

**Accounting for and managing risk in sex work:  
A study of female sex workers in Hong Kong**

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Nga Yan Cheung hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: *Olive Cheung*

Date: 18 March 2011

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers how in the course of their work female sex workers in Hong Kong experience risk. It concerns the indoor side of the sex market, an area which has so far been largely ignored in studies on commercial sex. The focus is on women working independently from flats. Focusing on women's own accounts of work-related risks, risky behaviour and coping strategies, this study investigates sex workers' reflexive understandings of prostitution and their occupational risk in late modern societies. The study emphasises the social, cultural, interactional and situational context, to understand the ways in which women involved in sex work conceptualise and respond to risk.

There are three main themes emerge in sex workers' accounts. The first one is sexual health and diseases. In this empirical chapter, the main focus is on the flat-working women's accounts of themselves and their risk-taking (or risk-avoiding) behaviour in (potentially) risky situations, where, for example, unprotected sex has occurred. The findings suggest that, despite sex workers are being frequently seen as most susceptible to sexual health problems, the social norms which exist among sex workers and their clients play a crucial role in enabling sex workers to gain control over the sexual encounter and avoid risk behaviour.

The next theme is violence against sex workers. Findings suggest that what violent crime symbolises in the context of sex work is that some women are beneath contempt because of their working identity. It is more "acceptable" to perpetrate violence against sex workers because this group is set apart from women in other service occupations.

The last theme is concerned with sex workers' accounts of their emotional experiences at work, which mainly explores how social and cultural factors influence individuals' interpretation and accounts of their emotions. Accounts given by women demonstrate that many of them seemingly did not conceive their involvement in the sex business as "wrong". Nevertheless, because sex work is still largely marginalised and stigmatised in Chinese societies, they might experience unpleasant emotions which were mostly related to the "whore" stigma.

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## Glossary

<i>Ah-gu</i>	阿姑	Women working from brothels in 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Hong Kong
<i>Bak-gu</i>	北姑	Literally, 'Northern girls', Mainland Chinese female sex workers
<i>Changsan</i>	長衫	Ordinary prostitutes who provided sexual services in exchange for money in 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Shanghai
<i>Fei-ge-coeng</i>	飛機場	Literally 'airports', massage parlours which offer sexual services such as hand relief
<i>Gail</i>	雞	Literally 'chickens', female sex workers
<i>Gei-neoi</i>	妓女	Female prostitutes
<i>Gei<sup>1</sup></i>	妓	Prostitutes
<i>Gei<sup>2</sup></i>	伎	Female artists
<i>Ha-baau</i>	口爆	Ejaculation into the mouth
<i>Jat-lau-jat-fung</i>	一樓一鳳	One-woman brothel
<i>Ngaan-se</i>	顏射	Ejaculation on the face
<i>Ngai</i>	藝	Art



<i>Ngai-gei</i> <sup>3</sup>	藝伎	Female artists (women who were trained in music and dancing with the aim to provide entertainment)
<i>To-dei</i>	陀地	Literally ‘local girls’, Hong Kong female sex workers
<i>Seoi-haak</i>	衰客	Bad Clients
Shek Tong Tsui West	塘西	The well-known red-light district of the nineteenth century Hong Kong
<i>Shuyu</i> <sup>4</sup>	書寓	Courtesans in the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Shanghai
<i>Sing-gung-zok</i>	性工作	Sex work
<i>Sing-gung-zok-ze</i>	性工作者	Sex workers
<i>Ze-mui</i> <sup>5</sup>	姊妹	When literally translated, <i>Ze-mui</i> means “sisters”, which is widely used by female sex workers to address their colleagues.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See note 2 in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See note 2 in Chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> See note 1 in Chapter 2.

<sup>4</sup> See note 3 in Chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> See note 4 in Chapter 8.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The metaphysics of male sexual domination is that women are whores. This basic truth transcends all lesser truths in the male system. One does not violate something by using it for what it is: neither rape nor prostitution is an abuse of the female because in both the female is fulfilling her natural function; that is why rape is absurd and incomprehensible as an abusive phenomenon in the male system and so is prostitution, which is held to be voluntary even when the prostitute is hit, threatened, drugged, or locked in.

(Dworkin 1981, p.203–204)

What I hate most of all is the idea that we are all victims. That's what we are trying to change in society: the idea that every woman who is a hooker is a victim. We are not woman who hate men, we're not women who have been beaten up by our parents, that's not what we are at all.

(Jasmin 1993, p.34)

### Introduction

This thesis considers how in the course of their work female sex workers in Hong Kong experience risk. It concerns the indoor side of the sex market, an area which has so far been largely ignored in studies on commercial sex (Weitzer 2000; Sanders 2005a). The focus is on women working independently from flats, commonly known in Hong Kong as *jat-lau-jat-fung* (一樓一鳳), which is most often translated as “one-woman brothel” (see p.148 for further discussion). Focusing on women's own accounts of work-related risks, risky behaviour and risky coping strategies, this study investigates sex workers' reflexive understandings of prostitution and their occupational risk in late modern societies. The study emphasises the social, cultural, interactional and situational context, to understand the ways in which women involved in sex work conceptualise and respond to risk. In order to establish a context for discussion, the present chapter begins with a broad overview of the sex industry in Hong Kong. Then it moves to a brief discussion of the established association between sex and risk in the existing literature, and how far the occupational risks of sex work are conceptualised

in the related literature. The final part describes the way in which the thesis is structured and provides the key themes and content of each chapter.

### **Why choose Hong Kong as the site of research?**

In this study, Hong Kong is chosen as the site of research because of its specific historical background. The city was once a British colony. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2, during the colonial period Britain played a significant role in shaping the meanings of prostitution and consequently the policy response to this activity in Hong Kong. The main prostitution laws were established when this city was under colonial rule. The city became a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China after the transfer of sovereignty in 1997, but no significant changes in the prostitution laws have been made. As a result, current official conceptions and understandings of prostitution in Hong Kong are similar to the conceptions and responses to it in Britain. Therefore, Hong Kong should serve as an interesting example to illustrate how dominant Western ideas of prostitution affect the ways in which the issue is conceived in a Chinese context.

As further explained in Chapter 3 and 4, while there is a substantive body of literature on commercial sex contributed by Western scholars, the lives of East Asian women have received little attention (Jackson *et al.* 2008). Women from "the poor" nations such as Thailand are more likely to attract concern, because prostitution is widely conceived as a "problem" of "the poor" nations. Conversely, hitherto there has been only a limited body of the documented experiences of sex workers neither from the "First World" nor from the "Third World", such as those in East Asia including Hong Kong.

The consequent changes in policy for Mainland residents visiting Hong Kong after 1997 has resulted in the relaxation of the border between the two regions. By situating Hong Kong's experience as part of the global trend of women migrating to engage in commercial sex in a foreign city, this study attempts to shed light on female sex workers' understanding of sex work and its related risks in a non-Western culture, an area which has received

relatively little attention in the related literature to date. One of the aims of this study is to attempt to fill this void.

### **Selling and buying sexual services in Hong Kong**

As in other big cities, prostitution makes up a disproportionately large segment of the informal economy of Hong Kong. The official estimates of the number of people involved in selling or buying sex are not available because of the lack of data on the number of resident sex workers and of illegal migrant sex workers (Ng 2004). Despite this, the fragmentary evidence that does exist suggests that prostitution is a significant phenomenon in Hong Kong. In 1997, Chow (1999) conducted a telephone survey and calculated that 14% of respondents (n=32,6297) aged 18 to 60 years had had experience of buying sex. On the basis of Chow's (1999) findings, Wong and Wun (2003) estimated that about 300,000 males engaged in paid-for sex and the total population involved in commercial sex, including those working in the sex industry, exceeded half a million at the time that the survey was conducted. Drawing on data from nine HIV behavioural surveillance surveys carried out from 1998 to 2010, Lau and his colleagues estimated that 275,000 male adults have visited sex workers (Lau & Siah 2001), or approximately 12% to 14% of men in Hong Kong had purchased sexual services in 1998 (Lau & Tsui 2003b). The estimated number of clients dropped to 190,000 people, or approximately 8% to 9% of male population in 2010 (Lau *et al.* 2010).

Though the population of men who visit sex workers has decreased in recent years, this phenomenon is significant in Chinese societies; the number is relatively high there compared with the West. For example, findings of the *National Health and Social Life Survey* in 1992 suggest that 16% of men in the United States had ever paid for sex, but only 0.6% of men visited sex workers each year (Monto 2000). A study on sexual behavior in Britain found that among the 8,384 men surveyed, 6.8% of them had paid for sex, and 1.8% of them had purchased sex within previous year (Wellings *et al.* 1994). Similar findings were reported by Knox *et al.* (1993): 7% of the 1,200 male

respondents had the experiences of buying sex; Johnson *et al.* (2001) found that 4.3% of 4762 male respondents reported that they paid for heterosexual and/or homosexual sex in past five years.

A survey carried out in 1999 and 2000 by the Social Hygiene Service and the AIDS units of the Hong Kong Department of Health calculated that there were over 200,000 sex workers in the city. The figure relied on a newspaper article published in 1993. In their report, Chan and his colleagues (2002) criticised the assertion that “the estimated total number of 200,000 female sex workers in Hong Kong, made by the media, may be an underestimation” (p.818). The figure has been widely cited (for example, see AFRO 2007; Ho 2001; Holroyd *et al.* 2008; Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006; Wong *et al.* 2008; Wong & Wun 2003), but it appears to be problematic in the sense that the author of the original newspaper article reported that, according to police sources, there were an estimated total of 20,000 female sex workers in Hong Kong at the time (Cook 1993). In 2004, a semi-official report cited the data provided by a non-governmental organization (NGO) and estimated that at any one time there were at least 10,000 female sex workers in Hong Kong (Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006). Considering the fact in the last two decades, that there has been a noticeable rise in the number of migrant sex workers (see p.15 for further details), I would argue that this number is likely to be an incomplete estimate. Like other hidden and hard-to-reach populations, realistic estimates of the whole population can be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, as it further discusses below, an estimation of the population of flat-working women is made in this present study (see p.19).

### **The sex industry in Hong Kong**

The following sections outline the pattern of the sex industry and the characteristics of women involved in commercial sex. As suggested above, only a few official records exist of the organisation of the sex industry. Existing data, including those presented here, were mostly collected from female attendees at the Government Social Hygiene Clinics<sup>6</sup> (for example, Chan *et al.* 2002; Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006). These public

sector clinics provide Hong Kong residents with free and confidential medical consultation services, including the screening, investigation and management of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The Social Hygiene Services and the AIDS units of the Hong Kong Department of Health have been carrying out regular surveillance on female sex workers. They have obtained information about the commercial sex markets by inviting female attendees to voluntarily participate in surveys.

It should be noted that the findings derived from these investigations are by no means conclusive. Among the limitations of these data are reporting bias from the female attendees, findings which rely on self-reporting measures and the dubious representativeness of the samples. Nevertheless, the available data still suggest a number of trends which provide a context for the later discussion in this chapter of women working in indoor settings, flats in particular.

### ***Sex work as a stratified business***

As in other places, the sex industry in Hong Kong is multi-faceted and complex. The findings of Chan *et al.* (2002) suggest that the most common workplaces of the attendees at the Social Hygiene Clinics were the karaoke nightclubs (32.0% in 1999 compared with 32.6% in 2000), clubs (8.95% in 1999 compared with 11.7% in 2000), one-woman brothels (8.6% in 1999 compared with 9.0% in 2000) and massage parlours (7.0% in 1999 compared with 8.1% in 2000). The distributions of the workplace of sex workers who attended the Social Hygiene clinics for the first time in 2004 (Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006) were similar to 1999 and 2000 (Chan *et al.* 2002). The findings suggest a typology of sex markets in Hong Kong. For example, Wong *et al.* (1996) explore the pattern of various forms of commercial sex establishments or activities and suggest that the sex economy in Hong Kong can be divided into eight distinct markets: villas/apartments, one-woman brothels, karaoke bars/nightclubs, massage parlours, street sex work, private brothels, call centres and escort companies (in descending order of prevalence).

What needs to be highlighted is that although most of the female attendees who were involved in prostitution worked from karaoke bars/nightclubs, this does not necessarily mean that this sex market was more prevalent in Hong Kong. There seems to be a bias in data in the sense that non-resident sex workers might choose not to use the Social Hygiene clinics. In April 2003, a charging policy was imposed on non-Hong Kong residents. Since then individuals who do not hold a valid and relevant Hong Kong resident identity document are charged HK\$1,400 (approximately £108)<sup>7</sup> for using the services of the Social Hygiene Clinics. It is possible that illegal or transient sex workers, who often work from other types of sex establishment such as villas (see p. 18), do not attend the Social Hygiene clinics because of the introduction of this charging policy (Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006; Wong *et al.* 2006a).

The sex markets listed above are different not only in terms of organizational structure and working practices but consequently also the level of the women's exposure to risk (Sanders 2005a). It is evident in previous research that sex workers work in different sex markets with different levels of control over sexual encounters and this affects their experiences of risk (for example see Barnard 1993; Høigard & Finstad 1992; McKeganey & Barnard 1996 for street sex workers; Day 2007; Hart & Barnard 2003 for street and indoor sex workers; Ho 2003c, 2003d; Kong 2006, Sanders 2005a for indoor sex workers). This point will be revisited later (see p.27), but now it turns to a discussion of migrant sex workers in Hong Kong.

### ***The rapid increasing of migrant sex workers from Mainland China***

Although Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997, under the "one country, two systems" model, the border between Hong Kong and China is still regulated through a strict immigration policy. Mainlanders can stay a maximum of three months on a permit for visiting relatives or seven to fourteen days on a tourist endorsement. In 1995, the Hong Kong government introduced the One-way Permit Scheme which is mainly meant to facilitate the re-uniting of families. A quota of 150 residents from the Mainland per day may settle in Hong Kong through this scheme. As

a result of changes in policy on Mainland Chinese residents visiting or moving to Hong Kong after 1997, there has been an increase of Mainland Chinese going to Hong Kong. From April 2007 to March 2008, 38,394 Mainland residents migrated to Hong Kong under this scheme (Immigration Department 2008).

Data drawn from surveys on new arrivals from the Mainland between 2001 and 2009 suggest that approximately 70%-80% of the immigrants were women. In the first quarter of 2009, 51.2% of these women were aged 25 to 44; most of them were married to Hong Kong men (Home Affairs Department 2009). On average over 90% of one-way permit holders reported that their purpose in going to Hong Kong was to be reunited with their relatives. This can be explained by the trend of Hong Kong (male) residents marrying Mainland Chinese women (Ku 2001; Siu 1996; So 2002).

The launching of the Individual Visit Scheme in July 2003 allows travellers from Mainland China to visit Hong Kong on an individual basis (rather than having to join a group tour). Following the relaxation of the border between Hong Kong and China, the total of Mainland arrivals rose from 6.83 million in 2002 to 12.25 million in 2004 – the growth was 44.6% (Hong Kong Tourism Board 2003; 2005). At June 2010, there were over 52 million visitor arrivals from the Mainland through this scheme since its implementation (Information Services Department, HKSAR Government 2010). Among these immigrants and also visitors, some have engaged in the sex industry in Hong Kong, which has contributed to a significant increase of migrant sex workers in Hong Kong in the last decade.

Like many other places, Hong Kong has made no comprehensive record of the number of migrant sex workers in Hong Kong. In 1999, the findings of a survey conducted in the Government Social Hygiene Clinics suggested that most of the female sex workers using the clinics originated from Hong Kong and were local residents (82.9% in 1999 and 82.6% in 2000), followed by Thai, Filipino and Chinese women from Mainland China (Chan *et al.* 2002).



Nevertheless, in an earlier survey of attendees at the Social Hygiene Clinics in mid-1993, Wong *et al.* (1994; 1996) were already suggesting that China has replaced Thailand and become the main source of non-local sex workers in Hong Kong. This is evident in more recent empirical studies. In 2003, Zi Teng<sup>8</sup> estimated that there were about 100,000 female migrants engaged in the business. Among these women, it was estimated that about 80% were from Mainland China; others were mainly from South Asian countries including Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand and Korea (Zi Teng 2003). In their study on street sex workers in 2004, Wong and his colleagues (2006a, 2006b) interviewed 90 street sex workers, of which 90% were Mainland Chinese women. Likewise, Chu (2000) cites a police source and notes that Mainland Chinese female sex workers, known locally as *bak-gu* (北姑, literally, 'Northern girls'), "have become the mainstream sex workers in Hong Kong". He attributes this to the fact that *bak-gu* "are both cheaper and "better quality" (p.104–105), in the sense that in Hong Kong these women are considered more likely to be younger and more willing to provide particular sexual services at a relatively low price than Hong Kong female sex workers, known locally as *to-dei* (陀地, literally "local girls"). The following chapters will further explore if this stereotype has affected the ways in which *bak-gu* are perceived and women's experiences of risk in the course of their work.

### ***The high mobility of sex workers***

The population of female sex workers in Hong Kong is highly mobile, migrant sex workers in particular (Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006). In their survey, Chan *et al.* (2002) find that among workers originated from China, there was an increase in the number of transient sex workers who worked in Hong Kong temporarily by holding travel visas. This is also evident in the recent figures of arrests of Mainland Chinese women related to prostitution. According to the Police and Immigration Department in Hong Kong, approximately 10,000 Mainland Chinese women were arrested in both 2004 and 2005 (Working Group on HIV Prevention 2006). Laidler *et al.* (2007) find that of the women arrested in 2005 and 2006 for suspected involvement in

sex work, approximately 94% originated from China. The researchers interviewed 58 Chinese women who were arrested in Hong Kong and found that many respondents were arrested by the police via raids (34%) or on the street (14%).

Like elsewhere, the discussion of migrant workers in Hong Kong has been often framed in terms of human trafficking. Previous research suggests that Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong triads have been involved in arranging for the transport of Chinese women to Hong Kong (Brewis and Linstead 2000; Castells 1998; Chu 2000; Shan 1999). In his discussion on the global criminal economy, for example, Castells (1998) suggested that the Chinese Triads in Hong Kong and the Japanese *Yakuza* were actively involved in the trafficking of women and children. He claimed that both parties played a significant role in controlling the sex industry in Asia, but did not provide any data to support his argument. Citing Castells' discussion in their own work, Brewis and Linstead (2000) arguably claim that the People's Liberation Army of China may also be engaged in trafficking, but present no evidence. What should be emphasised is that many arguments are not based on empirical evidence.

Recent research suggests that some migrant workers may have a connection with, but were not necessarily controlled by, gangs. Yang (2006) reasons that as *bak-gu* are not familiar with the customs procedures many of them have accepted recruitment by and paid to the pimps to secure a visiting visa. These women have often been organised to work in vice establishments such as villas or (illegal) massage parlours (ibid). Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest a growing trend of *bak-gu* who work independently rather than being connected to triads (AFRO 2007; Kong & Zi Teng 2003). Many of them work from rented flats.

### ***Women working as self-employed sex workers***

The increasing number of self-employed sex workers can be explained by the fact that the business of karaoke bars/nightclubs has been severely affected by the economic downturn and the flourishing of the sex industry in

nearby regions, such as Southern China and Macau (Shan 1999). Most establishments have experienced a dramatic drop in business, luxury nightclubs in particular.

Apart from the decreasing demand, the dramatic increase of *bak-gu* going to Hong Kong has also put *To-dei* under pressure. It is evident in the findings of previous studies that most women have left karaoke bars/nightclubs in their late twenties, as they suffer a severe drop in income. They have then often worked in other establishments, such as low-class nightclubs and massage parlours (Yang 2006). In their late thirties, many women have been forced to leave karaoke bars/nightclubs or massage parlours. They become self-employed and turned into flat-working women. Consequently, the number of *jat-lau-jat-fung* has increased rapidly since late 1998 (Shan 1999). There is no comprehensive recording of the number of sex workers working from flats in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, as is furthered detailed in Chapter 5 (see p.122), by calculating the number of advertisements about sexual services posted by flat-working women on two local adult entertainment websites, this study estimates the population size of flat-working women during the period of this research was approximately 1,500.

In summary, the landscape of the sex industry in Hong Kong has changed rapidly in the last decade. The relaxation of the boundary between Hong Kong and China since 1997 has largely increased the mobility of Chinese residents. Consequently, in recent years China has replaced South Asian countries as the main source of non-local female sex workers in Hong Kong. At the same time, there is a growing trend of Hong Kong commercial sex clients who cross the border and visit sex workers in Mainland China. This has severely affected some sectors of the sex industry of Hong Kong. As a result, many sex workers have become self-employed and work from rented flats.

Considering the specific historical and geographical context of Hong Kong and also the social and cultural differences between Hong Kong and Mainland China, the working experience of flat-working women in Hong Kong

can serve as a good example of the general experience of groups of indoor sex workers in East Asia, an area which has received little attention in the scholarship of prostitution. This study focuses on flat-working women, a question immediately emerges: are there any differences between local Hong Kong sex workers and Mainland Chinese migrant sex workers in terms of behaviours and the perception and experience of risk? It is evident in previous studies that some cross-border travellers have engaged in high levels of risk behaviour when they visit sex workers in Mainland China (Lau & Siah 2001; Lau & Thomas 2001; see Chapter 4). What accounts do sex workers in Hong Kong give of their clients' behaviour during the sexual encounter? If their clients have engaged in risk behaviour in a transaction, how do sex workers understand the event? If workers feel that they are at risk, what strategies do they adopt to minimise potential harm? A risk analysis on women's working experiences which emphasises the specific social, cultural, interactional and situational context of Hong Kong will, I would hope, be able to make a contribution to this scholarship.

### **Research on risk and sex work**

The focus of this research is on the ways in which sex workers conceptualise the occupational risks of sex work. As is discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, risk is a central concern of the scholarship of sex work. Considerable attention has been given to the health of sex workers. Since the mid-1980s, female sex workers have been identified as key vectors of the spread of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, the use of drugs among sex workers has received much attention, in particular, the relationship between injecting drug use and HIV transmission (Hart *et al.* 1989; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; McKeganey and Bloor 1991). Nevertheless, on the basis of the low HIV prevalence in Western European countries and the decline in the prevalence of acute STI and HIV among sex workers working there in recent years, commentators have increasingly argued that there was a misplaced fear that sex workers posed a threat to public health (Scambler & Scambler 1999; Scambler 2007; Scambler & Paoli 2008); it is argued that sex workers have been scapegoated (Day 2007) but the stigma associated with sex work was

already reinforced. Hence, some commentators suggest that there is a need to move beyond sexual health (Sanders 2006c). Since the 1990s there has been an increasing interest in other risks faced by sex workers, such as client violence (see Brooks-Gordon 2006; Hart and Barnard 2003; Høigard & Finstad 1992; Kinnell 2006; Sanders 2001) and the emotional consequences of selling sexual services (Sanders 2004a; 2005a).

On the discussion of risk and risk taking, it has often assumed that “risk behaviour is based on individualist and rationalistic assumptions” (Plumridge 2001). This theoretical position sees individuals as rational beings who are assumed to be willing to avoid engaging in risk behaviour if suitable advice is given to them (Earle and Sharp 2007, p.100), or if they have sufficient knowledge and awareness of the risk. Nevertheless, this approach may not be able to explain the complex reality. For example, previous research suggests that some HIV positive people deliberately had unprotected sex with their HIV negative partners, as the physical barrier of the condom was seen as a sign of emotional distance or detachment (Rhodes & Cusick 2000; 2002). There is also evidence to suggest that some sex workers take drugs in order to cope with the work (McKeganey & Barnard 1996), or use it as a mechanism to manage their stigmatised identity (Brewis & Linstead 2000). In other words, although women may know the unwanted consequences of doing so, they used drug taking as a distancing strategy. In these circumstances, for individuals having unprotected sex or the use of drugs appears to be a rational choice, rather than risky behaviour.

The above examples suggest that when studying occupational risks, the meanings of risk or risky behaviour held by sex workers is important. Women’s perceptions of risk are likely to be affected by their motivation and circumstances. It is evident in previous studies that sex workers’ behaviour was constrained by factors such as financial pressure (Whittaker & Hart 1996), the relationship with clients (Sanders 2005a; 2008) and the regulatory policies (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Phoenix and Oerton 2005). In their work, Whittaker & Hart argue:

Rather than focus on women's self-efficacy or health beliefs ... it is through the social organisation of their work that we are best able to understand the nature of their risk exposure and their strategies for managing risk in relation to their occupational health.

(Whittaker & Hart 1996, p.399)

As it further discusses in later chapters, the meanings of risk are fluid rather than fixed. When examining sex workers' perceptions and experiences of occupational risk, it is important to take the social and cultural context into account, as interactional, social situational and cultural factors are likely to affect individuals' conceptualisation of risk, their behaviour and their coping strategies.

In the existing studies on sex work and risk, however, little attention has been paid to the ways in which sex workers conceptualise and manage risk (Sanders 2005a). Previous research has mostly focused on what types of risk workers may face, or what factors contribute to risky behaviour, with few research studies asking how contextual factors affect workers' conceptualisation of risk, how their understanding of risk influences their risk calculation and decision making and what meanings they attach to "risky" behaviours (Brewis & Linstead 2000; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Sanders 2005a; 2008). Many previous studies on sex work were conducted in the West, in particular, in European societies. Therefore the findings of these studies may not reflect the experiences of sex workers in a non-Western context. Focusing on sex workers in Hong Kong, this study attempts to shed light on sex workers' conceptualisation of risks in a Chinese context.

### **Research on sex work in Hong Kong**

Despite the growth of the sex industry and large number of individuals involved in prostitution, relatively little research has been conducted on this area in Hong Kong. In the research literature, writers have been concerned with the regulation of prostitution (Howell 2000, 2004a, 2009), health behaviours among female sex workers (Chan *et al.* 2002; Wong *et al.* 2006a) and their male clients (Lau and Thomas 2001; Lau and Tsui 2003a, 2003b;

Lau *et al.* 2003, 2010a). Although commentators in recent years have started to pay attention to the different types of risk that sex workers may face at work, sex workers have always been seen as “purveyors of disease”. As a result, sexual health of sex workers has still drawn a considerable amount of attention of health researchers and policy makers (Scambler and Scambler 1999, p.79). In Hong Kong, the topic of sex work appears to attract more attention from researchers with medical backgrounds. This may explain why the existing literature is predominantly concerned with matters of regulation and sexual health. Perhaps not surprisingly, consequently many previous studies on sex work in Hong Kong are “surveillance research”, particularly concerned with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) or STIs (sexually transmitted infections). The above studies have undoubtedly contributed to the knowledge of the Hong Kong sex economy. The problem is that, as Wong and his colleagues (Wong & Wun 2003; Wong *et al.* 2006a) point out, existing research on sex workers in Hong Kong has tended to focus on sexual health at the expense of other occupational health problems.

As is further discussed in the historical review in Chapter 2 and the literature review in Chapters 3 and 4, there is a long history in the West of associating prostitution with diseases and this has existed also in Chinese societies since the nineteenth century. For example, in her research on the lives of Shanghai prostitutes from the late nineteenth century to the present, Hershatter (1997) finds that in the historical record on prostitution, different issues including regulation, trafficking of women and sexually transmitted diseases are addressed. However, these existing documents have only shown “the classificatory strategies of the authors” (Hershatter 1997, p.3), or the perceptions of these authors about prostitution and prostitutes. These women’s “daily lives, struggles and self-perception”, as Hershatter argues, “were...constructed in part by...other voices and institutions” (*ibid*, p.4). Hershatter (*ibid*) further points out that the experiences of women were excluded, in the sense that the story of prostitutes documented in historical accounts was not spoken through the voices of these women.

