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Between Emotional Politics and Biased Practices—Prostitution Policies, Social Work, and Women Selling Sexual Services in Denmark

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Abstract This article is an exploration of current Danish discourses on prostitution based on a material consisting of long-standing ethnographic fieldwork in the field of street prostitution, including interviews with sex workers, counselors, and policy makers, and of analyses of legal documents, newspaper articles, and evaluative reports commissioned by governments. The article outlines a polarized debate about possible change to the current legislation and how the 'othering' and victimizing rhetoric of main actors are based on generalization and biased estimations and a mutual blaming for "stealing the voices" of sex workers. It is demonstrated how this polarized and victimizing discourse mediated by social workers in encounters with women in prostitution reduces the women's possibilities to perform rationality and thus their ability to gain relevant capital in the eyes of the counselors. By reducing the women in prostitution to victims, the media and the social system in the last instance can be said to rob them their status as 'citizens.'

Keywords Criminalization · Discourse · Objectification · Othering · Prostitution · Social construction · Victimization

Introduction

Women selling sexual services have been portrayed as objects for control and regulations in different ways in different times and places (Järvinen 1993; Jeffreys 1997; Mattews 2008; O'Neill and Scoular 2007; Phoenix 1999; Weitzer 2010). In the past, the reasons for criminalizing women selling sexual services in Denmark were to protect respectable women and families from both a moral threat and venereal diseases and to uphold social and public order (Bøge Pedersen 2000; Lützen 1998; Mathiessen 1919; Spanger 2008). Today the stated aims of prostitution policies are to facilitate their access to psychological help and to the labor market (Regeringen 2005) and to protect women selling sexual services from their customers (www.reden.dk). This article examines the changing policies and representations of female prostitutes in Danish public discourse and discusses the consequences of these shifts for women selling sexual services in the context of the broader Danish social system. I will demonstrate how a current 'oppression paradigm' (Weitzer 2010) has permeated public discourse and shaped policy debates by constructing prostitutes as individual victims (Agustin 2007; Weitzer 2007), thus producing 'silences' between women selling sexual services and social workers and contributing to the (re)production of women selling sexual services as muted actors in public discourse (Ardener 1981; Lawler 2004; McRobbie 2004).

The first part of the article maps historical and current tendencies in Danish prostitution policy and in the public representation of prostitution, linking these tendencies to recent discussions about criminalizing the purchase of sexual services. The second part of the article analyzes how strategies of caretaking among social workers and the relation between client and social system are informed and influenced by public discourses about legal and sociopolitical aspects of prostitution. It also explores the ways in which the prominence of victimhood in public representations of 'the prostitute' affects the strategies and identities of women selling sexual services.[1]

The article adopts a social interactionist/constructivist perspective, stressing the relativity of the concept of

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[1] Women selling sexual services on the streets of the three largest cities in Denmark is the empirical object of my studies, and thus this paper do not focus on women working in parlors, trafficked women, men, and transgender people.

prostitution and the importance of social control in defining the phenomenon (Järvinen 1993). This perspective focuses on the interaction between the controlling subject (the relevant authorities, including media) and the controlled object (the women selling sexual services), in order to ask how the processes of classification and control affect both individual actors and society (Järvinen 1993). Pierre Bourdieu's concepts 'habitus' and 'field' are used as a means to bridge the structural, institutional, and individual processes (Bourdieu 1977, 1996, 1997).

Analytically the article is structured around three themes: firstly, the victimization of women in prostitution; secondly, the paradox of prostitution being both enabling and threatening; and thirdly, the tendency to ignore 'the actor's point of view.' These themes have also been pointed out by researchers in other national contexts (See Järvinen 1993; Mattews 2008; Murray 1991; Nagle 1997; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Phoenix 1999, Scambler and Scambler 1997; Shrage 1989; Simmons 1998; Skilbrei 2001; Weitzer 2010).

Methods

The analysis is based, in the first place, on the extensive fieldwork, consisting of extensive participant observation in a shelter for marginalized women from 2001 to 2004 and of 37 life history interviews (with ethnically Danish women aged between 20 and 55), which I conducted for my doctoral thesis about the everyday life of drug-addicted women selling sexual services on the streets in the second largest city in Denmark. The life history interviews varied in length, from 2 h to 21, including between one and seven sessions (interviews nos. 1–37). In addition, I draw on a research project I undertook for the Ministry of Social Affairs (Socialministeriet) in 2009 and 2010, focusing on the relation between addiction counselors and female prostitutes in drug treatment. I interviewed 30 women with experience from selling sexual services (ethnically Danish women aged between 22 and 53 from the three largest cities) (Bjønness 2011). The interviews took place in drug treatment centers or in the women's homes, varying in length from 1 to 3 h (interviews nos. 38–67). I also interviewed 30 social workers, addiction counselors, and leaders employed at drug treatment centers about their relations to the women using the centers (Bjønness 2011).

