

## The Virtues of Dockside Dalliance

### *Why Maritime Sugar Girls Are Safer Than Urban Streetwalkers in South Africa's Prostitution Industry*

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South African prostitutes operate in a context characterized by extreme levels of sexual violence. The country has one of the highest rape rates in the world, with one in four South African men admitting to coercing females into sex (Smith 2009) and too many others using rape as a means of enforcing social control (Moffett 2006). According to the literature on township and rural sexuality, transactional (commodified) sexual relationships, aggressive masculine identity formation, and unprotected promiscuity lead many women to believe that sexual coercion is normal (Abrahams, Jewkes, and Laubsher 1999; Delius and Glaser 2002; Hunter 2002; Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Wood and Jewkes 1996, 1998). Although many women resist this aggression, gender violence is maintained by a patriarchal social order, women's financial dependence on men, and a social and legal regime dismissive of women's complaints of abuse.

Prostitutes are especially vulnerable in this context. They are criminalized by law enforcement and stigmatized by their communities. They face assault and rape from clients, harassment from police, and abuse from pimps. Some prostitutes are more vulnerable than others, however. Structural differences between the various sex sectors determine the likelihood of violence within them. For instance, streetwalkers face greater risk from the police than do agency escorts. "Beer prostitutes," as women who consent to sexual relations with men in exchange for beer or other gifts are known, face greater risk from clients than do urban brothel women. And hotel sex workers face greater risk from extortionate third parties than do dockside prostitutes.

This article focuses on the neglected dockside prostitution sector, and shows how that sector's structural features enhance women's ability to avoid violence. By comparing the street, truck stop, brothel, and agency sectors, I

argue that sex workers' vulnerability to violence depends on five structural factors: the client's social and legal status, the site of the negotiation, the location of the sexual act, the level of discretion in the solicitation process, and third-party involvement. After discussing how each of these variables affects violence, I provide policy recommendations for industry interventions that could improve prostitutes' safety.

### *Context, Method, and Profile*

Three nightclubs in Cape Town and one in Durban cater to foreign sailors. Located in downtown areas, they resemble other local nightclubs with one exception: they are patronized exclusively by female prostitutes and international seamen. The women interact with the sailors for four to eight hours each evening, dancing, drinking, smoking, shooting pool, singing karaoke, and chatting. After a few hours together, the women initiate negotiations for sexual trysts outside the club. If a couple agrees on terms, they take a taxi to her flat, a hotel, or a friend's house to consummate the contract. In the morning he departs to his ship and she to her abode.

Between 2006 and 2008 I spent 150 evenings interviewing sex workers and sailors at nightclubs in both cities. I usually spent five hours there per night, talking with the women and observing their behavior. In this way I pieced together the outlines of the women's life histories, established how they approached their relations with the sailors, and considered the impact this work had on them. I gathered information through ethnographic participant observation, casual conversations, and intensive interviews. I used an open-ended approach to elicit information, allowing informants to explore issues over the course of multiple encounters.<sup>1</sup> I also met with the women during the day, conversing in English, Zulu, or Afrikaans. I interviewed a total of ninety female sex workers and dozens of club owners, managers, bouncers, barmaids, cab drivers, and sailors.

In Durban most of the eighty women hailed from rural towns outside the city. Others had migrated from other African states. Sixty African women worked alongside sixteen whites and four coloureds (of mixed race) and Indians (Trotter 2007). Most were between eighteen and twenty-nine years of age, and the rest were between thirty and forty. Most spoke Zulu, although all the women had some facility in English, the language of solicitation.

In Cape Town sixty women solicited from three seamen's clubs. Except for five white women, all were local coloureds similar in age to the Durban women. Most spoke Afrikaans, but all spoke English as well. Most also

spoke one Asian language—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, or Indonesian—which they had learned through interacting with the trawlermen, using it as their language of solicitation.

### *Factors Affecting Violence in Sex Work*

This section discusses the five key structural variables that affect the likelihood of violence against prostitutes, focusing upon how each relates to particular sectors of the South African sexual economy.