Hershat's (ibid) observations are perhaps applicable to the medical and psychological research on sex work in Hong Kong. Most of these studies have adopted a quantitative approach to sex work. Women's experiences of risk in the course of their work were treated as an objective phenomenon and were highly quantified. Consequently, sex workers' voices were excluded, in the sense that their accounts of occupational risks have not received much attention. Little is known about the ways in which sex workers perceive sexual health risk, their experiences of practising risky sexual behaviour or the meaning of the event to the woman involved. More importantly, while the main concern is with sexual health, little is known about other types of risk which sex workers may face. As noted above, the ways in which sex workers conceptualise the risks experienced in the course of their work and the mechanisms used to cope with risk need to be further explored.

As will be further detailed in the next section, in response to the lack of sociological interest in sex work related risk so far, in particular in the non-Western context, this study attempts to develop a framework to understand risk in sex work context with an emphasis on meanings and individual women's experience.

### **Aims of this study**

This research aims to explore how flat-working women experience risk during the sexual encounter with their clients. What is emphasised here is their reflexive understanding of prostitution and work-related risks. Prostitution has traditionally been equated with sexual exploitation (Barry 1996; Dworkin 1993, 1994; Pateman 1988) and the sex industry has been seen as a risky business. However, more recent studies suggest that criminalising sex work may contribute to a risky working environment (Phoenix & Oerton 2005; Kinnell 2006; 2008). Some commentators, in particular, feminists or sex workers involved in the sex worker's rights movement, argue that sex work should be treated as a normal business; working in a safe and healthy environment is the human right of sex workers (for example, Alexander 1997; McClintock 1993a; Pheterson 1989b; also see



Chapter 3 for further details). Some scholars with an East Asian background, however, comment that this theoretical perspective on sex work may not be optimally suited to understanding the experiences of sex workers in a non-Western context (see Chapter 4). By investigating accounts given by sex workers in Hong Kong, this study attempts to explore sex workers' reflexive understanding of selling sexual services and risks which they experienced or might face during the commercial sexual encounter.

As noted above, while the concern in the published materials from Hong Kong, as elsewhere, is mostly on sexual health, little is known about sex workers' experiences of other types of risk. Little is known about sex workers' perceptions of risk and risk management. Some women may be involved in apparently risky behaviour; little is known about what meanings they attach to their behaviour. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, in recent years there has been a growing trend of new female immigrants from Mainland China who work in the sex industry. Little is known about the impact of this on the sex work in Hong Kong in terms of the organisation of sex work, working practices and exposure to risk. While previous studies have clarified some of these issues, individual sex workers' views of risks may not be fully understood without setting these views in their specific context. Different factors, such as social class, legal status, the motivation and circumstances of the sex worker and the legal framework of sex work may mediate individuals' experience of risk. In this sense, the findings of studies conducted in other countries may not reflect the experience of sex workers in Hong Kong, as the meaning of risk is always fluid and embedded in context.

### **A note on nomenclature**

In the English-speaking world, the term "prostitution" has a double meaning (Shrage 1994). As defined in *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, the term prostitution means "the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with someone for payment" or "the *unworthy* or *corrupt* use of one's talents for personal or financial gain" (italic emphasis added). The second definition obviously has moral connotations. Shrage further points out that the term

“prostitute”, simultaneously “signifies both a commercial sex provider and someone who debases herself [sic] for material gain” (ibid, p.121). In order to minimise the ‘whore’ stigma, in the late 1970s the term “sex work” was proposed by some feminists to replace the stigmatised term “prostitutes” (see Chapter 3, p.73).

As this study aims to investigate women’s reflexive understandings of commercial sexual activity, in the present thesis “sex work” is conceptualised as sexual activities which are commercially oriented. The term “sex work” is preferred and is used to replace “prostitution” in the text because of the moral connections of the latter. Taking a morally neutral position is a response to the arguments that defining sex work as ordinary work serves to counter the “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1996) and that the “work” aspect should be emphasised rather than the “sex” aspect (Brewis & Linstead 2000; see Chapter 3 for further details).

The “sex work as work” perspective stresses the agency of the sex worker, which opens a theoretical space to further explore the ways in which women conceptualise occupational risk. Within such a framework it is possible to explore how sex workers conceptualise and manage risk, with an emphasis on women’s autonomy and agency. Most importantly, the terms are adopted in this text because most of the women of this study used the term “*sing-gung-zok*” (性工作, literally ‘sex work’) in their accounts and they tended to identify themselves as “*sing-gung-zok-ze*” (性工作者, literally, ‘sex workers’). Nevertheless, the terms “prostitution” “sex work” are in this thesis used interchangeably in order to fit the context, with particular reference to institutions or in contexts where the concept “sex work” does not exist.

One point to be highlighted is that although the term of “sex work” is used in the text, this is not to suggest that it is viewed uncritically by the women in this study. Also, as noted above, the theoretical position of “sex work as work” is in fact challenged by scholars from East Asia (see Chapter 3). These issues are further explored in the ensuing chapters.

### ***A typology of sex work careers***

This study avoids the exploitative situations where individuals are forced to engage in the sex industry, but concerns itself with “voluntary adult sex work” (Scambler & Scambler 1997c, 1999). Here the term “voluntary” implies that women provide commercial sexual services with consent. In this study, therefore, the term “sex worker” refers to an individual aged 18 or over who is willing to provide sexual services for money, or occasionally other rewards. However, putting a heavy emphasis on “voluntary” sex work without recognizing the socio-economic context of prostitution may contribute to romanticising the account. While this study deals predominantly with voluntary adult sex work, it must be recognized that among sex workers who maintain that they have voluntarily committed themselves to sex work, some may have experienced inequalities of various kinds. As O’Neill (1997, p.15) suggests, these include “income, education, welfare and health, employment and training opportunities; the realities of sexual and social oppression; the increasing feminisation of poverty; male violence, gender relations – masculinity and the social organization of desire”. These socio-economic problems associated with prostitution are common phenomena, in particular in developing countries. This study argues that not all female sex workers are passive victims of unequal and social practices. Nevertheless, it should be highlighted that it has no intention of denying the problems faced by voluntary sex workers.

There is increasing awareness that “the literature on prostitution [has] suffered serious bias” in the sense that it has focused mainly on street sex work but generalised it “to sex work as a whole” (Agustín 2010; Day 2007, p.14; see also Weitzer 2000b; Sanders 2005a). Consequently, in the more recent scholarship of sex work, attention has increasingly been paid to the difference between different markets and types of sex work (Day 2007; Kempadoo 2001; Sanders 2005a; Scambler & Scambler 1997b; Scambler 2007; Wong *et al.* 1996). This study is an attempt to contribute to the scholarship in this area, and main focus is on flat-working women who work

in the second largest, if not the largest segment of the indoor sex market in Hong Kong.

The findings of previous studies show that the experiences of sex workers are affected significantly by the characteristics (such as the organisational structure and working practices) of the sex market in which they work. For example, previous studies suggest that women working in off-street locations are likely to have control over the sexual encounter. Consequently, as is furthered detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, the literature of prostitution from the West suggests that flat-working women consequently face lower levels of risk than street-sex workers (Hart and Barnard 2003; Sanders 2005a; Whittaker & Hart 1996). Moreover, comparative studies of indoor sex workers and streetwalkers suggest that these two groups of women differ in social status, control over working conditions, experiences at work and adjustment to their work (Day 2007; Sanders 2005a; Weitzer 2000b); also the two types of sex work are conceived as having impacts of different kinds on the community and consequently receive different responses from the residents (Kinnell 2008; Matthews 2008).

Not surprisingly, differences also exist in various categories of indoor sex work. The organisation of the working space in different establishments, for example, affects the strategies employed by women to minimise risk at work (Hart & Barnard 2003; Phoenix 1995, 1999). Yet the differences within each type of sex work appear hitherto to have been largely ignored. Women involved in a form of commercial sexual activity are often seen as a homogeneous group, although the characteristics of individuals may affect their experiences and perceptions of risk.

Since women working in the sex industry are varied in background, it could be difficult to suggest a typology of those who engage in sex work (Sanders 2005a). Nevertheless, Scambler (2007) suggests a typology of sex work careers, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the heterogeneity of sex workers (see Table 1.1).

Career	Paradigmatic example
Coerced	abducted, trafficked
Destined	family, peers in trade
Survivors	drug users, single parents, debtors
Opportunists	project financing
Bohemians	Casual, without need

Table 1.1 A typology of sex work careers

The significance of this is that, while the problem of overgeneralisation is increasingly recognised in much of the literature on sex work (Weitzer 2000b, 2009), this typology of careers in sex work highlights that the differences exist not only between the indoor and the outdoor sex market, but in fact among sex workers in the same segment of the sex market. Alongside the core sex workers who are forced into prostitution, under the umbrella term “voluntary sex workers”, there are different types of sex worker (“destined”, “survivors”, “opportunists” and “bohemians”) who enter and remain in the sex industry for different reasons. As is further discussed in the chapters below, such a framework allows the researcher not only to move beyond the model of “victims vs. voluntary sex workers”, but, most importantly, to open a theoretical space where researchers can explore the ways in which sex workers’ motivations and circumstances affect their experiences and conceptualisation of risk and also of risk management.

This introductory chapter illustrates the aims of this research and the key research questions. It describes the current circumstances of the sex industry in Hong Kong and briefly explains the ways in which prostitution is conceptualised in this thesis. It also highlights the association between sex work and risk, which has long been established in the literature on sex work, outlines the types of occupational risks which are conceived as prevalent among sex workers and highlights the gap in the existing literature. The last section of this chapter then moves to a discussion of the structure of this thesis.

## **Structure of the thesis**

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 turns to outline the history of prostitution in Hong Kong, with the aim of setting into context the contemporary understanding of sex work and the regulations on the activity within its historical context. It examines the ways in which prostitution was conceptualised under the colonial rule in the nineteenth century of Hong Kong. It explores how this understanding shaped the prostitution laws and the regulation of prostitution, which still have a significant impact on the ways in which prostitution is regulated and conceived.

Chapter 3 reviews various theoretical perspectives on sex work. It reviews and summarises studies of sex work in the social science literature of relevance, with the aim of examining some of the main theoretical perspectives on commercial sex. The chapter outlines the debate around commercial sex, evaluates the theoretical contributions to our understanding of sex work and explains the ways in which sociological theories of prostitution, in particular, those produced in the Chinese context, may offer some new perspectives on research in this field.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the aspects introduced here. It reviews the medical, psychological and in particular the sociological literature for what it reveals about the types of occupational risk conceived to be prevalent in the sex industry and the ways in which occupational risk is conceptualised in the existing literature from Hong Kong and elsewhere. It then examines different sociological approaches to risk and explores how the sociological conceptualisation of risk may contribute to our understanding of the occupational hazards of sex work.

Chapter 5 describes and explains the methodology employed, including issues of the sampling method, the typical characteristics of the women in this study, the research methods and data analysis.

Following Chapter 5, which explains the research design of this study, Chapter 6 describes my experiences in the field. It describes the problems which I encountered when I conducted my fieldwork in Hong Kong.

The following three chapters turn to describe the findings of this study. Chapter 7 considers sexual health risk, one of the main themes found in accounts given by the flat-working women in this study. This chapter aims to explore women's understandings of sexual health risk, and the ways in which they conceptualised risk-taking behaviour occurred in the sexual encounter with the client.

Chapter 8 turns to a discussion of violence against sex workers, another theme which emerges in accounts given by women in this study. This chapter explores the ways in which workers conceptualise the risk of violence in the course of their work.

Chapter 9 is about the emotional experience and emotional labour of sex work. There is a substantial body of psychological literature on emotional harm attributed to selling sexual services. Nevertheless, the emotional experiences of sex workers have still received little attention from sociologists. This chapter considers the ways in which sex workers commercialise their feelings, sex and body (parts) in order to offer sexual services for financial rewards.

Chapter 10 is the concluding chapter, which summarises the key findings of this thesis, and discusses the research and theory implications of this thesis.

## Note

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<sup>6</sup> There are five Social Hygiene Clinics in Hong Kong providing services to women, which include medical check-ups, treatment and counselling on sexually transmitted infections.

<sup>7</sup> The Hong Kong dollar (HK\$) is the currency of Hong Kong. Currency values as of July 2010: 100 HK\$ = £8.38. Or £1 = HK\$11.92.

<sup>8</sup> Zi Teng (紫藤) is a Hong Kong campaigning group which support workers involved in the sex industry. Zi Teng (meaning Acorus Calamus), which is described as “a plant with an extraordinarily tough and strong vitality” by the group (see their website [ziteng.org.hk](http://ziteng.org.hk)), is used here as a metaphor of sex workers. Some of the respondents of this study were recruited from this group for interviews in this research.



## Chapter 2

### A Historical Perspective on Prostitution in Hong Kong

It is extremely rare to find instances where prostitutes speak or represent themselves directly.... Rather, they entered into the historical record when someone wants to appreciate, castigate, count, cure, pathologize, warn out, rescue, eliminate, or deploy them as a symbol in a larger social panorama.

(Hershatter 1997, p.3)

#### Introduction

As noted in the introduction, this study aims to explore female sex workers' reflexive understanding of selling sexual services and occupational risk, with an emphasis on the context. The main focus is on the female sex workers' own accounts of selling sexual services and their experience of occupational risk. With a view to setting the study in a historical, social and cultural context, this chapter reviews the regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By doing so, it attempts to explore how Western ideas of prostitution and prostitutes transferred to Chinese society, and argues that these ideas have played a crucial role in shaping Hong Kong's popular understanding of commercial sex nowadays. More importantly, the prostitution laws established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still have a significant influence in shaping the current Hong Kong laws. As will be further explained in this chapter, the regulation of prostitution during the colonial period has substantially affected the present legal framework. Thus, in order to better contextualise risk and set the study in its historical context, this chapter overviews the regulation of prostitution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong, the period after Hong Kong was ceded to Britain and became a colony.

Arguing that the link between risk and commercial sex was largely affected by the regulation of prostitution and the legal framework introduced by the colonial government, the first section of this chapter considers historically how women in the sex business were cast as the deviant, and a source of disease in 19th century China. Setting this study in its historical context is

important in that it reveals the links between the past and the present. This chapter begins by looking at the meanings of prostitution, which demonstrates that prostitution may not be the “universal” phenomenon that it appears to be. This develops a sociological understanding of the issues, including (1) the various meanings attached to prostitution; (2) the way in which the phenomenon came to be defined as a social problem; and (3) the legislation introduced to implement a regimen of control.

### **The meanings of prostitution in the English-speaking world**

Before discussing how commercial sex was understood in the Chinese societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this section will first discuss typical definitions of prostitution. As noted in Chapter 1, the term “prostitution” in the English-speaking world has a layered meaning (see p.25). Some of the definitions appear to be more morally neutral. In the *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, for example, prostitution is defined as “the work of a prostitute”; the term “prostitute” is defined as “a person who has sex with someone for money”. Here, more emphasis is placed on the commercial and the work aspect of this sexual activity. Likewise, *Collins Web-linked Dictionary of Sociology* suggests that in common usage the term “prostitution” means “a practice involving sexual services for payment or other reward”. Similar definitions are found in both lay and academic circles. Most commentators define prostitution or sex work as the exchange of sex for money (see Davis 1937; Edwards 1993; Nencel 2001; O’Neill 1997; Sanders 2005a; Scambler & Scambler 1997b), which involves “the commodification of sex” (Overall 1992) or “the commodification of the body as an object for consumption” (Brewis and Linstead 2000).

While in much of the literature, prostitution is presumed to be a universal phenomenon, a few commentators point out that such definitions can be problematic, arguing that 1) the rewards of a commercial transaction can be anything of exchangeable value other than money (Jesson 1993; Overall 1992); 2) the diversity of activities and relationships experienced by sex workers are collapsed as a result of defining prostitution as the exchange of

sex for money (Phoenix 1995); and 3) prostitution is also an institution in which the (male) customer is allowed to exercise certain power over the (female) sex worker (O'Connell Davidson 1998; Overall 1992).

The arguments presented by these commentators demonstrate the limitations of typical definitions of prostitution, but the idea that the concepts of “exchange” and “commercialisation of sex” are essential to the definition is left unchallenged. By considering the traditional Chinese conceptualisation of prostitution, the following section attempts to demonstrate that the resemblance between the meanings attached to prostitution in contemporary Hong Kong society and the West is not a coincidence. Rather, it is a consequence of the nation's interaction with the West. What needs to be emphasised is that this section does not set out to give a historical account of prostitution in China. At the risk of simplifying the picture, this brief discussion serves as a historical background for the discussion of the changes in the Chinese conceptualisation of prostitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Is the term “*Gei-neoi*” (妓女) synonymous with the term “prostitutes”?**

In contemporary Chinese societies, the word *gei-neoi* (妓女) is commonly used to refer to women who work in the sex industry, in particular those who provide sexual services for money or other reward. Tracing the change in the meanings of the word from ancient China to the present day, the findings suggest that the nature of prostitution and its function in the earlier period, even up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were rather different from that at present. According to Cheng (2003), the word “*gei-neoi*” is derived from the ancient Chinese word “*gei*” (伎), which refers to “female artists”. The term *ngai-gei* (藝伎; *ngai* literally means “art”) was used to address those women who were trained in music and dancing, with the aim of providing entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Selling sex was not necessarily part of the job of the *gei* or *ngai-gei*, as entertainers, though some women were sexually available. At a later period, the term “*gei*” (妓) was created, to describe women who sell both art and sex.<sup>2</sup> In contemporary Chinese societies, the term *gei-neoi* (妓女) is still

widely used to refer to women involved in the sex industry, although nowadays *gei-neoi* are more likely to offer sexual services than art.

### ***Prostitutes in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Shanghai***

These definitions of *gei-neoi* reflect that prostitution was understood rather differently in Chinese culture and in the West. As Gronewold (1982) writes:

In the nineteenth century, westerners were often struck by the difference between the “social evil” in China and the West. They found in China no lewd streetwalkers or sordid side streets filled with brothels, no blatant attempts to advertise or seduce customers on roadways or brothel quarters, no evidence of rough pimps who blackmailed customers and pummeled recalcitrant “johns” and their women. Instead, they discovered magical pleasure boats and teahouses filled with sophisticated ladies whose *primary function was entertainment*.

(Gronewold 1982, p.1; emphasised added)

The paragraph cited above demonstrates that the practice of prostitution in China was largely different from the West. In the Chinese context, sex was not the core element in prostitution. Rather, women were expected to provide entertainment through their dancing, singing or telling stories. Here, as one of the most prosperous regions in China at the time, Shanghai serves as a good example to illustrate the practice of prostitution in Chinese society. In her study of this institution in 19th century Shanghai, Christian Henriot (2000) maintains that, before the opening of the city to foreign trade, the world of prostitution was dominated by courtesans, known in Chinese as *shuyu* (書寓)<sup>3</sup>. This is the most sophisticated class among prostitutes, and these women occupied a high position in the hierarchy of prostitution.

In the *Cambridge Dictionaries Online*, courtesan is defined as “a woman, usually with a high social position, who in the past had *sexual relationships* with rich or important men in exchange for money” (italic emphasis added). In China, however, *Shuyu* defined themselves as *artists* and *sold only their art* by “providing company at banquets, [serving] wine, and [entertaining] customers with their songs” (Henriot 1997, p. 23). Clients might expect to

develop intimate relationships with these women. Yet, unlike men in contemporary societies, clients of courtesans could not simply purchase sexual services. Rather, “they had to go through a subtle game of seduction and courtship in order to obtain it” (ibid, p.25). These practices distinguished courtesans from ordinary prostitutes who provided sexual services in exchange for money, known in Chinese as *changsān* (長衫). Considering the fact that up to the mid-nineteenth century courtesans were the dominant group, not surprisingly at that time the primary function of prostitution in Chinese society was perceived as providing entertainment rather than sexual gratification.

### ***Ah-gu (阿姑) in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Hong Kong***

Hong Kong had received little attention before becoming a crown colony. There is not much of a printed record about the place (Balfour 1940-41/1970). Not surprisingly, materials available for studying the practices of ordinary prostitutes or courtesans in Hong Kong have been very limited; most of them are about the state regulation of prostitution during the colonial period. Nevertheless, as Hong Kong was part of China before it came to be a British colony, it is reasonable to assume that by that time conceptualisation of prostitution in Hong Kong resembled that in Shanghai, since the two cities share the same culture. This is reflected in a description given in a work on prostitution in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong:

To gain the favours of the girls, customers at the brothels and restaurants would spend lavishly. Yet often, even after having spent thousands of dollars, they still might not foster intimacy with the prostitutes. Shek Tong Tsui was also the best place for business transactions.

(Cheng 2003, p.9)

Shek Tong Tsui West (塘西) was a well-known red-light district in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong. The geography of Hong Kong consists of three main territories: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territory (see Figure 2.1). As a result of China’s defeat in the First Opium War and the ratification of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, Hong Kong Island was acquired by the British for naval and commercial purposes (Levine 1998). After China

was defeated in the Second Opium War, most parts of the Kowloon Peninsula were ceded to Britain. In 1898, the British leased the New Territory from China (which has become known as the New Territories). As indicated on the map below, Shek Tong Tsui West is in the north west of Hong Kong Island (Figure 2.1).



Figure 2.1 Hong Kong<sup>4</sup>

Two years after Hong Kong came under British rule, the colonial government introduced the regulation of prostitution which contributed to the emergence of the red-light district. In 1846, the government began to issue brothels with licenses. In earlier days, Chinese brothels were built around the Tai Ping Shan area from Hollywood Road to Po Hing Fong in the Mid-levels where Chinese people were concentrated, which were known as the Tai Ping Shan brothels (Cheng 2003; see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2.2 Tai Ping Shan brothels on Hong Kong Island

Licensed brothels were located in the centre of Hong Kong Island. Some of these brothels were exclusively for foreign clients, and were mostly built separately from Chinese-only brothels (see Figure 2.3).

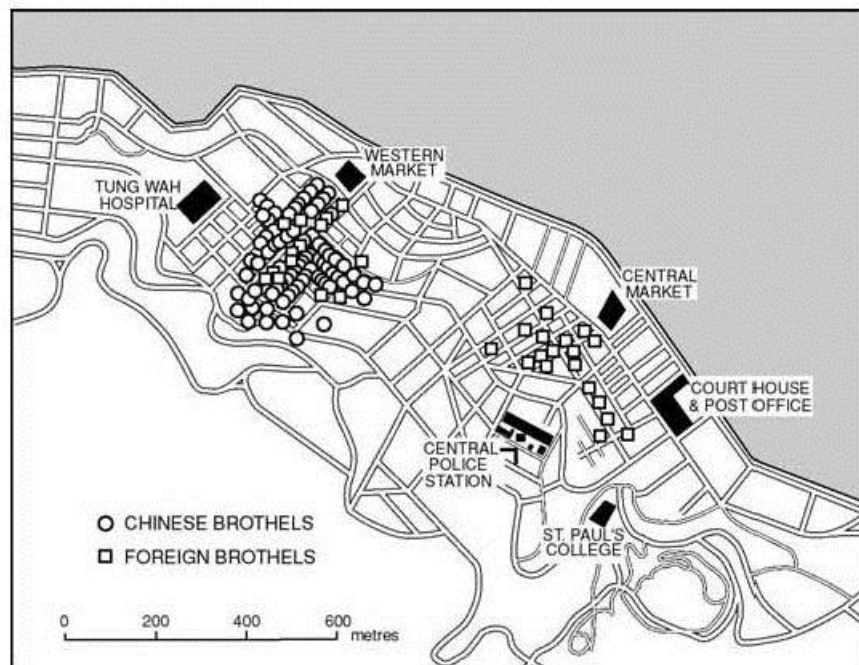


Figure 2.3 Licensed brothels in central Hong Kong, 1879 (Howell 2004)

In his work on the regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong and elsewhere, Philip Howell (for example 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2009) offers a theoretical rationale for the landscape of the red-light district, in terms of racial and spatial regulation. As shown in the map above, the geography of licensed brothels during the colonial period reflects, in Howell's words, "the segregated spatiality of colonial urbanism":

The majority of brothels for "foreign" clients were to be found in the "Central" district of the city, along with the most important landmarks of the British and European presence (Figure [2.3]). The Chinese-only brothels were located in the western district of the city of Victoria, as were the Tung Wah hospital – the premier institution of the Chinese political community – and the Lock Hospital for diseased women.

(Howell 2004a, p.241)

For the colonial government, the high density of the population – the map above (Figure 2.3) is self-explanatory – were likely to contribute to the outbreak of epidemics and consequently posed a public health risk (see p.45 for further discussion). The opportunity of regulating the red-light district came in 1894, when the Tai Ping Shan brothels were devastated by a typhoon and then by an epidemic (Cheng 2003). In order to redevelop the Tai Ping Shan area in 1903, the government ordered the brothels to move to a newly developed area, Shek Tong Tsui (see Figure 2.2). The sex business was at its most prosperous in the 1920s and over 50 brothels flourished, employing more than 2000 women (Cheng 2003; see p.49 for further details).

In nineteenth-century Shek Tong Tsui West, the dominant group in the sex business comprised women working from brothels, who were addressed as *Ah-gu* (阿姑). Similar to courtesans in Shanghai, *Ah-gu* provided company at banquets and entertainment to their clients by singing, playing games or serving wine. Also, *Ah-gu* might develop sexual relationships with their regular customers. At this time, courtesans in China were conceived as offering a range of companionship not to be found in arranged marriages, and therefore they were seen as both social and sexual companions (Hershatter 1997). Compared with the English definition of "courtesan",



however, much emphasis was placed on the woman's role of being a social companion in the Chinese context.

The social change in Shanghai, such as the growth of industrial sectors, the migration of peasant women from rural to urban areas and their involvement in the lower ranks of prostitution (such as *changsans*), contributed to the change of perception of the phenomenon. Moreover, the emergence of the notion of "marriage as a companionate partnership between equals" in the early twentieth century also had significant consequences for Chinese understandings of prostitution. As marriage was assumed to be companionate, what customers desired from courtesans was viewed to be sexual relations rather than social companionship. Prostitution was conceptualised as "exploitative" in the sense that the relationship between the prostitute and her madam was deemed as "oppressive". Subsequently, the authority defined the phenomenon as "disruptive of social order" and "dangerous to social and physical health" (Hershatter 1997, p.20).

In the case of Hong Kong, what should be highlighted is the Western cultural influence in the nineteenth century. Understandings of prostitution developed through a Western framework were used to conceptualise the situation in Hong Kong after the city came under British rule, which largely changed the social meanings of prostitution. In the West, the conflict between the institutions of the family and prostitution, and the anxiety over sexually transmitted diseases has contributed to the view that prostitution is a "social problem" at this time. The following section discusses how during the colonial period prostitution was portrayed as a "crime" in Hong Kong and female prostitutes as a "threat" to public health.

### **Prostitution as a social problem**

Even though prostitution already existed in Hong Kong before it became a trade port, there was no active intervention or regulations against prostitution from the Chinese government before Britain declared sovereignty over Hong Kong (Chin 2002). However, various measures of control, such as issuing

brothels with licenses, were soon introduced after Hong Kong became a crown colony (see above, p.38). As is discussed in detail below, anxiety in Britain over the spread of venereal disease by prostitution contributed to raising the question of controlling prostitution in the colony. But, just as importantly, cultural factors such as religion and a different conceptualisation of marriage also affected the acceptance and interpretation of prostitution.

