cameras down here and show them the way that you got people livin' here in slums." Jeez, no wonder people turn to drugs and everything, you know. (Dawne, Halifax)

Another interviewee, a mother who brooks no nonsense and who brought her son to the outreach centre while she did the interview, explained:

When I pay my rent, you know, what I get to live off, me and my kids, \$379. That's got to buy my groceries, that's got to feed him [my son], [pay for] cable, phone, lights, plus any other thing he needs. I don't understand how anybody can live from month to month on a welfare cheque ... People get excited: "It's cheque day!" What? Where is the money? What are you excited about? ... Like that's crazy, with a kid. My girlfriend has four kids. You know what she gets after she pays her rent? – \$380. Yes. That's just retarded. So if her, if the father of her children were to come back and say, "Okay, I got a good job and I'm going to give you \$400 a month," then she'll owe them [Social Assistance] probably a dollar. Yeah, like and they wonder why [we work in the sex trade] ... \$400 a month. (Heidi, Halifax)

Her resistance to disrespectful and misinformed attitudes is marked in her reversal of the power relationship, by refusing to "hear" or internalize these attitudes, much as those in power fail to hear her interpretations. For example, when her social worker suggested that her work in the trade is detrimental to her kids, she responded quickly:

I said, number one, that doesn't make me an unfit parent. And if that's the reason why you think that you should take my child, I think you need to go rent a couple of U-Hauls ... 'cause there's a lot of mothers out there doing it. Whether it's inside or outside, they're doing it, because it's called survival. So I ain't hearing that. (Heidi, Halifax)

The inability of middle-class professionals to understand the ridiculous constraints placed on those receiving assistance and the reality of trying to live on social assistance infuriated her:

Everything has a catch to it. It's like, you're never going to get ahead. So they wonder why people do what they do. This is why they do what they do. This is why people sell dope ... Because the economy, everything, is so high. And what we have to live on, like, it's like one time I asked them ... the woman told me to [get a line of credit] ... I said, "Excuse me, they don't give people a line of credit." She was telling me, "Well, you're over the budget." Over the budget? Well, how many thousands am I under the budget? Seriously. How many thousands am I under the poverty line? So you're telling me to go get some credit ...

It's like they are always on this budget, budget, budget. This budget thing. My boy needed glasses, you know I had to fight tooth and nail to

get them glasses. No, but he really needs his glasses, 'cause his eyes are bad. So these glasses are \$275. This jerk down here is telling me, he's going to give me ninety bucks. "Excuse me? You're going to give me ninety bucks? Where am I getting the other hundred and eighty some dollars? Where is that going to come from?" I told [the supervisor], I said, "Listen, he's trying to give me a \$90 voucher, so I tell you what, if you two together, 'cause you're the supervisor, can go in there and pull out my file and show me where \$275 fits in my budget, I'll pay it. So there. I'm not hearing you people. No, it's not in my budget. You find it in my budget."

They ended up paying for them, but it's just that I had to go through all this bullshit, you know. And then, he was so headstrong that he still ended up [sending] the \$90 voucher. So there I got to go all the way back up there and say, "Get your supervisor out here." I said, "You need to straighten this out because I'm not making another trip back here. 'Cause I'm going to end up in jail." Seriously. You know, like I told [the supervisor], as far as he goes she needs to keep him in check. 'Cause like I told her, "You look here, don't you stand here talking down talk to me and think that you can talk to me any way you want because I'm on the system. Because it's people like you that keep me part of the system. So don't." "Well," she said, "well, I'll talk to him about that." "You better. 'Cause don't you come out here and think you can talk down to me because I'm on the system ... you wouldn't have paycheques." Seriously. But this is like all the bullshit they give you. Seriously. They're just retarded like that. Everybody seems to have the double fucking standards and nobody understands. (Heidi, Halifax)

Some of the most frustrating things for her are the inability of assistance workers and government to understand how poverty works, particularly the need for fast cash:

It's like this stupid dental plan they're putting in progress. Welfare, they said, okay. Then they set up a program. Any dental work you need, Health Canada will cover it. Oh, they'll cover it? But here's the catch, if I go to my dentist, and I need \$400 worth of work, I need to pay him \$400. He does my work, send his, the bill, to Health Canada, and they send me back a cheque. Where am I getting the \$400 to start? So what was the sense of that program? What was the sense of that? What did they put that in effect for? It's not doing a damn thing. It's like, it's a Catch-22. [Provincial] Welfare puts a cheque out, the big boys [the federal government] put the cheque out, [then] Welfare wants it down [i.e., claws it back]. So you're not winning, women – one government is giving and the other government is taking it away. (Heidi, Halifax)

