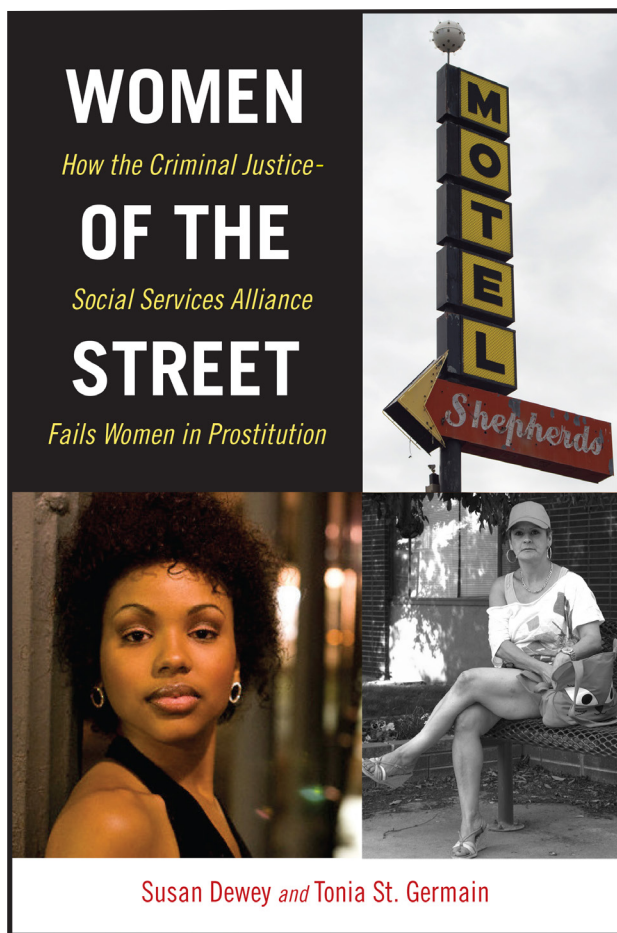


Women of the Street

How the Criminal Justice-Social Services Alliance Fails Women in Prostitution

By Susan Dewey and Tonia St. Germain

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Why Consider This Book for Your Class?

- Synergistic approach unites anthropological methods and analysis using a critical legal lens
- Based on an unprecedented level of access—as both a researcher and a services provider within the criminal justice-social services alliance—to the everyday lives of street-involved women and those tasked with their oversight
- Written in a vivid ethnographic style that prioritizes the words and experiences of street-involved women and the criminal justice and social services professionals with whom they regularly interact
- Presents evidence-based arguments for the decriminalization of prostitution based on the status quo's failure to address the socioeconomic forces that encourage women's street-based sex trading

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General Summary

This is a book about people who make their living by engaging in street-based sex work or criminal justice and social services efforts to curtail it through the work of police officers, public defenders, judges, probation officers, or court-mandated therapeutic treatment providers. Co-authored by an anthropologist and a legal scholar, the book explores these interactions and the cultural context in which they take place by drawing upon five years of ethnographic research with 231 women involved in street-based sex work and illicit drug use, as well as dozens of the criminal justice and social services professionals who regularly interact with them. To explore this issue, the book focuses on the criminal justice-social services alliance, which positions itself as a punitive-therapeutic partnership between law enforcement agencies and state, municipal, or independent non-profit social services entities. This alliance comprises a coalescence of punitive-therapeutic forces that work in tandem to police or otherwise regulate women involved in street-based sex work and illicit drug use. Such policing and regulation relies on an interventionist discourse that positions the women's decision-making as the product of traumatic interpersonal encounters rather than the exclusionary socioeconomic realities that frame their lives.

At core, *Women of the Street* argues that the criminal justice system's financial and ideological predominance within the criminal justice-social services alliance results in an amalgamation that highly individualizes women's sex trading and illicit drug use as pathological choices they make due to the cognitive distortions believed to result from abusive or otherwise traumatic life experiences. This approach advocates therapeutic treatment interventions, some of which are court-monitored, for street-involved women while effectively ignoring the gendered socioeconomic circumstances that inform their decision-making. Such incomplete (or even false) presumptions about street-involved women's experiences with illicit drug use, violence, homelessness, and sex trading engender counterproductive results reliant on dominant U.S. cultural norms that support individualism and deny structural inequality.