### ***Prostitution and trafficking***

After the 1920s, the economic recession pushed many women in South China to move to other cities such as Hong Kong. Chinese women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, apart from “the daughters and wives of the elites who were protected”, were commonly conceived as potential victims of abduction or kidnapping who were forced into prostitution (see for example Henriot 2000, p.188). In line with this thinking, migrant prostitutes in the colonial Hong Kong, like peasant women who travelled to urban areas and worked in Shanghai brothels, were often seen as being sold into prostitution by traffickers.

In the case of Hong Kong, language and categories drawn from Western missionary sources played a significant role in shaping the understanding of prostitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the West, prostitution has traditionally been identified as a sin, deviant behaviour or a social evil. This can be attributed in part to religious cultural factors. Christianity has had a significant influence on the concept of sexuality in Western societies. Having sex is viewed as legitimate for married couples only. All extra- or pre-marital sexual relationships are defined as sin, and a woman may have only one sex partner. In this context, prostitutes have been defined as “sinners” or “fallen women”. After Hong Kong became part of the British Empire, the city was open to Western missionaries and these concepts of sex and prostitution consequently travelled to the city. Since prostitution was seen as wrong, it was presumed that women’s involvement in prostitution was involuntary; women were vulnerable victims, who needed liberating.

While it has been widely conceived that traffickers either kidnapped women or bought them from financially desperate parents, the findings of

Hershatter's research (1997) on Shanghai prostitutes however seemingly suggest a different picture. By examining trafficking stories from different sources such as news reports, Hershatter (ibid) found that many women in fact entered prostitution without encountering any traffickers. Rather, the decision of becoming a prostitute or courtesan was the individual's own choice; income was often earmarked to support themselves or in particular, their families. In order to "strengthen the case for abolishing prostitution altogether", however, the authority often deliberately took "women forced into prostitution under the most extreme circumstance...as representative of all sex workers" (Hershatter 1997, p.201) Therefore, Hershatter (1997) argues that defining women as victims could be misleading. In fact, in her study of migrant sex workers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong, Chin (2002) finds that the experiences of these women were similar to those in Shanghai: the great majority of women were migrants of their own choice; economic gain was the main motivation for migrant women to engage in prostitution.

After Hong Kong became part of the British Empire, campaigners against prostitution and activists, including a humanitarian alliance of feminists from Britain, travelled to Hong Kong. They worked with missionaries and philanthropic groups in colonial Hong Kong on a range of activities to push for the abolition of prostitution, with the shared goal of saving these women from sexual oppression. For example, the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene founded by Josephine Butler, who actively campaigned against the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864-1869 in Britain and child prostitution in London, worked closely with philanthropic groups in Hong Kong. Most humanitarian alliances of feminists tended to link prostitution to female slavery. In their accounts, lower-class female migration was turned into sets of "social problems" such as trafficking and "barbaric practices" which were in comprehensible to the British public, and required urgent attention (Chin 2002). What concerned the feminists was how to protect poor women and girls from being trafficked and forced into prostitution. This idea was shared by the colonial authorities. For example, in an official document about prostitution in Hong Kong "Report by the commissioners" published in 1879, the commissioners claimed that "Chinese prostitution is essentially a bargain

for money and based on a national system of female slavery” (p.87), and used this claim to justify the state regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong.

### ***Prostitution and family***

Some commentators attempt to explain the phenomenon by examining the role of institutional factors in shaping the meanings of prostitution. In his earlier work “The sociology of prostitution”, Kingsley Davis (1937) compares prostitution with other institutions involving sex. He argues that, in Western culture, the primary function of sex has been linked to reproduction. For an obvious reason, the intercourse involved in commercial prostitution has been defined as illegitimate as it is divorced from the procreative function but directed to sexual pleasure. Moreover, elements embedded in prostitution such as multiple sexual partners and “emotional indifference” are “incompatible with primary or *gemeinschaft* association” (Davis 1937, p.749). As a result, prostitution has been distinguished from other legitimate institutions. In the same way, Ringdal (1997/2004) points out the conflict between the family and prostitution as institutions. Arguing that the nuclear family has been the dominant form of family structure in the West, he suggests that prostitution has an impact on family structuring. The level of acceptance of extramarital sex in a monogamous marriage is low. As a result, the two institutions are inevitably in conflict with each other.

In China, however, the situation was rather different. Until 1949 when the Communist Party came to power and implemented a marriage system based on freedom, monogamy and equality between a man and a woman through legislation (Evans 1997/2005), polygamy was the dominant form of marriage. In other words, the traditional Chinese ideas and concepts of marriage were in contrast to those of the West, in the sense that it was legitimate for married men to have multiple sexual partners. Before the Marriage Law was implemented in the 1950s and as a result monogamy was defined as the only legitimate context for sexual relations, there was widespread acceptance of extramarital relationships for men. It was not seen as offensive if men sought pleasure through visiting prostitutes or having sex with these women (though, as noted above, sex was not essential to

prostitution). In traditional Chinese culture, reproduction was seen as one of the main functions of sex, but intercourse exclusively tied to pleasure was not defined as illegitimate. The practice of having multiple sexual partners implied that even when a man was involved in a sexual relationship devoted to sexual pleasure (e.g. having sex with a prostitute), sex with other sexual partners could still serve the function of reproduction. For these reasons, the conflict between family and prostitution as institutions in the Chinese context was relatively mild. Nevertheless, these practices were deemed unacceptable by the new ruler from a Christian cultural background in the colonial context.

Religious cultural factors and the conceptualisation of family affected the way in which the authorities perceived prostitution and consequently the model of regulation introduced. After Hong Kong came under the rule of Britain, the dominant construction of polygamy and female slavery as social evils among the Chinese population of Hong Kong turned prostitution into a social problem. It is perhaps not surprising that prostitution, along with polygamy, was successively banned by the colonial governments in 1935 and 1971. As is discussed below, the establishment of a relationship between venereal disease and prostitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the West further supported the idea that prostitution must be controlled, as it posed a threat to not only social order, but also to public health.

### ***Prostitution and venereal diseases***

Apart from trafficking, disease was another main theme found in discussions of danger to prostitutes, their customers and the wider community. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, countries such as France and Britain increasingly demanded state intervention in public health. One of the reasons was that the number of British soldiers and sailors who were infected with sexually transmitted diseases increased dramatically. At this time, prostitutes were perceived as promiscuous and a main source of diseases; hence, it was believed that regulating their bodies was a solution to the problem. Learning from the experience in France, where prostitutes were subjected to regular medical examinations in order to prove that they were

free from venereal disease, doctors in Britain proposed introducing a similar system of regulation (Spongberg 1997). In response to requests from the medical field, Parliament passed the Contagious Disease Act in 1864.

The legislation brought the imposition of registration, regular medical inspection and the sanitary detention of “unclean” women: under this Act a policeman was allowed to arrest suspected women who were considered to pose a threat to the health of the public in any of the selected eleven districts. If a woman was found to be infected with venereal disease, she might face a detention of up to three months. If a woman refused a medical examination, she might be imprisoned for a maximum for two months. In 1866, a second Contagious Disease Bill was introduced. It was proposed that some women should receive a medical examination every two weeks for up to a year. Moreover, it was suggested that the period of detention in a Lock Hospital should be extended to up to six months. As with the 1864 Act, the Bill was approved by a parliamentary majority in Parliament and was passed. Not surprisingly, British ideas about prostitution and venereal disease travelled to Hong Kong and similar legislation was introduced in the colony. As a result, prostitution, which was initially represented as a threat to social order (see below for further details), was conceived as a public health issue.

Perhaps not surprisingly, because prostitution was defined as a “social problem”, regulation became a dominant approach. The idea behind this being that prostitution must be controlled. These ideas and concepts about prostitution travelled overseas and played a significant role in shaping the meanings of the phenomenon in some non-European countries. In the British colonial context, the experience elsewhere in the empire had a direct impact on its colonies. In Hong Kong, for example, the policy for regulating prostitution in Britain significantly affected the regulation in the colony in the nineteenth century.

Following this attempt to examine how prostitution was portrayed as a social problem in Hong Kong after 1842, we now move to investigate in details how prostitution was regulated in the colony.

## **State regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong**

Shortly after Hong Kong came directly under colonial rule, the government introduced legislation to control prostitution. Chiu (2005) suggests that the colony government's first attempt to address the problem of prostitution was in 1844, two years after Hong Kong came under British rule. Section 5 of the Good Order and Cleanliness Ordinance (1844) makes it an offence "if any person...shall keep any house for the occupancy of public prostitution". In 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, prostitution was considered as "The Great Social Evil", a "sin" which affected the social order (Logan 1843). Prostitution was considered to have negative effects on the living environment. It is therefore not surprising that the phenomenon was defined as a social problem in both Britain and Hong Kong. At this time, the purpose of regulating prostitution was to maintain social order in Hong Kong society.

Later, the concern however shifted from social order to public health. As noted above, Hong Kong Island was initially acquired by the British for naval purposes. In the 1850s, there was a rapid rise in venereal disease in the British army and navy (Chin 2002; Howell 2004a; Levine 1998; Miners 1984; Spongberg 1997). The situation in Hong Kong became a concern of the British Government, for the prevalence of venereal disease might affect the Empire in terms of its military power. In response to the request of the naval officer, the 4<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong governor, Sir John Bowring, introduced in 1857 the "Venereal Diseases Ordinance". A system for the registration and inspection of brothels was introduced as the first attempt to control the spread of the disease. Also, prostitutes who were considered as infected with diseases were liable to be removed to hospital (Howell 2009).

As noted above, what needs to be emphasised is that the main concern of the authorities was not the health of the general public. Colonial policy around prostitution and venereal disease mainly aimed to protect soldiers from the depredations of gonorrhoea and syphilis, since the spread of diseases would lead to the loss of soldier-power (Howell 2009; Levine 2003).

As a result, the colonial government issued licences to brothels which were frequently visited by the British forces. Women who worked in brothels catering for European clients were subjected to compulsory medical inspection (Lambert and Howell 2003). Those who transmitted venereal diseases to their clients would be punished and faced detention in the Lock Hospital<sup>5</sup> until they were cured (Miners 1984).

Apparently, there is an obvious resemblance between the Contagious Disease Act in Britain and the ordinance of 1857 in Hong Kong. Howell (2009) however highlights the influence of colonial medicine on venereal diseases legislation in Hong Kong. The regulation of prostitution there placed special stress on the difference between Europe and others. Only Chinese women who worked in brothels for European were subjected to regular examinations designed to detect venereal diseases. Those catered to non-European clients, and also European and American prostitutes were exempted from medical inspection until 1874 (ibid, 2009). For Howell, what happened in the colony demonstrated that the authority detached disease from the individual body and embedded it in the physical and cultural environment of the colony. As a result, the Chinese community and Hong Kong itself were pathologised. The spatial separation of brothels for Europeans and other non-Chinese (see Fig 2.3, p.39), for example, established a symbolic boundary between the healthy and the infectious, the orderly and the disorderly, the clean and the dirty (Howell 2009, p.195).

Abolitionists argued that the legislation endorsed prostitution, and urged the authorities to ban prostitution. Although selling sexual services was defined as a social problem, which needed to be controlled, the British government was hesitant to ban it. From the perspective of the government, criminalising prostitution would make it difficult for the authorities to keep track of the health status of prostitutes, which implied that the authorities would not be able to protect the health of British citizens in Hong Kong (Chin 2002). In 1867, the 6<sup>th</sup> governor, Sir Richard Graves Macdonell, introduced "Contagious Disease Ordinance", which replaced the "Venereal Diseases Ordinance" (1857). As a result, the severity and strictness of the prostitution



law was increased. This new ordinance preserved the system of brothel licensing, but created more restrictions on the system of licensing, which imposed sanitary inspection only on the brothels exclusively used by European clients (Howell 2004a, p.235; Lambert and Howell 2003, p.328). Moreover, it gave the police greater power to investigate prostitution: the police could break into a house suspected of being a brothel without a warrant. Moreover, it gave the police absolute power over women, in the sense that they could arrest any woman suspected of being a street prostitute. The governor believed that this measure could guarantee that prostitute women who worked in those inspected brothels were “clean” and “safe” enough to be visited by the British citizens.

The system of regulation was challenged by the 8<sup>th</sup> governor, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, in 1877. Because of a series of events including the accidental death of two Chinese women when they hid from officers inspecting unregistered prostitutes, and the scandals which accused the colony of making money out of prostitution, Pope-Hennessy concluded that the regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong should be abandoned. However, the British Government did not share this view. The Colonial Secretary, Lord Carnarvon, decided to preserve the system; government officers such as William Sloggett, Inspector of Hospitals under the domestic Contagious Disease Acts, also emphasised the need for regulatory measures. The system therefore continued to be implemented by force (Howell 2009). In 1879, the colonial government imposed a license tax on brothels and prostitute women. At this time licensed brothels were granted permits to operate, and all registered prostitute women were to be allowed to engage legally in prostitution (Anon 2003). In 1866, prostitutes in England were no longer subject to compulsory medical examinations. It follows that the repeal of the Contagious Disease Ordinance in Hong Kong in 1867 (Chiu 2005, cited in Lethbridge 1978, p.153–154).

In 1903, as noted in the previous section, the Hong Kong Government forced all the brothels to move to Shek Tong Tsui and allowed them to run their businesses in special segregated prostitution areas (see p.40). At that time

Shek Tong Tsui was still relatively undeveloped. The then Governor, Sir Matthew Nathan, expected that the forced displacement of brothels would help to develop the area (Anon 2003; Ng 2004; Western District Development Study Organizing Committee 2003). In the event, the plan was a great success: within a few years, Shek Tong Tsui was transformed into a well-known entertainment area (Ng 2004; Western District Development Study Organizing Committee 2003, p.6). Although the area of the restricted zone was very limited in size, a large number of brothels were established within it. During the most prosperous time, more than 50 (Cheng 2003) and possibly 70 brothels were established (Anon 2003); the number of prostitutes reached about 2,000. Businesses which were dependent upon prostitution, such as restaurants and opium dens, also sprang up in the once barren area. It is recorded that out of the population of 500,000, nearly 50,000 people directly or indirectly engaged in the sex industry (Anon 2003).

While the authorities perceived that the abolition of prostitution might not be the best solution of the social problem, increasing pressure from abolitionist movements in Europe (Chin 2002) and the passing of Children and Young Persons Act<sup>6</sup> in 1933 made the British government consider changing the form of regulation. In 1932, the 18<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong governor, Sir William Peel, announced a ban on legal prostitution. The ban was immediately imposed: all non-Chinese prostitute women were asked to leave the business, but a three-year grace period was granted for Chinese prostitutes. One by one, the red lanterns outside the brothels were gradually extinguished. The once flourishing industry in Shek Tong Tsui was brought to an end in 1935.

The above section has outlined the state regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong. Offering a detailed analysis of this complex issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, as a historical review of this kind aims mainly to offer a historical context for the risk analysis in the following chapters.

### After abolition: the regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong after 1935

The ban on licensed prostitution did not actually end the sex industry in Hong Kong. The majority of women became escort girls, and many women worked independently from home. Now that the brothels in Shek Tong Tsui were closed and the area failed to attract clients, many women moved from there to Des Voeux Road Central and Connaught Road Central in Sheung Wan, Tai Fat Hau in Wan Chai and Temple Street in Yau Ma Tei. From this time, sex establishments were spread across Hong Kong (see Figure 2.4)

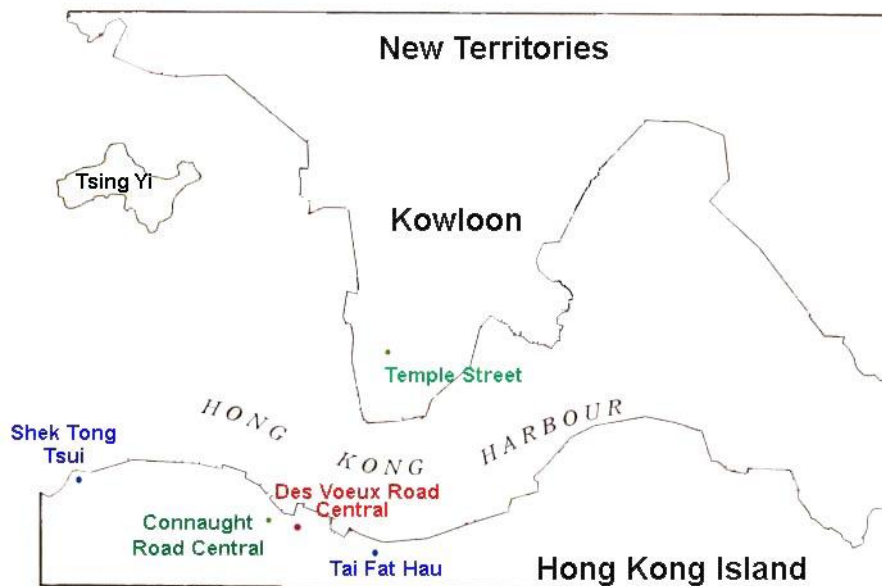


Figure 2.4 Brothels in Hong Kong after 1935

After the prohibition of prostitution in 1935, commercial sexual activities were tolerated and no policy for regulating them was introduced (Lethbridge 1978, p.157). In 1977, the colonial government introduced the “Crimes (Amendment) Bill”, which proposed to decriminalise prostitution. The *Wolfenden Report* published in Britain in 1957 had a significant influence on the legislation in Hong Kong (Chiu 2005, 2009). In this report, the committee on homosexuality and prostitution suggested that homosexual behaviour and heterosexual acts between *consenting* adults in *private* should no longer be a criminal offence (Wolfenden 1957). When the “Crimes (Amendment) Bill” was introduced, John Hopley, the Secretary of Justice in Hong Kong, emphasised that the Bill would not affect those involved in prostitution or their clients. The government emphasised that the Bill was morally neutral,

which mainly targeted human trafficking. In other words, apparently the legislation aimed to protect women; the government had no intention of regulating commercial sexual encounters between consenting adults in private. The bill was passed in 11 January 1978. Since then selling sexual services *indoor* has been decriminalised, although a lot of activities relating to prostitution are illegal. As is further discussed below, as a result of introducing the new law, the nature of the sanctions regarding prostitution has shifted from surveillance to punishment.

What follows is that the ordinances noted above were a translation of the British system into the Hong Kong context. The British colony was returned to Chinese rule in 1997 under the “one country, two systems” principle. As a result, there are different criminal laws in China. When Hong Kong became part of China, the law relating to prostitution in the present day did not change significantly and it has remained the same since the Crimes (Amendment) Bill was passed. Not surprisingly, the current prostitution law in Hong Kong closely resembles the related law of Britain. West (2000) provides a brief but clear summary of the regulatory framework which is currently applied in Britain:

This abolitionist variant of prohibition applies in the UK where all third party activities are prohibited, including pimping, living off “immoral earnings” and attracting custom. Put another way, prostitution is only legal if a woman works independently and she may only employ a maid or receptionist; otherwise the premises will constitute a brothel ... [P]ublic policy ... has sought to control public disorder not interfere with private freedoms. But tolerance of indoor prostitution (as opposed to street work) is only informal and unofficial.

(West 2000, p.116)

In brief, the following activities related to prostitution are considered as criminal offences in Hong Kong: criminal offences for which sex workers are usually charged include:

Criminal offences for which sex workers are usually charged include:  
Keeping a vice establishment (Cap 200 s 139);<sup>7</sup>

Soliciting for an immoral purpose (Cap 200 s 147);  
Advertising prostitution by signs (Cap 200 s 147A);  
Causing prostitution (Cap 200 s 131);  
Controlling persons for the purpose of unlawful sexual intercourse or prostitution (Cap 200 s 130);  
Living on the earnings of the prostitution of others (Cap 200 s 137);  
Operating a massage establishment without a license (Cap 266 s4);  
Letting premises for use as a vice establishment (Cap 200 s 143);  
Permitting premises where one is a tenant to be kept as a vice establishment (Cap 200 s 144);  
Permitting premises where one is a tenant to be used for prostitution (Cap 200 s 145).

As noted above, selling sexual services indoor is not illegal in Hong Kong, as in Britain. But the activities surrounding prostitution, in a range from soliciting to brothel-keeping and living off immoral earnings, are criminal offences.

The only significant difference between the two states in terms of regulation is that in Hong Kong only one woman may work in a flat in which she provides sexual services. No other people, including maids or receptionists, are allowed to work on the premises. In the section of interpretation of the Criminal Ordinance of the Laws of Hong Kong, it notes that in the section on “sexual and related offences”, premises, any vessel or place will be treated as a “vice establishment” if: “(a) the premises, vessel or place are or is used wholly or mainly by 2 or more persons for the purpose of prostitution; or (b) the premises, vessel or place are or is used wholly or mainly for or in connection with the organizing or arranging of prostitution.” (Cap 200 s 117). In this context, if a sex worker is working in a flat by herself, the flat is not treated as a vice establishment and technically it is not illegal. However, if two or more than two sex workers work together, the flat will be defined as a vice establishment (or, more commonly, a brothel). According to the law, it is illegal to keep a vice establishment.

In some studies “brothel” is seen as a synonym for “flat” in the context of an indoor setting (for example, Kong & Zi Teng [2003, p.iii] term a flat which is

used by an independent sex worker providing sexual services a “one-woman brothel”). According to the law, however, flats and brothels in the context of Hong Kong are defined obviously as different settings. In this study, therefore, the term “working flat” is used throughout the text.

Although in theory selling sex is not a crime in itself, in practice prostitute women are subject to prosecution. For example, street work is ultimately illegal because loitering or soliciting in a public place for the purpose of prostitution is an offence under the law of Hong Kong. Moreover, sex workers can never share a working place with another woman; if she does, one of them will be charged with keeping a brothel, control over prostitutes or living on the earnings of the prostitution of others. In other words, the regulatory framework adopted in Hong Kong is a prohibition in all but the narrowest sense. As West (2000) maintains, it is a modified form of prohibition, which “allows the sale of sex but bans all related activities such as soliciting, brothel-keeping and procurement” (p.106).

The above section has outlined the regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong after the abolition of prostitution in 1935. With such a complex issue over such a long period, a full analysis of the regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong would again have been beyond the scope of this historical review. For the sake of clarification, a summary of the important issues related to the regulations concerning prostitution, which was originally prepared by the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene (see p.43) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is provided in the appendix (see Appendix 1). A summary of the regulations on prostitution (see Appendix 2)<sup>8</sup> and the laws relating to prostitution in Hong Kong (see Appendix 3) is provided in the appendix to this thesis.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has reviewed the history of the regulation of prostitution from the colonial period to the present day in Hong Kong. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a huge difference between the understanding of and the practice of prostitution in China and the West. Colonial Hong Kong serves as a good

example to illustrate, as this study argues, that the meanings attached to prostitution are always fluid. By reviewing the regulation of prostitution in that time, this chapter attempts to explain how meanings of this phenomenon were shaped by Western concepts and ideas.

In the Hong Kong context, the dominant construction of prostitution as a “social evil” during the colonial period turned the phenomenon into a social problem. It was initially considered as a problem of social order, and later as a “threat” to public health. This understanding of prostitution played an important role in shaping the the form of regulation in Hong Kong during the colonial period, which significantly affected the current legislation of sex work. While the regulations of sex work at present apparently aim to protect women, as shown in later chapters, the findings of this study suggest that the legal framework appears to make sex work more dangerous. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical perspectives on sex work and risk.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> China had widespread influence in East Asia. In Japanese, the term *geisha* is written in these two Chinese ideographs, i.e. 藝伎 (*ngai-gei*), and is still widely used in the present day. The resemblance between the Chinese term *ngai-gei* and *geisha* is clear. In this Japanese term, “gei” refers to the fine and performing arts, including visual art, classical music and classic dance (Foreman 2008). *Geisha* are artists, though in the West they are often confused with sex workers.
- <sup>2</sup> The Chinese ideographs “伎” and “妓” have the same pronunciation (i.e. *gei*) but are written differently.
- <sup>3</sup> The term “*shuyu*” originally refers to “the courtesan’s apartments or the place where stories are told or read” (Henriot 1997, p.22), but the term was used to designate the courtesans themselves during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>4</sup> This map is originally from geology.com, but has been largely revised by the present author.
- <sup>5</sup> Philippa Levine (2003) offers a clear description of the Lock Hospital in *Prostitution, race and politics: policing venereal disease in the British Empire*, Introduction, note 2: “the locks were specialist hospitals dedicated to the treatment and eradication of VD. Women admitted for treatment for VD might be treated for other sickness simultaneously, but were never admitted for problems regarded as nonvenereal”, p.331.
- <sup>6</sup> According to the Act, “it is an offence to allow a child or young person who is between the ages of 4 and 15 years inclusive, and for whom you are responsible, to reside in or frequent a brothel.” Cf. Release, Sex Workers and the Law [online]. Available from:  
<http://www.release.org.uk/conference/special.php> [Accessed 30 January 2005]



<sup>7</sup> Here “Cap” is the abbreviation for “Chapter”, and “s” is the abbreviation for “section”.

<sup>8</sup> This summary is cited from Chiu 2005.

## Chapter 3

### Understanding Sex Work: A Review of Research and Theory

I think women and men and feminists have to realise that all work involves selling some parts of your body. You might sell your brain, you may sell your back, you may sell your fingers for typewriting. Whatever it is that you do you are selling one part of your body. I choose to sell my body the way I want to and I choose to sell my vagina.

(Eva Rosta;<sup>1</sup> in Pheterson 1989, p.146)

It is a form of work which arises from a particular system of political oppression – male supremacy.

(Jefferys 1997/2008)

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter explored the social and historical context in the period when prostitution became an issue in Hong Kong. The case of Hong Kong serves to demonstrate that the change of political attitudes towards prostitution has significantly influenced the way in which this issue has been conceived and responded to. The description of the changes in prostitution policy over time reveals that trends in the moral, legal and social structures related to buying and selling sex have also undergone changes over time.

This chapter will first examine theoretical understandings of prostitution by reviewing and summarising the relevant published research on sex work from the international literature. Drawing heavily on the relevant social science literature, the main focus of this review is on sociological theorising. It starts by examining some of the main theoretical perspectives on commercial sex and outlining the current debate around this issue. Then it moves to evaluate the theoretical contributions to our understanding of sex work. To summarise, it explores how sociological theories, in particular, theories produced in Chinese societies, can offer some new perspectives from which to conceptualise this practice.

## **Major theoretical approaches to sex work**

Scholars from different disciplines have developed different approaches and theoretical perspectives on sex work, which result in the varied understandings of this activity. This section explores theories on prostitution with a view to understanding how it is that various explanations can make sense of it as a risky business, and how a sociological framework can help to further develop an alternative approaches to prostitution. First, the discussion begins with the ways in which this phenomenon has been understood by looking from a sociological perspective which is largely rooted in biological essentialism.

### ***The sociobiological perspective***

Defined by its founding father, E. O. Wilson, as “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour” (1975, p.4; cited in Weeks 1986/2002, p.48), sociobiology suggests that social difference can be attributed to biological difference (Scambler and Scambler 1997a). It holds that individuals’ behaviour is affected by their particular biological configuration. A classic example is the studies of sexual behaviour of (white) men and women conducted by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Although Kinsey was a biologist and a zoologist, these studies are sociological in nature. The framework used by him and his group is close to a social constructionist perspective (Jackson and Scott 2010). They believed that sexuality is at root a feature of human nature, but argue that perceptions of sexual behaviour are significantly affected by social and cultural factors. As a result, homosexuality, for example, has been considered a form of deviance under the influence of social factors.

