Crack-Whores and *Pretty Woman*:
The Media Framing of Sex Workers

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**Abstract**

International human rights organizations such as the World Health Organization, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, and Amnesty International have advised nations to decriminalize sex work in order to protect the rights and safety of sex workers ("Sex Workers," 2018; "Sex Workers," 2014; "Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers," 2016). However, policy-makers in the US ignore these recommendations in favor of the full criminalization of sex work (Weitzer, 2010). Media largely influence public perception and policing of sex work, and media framings of sex workers align more with the current policies on sex work in the US than the research conducted and the proposals made by accredited human rights organizations (Nelson, 1997). This study examines newspapers published in California and Texas between 2002 and 2018 to uncover how media frame sex workers. The dominant frames in this dataset, the criminal frame and the victim frame, perpetuate and are reinforced by the US’ stringent sex work policies. The same moral convictions which influenced the criminalization of sex work in the US underlay the dominant frames in the dataset.

**Introduction: Sex Work and Media**

“Sex worker” refers to anyone who is employed in the sex industry, including but not limited to porn actors and actresses, erotic photographers, phone sex operators, professional dominants, erotic dancers, and prostitutes. Although this term technically covers a wide range of services, the term “sex worker” is used in this paper to reference someone who is involved in the direct sale of sexual services, also commonly known as a “prostitute.” “Sex work” is used to reference the industry in which sex workers are employed, commonly known as “prostitution.” This distinction is made due to the common practice of sex workers referring to themselves and
others as “sex workers” and not “prostitutes” in order to avoid the stigma associated with the word “prostitute” (Burnes, 2017).

The media portrayals of sex workers in the US seem to fall on a spectrum which ranges from the crack-whore trope to the image of the empowered and wealthy escort. On one end, sex workers are perceived as drug-addicted, STI-prone criminals who “walk the streets” on the prowl for men and boys to corrupt in exchange for cash or drugs. On the opposite side, sex workers are perceived as upper-class escorts, as empowered women who choose their profession because of the accessible and large payroll and who exchange sexual services for large checks or designer clothing—much like Julia Robert’s famous role in Pretty Woman. The portrayals of sex workers in media and popular culture are diverse—so how does the public really perceive sex work?

Sex workers are present in almost every society, and yet the topic remains taboo in some places like the US. People rely on the media for information which in turn affects how they form opinions. The media’s framing of sex work is the lens through which people view sex work; it creates and recreates the biases and stereotypes that drive discourses on sex work. These frames may be derived from socio-historically constructed conceptions of female sexuality and bodies.

Despite recommendations to fully decriminalize sex work by international human rights organizations, the US has one of the most stringent policies on sex work in the world: the full criminalization of sex work (“Sex Workers,” 2018; “Sex Workers,” 2014; “Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers,” 2016). What informs US policies on sex work, if not these recommendations? Existing literature suggests that media narratives reflect and shape contemporary political conversations (Nelson, 1997).

The Power of the Framing of Sex Work
I. The Power of Media Framing

People rely on media to obtain knowledge and make sense of the world around them—especially when they have no personal experience with the subject matter. Eighty percent of Americans’ primary source of information is the news media, and most people turn to the news to escape reality through fantasy and escape, rather than to educate themselves about public affairs (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). Media frames can function like storylines, lending coherence to otherwise discrete pieces of information (Nelson, 1997). People form opinions based on these news frames because they are more easily retrievable from one’s memory than concrete facts or data (Nelson, 1997).

Political elites also play a role in framing media. Elites have learned that it is more advantageous to make inflammatory, anti-oppositional remarks than to try to change public perceptions through evidence or logic (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997). Journalists often rely on these elite sources for content, even if they disagree with the source’s conclusions. Through this interplay between journalists and elites, news often advances political agendas which work to maintain the status quo (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997). Although strongly influenced by political elites and bureaucrats, it is ultimately up to the journalist to make these framing decisions, which subsequently influence how readers perceive these issues and how they integrate beliefs into attitudes (Nelson, 1997).

II. Examples of Media Framing

For example, take the case of the US anti-nuclear movement, which peaked in the 1970s and 80s. Clear ideological motives drive journalists’ patterns of media framing (Entman and Rolecki, 1993). In this case, the goal seemed to be to maintain the status quo by appealing to elite sources through their ambivalence toward public participation. The anti-nuclear movement
in the US had widespread support and even some support by elites, and the media properly reflected its legitimacy (Entman and Rolecki, 1993). However, when the social movement came close to garnering enough Congressional votes to support a nuclear freeze, the media began to portray the movement as illegitimate and irrational. Media thus have an important role in maintaining the status quo.

In another study, participants were exposed to different news narratives which portrayed the Ku Klux Klan using various frames (Nelson, 1997). Afterward, participants reported the importance of different values in tolerating the hate group. The results showed that their judgments corresponded with the frame that they were exposed to, illustrating that frames influence people’s values. Participants reported various comparative valuations of civic harmony and the freedom of speech, which also corresponded with the frame they were assigned to read (Nelson, 1997). Participants were more likely to sympathize with the Ku Klux Klan after reading articles which framed the issue of policing the Ku Klux Klan as an issue of free speech (Nelson, 1997). Opinions and values are volatile, and the immense influence that media framing has on public thought could result in policies and outcomes that do not reflect the true interests of the people.

Media framing has the potential to encourage public participation and provide people with entertaining news stories which they rely on to better their understanding of the world around them. But it can also have sweeping effects on public opinion, both intended and unintended. Not only can media framing deter the majority opinion by inaccurately portraying it as illegitimate or irrational, but it can also shape the way that people value principles like civic harmony and public safety (Nelson, 1997). Additionally, media framing has a direct effect on the success or failure of a social movement and influences the public’s opinion and support of a
movement (Entman and Rolecki, 1993). The dual purpose of media, to educate and to entertain, paired with Americans’ dependency on media for information and opinion-forming, gives the power to journalists and elites to spin or sensationalize everyday news stories instead of using logical evidence to inform the public. This directly affects how Americans view and discuss these issues, which cyclically becomes the status quo that journalists and elites seek to maintain.

III. How People Perceive Sex Work

Except for the state of Nevada, sex work is fully criminalized in the US (“Prostitution,” n.d.). The federal government sanctions prostitution under certain circumstances, such as those which “protect servicemen and women from the prostitution industry,” or to satisfy international treaty obligations (Hindle, Barnett, and Casavant, 2003). Other than these circumstances, the regulation of prostitution is not an enumerated power of the federal government. Thus, due to the Tenth Amendment to the US Constitution, states have the power to prohibit, permit, or regulate prostitution (“Tenth Amendment,” n.d.). Forty-nine out of fifty states have prohibited sex work and its related activities, such as loitering for prostitution (“Prostitution,” n.d.). These prohibitions are put in place with the intensions of stopping the spread of disease, suppressing the crime surrounding prostitution, and protecting the “integrity of the family,” among other things (Posner and Silbaugh, 1996). Sex work is considered a misdemeanor in most states, as well as a public order crime, or a crime that disrupts the order of a community (“Prostitution,” n.d.). However, there is little to no evidence that suggests that the criminalization of sex work deters people from engaging in sex work or from buying sexual services. Moral crusades dominate American sex work politics and public opinion instead of evidence-based research on the outcomes of sex work policies (Weitzer, 2010).
Moral crusaders in the US seek to further stigmatize and marginalize sex workers in public discourse and in public policy. They seek to stunt the growth of the sex industry’s normalization in American society as a means to prevent the loosening of traditional values. The American movement to criminalize sex work is a moral crusade in which people view sex work as a manifestation of the unraveling of conventional rules (Weitzer, 2010). Moral crusaders dramatize trauma experienced by sex workers, demonize perpetrators, and exaggerate the problem in order to portray all sex workers as victims, alarm the public, and resist the unraveling of conventional rules (Weitzer, 2010).

IV. The Framing of Sex Work

Media often frame sex work as a matter that requires intervention, both legally and morally. News media in Canada has historically perpetuated a script of risk-based problematization, in which blame is placed on sex workers and makes them targets for legal and moral intervention (Hallgrímsdóttir, 2008). Much like people’s broader social concerns yielded this narrative of sex work in Canadian media, discussions about sex work in the American media are based on tropes, stereotypes, and objectifying discourses (Weitzer, 2010). Further, sex workers are often stereotyped as either victims or as criminals, and neither of these two categories are deemed to be socially acceptable (Majic, 2014). Both illicit moral and legal interventionist responses.

