



## Sex Work and Prostitution: Male

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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*Prostitution* is a word meaning an exchange of sex for money, but as a metaphor used in everyday conversation it suggests a damaging compromise to one's sense of personal worth in exchange for money or other gain. The introduction of the term *sex work* reflects a move to de-stigmatize the idea of prostitution and characterize it as a form of ordinary work.

*Sex Work* is also a more inclusive category than prostitution and encompasses many different kinds of sexual services. These services exist along a continuum that includes varying degrees of *direct sexual activity* (such as oral sex or intercourse) and *fantasy*. For example, while performing in pornographic movies usually involves direct sexual interaction with other performers, its purpose is to supply fantasies to the viewers. Like prostitution itself, other forms of sex work that have a significant fantasy component, such as phone sex, stripping, and lap dancing, also involve some degree of interaction between customer and sex worker.

### **The Sex Industry**

Nowadays, sex work is often described as taking place in the "sex industry," where escort agencies, strip clubs, phone sex services, voyeur websites, or porn producers employ men and women who are as much sex workers as the street hustler.

While there are few rigorous statistical sources, the estimated revenues earned within the sex industry are huge--revenues in the U.S. porn industry alone are estimated at \$10 billion dollars a year. The U.S. porn industry, according to one estimate, employs approximately 20,000 people--though it is unclear whether this includes the many occasional and part-time workers employed in the porn industry or whether the figure refers to full-time equivalents.

Nor is the number of sex workers at any one time a fixed population. In fact, sex workers range from being well-organized professionals (working for an escorting agency or managing an independent escort business) to those who engage in unpremeditated and sporadic cash transactions resulting from casual encounters.

Money is involved in many sexual transactions and involves many people who do not identify themselves as professional sex workers. Some see sex work as one among a number of strategies to survive and engage in it occasionally and opportunistically.

In most of the United States (Nevada does allow some forms of prostitution) and in many other countries, prostitution is illegal. There are, of course, other forms of economic exchange for sexual services, which are more indirect, such as gifts, financial support, drugs, or housing, which may be properly considered as forms of prostitution but which are not necessarily illegal.

### **The Oldest Profession**

Prostitution is frequently characterized as the "oldest profession." While most people assume that the phrase applies primarily to female prostitution, historical evidence shows that men have also commonly worked in the profession. Much less has been written about male prostitution, but there is ample evidence of its existence going back as far as the ancient civilizations of Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas.

Ironically, in nineteenth century England, the term "gay" referred to a prostitute and did not have the homosexual connotation that it has today. During the nineteenth-century, in Europe and the U.S., young working-class men such as soldiers, servants, laborers, and messengers often worked as male prostitutes in order to supplement their low wages. While many of these men may have been heterosexual, others may have chosen to work as male prostitutes in order to engage in their preferred sexual activities, while yet others adopted female attire and would today be characterized as transvestites or transgendered individuals. Female-identified transgendered sex workers have always been a significant aspect of the "male" sex professions.

Many of the young heterosexual men who engaged in prostitution took typically "masculine" roles in sex (thus allowing themselves to be "serviced" in oral sex and to penetrate in anal sex). These men were characterized as "trade," a term in contemporary gay male slang that still signifies the same sort of homosexual behavior. In the first half of the twentieth century, these young men often used elaborate social and psychological strategies to neutralize the potential significance of their sexual behavior, and often engaging in homosexual activity as "trade" was a step on the path to coming out as homosexual, thus giving rise to the cynical proverb frequently used by homosexual men in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s: "Today's trade is tomorrow's competition."

### **Fantasy and Sex**

In the contemporary United States the market for male sexual services is organized into a series of overlapping markets. These markets offer different combinations of sexual services, ranging from those that involve *direct sexual contact* (for example, hustling or escorting) to those that primarily *stimulate sexual fantasies* (for example, phone sex or posing for pornography).

While most forms of sex work (like sex itself) provide an experience that is a combination of interaction and fantasy, some (for example, massage and stripping) are specifically organized around controlled or legally regulated forms of contact.

### **The Hustler and the Escort**

The two most common forms of male prostitution (involving direct sexual services) are the hustler and the escort. The hustler typically deals with his customers on a face-to-face basis--either on the street, at adult bookstores (a disappearing venue), bathhouses, and, especially, bars. In contrast, the escort generally arranges his business over the telephone, through an escorting agency, or on a website.