Likewise, our understanding of prostitution is inevitably associated with our understanding of sexuality, of masculinity and femininity (Brewis and Linstead 2000). For disciplines committed to understanding sexual behaviour and sexual differences on a scientific basis, sexuality and sexual differences are in essence biological and natural. Debates over prostitution in fields such as biology and psychology have used concepts including sexual drives and

the libido to explain sexuality, with the assumption that sexuality is a natural force (Jackson and Scott 2010; Weeks 1986/2002). It is presumed that there are fundamental differences between men and women in terms of sexuality and psychological response. These diversities have been used to reason men's purchase of and women's involvement in selling sexual services.

Biological theories have used the genital and reproductive distinctions between the biological man and biological woman, which are affected by hormones and genes; they use them to explain the presumably fundamental different sexual needs and desires of male and female sexual beings (Weeks 1986/2002). The male sex drive is seen as biologically determined and is perceived as stronger than the female sex drive (Baumeister *et al.* 2001); male sexual libido is deemed overwhelming and uncontrollable (Hollway 1989; Weeks 1986/2002). As men are seen as having high sexual needs and typically as desiring multiple sex partners (Baumeister *et al.* 2001; Fenigstein & Preston 2007; Ringdal 1997/2004), prostitution is consequently considered a natural response to male sexual needs (Matthews 2008; see p.65 below for further discussion).

In the early nineteenth century, as noted in Chapter 2 and discussed in Chapter 7, Western societies conceptualised prostitution as risky, in terms of the transmission of venereal diseases and being infected by them. The women involved in prostitution, rather than their male clients, were perceived as the ones who threatened public health. In medical discourse of the early nineteenth century, biological differences between the two sexes were used to designate the female body as a possible source of venereal disease. In her study of venereal diseases in nineteenth-century Britain, Spongberg (1997) notes that the sexual difference model used by physicians to explain venereal infection in the eighteenth century was derived from ideas rooted in ancient Greek medical studies. As early as the tradition of Hippocrates and Galen, the model of feminine inferiority was already established. The male body was represented as the gold standard for health. The vagina and its secretions were conversely considered as aberrant and diseased. Consequently, the female body was defined as the diseased body.

Spongberg (ibid) argues that the model of feminine inferiority significantly affected the ways in which venereal diseases were understood in the late eighteenth-century medical discourse. For instance, in the early days of the nineteenth century, doctors found that gonorrhoea was asymptomatic in the female body but had a major consequence for the male body. By the end of the nineteenth century, new findings were suggesting that gonorrhoea could infect internal organs. Physicians inappropriately identified vaginal discharges as symptoms of syphilis and gonorrhoea, and went so far as to suggest that all women might carry some taint of venereal disease. As a result, the female body was seen in the early nineteenth century as a vessel of disease. Women, in particular those involved in selling sexual services, were perceived as responsible for the transmission of all venereal disease. It follows that women involved in selling sexual services have throughout history been subject to medical surveillance.

With an emphasis on the crucial role of biological factors in shaping individuals' behaviour, sociobiology attempts to "bridge the gap which had opened up between traditional biological theories" and social explanations by revealing that "there was a key mechanism linking both" (Weeks 1986/2002). The sociobiological perspective therefore provides a theoretical framework to discuss how prostitution, like any other social activity, grows out of biological or evolutionary needs and is shaped by social factors.

Sociobiological theories have been criticised because of the presumed links between fundamental biological differences between males and females and their behaviour (see p. 65 below for further details). Nevertheless, the sociobiological perspective has opened up a theoretical space to explore prostitution as a social phenomenon. Biological explanations, as illustrated below, have been used by other perspectives to theorise prostitution.

### ***The pathological perspective***

As noted above, in the nineteenth century the female sex worker's body was defined in medical accounts as the diseased body and this view was widely

accepted by both authorities and the public. Spongberg (1997) points out that this was reflected in the fact that as early as the 1850s, the terms “social disease” and “social evil” were used interchangeably. Applying the concept of “feminised disease” to the medicalisation of female sexuality in nineteenth-century Britain, Spongberg argues that apparently neutral medical knowledge served to construct a certain sort of sexual behaviour:

Women were supposed to be innately pure and yet at the same time thousands of them were needed to be available to serve the sexual needs of men. In order to account for this, prostitutes were treated as pathological, as women who could not control their sexuality.

(Spongberg 1997, p.8)

The medical account of venereal disease was used as a control mechanism to regulate women, but only particular groups of women were targeted. For example, the regulation of prostitution in the nineteenth century targeted poor working-class women (Walkowitz 1982) in Britain and Chinese women who offered sexual services to Western clients in Hong Kong (Howell 2004, 2005, 2009; see also Chapter 2). Today, however, views about the role of sex workers in the transmission of HIV and other diseases have become ambiguous. Although there is empirical evidence to show relatively low levels of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases among sex workers in Europe, and also in places such as Lima in Peru (see Nencel 2001) and Hong Kong (Lau *et al.* 2007a, 2007b; Wong *et al.* 1996, 2003, 2005), the stigma still persists in Europe (Day & Ward for the health research group in Europe 2004; Matthews 2008)<sup>3</sup> and elsewhere including regions such as Hong Kong. Further discussion is to be found in Chapter 4.

Early work in the 1890s by Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero (1895) offered biological explanations for women’s involvement in prostitution. Their studies are considered important texts in criminology, because Lombroso was among the first to develop a “scientific” approach in investigating ‘the “natural” and “organic” causes of criminality’ (Phoenix 1999; see also Sanders *et al.* 2009). He and Ferrero quantified women’s physical

characteristics, attributed female offenders' deviant behaviour to their "evil characteristics"<sup>4</sup> and consequently developed a pathological approach to prostitution. The theory of the atavistic offender argues that women's involvement in selling sexual services can be explained by their inborn abnormal characteristics. Likewise, later work in the 1930s by Glueck and Glueck (1934) argues that women involved in prostitution were psychologically pathological, and attribute their "abnormal nature" to poverty (see p.71 below for further discussion). For them, women's "psychopathic personality" was a consequence of their childhood experiences of sexual abuse; women engaged in prostitution were those who grew up in "the unfortunate psychologic atmosphere of their homes" and with parents who were "of low mentality" (ibid, p.299; also see below). The contribution of the Gluecks is that, rather than focusing on biological factors, these scholars highlight psychological factors in their explanation of women's involvement in prostitution (Phoenix 1999).

The born criminal or prostitute theory is perhaps not as influential as it once was. Nevertheless, pathological approaches are still widely adopted by scholars who want to explore why women enter prostitution or remain in the business and the consequences of doing so. In more recent criminological research on prostitution, the main focus is on forced prostitution. Women's involvement in prostitution is explained as a result of human trafficking, illegal drug use and sexual abuse (Cote 2002; Gennaro *et al.* 2007).

At the same time, pathology in individual sex workers is still a focus for most psychoanalytic work in the twentieth century (Vanwesenbeeck 2001). Some psychological theories attempt to look into the psyche of women involved in prostitution. They assert early victimization, such as women's early experience of sexual abuse, as an explanatory factor for individual women's entering or remaining in the sex industry (Farley *et al.* 1998; Glover 1960; James & Meyerding 1977; O'Neill 2001; Silbert & Pines 1981). Commentators suggest that earlier victimisation may intertwine with financial reasons for entering this industry, and argue that running away is associated with homelessness and entering the sex business (Biehal and Wade 1999;

McClanahan *et al.* 1999). The assumption that female sex workers are passive victims was at first unexamined and it remains largely unexamined today. This idea has, however, been widely challenged by some feminist theoretical perspectives on sex work (see p. 68 below).

Other studies have attempted to explore the emotional experiences of sex workers, focusing mostly on the psychological aspects of emotion. Findings have suggested that selling sex is likely to result in emotional consequences, such as eating disorders (Cooney 1990), psychological distress (El-Bassel *et al.* 1997), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Farley 2004; Farley *et al.* 1998), depression (Chudakov 2002), and low self-esteem (Pyett & Warr 1997; Wojcicki 2001). A similar pattern is also found in studies of sex workers in Chinese societies. For example, in some studies acknowledging the emotional experiences of sex workers in Hong Kong (Kong & Zi Teng 2003; Lau *et al.* 2007; Ling *et al.* 2007; Holroyd *et al.* 2008; Wong & Wun 2003; Wong *et al.* 2006a, 2006b), sex workers were reported to experience emotional harm because of the stigma attached to prostitution and the HIV-related stigma (Lau *et al.* 2007a, 2007b). It was also suggested that women were in poor psychological health and suicidal because of the working environment of the sex industry (Ling *et al.* 2007).

In sum, pathological theories, including those developed from criminological and psychological perspectives, attempt to use apparently “scientific” methods to explore women’s involvement in prostitution. Such categories of theory deem women’s involvement in this practice to be attributable to their presumably abnormal psychical or psychological characteristics. Unlike biological explanations, these theories put more emphasis on the role of other factors in affecting a woman’s decision to enter prostitution. In the research studies cited above, women’s adverse status is considered the main influence on their decision to engage in prostitution. The experiences of childhood sexual abuse, mostly assumed to be linked to women’s early lives, are considered the main factors in this respect. Yet, pathological theories consider that prostitution contributes to women’s “psychological pathology”. Some of them highlight the ways in which social factors such as the working



environment affect women's psychological status. These explanations have added a degree of sophistication to the existing theoretical perspectives on the (abnormal) psyche of those entering or remaining "on the game".

The next section will examine the functional perspective. Here biological factors are once again supposed to playing a part in shaping social behaviour, in the sense that the theories in this category see prostitution as an functional institution which serves biological needs.

### ***The functional perspective***

Theories developed from this perspective understand prostitution as an institution which exists for the purpose of fulfilling men's sexual urges or satisfying their desires for the sake of sexual pleasure but not procreation (Davis 1937; Miller 2002; Ringdal 2004). This seems to explain the enduring existence of a large market for female heterosexual prostitution.

As noted above, biological theories take the male sex drive to be strong and uncontrollable. On the basis of this assertion, functional theories understand marriage as an institution which offers a way to channel men's sexual drive. Nevertheless, this is not viewed as the only aim of marriage: it is assumed that through which a man should show his commitment to his family (Gilder 1986/2008). Conversely, prostitution is considered as an outlet for men's sexual needs. In his classic work "The sociology of prostitution", Kingsley Davis (1937) adopts a functional perspective and conceptualises prostitution as an "uninvolved form of physical release"; the demand to buy sexual services "is the result of a simple biological appetite" (ibid, p.753). It is understood as a counter institution to marriage:

In commercial prostitution both parties use sex for an end not socially functional, the one for pleasure, the other for money. To tie intercourse to sheer physical pleasure is to divorce it both from reproduction and from the sentimental primary type of relation which it symbolizes.

(Davis 1937, p.749)

Whist prostitution is mostly understood as “the solution” for unmarried young men (Spongberg 1997), Davis points out that many men who visit sex workers are married, and they are attracted by the characteristics of prostitution, such as: “the craving of variety, for perverse gratification, for mysterious and provocative surroundings, for intercourse free from entangling cares and civilized pretense” (Davis 1937, p.753). He further argues that the motive for prostitution will never be completely absent, but the demand for it is likely to become less if there is greater sexual freedom (ibid, p.754). The theory proposed by Davis focuses mainly on the “function” of prostitution: to fulfil a man’s sexual desires and to protect the institution of marriage, in the sense that buying sex may channel the man’s desires which cannot be satisfied in his marital relationship.

This functional theory may partly explain why men pay for sex. For example, on the basis of findings of their research on sex workers and their clients in Glasgow, Scotland, McKeganey and Barnard (1996) suggest that there were five reasons why men found commercial sex attractive: 1) the capacity to buy “specialist sexual services”; 2) the opportunity to have various sexual partners; 3) the chance of having sex with women with specific physical characteristics; 4) the uninvolved nature of commercial sex; and 5) the pleasure of purchasing sexual services. Similar findings are found in other studies (see the review in Monton [2000]). Adding further to this literature, some studies also argue that clients try to gain control over women (Kinnell 2006; Monto 2000; O’Connell Davidson 1998) or to maintain male supremacy (Jeffreys 1997/2008) through purchasing sex.

This functionalist perspective understood prostitutes as deviant but also functional (see above) which serves some important functions in terms of satisfying men’s sexual needs. Some more recent sociological literature examines the functions of prostitution, with an emphasis on the role of contextual factors in the explaining of buying sex. Findings of a study conducted in Britain (Wellings et al. 1994) echo the argument put by Davis; it suggests that the marital status of men is inversely related to their involvement in buying sexual services. Clients are most likely to be widowed,

divorced or separated (see also Brooks-Gordon 2006; Monto 2000; Sanders 2008); those who were married or had girlfriends said that the sexual life with their partners was not satisfactory, in the sense that their partners were unwilling or unable to satisfy their intense sexual urges (Monto 2000) or desires for particular sexual experiences (Kinnell 2006; see also Browne & Minichiello's [1995] research on male sex work), such as oral sex, anal sex or so-called "kinky sex", including sadomasochism (S/M) or fetishes. In other words, as a functional institution prostitution is understood as helping to channel men's excess sexual needs, and therefore is viewed as a safety valve for society (O'Neill 2001, p.28).

The review of recent studies of prostitution in Brooks-Gordon (2006) suggests that there has been a decline in the practice of buying sexual services in America (also see Monto 2000) and Europe. Echoing Davis' earlier observation on prostitution, Wellings and her colleagues (1994) suggest that the decline in demand can be explained by the increase in the availability of free non-commercial sex (Wellings *et al.* 1994). Nevertheless, in a National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal 2000) in Britain, findings show that an increasing number of men were buying sexual services compared with data collected ten years before in a similar survey (Natsal 1990). It is argued that a greater tolerance towards casual partnerships and the increased liberalisation of sexual attitudes may affect individuals' willingness to report their purchasing of sexual services (Johnson *et al.* 2001).

In summary, on the basis of the idea that the male sexual urge is overwhelming and uncontrollable, functional theories assert that sexual contact between two sexes is inevitably functional. Here, the way in which sex is conceptualised is similar to sexual essentialism, in which "sex is considered as a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions" (Rubin 1984/1992, p.9). Individuals' behaviour is considered to be affected by their particular biological configuration; social institutions are seen as adaptive and products of evolutionary necessity (Weeks 1986/2002). As a result, both marriage and prostitution are conceptualised as sexual

institutions. Marriage is viewed as a way of channelling men's sexual drive (Gilder 1986/2008). Conversely, as stated above, prostitution is understood as a solution to men's excess sexual needs, promiscuous nature or their desires for sexual experiences which may be seen as "perverse" by their non-commercial partners and which therefore may not be satisfied without purchasing services from sex workers. This constitutes the legitimacy of male clients visiting sex workers.

The following section will explore how feminist theories conceptualise prostitution. Theories developed from the sociobiological, pathological and functional perspective take for granted that sexuality is a natural force. Women are put in a passive position and are seen as physically or psychologically impaired, or as suffering from the adverse consequences of engagement in prostitution, in particular, psychological harm. Conversely, feminist theories challenge the assumption that biological differences can be used as a sufficient explanation of the presumed distinctive sexual needs and desires of men and of women, which offer a more sophisticated analysis of prostitution.

### ***The feminist perspective***

The idea that "sexuality was an essential of human nature" has been critically challenged by feminists. Early work in the 1970s by Mary McIntosh (1978), for example, argues that, while it is taken as given that institutions such as marriage or prostitution are established to satisfy men's sexual needs, the needs that women may have are largely denied. McIntosh's work, along with other feminist theorising, highlights the ideology of the assumption that sexuality is natural (see Rubin 1984/1992; Sanders *et al.* 2009) and argues that the institution of prostitution is shaped by social and economic factors rather than "biological appetite" (Davis 1937), which in fact refers exclusively to "men's appetite" (Jackson & Scott 2010).

"Oppression" is the core issue in feminism. Western feminists argue that in patriarchal and capitalist societies women are oppressed (Carpenter 2000). It is therefore not promiscuity or the high libido of men, but inequality and

sexism that shape the institution of prostitution. Consequently, women involved in prostitution are asserted to be “at the front line of patriarchal oppression” (ibid 2000, p.2). Later work by Joanna Phoenix (1995, 1999, 2000), for instance, put more emphasis on the agency of the subject. It is argued that women are not necessarily helpless victims, though prostitution is asserted to be an oppressive institution in the social context where capitalism and patriarchy are present (also see Jeffreys 1997/2008; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Overall 1992; Sullivan 2007). Many feminists struggle between supporting a group of women who are already marginalised and opposing prostitution. Hence, some commentators suggest that prostitution presents a dilemma for feminism (Alexander 1988b; Carpenter 2000; Kesler 2002; Shrage 1994).

Feminist thinking about prostitution is diverse but simultaneously polarized, in the sense that there are two dominant feminist perspectives documented in the available literature on prostitution (Boutellier 1991; Chen 2003; Doezema 1998; Kesler 2002; O’Connell Davidson 1998, 2002; O’Neill 2001; Sanders 2005a; Sanders *et al.* 2009; Sullivan 2007). At one end of the spectrum, sex work is defined as a legitimate form of labour, and women have the right to choose to participate in the sex business (Alexander 1997). The emphasis is on the subject’s agency and rationality. At the other end of the spectrum, prostitution itself is conceptualised as “sexual slavery” (Dworkin 1981; Høigard & Finstad 1992) or “violence against women” (Jeffreys 1997/2008; Sullivan 2007). This thinking has been largely derived from the radical perspective, which emphasises that prostitution is structured in terms of a power imbalance between (male) clients and (female) sex workers (Overall 1992). In this perspective, prostitution as an institution is essentially oppressive. Hence, radical feminists locate prostitution in the same category as sexual assault and rape (Dworkin 1987; MacKinnon 1987). The following section will first examine feminists writing from anti-prostitution perspectives.

### **Anti-prostitution perspectives: prostitution as sexual exploitation**

The radical feminist arguments which have been developed since the 1980s highlight prostitution as a product of patriarchy and gender inequality (Sanders *et al.* 2009). Sheila Jeffreys defines prostitution as “male sexual behaviour characterised by three elements variously combined: barter, promiscuity, emotional indifference” (1997/2008, p.4). It is asserted that prostitution “is dependent both for its value and for its very existence upon the cultural construction of gender roles in terms of dominance and submission” (Overall 1992, p.719). Considered as a patriarchal institution, it is assumed that prostitution “allows certain powers of command over one’s body to be exercised by another” (O’Connell Davidson 1998, p.9).

The anti-prostitution arguments assert that sex is symbolically merged with the body. As women involved in prostitution apparently sell their body or at least parts of their body, selling sex is equivalent to selling bodies. Andrea Dworkin (1993, 1994) defines prostitution as “the use of a woman’s body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants”. Likewise, in her classic work Carole Pateman (1998) highlights that in the prostitution contract “the buyer obtains the *unilateral right of direct sexual use* of a woman’s body” (p.204; emphasis added) with the aim of satisfying his “natural” sexual urges (ibid, p.197). She uses the concept “sexual contract” to explore prostitution, and argues that in the capitalist market women’s bodies are sold as commodities (ibid, p.194). In this argument, clients are presumed to gain control over sex workers through purchasing sexual services, which is viewed as a mirror of men’s domination over women in a patriarchy (Pateman 1988; see also Jeffreys 1997/2008; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Overall 1992; Sharge 1989; Sullivan 2007).

In these arguments, the commodification of sex inevitably involves the objectification of the woman’s body (Dworkin 1987; O’Connell Davidson 1998; Overall 1992). It is suggested that during the commercial sex encounter a woman is objectified as “the mouth, the vagina, the rectum, penetrated usually by a penis, sometimes hands, sometimes objects, by one man and

then another and then another and then another” (Dworkin 1993, 1994). In other words, it is asserted that clients merely treat women as objects, therefore the agency of women is denied in prostitution.

As clients are assumed to be offered the use of and control over sex workers’ bodies, prostitution is viewed as reinforcing patriarchal values, which affects not only those involved but all women. Overall (1992) parallels sex workers’ experiences with those of female workers in other professions, and creates an argument which is different from those noted above. She agrees that the latter “also sell their labour power, and for many of them economic gain may be their chief or only motive” (ibid, p.709). Provided that women can genuinely choose to work in the sex business, and have control over their working conditions and hours, Overall suggests that selling sex is not necessarily “wrong”. She does not deny the fact that “some do have some alternatives, are explicitly conscious of them, and deliberately choose prostitution” (ibid, p. 713) and for her it “makes sense to defend prostitutes’ entitlement to do their work”. However, she stresses this should not “defend prostitution itself as a practice under patriarchy” (ibid, 1992, p.723; see also Phoenix 1999). In other words, these radical arguments do not implicate sex workers *per se*, but criticise prostitution as institutionalised sexual slavery (Barry 1979; Dworkin 1987; Kesler 2002; MacKinnon 1987; Shrage 1989; Sullivan 2007).

In her classic work *Female Sexual Slavery*, for example, Kathleen Barry (1979, p.9) argues that “sexual violence” is an essential element of commercial sex, and defines prostitution as “both an indicator of an unjust social order and an institution that economically exploits women”. As noted above, in late Western modernity prostitution is conceptualised as the explicit exchange for sexual services for money. This idea is evident in the empirical research on prostitution, which has found that in capitalist economies, economic gain is often the main motivation for women to engage in the sex industry (Bernstein 2007; Høigard & Finstad 1992; Kong & Zi Teng 2003; O’Neill 2001; Overall 1992; Vanwesenbeeck 2001; Yang 2006). The anti-prostitution arguments consider economic necessity as a key push factor for

selling sex and interpret women's experiences through the lens of economic exploitation. The motivation for selling sex is understood as a consequence of the feminisation of poverty (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Edwards 1997; MacKinnon 1987; O'Neill 1997), the lack of economic opportunities, of equal life chances and of equal opportunities for income and rewarding work (Phoenix 1999; Nencel 2001; Satz 1995). With the long-standing assumption about women's economic vulnerability, it is perhaps not surprising that although they are aware of the possibility that women might be free to "choose" to sell sex (Overall 1992), radical feminists hesitate to agree that women can make a genuinely "free choice".

Many anti-prostitution arguments consider women to be "trafficked" into the industry in both a symbolic and a real sense. Prostitution has therefore been connected to human trafficking or sexual tourism on a local and global level. Women, in particular, migrant sex workers, are understood as being forced, lured and cheated to sell their bodies and are controlled by pimps and/or gangs (Bindel & Atkins 2008; Brown 2001; Sullivan 2007). Migrant sex workers in Western societies or women selling sex in "Third World countries" (such as Thailand) are often identified as "victims" (see Fernand-Laurent 1983; Sullivan 2007; Thorbek 2002; Vanaspong 2002).

The conceptualisation of prostitution as sexual slavery implies that it cannot be defined as work (Nencel 2001). For radical feminists, prostitution is essentially different from other forms of capitalist enterprise. Pateman (1998), for example, stresses that despite the fact that a "sexual contract" is the central element of prostitution, the "prostitution contract" cannot be identified with other contracts. On the basis of the view that a contract between an employer and an employee is not likely to involve the use of the latter's body for sex, she (ibid) argues that by nature prostitution is not like any other form of work.

In summary, anti-prostitution arguments conceptualise prostitution as an institution which mirrors male dominance and female submission in the capitalist patriarchy. As it is asserted that individuals are not free to choose



the institutions which limit their opportunities and shape their decisions (Tong 1984; cited in Overall 1992), and also that the clients as buyers have powers of command over the woman's body, prostitution itself is understood as sexual exploitation and violence against women. It is thus concluded that the abolition of practices of prostitution should contribute to freeing women from sexual exploitation, and promoting their fundamental human rights.

The following section will consider theoretical perspectives under which women have the right to decide how to use their bodies. Voluntary prostitution is therefore considered as a possibility, and what is emphasised in these theories are issues of human rights of sex workers and various experiences of these women.

### **Pro-sex work perspectives: sex work as work**

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, sexuality is not the same as nature but is always gendered. Before the introduction of effective contraception, as Giddens (1992, p.23) wrote, women found sexuality "a source of worry, needing solutions; women who crave sexual pleasure are specifically unnatural". The introduction of effective contraception in the 1960s enabled sexuality to become "a potential 'property' of the individual woman" (ibid, p.27). Technologies have freed women from the fear of repetitive pregnancies and the consequent risks, which has affected the perception of female sexuality and contributed to women's pursuit of sexual liberation. The emergence of the second wave of feminism during the 1960s and the 1970s contributed to countering the anti-prostitution arguments developed by radical feminists.

The counter arguments highlight women's rights to sexual autonomy, to experience sexual pleasure, to control their own sexuality and body. Applying these concepts to prostitution, it is argued that women have the right to use their body and to sell sexual services for money (or other rewards). Rather than seeing women engaged in prostitution as victims of patriarchy, these arguments suggest that sex work should be normalised as "ordinary work". It

is argued that “sex work is work”; women have the right to choose to work in the sex business, and the perspective of victimhood has therefore been criticised.

Since the 1970s, sex workers have asserted their rights in movements which have promoted the idea of prostitution as work (Jeffreys 1997/2008), or as “a legitimate form of labour” (Boutellier 1991, p.207). Among the proponents of pro-sex work arguments, many are activists, sex workers or feminists who are “on the game”. For example, as a feminist and a sex worker, Carol Leigh (1997) argues that the term “prostitute” is problematic. She noticed that some women did not identify themselves as “prostitutes” because of the stigma attached to the term. For her, “[p]rostitute’ does not refer to the business of selling sexual services – it simply means ‘to offer publicly’”; the term is a euphemism that veils women’s ‘shameful’ activity” (ibid, p.229). Being seen as offering to hire one’s body for “indiscriminate sexual intercourse” is the main factor that contributes to the “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993), which has adverse effects on sex workers (Brewis & Linstead 2000; Day & Ward 2004c, 2004d; Høigard & Finstad 1986; Sanders 2005a). As a sex worker wrote:

There are many difficulties and problems in reality between whores and other sex workers – strippers, dancers, etc. *But a lot of this comes from society’s attitude in the first place.* It’s like a kind of hierarchical system with prostitutes at the bottom, and, I don’t know, maybe dancers at the top.

(Eva Rosta; in Pheterson 1989a, p.145; italics added)

Leigh (1997), along with other pro-sex work feminists, argues that the assumptions underlying the definition of prostitution deny women’s autonomy and seem to distort the reality of sex work. For her, the “[f]eminist analysis of prostitution as the ultimate state of women’s oppression didn’t fit the strength and attitudes expressed by the diverse women” whom she met (1997, p.227). Therefore, she coined the term “sex work” in the late 1970s.

While the term “prostitution” highlights that “women’s body is bought and used by johns” in this practice (Jeffreys 1997/2008), Leigh (1997) stresses

that replacing the term “prostitution” with “sex work”, and the term “prostitute” with “sex worker” can affirm the agency of those involved in prostitution. Compared with the term “prostituted women”, which implies that “somebody must have done something to the woman for her to be ‘prostituted’” (Jeffreys 1997/2008), the term “sex workers” may more accurately reflect a pro-sex work argument that “women have the right to determine, for themselves, how they will use their bodies” in a context such as prostitution (Alexander 1987a, p.17). A good example to illustrate this idea is the account given by Eva Rosta (see p.58, above).