The extensive research for this book entailed a unique mixed method approach with Dewey, the first author, inhabiting a number of distinct roles, from participant observer both on the streets where women trade sex and in a transitional housing facility where they seek assistance, to becoming an alliance professional herself through her work as the Admissions Coordinator at one of the few transitional housing facilities for women leaving street-based sex trading. This approach resulted in balanced representations of the significant everyday challenges faced by both street-involved women and the criminal justice and social services professionals with whom they regularly interact.

SUMMARY

This chapter introduces the criminal justice-social services alliance, a punitive-therapeutic confederation of federal, state, and municipal law enforcement agencies and state, municipal, or independent non-profit social services entities. The diverse bodies and individuals comprising the alliance are united by a cultural ethos characterized by the belief that street prostitution and illicit drug use are inherently harmful to women, who require sociolegal intervention and subsequent demonstration of their readiness to express accountability for their life circumstances. As part of a mutually reinforcing process, the alliance ethos interprets women's entrenchment in the criminalized economy that dominates the economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in which they live as evidence of their pathological individual and community traits. Alliance professionals accordingly have high levels of legally and socially endorsed discretionary latitude in policing or otherwise intervening in the "bad neighborhoods" where women engage in street-based sex trading.

Encounters between street-involved women and alliance professionals take place within the context of systemic intimacy, which refers to the interpersonal means by which individuals assess one another, and the broader institutional structures and social forces of which they are a part, as they go about earning a living. We use the word "intimacy" to convey three prevailing characteristics of the relationship between the women and those tasked with their legal oversight: the need to make claims to expert knowledge about each other's motivations and inner states, the individual cultivation of fragile intergroup trust bonds as a means to obtain specialized in-group knowledge, and the personalization of broader social forces that inform inter- and intragroup encounters. This intimacy is "systemic" because it is legally and socially sanctioned, occurs as part of a social process by which individuals reconcile contradictions between their lived experiences and the legislative and policy frameworks governing them, and operates via powerful forces endorsed by prevailing social norms.

This chapter also presents a detailed review of the research methods employed over the course of the six years that comprised the project. During the first year, Dewey spent approximately four days and three nights per week living as an unpaid staff member at a Denver transitional housing facility for women leaving the sex trade, using her spare time to enter data from paper-based client files from services provision encounters with 131 women who sought to leave the street over the course of a decade. Dewey's gradual integration into street prostitution's cultural and spatial world allowed her, in the second and third years of this project, to conduct and audio-record one hundred semi-structured interviews

Introduction

with women actively working the street or residing in the transitional housing facility. She regularly traveled, often with other street-involved women but sometimes alone, from motel rooms where women were using various controlled substances to a police station, correctional facility, or addictions treatment-oriented transitional housing facility, the closest approximation she could safely and legally take to the pathways street-involved women follow on a daily basis. In the fourth year of the research, Dewey received permission to sit in on an otherwise closed Denver-area prostitution diversion courtroom, which she complemented with regular visits to criminal courts that are open to the public. Dewey continued her work with the transitional housing facility in the project's fifth year, during which she interacted with hundreds of people employed in the fields of criminal justice and social services and conducted two dozen semi-structured interviews with some of them at greater length. She stopped collecting data in the project's sixth year, when the transitional housing facility's executive director asked her to take on the unpaid position of admissions coordinator, making her the first point of contact for street-involved women who wished to enter the program.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Cast in an adversarial relationship by the sociolegal norms that govern their respective income-generation strategies, street-involved women and alliance professionals both describe their interactions as fraught and emotionally charged. Systemic intimacy demands reification of each group by the other, specifically by presuming a generalized world view and inner state that enables an individual to predict or explain, with reasonable confidence, actions taken by a member of the oppositional group by drawing on previous experiences, collective knowledge imparted by other group members, or additional specialized forms of expertise. What are some examples of how the theoretical concept of systemic intimacy can be applied to help explain or better understand other areas of social life?
- This book is the product of an innovative collaboration between an anthropologist and a legal scholar, with research for it comprising an iterative mixed method approach implemented over the course of six years in a variety of contexts. How might the arguments and evidence presented be different had the authors taken a less expansive approach? If, for instance, the authors had only spoken to street-involved women or those tasked with their oversight, how might their argument have been different?
- Researchers often classify individuals who engage in stigmatized and/or criminalized activities, such as illicit drug use or sex work, as part of a "hard to reach population" because such individuals may be reluctant to participate in research due to fear of judgment or legal consequences. What are some