There is a lack of research-based rhetoric in discourse surrounding sex work and a need for an objective, nonjudgmental approach to understanding sex work. (DeBoise, 2014). Biased media narratives give rise to a stigma that often brings physical harm and vulnerability to sex workers, who are constantly subjected to these tropes. For example, the popular conflation of voluntary sex work and compulsory sex trafficking in media is a source of harmful
stigmatization of sex work (Peach, 2008). This conflation of sex work with sex trafficking portrays women as lacking moral agency and in need of intervention, pushing the industry underground as sex workers feel they have to hide from the public and from law enforcement. Whether these stereotype-driven representations are accurate or not, these stigmas have concrete effects on sex workers’ lives; they are less likely to solicit in safer areas, to report abuse from clients or employers, and to seek social support or health services such as STI checkups (Ditmore, 2001).

Beyond mainstream news media, sex work is framed in various ways on the scholarly level. Radical feminists argue that all women, but sex workers especially, are victims of the patriarchy and that the sex industry is an extension of such oppression (Mackinnon, 1993). Works written by radical feminists frame sex workers as having little or no agency, and as victims of their positions in society and of the patriarchy. Similarly, some radical feminists lament that sex work legitimizes male privilege— that the sex industry reflects the position of power that men inhabit, in which they view and treat women as mere means to receive sexual pleasure (Pollitt, 2014).

In contrast, the pro-sex worker stance held by liberal feminists questions whether the sale of sexual services genuinely harms sex workers or women as a whole, and rather posits that sex work gives many women more autonomy than they would have in other service jobs (Nussbaum, 1999). Liberal feminists frame sex work as a choice, and often emphasize that the problems with sex work are not inherent to the sale of sex but are created by working conditions and treatment by others. Scholarly publications are much more diverse and intentional than mainstream news articles in the framing of sex work. Uncovering the epistemologies and media frames that drive
the narratives in media is crucial in understanding how the public perceives sex work. These perceptions have concrete effects on policy and on the lives of sex workers.

**Methodology**

A content analysis is the most appropriate method in uncovering what narratives drive mainstream discourse on sex work. The content analysis was conducted on a sample of newspapers published in California and Texas that report an incident or topic relating to sex work from the years 2002-2018. The year 2002 is the start of the timeframe because it is widely recognized as the peak of third-wave feminism, which remained the dominant feminist discourse for over twenty years (*The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*, 2015). This is relevant because third-wave feminism, while not the original pioneer of the sexual revolution, marked a distinct change in feminist discourse. Most notably, third-wave feminism was accompanied by a spike in sex positivity, an awareness of gender-role stereotypes, and the use of the term “intersectionality” to describe the complex layers of oppression which women face, determined by such things as ethnicity, socioeconomic position, gender, and sexual preference (*The Politics of Third Wave Feminisms*, 2015). These concepts are central to the discussion of policing sex work.

Additionally, the Sex Workers Outreach Project-USA (SWOP-USA) was founded in 2003. SWOP-USA is the nation’s largest sex workers’ rights organization, and dedicates itself to promoting the human rights of sex workers by assisting sex workers and their communities while working toward ending stigma and violence against sex workers (*Sex Workers Outreach Project USA*, 2012). The founding of SWOP-USA may indicate a change in public opinion about sex workers, or at least the introduction of sex workers’ rights into the collective consciousness.
The data came from California and Texas, as these were the 2 states with the highest number of prostitution-related arrests in the US in 2016, and reflect a wide range of political views and perceptions of sex work (US and State Prostitution Arrests, 2001-2016, 2018). California and Texas also ranked in the top 5 for states with the highest number of prostitution-related arrests per 10,000 people (US and State Prostitution Arrests, 2001-2016, 2018). Framing incidences which occur in articles that were reviews or movie screening times containing descriptions of movies or plays about sex workers were omitted, as this information is irrelevant to the research question. Instead, only editorials and news stories were included in the dataset.

To find articles in the proper topic area, the following terms were searched: “sex worker,” “prostitute,” “hooker,” “whore,” “streetwalker,” and “call-girl.” The dataset consists of the incidences of different frame types in newspapers which meet these search terms, were published in the years 2002 to 2018, and were published in either California or Texas. The distribution of the terms used to refer to sex workers among frame types was then analyzed, observing whether there is a correlation between the term and the frame used. Then, the results of the findings by the state in which the articles were published were categorized in order to check for patterns of framing by geographic region, which could in turn reveal an association between the portrayals of sex workers in media and the geographic region or political leaning. The distribution of frames was also analyzed based on the political leanings of the counties in which the news organizations that published the newspapers containing the framing incidences. This further explores whether political leaning is correlated with the framing of sex work in certain ways.

Articles published in California were found on Newspapers.com. The university in which this research was conducted grants access to this database. Newspapers.com is the largest online newspaper archive, with over 7,500 newspapers published in the US and elsewhere. The
Newspapers.com archive contains newspapers from the 1700s to the 2000s. The news organizations on Newspapers.com mostly serve small or midsized towns (“About Newspapers.com,” n.d.). Newspapers.com has a limited archive of news organizations from Texas, so a different database was used to find news organizations from Texas.

Articles published in Texas were found on America’s News. The university in which this research was conducted also grants access to this database. Its archive of relatively small, local news organizations in Texas is more comprehensive than that of Newspapers.com, so only some news organizations from the database were used. First, news organizations which circulate in cities with a population over 300,000 were excluded. This was done to match the subset of news organizations from California, which included only news organizations from small or mid-sized cities. Then, news organizations were randomly selected until the number of newspaper articles selected from Texas closely matched the number of newspaper articles selected from California, since the search on America’s News resulted in a much larger number of results than the number of search results on Newspapers.com.

1. Content Analysis

The content analysis of newspaper articles that report on sex work reveals the dominant frames of the sample of newspapers, which can uncover the underpinnings of public opinion on sex work. Certain content, phrases, and terminology were coded for and then each article was categorized as using the predicted frames: the victim frame, the criminal/immoral frame, the empowerment frame, and the neutral frame. Also noted was the term used for sex worker, the political leaning of the news organization’s location, as well as whether the article was an editorial or a news piece, which reveals whether the purpose of the piece was to express an
opinion or to report a news event. It is noteworthy to observe whether these characteristics are associated with the frames that news organizations use.

It was also noted whether the article includes the perspectives of sex workers themselves. Then, an association between the inclusion of a sex worker’s perspective and frames used can be drawn. If there is an association between the inclusion of sex workers’ perspectives in the article and a certain frame, conclusions can be drawn on the self-perception of sex workers and the accuracy of certain frames. While the content analysis of the same of newspapers does not reveal a causal relationship between any of the characteristics of the articles and the frames which they use, associations or patterns can explain how the public understands sex work.

II. Potential Frames

Through a content analysis of various newspaper articles, it was expected that narratives of sex work would fall under four categories of frames: the victim frame, the criminal/immoral frame, the empowerment frame, and the neutral frame.

1. The victim frame: Sex workers are framed in ways that treat them as victims of their circumstances, the patriarchy, or other external forces. They seemingly have little or no autonomy, and were probably victims of childhood sexual abuse (Mackinnon, 1993). This frame reflects the ideologies of radical feminism, such as those of Catherine Mackinnon.

2. The criminal/immoral frame: Sex workers are framed in ways that treat them as criminals, as predisposed to commit other crimes, or as engaging in morally deplorable behavior. This frame reflects the morals of the Victorian era, the time period which immediately precedes the Mann Act. The Mann Act prohibits interstate or foreign transportation of sex workers and is one of the only federal regulations on sex work.
Specifically, the Victorian era birthed the concept of the “fallen woman,” which portrays women who stray from gender norms, such as sex workers, as more susceptible to committing other crimes (Lucas, 1995).

3. The empowerment frame: Sex workers are framed in empowering ways. They are perceived as having agency and the power to choose whether they work in the sex industry as well as their working conditions and hours. This frame reflects the ideologies of the pro-sex worker stance, held by liberal feminists like Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 1999).