Similar accounts can be found in writings by sex workers (see Delacoste & Alexander 1988; McClintock 1993; Nagle 1997). O’Connell Davidson (1995) argues that accounts given by women suggest that they understand selling sexual services as exchanging their labour for (financial) rewards, which is what other workers do in capitalist societies (see also Brewis & Linstead 2000).

Not surprisingly, the idea that “sex work is work” has been criticised by anti-prostitution arguments. For example, Jeffreys (1997/2008) stresses that using the term “sex work” as an alternative to “prostitution” is likely to normalise prostitution. For her, seeing prostitution as just “work” and “choice” is equivalent to supporting a form of exploitation, because “the acceptance of the term makes it difficult to conceptualise prostitution as a form of violence, a crime against women” (ibid, p.5). Likewise, Sullivan (2007) argues that the legalisation of prostitution contributes to the institutionalising of men’s rights to women’s bodies. In other words, anti-prostitution perspectives assert that prostitution is a violation of women’s humanity.

Conversely, pro-sex work perspectives claim that criminalising prostitution may increase the risk of selling sexual services. They argue that state repression of sex workers and defining prostitution as a legal problem is a violation of the human rights of sex workers (Alexander 1997), in the sense that this group of women may not claim protection in the course of their work as other workers can, which is likely to increase their vulnerability (Brooks-

Gordon 2006; Hubbard 1999a; Phoenix & Oerton 2005). It is evident in the findings from empirical research that most sex workers can practise only in “demarcated, marginal, deprived and culturally-undervalued localities” (Hubbard 1998, 1999a, 1999b; see also Hubbard & Sanders 2003; Sanders 2005a). This may increase the risk of violence against sex workers (Kinnell 2006, 2008). Moreover, the possession of condoms has been used as evidence of prostitution. Consequently, sex workers may hesitate to carry condoms and this is likely to increase the risk of diseases (Sanders 2005a). In addition, women who were reported to be harassed by the police commented that the policing was racist and discriminatory (Alexander 1987b; Brooks-Gordon 2006; Sanders 2005; Kong & Zi Teng 2003).

In countries such as Britain, and also cities such as Hong Kong, where the prostitution laws are similar, prostitution itself is not illegal but most of the activities related to it are criminalised. Therefore, sex workers are merely unable to practise without breaking the law (Hubbard 1998b). As Phoenix (1999, p.20) points out, “[i]n practice, then, the only way that prostitution can be practiced without committing a criminal offence is as a one-to-one arrangement between two consenting adults in private.” As discussed in Chapter 2 and further analysed in the following chapters, the law has been criticised for contributing to the risky working situations of the sex industry (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2006, 2008; Phoenix & Oerton 2005).

Some commentators stress that in opposing prostitution, it is crucial to make a distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution (Alexander 1997; Doezma 1998; Phoenix & Oerton 2005). For them, women who choose to work in this business may experience violence in the course of work akin to the way workers in other business do. Nevertheless, sex workers may not have access to or be protected by the legal system because of ambiguities which exist in the law. As a result, the rights of sex workers may be violated. Pro-sex work perspectives therefore argue that it is crucial to normalise the selling of sexual services as “ordinary work”. Adopting the “sex work as work” approach to conceptualise prostitution may allow further arguments to develop from the standpoint of the labour process, which suggest that sex

workers deserve the same human rights as workers in any other business (Alexander 1997; Dank & Refinetti 1998; Jasmin 1993; Highleyman 1997; Ho 2000 & 2003; Leigh 1997; McClintock 1993; O'Neill 2001; Petzer and Issacs 1998; Pheterson 1989b). In other words, the working environments, benefits, occupational health and safety of all women should become issues of concern not limited to sex workers (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Day & Ward for Europap 2004; Day & Ward 2004; Doezema 2004; McClintock 1993; Yim 2003). These issues should receive more attention from academics, researchers and authorities.

Here feminist perspectives have been discussed at length because they significantly influence the debates on prostitution/sex work. The most important contribution of the theories developed from feminist perspectives is that they highlight the fact that gender and sexuality are interrelated (Jackson & Scott 2010), and so affect our understanding of prostitution/sex work. The way in which scholars have theorised prostitution/sex work suggest that the meanings of this term, for instance as “a natural response to male sexual needs” (the sociobiological perspective) or “an institution which serves biological needs” (the functional perspective), are all constructed by and cannot be divorced from patriarchal ideologies.

### **Sociology of prostitution/sex work**

The above sections describe and outline the main theoretical and sociological/criminological perspectives on prostitution/sex work. As Scambler and Scambler (1997) comment, however, none of the theories discussed above is entirely convincing.

### ***The limitations of the theoretical perspectives on prostitution/sex work***

Biological differences between men and women do exist, and biology undoubtedly plays a role in creating anatomical differences and setting the limits of social activities. However, the biological determinist theories can be problematic in the sense that the meanings attached to characteristics do not come straightforwardly from biology but are shaped by culture and social

factors (Weeks 1986). While functional theories take for granted that the function of prostitution is to “channel men’s sexual drive” (see p.62 above), it is evident from the anthropological literature that human sexuality is not entirely innate but also learnt behaviour (Jackson & Scott 2010). Men’s sexual needs are therefore defined by culture rather than nature. Similarly, as is further discussed in the next chapter, sex workers are not necessarily victims; the links between disease and the abnormal psyche of prostitution are socially constructed.

Feminist theories have challenged the assumption that sexuality is natural and prostitution is a consequent product to satisfy human desires. Anti-prostitution perspectives see prostitution as an oppressive institution. Women in the business are often understood as victims. It is asserted that they are generally forced into the business and controlled by pimps or gangs. Yet, as noted in Chapter 1 (see p 18 above), and will be further demonstrated in later chapters, in fact women may work independently. Anti-prostitution perspectives also argue that through buying sex “power can be legitimately exercised over the prostitute by the client” (O’Connell Davidson 1998, p.17; also see p.69 above). Selling sexual services is seen as a “transfer of powers of command over the person” (O’Connell Davidson 2002, p.85). The power relationship between the sex worker and the client is viewed as always unbalanced, even when women have chosen to provide sexual services to clients (ibid). Different legal, social and institutional contexts may impact on the degree of power that the third party or the client can exercise over the sex worker (O’Connell Davidson 1998, p.17). As will be explained in following chapters, however, the findings of this research suggest that the power relationship in prostitution is more complicated. By adopting different strategies of control over the sexual encounter, in order to minimise risks, sex workers may not necessarily be controlled by their male clients during the transaction.

Victimhood perspectives have not only been challenged by pro-sex work feminists, but also by sex workers, who emphasise that women are not necessarily passive victims. It is evident in the writings of sex workers that

women define their involvement in the business as voluntary. The findings of empirical research also suggest that sex workers seek to control the commercial sexual encounter, and they adopt different strategies to achieve this control. As further explained in the following chapters, sex workers limit access to certain body parts and establish body exclusion zones (Sanders 2005); organise the working space to achieve spatial control (Hart & Barnard 2003; Ho 1998); and use a “strictly scripted” routine to achieve power over the encounter with their clients (Murphy 2003). Findings of this research also echo previous studies: Flat working women in Hong Kong attempted to have control over the sexual encounter, and some of the strategies they adopted ensure they achieve power over the situation.

Despite the stigma attached to prostitution, the “sex work as work” perspective stresses that prostitution should be “normalised” (Sharge 1994), or even “professionalised” (Sanders 2005a). In other words, these perspectives argue that selling sexual services is the same as other work. Unlike theories developed from victimhood perspectives, which share an assumption that a prostitute is inherently different from any other woman, the attempt to normalise prostitution treats a sex worker as an ordinary female worker. Sex workers therefore should have rights and be protected like other workers. Rather than seeing the women involved in the sex industry as a collective who are passively oppressed by the institution, this perspective treats women as individuals who make decisions with reflexive sense. Most importantly, seeing sex work as work may allow us to explore issues of workers’ rights and legal protection and to investigate how women as workers control their work and its environment.

### ***Sex work is just ordinary work?***

The main aim of this study is to investigate how sex workers in Hong Kong experience risk in the course of their work. This study considers sex work as a form of legitimate labour. As will be further explained adopting a perspective with an emphasis on individual agency is more likely to allow the researcher to capture the ways in which sex workers conceptualise occupational risks by looking at accounts which they have given.

Nevertheless, what should be emphasised is that like other theoretical perspectives, the “sex work as ordinary work” perspective is not without its limitations. Compared with workers in other “ordinary work”, sex workers are more likely to be stigmatised. Moreover, as documented in the literature, it appears that sex workers often experience violence at work, in the sense of being robbed, physically or sexually assaulted and even murdered (Høigard and Finstad 1992; Kinnell 2004, 2006, 2008; McKeganey & Barnard 1997). It is argued that the prevalence of violence against sex workers (O’Connell Davidson 1998), together with its sexualisation, stigmatisation and criminalisation (Chen 2008) distinguish the practice from other business. The popular view more commonly considers it a “deviant occupation” (Sanders *et al.* 2009).

As noted above, some commentators challenge the idea that women can genuinely choose to sell sexual services in patriarchy and deny that sex work is ordinary work. Chapkis (1997, p.52) defines prostitution as a form of labour, but she questions the idea of “free choice”. Because of their gender, race and class, female sex workers are often in disadvantaged positions. Chapkis (1997) therefore argues that most sex workers make a “rational choice” rather than “free choice” when they enter the sex industry.

Despite the limitation noted above, this study argues that the “sex work as a form of legitimate labour” framework is more likely to allow us to expand the debate on selling commercial sexual services. Scambler and Scambler’s influential work on prostitution in 1997 which considers, among other things, the discursive division between forced and voluntary prostitution and proposes the empowerment of sex workers through full citizenship. The concept of “voluntary adult sex work” has expanded the understandings of prostitution in sociological scholarship. Rather than seeing women involved in the sex industry as a collective who are passively oppressed by the institution, this approach opens up the analytical frame beyond victimhood debates and enables scholars to explore the ways which women, as individuals with reflexive sense, choose to enter or remain in the sex industry.



Considering the change of women's perception on sexuality in the last two decades, the agency of women must be taken into account when we understand commercial sex.

Also, this approach allows scholars to explore issues of sex workers' rights and legal protection, and to investigate how women as workers control their work and their working environment. Moreover, seeing prostitution as work rather than an abuse enables scholars to distinguish between consensual and non-consensual (sexual) acts (Kinnell 2006). This is crucial as this may take the argument beyond the endless "violence against women" debate by considering the complexities, contradictions and changes in risk understandings. For the above reasons, while in this study the term "sex work" is used interchangeably with the term "prostitution", the former is preferred. Likewise, the term "sex worker" is used to replace the term "prostitutes"

All the perspectives discussed in this chapter have their limitations. The discussion above suggests that, as O'Neill (1997) points out, sex workers' experiences need to be contextualised; the role of social, cultural, gender, historical, economic and political factors in shaping our understandings of prostitution should be taken into account. A sociological framework which admits agency and social changes (Scambler and Scambler 1997) and which emphasises individual women's experiences can contribute a better understanding of sex work. In more recent research, sociologists argue that a new approach is needed to take the debate beyond moral issues and sexual transactions in prostitution. For example, Augustín (2007) proposes to use a cultural-studies approach to investigate sex work in "its widest sense", which examines its interaction with not only social issues such as gender, class and citizenship, which has often been addressed in sociological studies, but also those including consumption, sexuality, urban space and family life (see also Scoular and Sanders 2010).

### ***Conceptualising sex work in the Chinese context***

This study attempts to use a sociological framework to understand sex work in a Chinese context and the way in which female sex workers experience risk in the course of their work. It has long been the case that Western feminists have paid little attention to the lives of East Asian women; despite the presence of a body of literature on East Asian women, its impact on Western women's studies and feminist theory is limited. The models of "First World women" and "Third World women" framed in feminist analyses have also been criticised, because East Asian women are excluded in the sense that they are neither from "the rich" nor "the poor" nations (Jackson *et al.* 2008).

A model of "North" and "South" is proposed in more recent studies by Raewyn Connell. While recognising the contributions of social theories from Europe and North America, Connell is critical of the dominance of these theories, while theories from the global South have received little attention (2007; 2009). In her study of gender issues, Connell (2009) considers gender theories from Latvia, Chile, Australia, western and southern Africa and Japan, with the aim of creating an international approach to gender studies. This "global dialogue", as Connell (*ibid*) terms it, seems more likely to capture the new gender issues faced by the world. Nevertheless, as Jackson and her colleagues (2008) point out, East Asian women are still excluded from the model of "North" and "South".

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the above observations are also applied to social theories of sex work. Most of the theories reviewed in this chapter are from the global North. Nencel's (2001) study on prostitution in Peru highlights the importance of the Latin American context in understanding the contribution of male sexuality to shaping the male domination and female subordination in the commercial sexual encounter. This is a good example to illustrate that "the view of the global North is not the only possible view of the world" (Connell 2009, p.x). Nevertheless, while there is now a body of literature available on sex work in the Chinese context, the dominant view of the global

North still plays a significant role in shaping theoretical understandings of Chinese women's experiences.

Apparently, the "sex work as work" model has significantly influenced the conceptualisation of sex work in recent sociological work from China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, in the sense that many scholars argue that women should have the right to choose to work in the sex industry (for example, Ho 2000; Pan 1997, 2000; 2005a, 2005b) and prostitution should be decriminalised (Li 2003). Consequently, in this body of literature, the term "*xing gongzuo*" (性工作, sex work) has been widely used to replace the term "prostitution"; women in the sex business are addressed as *xing gongzuo jie* (性工作者, sex workers) rather than *gei-neoi* (妓女, prostitutes).

Nevertheless, in his study of the working experiences of sex workers in Hong Kong, Kong (2006) adopts from Chapkis (1997) the concept of "emotional labour" and argues that while women had control over their work, the social stigma, surveillance and dangers at their workplace had increased their vulnerability. Kong (ibid) observes that there is a gap between the perspective of "sexual slavery" and "sex radical", and suggests that a "women-centred lived-experience feminist approach" is more likely to capture sex workers' experiences. In line with this thinking, on the basis of the findings of their research on sex workers in the Pearl River Delta Area of China, Ding and Ho (2008) observe that in the Chinese context some women would rather be called "*xiaojie*" (小姐, carrying the sense of "Miss") than "*xing gongzuo jie*" (性工作者, sex workers) (see also Pan 2005). They argue that this is because the latter focuses on sex and "to some degree resembles a Chinese term for prostitution in a negative sense" (Ding & Ho 2008, p.132). In addition, considering the fact that the practice of "sex work" in the Chinese context is not only about "sex" but can also be called "love labour" and "emotional work", the researchers argue that the concept of "sex worker" may not apply to many women engaged in the sex industry in the Pearl River Delta Area (see Chapter 10 for further discussions of the case in Hong Kong).

Within this study, prostitution or selling sexual services for financial reward is conceptualised as sex work, rather than deviant or criminalised behaviour, although this is not to say that it is viewed uncritically by sex workers. Within such a framework, it is possible to further explore whether sex work should be “normalised” (Sharge 1994) or even “professionalised” (Sanders 2005). But if it is treated as work, how can the seemingly high prevalence of violence against sex workers be explained? Even though sex work, in the popular and the academic accounts from the West and Hong Kong, is increasingly recognised as work, women involved in the sex industry are still broadly stigmatised. The present study seeks to explain the ways in which some professions are stigmatised by law and by custom, applying it to understand sex the work stigma. To do so it invokes the sociological concept of “dirty work” developed by Everett Hughes (1962) to show how ordinary Germans understood their involvement in the activities against Jews, Slavs and Gypsies during the Nazi era and the concept of “infamous occupations” developed by Anton Blok (2001). In addition, as it will be demonstrated in later chapters, concepts developed by Erving Goffman’s work (1963/1990) and that of Graham Scambler (for example, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2007) is used in the risk analysis to explore the ways in which sex workers conceptualise the sex work stigma and consequent emotional experiences and also how they manage their “spoiled identity”.

With the awareness of the view of the global North may not be able to capture the experiences of sex workers in other parts of the world, this study explores what new concepts can be generated from accounts given by sex workers in Hong Kong. As noted above, the term “sex work” was invented in the context of the feminist movement in the West. Relatively little research to date, however, has attempted to explore women’s reflexive understanding of “sex work” in the Chinese context. When women identify themselves as “sex workers”, do they conceptualise “prostitution” as “work”? Previous studies argue that prostitution should be “normalised” (Sharge 1994), or even “professionalised” (Sanders 2005a). Further questions can be asked: if

women see selling sexual services as “work”, do they understand it as work, as other normal business or as a profession?

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews theoretical perspectives on prostitution. The theoretical approaches noted above provide different explanations for this practice. Rather than seeing prostitution as having a fixed meaning, sociological theories posit that commercial sex needs to be understood in the context of social, economic and cultural relations, and examines the complex interrelationships between prostitution and other institutions.

Whether it is conceptualised as “a natural response to (male) sexual needs”, “sexual slavery” or “ordinary work”, “risk” is deemed to be inseparable from prostitution and consequently has become a dominant theme of studies from different theoretical perspectives. As discussed in the following chapter, scientific approaches to the risk of prostitution have mostly treated risk as an objective phenomenon. A key assumption in these approaches is that risks inevitably exist in commercial sex. What concerns biological, medical and psychological research on commercial sex are, for example, the types of occupational hazard, assessing related risks and the consequent harm to sex workers. What researchers attempt to do is to categorise and quantify hazards.

Like the sociological approaches to prostitution, the social theories of risk emphasise the ways in which other social, cultural and structural factors shape the meanings of risk, some aspects which have been neglected in the scientific approaches. Qualitative research approach, which is widely used in empirical sociology, is particularly “concerned with individuals’ own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour” (Hakim 1987/2000, p. 34). With an emphasis on individuals’ experiences and the meanings of events to the individuals involved, a sociological framework for conceptualising the risks of prostitution should enable us to hear the voices of women, which are often silent in scientific studies (the choice of research methods in this study is

revisited in Chapter 5). The following chapter will explore how social theories may help us to have a better understanding of the occupational hazards of sex work.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Rosta was a photo model, a go-go dancer and a stripper in England.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues attempted to understand human sexuality and sexual practices by interviewing around 5300 white men and 5940 women. Data were mainly collected by interviewing, and they emphasise the role of contextual factors in the conceptualising of sexual behaviour. In 1948, they published *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*. Five years later, they published *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* in 1953.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, there is a note to explain that the “Europap health research group (2000-2001)” consisted of: Jacinta Azevedo, Sophie Day, Pippa Greer, Raija Laisi, Ruud Mak, Paula McDonnell, Angeles Rodriguez, Irene Santo, Thérèse van der Helm, Bettina van Heusden, Helen Ward.

<sup>4</sup> In their study, Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero examined the bodies of female offenders (including sex workers) and normal women. Different parts such as the skulls, brains and faces of these women were examined. In *The Female Offender*, published in 1895, the authors used statistical data and pictures to argue that the abnormal characteristics of female offenders contributed to their engagement in prostitution.

## Chapter 4

### **Risk and Selling Sexual Services: A Review of Research and Theory**

Prostitution can have devastating consequences for the individuals involved and for the wider community. It involves the abuse of children and the serious exploitation of adults – many of whom are trafficked into and around the UK for this purpose. It has close links with problematic drug use and, increasingly, with transnational and organised crime.

(Blunkett 2004, p.5)

“I don’t believe that sex work is inherently dangerous,” Lebovitch (a sex worker in Canada) said. “It is the laws, the stigma (that are harmful).”

(Leung 2009)

#### **Introduction**

The implicit assumption in the current law relating to commercial sex in Hong Kong, where sex work is governed by a legal regime similar to that in many countries, is that this practice is necessarily harmful and undesirable. A good example to illustrate this point is David Blunkett’s statement in the consultation paper on commercial sex in Britain, *Paying the Price*.<sup>1</sup> The paragraph cited above demonstrates that this legal regime assumes that commercial sex must involve the exploitation of women and damage to society. Consequently, risks have become a dominant theme in public policy debates about commercial sex.

Risk has also been a main focus of research on prostitution. As noted in the previous chapter, the majority of academic findings on sex work establish the link between sexually transmitted diseases and HIV, violence, abnormal psyche and the selling of sexual services. And, as discussed in this chapter, sex work is also seen as often involving risky behaviour, such as the use of illegal drugs or the offering of “kinky sex” or “unconventional sex” to clients. The conclusion to Chapter 3 has suggested, and this chapter further explores, the proposition that “scientific” approaches to risk often attempt to

quantify and to categorise individuals' experiences; the major concerns are types of risk, the severity of the risks, and also the consequent harm to women of engaging in sex work. This is evident in the literature which is reviewed in this chapter.

This chapter aims to review and summarise the published research from Hong Kong and elsewhere on the occupational risks of sex work. It examines how risks have been conceptualised in the literature of sex work, in particular social science studies. As stated in the previous chapter, this thesis is concerned with "voluntary adult sex work" and here sex work is defined as the exchange of money for sexual services. This review focuses only on the risks experienced by sex workers in the course of their *work*, rather than in the form of hazards caused by the illegal status of sex work (such as violence against women by human traffickers or gangsters). It argues that a sociological framework for conceptualising the risks of sex work should help to open theoretical spaces in which to explore areas which have attracted little attention until now.

First, this chapter starts by summarising the relevant literature. It then moves to examine different sociological approaches to risk. Next, the chapter evaluates the theoretical contributions to our understanding of sex work and risk, and explores how the sociological conceptualisation of risk and work can be applied to the construction of selling sexual services and its related hazards.

### **Risks and prostitution**

One major theme of research on sex work has been on risk. Women involved in the sex industry have been identified as suffering various occupational hazards. Risk is perceived as "an inevitable feature of the clandestine activity" (Sanders 2005a, p.3). Selling sexual services is broadly viewed as a risky trade, an idea which has been reflected in the titles of books published in recent years (see for example, Kinnell 2008; Sanders 2005a). The following sections will discuss the risk-related issues raised in



the literature on prostitution, including sexually transmitted infections (STIs), emotional risks and client violence, which aims to provide an overview of the way in which occupational hazards have been conceptualised in the existing literature.

### ***Sexually Transmitted Infections***

Chapter 3 discusses the ways in which the link between sex workers and disease was established in nineteenth-century Western and Chinese societies. Since the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was identified in 1981 and named in 1982, those who having sex with strangers, having multiple sexual partners, having unprotected sex and injecting drugs are all identified as high-risk behaviour for HIV infection. Not surprisingly, sex workers have been linked with the transmission of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (Scambler *et al.* 1990). The epidemiological perspective has viewed (female) sex workers as an epidemiological “core group” (Bloor 1995b), more popularly known as a “risk group”, since it is presumed that this group of women are likely to engage in “risky behaviour”.

Consequently, in the last twenty years, much research on and public concern over sex work has focused on STIs, in particular HIV transmission and infection (Hart and Barnard 2003). Previous studies on HIV and sex work, in particular those adopting an epidemiological approach, have often considered health risk in terms of the potential spread of STIs (Barnard 1993, p.683). In line with the Western tradition of seeing the “female body as the diseased body” (see Chapter 3 of this thesis), HIV infection has been generally perceived as a problem mainly affecting female sex workers (rather than their male clients), above all in the HIV/AIDS panic during the 1980s. Sex workers have been deemed a group which “act as a bridgehead” for spreading AIDS in the heterosexual population (Barnard 1993; Bloor 1995b; Day *et al.* 1993; Scambler *et al.* 1990; Whittaker & Hart 1996), which is paralleled by the experiences of women involved in prostitution in the nineteenth-century Britain and Hong Kong (see Chapter 2). As a result, the focus of health care services in Europe and likewise in Hong Kong is often on female sex workers.

It is evident from empirical studies conducted as early as the 1990s that sex workers in the West do not play a significant role in spreading either HIV or other diseases such as syphilis, hepatitis B, Chlamydia trachomatis and Neisseria gonorrhoea (Vanwesenbeeck 2001). Interestingly, despite the wide recognition that sexual health may not be the priority for sex workers in Europe (Day 2007; Ward & Day 2004c), female sex workers have perpetually been categorised as a “high risk group” until the latest research. For example, Dukers-Muijters *et al.* (2010) conducted a research study on STI prevalence rates among swingers<sup>2</sup> in South Limburg, the Netherlands, and compared swingers with other “risk categories” including heterosexuals, men who have sex with men (MSM) and swingers. Findings suggest that among these categories, swingers have a higher STI prevalence, in particular those aged over 45. Although sex workers are asserted to be at risk, these findings once again echo those of previous research that sex workers had a lower STI prevalence than other “risk categories”.

### **Risk factors**

The findings of HIV prevalence studies from North America and Europe suggest that many HIV positive sex workers were injecting drug users. It was the sharing of injecting equipment, rather than sex work itself, that was thought to contribute to the risks of both HIV infection and STI (Day 2007; Ward *et al.* 2000).<sup>3</sup> This is evident in the studies conducted in different places such as Britain (McKeganey 1994; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Rhodes *et al.* 1994; Ward *et al.* 2000), San Francisco (Darrow *et al.* 1991; Padian 1988) and the Netherlands (van Ameijden *et al.* 1994). Nevertheless, some commentators argue that drug use may affect individuals’ awareness of the risk of having unprotected sex (Green *et al.* 2000; Klee 1990; Ward *et al.* 2000) or compromise workers’ ability to negotiate safe sex with their clients. It is also argued that women may be prepared to take more risks to finance a drug habit (Gilchrist *et al.* 2005), like those who are in desperate financial situations (Jackson & Highcrest 1996).

Commentators suggest that an “unprofessional setting” can be another risk factor (Vanwesenbeeck 2001). In a “professional setting” such as a sauna/massage parlour or a private flat, the collective working environment or workers’ familiarity with the setting of the premises may give women control over the encounter (Hart & Barnard 2003). It is also reported that condom use appears to be higher in the indoor sex market than in street sex work, for workers’ behaviour has often been shaped by codes of practice (see also Sanders 2005a), and subjected to pressures from the management.

Other studies from Singapore find that workers’ skills of control over the sexual encounter with clients and condom negotiation is apparently crucial in shaping the decision to use protection (Wong *et al.* 1994; Wong *et al.* 1995). Experienced sex workers often ritualise and routinise the sexual transaction (Hart & Barnard 2003; Ning 2004; Sanders 2005a); using condoms has become a norm in commercial sex. Nevertheless, some commentators argue that migrant sex workers from “foreign countries” contribute to the increasing rates of HIV among sex workers in Europe, for example in Italy (Spina 1997). Likewise, in Hong Kong, as is further discussed, more recent studies argue that cross-border prostitution and migrant sex workers from China may play a role in spreading disease.

While consistent condom use in commercial sex has been reported among sex workers in the West, exceptional cases have been found in previous studies. Occasionally sex workers may choose to practise unprotected sex because of the regularity and attractiveness of clients (Morris *et al.* 1995), or because women, even when “professional”, may have over-friendly attitudes to their clients (Vanwesenbeeck *et al.* 1993, 1995; Vanwesenbeeck 1994). In fact, there is some evidence that women are more likely to take risks in their private sex lives than in the course of work. In an intimate relationship, the use of condoms may become a symbolic barrier. This is evident in one study on HIV positive people. Respondents had unprotected sex with their sexual partners in the context of long-term relationships, and viewed the possibility of transmitting HIV to their partners as an acceptable risk. Non-use of condoms symbolised love, intimacy and trust between the couples (Rhodes

& Cusick 2000, 2002). Likewise, for similar reasons, sex workers may sometimes not use protection with their sexual partners in romantic relationships (Day & Ward 1990; Perkins 1991; Sanders 2004a; Vanwesenbeeck *et al.* 1993; Waddell 1996), although some women knew that their partners had unsafe sex with multiple sexual partners (Warr & Pyett 1999).