My presentation of political discourses about prostitution draws on analyses of selected newspapers and television coverage of the issue of prostitution, illustrating the main tendencies, arguments, and tones of the debate (see also Sorensen 2004). I also base my arguments on reports and evaluations from main governmental and nongovernmental organizations over the last decade (Bjønness 2008; Servicestyrelsen 2010), and on my 8 years (2004–2011) of experience with 'policy in praxis' as an employee in the shelter in which I did my fieldwork.

A Historical Overview of Prostitution Policies in Denmark

One of the main arguments of this article is that the public construction of 'the prostitute' as the counter image of the 'respectable woman' has long-standing and deep historical roots (Jeffreys 1997; Mattews 2008; Phoenix 1999; Scambler and Scambler 1997), which affects current policies. In Denmark 'public women' have been constructed as constituting different kinds of threat: to morality, to public health, to marriage and the 'family,' and to public order (Bjønness 2008; Bøge Pedersen 2000; Lützen 1998; Spanger 2007, 2008). The historian Bøge Pedersen (2000) has described how in the 19th century the control of so-called 'common prostitutes' lacked any legal basis. The "Act on Measures to Combat the Spread of Venereal Infections" of 10th of April 1874 introduced police authorization of prostitutes and compulsory registration of women as prostitutes, and was passed in order to prevent the spread of venereal diseases and to maintain public order and decency (Bøge Pedersen 2000, p. 256). As it was recognized though that public health was not significantly improved by the act, the law was repealed in 1906 and replaced by Penal Code Article 199, in which prostitution was constructed as a threat to public order. The situations in which a woman could be identified as a prostitute were, however, fluid and arbitrary; not only women offering sexual services for money could be identified but also women acting in 'certain ways' in public places attracted the attention of the vice squad (sædelighedspolitiet) and were punishable for vagrancy (Bøge Pedersen 2000).[2] In the 1970s, this social–hygienic understanding of prostitution (Bredmose 1938; Hartmann 1946; Jersild 1962; Kemp 1936) was replaced by a sociopsychological frame; prostitution has since then been perceived as a social problem, and 'the prostitute' has increasingly been constructed in public discourse as a victim needing protection, help, and guidance rather than a threatening, uncontrollable vagrant (Bøge Pedersen 2000; Spanger 2007).[3] This shift has influenced legal practice, for instance, as argued by the Minister of Justice, concerning the decriminalization of prostitution in 1999:

> "§ 199 is no longer in practical use. The suggested decriminalization thus points to the fact that prostitution

[2] Unaccompanied public appearance, drinking alcohol in public, or brief extra-marital relations were seen as threatening the family and the traditional role of women, and thus as reasons for police action (Spanger, 2007, p. 199).

[3] The spread of diseases like HIV and hepatitis, however, is still an important issue (Servicestyrelsen 2009, p. 9).

> is no longer to be considered a criminal activity. Prostitution is, on the contrary, both an expression of, and reason for, social problems, to the best solved by social political means. The decriminalization though, should not imply that prostitution is regarded as a legal occupation." (Sikkerhedsstyrelsen 1999).

The 1999 measures legalized the selling and buying of sexual services from adults (over 18) in Denmark. Brothels, streetwalking, escort services, etc. were allowed, and people selling sexual services had to register as tax payers. Nevertheless, they still lacked the rights to organize in unions or to receive social benefits. Despite the decriminalization and obligatory tax registration, the state has continued to view selling sexual services as a social problem (Regeringen 2005) and Danish researchers have accordingly labeled the legal revision of 1999 a symbol of the recurrent Danish double standard on prostitution (e.g., Greve 2005; Rasmussen 2007).

This brief overview has shown the widespread tendency to construct and stigmatize prostitute women as 'others' and deviants, and the change of the public construction of the prostitute from disturbing vagrant to 'both an expression of, and reason for, social problems'; a victim. The next section of this paper outlines current Danish discourses about prostitution, including the established actors' resistance to recent attempts to question the victim image and introduce perspectives on prostitution as 'choice' or 'work' (Bjønness 2008; Randers-Pehrson 2007; SIO 2011b). In this sense, legal and social–political discourses on prostitution can be understood as a 'field' in the Bourdieusian meaning of the word: as a social arena where cultural goods are contested, and a network of positions tied to the distribution of power and capital gives access to the advantages or goods that are in play in the field. The field develops through struggles to gain power to define what is at stake and to decide the 'currency' and the rate of change. Established actors fight to control access to the field, while newcomers may fight to change the rules and to get recognition for new perspectives and new 'trump cards' (Bourdieu 1996 [1994]).

Actors, Positions, and Arguments in the Public Debate after 1999

Since the decriminalization of prostitution in 1999, public debates have centered on whether purchasers of sexual services should be criminalized. Skilbrei has shown that discourses on prostitution preceding legislative measures are more intense than in other periods (Skilbrei 2011). In discussions preceding legal changes, fronts are marked, arguments are sharpened, and the objects of discussion, the supposed victims, are used as spearheads for many different purposes.[4] In line with this argument, recent debates have been increasingly aggressive and emotional (see also Weitzer 2010). The next section describes the role of different NGOs in the current public prostitution policy debates and analyzes the different perspectives and arguments mobilized by the key institutional actors in their efforts to legitimize their claim to represent women selling sexual services (see also Sorensen 2004).

