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ARTICLE

Is Sex Work Inherently Gendered?

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Abstract

Sex work is highly gendered, with 80 percent of sex workers being female, and the vast majority of buyers of sex being male. It is often taken for granted that this is how it is, and implicit in much of the debate around sex work is the assumption that it is inherently gendered. In this paper, I question this assumption, drawing on sociological research to challenge arguments which purport that it is inconceivable that women would ever want to pay for sex, or that sex work would exist under conditions of gender equality. I argue that gendered sexual norms likely are a significant reason for why sex work is so gendered, but sex work would probably continue to exist under conditions of gender equality, due to the diversity in motivations people have for buying and selling sex. Acknowledging that sex work is not inherently gendered is important for (at least) two reasons. First, it is probable that the gendered nature of sex work contributes to the stigma and bad treatment that sex workers, particularly female ones, face. Secondly, if sex work is not inherently gendered, this will have implications for how we should think about it, morally, practically, and legally.

1. Introduction

Sex work is highly gendered. It is estimated that 80 percent of sex workers worldwide are female (Minichiello et al. 2021, 219);[1] 11 percent of men in the UK have ever paid for sex, compared with less than 1 percent of women (NATSAL 3 Research Tables[2]) and 4 percent of men have paid for sex in the last five years compared to 0.1 percent of women (Jones et al. 2015). Figures in the USA seem similar, with a YouGov survey finding that 12 percent of the men and 1 percent of the women had paid for sex (Moore 2016).

Sex work is, of course, not the only profession which is imbalanced in gender. However, there is no profession, other than sex work, which one gender does, primarily, *for* another. Furthermore, sex work, more so than perhaps any other kind of work, is stigmatized and widely considered to be degrading and shameful.[3] Even in countries where sex work is decriminalized, it is not a job that it is easy to be open about or proud of doing. It is also dangerous work: for example, a recent survey of sex workers in

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London found that 53 percent had experienced recent physical or sexual violence from a client (Elmes et al. 2022, 327).

Therefore, we have a situation where it is predominantly women, who are already the lower status gender, doing dangerous, and widely considered shameful work, for men, the higher status gender. Consequently, the gender imbalance likely has some influence over the construction of masculine and feminine sexual norms and of gender inequality (Satz 1995).

This is a big problem, and I am by no means the first to have noticed it. However, what is striking is how often it is taken for granted that sex work is gendered. Consideration of *why* it is so gendered is important in helping us to work out whether sex work might ever be less gendered, and it can also shed light on problematic gendered sexual norms. As sex work tends to be viewed as something harmful or shameful, writers are often more concerned with why men *do* want to buy sex rather than why women *don't*. Not buying sex is the default; buying sex is the aberration. Implicit in much discussion of sex work are two assumptions: 1) it would be better if it did not exist; 2) it is *inherently* gendered.[4] By "inherently gendered" I mean that it is assumed that it is simply not possible or plausible that there will ever be an equal number of female and male buyers of sex and sellers of sex. This may be because it is assumed that sex work exists only because of certain biological facts about men and women, or because it is assumed that sex work exists only because of gender inequality, and so in conditions of gender equality, sex work would simply not exist (Overall 1992; Pateman 1983; Bindel 2017).

In this paper, I will consider the second assumption—that sex work is inherently gendered—from the perspective of why it is that women do *not* pay for sex nearly as much as men. In doing so, I will make reference to sociological research into women who do pay for sex, who often get left out of discussions of sex work. I will first consider three potential explanations for the gender imbalance in sex work: 1) the biological argument; 2) the availability argument; and 3) the patriarchy argument. I argue that none of these arguments provides a full explanation for why sex work is so gendered. Furthermore, in rejecting them, I hope to show that sex work is not *inherently* gendered; it is merely a contingent fact that women do not pay for sex as much as men, and under conditions of gender equality sex work would likely still exist. It is probable that a significant reason why sex work is so gendered is because of gendered sexual norms which position men as sexual consumers and women as sexual providers, in particular the norms that: 1) men should be sexually dominant and women sexually submissive, and 2) sexual purity is important for women but not for men. These norms are not going to be dismantled any time soon. However, acknowledging their role in the gender imbalance in sex work is an important step in the consideration of how to improve conditions for sex workers more generally since they are likely a factor (among others) in the stigma, discrimination, and violence sex workers face.

2. Notes on terminology

Although the term "sex work" is often used to include many different forms of sex work: stripping, pornography, phone sex, etc., in this paper, I use the term to refer to the payment for sexual services involving direct access, i.e. prostitution. I use the term "sex work" rather than prostitution because many sex workers prefer this term, as it connotes that sex work is work, and carries less stigma than "prostitution." When I refer to research which calls it "prostitution" though, I may use that term to avoid confusion. When I discuss sex workers, I am referring only to those who are fully consenting adults.

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Indeed, anyone being paid for sex who is not a fully consenting adult is *not* a sex worker, but rather someone who is being abused.

Sex work is a global phenomenon. However, the conditions under which sex workers work vary greatly from country to country, culture to culture, as do gender norms, expectations, and roles, and ideas about sex. I am based in the United Kingdom, so that is my main point of reference. I expect my arguments will apply in places with relevantly similar cultures, and I refer to research from countries such as Australia and the United States, but my arguments are culturally specific and will not apply globally.

When I use the terms "men" and "women" I use them to apply to anyone who identifies as those genders. However, some of the research I refer to in this paper is focused on cisgender men and women because it is looking at supposed biological differences between them. In addition, I acknowledge that trans men and women face particular issues in sex work: they are over-represented as sex workers (Fisher et al. 2023), but have less access to support services (Mac and Smith 2018, 50), and may be subject to transphobic violence and negative police responses to such violence (Lyons et al. 2017). Unfortunately, limitations of space prevent me from discussing these issues in depth.