In the U.S., the motivation to engage in prostitution and other forms of sex work is often, though not always, economic. Several studies have shown that male sex workers often have low levels of formal education, and their work choices are limited to unskilled labor, which pays less than they can earn through sex work.

Through the 1970s, in the United States, male sex workers worked primarily on the streets or in parks in sex districts or gay cruising areas and in porn theaters and bars, but their numbers sharply declined during the 1980s. Several factors were responsible. The onset of the AIDS epidemic, followed by the crack and crystal methamphetamine epidemics, hit street hustlers especially hard.

HIV disproportionately affected street hustlers and the homeless youth who supported themselves through

prostitution. Many customers saw sex with hustlers as a high risk activity for HIV infection and turned to porn and phone sex services as low risk activities.

### **Phone Sex**

During the 1980s, local gay newspapers began printing advertisements for men offering a range of sexual services, including escorting and massage. They also advertised other sex businesses, such as phone sex services, then the latest innovation. Since then male sexual services have increasingly used advertising, both in print and on the Internet, to attract customers. The rapid increase in the use of cell phones has facilitated this growth. Consequently, as the hustler declined in significance, the escort gained an increased share of the market for male prostitution.

Since its inception in the 1980s, phone sex has emerged as an important medium for providing sexual services with a large fantasy component. Phone sex services, typically reached through 900 or 976 numbers, provide personal contact with a phone sex operator who enacts or improvises a sexual scenario in response to the caller. Phone sex operators are "actors" who perform and improvise a large array of scripts that consist of sexually-explicit material organized around common themes that customers request. Operators will develop followings of clients who return time and time again to participate in their preferred fantasies with an actor who successfully maintains the fantasy's freshness and excitement.

### **Strippers**

In many large urban centers, bars and clubs offer strip shows and "dancing" as a form of live erotic entertainment. In strip shows, performers dance and strip in order to stimulate the erotic fantasies of their audience. The strip show promotes a sexual fantasy without an actual sexual act between the performer and the audience member, although the performer's presence permits a degree of interaction--even if it is only eye contact or stuffing dollar bills in a jock strap. Strippers may even create an ongoing fantasy persona that they regularly perform for their fans.

Strippers typically earn their income in the form of tips from customers--who drop dollars on the stage near a performer or tuck cash in the elastic band of underwear or a jock strap. Female strippers can earn quite large incomes, but male strippers, whether they work in gay clubs or before a straight female audience, earn considerably less. As a form of employment, stripping offers ready cash to performers, while providing an erotic spectacle to the audience. Local laws and enforcement policies determine the extent of nudity (which can range from underwear or jock straps to g-strings and total nudity), whether or not a live sex show can take place where alcohol is served, and the degree of touching that is permitted.

While many strippers may not work as escorts, stripping can serve as a point of contact for escorting. Whether or not strippers are available as escorts, they are nonetheless frequently solicited. Thus, "dancing" or stripping may also serve as a form of outreach and marketing to attract customers.

### **Pornography as a Career**

Performing in pornographic movies is also a form of sex work, but one entirely devoted to creating a fantasy. Unless a performer strips or escorts, there is no interaction with members of the audience. Porn actors, like other sex workers, may exclude certain activities from their repertoire, but their sexual behavior is primarily governed by the demands and constraints of the video production.

The sexual activities that take place on the porn set during filming are subject to many interruptions in order to capture the sexual activities from several different angles. Lighting must be constantly adjusted. During the post-production and editing process the illusion of an "authentic" and complete sexual performance is created. The finished movie is the combined product of the sexual performances of the actors, the director's skill in motivating and preparing the actors to perform the sexual acts filmed, and the

success of post-production editing in sustaining the credibility and coherence of the sex portrayed.