Nongovernmental Organizations

Four NGOs, in particular, are active in the public debate on prostitution, struggling for the right and legitimacy to represent women in prostitution. The Nest (Reden), which was founded in 1983 and now consists of three shelters for drug-addicted women in prostitution, is run by a private, religious organization and is financed mainly by the Danish state and municipalities. The Nest defines prostitution as male violence against women and strongly advocates criminalizing the purchasers of sexual services (Reden 2012). Since The Nest, up until 2007, was the main NGO working with prostitutes in Denmark, the perspectives of this institution have had a significant influence on public discourse about how to help women selling sexual services. After the decriminalization of prostitution in 1999 and the contemporary focus on criminalizing the purchaser, a more hostile rhetoric occurred. For example, in the words of the then leader of The Nest, Dorrit Otzen:

> "Men buy women in pieces; Vagina, mouth, hand, anus. Each part has its own price." (Otzen 2002).

Along with the hostile rhetoric, new NGOs entered the field. 'The Initiative of the 8th of Marts' was founded in 2007 as a union of 27 organizations and movements (feminist organizations, charities, NGOs, left wing parties, etc.) working alongside The Nest to criminalize purchasers of sexual services simultaneously establishing social projects for persons who exit prostitution (The initiative of 8th of marts). As a response, the Forum for Sexual Politics was founded in 2007 representing itself as a noncommercial think tank aiming at a 'free-minded debate on sexual politics' (SexPol 2012). This organization claims that sex work is a choice and that criminalization of the purchasers of sexual services would make life harder for sex workers. Finally, the Sex Workers' Interest Union (SIO) was founded in 2008, arguing that sex work is a job like any other and demanding legal rights for sex workers. SIO counteracts criminalization of purchase of sexual services and the stigmatization of people selling sexual services (SIO 2012).

[4] An example: Sweden criminalized the buying of sexual services in 1999; Norway did the same in 2009. The Swedish and Norwegian experiences have been used on both sides of the argument about criminalization of purchasers.

A Public Battle Field

The described institutional actors constitute a public *battle field*, characterized by stereotyping rhetoric and strong generalizations, in which the subject under discussion is not always defined clearly (see also Spanger 2008, p. 96). Arguments made are seldom based in well-documented or research-based knowledge but rather on strong emotions and opinions about the phenomenon of prostitution as such (for a similar argument, see Weitzer 2010). The Sex Workers' Interest Union and the Forum for Sexual Politics often accuse The Nest and the Initiative of 8th of Marts of exaggerating and misrepresenting the problems and numbers of prostitution (SIO 2011b, SexPol 2010). The latter two organizations, on the other hand, accuse the former of not having the legitimate mandate to represent sex workers and of sacrificing vulnerable women on 'the shrine of liberalism and indifference' (e.g., Lund 2011). Representatives confront each other in TV and radio programs, blogs, etc., and as the following case illustrates, show little effort to explore the others' point of view (e.g., Bjarup 2011; Lund 2011; Andersen. B.M, og Helth.H 2011).

A well-known Danish film actor used strong rhetoric when arguing for the criminalization of purchasers of sexual services in a live TV debate with a representative for The Sexorkers' Interest Union (God morgen Danmark 2011). The following day, a spokesperson from the Initiative of 8th of Marts defended the actor's rhetoric:

> "When she (the film actor) names prostitutes as cunts, she is spot on. She is condensing in one single word the perspective on women expressed by prostitution. Because cunts are what women are reduced to in the eyes of men buying sex. "Stigmatization" screams the Sexworkers' Union immediately, and the chair woman acts like a haunted innocent victim on TV. She is right, though; Prostitutes are stigmatized. Not by feminists or others, wanting to confront the right to buy sex, but by the way the sex purchasers look upon women—Welcome to Barbary. But what kind of freedom are the hard core libertarians talking about? The freedom to be exploited and to be destroyed sexually for money? And the freedom of sex-buyers to maintain slavery and prostitution? There is hypocrisy, and then there is hypocrisy." (Helth 2011, my translation).

The hostility of the debate was increased when a former Minister of Health responded:

> "What kind of Victorian Puritanism and intolerance do these moralist middle class women represent?" (Lund 2011, my translation).

Barbary, slavery, hypocrisy, Puritanism, moralism, and intolerance are strong expressions, and their use suggests that prostitution involves central values in society. In line with the argument of Weitzer that political actors' passionate commitment may undermine their objectivity (Weitzer 2010:15), it appears legitimate to use 'all available means' in the discursive struggle to define the phenomenon of prostitution. Furthermore, the quotations mirror a well-documented and major schism in the women's movement over the issue (Alexander 1997; Järvinen 1993; Jeffreys 1997): there has been an ongoing debate about the agency of prostitutes, often discussing degrees of 'consent' and 'choice' (Simmons 1998). In Danish public discourse, the point of view that prostitution is a form of violence and that prostitutes are objectified victims remains paramount, and the feminist argument for women's 'right to prostitute' which emerged internationally during the 1990s (Jeffreys 1997) seems to be weak.