3. Why is there such a large gender gap in sex work? Some accounts

Why sex work is so gendered is rarely asked. This is perhaps partly because buying and selling sex are generally considered to be deviant behavior. It is not only unusual, it is also in contrast with traditional and moralized ways of seeing sex as connected to love, intimacy, marriage, and procreation. Asking "why don't women want to buy sex" seems to presuppose that buying sex could be a good thing and this will be unfathomable to those who think there is something necessarily morally wrong with sex work (e.g., Settegast 2018; Scruton 2001).

Another reason why the question is rarely asked could be because it is assumed that the answer to the question is that things could not be otherwise—sex work is inherently gendered. In what follows, I will consider three arguments which could be given in favor of this view, and show that none of them can provide a complete explanation for the gender imbalance.

3.1 The biological differences argument

It is sometimes considered just a "fact of nature" that men want to pay for sex and women don't, i.e. it is a result of biological dispositions. Two potential reasons for this could be that: a) men want *more* sex than women and thus need to pay for it to supplement their sex intake; b) men want a *different kind* of sex than women, the kind that can be bought, but women do not want this kind of sex.

3.1.1 Do men pay for sex because they want more sex than women do?

It is widely believed that men have higher sex "drives" than women. And there is evidence to support this view. For example, a meta-analysis of research conducted in 2001 brought together a number of different studies and concluded that men have higher sex drives than women, and that this is a biological fact (Baumeister et al. 2001). Some examples of the kinds of evidence to which they referred are: studies from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which show that husbands want sex more frequently than their wives (p. 246); studies which show that men want more sexual partners over their

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lifetimes than women do (pp. 247–50) and studies which show that men were more willing to have sex with someone they had just met (p. 250).

There is also assumed to be an explanation for men's higher sex drive in what is sometimes called "the standard evolutionary model." This model theorizes that men have higher sex drives because it would have been more advantageous for our ancestors—the first humans—to have sex with numerous (reproductively fit) women as this would have greatly increased their chances of reproducing. However, for women, it was more important to find a mate who would support them, bringing them food and protection, so that they did not have to go out foraging while they were nursing their infants (Buss and Schmitt 1993).

Though an in-depth analysis of this account is beyond the scope of this paper, there are some important points to note in response. First, the sort of evidence provided by Baumeister, Catanese and Vohs above could easily be explained by factors other than biological difference. Husbands might want sex more than their wives because the sort of sex the couple has is not the sort of sex which is particularly enjoyable for the wives, and because cultural norms tell women not to be too demanding in the bedroom (which would have been even more true in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s). Or it could be because the wives in the studies were overwhelmed with taking care of their children and homes, as well as doing all of the emotional labor in the relationship. On men's desire for more sexual partners and greater willingness to have casual sex than women: this could equally be because social norms dictate that it is more acceptable for men to have casual sex than women. Thus, women might under-report desires and men might over-report them.

There is also conflicting evidence: for example, Dawson and Chivers report that several studies show that sexual desire emerges similarly between men and women as a response to sexual stimuli (2014, 213–14). They also found that when sexual desire is measured over time, taking into account, for example, the menstrual cycle, partnered men and women have similar levels of sexual desire (2014, 216).

The standard evolutionary model is also not without challenge. For one thing, it has difficulty explaining homosexual sexual desire. But also its origin story for sex differences can be questioned, that is, the view that sex differences in sexual desire exist because of the ways in which different kinds of sexual behavior would have been most advantageous for men and women to produce offspring for our genetic ancestors. As historian Stephanie Coontz notes, the idea that people lived in nuclear families in the Palaeolithic period is nonsense—no one would have survived for long like this (2006, 37–38). So, the picture of the cave woman at the home minding the children while her cave man partner goes out to kill an ox for their supper is just not realistic.

In any case, as Richard Lippa notes, we don't know what comes first, the differences between men and women, or the social structures that support them. Evolutionary theorists often claim that men's higher sociosexuality (desire for casual sex) is evidence of evolutionary differences. However, social structural theorists point out that all modern societies are patriarchal, and this could explain the differences in sociosexuality between men and women (Lippa 2009, 632). Indeed, gender differences in sexual preferences are smaller in societies which are more gender equal (Petersen and Hyde 2010). Therefore, were societies less patriarchal, women might be more sociosexual, and consequently might be more inclined to pay for sex.

Nevertheless, even if it *were* the case that men are biologically predetermined to want more sex than women, this would still not provide a full explanation for the gender imbalance in sex work. First, men who buy sex typically have more sexual partners overall—in the NATSAL-3 survey the more unpaid sexual partners a man had had in

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the past five years, the more likely he was to have paid for sex (Jones et al. 2015, 118). This suggests that many men are not paying for sex simply because they find it difficult to find enough willing sexual partners. Secondly, even if, *on average*, men want more sex than women, there would still be some women who wanted an equal amount of sex to the average man and some women who wanted more sex than the average man, and this proportion of women would likely be higher than the proportion who currently pay for sex. Thus, if the primary reason for buying sex was to acquire enough sex to satisfy one's desire, we would probably expect there to be less of a gender gap in paid-for sex.

3.1.2 Do men pay for sex because they want a different type of sex than women?

Perhaps the gender imbalance in sex work isn't (only) because men are biologically predisposed to want *more* sex than women; perhaps it's because they want a *different type* of sex, sex which can be bought easily, but harder to find if they don't buy it. For example, it could be that men prefer unemotional casual sex and/or sex involving domination, or it could be that they prefer certain sexual acts to women, such as anal or oral intercourse.[5] Again, we can find evidence to support the view that men prefer a different kind of sex to women. For example, in the Baumeister et al. review cited above, the authors report that men are more favorable towards casual sex than women and that "women require a relationship context for sexual activity more than men do." As evidence for this, they cite a 1996 study by Regan and Berscheid, which found that 35 percent of women, versus 13 percent of men, described "love and emotional intimacy as important goals of sexual desire," whereas 70 percent of men versus 43 percent of women said that "the sexual activity itself was the goal of sexual desire" (2001, 263).