The problem of upfront costs is particularly burdensome for women who want their children back (from foster homes, Family Services, or other family members). One interviewee wanted her son to come and live with her but, at \$264 a month from Social Assistance, she could not afford the apartment and equipment (fridge, stove, furniture) that was required before her son would be allowed to live with her. Nor would Social Assistance increase her cheque to cover the costs of her son until her son was actually living with her – a classic Catch-22. Recently, after a stint in jail, she had been avoiding work in the trade; however,

[it's] rough at times, thinking about it. It's rough, 'cause like I said, income assistance won't help me out, and I think and say, okay, I feel like going out and doing it. And [I'm] thinking, it's not worth it if I get caught, know what I mean? I don't know. It's rough. (Candace, Saint John)

Another worker spoke about the problem of moving out of the trade when Social Assistance rules make it difficult to get ahead, and straight jobs make her unable to care for her daughter:

And my daughter, she's fourteen, I've been having a lot of trouble with her. Like, last year she got put out on home school and the type of job I just found was back shifts from one in the morning 'til seven in the morning. It wasn't working with my daughter – me not being home, being out at those hours for her ... Bringing boys in the house, smoking weed, things like that. So, I had to call in and let them know that I couldn't come in and things like that, due to my daughter's situation and stuff. So, I was let go from that job.

So here I am today, and I'm doing this interview and after this interview, I need to go downstairs, 'cause my worker from Community Services, she then sends me a letter telling me she's not going to help me for the next two months. And I'm like, "Hello, what do you mean? At least give me rent money." They don't want to give me nothing now? I don't understand. Because I was out there in the workforce, and working, and was let go from the job. There's a new policy, I guess, with Community Services that they don't have to help you for the next six-week sequence to that date you were let go. So that's not very good and it sort of now, because, due to being a prostitute for so many years, I feel like I'm being backed into a corner. Where's my rent money coming from for two more months? You know, this is the only trade I really know. I did go to school last year. I mean, I just don't know, I don't ... They're sort of backing me into a corner, like I said, leaving me with [only] that option ...

Despite all these setbacks, she still kept on fighting:

I've made some contacts. She sent me an appeal thing, I have that in my purse, I filled it out. I'm gonna talk, like I said, after I'm done my interview. We're gonna see what can be done ... So, if I have to go there, I just feel, though, that it's not fair. Because I feel like they're gonna make me go out there and have to humiliate myself because I got to do what I got to do. And I am out there working, you know, trying to find some work now. Working on this place and that place and dropping résumés off but there's nothing yet. Hopefully, you know, I don't think I'll be left in any situation that I'll have to turn back to the streets right now.

She, too, was willing to talk back to Social Assistance:

Well, I called the worker and I said to the worker, "Listen, I'm a pretty reasonable person. Like, you don't have to pay me for my food this month, I don't care. I don't need your money for that. I need rent money though, I have children." "Oh well, I suggest maybe you move to your mother's." Move to my mother's? My mother and father live in the Towers there, in a one-bedroom apartment. There's no way. I have a three-bedroom townhouse that is fully furnished. Where is my furniture going? Like I don't think they look at them things. So, I don't know. I think it's going to come to a hearing. So I will get to voice my opinion with them, because I have to go through the appeal process ... So, it'll be probably the end of next month before ... but I think it is definitely going to come to that. My opinion is going to be heard. (Kisha, Halifax)

Not all of our interviewees had hard feelings for their welfare workers. One kidded:

I was over to see her [the welfare worker] yesterday. She went and broke her ankle or something. Poor sod. "Why'd ya go and do that?" I told her, "I'll break them off if you want them broke off." (laughter) I'm just teasing her though; she's a sweet thing. (Dawne, Halifax)

Economics 101: Sex Workers Do the Math

Women's socioeconomic circumstances – the burdens of motherhood, the general unreliability of men and marriage as a support system, and the minimal pay associated with service sector jobs – is summed up most effectively by one of our interviewees who had worked in sex work and was currently working in exotic dance. Her analysis lays bare the structural constraints that women face and makes it clear that barriers such as lack of education are not, in fact, the issue at all:

And it's like when you're a single mother, and now you're stuck with pampers, formula, cribs, strollers, rent, bills, bills, bills, and more bills. And you go to work for six bucks an hour; you work a fifty-hour week; so you never see your kid. So for example, eight bucks an hour: you work forty hours a week. That's \$320 a week, before taxes. So you come home with about \$265, \$270 a week. Times that by four, that brings you to maybe \$900 a month, after the taxes. And since you're working full time, [you need] a daycare. The cheapest one I've found so far was \$20 a day, five days a week, that's \$100. So there's \$400 a month, you take your \$900 you've made clear, you minus \$400, so now you're left with \$500. And you've now got rent, formula, pampers, stroller, cribs, food, and more bills, but you've got \$500 to pay your rent and everything else you need.