#### The Client's Social and Legal Status

The needs and constraints of male clients structure the operations of most prostitution sectors. The dockside scene, for example, is based on the transience and foreignness of international sailors (Trotter 2009), the truck-stop sector around the periodic need for relaxation among long-distance truckers (Marcus, Oellermann, and Levin 1995; Ramjee and Gouws 2002), the upcountry tavern niche around the dangerous labor and low wages of mine workers (Campbell 2000; Luiz and Roets 2001; Meekers 2000; Wojcicki 2002), and the Internet escort market around the wealth, cyberspace connectivity, and discretionary needs of traveling businessmen.<sup>2</sup> Thus the temporal, financial, social, and behavioral properties of an occupationally similar clientele determines the character of each prostitution niche. But whether the clients are local or foreign is crucial. Their differing social and legal status affects how comfortable they feel asserting power over women.

As a rule, the more social stature and legal protection a man enjoys in relation to a sex worker, the greater his freedom to act violently. In almost all sectors, the client's status is far superior to the prostitute's because of patriarchal social norms. Until the end of 2007 in South Africa, the Sexual Offences Act of 1957 had only criminalized the solicitation, sale, or procurement (pimping) of sex, punishable with fines or imprisonment. The (male) purchase of sex, however, remained legal, granting men a much higher status than prostitutes in their relations. Since 2007 the purchase of sex has also been criminalized, rendering the couple technically equal in the eyes of the law. But this has not yet translated to equitable law enforcement. Male clients face little threat for their actions, not only because prostitutes are hesitant to report client abuse (exposing them to legal hassles of their own) but because police do not regard the purchase of sex as a priority.

In the outdoor trades, streetwalkers and truck-stop women are vulnerable because local clients—and especially police officers—know what they can get away with. They realize the constraints facing prostitutes and understand how social double standards protect them in their engagement with sex workers.

The status of brothel and agency women is complicated, as they claim to provide legitimate services. They call themselves masseuses or escorts and say that if sex occurred, it was between consenting adults and not for a fee. This significantly protects the women's social and legal status. Unlike streetwalkers who solicit openly, these women maintain a certain degree of social and legal credibility. Although their clients tend to be local regulars or international tourists who retain a status advantage over them, the clients cannot be certain of impunity if they act violently.

In contrast, the clients of dockside sex workers are strangers to the country and its laws. Although they may enjoy a high level of male privilege at home, they feel much less comfortable asserting masculine prerogatives where they do not know the rules nor have much social standing. Sailors are allowed liberty time in a port as long as they respect the law and do not pose a health or security risk. Sailors who embarrass their employers through dubious behavior abroad face incarceration, deportation, or a ban on working at sea again. This, coupled with their vulnerable social and legal standing, dissuades them from acting violently with local prostitutes.

Thus men who feel legally and socially secure enough to abuse prostitutes (such as police officers) are more likely to do so than clients who are uncertain of impunity (such as foreign sailors).

### Location of the Negotiation

The location of negotiation for sexual services determines whether the prostitute can assess a potential client's character and refuse his advances if she desires. In all sectors the locations rarely allow sex workers to reliably evaluate a client's character, but sectoral differences influence whether they can refuse sex.

Streetwalkers who negotiate with clients through car windows have little time to judge the men's character. They rely on immediate clues and intuitive indicators: his vibes, cleanliness, car condition, tone of voice, negotiation style, and so on (Fick 2005). The same is true for truck-stop women who negotiate from parking lots, the side of the road, or passenger seats. In these exposed contexts, a sex worker has only a moment to make complex

judgments about her potential safety with a stranger. As long as she remains outside the vehicle, she can usually refuse sex. But she relinquishes much of her power once she enters the vehicle, a space largely controlled by the client.

For brothel workers, the location of negotiation coincides with the location of sex in a place that is managed by a third party. Neither she nor the client controls the space, so both must trust the owner to put their interests first. In some cases, owners watch out for their employees by mandating condom use, providing security personnel, and allowing women the right of refusal.<sup>3</sup> Such rules can be quite helpful given how little time women have to assess clients in the front room—but they can also disrupt business. If a worker refuses clients too often, the owner may start to lose business. This puts pressure on sex workers to accept virtually anybody who walks through the door (Fick 2005).