The first thing to note about this evidence is that 65 percent of women did *not* describe "love and emotional intimacy as important goals of sexual desire," and close to half of them said that the sexual activity itself was the goal. Therefore, although this study supports the claim that "women require a relationship context for sexual activity *more* than men do" (my emphasis), it does not support the claim that "women require a relationship context for sexual activity." Nevertheless, these figures also don't tell us anything about what men and women would consider to be important sexual goals were they to live in a different sort of society which conceived of female and male sexuality differently.

Thus, even if we, for the sake of argument, allow that it is true that men and women prefer different kinds of sex, we don't know whether this is because of social norms around sex rather than biological differences. There is evidence that suggests that social factors influence arousal and desire. Baumeister et al. cite a 1994 study by Laumann et al., which found that, of 14 sexual practices, men reported finding 13 more appealing than women did (2001, 257). However, another study from 2004 found that women's *accounts* of what arouses them differ to what *actually* arouses them, suggesting that socialization plays a role in female sexual desire. In the study, female physical sexual arousal was measured using a plethysmograph, which measures blood flow to the vagina. Women were showed pornographic images and asked to say which ones aroused them. What the women said aroused them did not match up to the results of the plethysmograph, which suggested that they were aroused by a much wider variety of images than they thought. The study also found that they were aroused by a wider variety of images than men (Chivers et al. 2004).

Furthermore, if *the* explanation for why more men than women pay for sex was that men want to buy a particular kind of sex—unemotional sex, perhaps involving domination, or particular sex acts—we would expect the kind of sex which is bought to

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usually be of this type. It is sometimes assumed that this is true. For example, Kate Millett argues that "the john is not buying sexuality, but power, power over another human being, the dizzy ambition of being lord of another's will for a stated period of time" (1975, 56). She is right about a portion of the sex that is bought; power is a motivation that some men have for buying sex (Minichiello et al. 2014) and among internet-based sex workers, 28 percent offer BDSM services (among others) (Sanders et al. 2018, 5). However, different groups of clients differ profoundly in their motivations for buying sex (Monto and Milrod 2014) and men can and do buy a huge variety of different kinds of sex, including sex in which they are dominated and humiliated by the sex worker, and the so-called "girlfriend experience," whereby the experience tries to mimic what it would be like to have sex with a girlfriend, including intimate connection and tenderness. In fact, a study found that the *majority* of men who buy sex online were seeking a "girlfriend experience," whereas only 6.4 percent of them strongly agreed with the claim "I like to be in control when I am having sex" (Milrod and Monto 2012, 803). Another study found that approximately a third of men who bought sex were seeking emotional connection, with one, for example, saying: "the money for sex should not be and is not the main focus. The main focus is the chemistry, companionship, friendship, care, love, and hopefully great sex that are shared during their time together" (Milrod and Weitzer 2012, 452–53). Thus, it does not seem true that all men buy sex just in order to have a particular kind of sex or to specify certain sex acts.

There are also those for whom paid-for sex is the only sex available, such as some people with certain disabilities and conditions. Kirsty Liddiard conducted research with men with disabilities who had paid for sex. She found that, for several of them, paying for sex was "integral towards learning even the most 'rudimentary' of intimate experiences, such as sensuous and erotic touch" and that it could also be "crucial towards learning about their own sexual body and sexual capacity" (2014, 846). For example, one of her interviewees, Graham, said: "It was the first time I realised a woman's body was warm, with no clothes on, naked, she was warm and that was a shock to me" (Liddiard 2014, 845). Thus, though their motivations for paying for sex were varied, a significant one was simply to learn about and experience sex. Liddiard concludes that "purchases were seldom rooted in a male 'need' to for sexual gratification" (2014, 849).[6]

Furthermore, some women enjoy unemotional sex, and some women enjoy being sexually dominant, so if sex work were just about wanting to buy unemotional sex and/or sex involving domination, we would expect more women to buy sex than currently do. Indeed, a survey of 1,500 adults about their sexual fantasies found that although more men—59.6 percent—than women had fantasized about dominating someone sexually, 46.7 percent of women had also had this fantasy; 12.5 percent of women had also fantasized about having sex with a prostitute or stripper (Joyal et al. 2015).

To conclude this section: the argument that biological differences between men and women explain the gender imbalance in sex work seems too crude. Men's and women's sexual preferences may not be as divergent as is sometimes supposed, and differences may well be due at least partly to social norms and structures. We also should not assume that there is just one sort of motivation for paying for sex, as people buy sex for a variety of reasons and the types of sex bought are diverse. Thus, the biological argument does not provide us with a satisfactory explanation of the gender imbalance in sex work.

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3.2 The availability argument

A related argument which might be made for why women don't pay for sex is that it is because they can find sex more easily than men and so don't need to buy it, presumably because men are more willing to have (casual) sex with women than women are with men. I am calling this "the availability argument."

This explanation is, again, unsatisfactory. Even supposing that it were true that women can "find sex" *more* easily than men *in general,* this does not mean that all, even most women, can "find sex" easily. They might not have the confidence, the contacts, the time, or the skill to be able to find sex, or they might just find themselves to be undesirable to men. For this latter group of women, paying for sex might offer them a way to have sex without having to encounter crushing rejection in the process. In addition, some women might want a type of sex that they can find only by paying for it. They might have an unusual fetish, or they might just be turned on by the transactional nature of paid-for sex. They might also feel less safe going out and having a one-night stand than paying for sex (Caldwell and de Wit 2021b, 559). Thus, even allowing for the fact that women—on average—could have non-paid-for sex more easily than men could, if availability was the only issue, we would expect more women for whom sex is unavailable to be paying for sex. Indeed, the term "involuntary celibate" or "incel" was coined by a woman who set up an online forum for lonely people to share advice and support (Srinivasan 2021, 114).