4. The neutral frame: Sex workers are framed in neutral ways. One’s occupation as a sex worker does not have strong implications on her life, and does not dominate her identity. Instead, the term for sex worker is used simply to describe or indicate the profession of a person. This frame also reflects the ideologies of liberal feminists, who suggest that sex work should be normalized (Nussbaum, 1999).

a. The Victim Frame

The victim frame portrays a lack of agency or external forces which forced sex workers into their situations, potentially focusing on crimes committed against sex workers, or perhaps poor working and living conditions. Under this frame, sex workers are perceived as victims of circumstances, the patriarchy, or other external forces. They lack or have very little autonomy under these perceptions. Journalists who invoke this frame use terminology and phrases that focus on the sex worker’s background, childhood, or past hardships to attempt to explain the external forces which coerced the sex worker into sex work. They are also often perceived as “easy victims” of violent crimes, such as assaults and homicides, due to their vulnerable nature (“Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers,” 2016). The journalist may also
mention or emphasize the sex worker’s current or former low socioeconomic status, pimps or third parties who coerce sex workers or increase hardships, and/or harsh working conditions. Journalists using this frame will most likely refer to the sex worker as a “prostitute” and may recommend the partial decriminalization of sex work, which seeks to place the criminality on the buyer of sex. This legal model criminalizes Johns and third-party profiteers, but not sex workers themselves.

b. The Criminal Frame

The criminal frame portrays sex workers as threats to public health and safety, furthering the “crack whore” trope—it may include descriptions of drug use, violence, theft, and overall immorality. The sex worker is perceived as a criminal. It may also imply that sex workers seek out men and boys to corrupt as clients. Journalists using this frame may mention or emphasize the sex worker’s past or current drug or alcohol use, the need to “clean up the streets” or to reduce crime in relation to sex work, and/or corruption and sex workers’ incapability of following legal and moral rules. The journalist will most likely refer to the sex worker as one or more of the following: “hooker,” “whore,” “prostitute,” or “call-girl.” The journalist may recommend for the full criminalization of sex work. This legal model, like the one in most states in the US, criminalizes all parties involved in sex work—Johns, third-party profiteers, and sex workers.

c. The Empowerment Frame

The empowerment frame portrays sex workers as empowered entrepreneurs who seek out consenting, contracting clients like employees in other industries. Journalists who use this narrative may emphasize that the sex worker chose to enter the sex industry, or that sex workers have autonomy. The journalist of an article that uses this frame may depict wealthy escorts who
do not necessarily have to perform sex acts but are paid a lot of money, or suggest that sex
workers get “easy money” and have agency over their working conditions, clients, and hours.
The journalist may also mention or emphasize that the sex worker(s) did not come from troubled
backgrounds but instead had a happy childhood and a steady family income. These journalists
will most likely use the term “sex worker” to refer to sex workers, and may recommend the full
decriminalization or legalization of sex work.

d. The Neutral Frame

The neutral frame portrays sex work as like other work— that is, it normalizes sex work.
Journalists who use the neutral frame may mention that a woman sells sex, but the content of the
news story or editorial has a focus other than sex work. These journalists will most likely use the
terms “sex worker” or prostitute” to refer to sex workers, and may recommend the
decriminalization of sex work.

III. Accompanying Epistemologies

These frames are connected to accompanying feminist and sex work theories. By
establishing these connections, conclusions can be drawn about why sex work is framed in the
ways it is. Each of these frames lines up with a different feminist perspective on sex work:
radical feminism with victim frames, Victorian-era moralistic convictions with criminal frames,
and liberal/pro sex work feminism with empowerment frames and neutral frames. Further
analysis of these theories will provide a more robust understanding of the epistemologies which
back the frame(s) that dominate the media portrayals of sex work.

IV. Representation of News Organizations

There were 201 framing incidences that occurred in articles published by California news
organizations: 138 were in articles published by the Santa Cruz Sentinel in Santa Cruz,
California; 44 were in articles published by *The Ukiah Daily Journal* in Ukiah, California; five were in articles published by the *Westwood Pine Press* in Westwood, California; 12 were in articles published by *The Star News* in Chula-Vista, California; one was in an article published by the *Feather River Bulletin* in Quincy, California; and one was in an article published by the *Porterville Reporter* in Porterville, California. Additionally, there were 141 framing incidences that were published in articles by Texas news organizations: four were in articles published by *Hood County News* in Granbury, Texas; 19 were in articles published by *The Orange Leader* in Orange, Texas; 19 were in articles published by *Big Spring Herald* in Big Spring, Texas; 10 were in articles published by the *Seguin Gazette-Enterprise* in Seguin, Texas; 17 were in articles published by the *Cleburne Times-Review* in Cleburne, Texas; 14 were in articles published by *The Huntsville Item* in Huntsville, Texas; 21 were in articles published by *The Baytown Sun* in Baytown, Texas; 16 were in articles published by *The Paris News* in Paris, Texas; and 21 were in articles published by the *Borger News-Herald* in Borger, Texas. Table 1 below summarizes the news organizations, the populations of the cities in which the news organizations publish their works, the counties in which the cities are located, and the political leanings of the counties. See Appendix A for more in-depth descriptions of the news organizations used in the dataset.

Table 1: Representation of News Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Organization</th>
<th>City of Publication</th>
<th>Population of City</th>
<th>County of Publication</th>
<th>Political Makeup of County*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Santa Cruz Sentinel</td>
<td>Santa Cruz, CA</td>
<td>65,021</td>
<td>Santa Cruz County</td>
<td>73.26% liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukiah Daily Journal</td>
<td>Ukiah, CA</td>
<td>16,036</td>
<td>Mendocino County</td>
<td>58.23% liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westwood Pine Press</td>
<td>Westwood, CA</td>
<td>1,647</td>
<td>Lassen County</td>
<td>70.79% conservative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data came in the form of counting the number of incidences of each frame through content analysis. Connections were made between each of these frames and the accompanying...
THE MEDIA FRAMING OF SEX WORKERS

epistemologies. Conclusions can then be drawn on why sex work is understood in the dominant frame(s). Conclusions may also be drawn based on whether associations were found between the frames used in newspapers, where the article containing the framing incidence was published, whether the article was an editorial or news piece, or whether the article included the perspectives of sex workers.

If an association is found between the state where the articles were published and the framing incidence, the dominant frame(s) can be analyzed on how they reflect or recreate the framing of sex workers by policy or political climates in the area. Connections can also be drawn between these sex work frames and the state legislature’s valuation of female bodily autonomy with respect to abortion and contraception laws in the state, and considerations can be made about what this suggests about the views of female bodies and sexuality.

If the article includes the perspective of one or more sex worker, the journalist took into account a first-hand experience with the subject-matter, something that journalists who do not include a sex worker’s perspective failed to do. Thus, the assumption is made that news articles containing sex workers’ perspectives are more accurate or indicative of sex workers’ perception of the sex industry.

Finally, whether the news articles under certain frames are predominantly editorials or news pieces is considered. This also has the potential to reveal the accuracy of certain frames. Editorials mainly function to convey opinions, and news stories function to retell a news event. Thus, editorials must contain more stereotypes and biases than news pieces, which should theoretically be rooted in facts and evidence. If the newspapers which fall under a frame predominantly contain editorials over news pieces, this frame could also be based on opinion-based biases over facts.
Results: The Media Framing of Sex Work

Of the 338 framing incidences in this dataset, 51 were incidences of neutral framings of sex workers, 45 were john-shaming frames, 38 were moralistic frames, 97 were criminal frames, 91 were victim frames, and 16 were empowerment frames. In other words, 15.1% of the framing incidences in the dataset were neutral frames, 13.3% were john-shaming frames, 11.2% were moralistic frames, 28.7% were criminal frames, 26.9% were victim frames, and 4.7% were empowerment frames. Figure 1 below the distribution of framing incidences in the dataset.

Figure 1: Frame Types

Figure 2 below shows the distribution of words used for sex worker within each frame in the dataset, by percentage of framing incidences using each frame type.
Table 2 below shows the number of framing incidences that were published in articles that used each term within each frame type, and the percentage of framing incidences that were published in articles that used each term within each frame category.

Table 2: Framing Sex Workers in Newspapers from 2002-2018 in CA and TX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>John-shaming</th>
<th>Moralistic</th>
<th>Criminal</th>
<th>Victim</th>
<th>Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>#</strong></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prostitute</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex worker</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whore</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hooker</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Streetwalker</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Call-girl</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The dataset included 97 incidences of sex worker frames that were published in editorials and 241 incidences of sex worker frames that were published in news stories. News organizations in the dataset described sex workers as “prostitute” 283 times, “sex worker” 11 times, “hooker” 19 times, “streetwalker” seven times, “call-girl” four times, and “whore” 14 times. The dataset reflects framing incidences and not the number of newspaper articles, so a single article may be represented more than once if it uses multiple frames.

