Psyche, Sex, & Society

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FEATURING

Sex Work, Industry, and Economy

MAGAZINE

In This Edition

5 **Clarifying Sex Work**

12 **Women's Sexuality**

13 **Woman Motivational**

14 **Madams in the Sex Work Industry**

21 **Eye Candy for The Ladies**

23 **Intimate Digital Arts (Visuals)**

25 **Erotic Arts (Visuals)**

27 **Should The United States Decriminalize Sex Work?**

Psyche, Sex, & Society

Founder & Editor-in-Chief

Nicole R. Goode, M.A., ABS (PsyD candidate)

Sexual labor is not confined to the sex industry; many women navigate it daily as they balance social respectability, domestic duties, and professional careers, yet they seldom attain true gender equality, intimacy, or sexual fulfillment with the men to whom they tether themselves.

From the Editor-in-Chief

Welcome to the seventh issue of *Psyche, Sex, & Society*. This edition dives headlong into one of the most contested, complex, and misunderstood topics of our time: sex work. More than a matter of commerce, sex work sits at the intersection of economy, morality, gender, and power. Here, we unpack the tangled realities shaping the industry and the laws that continue to define and confine it.

We begin by clarifying what sex work is—and what it is not. From that starting point, this issue invites readers into a deeper conversation about sex work as industry, economy, and cultural mirror. We highlight the legacies of notable madams and the sex work agencies they built—enterprises that, in many ways, pioneered models of worker protection, financial autonomy, and business innovation in spaces society preferred to keep hidden.

We also examine the contested terrain of regulation. Should sex work remain criminalized, as it is across most of the United States? Could partial decriminalization or full decriminalization provide better safeguards? Does legalization truly protect workers, or does it reinforce state control? Through these inquiries, we confront the stark reality that every policy model reflects not just attitudes toward sex work, but broader social anxieties about women's autonomy, sexuality, and economic power.

Yet the conversation cannot stop with those who identify as sex workers. This issue underscores how gender inequality and sexual labor are intertwined, revealing how even women outside the sex industry often perform forms of sexual labor in relationships and social negotiations without recognition, protection, or pay.

Taken together, these explorations challenge us to see sex work not as a marginal or illicit practice, but as a lens into the economic, gendered, and cultural forces that shape us all.

As ever, our mission is not to resolve the debate, but to deepen it—pushing past stereotypes, inviting critical thought, and refusing to look away from the intersections of psyche, sex, and society.

BY NICOLE R. GOODE, M.A., ABS (PSYD CANDIDATE)

Clarifying Sex Work

Photo by Adam Zubek-Nizol

Clarifying Sex Work:

Definitions, History, and Contemporary Manifestations

by Nicole R. Goode, M.A., ABS
(PsyD candidate)

Photo by WITTAYA ANGMUJCHA

Sex work, at its broadest, refers to the consensual provision of sexual services for compensation, including but not limited to money, goods, housing, or other forms of payment (Henslin, 2011; Woodhull Freedom Foundation, 2025). This article does not promote sex work but seeks to provide analysis and discussion. It offers a morally neutral, descriptive exploration of consensual, non-abusive, compensated sex work rooted in human dignity and rights.

Sexual labor is work.

What Sex Work Is and Isn't

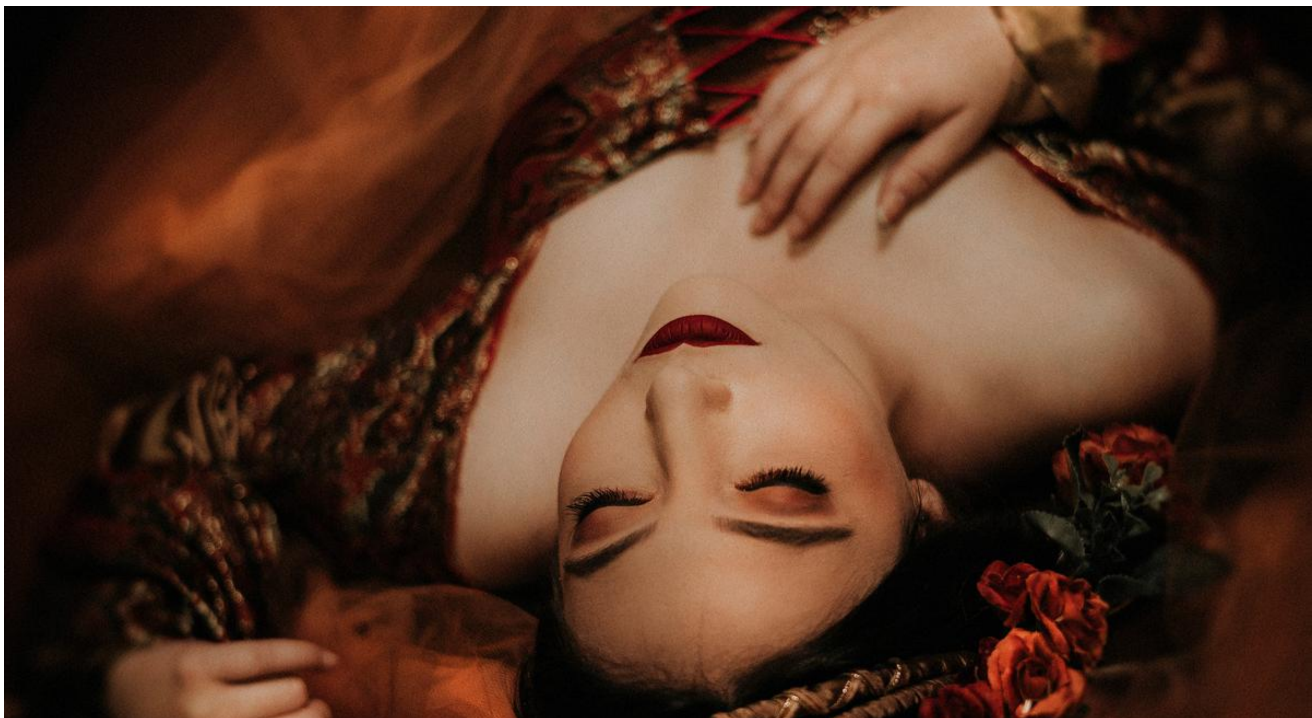
Sex work involves consensual, non-coercive, adult-partnered, compensated sexual activity. And consent in sex work is "always conditional on compensation; without payment, there is no consent" (Woodhull Freedom Foundation, 2025, para. 3).