of the challenges researchers face in working with individuals impacted by these issues, and how did this study's methodology help to overcome some of them?

- This chapter includes an extensive account of the authors' methods, which they designed to elicit the widest possible variety of perspectives on the complex issues related to addiction, homelessness, and street prostitution. What ethical considerations arose for Dewey, the project's ethnographer, as she became increasingly integrated into both the cultural and spatial worlds of street prostitution? How did such considerations impact her decision-making with respect to her position within the criminal justice-social services alliance, particularly as she took on an increasingly diverse set of responsibilities at the transitional housing facility?

SUMMARY

Chapter One argues that women's street involvement comprises a variety of criminalized income generation and resource acquisition strategies—including prostitution—that result in part from their cultural and spatial-environmental estrangement from legal work opportunities and social services. Situating the women's everyday hustles within this gendered and racialized sociolegal and economic context considerably complicates centuries-old debates on prostitution by elucidating how, for most street-involved women, sex trading constitutes the most immediately available solution to the need for money, drugs, and shelter. Trading sex for money, robbing clients and others, and selling marketable items such as prescription or illicit drugs, food stamps, and shoplifted clothing or electronics all constitute normalized forms of income generation in the neighborhood where the women live and work. Street-involved women face a different set of gendered and racialized vulnerabilities than their male peers struggling with addiction and homelessness; as women, they have an increased likelihood of engaging in transactional sex, which is more lucrative than other criminalized income generation strategies, such as panhandling, readily available to them.

The women's enmeshment in the criminal justice system, refusal to identify their sex trading activities as work, and historic race and class oppression all confound efforts to neatly characterize their experiences within the narrow parameters of longstanding debates on the sex industry, which tend to pivot on varying definitions of choice. Indeed, the ways in which women organize and engage in sex trading vary considerably according to their age, relationship status, drug use, and numerous other factors unique to each individual woman. Old school cougars, frequent flyers, caretakers, bonded, intergenerational, and under the radar are all emic terms the women use to distinguish themselves from other street-involved women or, in the case of bonded and intergenerational women, to characterize situations and relationships to others that compel them to exchange sex for money or drugs. The contextualization of women's perspectives within their particular orientation to sex trading is intended to highlight the creativity that suffuses the women's income generation strategies, rather than reinforcing well-entrenched stereotypes about street prostitution as the last resort of the unskilled and destitute.

Alliance professionals also engage in their work differently depending on their personal and/or professional subscription to particular ideological frameworks informed by the cultural and legal contexts in which they live and work. They do so while working in the context of five dominant socio-ideological models for addressing street prostitution as a social issue: state, quasi-state, faith-based,