So, when you're a single mother, yeah. No wonder why women become prostitutes. You're making \$2,000 in a night. Hello! You can hire a sitter for one night, and pay all your bills, and spend the rest of the month with your kid. To me, that's logical to me, and if it was all legal, and all screened, then you wouldn't have to worry as much, about catching something. And you buy heavy-duty condoms, and you make sure you use them. If you got to double them up, then double them up. That way you don't bring nothing home to your kids. But to me it makes perfect sense.

Like, I've debated it in my head forever, that if my husband were ever to leave me, what would I ever do? I have no high school diploma, I have lots of experience in shit jobs, Tim Hortons, whatever. I've done waitressing, which paid all right with the tips, but still you put up with a lot of shit for the tips – drunks and all. But I thought to myself, okay, [with] no education. Even if I did have an education, that doesn't go very far nowadays anyhow. I mean, there's college graduates who have master's degrees who are working at my work for eight bucks an hour right now ...

So I always thought to myself, that would be like the perfect thing for a single mother to do. Even though, yes, I'll admit, it's dangerous. It's kind of nasty. It is. But I mean, so is flipping burgers. It's still nasty, [you] get no friggin' pay ... and not only that: you don't spend no time with your kids – no time at all. And you're paid these shit wages that you can't even live off of. So it would just make perfect sense to me, to be a class citizen, have a real job from nine to five, and once your kid goes to bed, you maybe do two calls a night, two hours at the most, and you at least make, anywheres from one hundred to two hundred if not more – depending on what you're willing to do for what tips ... Say buddy wanted a, I don't know, he wanted his hour, which is a hundred bucks. Right there you gotta give half that away to the service owner. So you get fifty bucks right there, to walk in the door and do their hour. Well, that only includes sexual intercourse. So there's lots of other favours to be done, or to have

done. Like lots of men love to eat women out, so the women charge that, and you can get anywheres from eighty to a hundred bucks to let a man go down on you. So ... you could leave there – buddy could have wanted different little things – you could leave there in one hour, with like five hundred bucks, and you're only away from your kid for an hour.

I've thought a lot about that, because, I mean, love, yeah, sure it lasts forever, white picket fence ... Maybe some people last fifty years, some people last two minutes. Nothing in this life is guaranteed. I love my man with all my heart and soul, and I would die for him ... [But], I mean, we could fall out of love. We could be so in debt that we're just too stressed and we start hating each other. It could be just various things. Maybe I find somebody closer to my own age, or maybe he finds someone younger. Anything could happen. I could have a second kid and be a fat pig, and he could just not be attracted to me no more, and go cheat on me, and then I'd have to kick him out. You know, anything. As well as, you know ... nothing in this life is a guarantee. Everything happens for a reason. There's no guarantees. So if I were ever to be a single mother, there's no way I'm gonna be flipping no burgers for \$6 an hour, and trying to support a kid. And then once they get older, they want that Tommy Hilfiger, and they want that Fubu and they want ...

Interviewer: And they want to know why you're never around.

Oh, I'm never around 'cause I gotta ask people if they want to upsize their fries. So, even with a college degree ... (Colleen, Moncton)

Conclusion

While the fact that sex workers are “doing it for the money” is generally (although not completely) accepted, few understand the true meaning of these words. The women and men we spoke with went into sex work not because they were forced into it by economic circumstances or addictions (although these sometimes played important roles) but because they were resisting the other options available to them in their given circumstances. What is striking about so many of the people we spoke with is their spirit of resistance: their refusal to accept the economic options that force them to accept being treated as cheap labour or as “the poor.” Sex workers had looked at, and often experienced, other forms of survival – minimum wage or service-sector work and social assistance – and found them wanting. Sex work was seen as a logical way to piece together a living that offers both financial rewards and independence and flexibility of work. One could also argue that sex workers are resisting the age of neo-liberalism and its tendency, as Thom Workman has explained, to view social problems as individual problems and to attempt “to change the behaviour of the poor forcibly through a system of punishment and rewards.”⁶³ What the sex workers speaking

here make clear is that it is the system, rather than them, that is not working. They refuse to accept this system and they refuse to be treated as if they do not deserve better. That is, they refuse to internalize the discourses that attempt to render them “cheap labour” and they fight back against the economic system that tries to exploit them by trying to maximize their control over their own labour.