Sex work does not include sex trafficking, where individuals—especially minors—are coerced, exploited, or manipulated into sexual activity. It is pivotal to emphasize that **minors cannot legally consent to prostitution or any sexual activity with an adult in the United States**.

"The World's Oldest Profession": Historical Roots

Prostitution is often dubbed "the world's oldest profession." Archaeological and textual evidence —from ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and beyond—suggests state-sanctioned or temple-linked sexual exchanges dating back millennia (Henslin, 2011). Both males and females were engaged in sexual labor, often in distinct social and economic contexts: women frequently participated in temple or ritual prostitution tied to religious or economic obligations, while males sometimes served in specialized sexual roles or as entertainers within elite or ritual settings (Henslin, 2011).

Although exact records vary, historians trace paid sexual labor as far back as the Code of Hammurabi (circa 1750 BCE) and ancient Greek sacred prostitution (Henslin, 2011). Over time, the framing—ritual, economic, or survival-driven—shifted, but the practice persisted culturally across civilizations, reflecting a deep-rooted intersection of sexuality, commerce, and societal structures. These historical patterns help contextualize contemporary perceptions of sex work, revealing how longstanding social, economic, and moral judgments—particularly those applied to women—continue to shape stigma, regulation, and public discourse around the profession today.



Contemporary Sex Work in the United States

Modern sex work in the U.S. manifests in diverse forms—from street-based work to indoor services, escorts, digital platforms, and more (Woodhull Freedom Foundation, 2025). Legal status varies by locality, with most jurisdictions criminalizing or semi-regulating it. Nevada is the only state where prostitution is legal and regulated in certain counties, while other states have varying laws that criminalize or partially decriminalize aspects of sex work (FindLaw, 2025). For instance, Maine decriminalizes the act of selling sex but criminalizes purchasing sex (Hirschkorn, 2023). This patchwork of laws demonstrates the complexity of the legal landscape in the U.S. and underscores the need for policy discussions that consider the safety, rights, and agency of sex workers.

Stigma against sex workers is often used as a justification to dehumanize and abuse them. Those persons seeking to harm or degrade individuals engaged in sexual labor are masking their own depravity.

Gendered Attitudes Toward Sex Workers

Women in sex work often face intense stigma, being portrayed as immoral, deviant, or victimized. This reductive binary—framing sex work as either entirely consensual or entirely coerced—obscures the nuanced realities of the profession, particularly regarding the spectrum of consent, agency, and autonomy (Woodhull Freedom Foundation, 2025). Such oversimplification not only misrepresents the experiences of women in the field but also reinforces societal narratives that justify their marginalization. The shaming and harsher penalization of women compared with men for providing sexual services reflects deeply entrenched gender norms and moral judgments (McKeever, 2025).

Heterosexual men involved in sex work are often subject to far less societal stigma. Their participation is frequently overlooked or normalized because it aligns with traditional notions of male sexuality, which valorize sexual activity and reward men for sexual experiences (Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022; McKeever, 2025). In many cases, heterosexual male sex work remains largely invisible and, when acknowledged, is rarely condemned to the same degree as female sex work.

Men engaged in sex work serving male clients, however, face a different form of stigma. While they may encounter social disapproval and homophobia, some male sex workers can access more accepting subcultures—such as within segments of the LGBTQ+ community—where their work is partially normalized or less heavily stigmatized (Siegel, Sundelson, Meunier, & Schrimshaw, 2022).

These differences highlight how gender, sexual orientation, and social context intersect to shape the lived experiences and societal reception of sex workers.