The majority of journalists who wrote articles containing framing incidences used the word “prostitute” to refer to sex workers. For example, 92% of victim frame incidences used “prostitute,” and 89% of criminal frame incidences used “prostitute.” The only frame type in which framing incidences which used “prostitute” to refer to sex worker was less than 50% of frame type incidences was among the moralistic framing incidences; only 45% of moralistic framing incidences used the word “prostitute,” followed by 29% which used “whore,” and 21% which used “hooker.” Thus, there is an association between frame type and the word used for sex worker.

In the dataset, the proportion of framing incidences varied by the word used for sex worker. Among news articles containing the word “prostitute,” 17% used the neutral frame, 14.1% used the john-shaming frame, 6% used the moralistic frame, 30.4% used the criminal frame, 30% used the victim frame, and 2.3% used the empowerment frame. Among news articles containing the word “sex worker,” 18.2% used the neutral frame, 36.4% used the victim frame, and 45.5% used the empowerment frame—none of the articles containing the word “sex worker” used the john-shaming, moralistic, or criminal frames. Among news articles containing the word “whore,” 78.6% used the moralistic frame, 14.3% used the criminal frame, and 7.1% used the victim frame—none of the articles containing the word “whore” used the neutral, john-shaming,
or empowerment frames. Among news articles containing the word “hooker,” 5.3% used the neutral frame, 15.8% used the john-shaming frame, 42.1% used the moralistic frame, 31.6% used the criminal frame, and 5.3% used the empowerment frame—none of the articles containing the word “hooker” used the victim frame. Among news articles containing the word “streetwalker, 28.6% used the moralistic frame, 28.6% used the criminal frame, 28.6% used the victim frame, and 14.3% used the empowerment frame—none of the articles containing the word “streetwalker” used the neutral or john-shaming frames. Among the news articles containing the word “call-girl,” 50% used the john-shaming frame, 25% used the criminal frame, and 25% used the empowerment frame. Figure 3 below shows the distribution of framing incidences among words used for sex worker.

The figure makes it clear that there are stark differences in framing incidences among articles using each word for sex worker. Articles containing the word “prostitute” mostly use the criminal and victim frames (consistent with the general dataset), articles containing the word “sex worker” disproportionately use the empowerment frame, articles containing the word “whore” and “hooker” disproportionately use the moralistic frame, articles containing the word
“streetwalker” mostly use the moralistic, criminal, and victim frames, and articles containing the word “call-girl” disproportionately use the john-shaming frame. While there is no one-to-one relationship between a word and a frame, there appears to be a relationship between the words a journalist uses for sex worker and the framing of sex workers.

There is a high correlation between certain words that refer to sex workers and specific frames. For example, the high proportion of moralistic framing incidences that occur in newspapers that use the word “whore” to refer to sex workers, the high proportion of moralistic framing incidences that occur in newspapers that use “hooker” to refer to sex workers, the high proportions of victim and criminal framing incidences that occur in newspapers that use the word “prostitute” to refer to sex workers, and the high proportion of empowerment framing incidences that occur in newspapers that use the term “sex worker” to refer to sex workers illustrate an association between the word chosen to refer to sex workers and the frame used to portray sex workers.

1. Incidence of Anticipated Frames

The following shows the incidence of the anticipated frames, as well as the distribution of words used for sex worker and the number of editorials and news stories within each frame type.

a. Victim Frame

The victim frame includes much more than predicted in the literature. When a news organization mentions the murder or assault of a sex worker, the journalist uses the victim frame. Journalists also use the victim frame when they portray the sex worker as an oppressed group, needing of protection, or when they describe “survival sex work,” or the necessity to sell sex in order to survive. Other articles which used the victim frame also describe sex workers as victims
of childhood abuse or poverty. Stories of people “helping them out” by giving them money also use the victim frame.

News organizations used the victim frame 91 times in the dataset, or 26.9% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. 84 incidences of this frame, or 92.3% of incidences of the victim frame, used “prostitute” to reference sex workers; four incidences, or 4.4% of incidences of the victim frame, used “sex worker”; two incidences, or 2.2% of incidences of the victim frame, used “streetwalker”; and one incidence, or 1.1% of incidences of the victim frame, used “whore.” No news organization using this frame used the words “hooker” or “call-girl” to refer to sex workers. In the dataset, editorials used the victim frame 12 times, and news stories used the victim frame 79 times. Figure 4 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the victim frame.

![Figure 4: Victim Frame](image_url)

b. Criminal Frame

The criminal frame also includes more content than predicted. Journalists that use the criminal frame may describe their support of police “crackdowns” on sex work, or may report on
sex workers who commit other crimes like theft or drug use. The criminal frame may also support a narrative that sex workers belong in prison or should not be treated as normal citizens, nor should they receive the same rights as other people, because they have committed the crime of selling sex.

News organizations used the criminal frame 97 times in the dataset, or 28.7% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. 86 incidences of the criminal frame, or 88.7% of incidences of the criminal frame, used “prostitute” to reference sex workers; six incidences, or 6.2% of incidences of the criminal frame, used “hooker”; two incidences, or 2.1% of incidences of the criminal frame, used “whore”; two, or 2.1% of incidences of the criminal frame, used “streetwalker”; and one incidence, or 1.0% of incidences of the criminal frame, used “call-girl.” No news organization which used the criminal frame referred to sex workers as “sex workers.” In the dataset, editorials used the criminal frame 18 times, and news stories used the criminal frame 79 times. Figure 5 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the criminal frame.

![Figure 5: Criminal Frame](image-url)
c. Empowerment Frame

The empowerment frame also included news organizations covering unanticipated content. Journalists who describe sex workers engaging in activism or advocacy use the empowerment frame.

News organizations used the empowerment frame 16 times in the dataset, or 4.7% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. Eight incidences of this frame, or 50% of incidences of the empowerment frame, used “prostitute” to reference sex workers; five incidences, or 31.3% of incidences of the empowerment frame, used “sex worker”; one incidence, or 6.3% of incidences of the empowerment frame, used “streetwalker”; one incidence, or 6.3% of incidences of the empowerment frame, used “call-girl”; and one incidence, or 6.3% of incidences of the empowerment frame, used “hooker.” The relatively high proportion of empowerment frame incidences which used the term “sex worker” is unique from the distributions of words referring to sex workers in the overall dataset of frame incidences. No news organization using this frame used the words “whore” to describe sex workers. In the dataset, editorials used the empowerment frame five times, and news stories used the empowerment frame 11 times. Figure 6 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the empowerment frame.
d. Neutral Frame

Some journalists use a neutral frame. This frame was not found in existing literature. Articles which used a neutral frame may describe the sex market as an appropriate way to relieve sexual desires, or that sex workers should use condoms to reduce the spread and contraction of STIs. These are factual, objective statements that impose little or no personal bias.

News organizations used a neutral frame to describe sex workers 51 times in the dataset, or 15.1% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. In 48 incidences of the neutral frame, or 94.1% of neutral frame incidences, used “prostitute” to identify sex workers; two incidences, or 3.9% of incidences of the neutral frame, used “sex worker”; and one incidence, or 2% of incidences of the neutral frame, used “hooker.” No incidence of the neutral frame contained the words “whore,” “streetwalker,” or “call-girl” in reference to a sex worker. Editorials used the neutral frame 25 times and news stories used the neutral frame 26 times. Figure 7 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the neutral frame.
II. New Frames

The following shows the incidence of the discovered frame types, as well as the distribution of words used for sex worker and the number of editorials and news stories within each frame type.

a. John-Shaming Frame

The john-shaming frame did not appear in existing literature and thus was not an expected frame. This frame is distinct from the others because it describes news organizations which focus on the moral wrongdoing of the john, or the buyer of sex, not the sex worker. Journalists that use this frame may describe the solicitation of a sex worker as a controversy or public relations issue. These articles often have little or no mention of the sex worker herself, but focus on stigmatizing the john. Journalists that john-shame may also suggest that johns belong in prison.

News organizations used the john-shaming frame 45 times in the dataset, or 13.3% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. 40 incidences of this frame, or 88.9% of john-shaming frame
incidences, used “prostitute” to reference sex workers; two incidences, or 4.4% of john-shaming frame incidences, used “call-girl”; and three incidences, or 6.7% of john-shaming frame incidences, used “hooker.” No news organization using the john-shaming frame used the words “sex worker,” “whore,” or “streetwalker” to refer to a sex worker. In the dataset, editorials used the john-shaming frame 14 times and news stories used the john-shaming frame 31 times. Figure 8 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the john-shaming frame.