Perhaps though, it is not just that women have more *quantity* of sex available to them, but also more *quality* sex. Thus, maybe women are just more sexually satisfied than men, and so the reason they don't pay for sex is because they are already having good sex, whereas men are not. This supposition does not seem to be well-supported by the evidence though. Some research suggests that partnered women are less sexually satisfied than men (Salazar-Molina et al. 2015) and numerous studies show that there is a gendered orgasm gap, with men experiencing orgasm more frequently than women during sex between men and women (Mahar et al. 2020). While 95 percent of heterosexual men orgasm when sexually intimate, only 65 percent of heterosexual women do. Women who ask for what they want in bed and are "more selfish" are more likely to orgasm more frequently, as are women who have sex with other women (Frederick et al. 2018). This suggests that the orgasm gap is not due to women being *unable* to orgasm, but rather to them being socially conditioned to not ask for what they want and because the sort of sex men and women have together is less likely to cause women to orgasm than the sort of sex women have together.

Therefore, we cannot conclude that women don't buy sex because they simply have so much fully satisfying sex on tap that they do not need to buy it. There is another version of the availability account that warrants consideration though, and that is that women don't buy sex from men because it is not available to them to buy. For example, Lars Ericsson suggests that prostitution is unequal because: "Instead of trying to solve the sexual problems together with his wife, the married man can resort to the services of the hustler; but the married woman lacks the same advantage, since there are not so many male heterosexual prostitutes around" (1980, 349). First, this seems wrong-headed: where there is a market for something there are usually people who will sell it. Furthermore, there is some evidence that there are fairly high numbers of male and female sex workers who advertise sex to women and thus want to sell to them. A study which analysed 25,511 registered member profiles of an online escort directory found that 28 percent of advertisements were of people identifying as male, two-thirds of

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whom advertised to female clients. They also found that 49 percent of the female escorts advertised to women clients and 62 percent to couples (Kingston and Smith 2020). Therefore, it does not seem true that there is nobody willing to sell sex to women.

3.3 The patriarchy argument

Some feminist philosophers, such as Carole Pateman (1983) and Christine Overall (1992), argue that sex work is an *inherently* unjust practice, that it depends on female submission and male dominance, and therefore that it would not exist were it not for patriarchy. Pateman argues that "prostitution is grounded in the inequality of domination and subjection" and that "the expression of sexuality and what it means to be feminine and a woman, or masculine and a man, is developed within, and intricately bound up with, relations of domination and subordination" (1983, 562). Further, "to be able to purchase a body in the market presupposes the existence of masters. Sex work is the public recognition of men as sexual masters" (Pateman 1983, 564). Thus, for Pateman, sex work is a public display of men's sexual control over women: "When women's bodies are on sale as commodities in the capitalist market, the terms of the original [sexual] contract cannot be forgotten; the law of male sex-right is publicly affirmed, and men gain public acknowledgment as women's sexual masters—that is what's wrong with prostitution" (1983, 208). Overall agrees. She argues that "sex work is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy" (1992, 724). She considers whether we could ever have a situation "where both women and men buy sex and sell sex," but argues that "that is much more difficult to conceive" because the gendered nature of prostitution is bound up with expectations and male and female sexuality (Overall 1992, 719). She dismisses the idea that "buying sexual services is a benefit in and of itself" but rather, the reason men want to buy sex is due to "gender socialization, which defines men's sexual desires in such a way that prostitution is seen as a legitimate response to them" (Overall 1992, 720–21). Therefore, she does not think that it is a worthy goal for women to act sexually "just like men" or "that women's purchasing sexual services is a potential benefit" (Overall 1992, 721). On the contrary, she argues that: "like rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and incest, prostitution is inherently gendered, a component and manifestation of the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality. Prostitution is structured in terms of a power imbalance in which women, the less powerful, sell to men, the more powerful" (Overall 1992, 721). Therefore, she argues that "the reversibility of sex services [is] implausible and sexual equality in the trade [is] unattainable" (Overall 1992, 724). (By "reversibility of sex services" she means for men to sell sex to women.)

What is common in both Pateman and Overall's views is that they see the default situation as being one in which sex work does not exist, and then it is patriarchal (and capitalist) conditions which bring it into being. Furthermore, they have defined prostitution in such a way that to be a prostitute is to be female and to be a buyer of sex is to be dominant over the seller of sex.[7]

This seems wrong. First, we should remember that 20 percent of sex workers worldwide are male (Minichiello et al. 2021). Male sex workers and the men who buy sex from them often get left out of discussions of sex work, for example, an analysis of 166 social science academic articles on sex work found that a majority did not mention male sex workers (Dennis 2008, 19). However, they complicate the picture of sex work as a practice that depends on female submission. A large survey across 38 European countries found that among men who have sex with men, 8 percent had bought sex in

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the last 12 months, and 5 percent had sold sex. The authors note though that, of the men who had sold sex, 52 percent had done so once or twice, which also suggests that the sale of sex between men is often just opportunistic exchanges, and the sellers of sex might not conceive of themselves as sex workers. The survey also showed that men who buy sex often have a clandestine sexuality or are in a relationship with a woman. Feeling lonely, drug-taking, and having a high number of sexual partners were all factors associated with both buyers and sellers of sex (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control 2013, 125–27). Little research has been done on men who buy sex from men, but research suggests that men buy sex from men for similarly diverse motivations as men who buy sex from women, such as power, intimacy, sensation (Minichiello et al. 2014, 160–61).

Secondly, it is not true that the buyer of sex is *always, in all senses*, the dominant party: Overall argues that "prostitution is a classist, ageist, racist, and sexist industry, in which the disadvantaged persons sell services to those who are more privileged" (Overall 1992, 717). This might be true for the industry as a whole, but while it is *often* the case that person selling the sex is more disadvantaged than the person buying, it is probably not wildly uncommon for a buyer of sex to have similar demographic characteristics to the seller. For example, sex might be sold by a white man in his late twenties to another white man in his late twenties, both of whom have a similar level of income. Different categories of buyer differ vastly from one another: "internet hobbyists," for example, are more likely to be highly educated and have high incomes, while those who buy sex from street sex workers are likely to have less money and social capital (Monto and Milrod 2014). Similarly, there are significant differences between different groups of sex worker, with some being more disadvantaged than others. The internet has also likely altered the landscape of sex work: the online sector is now the largest sector of the sex work industry, and two-thirds of 641 sex workers who sell sex online said in a survey that they would not do it were it not for the internet (Sanders et al. 2018, 2).[8]

It is also possible for the seller and buyer to both be disadvantaged but in different ways: for example, the seller could be disadvantaged by gender and ethnicity, being a woman of color, but perhaps the buyer is disadvantaged by being disabled and having a low socio-economic status. As we will see below as well, some cases where women do pay for sex further complicate the view that the buyer is always the one with all the power.