### **Sexual health and commercial sex in Hong Kong**

In parallel with the experience in the West, the evidence in studies from Hong Kong demonstrates that the prevalence of diseases and risky behaviour has generally been low among female sex workers. In other words, these women are not playing a key role in spreading disease (Chan *et al.* 2002; Chan *et al.* 2004; Choi *et al.* 2008; Holroyd *et al.* 2008; Lau & Thomas 2001; Lau & Tsui 2003a, 2003b; Wong & Wun 2003). Yet, sex workers as a group are still broadly defined as vulnerable to the risk of STIs and HIV in research undertaken in the HIV field. While it has become clear that sex workers are not the source of sexually transmitted diseases, some commentators argue that AIDS in the 2000s has been linked to specific types of sex worker. In the context of globalisation, migrant sex workers have been blamed for carrying diseases across borders (Augstín 2004; Day & Ward 2004). In Hong Kong, for example, the focus of more recent research has moved to cross-border prostitution.

Since the change in Hong Kong's immigration policy in 2002 as a consequence of the city returning to Chinese sovereignty in 1997, cross-border travel between China and Hong Kong has been an increasing phenomenon. It has been reported that the number of migrant sex workers from China has increased significantly in the last decade (Holroyd *et al.* 2008; Wong *et al.* 2006a, 2006b; Wong *et al.* 2008). This has been often attributed to the economic gap between the two sides. On the one hand, a higher income in Hong Kong acts as a pull factor which encourages women from Mainland China to travel to Hong Kong and work in the sex industry. On the other hand, men from Hong Kong have been attracted by the relatively low

price for sexual services offered by sex workers in China, in particular, regions near Hong Kong in southern China.

It has been estimated that in China heterosexual transmission of HIV, mostly through commercial sex, may become the dominant mode of transmission (Lau *et al.* 2008; Ma *et al.* 2002). In 2002, for example, it was found that around 40% of the sex workers in Sichuan,<sup>4</sup> south-western China, claimed that they always used protection during sexual encounters with their clients (UNAIDS and WHO 2004). Findings of another research study however suggest that compared with male clients in Hong Kong, those in China have reported more inconsistent condom use when they purchase sexual services (Lau *et al.* 2003). It is also suggested that more than 30% of sex workers and clients did not recognise that using condoms could prevent them from contracting HIV.

Findings from the studies noted above appear to be ambiguous. Yet, considering the high prevalence of HIV in China compared with Hong Kong, mobile populations have been widely recognised as serving as bridge populations (Lau *et al.* 2003; Wong & Wun 2003; Wong *et al.* 2007). Chinese female immigrant sex workers, in particular, have drawn the attention of researchers in various health-related fields. For example, Wong and his colleagues (2006a) examine the frequency and pattern of use of health services by migrant street sex workers in Hong Kong, and suggest that they are at risk of STIs because this group of women may not be able to afford either public or private health services.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, it is common for these women to self-medicate or delay in seeking medical help. Wong *et al.* (2006a) argue that this may lead the women to become vectors of disease. In recent years, male clients have received increasing attention. Findings of previous research studies suggest that male cross-border travellers are not keen on using protection, in particular when they purchase sexual services in China (Choi *et al.* 2005 for Sichuan; Kong & Zi Teng 2003 for Hong Kong; Lau *et al.* 2005 for Shenzhen). Consequently, it has been widely recognised that they may face higher risk when compared with sex workers.

Understanding of risk has been seen as a crucial factor affecting safe sex practices. A more recent study on cross-border truck drivers suggests that those who have received voluntary counselling and testing are more aware of the risks of unprotected sex; they are more likely to use protection when purchasing sexual services. It is therefore suggested that intervention services may help to promote behaviour which prevents the spread of HIV (Lau *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, since the prevalence of inconsistent condom use with sex workers in Mainland China is still high, this group of cross-border travellers are still defined as potential carriers of disease (Lau & Siah 2001; Lau & Thomas 2001; Lau & Tsui 2003a, 2003b; Lau & Wong 2001; Lau *et al.* 2009; Lau *et al.* 2010).

Also, experts in health-related fields suggest that condom policies have a positive impact on prevention of HIV/AIDS in countries such as Cambodia and Thailand (UNAIDS and WHO 2004). Considering the fact that few brothels in China provided condoms or kept them on the premises, Chinese women have been conceived as at risk of STIs (*ibid.*). More recent research in 2004 and 2005 suggests that female sex workers in Sichuan showed overall improvements in HIV-related knowledge and behaviour (such as condom use with clients and other sexual partners who took part in voluntary testing and counselling). But the risk of HIV transmission through heterosexual commercial sex was still reported to be substantial (Lau *et al.* 2007). Some experts have attributed this to the high prevalence of inconsistent condom use with clients (Gu *et al.* 2008; Gu *et al.* 2009; Lau *et al.* 2008; see also studies from other regions of southern China: Lau *et al.* 2009 for Guangzhou; Lau *et al.* 2002 for Shenzhen; Ma *et al.* 2002) and condom failure, such as slippage or breakage (Choi *et al.* 2008; see also Kong & Zi Teng 2003 for Hong Kong). Women's poverty, client violence (Choi & Holroyd 2007) and drug use above all (Choi *et al.* 2006; Choi & Holroyd 2007; Choi *et al.* 2008; Gu *et al.* 2009; Zhang & Ma 2002) have been identified as the key factors which affect the negotiation of condom use in commercial sex.

While findings of recent research in Hong Kong and elsewhere suggest the role of sex workers in transmitting HIV or STIs is insignificant, commercial sex has still been strongly linked to HIV/AIDS and STIs. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, this linkage has contributed to the stigma attached to sex workers (Day & Ward 2004c; Day & Ward for Europap 2004; Scambler & Scambler 1997b; Wong *et al.* 2011). Moreover, the following chapters also seek to answer the question of whether there is any gap between the accounts of sexual health risks given by experts and those of sex workers. This area has apparently received little attention in the existing literature, in particular from East Asia. The following section will discuss client violence against sex workers, another main focus of research in the field of sex work.

### ***Violence against sex workers***

Violence against sex workers is an issue of common academic concern. As noted in Chapter 3, violence has been considered as an occupational hazard of sex work; female sex workers have broadly been seen as victims of human trafficking and organised crime. The relationship between the risk of violence and the working environment has been established in the existing literature of voluntary sex work (Barnard 1993; Hart & Barnard 2003; Høigard & Finstad 1992; Kinnell 2006; Sanders 2005a; Whittaker & Hart 1996).

Apparently working on the street is comparatively risky, as this group of women may experience “the whole spectrum of behaviours provoked by the sight of prostitution ranging from name calling to physical assault, rape and murder” (McKeganey & Barnard 1996, p.71). In their research McKeganey and Barnard stress the high prevalence of violence against street sex workers in Glasgow, in the sense that “women expected it to happen at some point and considered themselves lucky if they had so far managed to avoid” it (1996, p.70). Likewise, in a UK based survey conducted in Leeds, Edinburgh and Glasgow (Church *et al.* 2001), findings suggest that street sex workers were more likely to experience violence when compared with indoor sex workers working in saunas or flats. While the former most frequently reported being slapped, punched, or kicked, the latter often mentioned

attempted rape. It is also evident in previous research that sex workers, indoor workers in particular, commonly experience robbery with violence and sexual violence (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2004, 2008; Sanders 2005a). In Sanders' research (2005a, p.74), over half of her respondents (34 out of 55), all indoor sex workers, said that they "had never encountered harm through prostitution". Drawing on the data of a previous study,<sup>6</sup> Kinnell (2006) makes a similar observation. She notes that among those indoor sex workers who attended a London service, only a few of them said that they had experienced violence at work. She further points out (2008) that over 70% of female sex workers in Britain were indoor workers, but among the victims of sex work-related homicides between 1990 and 2006, only 22% worked indoors.

Apart from the working environment, problems with the legal system may also contribute to workers' vulnerability to sexual assault. Sullivan (2007) examined rape laws in the UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, and found that there were significant barriers, at least before the reform of the rape laws in some countries, to the prosecution of offenders who raped sex workers (see also Phoenix & Oerton 2005). Some commentators argue that the experiences of rape or sexual assault of female sex workers' are also largely denied by society because of their work identity. The concept "rape myth", defined as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" (Burt 1980, p.217), has been widely used to explain sexual assault against sex workers. Victims of sexual violence were blamed for the "carelessness or shortcomings on the part of individual women" (Maher 1997; see also Burton 1998), or more likely in the context of sex work, simply for being "promiscuous" (Sullivan 2007) or "sexually available" (McKeganey & Barnard 1996). Sex workers may experience sexual assaults during the course of their work; but because they are seen as always consenting to sex, it is taken for granted that sex workers "cannot" be raped. It is therefore suggested that "rape myths" contribute to sex workers' vulnerability to sexual assault (Klein & Gorzalka 2009; Maher 1997; Sullivan 2007): Their social characteristics, in this case both their gender and their marginal status in society, affect the ways in which these women perceive



their experiences of violence. It is evident from previous research that sex workers, who also accept rape myths (Maher 1997), may not have reported their experiences of sexual assault to the police, or perceived that the police might not take their complaints seriously (Jordan 2004; Sanders 2005a; Sullivan 2007).

Commentators also argue that the sex workers are endangered by legislation which criminalises their working environment (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2006, 2008; Phoenix & Oerton 2005), in the sense that, for example, the law in Britain, as in Hong Kong, allows workers to work alone, but only from a flat. The removal of street sex workers from public areas may indeed push them to work in dangerous areas, which is likely to increase their vulnerability (for example Hubbard 1999b; see Chapter 8 for details).

It is worth emphasising that, while the prevalence of client violence appears to be high among female sex workers, early work by McKeganey and Barnard (1996) was already pointing out that, while most respondents reported their experiences of violence in the course of their work, “only a minority of actual encounters between prostitutes and their clients involved violence” (p.70). Similar findings are also documented in a more recent study on male clients in Britain (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Sanders 2008). Drawing on other studies (for example, Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2006a), Sanders (2008) further indicates that many violent offences against sex workers or their murder were committed by repeat offenders. Likewise, in their research on street sex work in Oslo, Norway, Høigard and Finstad (1992) suggest that while “it is without doubt customers who are responsible for most of the violence against prostitutes”, they admit that “the majority of customers are peaceful men” (p.57). Moreover, the findings of empirical research on male clients of female sex workers worldwide, for example in San Francisco, Las Vegas and Portland (see Monto & Hotaling 2001) and in British Columbia (Klein *et al.* 2009), suggest that the level of rape myth acceptance among respondents seemed to be low.<sup>7</sup>

While client violence has been the primary focus of research devoted to the issue of violence against sex workers, what needs to be highlighted is that in fact women may also experience violence from vigilantes, muggers and robbers. Also, sex workers reported experiencing violence from their partners and the police (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2006, 2008; Sanders 2005a). Moreover, communities often perceive that prostitution, in particular, street sex work, tends to “[lead] to a decline in public order and increase in lawlessness”, and assert that workers may be associated with other crimes such as drug use and theft (Home Office 2004, p.79). Matthews (2008) claims that women living in and around the red light districts are “regularly propositioned, harassed and, on some occasions, assaulted”, but no empirical evidence is provided to support this argument. Nevertheless, it is documented in previous studies that sex workers in Britain were subjected to community violence, such as threats, abuse, rape and assault (see Kinnell 2008; Matthews 2008).

### **Violence against sex workers in Hong Kong**

In a study on the working experiences of flat-working women, Kong & Zi Teng (2003) suggest that respondents had to contend with behaviour ranging from robbery, clients taking off condoms during intercourse and being paid less than the negotiated amount (see also Kong 2006). A relatively small proportion of respondents experienced physical violence (9.2%, 13 out of 141 women) or sexual violence (7.8%, 11 out of 141 women; see Table 4.1).

Occupational Dangers/Risks	Frequency	Valid percentage (%, n=141)
Robbery	44	31.2
Clients taking off condom during intercourse	43	30.5
Getting less than the negotiated amount	34	24.1
Clients refusing to pay	20	14.2
Receiving fake money	17	12.1
Beaten up by clients	13	9.2
Rape	11	7.8
Forced to do something unwanted	7	5.0

Table 4.1 Occupational dangers/risks of flat-working women (Kong & Zi Teng 2003, p.15).

In another survey of the occupational safety of female sex workers, respondents were either working indoors (including nightclubs, dance halls, karaoke, pubs) or outdoors (AFRO 2007). Likewise, “client violence” was a main focus of this survey. Respondents mostly reported that they experienced clients taking off condoms during intercourse, or that they were forced to have unprotected sex and to commit non-consensual sexual acts (see Table 4.2).

Type of offence	Work setting				Others (n=2)	Total 113
	Outdoors (n=30)	Indoors (n=83)				
		Nightclubs/dance halls/karaoke/pubs (n=40)	working-flats (n=36)	hairdressing salons (n=5)	Call girls (n=2)	
Robbery	10 (33.3%)	2 (5%)	3 (8.3%)	1 (20%)	0	16 (14.2%)
Clients taking off condom during intercourse	16 (53.3%)	13 (32.5%)	18 (50%)	0	0	47 (41.6%)
Clients refusing to pay	10 (33.3%)	3 (7.5%)	8 (22.2%)	0	0	21 (18.6%)
Experienced client physical violence	3 (10%)	4 (10%)	7 (19.4%)	0	1 (50%)	15 (13.3%)
Forced to commit non-consensual sexual acts	8 (26.7%)	14 (35%)	6 (16.7%)	1 (20%)	0	29 (25.7%)
Forced to have unprotected sex	17 (56.7%)	18 (45%)	9 (25%)	2 (40%)	0	46 (40.7%)

Table 4.2 Occupational dangers/risks of women working indoors or in the street sex market. Values are numbers of sex workers; figures in brackets are the percentages of all offences by work sector (Action for Reach Out 2007).

The findings of this survey echo the previous study conducted by Kong and Zi Teng (2003), in the sense that most of the respondents did not experience physical violence from clients (see Table 4.2). One point to highlight is that in both studies, among flat-working women, a significant number of women reported that clients forced them to have non-consensual sexual acts, such as clients taking off their condom during intercourse (30.5% [43 out of 141] of

women in Kong and Zi Teng's study [2003] and 50% [18 out of 36] of women in AFRO's [2007] survey), forced to have unprotected sex (25% [9 out of 36] of women in AFRO's survey [2007]) or to do something unwanted (5% [7 out of 141] of women in Kong and Zi Teng's [2003] study). Moreover, being robbed was also a common experience of flat-working women (31.2% [7 out of 141] of women in Kong and Zi Teng's study[2003]).

To summarise, among the few studies that explore the issue of violence against sex workers in Hong Kong, what most concerned the researchers was "client violence", in particular "physical violence" (see Chapter 8 for definitional issues of "violence" in the Chinese context). Less attention has been paid to other forms of violence, despite the fact that sex workers may experience violence primarily from other parties such as pimps (see also p.97, above). In fact, accounts given by sex workers demonstrate that only a few respondents of these studies experienced physical violence from clients. For some commentators, as is evident in the findings of studies from Hong Kong and elsewhere, "[m]uch of the literature on the frequency and nature of sex buyer violence appears to be empirically overestimated and theoretically underspecified" (Lowman and Atchison 2006, p.293; cited in Sanders 2008, p.179). Nevertheless, findings of these studies appear to suggest that sex workers are often being forced into non-consensual sexual acts. Moreover, some commentators also point out that social institutions (such as the law) and social stigma contribute to women's vulnerability (AFRO 2007; Kong & Zi Teng 2003; Yim & Chan 2003; Yim 2003). These issues have seemingly received little attention, but will be further explored in Chapter 8.

Therefore, the following questions will be explored in this study. First, how do experts' and workers' frames of reference differ with regard to violence against sex workers? Second, what role do social, cultural and institutional factors play in workers' perceptions of the risks of violence? Third, the findings of studies from Hong Kong suggest that being robbed and forced to have non-consensual sexual acts during the commercial sexual encounter are commonly experienced by sex workers; what factors contribute to these types of risks? How do individual women conceptualise consensual and non-

consensual sex? Fourth, studies from the West suggest that sex workers often face community violence (Kinnell 2008). Residents of areas in which prostitution have been practised may conceive that prostitution have undesirable impacts on community life (Matthews 2008). As a result, their hostility may turn towards sex workers. Depicted as “community pollutants”, sex workers have been seen as “legitimate objects of aggression”, and consequently have often been attacked by individuals and gangs (Kinnell 2008). Have women in Hong Kong had the same experience?

The literature has widely recognised that diseases and violence are two types of occupational hazard for sex workers. The next section moves to an area which has received increasing attention in the field of sex work: emotional risks.

### ***Emotional risks***

As noted in Chapter 3, there is a body of literature from the West concerning the psychological harm of selling sex. This area has, however, received relatively little attention compared with other occupational hazards. Previous studies, in particular those taking psychological approaches, suggest that selling sexual services comes with mental health consequences, such as stress and depression, insomnia, flashbacks, panic attacks and fears of disclosure, problem alcohol and drug use, nervous breakdowns and severe personality disorders, can follow from drug use (Day 2007). Commentators argue that the problems which sex workers and ex-sex workers have noted reveal “the stress of living such complex lives and an abiding sense of injustice” (Day 2007, p.230; see also Day & Ward 2004b, 2004c). Sex workers also describe emotions of guilt, disgust and shame, which for them are a consequence of selling sexual services (Sanders 2005a). Likewise, in a study on male sex work in Edinburgh and Glasgow (Connell & Hart 2003), accounts given by respondents suggest that selling sexual services has a detrimental effect on workers’ mental health, which may contribute to feelings of depression, apathy, low self esteem, stress, anxiety, loss of trust in others, boredom and isolation.

Yet the findings of some empirical studies suggest that the exchange of sexual services does not necessarily damage mental and emotional health. For instance, Exner and his colleagues (1977) explored the psychological characteristics of 95 women from five segments of the sex industry in New York, and found that sex workers, in particular those not working on the street or taking drugs, appear to be “essentially free of pathology at least as much so as other demographically similar women” (p.485). In a more recent study from New Zealand comparing a group of sex workers and a group of women in the same age range, Romans and her colleagues (2001) found that the data “do not provide any convincing evidence that these sex workers have poorer physical or mental health, lower self-esteem or impaired social relationships” (p.79). Sanders (2005a) highlighted that sex workers often feel negatively about their work, but her findings demonstrated that 6 out of 55 respondents described the sexual encounter with clients as “enjoyable”. Likewise, as it will be further explained below, in a study from Hong Kong some sex workers (Kong & Zit eng 2003) reported that they had a “very positive attitude” towards sex work.

While the majority of academic findings on sex work establish a relationship between undesired mental health consequences and selling sexual services, what needs to be highlighted are those “exceptional cases” as noted above. They are important in the sense that they demonstrate that the link between emotional harm and selling sexual services is not essential. This opens up a theoretical space which allows us to explore a sociological question: what are the factors contributing to women’s different emotional experiences at work?

### **Emotional consequences and commercial sex in Hong Kong**

While the majority of academic studies have focused on STIs and violence against sex workers, the emotional consequences of selling sexual services have still received surprisingly little attention in the literature from Hong Kong. For example, commentators in Hong Kong argue that no research from Hong Kong has investigated how women’s work and their “unhealthy lifestyles”

including smoking or gambling, affect their well-being (Wong & Wu 2003, p.472), and urge that there is a need for academic research to move beyond sexual health (Wong *et al.* 2006b). Only a little research acknowledges sex workers' emotional experiences. Among these studies, the main focus of the work is on emotional harm. Findings suggest that workers experience HIV-related stigma (Lau *et al.* 2007b), "whore" stigma (Kong & Zi Teng 2003), poor psychological health (Holroyd 2008) and suicidal urges (Ling *et al.* 2007). Commentators argue that the working environment of street sex workers has significantly contributed to their poor emotional health (Holroyd 2008; Ling *et al.* 2007).

Since individuals' involvement in sex work is often assumed to be "a negative experience or an expression of deviance" (Cusick 2006), many studies of sex work, medical and psychological studies in particular, have focused on the negative emotional health consequences of sex work. These studies take for granted that these negative feelings develop from selling sexual services.

Rather than assuming selling sex itself affects women's emotions, some studies, in particular those adopted a sociological approach, argue that these feelings have to be understood in the specific social and cultural context within which they are situated. Negative feelings are considered to be mediated by social factors, and should be understood in the context of, for example, stigmatisation (Scambler 2006, 2009; Scambler & Paoli 2008). In other words, specific social and cultural influences have played a significant role in shaping sex workers' feelings about their work.

For example, while Cusick (2006) recognises that there are harms introduced by sex work, she argues that "harms are not inherent problems of sex work but of vulnerability" (2006, p.7). Kong (2006) is among a handful of researchers in Hong Kong who investigates emotions in the context of sex work from a sociological perspective. In his study on flat-working women (*ibid*), he examines the emotional labour and emotional management of sex workers. Findings suggest that workers commonly experienced "negative feelings" because of the low social status and the "whore" stigma attributed

to sex work, rather than the actual act of providing sexual services to clients. In the same vein, in their study of sex workers in Hong Kong, Wong and his colleagues (2006) argue that when compared with women of the same age group, sex workers were significantly below them in physical, psychological and environmental health in their WHO Quality of Life Score (see also Wong *et al.* 2003; 2008). It is argued that sex workers were suffering from poor psychological health and were suicidal (Ling *et al.* 2007).

Nevertheless, a more recent study argues that women's negative feelings may "arise from their awareness of the fear and stigma that surrounds their industry" rather than sex work itself (Wong *et al.* 2011; see also Holroyd *et al.* 2008). Moreover, policing practices have been criticised because they seemingly contribute to marginalising sex workers and increasing the level of risk for them in the course of work (Kong & Zi Teng 2003; see further discussion in Chapter 8).

As noted above, the stigma surrounding sex work and risks experienced by sex workers has been used to explain sex workers' negative feelings towards their work. Nevertheless, it is worth highlighting that findings in studies from Hong Kong and elsewhere show that some sex workers seemingly have a "positive job attitude" (Cusick 2006; Ho 2000; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Sanders 2005a). Because this body of literature is relatively small, accounts of this kind have often been called "the exceptions" without further detailed exploration. Nevertheless, as it will be demonstrated in the later chapters, these "exceptional cases" are important in the sense that they may challenge the established link between emotional harm and sex work.

In recent studies, some scholars have applied the concept of "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983; see Chapter 9) to explore sex workers' emotional experiences (Kong 2006; Sanders 2004b, 2005a). In this approach, the focus is not merely on the (undesired) emotional consequences of sex work. Most importantly, it creates a space allowing the researcher to explore how sex workers conceptualise their work related feelings and the ways in which they manage their emotions. In the same vein, this sociological study uses the



concept of “emotional labour” to analyse accounts given by sex workers in the hope of going beyond the images of victim and recognising the complexity of the emotional experiences of sex workers. Areas to explore include: 1) the ways in which social and cultural factors shape sex workers’ accounts of their emotional experiences in the course of work; and 2) the emotion-management strategies adopted by sex workers to manage their feelings at work. All these questions are addressed in Chapter 9.

As it is widely asserted that selling sexual services is inherently dangerous, risk has become a dominant theme of the research on prostitution. There is an extensive body of scientific literature in this field. Biological, medical and psychological research on commercial sex is concerned with, for example, the types of occupational hazard, assessing related risks and the consequent harm to sex workers. What researchers are attempting to do is categorise and quantify hazards. A key assumption in these approaches is that risks inevitably exist in commercial sex. As noted in the literature above, the *essential* link between risk and sex work has however been challenged by the findings of empirical research. The next section examines how social theories may provide an alternative understanding of the occupational hazards of sex work.

### **Social theories of risk**

Drawing on Kronenfeld and Glick (1991), in his early work Gabe (1995) points out that up to the mid-1990s sociologists had paid little attention to risk analysis. But in the last decades, a substantial body of sociological literature of risk in this field has been developed. Sociologists have contributed significantly to the theoretical understanding of risk. Surprisingly, despite the fact that sex work is widely recognised as a risky business, this area has seemingly attracted little attention in the sociological literature but more in medical and psychological studies.

Approaches to risk can be broadly divided into two groups. The realist perspective sees risk as “a physically given attribute of hazardous

technologies: objective facts, which can be explained, predicted and controlled by science, are separated from subjective values” (Bradbury 1989, p.381). The second perspective understands risk as “a socially constructed attribute”, which is associated with human beings “who assess and experience its effects” (ibid).

In contrast to the second perspective noted above, scientific approaches to the risks of prostitution have mostly treated risk as an objective phenomenon. As Gabe (1995) points out, psychological risk analysis, for example, often uses quantitative methods to collect data and emphasises “objective” findings, which may neglect the way in which other external social factors affect individuals’ perception and acceptance of risk and consequently their response to risk. Sociological theories, however, provide an alternative to the existing scientific approaches to this issue. Rather than seeing prostitution as having a fixed meaning, this body of literature posits that commercial sex needs to be understood in the context of social, economic and cultural relations and examines the complex interrelationships between prostitution and other institutions. Likewise, sociological approaches to risk emphasise the ways in which other social, cultural and structural factors shape the meanings of risk, aspects which have been neglected in scientific approaches. A sociological framework for conceptualising the risks of prostitution should help to open theoretical spaces in which to explore how risks of commercial sex are constructed and legitimated by scientists and governments and to problematise and to rethink the taken-for-granted relationship between risks and selling sexual services established in the existing scientific approaches to commercial sex.

Most importantly qualitative research, which is widely used in empirical sociology, is particularly “concerned with individuals’ own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour” (Hakim 1987/2000, p.34). With its emphasis on individuals’ experiences and the meanings of events to the individuals involved, a sociological framework for conceptualising the risks of prostitution should include women’s voices, which are often silent in scientific

studies. (The choice of research methods in this study is returned to in Chapter 5).

The following section turns to some theoretical approaches to risk. As noted in Chapter 1, with an emphasis on the social, cultural, interactional and situational context, this present study concerns the ways in which sex workers understand and respond to work-related risks. Hence, this literature review focuses mainly on the sociocultural literature. It will explore the ways in which sociological risk analysis may help us to explore sex workers' accounts of occupational risks.

In risk analysis, constructionism directly challenges realist approaches. In contrast to scientists, those who have adopted social constructionism have no intention of exploring the "truth" of a risk. What interests them is the construction of meaning regarding "risk" in a social and cultural context. Rather than viewing risks as objective facts or "natural" dangers or hazards, constructionism suggests that the meaning of risks depends on the way in which individuals interpret dangers or hazards.