One characteristic of this current battlefield is a tendency to generalize and to treat prostitution as one single phenomenon and the related tendency to be unspecific about the object under discussion (Weitzer 2010). I argue that the lack of public representation of the very different motives, needs, and experiences of women who sell sexual services allow for a hostile and polarized discourse. As one informant puts it in this quotation:

> "All these 'trying-to-do-good-women,' they pity us. I admit that some of us have problems, but when generalizing in this way, it is as they forget that we are as individually different as anybody else. This really pisses me off!" (Interviewee no. 63).

The current discourse about trafficking is useful to illustrate the point about generalization: one of the main arguments in favor of criminalizing the purchaser of sexual services is that a lot of prostitutes are forcefully traded to Denmark (www.redeninternational.dk). According to the official Danish definition though, prostitution is defined as an *agreement* between adults, and women traded against their will can consequently not be labeled prostitutes (Rasmussen 2007). In spite of that, the stories of forced and battered women are used to document the *general* inhumanity of prostitution and as an argument in favor of criminalizing the purchase of all sexual services. The image used by the organization The Nest International is a telling example of this objectification (Fig. 1).

As the figure (Redeninternational 2012) illustrates, the discourse is based on generalizations and stereotypes and leaves the Danish public with limited knowledge about the complex lives of women who sell sexual services and their varying reasons for choosing prostitution. As Weitzer argues, the labels indicate that "prostitution is something that is done to women" (Weitzer 2010, p.17). The points made by the Sex Workers' Interest Union and by some researchers (Alzaga 2007; Phoenix 1999; Spanger 2011),

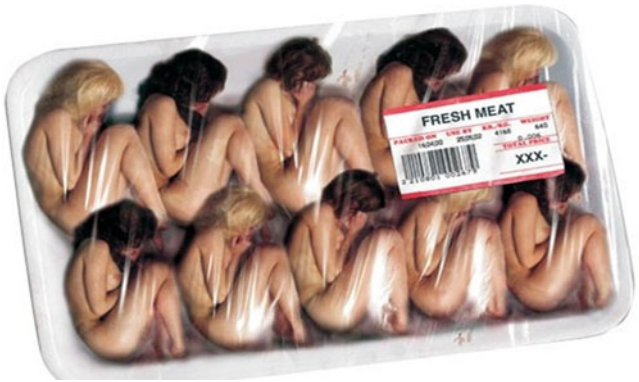

Fig. 1 Image used by The Nest International

that prostitution makes sense in the material and social conditions in which many women live and may be subjectively meaningful for the ones engaged in it, are seldom represented in the media and thus not understood or accepted by the general public. Because women prostitutes' logics and motives thus remain unknown or are muted or presented as irrational to the public, it seems unlikely to the public that anyone willfully would engage in such a seemingly devaluing and stigmatized act (Bjønness 2011), which again negatively affects the women's status as subjects, equals, and 'citizens.'

Analysis—A Complex and Contradictory Field

As outlined above, the significant institutional actors are divided between two conflicting positions. The first position (liberal/feminist) opposes the criminalization of the purchase of sexual services, regards prostitution as a choice, and perceives sex workers as rational actors.[5] The second (prohibitionist/radical feminist) favors the criminalization of sex purchasers, sees prostitution as violence against women, and characterizes women in prostitution as victims.[6]

In the following, I will explore and discuss three internally linked aspects relevant to contextualize the portrayed 'battle field.' I will argue (a) that the public discourse dominated by a somehow emotional and 'prescientific reasoning' affects social policy (Weitzer 2010:15); (b) that The Board of Social services [Servicestyrelsen], given its role as implementing the policy of the Danish government, may impede the production of complex and research-based knowledge about prostitution; and (c) that the current 'state of affairs in the field' (Bourdieu 1995[1979]) may be seen as a refraction of the overall view of individuals in Danish social policy, as rational, choosing, and responsible (e.g., Järvinen and Mortensen 2003).

Emotional Politics

In June 2011, The Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI) published an extensive, government-commissioned, survey meant to 'map the field of prostitution in Denmark' (SFI 2011). The report concluded that most women who sell sexual services disagree with the arguments of The Nest and the Initiative of 8th of Marts, among others, that prostitutes are victims and that buying sexual services consequently should be criminalized (SFI 2011). One of the front figures of the Socialist People's Party[7] reacted by commenting on the survey findings thus:

> "Regardless of the great efforts made by the SFI researchers to construct the 'happy history' about prostitution as quite normal, minimal-risk, work, the report makes clear, that prostitution is harmful and primarily is chosen as a career of economic reasons. And even though psychiatric harmful consequences, transgressive experiences, and the risk of violence and rape are characteristics of the backcloth of prostitutes, the SFI hasn't bothered to explore this." (Vigsø Bagge 2011).