In addition, if patriarchal conditions are what cause sex work to exist, then we would expect the prevalence of sex work to decrease as societies become less patriarchal. However, in the UK, 4 percent of men reported having paid for sex in the last five years in 2010 compared to just 2 percent in 1990 (Jones et al. 2015), despite there being considerable improvements to gender relations in this period. And less patriarchal countries do not necessarily have less sex work than more patriarchal ones. Slovenia, for example, had the seventh lowest gender difference of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report in 2017, whereas Peru came forty-eighth (World Economic Forum 2017), but Slovenia had an estimated female sex worker prevalence rate of 1.4 percent in 2006, whereas Peru had a rate of just 0.2 percent (Vandepitte et al. 2006). Obviously there could be many factors explaining the difference in sex worker prevalence, but this at least calls into question the view that patriarchy is the primary cause of sex work.

Furthermore, some women do pay for sex, and enjoy doing so,[9] and their existence challenges the theory that sex work depends on patriarchy and is always a way for men to exert their dominance over woman. Hilary Caldwell and John de Wit interviewed 21 women who have paid for sex in Australia and published their findings in 2021. Their

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sample size is clearly small, but nevertheless, the interviews provide useful insight into a segment of society on which there is extremely limited research. Caldwell and de Wit categorized the motivations of the women they interviewed as follows.

1) Therapeutic reasons: almost half of the sample gave this as their motivation. Reasons for seeking sex as therapy included vaginismus and healing from intimate partner violence and childhood sexual abuse.
2) Buying sex to learn: this was also a common motivation. For example, one interviewee said "I learnt through this particular male sex worker so much about my own sexuality and my own body which I didn't even realise which he had taught me. And it opened my eyes up completely" (Caldwell and de Wit 2021b, 556).
3) Buying sex for intimacy: this was described as a motivation for most interviewees, with "authenticity" of the sex worker being considered important.
4) Buying sex for pleasure. Some women highlighted the value of "getting to be selfish," and also their intense satisfaction with their experience, with one interviewee saying: "Joy, is what I think I got out of it." (Caldwell and de Wit 2021b, 558).

Caldwell and de Wit highlight that many of the women, particularly those paying for services from men, felt scared and nervous, mainly about the prospect of male violence, though some said that paying for sex was safer than picking a man up in a bar (2021b, 559). However, many of the interviewees found the experience of buying sex empowering and confidence creating, with one saying: "that freedom, and being able to explore different things and, not feeling judged or stupid. Or not, you know, this may sound awful, but really not needing to take care of him. Of really, understanding my body." (Caldwell and de Wit 2021b, 561). And another, a survivor of childhood sexual abuse "felt she had not yet learnt to verbalise her sexual needs, but had progressed to being able to 'move his hand to the right spot'" (Caldwell and de Wit 2021b, 562).

In an earlier study, Caldwell interviewed 17 sex workers. Their accounts of sex with female clients corroborated what the female clients in the 2021 study said about motivations. For example, sex as therapy was a theme. One male sex worker said:

> I get a number of women, a significant portion, I guess, who come to me, who are either virgins or have issues in their past sexually, like abuse or very bad or traumatic relationships, where they have been run down and made to feel worthless . . . Ah, so they come to me to rebuild their trust in themselves and in men. So they are not coming to me just to have a sexual experience, they are coming to me to repair something in themselves, in their life, in their sexuality. (Caldwell 2018, 124)

And the sex workers also mentioned safety as being a primary concern of female clients, with one saying: "If you just want sex, you can go and get that. They will come and I've said that to a few people and they have said, 'well, I've tried, but you are safe, this is safe'. So they are paying for safety. They are paying for trust." (Caldwell 2018, 127).

Another study carried out by Sarah Kingston, Natalie Hammond, and Scarlett Redman in 2020 found similar findings. They had a sample of 49 participants, ten of whom were women buyers of sex, four of whom were buyers and sellers of sex, and 35 were sex workers who sold sex to women (nine female, 27 male, two trans women, aged

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between their twenties and fifties). The women buyers of sex came from a variety of different social backgrounds including nursing, air-hostessing, accounting, and teaching, and being aged between their thirties and fifties. Some had children and were married and others were single (Kingston et al. 2020, 71). Their sample was small, but diverse, and the interviews they carried out were in depth. They found that some women become clients after selling sex, which suggests that being closer to the world of sex work normalize it, making people feel more comfortable paying for sex (Kingston et al. 2020, 200).

Of the male and female sex workers they interviewed, the main motivation was to have an additional income and flexible hours (Kingston et al. 2020, 189). No male sex workers reported doing it to survive "or being marginally housed or employed." They found that female sex workers tended to be more dependent on the earnings from sex work than men and "the economic aspect is … not the only driver for entry into sex work for men who sell sex to women" (Kingston et al. 2020, 191). Instead, this study found that many of the male sex workers were motivated to sell sex because of fun and pleasure. For example, one of the male sex workers they interviewed, Bob, who is in his thirties, said: "I felt good as well. So, if I can do that, earn a living and feel good, doing something that makes me feel better than my day job at the time did" (Kingston et al. 2020, 194). Another, Harrison, 51, said: "I think it's actually fun, obviously there is money in it, but that aside, I would probably do it for free. I just enjoy the whole experience, I think it's a bit, it's quite sexy, it's quite naughty, it's different, it's just good fun." (Kingston et al. 2020, 193). Durocher also emphasizes pleasure in his account of selling sex to women: "It carries me to a wonderful place where joy and pleasure are the only rulers" (2021, 334). Kingston et al. argue that for men, selling sex to women is often seen as a recreational activity (2020, 195).