In her work on risk, Deborah Lupton (1999/2005) suggests that for approaches which have adopted a social constructionist approach, "a risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions" (p.29). Rather, pre-existing knowledge and discourses shape the ways in which we measure, identify and manage risks. These approaches adopt different positions ranging from strong to weak constructionism (Lupton 1999/2005; see also Denny 2005). Commentators taking a strong social constructionist position argue that "there is no risk in reality" in the sense that the definition and understanding of risk depend on the way in which the issue is considered (Ewald 1991, p.199). Conversely, those who have taken a weak social constructionist position argue that believing "risk" to be a product of social and cultural construction does not necessarily deny that there is risk in reality (Lupton 1999/2005, p.28). For them, the judgements of "experts" (such as researchers or scientists) are not entirely unbiased, but are also constructed through implicit social and cultural

processes (Lupton 2003). The following discussion begins with an approach which takes a weak social constructionist position: the “cultural/symbolic” approach.

### ***The “cultural/symbolic” perspective***

In contrast to realistic approaches which assert that risk is an “objective” phenomenon, the social-cultural perspective considers the ways in which risks “are mediated, perceived and responded to in particular ways via social, cultural and political processes” (Lupton 1999/2005, p.28). In other words, in risk analysis the perspective takes social, cultural and political factors into account, factors which are ignored from realistic approaches to risk.

The social-cultural perspective views risk as “a socially constructed attribute”, which is associated with people “who assess and experience its effects” (Bradbury 1989, p.381). The major concerns are about “the ways in which notions of risk are used to establish and maintain conceptual boundaries between self and other” and also “how the human body is used symbolically and metaphorically in discourses and practices around risk” (Lupton 1999/2005, p.25). This perspective does not deny the value-added nature of knowledge regarding risk estimation and risk behaviour; it sets the focus mainly on “social institutions and the social and cultural context in which risk is assessed and managed” (Bradbury 1989, p.389).

The socio-cultural perspective conceptualises “risk” as a product of social and cultural construction. There are three assumptions in constructionism (Denzin 1989; Levine 1992). First, it is assumed that social reality is socially constructed. All the meanings or definitions attached to an object are obtained through the process of social interaction. Second, social interaction is symbolic, emergent and negotiated, because human interaction always relates to mental processes, which involve the manipulation of symbols, words, meanings and language. Third, self-reflexivity is a key feature of human beings. Individuals are able to shape and direct both their and other people’s actions.

Mary Douglas' approach to risk is one of the examples of strong constructionism. As an anthropologist, Douglas (1992, p.23) suggests that the notion of risk varies in different times and places. In the eighteenth century Western societies saw risk in the context of marine insurance as a rather neutral concept (see also Gabe 1995). Risk was analysed in order to estimate if a ship would arrive home. In this sense, the idea of risk implied both losses and gains. In the nineteenth century, the theory of risk-taking became more important in the economic field. It was assumed that individuals were risk-averse and would in general choose to avoid risk. Business owners would not take risks with an investment unless they found that they might make attractive profits from it. Therefore, Douglas argues that risk is not an objective idea. The meaning attached to this concept can be changed in different situations.

For cultural anthropologists and social anthropologists, the evaluation of risk and the willingness to accept risk are not merely psychological problems but also social problems (Luhmann 1993). Individual's perceptions of risk are not private (Douglas 1985). Rather, "culturally learned assumptions and weightings" play a significant role in the ways in which they judge and consequently manage risk (Douglas 1992, p.58). Individuals may conceptualise risk in a way which is different from experts, and they may be involved in activities which are considered by experts to be "risky". However, this does not necessarily mean that they fail to understand risk, or have wrong or biased perceptions of "risky activities". For Douglas, "a refusal to take sound hygienic advice is...a preference" (1992, p.103). As a rational agent, an individual not only objectively calculate probabilities, but also subjectively judges risk (Douglas 1985). This explains why the public may refuse to take experts' advice: while an expert tends to judge risk on the basis of his/her skilled experience, a layperson's judgement is often guided by probabilistic principles which s/he learns from culturally learned institutions. Douglas therefore argues that risk perception is a highly socialised cognitive processes (ibid, p.37). Individuals' responses to risk must be understood in a particular cultural context.

In her influential work *Purity and Danger* (1966/2002), Douglas applies the concepts of purity and pollution to risk and explores the ways in which boundary pollution is established. Risk beliefs and practices have a function which not only allows individuals to make sense of danger, but also enables them to form their own boundary and to exclude others. Her theories about risk provide a different perspective from which to understand how the account of risk has been applied to some sexual behaviour or subgroups as a control mechanism to regulate those being identified as outsiders, or Others. For her, risk ideas are therefore not neutral, but moral and political (Kemshall 2006; O'Malley 2006). As is explored further in the following chapters, ideas developed in Douglas's work may help to understand sex workers' response to risk, and to answer the following two questions: how the account of risk has been used as a mechanism to define selling sexual services as deviance? And consequently, how have sex workers become "Others" and been regulated?

The following section moves to discuss the "risk society" perspective. Lupton (1999/2005) has observed that in his writings Ulrich Beck adopts a realist approach to risk, although this is inconsistently maintained throughout his work. Therefore, she suggests that Beck "demonstrates a 'weak' version of social constructionism" (ibid, p.60). In contrast to a strong constructionist approach which argues that "there is no risk in reality", Beck recognises the presence of "real risks", but maintains that an individual's perception of risk is socially mediated. Anthony Giddens' writings demonstrate that he has taken a similar position, which emphasises that the analysis of people's understanding and response to risk must take both institutional and individual reflexivity into account (Giddens 1991, 1998).

### ***The risk society perspective***

In his "risk society" thesis, the risk society perspective developed by Beck's influential work, *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*, Beck defines risk as:

[A] *systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself*. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt. They are *politically reflexive*.

(Beck 1992/2005, p.21; original italic)

Beck recognises that “risks” are always present, but can be “prevented, minimized, dramatized, or channeled” (ibid). For him, risk has two faces: chance and danger (2007/2009). Beck’s argument partly echoes the view held by Giddens. Nevertheless, for the latter “[e]ssentially, “risk” always has a negative connotation, since it refers to the chance of avoiding an unwanted outcome” (Giddens 1998, p.27). Giddens emphasises that risk must be separated from hazard or danger (ibid, p.26), and further suggests that there are two kinds of risk: 1) external risk, which is risk of events that happen regularly. They are predictable, and therefore insurable (ibid, p.27); 2) manufactured risk, which “is created by the very progression of human development, especially by the progression of science and technology” (ibid, p.28).

Scientific approaches define risk as “the product of the probability and consequences (magnitude and severity) of an adverse event” (Bradbury 1989, p.382). Risk is seen as calculable and needing to be controlled. In the risk society, however, risk is controversial (Becks 2007/2009, p.13; Giddens 1988, p.30). Experts frequently disagree with each other when they attempt to define and provide explanations of risks. As a result, competing viewpoints and conflicting claims are produced (Becks 1998, p.14). Moreover, rather than telling the public that which risks are acceptable, experts can usually only provide “uncertain factual information about probabilities” (ibid). Lay people have to take a decision “in the context of conflicting, changeable scientific and technological information” (Giddens 1988, p.32), and may consequently find it difficult to simply rely on expert knowledge to understand risks (Beck 1998; Giddens 1988).

As noted above, Beck does not deny the existence of risks. He argues that risks are not an invention of modernity” (Beck 1992/2005 p.21). They are not simply illusions, or “products of a widespread alarmism or the sensationalism of the mass media” (Beck 2007/2009, p.13). However, Beck also stresses that “the objectivity of a risk is a product of its perception and its staging” (ibid). For him, the “reality” of risk is mediated by “particular cultural perceptions and evaluations” (ibid). The concept of risk is not scientifically neutral. Rather, social, cultural and political meanings are always inherent in a scientific definition of risk (Beck1993/2005, p.24). In other words, Beck argues that “[r]isks do not have any abstract existence in themselves” (2007/2009, p.13). Some risks are considered as threatening and real not because they are comparatively more dangerous than others, but because they are “a result of particular cultural perceptions and evaluations” (ibid). Here, the political aspect of risk is highlighted in the risk society thesis. As Lupton (1999/2005) suggests, risk has become a political concept in a risk society because there is “a continual definitional struggle over risk” between different groups (p.68). The struggle is not only between experts (or those who produce definitions of risks) but also lay people (or those who consume these definitions). Because no one completely understands risks, it consequently “generates a diversity of possible futures” (Giddens 1998, p.25).

In parallel with Douglas’ work as noted above, the risk society thesis suggests that lay people refuse to take experts’ advice not because they are ignorant. Rather, it is a rational response to the conflicting information on risks (Beck1993/2005; Giddens 1998). The concept of “reflexivity” has been applied to the accounts of risk (Beck1998, 1993/2005, 2007/2009; Giddens 1998, 1991, 1993). Beck (1986) and Giddens (1991) argue that an individual’s reflexive sense of risk and of his or her identity, which is shaped by social and cultural factors, contributes to her/his own ideas of risk. As a consequence, the individual may become increasingly suspicious of expert knowledge and may even challenge the expert’s account of risk.

As noted in Chapter 3, it is empirically evident that there is a gap between the accounts given by sex workers and by experts or authorities. Concepts



provided by the risk society perspective may help us to explain this phenomenon. In the case of AIDS, for example, experts suggest that migrant sex workers, in particular those from poor regions such as Sichuan in China (Lau *et al.* 2008), are more likely to have unsafe sex with their clients, which is often attributed to their lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases (for example, Wong *et al.* 2008). The risk society perspective may however enable us to take sex workers' agency and reflexive sense into account and understand individual women's response to other occupational risks like client violence and emotional harm along with diseases, in a specific cultural and social context. As a result, we may ask the question in the context of sex work's being widely recognised as a risky business, how individual sex workers respond to the account of risk? If risk is not "objective", "neutral" or "unbiased", how are women's understandings of occupational risks shaped?

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the literature on risks associated with working in the sex business. Among the existing studies, risk is similarly the main theme. From a review of studies on commercial sex in Hong Kong between 1996 and early 2003, findings suggest that sex work had received limited attention. Most of these studies, particularly those from the medical or psychological field, were mainly concerned with the sexual health of the clients of sex workers or the negative emotions experienced by sex workers.

Similarly, this chapter demonstrates that there is a fairly substantial body of literature on sex workers produced by scholars with a medical background. Because of this background, most of the existing studies on commercial sex in Hong Kong are quantitative. It follows that the concern has mostly focused on health risks, in particular from the sexual transmission of infection and HIV (see for example, Chan 1999/2000; Lau & Tsui 2003; Lau *et al.* 2007). Considering that the number of travellers who cross the border between Mainland China and Hong Kong has grown sharply since Hong Kong was handed back to the Chinese authorities in 1997, it is argued that both migrant sex workers and male clients are potentially vectors of diseases including

HIV. Moreover, there is a relatively small literature exists on other types of risks faced by sex workers, which demonstrates that sex workers are likely to face violence or crime in the course of work and experience undesired emotional consequences. Whilst involvement in sex work is assumed to be harmful, this chapter demonstrates that findings of related studies appear to be ambiguous.

Despite the fact that in the last decade, sex work has received increasing attention from different disciplines, the attention from sociologists is still relatively sparse, in particular studies from East Asia. This study uses a sociological framework to examine accounts given by female flat-working women on the risks in the course of their work. It attempts to understand the ways in which occupational risks such as sexually transmitted infections, violence and emotional harm are mediated, perceived and responded to in ways affected by social and cultural factors. What needs to be emphasised is that, like those approaches noted above which take a weak social constructionist position, this study does not deny the existence of sex work related-risks. Rather than taking for granted that sex work itself introduces risks to sex workers, as it will be demonstrated in later chapters, it argues that risks should be understood in specific social and cultural context. The following two chapters will discuss the research design and my experiences in the field as a researcher.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> David Blunkett was the Home Secretary of the United Kingdom at the time when the consultation paper was published in July 2004.

<sup>2</sup> In their article, Dukers-Muijers (2010, p.315) and her colleagues define swingers as “a couple who practice mate swapping, group sex, visit sex clubs for couples”.

<sup>3</sup> Wards *et al.* (2000) suggest that crack use may facilitate hepatitis C transmission because of oral lesions from smoking.

<sup>4</sup> In 2005, Sichuan ranked sixth among all Chinese provinces in the number of reported HIV cases. A high HIV prevalence among female sex workers in some parts of the region was reported (Choi *et al.* 2008; Lau *et al.* 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Since April 2003, all non-Hong Kong residents are charged a fee of HK\$1,400 (about £100) for using public health services, while Hong Kong residents have free access to these services.

<sup>6</sup> Azevedo, J., Ward, H. and Day, S. 2002. Health risks for sex workers: results of a European study. In *Sex work and health in a changing Europe*, EUROPAP Conference. Milton Keynes, UK January 2002.

<sup>7</sup> What needs to be highlighted is that the participants of these studies were male clients who attended the workshops, education projects or prostitution offender programmes after being arrested for attempting to solicit sexual services from an undercover female police officer. Findings may be biased because of the characteristics of the sampled population.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Methodology (1): research design**

Researchers are sometimes seen as little more than pimps: coming into the field to take, they then go back to their campus, institution, or suburb where they write up the data, publish and build careers – on the back of “others”, of those they took data from.

(O’Neill 2001, p.50)

#### **Introduction**

This study investigates sex workers’ reflexive understandings of sex work and occupational risks. Previous chapters have reviewed the literature on related issues from Hong Kong and elsewhere. Here I discuss the design of this piece of research, an ethnographic study which started in 2005. The present chapter describes and seeks to justify the methodology employed. It traces the design of the research, including the sampling method, the typical characteristics of the women in the study, issues of interviewing and observation, data analysis and problems which I thought I might face when I was in the field. Finally, I conclude by discussing the strengths and limitations of this study.

Given that until relatively recently sociologists have paid little attention to the occupational risks of sex work, this study aims to explore this area with an emphasis of the meaning of occupational risks and the working experiences of individual sex workers. The present chapter begins with a discussion on my rationale for using a qualitative ethnographic approach in this study. Then it moves to a discussion of the design of the research. The final part explores the challenges which I encountered in the field.

#### **Qualitative research and women**

In this study, the example of sex workers in Hong Kong serves as a case study for the way in which, in the course of their work, female sex workers who work independently in indoor settings experience risk, and the ways in

which they conceptualise and manage risks. For several reasons, in this study, I employed a qualitative ethnographic approach to collect data in the field. As demonstrated in previous research, studies employed quantitative approaches may identify trends of a phenomenon. However, qualitative approaches may provide description. First, qualitative research methods allow researchers to obtain information through interaction with the subjects, perhaps more appropriately termed “participants” in such research. They are more likely to get closer to respondents’ perspectives through core data collection methods such as interviewing and observation than they would with a quantitative approach (Bryman 2001; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Fetterman 1989; Silverman 2005).

Second, qualitative research stresses the intimate relationships between the researcher and participants in the study (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Most importantly, it “provides greater opportunity for a feminist sensitivity to come to the fore” (Bryman 2001, p. 286). This is particularly important in conducting a research study on women in a subordinate position, such as those involved in the sex industry.

Third, as noted above, the experiences of women working in indoor sex markets have been largely ignored in Hong Kong and elsewhere. As noted in Chapter 4, the issue of occupational risk in sex work has attracted less attention from sociologists. Many existing studies on this topic have been conducted by scholars with a medical background who have consequently mostly adopted quantitative approaches to the related issues which they investigate. The findings of these studies may offer a picture of trends in the areas concerned (for example, that consistent condom use in commercial sex has been reported among sex workers in Hong Kong but not in Mainland China; see Chapter 4). Focusing on a restricted range of variables, a common practice in quantitative research, may achieve a nomothetic explanation (de Vaus 2001/2006). Nevertheless, de Vaus (*ibid*) points out that as in quantitative research these variables are not considered within the context of the case, meanings of a phenomenon produced by individuals in a particular context may not be able to be captured:

By wrenching traits out of the context in which they occur we strip them of much of their meaning and consequently risk misreading their meaning and significance and thus misunderstanding their causes.

(de Vaus 2001/2006, p.234)

While details may be ignored in quantitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000) due to the idea of controlling variables (Smiths 1987; Williams & Heikes 1993), case studies “emphasize an understanding of the whole case and seeing the case within its wider context” (de Vaus 2001/2006, p.234). Understanding behaviour in context is particularly important in this study. As discussed in previous chapters, this research project explores some meanings of occupational risk by examining the accounts given by sex workers, an area largely ignored in previous research from East Asia, including Hong Kong. The risk analysis of this study, with an emphasis on the meanings of risk, covering the *context* within which occupational risks occur, is important because, as de Vaus argues, “the same behaviour can mean very different things depending on its context” (2001/2006, p.235) and the meanings of the behaviour as interpreted by the actors are “an important source of understanding of human behaviour” (ibid). As noted above, while previous research employed quantitative approaches to identify trends and patterns of sex work, qualitative approaches may provide description which is likely to generate detailed data about flat-working women’s subjective experiences. As it will be further demonstrated in the following chapters, such data is vital in understanding some generally ignored aspects of sex work.

With an emphasis on the meanings of risk is understood by the sex workers, based on their experiences and their accounts, a case-study approach seemingly promises the women concerned a relatively greater control over the study, in the sense that they are likely to have more room to express their views than they would in a quantitative study. This may help to balance the power difference between the researcher and participants, in the sense that a more consensual relationship may be established for the study (see p.127, below).

## **Ethnography and ethnographic study**

Ethnography has been a popular approach in studying commercial sex (for example, Hart 1988; Hart and Barnard 2003; McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Nencel 2001; Sanders 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b). Some researchers did not undertake ethnography, but employed ethnographic methods, such as interviews and observation, to conduct their studies (for example Barnard *et al.* 2001; Church *et al.* 2001; Davidson 1989).

Brewer suggests that ethnography can be defined in two ways: “big” and “little”. The former considers ethnography in a broad sense, which “equates it with qualitative research as a whole”. The latter is equivalent to “ethnography-as-fieldwork” and is defined as:

[T]he study of people in naturally occurring settings or “fields” by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

(Brewer 2000, p.10)

Similarly, for Chambers (2000, p.852) ethnography aims to “describe or interpret the place or culture in human affairs”. A distinguishing characteristic of ethnographic research is that ethnographers are expected to go into the field and rely on themselves as the primary research instrument (Wolcott 1999). In short, this approach generally focuses on a single setting or group and the study is small in scale. Researchers are expected to stay in a social setting for a long period in order to become familiar with the culture (Dalamont 2004). Data are collected in a flexible and unstructured way in order to capture people’s natural behaviour. When collecting data, researchers should look from the perspective of the researched, though they are responsible for “making sense of all the data from an external social scientific perspective” (Fetterman 1989, p.21). In other words, researchers have to immerse themselves in a social setting and conduct observation, but

should maintain a professional distance in order to avoid going native (Bryman 2001; Fetterman 1989).

Bryman (2001) finds that the two terms 'ethnography' and 'participant observation' are often used interchangeably. It is widely accepted that participant observation is the core methodology of ethnographic research, though this approach involves the use of various techniques for collecting data. Chambers (2000) argues that ethnography should be defined by its subject matter (ethnos or culture) but not by its methodology.

Wolcott (1999) suggests that as a research approach, ethnography should not only emphasise the field methods employed in data gathering, but also how the data are organised, analysed or reported. He urges researchers to make a clear distinction between "doing ethnography" and "borrowing ethnographic techniques" in their work.

As noted above, I describe the approach which I employed in this research project as a qualitative ethnographic approach. The focus of this study is on the culture of human affairs and emphasises the interaction between the researcher and the participants. There is a methodological link between this approach and ethnography, though it is different from traditional ethnography. The core research method is in-depth interviewing. When I was in the field, I could mostly observe but was *unable* to participate in the activities, due to the nature of the research questions. Using Wolcott's (1999) phrase, in this research I "borrowed" various "ethnographic techniques" to explore the occupational risk related experiences of flat-working women in Hong Kong.

### **The design of the research**

The data for this research were mainly collected, then, through in-depth interviews with flat-working women and observation of the sex industry. The study aims to understand the ways in which indoor sex workers accounted for occupational risks and the strategies which they developed to manage the risks they faced.



### ***The period of the fieldwork***

The fieldwork was started in Hong Kong in July 2006. Interviews were held and observational data collected mainly during a seven-month period and I left the field in January 2007. Before I entered the field, I conducted pilot research in a visit during February 2006. During the visit I conducted two interviews, located potential participants and started to build a network of gatekeepers and sex workers. All these preparations were aimed to produce a practical research plan and to smooth the process of the fieldwork.

### ***Settings of interviews and participant observation***

As noted above, this study, focusing mainly on flat-based sex work, which is a segment of the indoor sex market, was conducted in Hong Kong. I invited the participants to choose the time and venue for meetings, with the aim of creating a comfortable and relaxing environment for interviewing. There were three key sites:

- (1) **The office of the Sex Worker's Alliance of Hong Kong:**<sup>1</sup> this office was situated in a residential building in the city centre. To be precise, the place was not only used as an office of the Sex Worker's Alliance of Hong Kong, but was also open to the public and individuals could get access by appointment to an archive there. The organisation often put on courses for sex workers, for instance, on occupational health and safety, legal issues, job related skills or other courses for leisure (such as dancing classes). Occasionally, physicians under the aegis of the organisation voluntarily gave free medical advice from the office'; workers could also buy or order "necessities" at a low price there, such as condoms or lubricants. Thirteen women were interviewed at this site. Moreover, with the permission of the organisation, I also conducted observations there when women participated in meetings or activities.
- (2) **Working-flats:** Ten women in this study chose to be interviewed in their working-flats. All these women but one (who was interviewed on her day off) were expecting clients during the interview. In order not to disturb their working lives, I conducted the interviews with these women when

they had no clients and interrupted the interviews if clients approached them.

- (3) **Public setting:** Not all the participants wanted to meet at their working flats. As explained in Chapter 2, the Hong Kong prostitution law allows only one sex worker to work alone from the premises. Police officers visited working-flats occasionally. Some women perceived that it was risky to have more than one woman staying in a working-flat, though they understood that they were unlikely to be prosecuted. Five women chose to be interviewed in a restaurant. Some women were concerned about their privacy and worried that we might be overheard during the interviews. As a result, two interviews were conducted in an empty sports field late in the evening.

### ***Sampling and population characteristics***

This study examines the indoor sex market. The population of interest is a subpopulation of sex workers: women working from a rented flat or a flat of their own. As noted in Chapter 1, there is no comprehensive recording of the number of flat-working women in Hong Kong. In this study, the number of advertisements for sexual services posted by flat-working women on two local adult entertainment websites was used as an indicator of the number of flat-working women in Hong Kong during the period when this study was conducted.

The Internet over the past few years has become a popular medium for advertising among flat-working women in Hong Kong. Workers often posted advertisements on two websites “Sex 141” and “Sex 161”, to promote their services. In his study, Ming (2005) observes that there were on average 80–100 advertisements for flat-working women on “Sex 141” in 2002 and on average approximately 500 in 2004. Likewise, most women surveyed in the present study (28 out of 30) advertised their services on one of these adult entertainment websites; a few of them advertised on both of them. Having noticed this, when I was collecting data, I therefore carefully read every single advertisement, to avoid double counting. Between 2005 and 2010, the

number of advertisements on these two websites increased from approximately 600 on average to 1,100. Considering the fact that some women may advertise their services on other websites or in print media, the estimated population of flat-working women during the period of this research totalled approximately 1,500.

Thirty women were recruited and interviewed for this study. They were Hong Kong residents with legal status but from different origins: fifteen women were originally from Hong Kong; fifteen women were from other cities in Mainland China.

Apparently, the sample size of this study is small compared with that in previous quantitative research conducted in Hong Kong. Yet, in contrast to what applies to quantitative research, the adequacy of sample size is relative (Sandelowski 1995). The optimum size for the intended purpose of a study “is a matter of judgement” (Neergaard 2007, p.259; see also Sandelowski 1995) and is adequate or not in terms of the sufficiency and quality of the data obtained (Neergaard 2007, p.260). The qualitative approach focuses in depth (Patton 1990) and involves informational representativeness. It is recognised that small is beautiful (Sandelowski 1995), but simultaneously the sample size should not be too small or it may fail to achieve informational redundancy or theoretical saturation (ibid). What the qualitative principle requires is “purposeful sampling” and “good” informants (Morse 1991, p.127).

Like other case studies, this study attempts to achieve both more complex and fuller explanations of a phenomenon – different types of occupational risks associated with selling sexual services. This study adopts a “theory testing” approach (Yin 2003). Much of the literature on sex work from Hong Kong, like that from elsewhere, suggests that the levels of occupational risk faced by migrant sex workers may be different from those for local sex workers. As a result, this may contribute to different understandings of occupational risk between the two groups of women. This study, therefore, begins with a question: “What is the difference between voluntary migrant and voluntary local adult sex workers in Hong Kong in terms of their

experiences of different types of risk in the course of their work? How may this affect their understanding of risks?”

With the intention of answering the above questions, therefore, I recruited participants in this study by using a purposeful sampling approach. Participants should always be selected according to the needs of the study (Morse 1991). As discussed in the literature review (see Chapter 4), the knowledge of occupational hazards in this field has so far been generated mostly from studies on female sex workers in the West. Women in East Asia have received relatively less attention. With the aim of broadening this literature beyond the Euro-American axis, only *female* sex workers were included in this study. As a result, the term “sex worker” is considered to refer only to females in the text of this work. As noted above, of the women in this study, half were from Mainland China and half were local Hong Kong sex workers. All participants defined themselves as being involved in “voluntary adult sex work” (Scambler & Scambler 1997c; see discussions of “sex work as work” in Chapter 3). In other words, those who were under eighteen years old, forced into or manipulated by a third party were excluded. In addition, the sample excluded those who did not have legal status or worked in other segments of the sex industry during the time of the study. With this study design, these participants should be considered good sources of information (Sandelowski 1995).

The major strategy used for sampling was networking (Lee 1993/1999), which is traditionally known as snowball sampling. I also offered my services as a volunteer with the Sex Worker’s Alliance of Hong Kong, in order to gain access to sex workers. It has been extensively recognized in the literature that this strategy is effective for sampling hard-to-reach populations (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Faugier 1997; Faugier and Sargeant 1997, Lee 1993/1999; Sanders 2005a; Van Meter 1998), in particular highly stigmatised groups. Apparently “security” (Lee 1993/1999) plays a crucial role in determining whether a participant declines to participate or not (see p.126). Lee (ibid, p.66) even suggests that in many circumstances it is the only way of producing a sample in this context. Hence, it was not a surprise that

sampling by networking has been widely employed in the research on selling sex (for example, see Chen 2003; Hart 1998; Ng 2003; Sanders 2005a; Yim 2003).

### ***Interviewing***

In an ethnographic study, the interview is one of the crucial techniques for collecting data (Fetterman 1989). In this study, the focus of the interviews was upon three main areas: women's experiences of occupational risk; how they accounted for risk and their interpretation of events associated with it; and the strategies which they adopted to manage the risks. As is further detailed below, in Hong Kong society, women's sexuality and consequently sex work, are sensitive topics. Previous chapters have already demonstrated that in Hong Kong many researchers have used survey research in this field. But, as Lee (1993/1999) points out, "even at a purely technical level, many topics – especially of a sensitive kind – remain ill-suited to study by means of the survey" (p.101). This may explain, as is demonstrated in Chapters 3 and 4, why it is that many questions about the occupational risks of sex work are still unanswered.