grassroots human rights organizing, and harm reduction. Each model features an approach derived from a particular dominant narrative or textual reference that advocates a unique set of responses to women's street involvement and produces a particular type of conventional wisdom that informs everyday encounters between individual street-involved women and those tasked with their oversight. In the United States, the alliance ethos dominates in state and quasi-state models, which regard prostitution and illicit drug use as inherently harmful, such that women engaged in these behaviors require sociolegal intervention and subsequent correctional monitoring. The state and quasi-state models rely primarily on the Constitution and municipal, state, and federal legislation as textual frames of reference within a dominant narrative that emphasizes the importance of the rule of law. Alliance professionals tend to fall into four primary categories with respect to approaches they take in their work: idealists, enforcers, transgressors, and bureaucrats. They do this work in an ethnographic and legal context that mandates their adherence to an ethos that criminalizes and stigmatizes prostitution, and yet the spectrum of approaches to their work indicates that alliance professionals do not always adhere to a singular mode of interaction with all street-involved women.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- It is well-established that in most U.S. cities street prostitution takes place in neighborhoods with high rates of intergenerational poverty and illicit drug economy participation. If you were a highly ranked police officer or other city official tasked with determining street prostitution-related policing priorities, what major issues, evidence, or perceptions would you consider in making these decisions? How are these concerns different from the issues a social worker must consider while providing services or forms of oversight to street-involved women?
- If you were the executive director of a social services agency that works with women struggling with homelessness, addictions, and compromised mental health, what would you take into consideration in determining your agency's stance on transactional sex? How might your chosen stance impact your ability to receive funds, provide services you regard as necessary, or otherwise effectively work with the women?
- Women and men both play roles in the illicit drug economy that suffuses street prostitution yet, as in almost all other spheres of the U.S. economy, women routinely have less access to more lucrative income generation opportunities and experience sexual and intimate partner violence more often than men. Yet alliance approaches deny street-involved women's shared structural inequalities by highly individualizing their struggles with addiction,

poverty, and fraught interpersonal relationships. How might alliance approaches change or expand to encompass the realities that street-involved women ultimately do make choices within socioeconomic and interpersonal circumstances that significantly constrain their abilities to make changes to their lives or even envision alternatives they regard as both feasible and desirable?

- Individual street-involved women and alliance professionals all take different approaches to earning a living based on a variety of circumstances as well as structural and interpersonal factors. In your opinion, what role does individual personality play within the structural forces that encourage or impel people to pursue particular life paths?
- Socio-ideological models for addressing street prostitution as a social issue derive from powerful dominant narratives and/or textual references and tend to be polarized. What alternatives might combine some of the more pragmatic aspects of each socio-ideological model to reduce the punitive approach dominant within the criminal justice-social services alliance while providing street-involved women with realistic and meaningful opportunities to change their lives?

SUMMARY

This chapter argues that the criminal justice-social services alliance pathologizes women's street-based sex trading and illicit drug use as individual responses to previous traumatic events and resulting flawed thought processes that encourage what alliance professionals often characterize as "high-risk behaviors." This ideological position derives from prevailing U.S. cultural norms and attendant structural forces regarding personal responsibility and appropriate gendered sexual behavior in characterizing particular aspects of street involvement—specifically homelessness, substance abuse, criminal justice oversight, and interpersonal violence—as uniquely compound and totalizing for women. Chapter subsections specifically address prevailing theoretical conceptualizations of risk in public health and the social sciences, quantitative data on the women's demographic characteristics, women's perspectives on their own occupational risks, and alliance professionals' perspectives on the women's, as well as their own, work-related risks.

Risk, like work, is a highly subjective and context-dependent concept that nonetheless holds enormous cultural significance for practitioners, the general public, and academics. Public school teachers and administrators routinely refer to "at-risk students," public health researchers refer to "at-risk populations" or "risky sexual practices," and insurance agents conduct proprietorial risk assessments on a policyholder's likelihood of becoming a potential claimant. Beliefs about risk dramatically inform interactions between street-involved women and the criminal justice and social services professionals they regularly encounter in a variety of contexts. Individual street-involved women and alliance professionals are by no means monolithic in their formulations of risk, yet each group's shared cultural norms contribute to general understandings regarding the challenges and consequences they face in their respective ways of earning a living.

Denver street-involved women trade sex in a socioeconomic context characterized by a multi-tiered set of risks that fall into the two major thematic categories of policing and gendered socioeconomic relations in a neighborhood dominated by the illicit drug economy. Policing-related risks entail three major components: constant vigilance necessary to avoid arrest, gender profiling in a "known prostitution area," and the speed with which encounters leading to arrest unfold, such that the women may face lifelong consequences as a result of events that transpire very quickly. The women describe three risks related to gendered socioeconomic neighborhood relations: constant economic pressures, restricted social support, and client-related concerns. Yet the alliance ethos conceptualizes a woman's involvement in street prostitution and illicit drug use as an individual choice, albeit one inherently tied to her socioeconomic vulnerability and past experiences with traumatic events.