The same politician also accused journalists reviewing the report of being a part of the same 'project':

> "They [the journalists] are so busy promoting the view that prostitution is an occupation, that they primarily treat the topic from the ultra liberalist assumption that the individual absolutely should have the freedom to do anything—also to destroy themselves." (Vigsø Bagge 2011).

This politician's attempt to repudiate the research of the National Research Centre indicates that popular debate has influenced recent policy debates and outcomes (see also, Agustin 2007) and is typical of the apparent logic of some actors, being that the inherently oppressive character of prostitution is self-evident and does not require empirical documentation (for similar argument, see, Weitzer 2010). Thus there exists a doxa in the Danish field of prostitution, which leaves unthought of the prerequisites for what is, or can be, thought (Bourdieu 1997). Doxa, what is not questioned, is, in this context, that prostitution is a social problem and that women selling sexual services are either 'victims' or 'others.' Attempts to argue for a more complex understanding of the phenomenon, as in the SFI report, are labeled irrational or just ignored.

[5] Including the The Sex Workers' Interest Union, Forum of Sexual Politics, and right wing and liberal parties.

[6] Including The Nest, The initiative of 8th of Marts, and left wing parties.

[7] The Socialist Peoples' Party, currently in government, is in favor of criminalizing the purchase of sexual services and argues that buying access to other people's bodies is unacceptable in a modern society (www.sf.dk).

The Relation Between Political Agendas and the Production of Knowledge

The National Board of Social Services is a 'Knowledge and Communication Centre' implementing the policy of the Danish Government and producing reports and information material about prostitution to the public (Servicestyrelsen 2011a). The Board defines prostitution as a social problem and runs centers offering support and advice from a harm reduction perspective including help to exit prostitution. Its work is mainly informed by reports from social projects, shelters, and the police, focusing on the problematic aspects of prostitution, like negative health consequences (Servicestyrelsen 2011a). As the role of the Board is to implement a certain policy, critical reflections on the relation between theoretical assumptions, method, and empirical data have been scarce, as have initiatives to address ethical and socio-political aspects of prostitution (Bjønness 2008, 2011). Bømler has labeled the Board 'a competence centre without competence' (Bømler 2008), and among others the Sex Workers Interest Union have accused The Board of contributing to a lack of evidence-based knowledge in the debate (e.g., Jensen et al. 2009). The press has particularly queried The Board's role in a recurring discussion on the alleged explosion of numbers of women selling sexual services in Denmark (Haar Rasmussen 2008; Kjærulff 2010). The numbers, reported by The Nest [Reden] and reproduced annually by The Board's reports, have been used concurrently by NGOs as an argument for more funding and for regulating the demand through criminalization of the purchase of sexual services. In 2011, it was revealed though, that The Nest had reported progressive and not annual numbers. The total number of people providing sexual services was subsequently estimated lower in 2011than it was in 2002 (rectified from 5,534 to 3,483, by Servicestyrelsen 2011a). This led Spanger, among others, to suggest that 'numbers constitute a central technique of power among the actors' (Spanger 2008, p. 88, see also Bjønness 2008). In line with Spanger, I argue that an important aspect of the current Danish discourse on prostitution is the close and often not sufficiently reflected relation between help and knowledge production in the work of The Board (see also, Margolin 1997; Skilbrei & Holmström 2008).

Rational, Choosing, and Responsible Individuals

The historical shift from labeling women who sell sexual services as threatening and dangerous to labeling them as victims who have only little agency and are dangerous mainly to themselves and their own well-being may be seen as a refraction of a more general tendency in Danish social policy; an increasing preoccupation with the responsibilities, will, and choice of the individual (Bertelsen and Bømler 2004), which again mirrors an overall view of actors as rational, choosing, and responsible individuals (Giddens 1991; Skeggs 1997). The public contradiction involved in seeing prostitution as a rational choice, understood in the light of the history of prostitution and the strongly stigmatized identity of 'prostitute' (Randers-Pehrson 2007), is clearly demonstrated by recent efforts to criminalize customers only. The prostitute is, in this paradigm, as she was in the period of police regulation around 1900, seen as not punishable (alongside children and mentally ill people), and thus robbed of her status as an equal citizen (Jessen 2009). In this discursive environment, both the women with experience of selling sexual services and those who advocate their points of view, when attempting to explain the possible rationality of something as *self-evidently* irrational as prostitution, may place themselves outside the category of rational citizens. To summarize my argument then, the emotional discourse, combined with a lack of documented knowledge of the very different economic and social contexts within which women sell sexual services, and the strong trust in the rational and choosing actor leads to a 'psychologization' and 'pathologization' of 'the prostitute' and to the assumption on the part of the public that women selling sexual services are radically different from and far more vulnerable than other women.

I shall now explore how the different aspects of public discourse become 'real' for the women who sell sexual services in their encounters with the Danish social system, illustrating Phoenix's argument that prostitution enables individual *economic* survival while threatening the individuals' *social* survival exactly because selling sex is not acceptable or respectable (Phoenix 1993). I argue that not only has the current hostile and emotional discourse been powerful in shaping social policy but it has also implied that both social workers and the women selling sexual services have come to understand prostitution as something extraordinary, which must be handled with care.