![Figure 8: John-Shaming Frame](image)

- **4%**: Prostitute
- **7%**: Call-girl
- **89%**: Hooker

### b. Moralistic Frame

A moralistic frame also appeared in the dataset. While the criminal frame was originally grouped with the moralistic frame, the two frames are distinct. This change was made while recoding the first twenty news organizations in the dataset. While the criminal frame perpetuates a narrative that sex work is associated with other crimes, like drug use and gang activity, the moralistic frame suggests that the act of selling sex is wrong in and of itself. Moralistic framing incidences suggest that sex workers have crooked morals because they chose to sell sex. This manifests in news articles in which the journalist uses a term for “sex worker” as an insult or
judgment, often in the form of commenting that someone who does not sell sex dresses like, or somehow otherwise resembles, a sex worker.

News organizations used the moralistic frame 38 times in the dataset, or 11.2% of the dataset, to describe sex workers. 17 incidences of this frame, or 44.7% of incidences of the moralistic frame, used “prostitute” to reference sex workers; 11 incidences, or 28.9% of incidences of the moralistic frame, used “whore”; eight incidences, or 21.1% of incidences of the moralistic frame, used “hooker”; and two incidences, or 5.3% of incidences of the moralistic frame, used “streetwalker.” The relatively high proportion of incidences of the moralistic frame that used the terms “hooker” and “whore” in reference to sex workers is notable. No news organization which used the moralistic frame used the words “sex worker” or “call-girl” to refer to a sex worker. In the dataset, editorials used the moralistic frame 25 times, and news stories used the moralistic frame 13 times. Figure 9 below shows the distribution of words for sex worker used by journalists who used the moralistic frame.
III. **Perspectives of Sex Workers**

Only ten frame incidences in the dataset included the perspective of a sex worker. Seven out of these frame incidences used the empowerment frame, one used the criminal frame, and two used the victim frame. 70% of the frame incidences that included the perspective of sex workers used the empowerment frame, compared to 4.7% of the overall dataset that used the empowerment frame. 10% of frame incidences that included the perspective of sex workers used the criminal frame, compared to 28.7% of the overall dataset that used the criminal frame. 20% of the frame incidences that included the perspective of sex workers used the victim frame, compared to the 26.9% of the overall dataset that used the victim frame.

These discrepancies between the proportion of each frame among frame incidences in the dataset which include the perspective of sex workers and the proportion of each frame in the overall dataset may reflect differences in the self-image of sex workers and outsiders’ judgments about sex workers. Specifically, this data may suggest that while sex workers view themselves through an empowered lens, the public does not take this into consideration when evaluating sex workers. Figure 10 below shows the distribution of frame types among framing incidences which include the perspectives of sex workers.
IV. Framing Incidence by Political Leaning

Given the political makeup of the regions in which the newspaper articles are published and circulated, the publishers can be categorized by their geographical locations as “liberal-leaning,” “moderate,” and “conservative-leaning.” “Liberal-leaning” describes a locality in which 60% or more of its residents voted liberal in the 2016 presidential election, “moderate” describes a locality in which 40-60% of its residents voted either conservative or liberal in the 2016 presidential election, and “conservative-leaning” describes a locality in which 60% or more of its residents voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election. “Liberal-leaning” includes Santa Cruz Sentinel, “moderate” includes The Star-News, Porterville Reporter, Feather River Bulletin, Ukiah Daily, Seguin Gazette-Enterprise, and The Baytown Sun, and “conservative-leaning” includes Hood County News, Westwood Pine Press, The Orange Leader, Big Spring Herald, Cleburne Times-Review, The Huntsville Item, The Paris News, and Borger News-Herald.

In the dataset, there are 138 framing incidences that were in articles published by news organizations in liberal-leaning regions, 89 framing incidences that were in articles published by
news organizations in moderate regions, and 111 framing incidences that were in articles published by news organizations in conservative-leaning regions. Figure 11 below shows the distribution of frames by the political leaning of the county in which the news organization is based.

![Figure 11: Framing Incidence by Political Leaning](image)

While the distribution of frame types varies among political leanings, the victim and criminal frames remain dominant in each political leaning. Other differences of note include the relatively high incidence of the empowerment and moralistic frames in liberal-leaning newspaper organizations, the relatively high incidence of the john-shaming frame in conservative-leaning organizations, and the relatively high incidence of the neutral frame in moderate organizations. Liberal-leaning, moderate, and conservative-leaning news organizations seem to mostly agree in their framings of sex workers as victims and criminals.
V. Framing Incidence in California

Of the 201 framing incidences that occurred in newspapers published in California, 30.5% of incidences were the victim frame, 29% were the criminal frame, 13.5% were the neutral frame, 10.5% were the john-shaming frame, 9.5% were the moralistic frame, and 7% were the empowerment frame. The high incidence of the criminal frame helps explain or be explained by the high rate of sex worker arrests and the full criminalization of sex work in the state of California. The high incidence of the victim frame may also explain these things—sex work is viewed as harmful and as something that should be entirely eradicated. The incidence of the empowerment frame is higher than that of Texas; this may illustrate California’s relatively liberal laws concerning female bodily autonomy in the form of reproductive rights and abortion access. However, this perception of female bodily autonomy has not yet reached the realm of sex work policy, perhaps because sex work policy directly affects less people than policies concerning reproduction and abortion do. Figure 12 below shows the framing incidences among newspaper articles published in California.
VI. Framing Incidence in Texas

Of the 142 framing incidences that occurred in newspapers published in Texas, 21.4% were the victim frame, 27.1% were the criminal frame, 18.6% were the neutral frame, 17.9% were the john-shaming frame, 13.6% were the moralistic frame, and 1.4% were the empowerment frame. The high incidence of the criminal, john-shaming, and victim frames also helps explain or be explained by the high rate of sex worker arrests and the full criminalization of sex work in the state of Texas. In addition, the incidence of the moralistic frame in Texas is higher than that in California—this may explain not only the stringency of sex work policy, but also the stringency of abortion regulations and the views of the public on female bodily autonomy. The low incidence of the empowerment frame corroborates this perception of female bodily autonomy; a woman should not have full control over her body but should allow governments to police it. Figure 13 below shows the framing incidences among newspaper articles published in Texas.

![Figure 13: Framing Incidence in Texas](image-url)
VII. Type of Article by Frame Type

The proportion of editorials and news stories varies by frame type as well as by the word used for sex worker. 13.2% of victim frame incidences were found in editorials, along with 7.2% of criminal frame incidences, 31.3% of empowerment frame incidences, 45.1% of neutral frame incidences, 31.1% of john-shaming frame incidences, and 63.2% of moralistic frame incidences. 25% of framing incidences which included the word “prostitute” were found in editorials, along with 18.2% of framing incidences which included the term “sex worker,” 64.3% of framing incidences which included the word “whore,” 63.2% of framing incidences which included the word “hooker,” 28.6% of framing incidences which included the word “streetwalker,” and 25% of framing incidences which included the word “call-girl.” Editorials are mostly concentrated among moralistic frames, making up the majority of moralistic framing incidences, as well as framing incidences which included the word “whore” and “hooker.” This suggests that journalists who employ the moralistic frame, or that use terms such as “whore” and “hooker,” which are disproportionately used by journalists who use the moralistic frame (see Figure 9), often do so in order to convey an opinion and not to share a news event.

VIII. Dominant Frames

The dominant frames in the dataset are the victim frame and the criminal frame. This is not surprising, given the state of complete illegality that governs sex work in the vast majority of America, including California and Texas. The dominance of victim and criminal frames may also explain, or is explained by, the high numbers of arrests of sex workers in these states. When media frame sex work as victimizing or as criminal, they convey to readers that selling sex is either a danger to society or a danger to sex worker themselves. This informs and reinforces the political frameworks and interventionist attitudes surrounding sex work.
IX. Accompanying Epistemologies of Dominant Frames

The criminal frame can be understood as a normative view of sex work: that sex work is wrong and should, like other crimes, be diminished through policing and law (Majic, 2014). This valuation of sex work and sex workers, paired with the values of the Victorian Era, has led to the full criminalization of sex work in America.