Porn stars operate in a national arena in a way that most other sex workers do not. Most hustlers, escorts, and strippers work in a particular city or region. Traveling around the country dancing in gay clubs and burlesque theaters allows porn stars to demonstrate and exploit their appeal in markets outside the gay meccas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to earn an adequate income as a porn performer. For most performers, acting in porn is not a full-time job. Performers typically earn between \$500 to \$2,500 per scene (depending on the actor's popularity, the sexual acts to be performed in the scene, and the prestige and wealth of the studio). Smaller companies generally pay much less--i.e., closer to \$500 per scene. Even if a performer were paid \$2,000 a scene and made a movie every month (which actually is quite a lot), his annual income from pornographic acting would be \$24,000, a nice supplement to income from a regular job, but not in itself a large income. Some porn actors do perform more than 12 scenes a year--they may "star" in a movie and perform in more than one scene (though this is not very common) or they make more than one video a month, but for the vast majority, the money earned in porn is supplemental.

In order to earn higher incomes, many porn stars also work as escorts. "I don't think that porn stars really make a living doing porn, they have to have some kinds of other income," notes director Kristen Bjorn. "They just cannot make that much money. So those who are totally into just doing porn movies are, basically, prostitutes who use the porn movies as publicity for what they really do."

If a porn star decides to pursue work as an escort, his relationship to making porn and to working as a stripper changes; it transforms his work in porn and as a stripper into adjuncts of escorting. Escorting is much more lucrative and doesn't necessarily require a forty-hour work week. Porn movies then function as infomercials, and the dancing and stripping on the gay club circuit become a modern triple-x version of the traveling salesman.

### **The Internet Revolution**

For spectators and other potential customers, many fantasies are generated through interviews (sometimes completely fabricated) with their favorite porn stars in soft-core porn magazines. However, interviews in local gay magazines and newspapers (when the porn star is in town dancing at a local club or promoting his latest film) also feed the fantasy of connection.

Recently, the Internet has come to dominate the way in which sex workers attract customers. Websites for escorting agencies and for individual escorts abound. These websites typically include information about the escorts' appearance, endowment, sexual roles and interests, and rates. There are even websites in which the sexual performances of escorts are reviewed and discussed.

In addition, the proliferation of chat rooms, web-cams, voyeur sites, and interactive websites allow fans to engage in conversations and have contact with amateur performers, escorts, and porn stars. For example, on one website that offers 1-on-1 sessions, fans can purchase "exclusive" time with the performer, interact with him, and together enact a fantasy scenario--while voyeurs, who pay a lower fee, can watch the performance but not interact with the performer. This is the cyber-fantasy equivalent of an escorting encounter.

Thus, increasingly, the Internet has taken the place of face-to-face contacts, interactions, and marketing for male sex workers.

### **The Retrogressive Dynamic**

A constant demand for "new faces," "fresh meat," and new people is integral to most markets for sexual

services and most forms of sex work. In the 1930s, sociologist Paul Cressey formulated the theory of retrogressive life cycles to explain the careers of young women who worked as taxi dancers ("dime-a-dance" girls). The young women who sought work as taxi dancers typically had left their families and communities to work in an occupation that was closely associated with prostitution. At first the young women found it exciting, but the longer they worked as taxi dancers the more difficult it was to compete with the newer and younger women who followed. Usually, the longer each woman worked, the less money she made and the seedier the venues in which she worked.

The life cycle or "career" cycle of men who work in the sex industry is subject to the same dynamic. One of the most important factors in this process is the sex workers' declining ability to sustain the fantasies that they provoke among their steady customers. Of course, this dynamic is especially important for those forms of sex work that have significant fantasy components--such as strippers, porn stars, and phone sex operators.

Porn actors, in particular, are aware of this dynamic, which is often characterized in the porn business as "over-exposure." While many leave the industry or move over to jobs behind the camera, other performers will try to hold onto their fans by expanding their sexual repertoire in order to enhance the "fantasy potential" among their fans.

But often this progression leads to appearances in lower budget productions. "One interesting thing about this business," director Kristen Bjorn observes, "is that the longer you are in it, the less money you are paid. Once you are an old face, and an old body, forget it. You're through as far as your popularity goes."

Male sex workers in other genres also react to the retrogressive dynamic by expanding sexual repertoire, or, where possible, by working in other markets and locales.

Male prostitution and sex work has long been a highly stigmatized activity--because it is often illegal and widely considered shameful, but also because it seems to contravene conventional masculine roles. Nevertheless, it is an activity that in many new forms has become increasingly significant.

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### **About the Author**

**Jeffrey Escoffier** writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.