It is rare, but there are also women sex workers who sell sex exclusively to women. An escort agency in the Netherlands, De Stoute Vrouw or "The Naughty Woman," is run by women and sells only to women. They say they stand for "A personal approach, respect, mutual consent, excitement, sensuality, sex, overheated conversations, sexual healing, experimenting, guidance, womenpower … and so much more; everything that makes women so incredibly great." The escorts are described as "pioneers," who "love women, love adventure and feel strongly about setting a new standard." The language on the website is respectful, inclusive, and sensitive. A woman who works for this agency, "Velvet," describes her work positively in a magazine interview: "Being a part of such a sensitive and special moment in a person's life is an incredible honour. You might not expect it, but those few hours can be a really intense experience for both parties, as people's true emotions tend to come out during sex. It can be a very profound experience" (Velvet and Pringels 2018). Thus, again, we are seeing diversity among sex workers and the people who pay for sex. Sex work, no doubt in many cases, involves misogyny and men trying to exert power over women. But sex workers and their clients are varied in their backgrounds, motivations, and how much their enjoy the experiences. We thus have good reason to believe that sex work would exist in the absence of patriarchy.

4. Gendered sexual norms and sex work

It is probable that there is not just one reason for why so many fewer women than men pay for sex—women have less disposable income than men;[10] women may fear that paying for sex would be unsafe; women may be unaware that it is *possible* for them to pay for sex;[11] women might find it more difficult than men to get time away from their

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domestic duties; women might worry more than men about the damage to their reputation if it got found out that they had paid for sex. Underlying these reasons, and others, are norms around gender roles. In particular, if we want to understand why women don't pay for sex at anything like the rate that men do, we need to attend to gendered sexual norms, which influence the sort of sexual roles men and women want to take on. These likely have a significant role in explaining not necessarily the *existence* of sex work, but rather why it is so gendered. This is because norms shape both the way we behave, but also our very desires. Thus, they likely go some way in explaining both why women only rarely pay for sex and why men do so much more frequently. In what follows, I discuss two gendered sexual norms and their likely influence on the gender imbalance in sex work: 1) men should be sexually dominant and women sexually submissive, and 2) sexual purity is important for women but not for men.[12]

4.1 Men should be sexually dominant; women should be sexually submissive

Male sexual dominance, even aggression, and female submission are often eroticized and romanticized in popular culture. Men are still often expected to initiate sexual and dating activity (Cameron and Curry 2020) and women are often seen as sexual gatekeepers who can choose to consent or not consent to sex, but who do not have, or at least seek out, their own sexual desires. As John Gardner writes: "Our cultural preoccupation with sexual consent is a preoccupation with women as those whose consent is called for, and men as those to whom the consent is to be given. As thus imagined, sex is something in respect of which men are active and women are passive" (2018, 22). The relative perceived passivity of women is indicated by the language that we often use to describe sexual acts—the woman is "fucked," "screwed," "had" etc. by a man (Baker 2009, 229). Furthermore, as Juno Mac and Molly Smith, two sex workers, authors, and activists write, "we live in a culture where it is assumed that to penetrate someone is intrinsically an act of dominance and to be sexually penetrated is to be made subservient" (2018, 45). And heterosexual sex is often assumed to *be* penetrative sexual intercourse (with the male penetrating the female), with other sexual acts relegated to "foreplay."

It is quite clear how this norm would be both a cause of the gender imbalance in sex work, and reinforced by it. If women do not see themselves as sexual actors, they are more likely to position themselves as providers of sex for men and less likely to initiate sex through going out to buy it. And if men see themselves as sexually dominant over women, they are more likely to position themselves as consumers of sex rather than providers. Further, as "it is not part of the identity of a class of men that they will service women's sexual desires" (Satz 1995, 78), the gender imbalance in sex work also reinforces the idea that it is "natural" for men to be sexually dominant and women to be sexually submissive.

These norms might also mean that male sex workers experience less stigma than female sex workers because "male sex work can be understood within traditional perspectives of masculinity and male sexuality," given its associations with "masculinity, sexual prowess, work, career, and entrepreneurship." And, "in particular, (the relatively small group of) male prostitutes working with female clients may experience commercial sex as least deviating from norms of masculinity, and therefore least threatening of their reputation" (Vanwesenbeeck 2013, 14). Interestingly, in the analysis of 166 academic articles on sex work referred to above, 66 percent of the articles referred to female sex workers as prostitutes, compared with 25 percent of the articles concerning male sex workers, and female sex work was often described as degrading, but not male sex work

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(Dennis 2008, 8). The analysis showed that male sex workers were often assumed to have much more agency than women, who were often assumed to have been coerced (Dennis 2008, 19). This highlights how much the gender of the sex worker bears on the way that their work is perceived.

Interestingly, the research into women who pay for sex demonstrates that, even when women do pay for sex, sometimes they are doing this because of patriarchal norms around sex—some of the women interviewed who paid for sex did so because they were afraid of sexual violence; because they were survivors of abuse and trauma; or because they were used to having sex only in order to pleasure men. Some of the clients were nervous and afraid. This is a reminder that power comes in different forms, undermining arguments that merely being a buyer of sex puts you in a more powerful position than the seller (Watson 2022) and that sex work is necessarily exploitative (Jeffreys 1997). Instead, it shows the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms around sex, and that motivations for paying for sex can be diverse.