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Consumer Demand and "Unfulfilled Sexual Needs"

Sociologists have long argued that sex work fulfills consumer demand for intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and emotional connection. Dr. Kingsley Davis (1937, 1966) posited that prostitution serves multiple social purposes—providing economic means for sex workers while offering a sexual outlet for men dissatisfied within their relationships. He further suggested that such outlets could potentially lower divorce rates by providing a detached sexual alternative that does not directly threaten marital stability. Subsequent research has reinforced this view. Freund, Lee, and Leonard (1991) found that sex workers provide a necessary sexual outlet for certain clients, while Gemme (1993, as cited in Henslin, 2011), similarly framed sex work as a functional profession. Monto (2004) explored the dynamics of female prostitution, including customer motivations and associated violence, emphasizing sex work's role in meeting sexual needs. Dr. Elizabeth Bernstein (2001) expanded this understanding, noting that for some clients, interactions with sex workers extend beyond fleeting or purely transactional encounters to involve emotional connection and authenticity. In her later work, Temporarily Yours, Bernstein (2007) introduced the concept of "bounded authenticity," describing a contractual yet emotionally resonant form of intimacy negotiated between sex worker and client.

The social, emotional, and economic aspects of sex work echo patterns found in many marital relationships shaped by financial and sexual considerations. Thus, transactional intimacy is not unique to commerce or the sex industry but also underpins many marriages and socially acceptable romantic relationships.

Transactional Marriage as a Form of Sex Work?

There are marriages mirroring the characteristics of transactional sex. Wives have historically performed a form of sexual labor within marriage, since intimacy has often been embedded in economic and social exchange rather than treated solely as personal desire. Feminist scholars assert that marital sex has functioned as a gendered labor contract, wherein sexual availability is expected in exchange for financial support, household security, or social legitimacy (Coontz, 2005; Zelizer, 2005). This contextualization positions marital intimacy as a form of unwaged sexual labor, particularly under patriarchal norms that constructed sex as part of a wife's duty (Delphy, 2016). Scholars of sexuality and labor maintain that this dynamic blurs the boundary between marriage and sex work, insofar as both involve the commodification of women's sexual and emotional labor under systems of gendered power (Pateman, 1988; Brown, 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish that in contemporary contexts, sexual intimacy within marriage may also function as a mutual expression of chosen desire, transcending its historical role as labor.

Ultimately, as long as Eurocentric patriarchal structures persist, many women may engage in sexual relationships or sexual labor to secure sustenance at varying levels, reflecting the enduring intersections of gender, power, and economic dependence.

Conclusion

Examining sex work through multiple sociological lenses reveals the complexity of the profession. From a functionalist perspective, Davis (1937, 1966) highlighted that sex work serves important societal functions, including providing income, offering sexual outlets, and contributing to marital stability. In contrast, conflict and feminist theories emphasize the structural inequalities that drive individuals into sex work, illustrating how poverty and patriarchal norms perpetuate economic disparities, objectification, and broader social inequities (Henslin, 2011). Symbolic interactionism focuses on the shared meanings constructed between sex workers and clients, noting that many workers view themselves as offering services beyond physical sex, such as companionship and emotional support (Henslin, 2011). Taken together, these structural and cultural insights illuminate the multifaceted nature of sex work, demonstrating that its economic, social, and emotional dimensions defy simplistic moral binaries.

Understanding sex work through these intersecting perspectives challenges reductive judgments and calls for policies and cultural attitudes that recognize the humanity, agency, and rights of those engaged in sexual labor.

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Additional Recommended (Non-Scholarly) Readings:

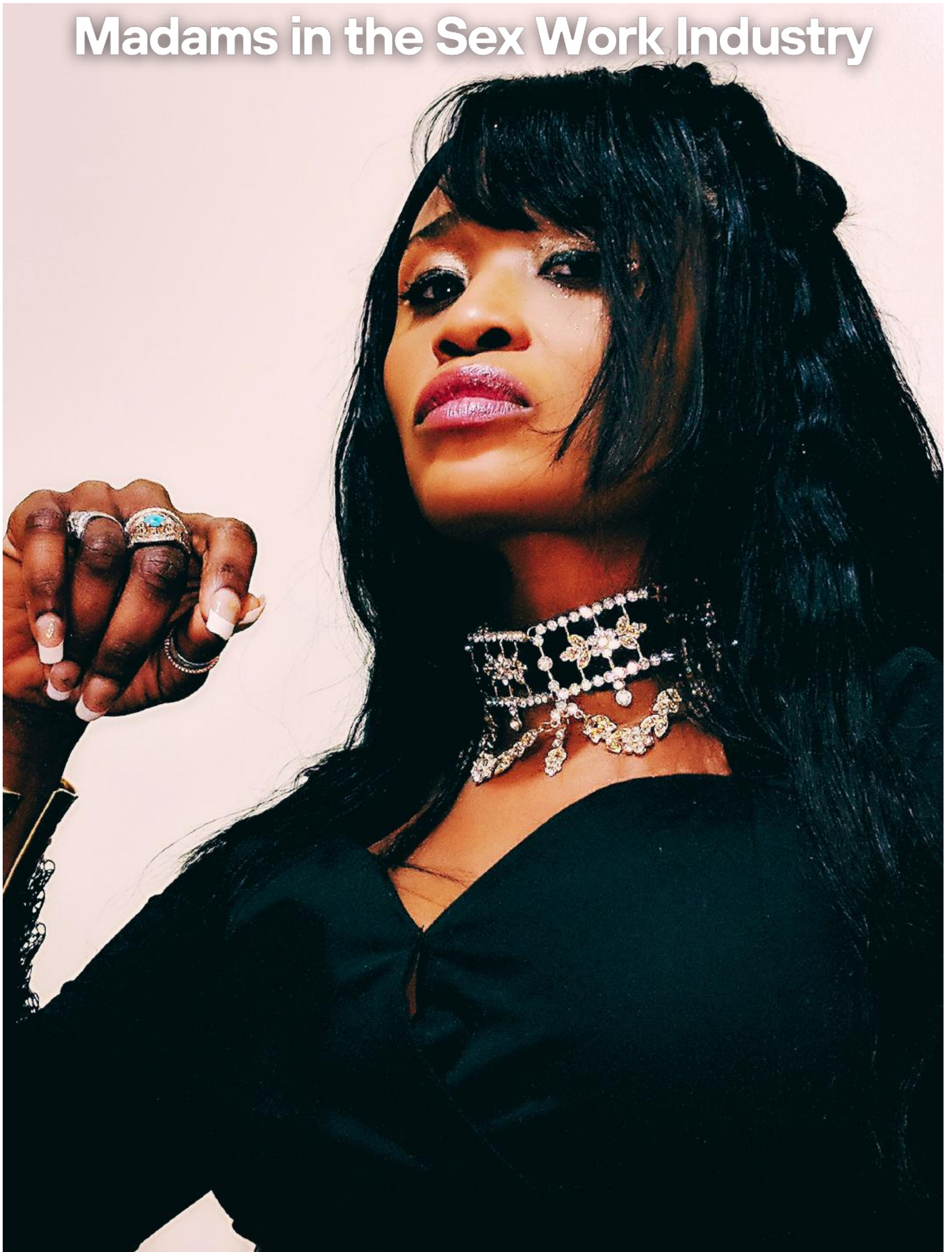
- https://medium.com/@NicoleRGoodeMA/what-is-the-difference-between-a-courtesan-a-concubine-a-prostitute-a-mistress-a-side-chick-09aa2a4f9466
- https://medium.com/@NicoleRGoodeMA/what-is-the-difference-between-secular-prostitution-sacred-holy-prostitution-and-sacred-sex-2a4f88cd2079

Women's Sexuality

Woman Motivational

BY NICOLE R. GOODE, M.A., ABS (PSYD CANDIDATE)

Madams in the Sex Work Industry



Madams in the Sex Work Industry:
Roles, Agency, and Clientele

by Nicole R. Goode, M.A., ABS
(PsyD candidate)

Madams have historically functioned as intermediaries who recruit, screen, and negotiate services between sex workers and clients. Their role often parallels that of a procuring agent, though definitions vary across legal jurisdictions. In elite settings, madams maintained discretion, curated client lists, and managed operations in ways that suggest both agency and organizational control, as seen in Madam Alex's two-decade Beverly Hills operation, where she earned substantial commissions by overseeing up to 150 women and charging large sums (Kornbluth, 1989, 1995).

Madams are not merely managers of sex work enterprises: they are businesswomen—Chief Executive Sexual Liaison Officers.

Are Madams Safer for Sex Workers?

Some madams, such as Madam Alex, stressed client screening, worker support, and long-term financial planning, positing a structure that could potentially be safer and fairer than independent street work. She also emphasized cultivating educated, articulate women: “I never sent girls to weirdos,” she stated, adding that she advised women about burnout and saving, referring to her establishments as “an honorable way station” (Kornbluth, 1989). Likewise, Sally Stanford paid her workers generous shares (around 60 %) and actively protected them, maintaining favorable relations with local officials that often safeguarded her enterprises (Alexandra, 2018). These practices, however, coexisted with the risk of criminal disruption, exploitation, and social stigma, as evidenced by the legal downfall of Heidi Fleiss despite her initial success (Hubler & Zamichow, 1994; Hubler, 1997; Helling, 2017).

High-End Clientele and Prestige Branding

Across eras, madams have cultivated high-end clientele by providing discretion, ambiance, exclusivity, and elite branding. Heidi Fleiss famously earned her first million within four months of taking over and catered to celebrities and wealthy patrons (Helling, 2017). Madam Alex similarly commanded up to $2,000 per engagement, focusing on cultured interactions with affluent Middle Eastern clients that emphasized conversation over mere appearance, maintaining an aura of refinement and protection (Kornbluth, 1989, 1995). Sally Stanford’s establishments were known for their elegance and hosted celebrities like Humphrey Bogart and Errol Flynn, drawing clients through charm and opulent settings (Alexandra, 2018).

These contemporary examples reflect a lineage of madams who combined business acumen with social strategy, providing a profitable framework that procurers within the sex work industry can implement to ensure decency, dignity, safety, and order for everyone involved.