The Victorian Era birthed the concept of the “fallen woman.” In turn, prostitution became criminalized by the start of the Progressive Era. Ann M. Lucas (1995) cites the concept of the “fallen woman” as the source of contemporary and historical stereotyping of sex workers. Sex workers were viewed as the ultimate example of this concept—they had “fallen from virtue,” and were subsequently considered irreversibly degenerate, now capable of any crime (Lucas, 1995). This Victorian view of female sexuality also considers female offenders more egregious than male offenders, because deviant women live lifetimes of crime, whereas male offenders may only commit one crime. This, in turn, ideologically links prostitution to every form of crime and immorality.

Female sexual deviancy stems from the modernization of social life during the Progressive Era. People feared moral decay and the progression of women’s rights, and the beginning of their sexual liberation symbolized this (Lucas, 1995). Further, people feared the social mobility of the working class, immigrants, and people of color, and assumed that people in these groups were promiscuous and deviant. Sex workers were often members of these groups (Lucas, 1995). In “Prostitution, Contemporary,” Alison Marganski (2012) illustrates how police have used prostitution laws to subjugate women. Although it is illegal in the US to both buy and sell sex in the sex market, police arrests have historically been focused on arrest and prosecuting women, especially women of color (Marganski, 2012).
Venereal disease also represented a threat to social order and gender norms in the Victorian era, viewed differently than other contagious diseases. The argument to contain STI’s was used to bolster the criminalization of prostitution (Lucas, 1995). Women today may face enhanced penalties if they disclose that they are HIV positive—these Victorian values have not expired in the modern age (Marganski, 2012).

The U.S. political response to the beginnings of female sexual liberation was to criminalize sex work. This, from its fruition, was an attempt at moral control over women and maintaining rigid gender norms (Lucas, 1995).

Perhaps the most well-known proponent of the victim frame, Catharine Mackinnon (2011), refers to sex workers as “the violated” and clients and third-profiters, like pimps and landlords, as “the violators.” Further, Mackinnon suggests that many sex workers depend on drugs and alcohol to “numb the pain” of the trauma associated with sex work, or are forced by their pimps to become addicted to drugs and thus become dependent on the pimp (Mackinnon, 2011). This notion combines the victim and criminal frames—sex workers are perceived as having been coerced into a profession that makes them resort to drug abuse and other crimes.

Mackinnon makes a variety of claims about sex workers, after conversations and encounters with a select few. She assumes that most sex workers enter the industry due to some violent trauma in their childhood, most often sexual abuse (Mackinnon, 2011). Further, she says that most adult women in prostitution are first forced into the market as minors and are never able to escape (Mackinnon, 1993).

Here, she intentionally conflates sex work with sex trafficking—to Mackinnon, all sex workers have been trafficked, or coerced, by the vulnerabilities of class, sex, and often race. Gerda Lerner (1986) similarly equates sex work to modern enslavement, citing the historical
prevalence of slaves who were also concubines. Both Mackinnon and Lerner would argue that there is no distinction between sex work and sex trafficking, drawing from Mackinnon’s assumption that all sex workers would like to leave the industry but cannot.

Radical feminists mostly advocate for the partial decriminalization of sex work—in eight countries in Europe, governments criminalize buyers of sex and oftentimes third-party profiteers, but not sex workers themselves (“Nordic Model,” n.d.). However, this model fails to address underlying human rights violations that stem from the criminalization of sex work and the dangers of pushing the industry underground, described in the following section.

X. Epistemology Supporting the Decriminalization of Sex Work

A number of feminist theorists support the transition away from the full criminalization of sex work. In Whether from Reason or Prejudice: Taking Money for Bodily Services, Martha Nussbaum (1998) describes sex work as being just like other jobs in the labor market, specifically service jobs. In fact, Nussbaum argues that sex work is sometimes less degrading, traumatizing or violating than other jobs which are legal and socially acceptable (Nussbaum, 1998). She would also agree that it is not sex work itself that is harmful, but the working conditions and treatment of sex workers that stem from stigma that do harm.

Further, international human rights organizations including Amnesty International, the Joint Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the World Health Organization (WHO) recommend that nations adopt policies that fully decriminalize sex work. These organizations use research-based evidence to support their stances that the full decriminalization of sex work would improve the health and safety of sex workers, protecting them from the number of abuses to which they are otherwise vulnerable (“Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers,” 2016).
From its research of various countries and their legal models of sex work, UNAIDS asserts that the criminalization of sex work pushes the industry underground, discouraging sex workers from seeking help from the police when they are victims of abuse, rape, or theft (“Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers,” 2016). This is largely due to the heightened stigma of sex work associated with its criminalization. Models of criminalization also often provide johns with impunity. The refusal of the US to change its policies on sex work based on this research illustrate its dehumanization of sex workers and the strength of moralistic stereotypes of sex workers in the public sector.

**XI. Framing Discoveries**

There are several possible explanations for why some of the framings of sex work did not appear in the literature, and were thus unanticipated findings. One possible explanation stems from the polarization of views in the literature and amongst feminist scholars, versus the plurality of self-images and experiences of sex workers in reality. While the main arguments in feminist literature are made by liberal feminists, who use the neutral and empowerment frames, and radical feminists, who use the victim frame, the dataset revealed that media use more than just these frames; specifically, the dataset revealed that media also use john-shaming and moralistic frames.

In addition, the victim frame included more than what was predicted in the literature. While radical feminist literature suggested that sex workers are victims of socioeconomic and patriarchal forces and often childhood sexual abuse, the dataset included much more: news stories detailing the murder, serial murder, or assault of sex workers; editorials describing sex workers as an oppressed group in need of protection; editorials and news stories describing sex work as a means of survival; and stories of people giving money to sex workers as charity. It is
likely that the victim frame has become so engrained in public consciousness that it has strayed from its epistemological origins in feminist literature and expanded to include more content than anticipated, although the empirical section does not provide full support for this conclusion.

The criminal frame also included more than what was predicted in the literature. The Victorian era concept of the “fallen woman” would predict that incidences of the criminal frame would include content portraying sex workers as predisposed to commit other types of crimes, as disturbing public order. However, the frame included more content than this. The criminal frame also included news stories and editorials which supported police crackdowns of sex workers, as well as those which bolstered narratives that sex workers belong in prison or should not receive the same rights and treatment as other citizens. This creates further dehumanizing effects of Victorian-era morals. “Fallen women” are not just predisposed to commit other crimes but are viewed as undeserving of the same rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens.

Further, the moralistic frame was distinct from the criminal frame. While the criminal frame extends from the “fallen woman” trope, in which sex workers are portrayed as likely to commit other crimes, the moralistic frame suggests that the act of selling sex is immoral in and of itself. This frame is especially stigmatizing—no matter what kinds of behavior the sex worker engages in, or what kind of moral code the sex worker lives by, she is viewed as inherently immoral. Journalists who engage the moralistic frame may describe someone as dressing or acting “like a prostitute,” using any of the words used for sex worker.

While the empowerment frame appeared in the literature, and specifically is used by liberal feminists and those who support pro-sex work perspectives, this dataset again included more than anticipated. The empowerment frame included news stories and editorials which
covered sex workers involved in activism, advocating for sex workers’ rights. Perhaps this is due to the fairly recent inclusion of sex workers in policy-making and public discourses.

Finally, the john-shaming frame did not appear in the literature. Journalists who use the john-framing frame focus on the moral wrongdoing of the john, the buyer of sex. The buying of sex is framed as a public relations issue, and stigmatizes the john instead of the sex worker. The absence of the john-shaming frame in the literature may be due to obvious reasons—the focus of feminist literature on women, not men. It may also stem from a lack of blame traditionally placed on men, or the acceptance that men will engage in the buying of sex but the failure to accept that women may engage in the selling of sex.

XII. Framing of Sex Workers in Policy

The US model of the full criminalization of sex work reflects the aforementioned values and epistemologies behind the victim and criminal frames. In the US, sex workers are perceived as simultaneously deviant and victimized. The public and political discourse then focus on ways to eradicate sex work, much like discourse which focuses on eradicating drug abuse—they attempt to address the side effect of a real determinant of health: gender, socioeconomic status, race. The kind of policy that results is reactionary and lacks supporting research, but merely draws from historically-driven stereotypes. The belief in these tropes are so strong in fact, that they have drowned out the sound of international human rights organizations which advise countries to fully decriminalize sex work for the sake of sex workers’ health and safety. These beliefs are confirmed and reiterated by framing in media and in policy.