Discussion Regarding the Impact of Discourse

The National Board divides women selling sexual services into three categories: women working in parlors, women working on the streets, and 'call girls' (Servicestyrelsen 2011a). Migrant women are mainly seen on the streets and in parlors. In line with my argument, the public focus on victimization and the radicalization of discourse about prostitution has different consequences for different groups. Migrant women, for example, have received a lot of attention in the Danish media, and an increased number of social workers and police try to control the area of human trafficking. The Sex Workers' Interest Union, mostly representing women working in parlors, argue that their members (approximately 200) feel stigmatized by the victimizing and generalizing discourse

about trafficking (SIO 2012). By comparison, Danish women selling sexual services on the streets have generally attracted little attention in recent public discourse (see also, Jessen 2009). Knowledge of the impact of recent market changes such as the development of sex trafficking is consequently scarce, as are social policies addressing this last group. In what follows, and on the background of my empirical study of streetwalkers, I will thus explore how their lives are affected by public discourse and also how it affects the attitudes of social workers towards this group of women. I argue that the social workers' are affected by the polarized and radicalized discourse and that the powerful image of prostitutes as individual victims makes it difficult for social workers and addiction counselors to access their clients' narratives and feelings about prostitution. The victimizing of prostitutes in public discourse produces 'silences' between women who sell sexual services and social workers, who come to comprehend prostitutes as 'radical others' to be treated with extra care. This further contributes to the reproduction of women who sell sexual services as muted actors in public discourse (see, Ardener 1975).

The Women's Narratives: A Matter of Trust

In this section, I refer to my informants' own narratives and reflections when asked about their background for engaging in prostitution and about their relations to the social system.[8] Their sense of coherence between own background and current circumstances is strong, as one of them puts it:

> "Prostitution? That is just a bad childhood and easy money." (Interviewee no. 11).

Most of the women in my study were raised by single, unemployed parents, primarily mothers with problematic alcohol or drugs use and/or psychological problems. They record being handed too much responsibility, too early, for siblings and other family members and of suffering from a general lack of care and stability. Social networks were fragile and their financial situation was bad. The women have experienced marginalization during their early years. Loneliness and distrust were central experiences, as one of the informants' records in this quote:

> "My only memory from my childhood is hiding behind a door, I don't know why I hid, but I remember the anxiety." (Interviewee no. 17).

Most of them blame the social system for not intervening to solve their problems. The women record having tried to get help from teachers and the social system—concerning conflicts with their parents, for example—but for different reasons they stopped believing early that the authorities would be of any help. Consequently, they stopped telling teachers and social workers about their problems and did not engage in trustful relations. This woman remembers that she tried to get help from her mother and the head teacher after being sexually assaulted by a teacher:

> "Nobody believed me, as I was not the 'nice doll type'. I had a dress with a wide neck, and when I uncovered my shoulder, I thought it was nice… I didn't realize the tools I was starting to use." (Interviewee no. 9).

She explains the distrust on behalf of the adults by reflecting that she was not using the right kind of femininity. Another woman tells about a feeling of "never having got it right" (Skeggs 1997). As we can see, they learned early to evaluate themselves through the eyes of others (Goffman 1963).

In early youth, most of these women started to use medicine and drugs; many 'borrowed' pills from their mothers or grandmothers:

> "I could escape and avoid the pain—I didn't have to feel." (Interviewee no. 52).

They started drinking or smoking marihuana with friends to repress sadness or to relax and enjoy life. Later they started to inject heroin, cocaine, and other drugs and the selling of sexual services emerged as a strategy to earn money to buy drugs.

As adults, the women are unemployed, living on social security, and they are enrolled in different kinds of drug treatment. Selling sexual services is perceived as a legitimate way of solving economic problems and as a better option than robbery or assault, but not as regular work. The term 'sex work' is not in their vocabulary and they do not have a self-identity as 'prostitutes.' Their own, emic term is 'making money.' They have only sporadic encounters with social workers, contacting their counselor primarily when they have acute problems, such as being subjected to partner violence or when they are broke. Only a few consider the relation to their counselor as good or useful and they feel that most social workers/counselors are either not competent or nonappreciative in the way they address the women's experience selling sexual services. In their narratives, the emergence in childhood and youth of a state of basic distrust is described as crucial to their adult relations to the social system. In this they support the point made by Bourdieu that early experiences are important for the building of a 'habitus' and 'habitus' is what disposes actors to act in certain ways when confronted with new situations (Bourdieu 1977).

The Silence About Prostitution in the Relation Between Client and System

Most social workers in drug treatment centers know of the women's backgrounds and their distrust of the social system.

[8] I refer to my interviews with 67 women (aged 22–60) with experience of selling sexual services for my doctoral thesis (forthcoming) and for a research project for the Danish Government (Bjønness 2011). The information provided is not to be regarded as 'objective' incidents, but as the informants' own, context-dependent constructions (Bourdieu 1979).