However, the research also suggests that women have some similar motivations to men for buying sex: for intimacy, for pleasure, to learn. We must be careful not to overstate the differences between female and male clients of sex workers, or to cast female clients as victims. As Caldwell and de Wit note, female clients "suffer from being considered inconsequential" despite having similar motivations as men for buying sex, doing so in similar ways, and having similar outcomes (2021a, 349).[13]

4.2 Sexual purity is important for women but not for men

A related norm is that women must guard their "sexual purity," but sexual purity is not an issue for men. The norm that women should be "sexually pure" has long been used, and is still used, as a tool to control women's sexuality by shaming and punishing those who are "impure." There are countless examples of heinous things done to women in the name of the preservation of their sexual purity. Purity norms can also be seen in the use of words like "slut", "whore," and "slag" which are still used as slurs for women who are seen as sexually "impure." Such slurs are not used for men: there is no such thing as a "fallen man," and the term "male slag" is often seen as a badge of honor.

In some historical contexts, and still in some cultures today, sexual purity for women has entailed being a virgin until marriage and then having sex only to please one's husband, or for procreation, but not to enjoy it oneself. Of course, in many societies today, women do not have such stringent expectations put on them. This does not mean though that, as Igor Primoratz claims, this outlook is "well behind us a society" (1993, 179). Women may not be expected to be virgins until marriage or to have no sexual desires of their own, but we are by no means at a point of gender equality in expectations around sexual behavior. Women are still routinely sexually objectified and are widely expected, more so than men, to prefer sex which is loving, emotional, romantic, and monogamous, while not being too demanding of their partners. Women who do not follow these norms are often derided and humiliated, even to be seen as "fair game" for rape and violence. Rape myths purporting that women who act or dress in a way considered "sexually provocative" deserve to be raped remain worryingly common (Jenkins 2017).

Norms around female sexual purity are also made stark in perceptions of sex workers. As Mac and Smith argue, sex work "signifies moral loss" for women (2018, 25): "This supposed sexual excess, and the loss that accompanies it, delineates the prostitute as 'other'. The 'good' woman, on the other hand, is defined by her whiteness, her class, and

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her 'appropriate' sexual modesty, whether maidenly or maternal" (Mac and Smith 2018, 26). They continue: "sex workers are associated with sex, and to be associated with sex is to be dismissible" (Mac and Smith 2018, 28). Mac and Smith note, however, that, though male sex workers are subject to homophobic violence, men who sell sex are not seen as "losing something special" in the way that women who sell sex are, because "men are seen as able to have casual, meaningless, or transactional sex with much less risk to their 'essential selves'" (2018, 29). Female sex workers do experience more violence than male sex workers, which could be partly because women who sell sex are disrespected and stigmatized more than men who do the same work. For example, a study conducted in San Fransisco found that 27 percent of male sex workers had been subjected to sex worker related violence, compared to 36 percent of the female sex workers, and a study of street-based sex workers in Washington, DC, found that 74 percent of the female sex workers had been raped, compared to 13 percent of the male sex workers (Raine 2021, 346).

Having the wrong kind of sex (i.e., sex outside of a committed, loving, monogamous relationship) can be seen to *pollute* women, leading to them not only being shamed and degraded, but also to not being taken seriously intellectually. Even asking for contraception can be too much: Kate Manne discusses the case of right-wing pundit Rush Limbaugh, who said of Sandra Fluke on his daily radio show in 2012: "What does it say about the college co-ed Susan Fluke [sic], who goes before a congressional committee and essentially says that she must be paid to have sex, what does that make her? It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute." Fluke, a law student, had argued before the House of Democrats that health insurance at religious institutions ought to cover contraception (Manne 2017, 56). Men, on the other hand, tend to be permitted a much wider range of sexual experiences before such experiences affect how much respect they are given (Hugh Grant, for example, is still a much-loved successful actor, despite being known to have paid for sex).

This norm influences sex work in two ways. First, it makes female sex workers more liable to violence, humiliation, and general mistreatment than other women and male sex workers, since they are considered less worthy of respect due to being "fallen" women. Secondly, it makes women less likely to pay for sex, since doing so would be the "wrong" kind of sex for a woman to have. Consequently, "women who buy sex risk slut shaming, stigma and being reduced to anomalies" (Caldwell and de Wit 2021a, 349).

Another way that the norm might influence the way that we view women who *do* pay for sex is by changing the narrative, so when women do buy sex, it is said that what they really want is romance, yet when men buy sex what they really want is sex. Caldwell and de Wit argue that: "Women's sexual desire and capacity to buy sex are not only overlooked in contemporary Australian discourse but also denied, indeed sanitized, in academic discourse, as exemplified by papers positioning female sex tourism as romance tourism, a phenomenon separate from male sex tourism" (2021a, 349).

An example of such positioning is Sheila Jeffreys's (2003) take on female sex tourism. She argues that female sex tourism has profound differences to male sex tourism. She argues that women tourists to the Caribbean who pay for sex "do not recognize that the men are interested in monetary reward and consider that they are being genuinely wooed for a short-term romantic or something more serious" (2003, 228). Jeffreys's suggestion seems to be that female tourists end up getting duped into paying for sex, when really they want romance, whereas male tourists know exactly what is going on and what they want. Thus, she appears to be assuming that women would not *really* want to buy "just" sex even when that is exactly what they are doing.

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She further claims that "one principle that distinguishes the sexuality of prostitution is that the prostituted women service men sexually without any sexual pleasure on their part" (Jeffreys 2003, 229), whereas when men sell sex to women they enjoy it. She thus argues that "the local men remain in control of the sexual interaction as they would in sexual relations with any women, tourist or not, by virtue of male privilege and the construction of male dominant sexuality" (Jeffreys 2003, 229). The evidence she uses to make this claim appears to be a singular quote by a Barbadian beach boy. But let's suppose that other Barbadian beach boys also enjoy the sex they are paid for by female tourists. This does not show that they are *in control* of the sexual interaction but only that they enjoy it. Indeed, the relationships being more "romantic" does not make them less harmful for the beach boys, with there being "emotional responses of disillusionment, betrayal, and shame … when males are eventually and inexplicably discarded and abandoned after experiencing deep levels of intimacy and revealing their most private selves" (Richards and Reid 2015, 425)

Furthermore, the unevidenced claim that women who sell sex get no sexual enjoyment from it is too strong. Again, Jeffreys is assuming that it is not even possible for women to enjoy paid-for sex, but that it is for men. This is not true. A recent survey of sex workers who sell sex online, 75 percent of whom were women, found that 91 percent of them were enthusiastic about their job at least some of the time—with 19 percent being enthusiastic all of the time, and 51 percent most of the time (Sanders et al. 2018, 7).