Conclusion

The dataset of framing incidences reveals that there are distinct frames which dominate media representations of sex workers in California and Texas in 2002-2018. These frames, the
criminal frame and the victim frame, reflect the criminalization of sex work in the US more so than the recommendations by international human rights organizations. The incidence of the framing of sex workers as either victims or criminals could also indicate the political ideology of a region. Other indicators of political ideology, such as the stringency of regulations on abortions and the history of gaining access to oral contraceptives in the US, correlate with the underlying moralistic valuations of the dominant frames.

I. Dominant Frames

The dominance of the victim and criminal frames in newspapers published in 2002-2018 in California and Texas conveys the public opinion on sex workers—that is, that sex workers work in a profession that degrades and dehumanizes them. This public opinion reinforces, and is reinforced by, the full criminalization of sex work in most places in the US. The epistemology which explains the values behind these narratives is based largely on case studies and assumptions, such as the notion that all sex workers were forced into the profession. Even when many sex workers say that they choose to enter the sex industry and are sometimes empowered to do so, policy-makers refuse to acknowledge the agency of these women. The idea that sex workers are more deviant or more vulnerable than the general population has led to, and is perpetuated by, the current policy in the US: the full criminalization of prostitution. Victorian ideals of female sexuality continue to govern the bodies of women in America today.

The victim frame had the second-highest incidence in the dataset, following the criminal frame. Radical feminists such as Catharine Mackinnon (2011) argue that fully decriminalizing sex work “ignores the unequal and violent material conditions in her life,” and that such policies wrongly attribute agency to sex workers. However, this suggests that those who are similarly marginalized by unequal and violent conditions—such as those living in poverty, homelessness,
or amidst racism and discrimination—are also stripped of agency. This overly-paternalistic view of the vulnerable is both patronizing and moralistic. Although sex workers are often influenced to enter the industry by their socioeconomic disadvantage, this is not unlike other workers in the service industry. Vulnerable groups such as sex workers should be protected by the law, not subjugated by it.

The dominance of the criminal frame suggests that people are often exposed to this framing of sex work, and are thus influenced to share the understanding of sex workers as criminals. The criminal frame has no accompanying epistemology in modern literature, but its underpinnings stem from Victorian era morals (Lucas, 1995). Specifically, the idea that women deemed as sexually deviant are “fallen women” who are likely to engage in any other crimes still permeates people’s perception of sex workers. Both of these assessments of sex workers—that of the radical feminist and that of the Victorian-era thinker—perpetuate gender norms and stereotypes in public consciousness and public policy. These stereotypes strip women of bodily autonomy and sexual agency.

The criminal frame thus coincides with the epistemology of the victim frame—both are normative views of sex work. They suggest that sex work should be eliminated from society by imposing stringent interventionist laws on the sex industry. In forty-nine out of fifty US states, this is manifested in their legal model of full criminalization of sex work.

The criminalization of sex work has some potentially damaging effects. This stringent legal model deepens dangerous stigma against sex workers, dehumanizes sex workers, and forces the profession to be more covert, which makes sex workers even more vulnerable. International human rights groups have, based on research and evidence, advised countries to decriminalize
sex work. The US has purposely ignored this advice. As the research of human rights organizations suggests, the US should adopt a legal model of full decriminalization of sex work.

The dominance of the criminal frame in the dataset mirrors the high number of prostitution arrests in California and Texas. Whether the high number of prostitution arrests influences the public to perceive sex workers as criminals that should be persecuted and journalists to frame sex workers as such or vice versa, this perception of sex workers may encourage the arrest of sex workers. As explained by human rights organizations, an increase in such arrests is dangerous for the health and safety of sex workers but do not decrease the incidence of sex work (“Sex Workers,” 2018; “Sex Workers,” 2014; “Q&A: Policy to Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers,” 2016).

From the data, it is clear that there is an association between frame type and the word used for sex worker. The mere word used to refer to sex workers in a newspaper article may create associations with a specific framing of sex workers. These words carry connotations associated with specific frame types. If journalists seek to be more self-aware of the frames they invoke, they must consciously and carefully choose the words used to refer to sex workers—they could affect the treatment and safety of sex workers.

Only ten framing incidences, or less than 3% of the dataset, were published in articles which included the perspective of one or more sex worker. Of these, seventy percent of framing incidences used the empowerment frame—over fourteen times the incidence of the empowerment frame in the general dataset. This discrepancy between the self-perception of sex workers and the public perception of sex workers reflects policy-making in the US. Policies do not accurately reflect the realities of sex work because policy-making processes in the US exclude sex workers’ perspectives.
The current laws in the US reflect historically-constructed epistemologies and valuations of sex work and female sexuality, but fail to protect the health and safety of sex workers, themselves. Whether or not these portrayals of sex workers are accurate is not central to protecting the human rights of sex workers. Policy-makers in the US must lean on the research-based evidence, paired with the personal narratives and preferences of sex workers, instead of socially-constructed stereotypes. In the current stage, these framings and stereotypes dominate public opinion and policing of sex work in potentially harmful ways.

II. Policing Bodily Autonomy in the US

Ideologies and moralistic valuations do not just affect sex work policy. Although the two dominant frames remained consistent among different political leanings of news organizations, political leaning often dictates the bodily autonomy (and thus, reproductive rights) of women. While sex work is fully criminalized in both California and Texas, a comparison between the two states’ abortion laws and a look at the history of gaining access to oral contraceptives in the US reveal policymakers’ and the public’s perceptions of female bodily autonomy. This also has important implications on how these groups view sex work. It illustrates the extent to which women have legal rights and control over their own bodies. The issue of abortion rights is highly politicized; in 2017, the Pew Research Center found that 75 percent of Democrats believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, and only 32 percent of Republicans believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases (Bacon, 2018).

Democrats have won the state in California in every presidential election since 1988, and Republicans have carried the state in in every presidential election Texas since 1976 (Krishnakumar, Emamdjomeh, and Moore, 2016; Philpott, 2016). However, the number of sex worker arrests per 10,000 people in California and Texas does not differ by much—in 2016,
there were 1.97 in California and 1.81 in Texas (“US and State Prostitution Arrests, 2001-2016,” 2018). Unsurprisingly, though, the two states have different abortion laws.

Historically, California has more liberal abortion laws than Texas. *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark Supreme Court case that deemed a Texas statute, which forbade abortions in all cases except when it threatened the life of the mother, unconstitutional (“Roe v. Wade: The Constitutional Right to Access Safe, Legal Abortions,” n.d.). In contrast, California had more liberalized abortion laws, allowing abortions when the pregnancy threatened the mother’s physical or mental health, even before *Roe v. Wade* (Cannon, 2013). Texas continues to have more stringent regulations on abortions.

In Texas, in order to get an abortion, a woman is mandated to do the following: receive state-directed counseling which discourages her from having an abortion, wait for twenty-four hours before the procedure is provided, pay for the procedure without help of private and public insurance policies unless the pregnancy would compromise the mother’s health, obtain the consent and notification of a parent if the woman is a minor, and undergo an ultrasound, which the provider must show and describe to the woman, at least twenty-four hours before the procedure ("State Facts About Abortion: Texas," 2018). California has none of these restrictions on abortions. *Roe v. Wade* recognized a woman’s constitutional right to abortion. Yet, in Texas, restrictions on abortions increase every year, and the number of abortion providers decrease every year ("State Facts About Abortion: Texas," 2018).

In California, not only are there no major types of restrictions on abortions, but the number of abortion providers has not decreased. Further, abortions are among the safest surgical procedures—complications arise in .05 percent of abortions ("State Facts About Abortion: Texas," 2018). The increase in restrictiveness of abortions in some states does not stem from
some constitutional conviction nor concern for the safety of women. Instead, moralistic convictions about the bodily autonomy of women and the viability of a fetus largely influence policymakers’ decisions and the public’s understanding of abortion.

Moralistic convictions about traditional gender roles have historically swayed laws and Supreme Court decisions. *Poe v. Ullman* was a 1961 US Supreme Court case that held that a Connecticut law could ban the use of contraceptives as well as ban doctors from advising patients to use contraceptives (“Poe v. Ullman,” n.d.). Justice Harlan famously dissented in this decision, suggesting that such a ban on contraceptives is not protected by the Fourteenth Amendment, but instead unjustifiably imposes on the “liberty” protected by the Fourteenth Amendment (“Poe v. Ullman,” n.d.). Harlan writes that the law has “traditionally concerned itself with the moral soundness of its people,” and that moral judgments underlying anti-contraceptive statutes are unjustified (“Poe v. Ullman,” n.d.). Justice Harlan’s dissent in *Poe v. Ullman* has been endorsed in later Supreme Court cases. Until *Griswold v. Connecticut* held that the use of contraceptives fell within the right to privacy four years later, unjustified moral judgments dictated a woman’s access to contraceptives (“Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965)”, n.d.).