In contrast, a dockside “sugar girl” spends hours with a man—in a public space—before initiating negotiations. She assesses him during their initial greeting as they converse together, as he chats with his mates, and as they drink, dance, and flirt. Over time, she observes him in multiple registers, assessing his character while maintaining the right to refuse sex. This long assessment period usually allows her to make sensible decisions about the man, increasing her likelihood of safe treatment.

### Location of the Sexual Act

Sex workers typically negotiate contracts in one space and fulfill it in another. This distinction usually allows them to reject potential clients if they cannot agree on terms. But, in reality, negotiations continue until the moment of sex and after. Once in bed, a client may refuse to wear a condom, demand extra services, or pay a lower fee than agreed to. According to Campbell (2000), nine hostel prostitutes report that, after sex, some clients threaten them with knives to get their money back. The location of sex has a major impact on whether clients feel comfortable using violence to achieve noncontractual goals.<sup>4</sup> Generally the more control a prostitute has over this space, the less likely that a client will use force against her, and vice versa.

Streetwalkers and truck-stop women typically enact the sexual contract within a client’s residence or vehicle. They are strangers in these spaces and so are at heightened risk. The sex worker, especially in a client’s residence, lacks information on reliable escape routes and may be isolated by its location. Meanwhile, the terrain is completely legible for the client. His comfort level with asserting demands will be higher in his own space.

Brothel women do not control the space where sex occurs but enjoy some rights within it, because they work under an employer who usually has some interest in their welfare. Prostitutes can feel quite unsettled if their employer does not demonstrate such interest, since failure to do so may indicate that the owner will protect clients' interests first (Fick 2005). Typically, however, the client is surrounded by people who support the sex worker.

Escorts who publicize their services through newspaper ads can meet a client at his house, a neutral hotel, or their own abodes. Escorts often also hire drivers to drop them off and pick them up at their rendezvous points, which makes the client understand that people know where the woman is and care about her welfare. This undercuts much of the advantage the client may have on his home turf.

At the dockside, it is the woman who is the local and the one who chooses where sex occurs. If the client ships out the next morning, she will likely choose a hotel; if he is in town for a few days and available for multiple engagements, she may prefer her home. In either case, she has superior knowledge of the environment and can call on a potential network of contacts. When the woman chooses the space of intimacy, she commands greater control than the man, which decreases the likelihood that he will be violent.

### Level of Discretion in the Solicitation Process

Clients and sex workers both value discretion, because prostitution still invites moral opprobrium and social embarrassment for both parties. Hence clients usually reward discreet solicitation with higher fees (Leggett 2001). Such discretion also allows prostitutes to safeguard their reputations, avoiding stigmatization and police harassment. A woman's social and legal status—derived from her public reputation—establish her level of power relative to a client. Sex workers who protect their reputations through discretion generally maintain more personal power than those who do not.

Women who solicit openly are therefore more likely to experience violence than those who solicit discreetly. Open solicitors receive almost no social or legal protection, because they have taken on a publicly criminal identity. A client can abuse a streetwalker with virtual impunity, because she cannot mobilize social or legal support for her complaints.

Escorts, however, often lead double lives and are not publicly known as prostitutes. Their discretion allows them greater flexibility in constructing their identities. Newspaper or Internet advertisements do not expose them

to communal surveillance. Their anonymity protects them from stigmatization and allows them to mobilize legal resources if they get into trouble with men.

Dockside solicitation is also discreet, because it takes place indoors and resembles flirtatious activities that occur in normal clubs: dancing, drinking, singing, talking, and touching. Although the sailors know that the women are sex workers, whose flirtations are really just solicitous gambits, they lack the means to leverage this information against them. Sailors have no social impact beyond the clubs and so pose no threat to the women's reputations.

### Role of Third-Party Involvement

Although many South African sex workers are independent agents, their transactions often involve third parties who exacerbate, or reduce, the likelihood of violence against them. In the streetwalker and brothel trades, pimps, gangsters, and brothel owners have a direct financial interest in a prostitute having as many clients as possible. These characters can apply subtle or overt pressure on a prostitute so that she accepts new clients despite her reservations. They usually claim to provide a service that justifies her payment to them. Pimps might provide protection, gangsters drugs, and brothel owners a place to work (Fick 2005). They all get a cut of her fees and may use physical force to assure her compliance. But not all are abusive or controlling: some remain nearby for protection and write down a client's license-plate number before accompanying the woman home (Pauw and Brenner 2003). Although this is preferable to an abusive relationship, the pimp still relies directly on the prostitute's earnings for his livelihood (Leggett 2001). This may lead the third party to exert pressure, or even inflict violence, on a woman to make her to go with a client she does not trust.