Notable Figures in Sex Work History

From the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, several madams established precedents in discretion, client management, and operational sophistication that continue to inform contemporary sex work enterprises. However, we will explore only a few of them more closely, such as:

- **Heidi Fleiss (1990s, Los Angeles)**

Rising under Madam Alex's tutelage, Fleiss swiftly established her own high-end escort ring. Reportedly, Charlie Sheen paid over $50,000; and Fleiss could earn up to $97,000 in commission per night (Singer, 1993; Helling, 2017). Sex workers under Fleiss could earn well, especially top-tier escorts, but the overall system prioritized profit for the madam, and pay varied widely depending on status and clientele. Her operation crumbled under pandering and tax evasion charges, resulting in prison time (Hubler & Zamichow, 1994; Hubler, 1997; Helling, 2017).

- **Madam Alex (Elizabeth Adams; 1970s–1980s, Los Angeles)**

Known for discretion and elite clientele, she reportedly employed 150 women and earned about $100,000 monthly by charging up to $2,000 per day, especially serving Middle Eastern patrons (Kornbluth, 1989, 1995). Like many high-end madams, she took a substantial cut of the earnings, often standard for agency-style operations. Nonetheless, experienced and elite escorts earned more per engagement, though less than the revenue retained by Madam Alex herself. The work environment was as organized, hierarchical, and disciplined, with clear expectations and rules. She often referred to her employees as "creatures," signaling her management style and the formalized operational structure (Kornbluth, 1989). Madam Alex's model provided sex workers with high earning potential and relatively safer working conditions, especially compared to street-based sex work. Madam Alex's sex work business gradually declined in the 1990s due to legal scrutiny, changing social norms, and competition from newer high-end escort services, including Heidi Fleiss's operation (Kornbluth, 1995). She eventually retired from the industry, closing her elite escort service. Her later years focused on maintaining privacy and a low profile outside the spotlight of her former profession.

- **Sally Stanford (1940s–1950s, San Francisco → Sausalito)**

Operating upscale brothels in San Francisco's Tenderloin and Nob Hill—including a marble-lined mansion—she paid her workers 60% of earnings, safeguarded them from law enforcement through connections, and later transitioned into politics, becoming mayor of Sausalito (Alexandra, 2018). Stanford emphasized refinement, etiquette, and client satisfaction, which provided sex workers with a professional and relatively secure working environment (Alexandra, 2018).

- **Josie Arlington (Early 1900s, New Orleans)**

Born Mary Deubler, she built one of the most lavish brothels in Storyville, dubbed the Arlington. It was celebrated as "the most decorative and costly fitted out sporting palace," employing luxury to attract elite patrons. Her business inspired significant real estate acquisitions and wealth accumulation (The Historic New Orleans Collection, n.d.; Long, 2011). Her business ended when Storyville, New Orleans' legalized red-light district was shut down by federal authorities in 1917. After the closure, Arlington retired from sex work and focused on managing her personal affairs (Long, 2011).

- **Lulu White (Late 1800s–Early 1900s, New Orleans)**

Known as the "Diamond Queen," White established the opulent Mahogany Hall in Storyville, featuring marble, multiple parlors, and a mirror-lined décor. As a self-made Creole madam, she defied segregation by embracing "octoroon" branding and hiring racially diverse staff, navigating respectability politics through savvy entrepreneurship (Landau, 2011; Neff, 2022). Sex workers were paid a portion of client fees, but the majority of profits went to White, who maintained strict financial control. White emphasized decorum, elegance, and client satisfaction, creating a highly organized environment for her employees (Landau, 2011). Similar to Josie Arlington, Lulu White's brothel closed after the federal government shut down Storyville in 1917, ending legalized prostitution in the district. She later lived out her years away from the sex work industry (Landau, 2011).

Conclusion

Madams have historically shaped the professionalism, structure, and profitability of the sex work industry, demonstrating that organized management can balance discretion, safety, and high-end service. Among the examples discussed, Sally Stanford's approach stands out: by allocating up to 60% of client fees to her workers, she provided a framework that not only ensured safety and dignity but also empowered sex workers to live comfortably, save, and invest for the future (Alexandra, 2018). While contemporary high-end madams like Heidi Fleiss offered lucrative opportunities through elite clientele and structured operations, the majority of profits remained with the madam, limiting long-term financial stability for most workers (Helling, 2017; Kornbluth, 1989, 1995). Stanford's model, by contrast, demonstrates the potential for a sex work agency that maximizes earnings, safeguards employees, and enables sustainable financial independence—an ideal blueprint for ethical, profitable, and worker-centered sex work today.

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Eye Candy for the Ladies

Photo by Paul

Eye Candy for The Ladies

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Intimate Digital Art

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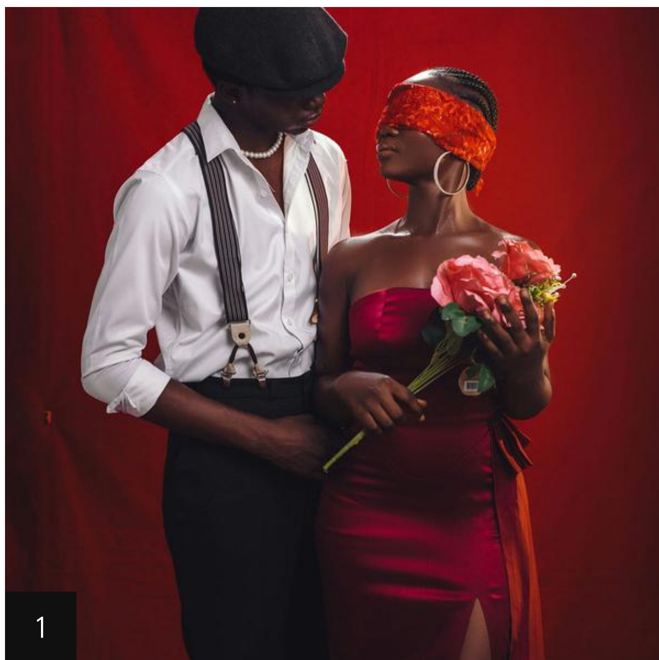
Erotic Arts

