



Flipping gendered power in commercial Sex: When women buy sex in Australia

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Never Stand Still

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Background



Power in sexual relations is not measurable, universal or finite.

Pateman (1988) – consent impossible for female sex workers due to patriarchy.

Socio-political contexts of sex work are often defined by theories based on gendered power = men exploit female victims.

Aim

To explore gendered power relations when women buy sex (WBS) in Australia.



Gendered power in Female sex tourism (FST)

There is scant academic evidence of WBS, except in FST where women are often excused as being lonely, romantically driven, or powerful in racist and economic terms.

These explanations detract from challenges to gendered power debate when women buy sex.

- Kempadoo (2001) FST experiment with control over men
- Jeffreys (2003) men still control sex when women pay
- Jacobs (2009) FST adopt masculine identity



Project Design

- Textual analysis of Australian social commentary about women buying sex
What does the general public think?
- Thematic analysis of interview data from 17 sex workers about women buying sex
What do service providers think?
- Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview data from 21 women who have bought sex
What do women who buy sex think?



What does the general public think?

- McKee's Textual analysis of Australian social commentary about women buying sex
- 147 people made 364 online comments in response to an article published about female sex tourism on an ABC website.
- 26 people said commercial sex always exploits a person.
- 25 people said sex can be work and/or fair trade.
- 61 people acknowledged a double standard where men who buy sex are condemned and women who buy sex are 'empowered'.



What do service providers think?

- Thematic analysis of interview data from 17 sex workers
- Female clients were diverse in age, income and educational level and ethnicity
- Sex workers said - female market is increasing
 - more WBS from female SW than male
- Only subtle differences were noted between male and female client behaviours
- Sex workers have provider power to define and control services. Clients of all genders have consumer power to negotiate desires.



Sex workers said women buy sex...



- rather than casual sex to have more control over safety and sexual experience, and
- to feel powerful by having choices to buy sex; when, how and with whom.

'They know that they have the choice about whether to see me again. They know that I don't know them' Interviewee 15 (MSW, Straight, VIC).

'Cause, so much of the sex that they know is male dominated, is subservient... and so they are trying to reverse that while still within a male/female relationship and in intimate experience, is quite tricky for some people. But as long as I remind them and encourage them and coax them, then they sometimes learn to talk, and to ask for certain things (Interviewee 15).



What to women who buy sex think?



- Interpretive phenomenological analysis was applied to interview transcripts from 21 WBS
- Ages 18-69 (11/21 under 40 years)
- 11/21 bought sex with MSWs only, 10/21 flexible up to 4 types of sex (eg. FSW, couples, BDSM)
- 6/21 said buying sex was 'empowering'
- 6/21 said buying sex 'increased confidence'
- All WBS spoke about being in control.



Feeling powerful



- *'I felt really in my power'* (Interviewee 4)
- *'The power is in learning to understand and communicate your own sexual needs. Women are not in positions to learn that from sex ed[ucation]. It is a confidence thing'* (Interviewee 17)
- Several interviewees compared, perhaps unfairly, relationship sex with commercial.

'So asking for what I want or what I need was very difficult with my husband and was very easy with the escort' (Interviewee 13)

- Interviewee 9 - before BS she felt an urge to perform acts she does not desire to please others. BS has helped her to negotiate casual sex, breaking a habit of feeling worthless and used by men when she 'gave into' their sexual demands.



More and more power!



- *'I have claimed my sexuality'* (Interviewee 3)
- *'I walked out much more grounded'* (Interviewee 4)
- *'[it was] transformative'* (Interviewee 5)
- *'the mental impact it has had on me is, that is like priceless. It is reaffirming my own sexual power'* (Interviewee 9)
- *'restored my confidence as a woman'* (Interviewee 13)
- *'It felt like a real feminist moment'* (Interviewee 7)



Power in specific circumstances



- sexual orientation

'I realised that I had always had feelings for women and I didn't really want to talk about it with my husband. And it surpassed my wildest expectations about how healing it was for me as a woman. And I can easily identify as being bisexual or queer. I feel more authentically myself'
(Interviewee 20)

- Submissive acts

'Yeah, on the whole I felt like I was in control of the service. I still want men to desire me. Um, and so it is important that while I was in control of the session, he still knew how to, um, how to lead me to the bed, and how to kiss me and how to guide me in a way. Does that make sense?'
(Interviewee 7)



Power when couples buy sex



- FMM male idea to buy sex

'There was nothing unpleasant about it. I didn't hate it. It wasn't tortuous or abusive or unpleasant in any way. In fact really, yeah I'm not. [as if speaking to her boyfriend] I'm doing it for you and not for me. [speaking in the interview] But during that situation, I was, there wasn't a second where I didn't feel like I couldn't just say, just let's, you know? [speaking to a sex worker] Can you put your leg here? Can you, blah blah?' Interviewee 6

- FFM female idea to buy sex

Her male friend was *'just tagging along for the ride'* (Interviewee 18)

These accounts suggest that feeling enjoyment is connected to perceptions of control



Conclusions



- Men and women buying sex are treated differently in academic debate and in society.
- If more women buy sex from female sex workers, heteronormative viewpoint is inadequate.
- Client-pleasing is not an inherently powerless act. Client satisfaction is not fundamentally powerful.
- WBS can feel powerful by having choices to buy sex; when, how and with whom.
- Women who have bought sex may learn skills to empower them in future and in non-commercial relationships.



References

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