Dockside prostitutes also deal with many third parties, but these figures have a vested interest in keeping them safe. The nightclub management, cab drivers, and hotel owners all derive indirect commerce from prostitutes, and form part of an informal surveillance network over them and their clients. In Durban, for instance, the nightclub owner notes which sailors the women pair up with. When sailors enter the club, they sign a registry listing their name, nationality, ship, and employer. If a woman has a problem with a client, she can call the club owner, who will talk with the port authority or shipping agent concerning her complaint. Hence sailors are confronted at every turn by the prostitutes' allies, allowing the women to make sexual decisions without much threat of violence.

Moreover, because these third parties derive only indirect business from the prostitutes' labor, they provide decent service so that the women will continue bringing them business. The clubs' success depends upon the presence of sex workers who encourage the sailors to spend lavishly in such establishments, and thus owners must keep the women happy so that they continue to solicit from their clubs. The same is true for taxi drivers and hotel owners, who rely on the women to bring in customers. These parties have no incentive, therefore, to pressure the women into choosing bad clients. Instead they provide sex workers with casual surveillance that allows them to move around safely.

### *Recommendations for Reducing Violence in the Sex Industry*

Dockside prostitutes are safer than most other sex workers because of the structural logic of their sector that caters to the needs and constraints of foreign maritime transients. Based on this knowledge, I propose five policy recommendations for making prostitution safer in South Africa, though these are also relevant elsewhere. In this section I discuss how legal, social, linguistic, commercial, and procedural policy interventions can decrease the likelihood of violence, especially in the more dangerous sectors.

#### Legal Intervention: Criminalize the Purchase but Decriminalize the Sale

The typical clients of the dockside sector do not enjoy a high social or legal status. Although South African society supports patriarchal gender norms and criminalizes sex work, seafarers do not have an appreciably higher status than the prostitutes because of their transience and foreignness. In other sectors, though both parties are legally criminalized, patriarchal double standards ensure that local clients retain a higher status. This inequality increases women's vulnerability to violence, as they lack the credibility to seek redress from judicial institutions. Indeed, in the outdoor trade, clients can abuse prostitutes with virtual impunity. Religious morality and social stigma often end up excusing the non-enforcement of prostitutes' rights.

To remedy this inequality, a positive legal double standard should be established that operates similarly to racial affirmative action. The premise behind affirmative action in South Africa is that the legacy of racism continues to structure social and economic opportunity and that only a legal double standard can help previously disadvantaged groups succeed despite that legacy. The law is used as an instrument to overcome a prevailing social



norm—white privilege—that would otherwise remain unassailable through a strictly nonracial legal code.

Given that patriarchal norms continue to structure unequal gender relations, applying *positive discrimination* to the sex industry could also decrease violence against female prostitutes. This would be achieved by leaving the purchase of sexual services criminalized while decriminalizing their solicitation and sale, as has been done in Sweden (Ekberg 2004).

Such a legal double standard would erode the veritable impunity that clients enjoy by redistributing power away from them toward the sex workers. Essentially this would resemble the situation foreign sailors face in South African ports as transient, low-status visitors. Clients would respond by demanding greater discretion from sex workers, encouraging them to seek those who work indoors rather than outdoors. Such a reversal of power would also create a new bargain between the couple: she would honor the man's desire for discretion if he behaves and follows her rules; if he abuses her, however, she can seek legal redress.

This is not an “ideal” solution, in that it does not further legal equality. Nor is it enough. But it is a practical proposal in a patriarchal context characterized by high levels of gender violence. The prevalence of domestic abuse, rape, and violence against the general population of South African females shows that legal equality would not be enough to protect vulnerable prostitutes. Indeed, they require greater legal protection than clients so that, in reality, they might be able to operate as equals.

### Social Intervention: Periodically Name and Shame Male Clients

Sailors safeguard their reputations so that they remain employable. They are vulnerable to the negative attention a prostitute can bring if she complains about them to the ship's captain, the police, the port authority, or the ship's agent. Thus they have a financial incentive to behave properly overseas. Clients of prostitutes in other sectors, however, face no such threat to their reputations.