CURATED AND TITLED BY NICOLE R. GOODE, M.A., ABS (PSYD CANDIDATE)



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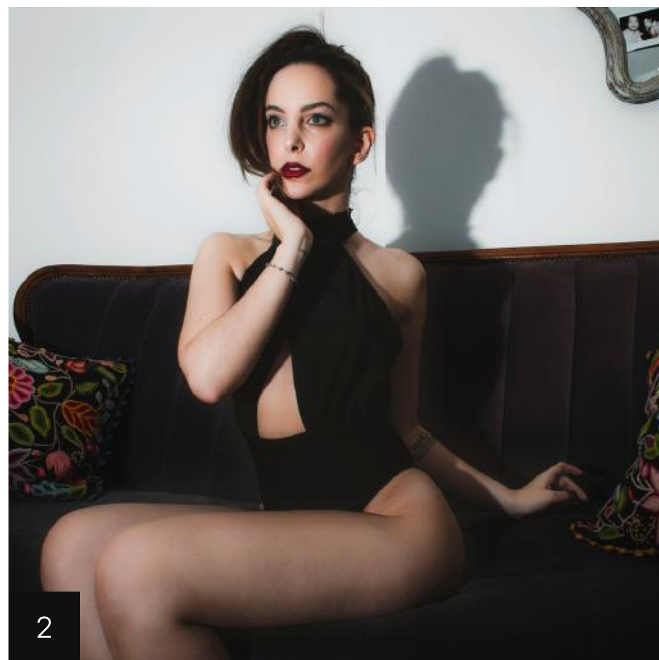

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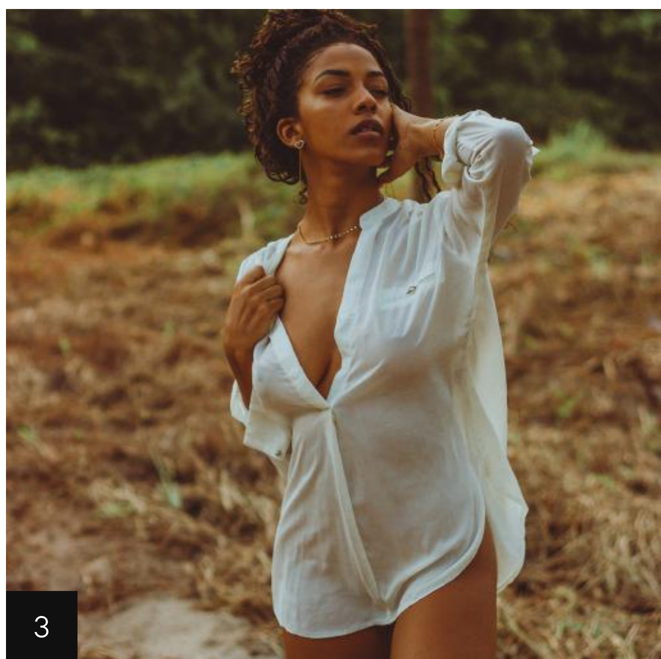

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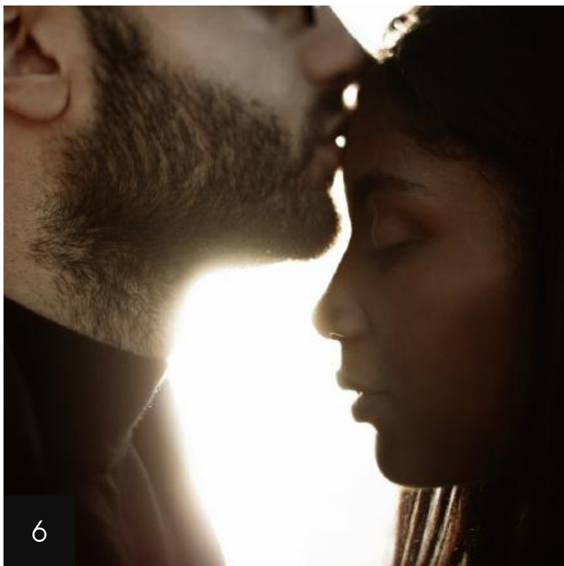

1 **Trust Me**

Photo by Godfred Kwakye on Unsplash

2 **Pose**

Photographer unknown

3 **Earth Tone**

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4 **Bare**

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5 **Midnight Ballerinas**

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6 **Forehead Kiss**

Photographer unknown

7 **Relax With Me**

Photographer unknown

Should the United States Decriminalize Sex Work?