Occupational Risks

Identifying and interpreting the women's occupational risks within the alliance ethos is an important task for all alliance professionals irrespective of their work orientation, such that they must encourage, or even mandate, that women share (or at least convincingly fake adherence to) the system's values. Yet even as alliance professionals come to know at least some aspects of the women's lives through their encounters with them, they face particular occupational risks of their own. These perceptions of occupational risk involve individual sensitivities and preferences but, as with women who are street-involved, commonalities do exist, specifically in the areas of feeling ineffective, struggling with limited resources, experiencing racism and sexism at work, and the potential for the abuse of power.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Risk is a culturally loaded concept that can obscure the socio-structural forces that create or contribute to conditions that compromise people's health, safety, or ability to self-actualize on their own terms. Make a list of the issues that Corinne, whose story features in this chapter's concluding vignette, must consider in making decisions about her future. Using this list, identify the interpersonal, institutional, and socioeconomic forces that shape her decision-making. What, in your opinion, are the biggest risks Corinne faces?
- Quantitative data presented in this chapter clearly demonstrates the overrepresentation of African American women and Latinas in street prostitution, the sex industry venue where they are most likely to face arrest and least likely to reap significant financial benefits or protection from violence and other harms. The authors interpret this data as reflective of the structural racism that shapes their lives, but there is also the potential risk that this could be misconstrued to reinforce problematic stereotypes that hypersexualize and criminalize women of color. What does such potential for different forms of interpretation reveal about the decisions researchers must make when publishing or otherwise presenting their data?
- Street-involved women describe risks that coexist and overlap in the criminalized and economically precarious social context that informs their decision-making. Relationships and "street identities" shift within this context according to the actors involved and the terms of the exchange that takes place between them. How might acknowledging the wide array of street-involved women's relationships with others potentially lead to evidence-based alternatives to the alliance's status quo approach?

Occupational Risks

- In characterizing street-involved women's ways of being in the world as intrinsically "unhealthy" for both their bodies and their inner selves, the alliance positions the women as physical manifestations of social ills stemming from structural inequalities that require and, from the alliance perspective, deserve state intervention. What accounts for the striking divergence between street-involved women's and alliance professionals' perspectives on the women's occupational risks? How might a more realistic alliance approach to how the women regard their own risks produce different results?
- "Burnout" is the evocative term alliance professionals use to describe colleagues who can no longer perform their jobs because they have become too overwhelmed by exhaustion and feelings of inefficacy. Many alliance professionals feel emotionally battered by the suffering and interpersonal violence they see on a regular basis and have few resources to deal with these feelings. How might these professionals be encouraged to recognize the signs of burnout and seek services without incurring judgment in occupational settings that do not always value self-care?

SUMMARY

This chapter contends that the alliance positioning of street-involved women as damaged by dysfunctional families and communities neglects the structural forces that inform the women's everyday lives. Resulting attempts to provide therapeutic services, while intended to address the complex reasons that women struggle with substance abuse, homelessness, and involvement in sex work, focus almost exclusively on women's individual decision-making. This focus fails to acknowledge that sex trading is itself a help-seeking strategy for women that allows them to meet their immediate needs without facing restrictive services provision conditions that often include lengthy wait lists, mandatory self-disclosure, and abstaining from illicit drug use. Many alliance professionals, particularly those who work directly with street-involved women, readily acknowledge the limitations of these prevailing approaches, and yet they remain bound by systemic constraints that position the women's collective struggles as individual problems. Chapter subsections specifically address prevailing conceptions of help and harm reduction in social sciences and public health literature, present quantitative data on the women's housing, formal education, employment and health histories; women's perspectives on their needs and harm reduction strategies, as well as alliance professionals on the women's needs.