By periodically naming and shaming clients, law enforcement would give teeth to the criminalization of client purchases. Such a practice would warn clients of the risks that they, not just the sex workers, take by engaging sexual services. Not many of these examples would be needed to put sex buyers on alert. The Western Cape provincial government already does this with drunk drivers (offenders are named and shamed in the major local newspapers), an effort that has made the roads safer (van der Fort 2010). The effects of pub-

licly shaming transgressors could be quite severe for clients' reputations, but it would dissuade them from using violence against prostitutes as this would call attention to their illegal activities.

If the likelihood of violence is based on clients' ability to escape public exposure for their actions, then their reputations represent a crucial point of leverage in achieving safety for prostitutes.

### Linguistic Intervention: Equate the Moral Position of Buyer and Seller

Social discourse about prostitution relies on a vocabulary that reinforces gender inequality. Currently only sellers are stigmatized, called "prostitutes," a term that sets their identities within conceptual boundaries that are morally, socially, politically, and legally debilitating. (The term "sex worker" is a welcome corrective but has not been adopted by sex workers themselves. Moreover, "sex worker" is as over-determining as the term "prostitute," since many of the women are quite transient to the business.) Buyers of sexual services bear no comparable stigma, referred to by bloodless, amoral terms such as "client" and "john." So whereas the people on the demand side remain free of taint, those on the supply side are marked for life. This reinforces the gendered power imbalance between the two parties. Through a linguistic shift, this imbalance could be tipped somewhat in favor of the suppliers. Just as language identifies sellers (prostitutes) with their business (prostitution) it should identify buyers with their actions by labeling them "prostitutors," a term evincing their agency, complicity, and responsibility for the trade.

Dictionaries define a prostitutor simply as a prostitute, offering yet another redundant name for the seller. But because the term "prostitutor" is almost never used to actually talk about female sex workers, it could be adapted to refer to the other party in the transaction. Thus a prostitute is the seller and a prostitutor is the buyer.

This would add a moral dimension to male behavior, making prostitutors bear moral and social risks comparable to those of prostitutes. Currently South African communities rarely penalize men for sexual purchases. A campaign for substituting the label "prostitutor" for the vacuous term "client," however, would raise awareness about how these gendered identities are unequally constructed. It would also threaten the assumed moral and social impunity that prostitutors enjoy in their sexual dealings. Alone this strategy would achieve little, but in conjunction with other measures it could gradually change the public's understanding of how each gender contributes to the sex business.

## Commercial Intervention: Promote Ancillary Third-Party Involvement

In the dockside trade ancillary third parties help protect prostitutes because of their reciprocal commercial relationship with them. Club owners, taxi drivers, and hotel owners, as noted previously, form a casual surveillance network for the women.

In other sectors the women either work alone or are burdened by brothel owners, gangsters, and pimps, who have a direct financial interest in their business. Although it is criminal to profit from prostitution, brothel owners, gangsters, and pimps face little legal threat. Police usually turn a blind eye to vice profiteering. Although some of the services that these parties provide are helpful, they also can entail drug peddling or virtual sex slavery. A preferable option would be if they provided such services for a standard fee so that the women could take or leave such services without coercion.

Admittedly it is difficult to add new parties to niches that are structured around the existing needs of clients. After all, street-cruising clients and truckers do not need the services of cab drivers, hotels, or nightclubs. But if such clients are criminalized and occasionally named and shamed, they might seek discretion and alibis for their sexual purchases. As mentioned earlier, when solicitation is incorporated into regular recreational environments such as nightclubs or bars, the women tend to benefit from third-party surveillance. The more that prostitution-related activities are incorporated into larger fields of legitimate commerce, the safer the industry will be for sex workers.

## Procedural Intervention: Enhance Complexity, Value-Added Services, and Discretion

In the dockside trade, sexual engagements follow after hours of drinking, dancing, and conversation at a nightclub. Such legitimate activities shroud the connection between solicitation, sex, and money, masking the work of prostitution and protecting sex workers from legal harassment.