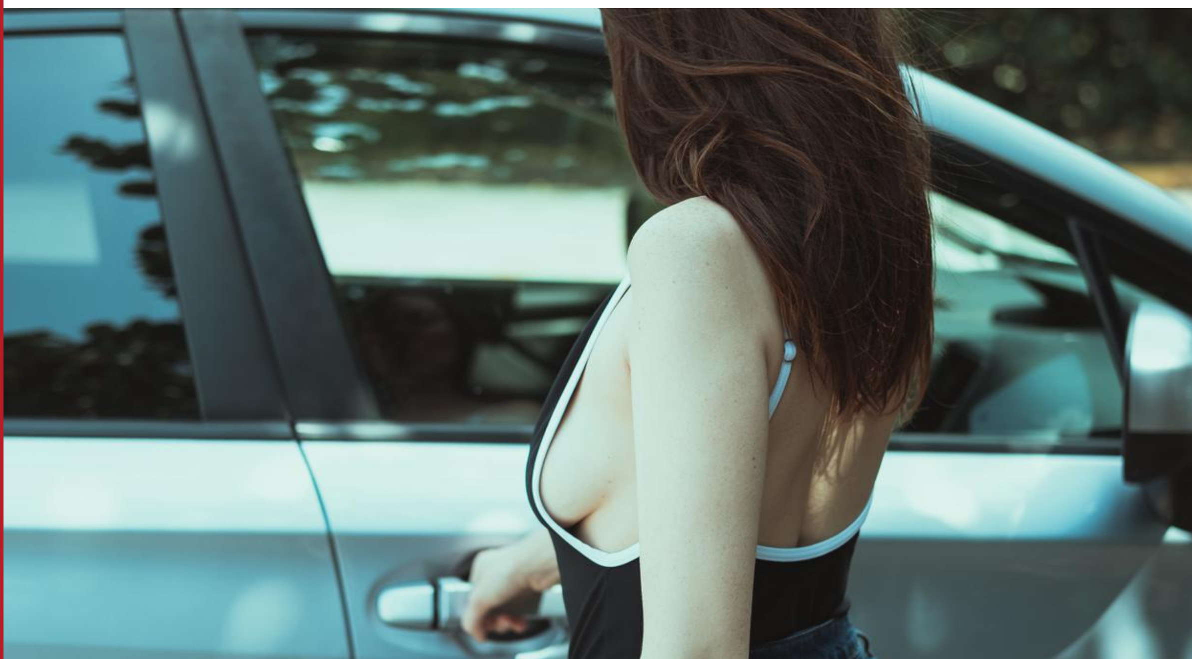
By Nicole R. Goode, M.A., ABS (PsyD candidate)

Should the United States Decriminalize Sex Work?

By Nicole R. Goode, M.A., ABS (PsyD candidate)

In the U.S., sex work remains criminalized in nearly every state, and this legal environment has serious consequences. Research shows that when sex work is criminalized, sex workers are almost three times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence compared to those in settings with supportive laws (Platt et al., 2018). Criminalization also heightens health risks, making workers more vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, partly because laws and policing practices often discourage condom use or make safer work environments harder to access (Platt et al., 2018).

For many sex workers, especially those who are migrants, transgender, or working indoors, fear of arrest keeps them from reporting abuse or turning to police for protection. Instead of being safeguarded, they often encounter harassment, exploitation, or dismissal when seeking help (McBride et al., 2020; Struyf, 2023). This creates a cycle where violence goes unreported and unpunished, leaving sex workers more isolated and at risk. Across different contexts worldwide, evidence consistently shows that when the law treats sex work as a crime, it pushes the industry into the shadows, where both violence and health risks multiply.