However, interviews with social workers, addiction counselors, and leaders of drug treatment centers reveal that they have very limited knowledge of prostitution and that they are often very uncomfortable and unsure about how to address the women's experience of selling sexual services. Most choose not to address prostitution, as they feel, they have little to offer:

> "It takes thrust and cautiousness to ask about prostitution. It is so difficult, it may be because of the taboo… and the problem is; we have nothing to offer, we can talk, but they have nowhere to go to receive help." (Addiction counselor no. 2).

Since the staff seldom talks about prostitution with their clients and prostitution is not addressed in meetings or conferences inside the drug treatment centers, most of their knowledge of and opinions about prostitution are, I suggest, shaped by public discourse. Supporting this interpretation is the fact that even though prostitution is rarely on the professional agenda of the drug treatment centers, most social workers and addiction counselors have very strong opinions about how prostitution may affect the women, as for instance, expressed by this addiction counselor:

> "Me and my colleagues haven't experienced that the women want to talk about prostitution. I think they avoid it… Maybe it would be like opening an abscess, and the substance would pour out, and they will have a breakdown. They don't need that. I have the notion that they just repress it and that they might be embarrassed. And maybe the social workers are afraid of addressing it." (Addiction counselor no. 13).

I argue that such presumption about the extraordinariness of prostitution is both part of and informed by a public discourse that is characterized by stereotypes and a victimizing rhetoric. Prostitution becomes a form of 'master status' (Becker 1963) that imply a whole range of expectations, like frailty, powerlessness, and coercion. As a consequence, the stronger the victimization of prostitutes appears in the media, the deeper is the reluctance of the social workers to address the issue of prostitution. The media presenting the prostitute as the ultimate victim and focusing on the harmfulness of prostitution, as exemplified in this paper, thus affects the relation between the social workers and the women selling sexual services; the women are constructed as radically different, as a different 'kind' (Hacking 1999) with an image of a really suppressed and dehumanized group as seen in the quotation above on 'abscesses.' Interestingly, the 'othering' can even take form of a kind of admiration of the women's ability to cope, as in this quote:

> "My God, they must be strong, to be able to cope with prostitution and life on the streets. I would die after a few days." (Addiction counselor no. 17).

The consequence can be characterized as a 'reverse taboo': because of the way prostitution is constructed in public discourse, as something extraordinarily vulnerable, the social workers expect prostitution to be a particularly harming experience, dangerous to address both for the client's well-being and for the fragile relation between client and the social worker:

> "I do not know so much about prostitution, and I do not know how transgressive it is for them if I address prostitution. Maybe it is also about me as a social worker; that I complicate things because I am afraid of transgressing her boundaries and thus endanger our relation?" (Addiction counselor no. 4).

This preoccupation is mirrored in the statement of some of the clients, as in this quotation:

> "In the drug treatment centers there was a lot of fear of being transgressive. The addiction counselors were afraid that I would shatter if they asked me about prostitution." (Interviewee no. 34).

Afraid of doing further harm to the client, social workers and addiction counselors thus choose not to address prostitution, thereby excluding themselves from knowledge about the women's own strategies and reasoning, and about the social context of women who sell sexual services:

> "Have you been a prostitute? In respect for the client, we don't ask that question. We do not want to ascribe something to them, which we cannot be sure of." (Addiction counselor no. 11).

As a consequence, social workers' assumptions about prostitution—as a devastating and harming experience—remain intact and may even be reinforced. The complex stories about the central paradox of prostitution as solving some problems and creating others (Bjønness 2011; Phoenix 1999) remain untold. This noncommunication about prostitution becomes a vicious circle for the women who sell sex on the streets. The stereotypical images of the staff, and the resulting silence, is experienced as a hurdle in their effort to present themselves as rational and responsible agents:

> "When I have told an addiction counselor that I have been engaged in prostitution, they have looked upon me, as if I was insane… I don't think that they are ready to talk about that." (Interviewee no. 14).

Silence is sometimes even felt as condemnation. A woman, drug-free for 2 years, recounts the social workers reaction when she told her about being pregnant:

> "She [social worker] just condemned me. I felt that all I had been fighting for was lost; I was still seen the same way; a fucking junkie, who wouldn't be able to take care of her child." (Interviewee no. 42).

Another woman tells about a discharge talk after a childbirth, which made her fell stigmatized:

> "We were a lot of people around the table, and then the medical superintendent says; 'we will follow you for three to five years, because we often see, that in a year or two, problems will arise'… It made me feel that I was carrying the burden of all prostitutes." (Interviewee no. 27).

The experience of not receiving due recognition makes the women, in turn, very pragmatic in their relations to the system. They may consequently act without the humility, responsibility, and respect appreciated by many social workers (Bjønness 2011; Järvinen and Mortensen 2003), as described by this addiction counselor:

> "If you [the client] are to stay here [in drug treatment], it is your own responsibility that you answer properly. I can understand your frustration, but your responsibility is to approach me and say; Karen, I am sorry. Do you have the time to talk to me?" (Addiction counselor no. 5).s

As we know from the brief outline of the women's early experiences, the counselor in this quote asks for exactly the kind of trust that the women have long since categorized as useless and even dangerous, and thus asks for a kind of response that most of the women cannot, or will not, give. As one woman states:

> "They [the counselors] want me to kneel, but I can't do that, I can't." (Interviewee no. 23).

