

## Introduction

### Toward a Better Understanding of Transgender Sex Work

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Small but significant numbers of individuals in the United States and worldwide experience or present themselves in ways that challenge cultural norms about sexuality and gender.<sup>1</sup> Sex assigned at birth for these individuals is inadequate or inappropriate for describing their feelings and sense of self. Some surgically alter their sexual anatomy and transition to the gender opposite their birth sex; some become committed to a gender different from their natal sex and dress in ways expressive of that gender; some derive personal and perhaps sexual satisfaction from wearing the apparel appropriate for a different sex; some define themselves along a continuum from maleness to femaleness; and some totally reject the binary gender system, and the very concept of gender, as applying to themselves. Those born as males who later experience or present themselves in feminine ways are often described as transgender women, or transwomen; those born as females who later experience or present themselves in masculine ways are often described as transgender men, or transmen.<sup>2</sup>

In the United States and increasingly around the world, all these individuals are now collectively described as transgender. The term arose in a political context to reflect the fact that these individuals, while diverse, nonetheless share histories of social oppression (Feinberg, 1996). Since the 1990s the term has been used by service providers to

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incorporate gender-nonconforming populations within a single mechanism for federal funding (Valentine, 2007); transgender studies have become a recognized field of study (Stryker, 2008); and the term is now embedded in popular culture.

*Transgender* has typically been defined and measured as incongruence between sex—understood as a biologically determined division of humans into males and females—and gender identity, understood as a psychologically determined division of humans into boys (men) and girls (women).<sup>3</sup> This formulation, while often used in research studies, is conceptually elusive (Thurer, 2005). The assumption that there are two mutually exclusive sexes that map (or fail to map) onto two mutually exclusive genders has been questioned in anthropological studies (Herdt, 1996; Nanda, 1999, 2014; Sinnott, 2004), and some scholars have described both sex and gender as socially constructed (Seidman, 2010) and historically variable (Foucault, 1990; Laqueur, 1990). Transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals may, indeed, be defined and understood in different ways around the world, but (following Feinberg) there is nonetheless considerable uniformity in the ways all these individuals are misunderstood and socially marginalized (Feinberg, 1996; Nanda, 2014).

Small but significant numbers of individuals in the United States and worldwide provide sexual services for material compensation as well as selling erotic performances and products (Weitzer, 2012).<sup>4</sup> Sex work includes direct physical contact between a buyer and seller as well as indirect sexual stimulation and may include emotional intimacy and companionship. Sex work may be negotiated and occur in different venues and social contexts, including streets and public spaces, parlors or residences known as places where sex may be purchased, hookups through message boards and the Internet, and various informal arrangements (Sanders, O'Neill, & Pitcher, 2009).

Terminology and social understanding about sex work (like transgender) vary across cultures and have been historically variable. At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, *sex work* was understood in moralistic terms as “prostitution” and often vaguely defined to include marital infidelity and other violations of monogamous sex in the context of marriage (Connelly, 1980). In the twenty-first century, this exchange is increasingly understood in economic terms as a transaction of sex for money among consenting adults. In contrast to prostitution, the term *sex*

*work* points to the skills, labor, emotional work, and physical presentation of sellers in the context of a commercial relationship.

Small but significant numbers of individuals in the United States and worldwide are both transgender and sex workers.<sup>5</sup> Given the diversity in transgender and sex work noted above, transgender sex workers should be regarded as highly heterogeneous populations that include different identities, modalities of operation, and provided services.

Numerous studies of transgender persons have been conducted that incorporate (primarily street-based) sex work as a correlate of mental health issues or HIV, but very few of these studies have focused on sex work as the primary variable of interest. The current volume is an initial attempt to systematically examine transgender sex work, and the issues associated with it, in the United States and around the world.

The first three chapters provide detailed descriptions of sex work among transwomen in New York City, in conjunction with theory that includes socioeconomic disadvantages, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and issues associated with urban poverty. Special issues associated with transgender sex work during adolescence and early adulthood are then described and compared across the United States and United Kingdom. Qualitative data pertaining to high-risk sexual behavior between transwomen and their cisgender partners are presented, followed by a current review of substance use among transgender sex workers. Issues associated with different forms of gender-related abuse are examined from different methodological perspectives and in different subpopulations. The extent to which observed associations of sex work with major depression and HIV/STI are mediated by abuse is investigated in some detail.

Subsequent chapters provide glimpses of transgender populations from around the world, including discussions of the extent to which these populations, in different cultural contexts, experience social adversity and health issues that may reflect this adversity. Approaches to the care and treatment of transgender sex workers are then discussed, with an emphasis on integrating multiple factors, including abuse, in these regimens. This volume concludes with examinations of public health compared to criminal justice perspectives on transgender sex work that include discussions bearing on the hotly debated topic of decriminalization.

All the contributors to this volume were confronted with conceptual and methodological challenges that include clearly defining the

populations under study and obtaining samples representative of broader transgender populations. Most of the chapters define transgender as a mismatch between natal sex and current gender identity, but this definition, while at the moment standard in research studies, may exclude those who totally reject the binary gender system. Probability samples of transgender populations are beginning to appear in the literature, but analytic studies examining the lifestyles and health of transgender populations have thus far been based on convenience or nonprobability community samples.

The book is divided into sections that reflect important themes and issues. Most of the chapters focus on transwomen sex workers, though there are some discussions, when relevant, pertaining to transgender male sex workers. Additional study is needed about the level of HIV risk in the latter population. There is some overlap in content, but the chapters may be read and understood independently.

## NOTES

1. The size of this population is largely unknown, but a household probability sample of adults in Massachusetts found that .5% of them could be described as transgender (Conron et al. 2012). This may be an undercount and may not reflect the full range of transgender as described here.
2. Such terminology may not include individuals who experience or present themselves in gender-neutral ways.
3. Current guidelines from the American Psychological Association (2015) define transgender as a mismatch between sex assigned at birth and gender identity, but these individuals are now described more broadly as transgender and gender-non-conforming people. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th edition) has likewise replaced Gender Identity Disorder, understood as a mismatch between assigned sex and gender identity, with Gender Dysphoria, understood as incongruence between gender expression and the gender that would be assigned by others (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
4. Estimates of female sex workers in different parts of the world range from .2% to 2.6% in Asia and .2% to 7.4% in Latin America (Vandepitte et al., 2006).
5. The size of this population is largely unknown; however, as is discussed throughout this book, significant numbers of transgender women are involved in the sex trade, and a significant percentage of sex workers appears to be transgender. In the red-light districts of Antwerp, Belgium, for example, 10% of the window workers have been described as transgender (Weitzer, 2012).

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