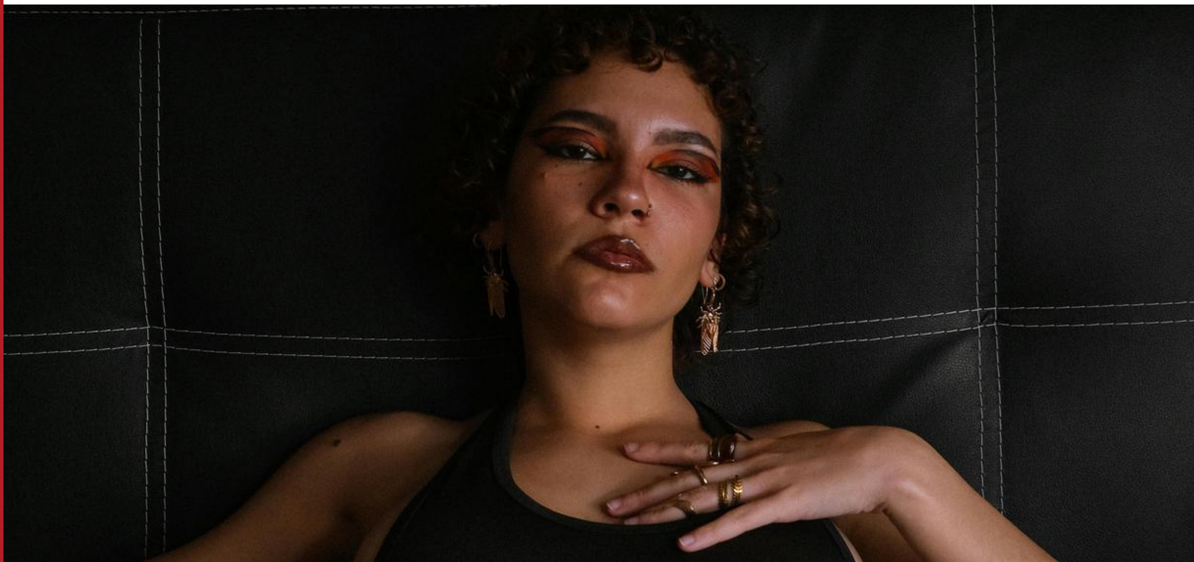


The Nordic or “End-Demand” Model

One increasingly discussed approach is the Nordic Model, sometimes called “partial decriminalization” or the “end-demand” model. Under this system, selling sex is not a crime, but buying sex is. Advocates argue that punishing buyers reduces demand and ultimately protects women from exploitation. In practice, though, the picture is much more complicated.

Research from countries like France shows that criminalizing clients often forces sex workers into more hidden or dangerous locations to meet the shrinking pool of customers (Le Bail & Giametta, 2019). When clients face arrest, they demand quicker negotiations, making it harder for workers to screen for safety or insist on condom use (Lowery, 2025). To keep clients, many sex workers also lower their rates, which reduces their earnings and bargaining power (Le Bail & Giametta, 2019). Instead of making sex work safer, the model frequently pushes it deeper into the shadows.

The consequences are visible in violence rates. After France adopted the Nordic Model, surveys showed that 42 percent of sex workers reported increased exposure to violence and 38 percent said negotiating condom use had become more difficult (Le Bail & Giametta, 2019). Evidence from other countries points to similar outcomes: rather than decreasing exploitation, the model heightens risks by creating more secrecy and instability (Lowery, 2025).



Full Decriminalization

By contrast, full decriminalization removes criminal penalties for both buyers and sellers, as long as all parties are consenting adults. This approach has been in place in New Zealand since 2003, and the evidence there is striking. Workers report better safety, stronger autonomy, and improved relationships with health and social services (Armstrong & Abel, 2020). With fewer legal barriers, they are more likely to report abuse, refuse unsafe clients, and build peer networks for support.

Public health research also highlights the benefits. One study found that decriminalization in Rhode Island was linked to a 40 percent drop in gonorrhea rates among women and a 30 percent decrease in reported rapes (Cunningham & Shah, 2018). Global modeling suggests that full decriminalization could cut new HIV infections among sex workers and clients by half over a ten-year period (Shannon et al., 2015). By lifting criminal penalties, decriminalization makes space for harm reduction, workplace protections, and dignity.

Legalization

Another approach is legalization, which allows sex work but under strict regulations. In some countries this means mandatory licensing, health checks, zoning restrictions, or bans on migrant participation. Legalization can bring some improvements, such as safer working conditions in licensed brothels and reduced rape rates in certain contexts (A-Mark Foundation, 2023).

But legalization is far from perfect. Strict regulations often exclude the most marginalized sex workers—especially migrants, undocumented people, and those unable to comply with licensing fees or health requirements (Weitzer, 2017). This creates a two-tiered system: those who can operate legally benefit from protections, while those left outside remain criminalized and vulnerable. In Germany, for example, legalization reduced murders of sex workers, but attempted murders increased, revealing mixed outcomes (A-Mark Foundation, 2023).

Which Model Works Best?

Looking at the evidence, the Nordic Model seems to fall short of its intentions. While it aims to protect workers by targeting clients, it often reduces income, increases secrecy, and heightens exposure to violence. Legalization offers some safety benefits, but its rigid rules often exclude those most at risk. Full decriminalization, on the other hand, consistently shows the strongest improvements in safety, health, and dignity.

For the United States, where sex workers remain heavily criminalized, the lessons are clear. Full decriminalization not only reduces violence and health risks but also supports human rights and labor protections. By shifting away from punitive laws and toward supportive structures, the U.S. could move closer to ensuring that sex workers are not treated as criminals, but as people entitled to safety, dignity, and justice.

Conclusion

Decriminalizing sex work in the United States is only the first step toward ensuring safety, dignity, and fairness for sex workers. Legal reform must be accompanied by structural supports that address the broader conditions of labor and wellbeing. Universal healthcare access is essential, allowing sex workers to receive medical care, mental health services, and sexual health resources without fear of stigma or financial burden. Establishing a sexual labor union could guarantee equitable pay, ensuring that workers employed by an agency, brothel, or third party retain at least 50% of their earnings while having access to safe, clean housing, utilities, and personal security.

Protections against abuse and violence must be enforceable by law, with mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable, whether clients, managers, or others. Occupational safety standards, including access to security personnel and safe workspaces, would further protect workers from harm. Referring to sex workers as sexual connoisseurs can help destigmatize their work. This terminology may reframe people's perception of their inherent humanity and worth, and in turn reduce mistreatment and social shaming. By combining decriminalization with robust labor rights, social services, legal protections, and cultural reframing, the United States can move beyond criminalization toward a model that truly respects sex workers' autonomy, safety, and human dignity.

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