Another woman uses the metaphor 'tame' about the way she presents herself to her counselors:

> "I manage to act tame, but I cannot be trusted. I also manage being wild, but only to scare people." (Interviewee no. 6).

The reluctance of the clients to enter into trusting relationships again confirms the social workers' impressions that these women *are* radically different from others. The victimizing public discourse on women who sell sexual services, mediated by social workers in encounters with the women, thus reduces the women's capacities to perform rationality and their ability to accrue relevant capital in the eyes of their counselors. This woman reacts to being denied drug treatment by presenting the response of the system as a self-fulfilling categorization (Goffman 1959):

> "Ok, if they want a drug addicted whore, they can have one!" (Interviewee no. 44).

By reducing the women in prostitution to victims, the media and the social system can be said, in the last instance, to rob them their status as equals and as 'citizens.' This is a devastating experience for these women, as communicated in this quote:

> "It is as if we, women who 'make money,' are seen as not belonging to the human race." (Interviewee no. 2).

Their social position implies that they do not have a union, workplace, or other platforms from where they can express their experiences and opinions. So when social workers do not apprehend the stories and perspectives of the women, there are few channels left through which they can make their stories and their suggestions for appropriate action heard. In the end, the stereotype of the prostitute as having a certain kind of *personality* is reproduced. This 'psychologization' of female prostitution is exemplified by the fact that some of the women have experienced that their critique of the system, or of the way they are treated, for example, in psychiatric hospitals or drug treatment centers, has been perceived by counselors in itself a symptom of psychiatric illness, rather than perspectives to be heard, investigated, and acted on.

Conclusions

This article has outlined recent changes in the public discourse dealing with prostitution and highlighted that the struggle about the legitimacy to define what is of value in the field of prostitution has historical roots. As Shrage puts it, prostitution is a contingently oppressive practice—oppressive due to the way it has been shaped by historically and culturally specific forces (Shrage 1994). Recently new institutional actors have entered the debate, defining selling of sexual services as normal work and as a choice. These actors raise objections to the public construction of prostitutes, as offenders or victims, and make the case for seeing prostitution as only one aspect of complex lives and not as a social field with a self-explanatory logic. From this point of view, prostitution is not an isolated social problem that can be managed through psychological treatment, as stated by the action plan of 2005 (Regeringen 2005), or by legal measures as claimed by the NGOs campaigning for criminalizing the purchase of sexual services.

I have argued that attempted challenges to the narrative of the prostitute as an individual victim, exposed to violence and abuse, are either ignored by core institutional actors or are dismissed because its proponents do not have the right capital, who cannot be trusted as the representatives of all prostitutes, or are exceptional, as 'one in a million.' The argument that prostitution may be a choice made by rational individuals has had great difficulties being accepted as legitimate, exactly because the doxic logic of major actors in the field is that prostitution *cannot* be seen as such.

I have exemplified the strategies to position oneself in the field by the very hostile and radicalizing rhetoric used by The Initiative of the 8th of Marts and other institutional actors. I have also argued that the strong victimizing rhetoric used in public discourse affects relations between clients and representatives of the social system. Addiction counselors, for example, import the image of the vulnerable victim into relations with women who have experience of selling sexual services, in a way that reproduces or even reinforces the image of 'the victim.' The relation between the women who sell sexual services and their counselors is a possible site for the women to (re)construct themselves as rational actors. However, because counselors, acting out of compassion that is influenced by radicalizing and victimizing public discourse, avoid the theme of prostitution, they reproduce the feeling of the client, of being 'othered' and stigmatized, and thus her capability to appear rational. More generally, by reducing women prostitutes to mere victims, the media and the social system, in the last instance, can be said to rob them their status as equals and as 'citizens.'

This development can be related to the argument of the Finnish sociologist Margaretha Järvinen, about a 'normative curfew' characterizing most of the 20th century. Women who ventured into out-of-bounds and forbidden areas of the cities had to be able to explain their presence to the police and to prove their 'decency' and 'respectability'. Failure to do so was converted by the authorities into sexual motives and alleged prostitution (Järvinen 1993). I argue that this 'normative curfew' seems to continue in a different guise: while there are no physical places where respectable women cannot venture, there are kinds of acts, or types of identities, that they cannot inhabit. It can be argued that recent public discourse on prostitution potentially does the same thing as the former vagrancy acts: make statements about what respectability means in certain time in certain places, and thus controls certain groups of women. A new kind of 'public women' emerges: the ones who resist doxa in the media and thereby commit what one could label 'discursive vagrancy.' The media are thus becoming a pillory for women who sell sexual services, at the same time, refusing to submit to the general public's understanding of their acts.

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