Street-involved women almost universally identify their major needs as housing, safety, mental health and substance abuse treatment, legal forms of paid work, and culturally sensitive services. The resulting impacts of homelessness, incarceration, and problems with substance abuse work together to compromise women's health, resulting in a kind of vortex from which it can be exceedingly difficult to emerge and begin a new life due to criminal records and lengthy periods away from legal employment. Such exclusion is even more meaningful when considered in conjunction with the women's relatively high levels of education and almost universal experience with legal employment. Cultural norms operative among the women position most existing services as excessively restrictive or even punitive, a sentiment neatly encapsulated in the women's frequent use of "the system," a powerful reference to the complex intersections between the social services and criminal justice mechanisms that frame their lives and that generally refuse assistance to all but those who fit a narrow model of being drug free, law abiding, and subservient to authority.

Street-based social networks, intuition, streetwise self-presentation, and invoking gendered social norms comprise the four major harm reduction strategies women utilize in the absence of adequate legal or social protections. Cultural norms position three primary figures as the most likely agents of assistance when

Harm Reduction and Help Seeking

women cannot solve a problem alone: the dopeman, as various neighborhood purveyors of controlled substances are known, intimate partners or others with whom women share their income, and, less frequently, other street-involved women. While women are well-aware of the limited services available to them, prevailing approaches necessitated by the alliance ethos unintentionally encourage or even force women to rely on street involvement by entrenching them within it because they cannot meet the requirements for legal forms of income generation that pay enough to support them and their dependents.

The alliance ethos regarding readiness to change and demonstrate accountability is at odds with street-involved women's everyday life realities in ways that actively work against their abilities to meet any of these benchmarks for "success." This is especially apparent in the sharp divides between women's expressions of "help" and those described by alliance professionals, with the latter focusing primarily on accountability and the former universally expressing a desire to meet basic needs. This speaks to the reality that, for many women, street involvement is the solution to their problems in that it provides cash while allowing them the relative freedom they need to navigate their struggles with addiction and homelessness.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- The alliance ethos assigns a paradoxical victim/criminal status to street-involved women, thereby creating a complex set of legal, ethical, and procedural questions for alliance professionals as they interact with the women. Likewise, street-involved women may find that forms of self-presentation that focus on their victimization— whether by third parties or by broader socio-structural forces— is likely to generate empathy and result in reduced punitive measures or alternatives to incarceration, such as access to drug or other therapeutic treatment. In your opinion, what changes to the status quo are necessary to facilitate communication between alliance professionals and the women about the real issues at stake: alliance professionals' need to uphold the rule of law and street-involved women's need to survive while struggling with addiction, homelessness, and compromised mental health?
- Quantitative data presented in this chapter indicates that women are more likely to be taking medications for mental, rather than physical, health conditions, a significant finding given that the majority of street-involved women use illicit drugs on a regular basis. The women most commonly receive medication to treat a mental health diagnosis following a crisis situation, such as incarceration or an emergency room visit following a severe mental health

episode or incapacitating physical health problem. What does this indicate about the general state of healthcare for the poor in the United States?

- A newly street-involved woman is likely to quickly accrue a criminal record for a variety of misdemeanor offenses such as prostitution, loitering, or possession of drug paraphernalia, which in turn may bar her from legal employment, housing, and particular social services, creating a situation that further compromises her health, safety, and ability to make substantive life changes. How is this complex interplay of socio-institutional forces evident in this chapter's opening ethnographic vignette, in which Keanna does not want to report a sexual assault to the police because of her and her family's negative experiences with law enforcement?
- A criminal record makes it difficult for street-involved women to obtain legal forms of work, which often pays considerably less than street-based sexual exchanges and offers none of the street's freedoms. Many critics of criminal background checks for employment or housing argue that the legally mandated disclosure of arrests and convictions is a contemporary form of the lifelong stigmatizing effect of the scarlet letter described by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his novel of the same name. What rights should employers and landlords have to information about prospective workers' or tenants' personal histories, and on what grounds should they have access to such information?