It is thus fairer to say that some sex workers enjoy the sex they have with clients some of the time, some of them enjoy it all of the time, and some of them enjoy it none of the time. And if it is worse for a woman to be a sex worker than a man, this is not going to be just because women enjoy sex (with strangers) less than men do. Mac and Smith point out that many sex workers agree with the critics of sex work that it is "a pretty horrible job" but "these sex workers may locate the problem not in *sex* but in *work*" (2018, 53). Sex workers are routinely subjected to disrespect, harassment, and violence, and while the exchange of sex for money is legal in the UK, sex workers can be arrested for soliciting or for brothel keeping, which can simply mean two sex workers sharing a premises for safety.[14] Sex work will often be worse *as work* for women than for men, because they are, in general, more stigmatized and disrespected, taken less seriously intellectually, and subject to more violence than male sex workers. Women also might find that their choices around work are more limited than men's, because they have to fit work around caring responsibilities, or because they find it harder to get hired in certain sectors (Criado-Perez 2020). And having fewer alternative options may make women more liable to exploitation. However, sex work might also be worse *as sex* for women than for men. If the man is positioned as the dominant party whether he is selling or buying sex, and if female purity norms lead women to experience more shame and guilt around sex than men do, then selling sex might be more difficult for women than for men.

5. Conclusion

The evidence and arguments I have outlined in this paper suggest that sex work is not gendered because of immutable biological differences between men and women, nor that it *exists* only because of patriarchal conditions such that it would disappear under conditions of gender equality. Rather, I have argued that it is likely that sex work *exists in its current gendered form* because of patriarchal conditions and the related gendered sexual norms. These norms are not going to change overnight. However, acknowledging that sex work is not inherently gendered is important for (at least) two reasons. First, it is

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probable that the gendered nature of sex work contributes to the stigma and bad treatment that sex workers, particularly female ones, face. Secondly, if sex work is not inherently gendered, this will have implications for how we should think about it, morally, practically, and legally. One of the things such an acknowledgment entails is including women who *pay* for sex in discussions about sex work. These women often get left out of discussions of sex work, but in spite of their low numbers merit consideration, since they complicate some of the arguments around it. It also means that those who find the gender imbalance in sex work problematic need not aim at its abolishment; an alternative aim is more gender-balanced sex work. And for opponents of sex work more generally, I should highlight that this does not entail aiming for there to be *more* sex work: in conditions of gender equality, we might see more women paying for sex, but fewer men doing so.

What is important to remember is that sex work is not just one thing, and that sex workers and clients have diverse backgrounds and motivations for selling and buying sex. This is one of the reasons why it such a contested issue. In this paper, I've focussed on one of its problematic features—its gendered nature. I have not had the space to discuss in depth broader questions about what its legal status should be, or how it might be reformed. However, sex work's steadfastness in spite of improvements in some places to gender equality, and in spite of various different states' attempts to criminalize it, suggests that it is not going to disappear any time soon. If that is the case, then we ought to be thinking about reforms to make it a less dangerous and degrading profession to work in. And if I am right that sex work is not *inherently* gendered, then any reforms ought to consider ways to make is less gendered. Such reforms would likely also impact on sex worker safety and general treatment, but more work needs to be done to establish what reforms would be most effective.

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Notes

1 An estimated 83 percent of indoor sex workers in the United Kingdom are female too (Minichiello et al. 2021, 220).

2 https://www.natsal.ac.uk/natsal-survey/natsal-3. These figures come from the most recent National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3), which involved interviews with 15,162 adults aged 16–74.

3 Indeed, some people argue that it was not work at all (Bindel 2017).

4 With some exceptions, e.g., Califia 2002.

5 I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

6 I note here that this is not to say that men with disabilities are fundamentally different to men without disabilities in terms of sexuality or otherwise. As Mac and Smith point out, the view of the disabled man as "the *deserving* client" who is "depicted as desexualised, unthreatening and deserving" is "a patronising, ableist way to view disabled people" (Mac and Smith 2018, 41)

7 Sheila Jeffreys goes further. She too, argues that "prostitution is socially constructed out of men's dominance and women's subordination" and "the idea that woman exists to be used," but she further claims that prostitution *is* the abuse of women by men (1997, 3).

8 Unfortunately, I lack the space in this paper to discuss how sex work is raced, but much could be said on this.

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9 Of the 21 women who buy sex that Caldwell and de Wit interviewed, "twelve women who had bought sex said they would unconditionally recommend it to friends, and the others said the answer might depend on the friend's circumstances and values" (2021a, 346).
10 However, while those in managerial or professional occupations are more likely to have paid for sex in the past five years (4.5 percent), 3.7 percent of men who are unemployed or work fewer than ten hours a week have also paid for sex in the last five years (Jones et al. 2015, 121).
11 Caldwell and de Wit found that over half of the women interviewed for their research paid for sex after reading a positive media article about women who pay for sex (Caldwell and de Wit 2021a, 349).
12 Laurie Shrage makes some similar points in her discussion of four beliefs "which structure the social meaning of the prostitute's business in our culture" (Shrage 1989, 352–56).
13 We might note that women are increasingly consuming internet pornography, now making up 36 percent of visitors to the website Pornhub globally, an increase of 12 percent in eight years (Pornhub 2023). I lack the space to discuss in depth the relationship between women's porn consumption and them paying for sex directly, but it is possible that changing norms and technological improvements are leading to women are becoming increasingly interested in sexual experiences which have been more typically associated with masculinity. I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I highlight this.
14 See, e.g. Nelson 2020.

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