Indeed, when sex is one of many components of solicitation or interaction, prostitutes are rarely targets of the law. When brothels advertise themselves as massage parlors or sex workers market their services as escorts, they add a veneer of legitimacy that provides the women with cover stories and offers greater discretion to prostitutes and their clients. This is not foolproof, but it helps.

Hence South African police officers tend to target prostitutes lacking plausible cover stories, such as streetwalkers (Fick 2005; Leggett 2001).

Legally these women have no defense against the charge of loitering with solicitous intent. If they merely moved their business indoors to a tavern or a nightclub, they could avoid much legal scrutiny and achieve greater stature in negotiating with clients. As it stands, the streetwalker, truck stop, and mine hostel trades cater far too much to the convenience of clients, as they ultimately enjoy massive structural advantages over the prostitutes. This is not what the prostitutes intend but is simply the result of the structural logic of these niches.

Thus, rather than forcing clients to seek socially complex engagements or forcing women to move their business indoors, incentives would have to be crafted to encourage these changes indirectly. Criminalizing clients and shaming selected purchasers would encourage many clients to take their purchases indoors, seek discreet providers of sexual services, involve third-party agents, relinquish their assumed power and comfort, and engage in more complex service arrangements that elevate sex workers' status and enhance their cover stories. Decriminalizing sex work would also allow the women to stop worrying about establishing cover stories to protect themselves. Of course, such measures would not necessarily eliminate the exposed trades, but they would at least alter the bargain between prostitutes and their clients.

### *Conclusion*

South African prostitutes may be restricted by patriarchal gender norms, stigmatized by their communities, and criminalized by the law, but their exposure to violence is heavily dependent upon the features of the sex sector in which they work. At one extreme, streetwalkers are highly vulnerable to client, police, and third-party abuse owing to the structural characteristics of the street trade. Specifically, their clients enjoy a higher social status than they do; the location of negotiation militates against reliable assessments of clients' character; clients control the location of sex; the women solicit openly without discretion; and they are surrounded by third parties that have a direct financial interest in their work.

At the other extreme, dockside prostitutes face little danger of sexual violence because of the structural logic of their sector. For example, their clients have a low social and legal status; the location of negotiation allows for deep assessments of clients' character; the women control the location of sex; their solicitation activities are relatively discreet, because they occur indoors and simulate normal nightclub behavior; and their relationships with third parties are characterized by mutual benefit.

These different experiences have nothing to do with the prostitutes' personal qualities: their race, ethnicity, educational level, and class background have little bearing on whether they experience violence within a given sector. These characteristics certainly affect which sector they might choose to work in, but, once there, sex workers confront irresistible structural forces that determine their likelihood of encountering violence. From a policy perspective, then, the most effective interventions in the sex industry may not revolve around modifying sex workers' behavior, for instance, through workshops or counseling; instead, they may involve altering the structural conditions of the sectors in which the prostitutes work so as to provide disincentives for male abuse.

In this chapter I have tried to counter the image of the typical "comfortable" client with that of the "uncomfortable" one to show how clients' comfort level (i.e., their feeling of sexual entitlement) relates to the probability that they will abuse sex workers. In South Africa's dockside sex trade, clients feel socially and legally insecure and do not control the spaces of intimacy. As a result, they rarely threaten or execute violence against prostitutes, but they are still able to achieve their contractual goals with the women. This insight should encourage the consideration of strategic interventions that help equalize power in the prostitute-prostitutor relationship. Focusing on the structural features of the various sex sectors would allow for the formulation of policies with greater precision and the provision of external support for the women who navigate risk within this industry.

## NOTES

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1. For further details on the dockside context, the participant profile, and my research methods, see Trotter 2011.

2. "Elaine," an elite "escort" or courtesan, maintained a website where she advertised her companionship availability and prices. She charged about ten to fifteen times the rate that streetwalkers charge for comparable durations with clients (Elaine, personal communication, Cape Town, May 5, 2006).

3. Such was the case for one woman who left brothel work in favor of the dockside clubs in Cape Town. Although she was not unhappy with brothel conditions, she moved to the dockside because she thought she could make more money (Moena, personal communication, Cape Town, March 6, 2007).

4. Mine hostels are residential compounds that house mine workers near the mines. Sex workers often congregate in open fields near the hostels, offering their services to the miners passing by.