Discretion

SUMMARY

This chapter holds that the structural and cultural forces embedded in both professional and street communities considerably constrain individual discretionary authority in interactions between street-involved women and alliance professionals. Discretion comprises the nuanced implementation of personal judgment and the mandates or norms governing work-related practices, and hence involves a process that fundamentally emerges in interpersonal encounters rather than being completely defined by professional procedures or norms. This chapter discusses these interactions by devoting a subsection to each of the everyday contexts in which they take place, including everyday police encounters, criminal and problem-solving courts, and probation or other forms of court-mandated oversight. It also includes a subsection that discusses how women seeking services at a transitional housing facility describe themselves in the life history narratives they write as part of their applications.

Alliance professionals and the street-involved women they police or otherwise regulate both employ discretion, often in strikingly similar ways, to guide their interactions with others in a fraught and potentially dangerous street social context. Prostitution-related law and policy take shape on the basis of prevailing ideology in a marketplace of political sensibilities informed by electoral and budgetary concerns. Significant federal, state, county, and city financial support endorses this prevailing ideology, which relies on a particular definition of, and beliefs about appropriate responses to, street prostitution as a social issue. Nevertheless, alliance professionals exercise discretionary latitude in their adherence to one or more of the major explanatory and ideological frameworks that justify alliance interventions in street-involved women's lives. These frameworks envision sex trading as a public nuisance, an ancillary result of addiction, a product of women's maladaptive social circumstances, and an intractable social issue that the law can police but never stop. Taken together, these alliance frameworks and those tasked with their implementation constitute a systemic force such that discretionary decision making at one level impacts all others as part of an interconnected sociolegal mechanism that imposes powerful punitive constraints on the women's lives.

Alliance professionals who most regularly encounter the women readily acknowledge that the law is a blunt instrument ill equipped to address either the complexity of the issues at work in women's lives or the nuances of the transactional sexual exchange. Such professionals often expressed this view as a result of their experiences engaging in police work driven by citizen complaints as well as neighborhood, police, district, and city-wide priorities that reflect the political

will of much more financially and culturally powerful forces rather than the realities they see in their work. Ambivalence regarding the utility of criminalizing prostitution and addiction is commonplace among those alliance professionals who have the greatest experiential knowledge about street-involved women's lives. In this challenging context, alliance professionals report a generalized sense of mistrust regarding punitive-therapeutic coordination efforts designed to eradicate prostitution. These efforts, which rely on acceptance of the alliance ethos, ultimately demand that professionals elide or ignore the glaring reality that a criminal record— even for misdemeanor prostitution-related offenses— functions to retrench the exclusion from housing, legal employment, and other basic needs that so often serve as antecedents to women's street involvement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Street-involved women report receiving different treatment in the criminal justice system based on where, by whom, and how frequently they have been (or are) arrested. This differential treatment reflects jurisdictional priorities, such as local businesses' or homeowners' complaints about street prostitution's presence in their neighborhood. The result is that street prostitution most often takes place in areas with low levels of home ownership, limited confidence in police, and high rates of poverty and illicit drug economy-related activities. If you were tasked with the development and implementation of a federal law on prostitution that would regularize these criminal justice system practices, what would you advocate and what evidence would you mobilize in support of your choice?
- In a dominant cultural context where prostitution is criminalized and stigmatized, alliance professionals may struggle to respectfully engage with the women. In your opinion, could certain types of training, administrative oversight, or other measures help to ensure that alliance professionals suspend their personal biases in their encounters with street-involved women? Can such biases against people who use illicit drugs or who trade sex for money potentially be eliminated, or are alliance professionals implicated in a system that demands adherence to an ethos that denounces prostitution as morally and socially repugnant?
- This chapter opens with an ethnographic vignette that takes place during a police sting operation resulting in the seizure of a significant quantity of controlled substances. Using this vignette as an example, explore the various factors that account for the strikingly similar role that intuition and discretion play in encounters between and among street-involved women and alliance professionals.

