

## Book Review

Bruckert, C., & Parent, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Getting Past 'The Pimp': Management in the Sex Industry*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 162 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4875-2249-0

Empirical data on sex work has grown over the years, but studies of third-party sex trade workers (e.g., management, assistants, security, etc.) are exceptionally rare. They are also exceptionally valuable. So, it was with much intrigue and elation that I saw the announcement of Bruckert and Parent's *Getting Past 'The Pimp': Management in the Sex Industry*, and agreed to review the book. For those familiar with sex worker issues, this volume may not contain anything particularly novel, but it does provide much needed evidence indicating that third-party relationships are not inherently problematic and further, that a climate of criminalization does not improve safety.

The text is well organized and highly digestible. The foreword and introduction establish the sociopolitical context; namely, the increasing deployment of political discourses that conflate all sex work with issues of exploitation and trafficking, as well as the subsequent passage in 2014 of the *Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA)*. The Canadian legislation that criminalizes all third-party activity. The law, Bruckert notes, "was roundly condemned by sex workers" (p. 5). Furthermore, it is widely understood by sex worker advocates that the law endangers lives rather than making them safer.

As importantly, the introduction outlines the epistemological premise, political alignment, study goals, and methods of the research project. This collection impressively draws together 75 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with third parties, as well as focus groups with 52 sex workers who have laboured with or for third parties, in four Canadian cities. The methodological notes portray a familiarity and reflexivity regarding key concerns in sex work research. As importantly, the notes indicate that the researchers had respectful relations with sex work communities and collaborated with sex worker rights groups. It seems clear from their writing that the editors take their ethical responsibilities to their participants and to the sex worker rights movement seriously.

While a variety of experiences are covered, one drawback of the study, however, is that most of the sex workers interviewed were ciswomen (49 cis/3 trans) and largely white; we might expect additional findings from workers exposed to different kinds of risk or privilege. This shortcoming may also reflect how the most stigmatized sex workers are often the least likely to participate in research. Concomitantly, the third-party workers interviewed composed a more diverse group, with over half identifying as women, which disrupts traditional ideas about who does this kind of work.

The first chapter (Mensah's) addresses the overarching trope of 'the pimp', usually produced through media and popular culture. This chapter sets the tone for exploring how insistence upon narrow stereotypes and binary thinking reinforces racist and classist assumptions and precludes any true understanding of third-party activity.

The next chapter (Bruckert's) teases out the various activities undertaken by third parties, the ways people come to work as third parties, and their various motivations, all the while problematizing any sharp delineation between sex worker, third party, and friend or intimate partner. These roles are often permeable, with some people rotating through them within a day or over the course of a career.

The following three chapters analyze specific issues and findings within street-based (Corriveau & Parent's), incall/outcall (Bruckert & Law's), and erotic dance (Law's) sectors of the sex trade. I appreciate that the findings are organized by sex trade sector, to illuminate what the sectors discussed do not have in common with another sector and, by extension, their commonalities with other types of labour. The structure of the chapters also speaks to a broader dilemma in sex work research and politics, specifically, while it is advantageous to organize activism under the umbrella of 'sex work' to create solidarity in the face of shared stigma, it can also erase the uniqueness of different sex work jobs and reinforce the very sex exceptionalism that underlies that stigma. For instance, different sectors may have things in common but ultimately entail very different workdays, with specific skill sets, organizational norms, and legal consequences.

Indeed, helpful analogies to other jobs are used throughout the book. Work in late-stage capitalism is increasingly precarious (Berg, 2016; McKee, 2016), and for better or worse more and more workers are considered 'independent contractors.' As Jeffrey writes in Chapter 6, "The flexibility of sex work, while it is one of the sector's attractions, also opens up the possibility of exploitation of labour when owners/managers exert control over the labour process without treating employees as actual employees" (p. 132); by removing all of the health and safety protections and worker benefits that employee status usually entails. In this way, sex work shares much in common with e.g., forms of contractual and service labour, taxi driving, aesthetician work, 'freelancing', and the trades. These analogies underscore how a fraught relationship to management is a characteristic of work generally, and not of sex work specifically.

The collection also illustrates ways that sex workers strategize and exercise agency when dealing with management, and clarifies many of the reasons that sex workers opt to involve third-parties, i.e. the benefits and securities that third parties can offer where mainstream resources will not. By approaching the issue foremost as a matter of *labour*, this study nuances what 'exploitation,' 'cooperation,' and 'resistance' in the sex trade look like. As Alana Massey (2018) writes, one reason sex worker voices are so often silenced is because they are complex and rarely fit the narratives of perfect exploitation or perfect liberation that people want. But as Mensah (Chapter 2) reminds us, echoing Stuart Hall: "nothing new can be learned from common sense" (p. 20). Such received 'wisdom' tends to contort the world into a stark binary of victims and monsters.

The conflation of sex work and sex trafficking is increasingly taken to be such common sense. It is imperative that empirical data and political resistance come together to illustrate that safety and justice for all is only possible when sex work is treated as work, and when work is treated as complex. As Jenn Clamen notes in the foreword, "Acceptance of third parties in sex work tends to be quite classist ... as it assumes that entrepreneurship is the only way to avoid some kind of unavoidable exploitation" (p. xiii). All work involves compromise and constraint, and the goal should be to improve working conditions, not to strive for its abolition.

While sex work may not be so different from other kinds of work, any regulation of it should be tailored by centering the expertise of sex workers. Jeffrey's final chapter highlights the wealth of existing knowledge and literature on best practices for regulating the sex industry in ways that maximize health and safety for workers and their communities. Contrary to the kind of popular belief that produced Canada's *PCEPA*, or which got *FOSTA/SESTA* passed in the US, the regulatory systems that are best for sex workers are *also* the best for ensuring that those who are being abused, exploited, or trafficked have the means to access resources and protection. But sex work abolitionists seem particularly prone to 'confirmation bias', only entertaining evidence that supports what they already believe. This is easy to sustain, given that most people have no direct contact with the sex industry. For this reason, empirical research can play a key role by foregrounding experiences that are routinely dismissed. This study is an important one for centering those who are truly the most demonized in the industry as there is no existing mainstream narrative that is sympathetic to third parties.

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