The historical moralism of the criminalization of sex work, the stringent regulation of abortion, and the access to contraceptives are indicators of how the US polices women’s choices. These policy choices stem from attempts to constrain women to the gender roles and value systems that were established in the Victorian era. The frames that media use to portray sex workers reveal how people perceive women who do not subscribe to traditional gender roles.

According to the dataset, Americans are most often exposed to media portrayals of sex workers as either criminals or victims. When sex workers are framed as criminals, the Victorian
idea of the “fallen woman” persists—sex workers are viewed as unviable members of society, their selling of sex symbolic of their moral corruption and predisposition to commit other crimes. When sex workers are framed as victims, they are perceived as having little or no agency and as having been forced into their profession either through trafficking or by socioeconomic conditions and patriarchal oppression. Both of these frames dehumanize sex workers, ostracizing them from mainstream society.

Sex workers are framed as “unwomen,” stripping them of humanity, autonomy, and rights. This perpetuates the idea that sex work is not a “real” option for women but an outcome of coercion or corruption—and that legal interventions should work toward actively eradicating sex work in order to protect sex workers and society. Traditional moralistic convictions about women’s roles in society fuel the criminalization of sex work. This research may not be specific to sex work but may reveal how American media and policies frame women who defy gender stereotypes. These frames work to rationalize the systematic and historical dehumanization and agency-stripping of women in the US who threaten to defy traditional gender roles.

**Limitations**

News organizations in the dataset come from small and midsized towns, not major cities. These findings thus may not be not generalizable on a national or state-wide level. The use of newspapers and exclusion of other media forms may also skew the data; newspapers are not as common as they used to be. The dataset thus may not represent the framing incidence of sex workers in other media forms. Further, the use of different databases for California and Texas may result in unreliable findings. Specifically, the database used for news organizations in Texas, *America’s News*, contained more newspapers published in more recent years compared to Newspapers.com, which was used to find news organizations in California. Finally, there was an
uneven representation of each state in the dataset—there were more framing incidences that occurred in California than in Texas. This may result in an overrepresentation of one ideology over another in the dataset.

**Further Research**

There are many opportunities for future research. The research of the incidence of the framing of sex workers in major news organizations and the comparison with the results in this dataset could reveal whether large cities and small to mid-sized cities frame sex workers differently. Further, exploration of the framing of sex work in other forms of media, such as film and television, could create a more robust representation of how the public perceives sex work. Research could also be done on the working and living conditions of sex workers, either between states in the US or internationally. Such research could determine whether is a difference between states in the working and living conditions of sex workers or whether there exists a correlation between political ideology, which may inform media framing, and the conditions of sex workers’ lives. That question could be explored in different countries in order to see how sex work policy affects the lives of sex workers.

A similar study could be conducted on media framing incidences that occur in countries that decriminalize or partially decriminalize sex work. Such studies would show the correlation, or lack thereof, between the media framing of sex work and the policing of sex work. Other research could investigate the correlation between the framing of women who receive abortions or take contraceptives with the framing of sex workers in order to draw conclusions about how people perceive and frame the bodily autonomy of women. The framing of sex workers is just one indicator of political ideology; further research could consider other indicators of political ideology, such as the framing of reproductive rights, rights to privacy, homosexuality—
especially among female-identifying people, and sex reassignment surgery. The dominant frames of such issues can reveal how the US treats and portrays people who defy the social order and the underpinnings of such perceptions.

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Appendix

A. Representation of News Organizations

*Santa Cruz Sentinel* is a daily news organization, published in Santa Cruz, California and covering Santa Cruz County, California (“CNHI to Acquire 6 Dailies from Dow Jones,” 2006). Santa Cruz County has a population of about 262,382 and is located on the California Central Coast, south of the San Francisco Bay Area (“Santa Cruz County QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau,” n.d.). Citizens of Santa Cruz County mostly vote liberal, and residents tend to be well-educated (“Santa Cruz County QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau,” n.d.). 73.26 percent of Santa Cruz County’s population voted liberal in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

*The Ukiah Daily Journal* was published seven days a week until 2011, when it began a Tuesday-Sunday publication cycle. It is published in Ukiah, California, which has a population of 16,075. Ukiah, California is located near the Pacific Coast, in northern California’s Mendocino County. Ukiah is also a predominantly liberal city (“Census of Population and Housing,” n.d.). 58.23 percent of Mendocino County’s population voted liberal in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

The *Westwood Pine Press* is published in Westwood, California. Westwood, California has a population of 1,647 and is located in Northern California, near the California-Nevada state line. Its elected representatives in Congress are all conservative (“2010 Census Interactive Population Search: CA - Westwood CDP,” n.d.). Westwood is located in Lassen County, which had 70.79 percent of its population vote conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).
The Star-News is a news organization in Southern California which serves the cities in Southern California of Chula Vista, California, Bonita, California, and National City, California (“About the star-news,” n.d.). Its circulation is 33,500 weekly (“About the star-news,” n.d.). Chula Vista has an almost equal split between liberal and conservative voters (“Chula Vista in Perspective, Chapter 3,” n.d.). Bonita and National City both have liberal elected representatives in Congress. Both cities are located in San Diego County, which had 56.3 percent of its population vote liberal in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

Feather River Bulletin is published in Quincy, California and covers Plumas County, California, which has a population of 20,007 (“State & County QuickFacts,” n.d.). Quincy is located in northern California, near the California-Nevada state border. Residents of Quincy and Plumas County are primarily politically conservative (“State & County QuickFacts,” n.d.). 55.03 percent of residents in Plumas County voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

The Porterville Reporter is a news organization in Porterville, California. Porterville is located in southern California and has a population of 55,466. Its elected representatives in Congress are politically conservative (“America FactFinder – Results,” n.d.). Porterville is located in Tulare County, which had 51.09 percent of its population vote conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

Hood County News is a twice weekly news organization which serves Granbury and Hood County, Texas. Granbury, Texas is located in central Texas. Hood County News has a circulation of 22,998 (“Your Source for Local News and Advertising,” n.d.). Residents of Hood County, Texas have been predominantly conservative since 1980 (“State & County QuickFacts,”

_The Orange Leader_ is a twice weekly newspaper which serves Orange County, Texas and is published in Orange, Texas. It has a circulation of approximately 3,000 (Dirks, Van Essen & Murray, 2014). Orange, Texas is the easternmost city of Texas. Residents are predominantly conservative. 79.7 percent of Orange County’s population voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

_Big Spring Herald_ is a daily newspaper based in Big Spring, TX. It covers the Howard County area of West Texas and has a circulation of 3,951 (“Big Spring Herald,” n.d.). Residents are predominantly conservative. 76.09 percent of Howard County’s population voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

_Seguin Gazette-Enterprise_ is a daily newspaper based in Seguin, Texas. It covers Guadalupe County in Central Texas and has a circulation of 4,802 (Lykins, 2011). Residents are predominantly conservative. 52.1 percent of Guadalupe County’s population voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

The Huntsville Item is a daily newspaper based in Huntsville, Texas. It covers Walker County in East Texas and has a circulation of 5,506 daily (“The Huntsville Item,” n.d.). Residents of Walker County are predominantly conservative. 65.08 percent of Walker County residents voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

The Baytown Sun is a daily newspaper based in Baytown, Texas. Baytown is located within Harris County and partially in Chambers County in the Gulf Coast region of Texas, and is included in the Houston metropolitan area. It has a population of 85,000 (“State and County Quick Facts,” 2015). Harris County is a predominantly liberal county, with 53.95 percent of its population voting liberal in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).


Borger News-Herald is a daily newspaper based in Borger, Texas. It covers the Hutchinson County area of West Texas and has a circulation of 1,975 (Anderson, n.d.). Hutchinson County is predominantly conservative. 86.35 percent of its population voted conservative in the 2016 presidential election (“2016 Presidential General Election Results,” 2016).

These are all local news organizations in small to mid-sized cities, and they primarily circulate amongst people living in those particular cities or counties. Thus, the audiences are
limited, and not representative of the general population. These limitations of representation are primarily due to the lack of publishers that distribute licensing rights to online databases. These represent the publishers that online archives Newspapers.com and America’s News have rights to archive, and that published news organizations which satisfied the criteria for this dataset.