Discretion

- It is those alliance professionals who interact most closely and regularly with street-involved women, including police officers who work vice or patrol, whose descriptions of the struggles the women face in their everyday lives most closely mirror the women's own self-representations. In this chapter's closing vignette, Lexi reveals a sophisticated understanding of the criminal justice system while providing one of the authors with a running commentary on court proceedings. In your opinion, do those most impacted by street prostitution have a more nuanced and complete understanding of its dynamics? If so, why are such individuals so rarely consulted by legislators or policymakers tasked with prostitution's regulation?

Conclusion

SUMMARY

Our conclusion questions the utility of an alliance between criminal justice and social services professionals that remains dominated by punitive paradigms. The alliance's ideological focus on changing individual women's decision-making processes translates into practical results that punish street-involved women for decisions they make in the context of the pervasive gender, class, and ethno-racial discrimination that limits their life choices. Hence even when street-involved women receive therapeutic social services in the alliance context, more often than not they return to the same socioeconomic conditions that impelled them to work the street in the first place.

Unrealistic parameters for services provision combine with criminal conviction-related discrimination to create a punitive-therapeutic paradox in which the alliance ethos echoes *ad infinitum* with little evidence to suggest its success at anything but the continued cycling of street-involved women through the criminal justice system. Decriminalizing prostitution would help to facilitate peer-led and harm reduction services provision options for street-involved women in ways that meet their complex needs. Alliance approaches currently mandate addictions and other therapeutic treatment for street-involved women in ways that actively condemn or ignore the creative strategies women use to help them avoid arrest and plan for financial and other exigencies that inevitably arise from theft, assault, and health issues that accompany addiction and chronic homelessness. At present women primarily teach each other these skills in correctional facilities, particularly jails, where they have a temporary respite from the daily search for money, illicit drugs, and housing while evading police. Decriminalization would allow for knowledge sharing that takes place on more widespread and equitable terms so that all street-involved women could learn to implement measures to reduce harm in what are indisputably difficult conditions. Peer-to-peer support centered on harm reduction remains the best (and internationally proven) approach to nonjudgmental services and skill building in the most practical aspects of day-to-day life working the street.

Potential alternatives to continued alliance predominance should be considered a form of harm reduction within an inherently punitive system that in many instances functions to further punish women in already very onerous circumstances. The primary means by which this harm reduction can be achieved involves reframing street prostitution as an economic activity undertaken in severely constrained socioeconomic circumstances. Ancillary recommendations include the provision of psychosocial support for alliance professionals to facilitate their commitment to the goal of therapeutic work, and equalizing funding available to

social services providers and criminal justice professionals.

Centuries of stigma adhere to prostitution, and women who trade sex for money or other needed things have historically and cross-culturally been political lightning rods for a wide array of ideological, political, religious, and other social anxieties. The fundamentally gendered inequalities that underlie street prostitution constitute enduring problems that warrant further critical examination into the ways in which the criminal justice system, and society at large, approach this important social issue. The nuances of street-involved women's lives require pragmatic, evidence-based legislative and policy approaches that reflect these complex realities; without these, the system will continue to fail the very women it aims to assist.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What role should the law play in regulating sexual behavior between consenting adults? Street prostitution—because it is typically connected with extreme poverty, substance abuse, and compromised mental health, and takes place in public—raises deep philosophical questions regarding individual rights. How can/should a fair and just society respect the rights of individuals to engage in particular sexual behaviors while upholding the rights of those who regard such activities' widespread prevalence as negatively impacting their neighborhood's quality of life?
- Legislators and policymakers remain beholden to a general public with little real knowledge about the dynamics that inform everyday interactions between alliance professionals and street-involved women. In your opinion, what do legislators, policymakers, and members of the general public need to understand about street-involved women's lives in order to advocate for cost-effective law and policy that will promote an improved quality of life for all citizens?
- Decriminalization is a harm reduction strategy based on the premise that prostitution will continue to exist irrespective of policing and public opinion and that women involved in it should not be further marginalized and stigmatized through arrest and unsafe working conditions. Why do arguments against decriminalization continue to prevail in the United States despite considerable evidence suggesting that it fosters a cooperative—rather than adversarial—environment among street-involved women, criminal justice professionals, and social services providers, such that the women can more readily seek out assistance without fear of prostitution-related arrests or judgmental treatment?