Ethnographic interviewing is thematic or topical in structure (Rossman & Rails 2003). It comes under the umbrella of in-depth interviewing, though it is distinguished from other types of interviewing by the duration and frequency of contact between the researcher and the respondents, as well as the quality of their relationships (Heyl 2001). Researchers are expected to conduct lengthy field studies and develop respectful, on-going relationships with participants. More importantly, this approach allows an interaction between the researcher and the researched, which enables the former to understand the participants' situations from their point of view. It creates the space for participants to speak of their experiences in their own words. Compared with survey research, it is assumed that qualitative interviewing can produce "more information" (Williams & Heikes 1993).

As noted in Chapters 3 and 4, the survey has nonetheless been a popular tool used in sex work-related research, in particular in the Hong Kong context.

The standardised questionnaire may not, however, provide respondents with much space to describe their experiences; findings suggest that sex workers face occupational hazards (with an emphasis on disease and violence), but how women interpret the risks they face and their experiences of risk management has been largely ignored. This study attempts to access women's narratives and capture their various and complex experiences through ethnographic interviewing.

Stage (2003) suggests that there are three steps involved in an ethnographic interview. The researcher begins the interview with a statement explaining the reasons and the purpose of the interview. Then s/he uses ethnographic explanations to elaborate on the way(s) in which the goals of the interview will be attained. In other words, the researchers will discuss with the interviewee how the interview will proceed, what aspects of the respondent's experience it is planned to explore and the method of recording the interview. Since ethnographic interviewing emphasises discovering answers from respondents (Spradley 2002), the researcher therefore should encourage the respondent to explain her concepts in her own language. After going through these two processes, the researcher starts the interview with different ethnographic questions, most of which are descriptive.

Learning from others, at the beginning of each interview I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the research to the participants. I told them that I was a research student at a university in the UK and that this study was a doctoral research project. My reason for introducing myself in detail was to establish the legitimacy of the interviews. In my initial research proposal, I presumed that it was important for me as a researcher to demonstrate that I would not look at them through a voyeuristic lens as some journalists did and it was crucial to provide respondents with a clear idea about the interview. However, as it will be demonstrated in Chapter 6, the women did not seem interested in my background or the aim of the research.

Before I started to interview the respondent and I went through the information sheet (see Appendix 4) given to the participants with them. It

detailed what issues this study was concerned with and the likely duration of the interview (1.5 hours). It also stated that the interview would be audio-taped using a digital recorder. Many women appeared to pay no serious attention to what I said or what was written on the sheet. Some even interrupted me and urged me to start the interview. Some of them showed a concern to know where the thesis would be published or who would probably read the work. Once the women knew that their privacy would be protected (see below for details), they did not ask further questions.

I then asked the participants to sign a consent form, though they were clearly informed that they could withdraw from the research at any stage without having to provide a reason. I left them with the information sheet about the research and a copy of the consent form (see Appendix 6). Also, contact details were provided for my supervisors, Professor Jonathan Gabe and Professor Raymond Lee. My intention was to ensure that the women in this study were well informed about the aims of the research. They were also told that they could contact me and discuss the interview with me afterwards; if they had further enquiries or were not happy with the process of the interview, they could contact my supervisors.

These steps were designed to prevent the participants in the research process from feeling silenced and to balance the power relations between them and me. Showing the women an information sheet and asking them to sign a consent form would not necessarily have balanced the power relations between the two parties. My experiences in the field suggested that these means might help to establish a more consensual relationship between the researcher and the participant, but the women might not share my understandings of the significance of reading the information sheet and signing the consent form. Other issues might arise from these documents, which highlighted the fact that women might also understand their relations with me differently from what I understood. For example, one participant, worried that the information sheet and the consent form would be seen by her family, refused to keep the documents. Learning from this experience, I reminded other participants that the documents contained sensitive

information. Some women returned the documents to me but noted down my contact details.

As noted above, I initially planned to have all interviews audio-taped. All but one participant from Mainland China had no problem with this. This woman had a fear that people, her husband in particular, would recognise her voice if they listened to the interview. Although I guaranteed that no one except me would listen to the interview, this woman allowed me only to take notes of what she said.

I went on to tell the participants that pseudonyms would be used in the thesis in order to protect their anonymity. In fact, the women in this study all told me their working names but not their real names; some respondents suggested that I might refer to them in my writing by the former. Considering that many women interviewed in this study worked in secrecy and could have been identified by peers or colleagues if I had referred them by their working names in the text of this thesis, I decided to assign pseudonyms to them all to protect their identity.

Because Hong Kong is a sexually conservative society where women's sexuality is marginalised and women's voices in this field are largely muted (see Chan 2008; Li 2008; to be discussed further below), women might have felt embarrassed to talk about their own experiences of selling sexual services, because sex work is a sensitive topic, above all in a cultural context of this kind.

In his discussion on asking sensitive questions, Lee (1993/1999) emphasises the importance of "privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemnatory attitude": these qualities are important because "they provide a framework of trust":

Within this framework, researchers can lead those studied to confront, in a fundamental way, issues which are deep, personally threatening and potentially painful.

(Lee 1993/1999, p.98)



Even though researchers treat the interview in a careful manner, they may alarm respondents by raising the subject of problematic or stigmatised behaviour in the interview. Brannen (1988) suggests that the researcher should allow sensitive topics to emerge progressively during the interview. Respondents are likely to disclose sensitive or confidential information only when they find that there is a certain amount of trust between them and the researcher.

Learning from Spradley's research (2002), I created a hypothetical situation on the basis of the information collected from newspapers, magazines or, mostly, interviews with other women (original sources were anonymous) and asked women to comment. The issues discussed were mainly to do with sex workers' experiences of risk in the course of their work and the public and popular views of sex work. I felt that raising "stories" of other sex workers at the beginning of the interview helped to open up the conversation and encouraged the participants to talk about their own experiences. After workers got used to talking about these sensitive issues, I then guided the conversations back to topics which were relevant to the participants' lives.

### ***(Non)-participant observation***

It is widely recognized that in the case of hard-to-reach populations, the researcher may have difficulty in capturing some aspects of group members' social life without participation (Bryman 2001; Roger 2004). Therefore, in the sexual setting it is not uncommon for researchers to employ participant observation as a strategy in collecting data. In contrast to Wolcott (1999), Delamont (2004) stresses that using this method does not mean that the researcher has to do exactly what the researched does. The former may be involved in some activities, though the emphasis is on interacting with individuals when they participate in activities. By using this method, some researchers have studied the interior design of sex workers' premises in order to explore how the setting contributed to arousing desire in clients and producing fantasies (Ho 2003c; Liepe-Levinson 2002). In some studies, researchers stayed in sex establishments or streets and watched the daily

working lives of sex workers, as well as their interactions with clients (Hart 1998; Ho 2003c; Li 2003; Nencel 2001; Sanders 2005a, 2006b).

Traditionally, social scientists are expected to conduct observation in natural social settings without intervening in the research (Adler and Adler 1994; Angrosino and de Pérez 2003; Brewer 2000; Emerson 1981; Roger 2004). However, in recent years social scientists have increasingly argued that observational data are not likely to be entirely objective. For Roger (2004, p.217), observation is “a process of *excluding* data as much as accumulating them and entails selection decisions at many levels”. When the researcher looks at a phenomenon, s/he is not likely to capture all its aspects. The researcher ignores those happenings which s/he views as irrelevant and pays attention only to those regarded as relevant. Factors such as the distinctive talents and limitations of the researcher and the way in which s/he conducts observation all determine what is captured as data (Angrosino and de Pérez 2003; Roger 2004). When the researcher writes a report, s/he analyses only what seems to her/him to be sufficiently relevant. The findings are thus not truly objective but a product of the researcher’s selection. In this sense, “observer bias” is unavoidable in observational data.

Aware that the objective truth of a culture or a social phenomenon is not likely to be established, sociologists and social scientists start to accept that not only can non-participant observation generate valid and reliable data, but that “participation as a legitimate base from which to conduct observation” (Angrosino and de Pérez 2003, p.113). Rather than remaining entirely outside the observed interaction, avoiding stimulating the researched and looking for objective truth, as naturalism suggests, more researchers are prepared to use it. Drawing on Buford Junker, Gold (1958) suggests four theoretical roles for an observer, namely, complete-participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant and complete observer. When a researcher adopts a role as either a complete-participant or a complete observer, however, the researched individuals are not aware that they are being observed and thus the problem is created that the informed consent of the research subjects is likely to be omitted (Angrosino and de Pérez 2003;

Gold 1958; Gray 2004). In this context, the two roles between the two extremes are more acceptable because the researched are aware that they are being observed. The observer-as-participant role is nearer to the complete observer role, which is adopted by the researcher when s/he conducts one-visit interviews. In contrast, the participant-as-observer role is close to the complete participant role. A distinguishing feature of this approach is that the individuals whom the researcher observes are aware that they are involved in a study. As individuals know the researcher and her/his purpose in the field, the ethical problems surrounding data collection through covert observation are minimized.

In Gold's (1958) typology of research roles in a naturalistic setting, he explores the theoretically possible balance between involvement and detachment. More importantly, he highlights the participation of the researcher in observations. Following this line of thinking, social scientists and sociologists suggest that, as well as an observer role, the researcher can adopt a membership role (Adler and Adler 1994). As is further elaborated in the next chapter, in this study I adopted the active-member researcher role. The researcher in this role is involved in the central activities of the researched group and it is assumed that the researcher's responses advance the group. While the researcher is highly involved in the setting, s/he is not committed to the members' values and goals (ibid, p.380).

In order to obtain objective and scientific data, detachment and strangeness are the crucial elements in naturalistic observation. It is stated in many textbooks that observational data must be collected in their *natural settings*. Observation in this context is therefore naturalistic in nature (Brewer 2000; Bryman 2001; David and Sutton 2004; Fetterman 1989; Gray 2004; Roger 2004). This is directly associated with the main characteristic of ethnography: the researcher is supposed to study people in their natural settings and therefore ethnographic research is widely recognized as research based on naturalistic observation (Roger 2004, p.217).

As shown above, however, sociologists and social scientists increasingly argue that the researcher is involved in the construction of knowledge and therefore is part of the ethnographic product (Angrosino and de Pérez 2003; Bryman 2000). This awareness comes from postmodernism, which challenges the notion of authoritative and objective knowledge and raises questions about representational issues. Consequently, those researchers who embrace this critique conduct research with a reflexive attitude. Rather than assuming that they objectively collect data from the field and then describe the reality of social settings through dispassionate accounts, researchers recognize that it is important to understand the role which their own attributes, such as gender, class and ethnicity, play in the process of research (Angrosino and de Pérez 2003). While in traditional ethnography, researchers in general virtually vanish from their accounts, an increasing number of researchers intentionally reveal the nature of their involvement in the research and explicitly reflect on the influence of their attributes on fieldwork (see Goode 2002; Hubbard 1999a; McKeganey and Bloor 1991).

As noted in Chapter 4, selling sex is always associated with stigma. On some occasions, respondents may apparently hesitate or decide not to reveal sensitive information in an interview (Bryman 2001). It is perhaps no surprise for the researcher to find that many things cannot be spoken about in the sexual setting, in particular sexual relations or controversial behaviour (for example, see Hart 1998; Li 2003). It is suggested that observation is an effective method to explore hidden activities. Nevertheless, experiences from previous research seem to suggest that there are some aspects of the setting which could never be captured by an outsider to the sex industry. Moreover, members in a researched group are likely to change their usual practice if an outsider is present. In order to enable myself to conduct observations in natural settings and be considered as a legitimate outsider, I positioned myself as a “volunteer”. Nevertheless, taking this position was not necessarily unproblematic. As it will be further discussed in Chapter 6, the organisation with which I was associated had its own agenda on issues relating to sex work. Therefore, the sex workers and so were likely to see me as a representative of the organisation, and so might not provide information

on behaviour or incidents which, in their minds, might have implications for the organisation. In other words, being a volunteer of the organisation allowed me to collect data from the perspectives of an “insider”, but might also have influence of the accounts given by the women in the interviews.

In this study, observational research was based on partial immersion. I did not move to live at the field site but spent a great deal of time taking part in the activities organised by Sex Worker’s Alliance of Hong Kong for sex workers, stayed in women’s working flats or and spent time with women. I observed everything I could (Delamont 2004), but focused mainly on the occupational risks related to such issues as the contribution of the participants’ working environments to the risks they faced; the ways in which women managed risk through spatial control or manipulating identity; the way in which women interacted with colleagues (at or outside work) and responded to the information to do with occupational risk provided by the agency.

The observational data were recorded in field notes. As is detailed in the next chapter, in some situations it was difficult to record what was happening in the field. With the concern that data not recorded is lost (Delamont 2004), I wrote field notes in “proximity to the field” (Emerson *et al.* 2001/2007) in the form of “jotted notes” (Lofland & Lofland 1995). As I did not want to arouse any participant’s attention, I wrote these down only when the women were not with me. I used the little jottings to write up the field notes before the end of each day.

### ***Transcription***

As noted above, interviews were audio-taped using a digital recorder. In order to ensure accuracy, as the interviewer I transcribed all the files into pseudonymous transcripts, as discussed above. All the audio files were then transferred and saved on the computer. In order to capture more subtle meanings, interviews were transcribed verbatim with the assistance of *Dau-Zi-Tang-Gou-Geiv1.04* (豆子騰稿機) software. This is a form of user-friendly

software which allowed me to open the audio file and type in data in the same window. Most importantly, by using the tool I could easily manipulate audio files by using shortcut keys (For example, I could fast forward the audio file by simply pressing “Alt” and “F”). All the files were saved and were imported into NVIVO 7, which is a QSR software designed to assist with management and analysis of qualitative data, for analysing.

### ***Data analysis***

This study focuses on the meanings of occupational risk to sex workers, with an emphasis on the importance of the context in understanding phenomena. In other words, it is argued that “the meaning of behaviour helps us ‘make sense’ of why one event produces particular outcomes” (de Vaus 2001/2006, p.250). Therefore, in contrast to quantitative research, which tends to quantify the data, the analysis of this study places the participants’ accounts of their experiences at its centre. The accounts given by sex workers, however, are unlikely to speak for themselves. This section discusses the ways in which the data in this study were analysed.

Learning from the analytic approach suggested by Bryman (2001), I began by reading through the transcripts without considering an interpretation, but highlighted some interesting or important points and produced memos (I saved memos first as word files and then imported the files into NVIVO 7). With the assistance of the software, I then examined the Chinese text again closely and explored the themes either generated in the literature review or emerging in the empirical data; I also explored the pattern of the data. Codes were produced typically in one or a few words. Ninety-eight free nodes<sup>2</sup> (without organisation) were generated, typically being attached to a phrase or a paragraph. These free nodes were grouped into categories. As a result, thirty tree nodes were created. Then I explored the connections between the codes and patterns (a list of the codes is given in Appendix 9).

### ***Data presentation***

As noted above, the interviews were conducted in either Mandarin or Cantonese,<sup>3</sup> and were transcribed verbatim in written Chinese. As this thesis is written in English, all quotations were therefore translated into English.

Translating the transcripts from one language to another is an extremely time-consuming process. In this study, as the interviews were conducted in a conversational style, they could be lengthy (most interviews took 2 to 3.5 hours, but an extreme case was 6 hours long). Due to time constraints, I did not translate all the transcripts into English but selected segments for translation. As noted above, all the transcripts were coded. Quotations were extracted from the transcripts and were translated in English.

### ***Ethics***

Since selling sex is a sensitive topic, women involved in this activity are stigmatised. In addition, women's attributes, such as gender, class and ethnicity, contributed to their vulnerability. Hence, in this study I took the ethical issues very seriously. In particular, concerns were raised about minimising the negative impact on participants' emotions; the issue of informed consent; and avoiding invasions of privacy.

The proposal for this research project with an application for ethical approval was submitted to the Research Committee of the Department of Health and Social Care at Royal Holloway in 2006. When the application was prepared, I carefully studied the statement of Ethical Practice from the British Sociological Association and sought at all times to follow the general principles listed in this statement when I conducted this research study. No significant ethical concerns were raised by the Committee and the proposal was approved in 2006 before the fieldwork started.

In the quotation cited above, O'Neill (2001) used the metaphor of the "pimps" to highlight the fact that an exploitative relationship may exist between the researcher and the research subject. Sex work activists have long argued that academic researchers may publish their research without actually

making any real contribution in terms of improving workers' situations (Nagle *et al.* 1997). Moreover, as explained above, this study attempts to explore sex workers' experiences and understanding of their occupational risks. During the interviews, women were asked to recall and to describe extremely personal and sensitive issues or unpleasant experiences related to stigmatisation, physical and psychological harm. As a result, respondents would have been vulnerable to exploitation (Brannen 1988).

To prevent myself becoming a "pimp" in the research, various means were used in the research design to try to encourage a more consensual relationship. During the interviews different strategies were used to help the women to open up and talk about potentially embarrassing or painful experiences of sex work and its occupational hazards (see p.125). At the same time, aware that the research process might have a negative impact on the participants' emotions, I used various strategies to avoid or minimise the harm that might be caused by recalling and talking about their experiences. Most importantly, the women were told that, although they had signed a consent form, they were not obliged to answer all the questions. I added that they were allowed to terminate their interview with me at any time. If they did, the signed consent form and the notes taken during the interview would be returned to them and all audio records would be deleted.

Because the data collected by qualitative interviewing is often "unique and personal", respondents are easily identified by themselves and others close to them (Lee 1993/1999, p.102). The researcher has responsibilities to protect the respondents from being identified, in particular in research involving sensitive issues, because identified respondents are at risk of stigma. As noted above, therefore, pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis to refer to participants and the organisations or agencies involved in this study in order to avoid any invasion of privacy. All personal information which might reveal the respondent's identity was excluded from the text.

Moreover, all the electronic copies of the transcripts and audio files were password protected. I transcribed all the interviews; no one except me could



open and listen to the files. None of the participants withdrew from the research; but if they had, all the related documents and audio files would have been returned to them or destroyed. The data collected were exclusively used for academic research.

After describing the process of developing the research design and the rationale behind it, the following sections consider various dimensions of undertaking research in Hong Kong. Here I examine in particular the trials of conducting the research and the challenges which I faced in the field. The reflexive exploration of the trials provides me with new insights into ethnographic practices.

### **Going to the Field: Accessing a hard-to-reach population**

Gaining access to a social setting is the first and crucial step in an ethnographic study. For the researcher, as an outsider, conducting a study on sensitive topics such as selling sex, illegal drug use and criminal activities, even gaining access can be a challenge. The “social invisibility and deviant social status” of people from these populations (Lee 1993/1999, p.119), their “stigmatised conditions” (Atkinson and Flint 2001) and the illegal nature of some behaviours (Bryman 2001) all contribute to the difficulties of accessing hard-to-reach populations.

Consequently, the researcher who conducts a study on a sensitive topic will find that sampling is an uneasy task for the following reasons: (a) people from these groups are more likely to cover their activities (see also Faugier and Sargeant 1997a); (b) although deviant populations are literally separate from normal populations, in practice the former are not distinguished from society in general. Therefore, the more invisible an activity, the more difficult it is for the researcher to sample; (c) the cost of obtaining sample elements will increase if they are rare (also see Watters and Biernacki 1989); and (d) if a deviant population is scattered, the researcher may face high cost if s/he intends to access respondents in different areas in order to increase representativeness.

Like accessing other “hidden populations” and “hard-to-reach populations”, the path of access to the settings of sex workers may not be smooth . As Lee (1993/1999, p.119) suggests, “[d]eviant worlds are often melded to or shielded from conventional worlds”. While not being separated from others in society, deviant individuals tend to conceal a stigma from unknowing persons by adopting different strategies such as covering (Goffman 1963/1990). Thus it is no surprise that sex workers have a high incentive to hide their jobs from others. Consequently, as noted in the following section, at the beginning of the research I found that approaching sex workers involved great uncertainties.

For these reasons, gaining access is therefore generally viewed as a major challenge to fieldworkers who conduct research on comparatively hard-to-reach populations and sensitive topics (Berger 2003; Faugier and Sargeant 1996; Lee 1993/1999). Nevertheless, the path of gaining access to hard-to-reach populations may be smoothed with the help of people who have connections with such groups.

### **Gaining access to sex workers via gatekeepers**

Gaining access to a group via its gatekeepers is one of the common strategies employed by researchers (Bryman 2001), in particular those conducting ethnographic studies. It is evident that gatekeepers enable researchers to locate potential informants and provide access to hard-to-reach populations. More importantly, gaining access via a gatekeeper provides the researcher with the legitimacy to contact potential informants (Feldman 2003 *et al.*; Hart 1998). For example, with the help of Zi Teng (see Chapter 1, note 2), Kong and his research team successfully recruited 150 flat-working women within three months for a quantitative opinion survey and conducted in-depth interviews with 13 participants (Kong & Zi Teng 2003). This is a good example of the crucial role played by gatekeepers in the process of gaining access. I discuss in detail below how my access to flat working women was gained via gatekeepers (see Chapter 6).

### **Gaining access to sex workers via individual sex workers**

Another method of gaining access was via individuals who acted as sponsors (Bryman 2001). Fetterman (1989, p.43) suggests that for the researcher “the best ticket into the community” is “an introduction by a member”. This is particularly apposite when a study is sensitive in nature and involves a hard-to-reach population. On the same lines as gaining access through gatekeepers, a sponsor can help the researcher to gain the trust of the members and strengthen his/her capacity to work in the community (*ibid.*) As I negotiated access to this group of women, I found that individual sex workers played a more important role in helping me to not only gain access but also to earn acceptance from the respondents.

### **Safety issues**

It is widely recognized that the potential dangers in the field related to selling sex put the researcher at risk of physical and emotional harm (see Hart 1998; McKeganey & Barnard 1997; Nencel 2001; Sanders 2005a). Nevertheless, researchers found during fieldwork for some previous studies that it was not as dangerous as they had estimated. For example, McKeganey and Barnard (1997) say of the only physical confrontation they experienced in the field that it did not involve any of the individuals engaged in the sex industry, but the police: the researchers were mistaken for drug dealers and were questioned by two police officers.

Likewise, Sanders (2005a; 2006b) did not encounter “any overt threats” in the field. On the basis on her own experiences, Sanders (2005a), however, argues that while researching prostitution has been conceived as potentially “risky research” and the fieldwork site as dangerous, the level of risk faced by the researcher depends on *the market* and *the researcher’s position*. In her study on sex workers in Birmingham, Sanders (2005a) mainly conducted her research in indoor sex markets. For her, these settings were safer than the outdoor market.

Second, with help from health-care professionals, perhaps even more importantly, Sanders was “protected” when she was in the field and therefore could visit the establishments and individuals without fear of trouble. This strategy has been widely adopted by other researchers in this field in order to secure a legitimate position there. In previous studies of sex workers, researchers often adopted a service provider role, supplying women with “necessities” such as condoms, sterile injecting equipment or health and safety information (Lau *et al* 2010; McKeganey and Barnard 1997). Some researchers provided free medical services to sex workers (Wong *et al* 2006b), or sometimes approached and worked with an existing project (Kelly 2004; Kong & Zi Teng 2003; Sanders 2005a; Yim 2003) or an agency in the field (Day 2007), where the researcher worked with a clinic during the research). The position which researchers occupied in the field provides them with the legitimacy to remain there. Moreover, researchers could learn information about the field from the organisation or the unit they worked with. This is likely to minimise the degree of risk which they face.

Although previous research shows that imagined threats may be greater than real ones, dangers indeed exist in the field and researchers may be at risk if they do not consider safety issues before they enter. Some commentators suggest that gender may play a crucial role in affecting the researcher’s experience of risk, in the sense that safety should be the main concern of female researchers (Adler and Adler 1994).

Lee (1995) points out, for example, that sexual assault is a risk faced by female researchers. In the case of research on sex work, a female researcher may face this risk for two reasons. First, while less research has been conducted on the clients of sex workers, it is widely believed that the “punter” can be dangerous (Sanders 2008). Second, prostitution has long been linked with gangs or criminal activities (for example, illegal drug use, human trafficking). This can pose a threat to researchers, in particular females. Third, female researchers may face risks when they conduct research, whether in public or private settings (Lee 1995). In the case of sex work, because street sex work is widely conceived as risky (see Chapters 3

and 4), the street can obviously be a “risky” research site. In my fieldwork, the hours spent in working flats could theoretically have resulted in legal risks (for example, I could have been arrested by the police if they had suspected that I was a sex worker, since the law allows only one woman to work from the flat at any time: see Chapter 2) and personal risks (for instance, of being robbed, harassed or attacked by clients of the sex workers or other predators).

In other words, female researchers are theoretically at greater risk of threat or attack in the field than male researchers. Yet, in the literature to date this issue has still received little attention (Lee 1995). Lorraine Nencel (2001) was among the minorities who were aware of the potential risk of conducting her fieldwork in Peru. She therefore employed a male assistant to accompany her when she was in the field in order to keep her from danger. Her experience shows that this strategy minimized the risk that she faced when she conducted research in the sexual establishments.

In sum, the experiences of researchers noted above suggest that the “imagined threat” may sometimes be greater than the “real threat” and researchers’ anxiety is likely to subside when they become more familiar with the fieldwork site and more confident in their ability to “distinguish between situations of real and imagined threat” (McKeganey & Barnard 1997, p.7). Yet the researcher can be in trouble if potential risk in the field is underestimated. Learning from others, my approach to conducting my fieldwork was guided by the potential for danger.

The issue of safety in the field and also other issues which were raised under research design in this chapter are further discussed in the next chapter. While this chapter explores the *potential problems* which I as a female researcher might encounter in the field, the next chapter moves to discuss my fieldwork experiences in Hong Kong and to examine the *actual problems* which I encountered.

## Conclusion

In the first part of this chapter, I discussed the research design, including sampling and the methods I used to collect and analysis data. In this research, the sample size was small. It raises the issue of generalisation, in the sense that the findings generated from a small sample size may not be generalisable to other contexts. Nevertheless, the main aim of this study was to explore a side of the sex market which has long been ignored. It has not been intended to establish statistical validity. Rather, the aim is to investigate closely flat-working women's experiences and to generate rich and in-depth data in order to fill a gap in the literature. In addition, ethnographic study emphasises the interaction between the researcher and the researched subjects. The small sample allowed me to interact with the respondents and *listen* to the accounts given by individual respondents.

As noted above, using networking as the sampling technique may inevitably contribute to bias. Nevertheless, considering the characteristics of this population, networking was the most effective, if not the only way, to gather a sample. In order to minimise the bias, I adopted different measures such as negotiating access with different groups (an agency and individual women) and recruiting participants from various ethnic groups.

This study will, it is hoped, make a contribution to the East Asian scholarship on sex work. As discussed in Chapter 3 and also in the present chapter, in Hong Kong surveys have been the most popular research method used in this field. But this research method, which searches for objective and quantified analysis of risks, is ill-suited to studying a sensitive topic (Lee 1993/1999) such as the occupational risks of sex work. In contrast, the qualitative approach which this research adopts, including qualitative interviewing and observation, focuses on the meanings held by the participants and places the analysis in context. Adopting this research approach seemed to be the most suitable for exploring the complex meanings of different types of occupational risk held by flat-working women

and the strategies adopted by them to manage risks, aspects which have been largely ignored in previous studies, in particular survey research.

The next chapter describes my experiences in the field, the difficulties I encountered during the research, including negotiating access via gatekeepers and individual women and the problems I encountered when I tried to earn acceptance. As a result, a reflexive view on my fieldwork is developed in Chapter 6 which may make a contribution to the scholarship on sex work in East Asia.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the research participants' anonymity, I provide pseudonyms for the organisations involved in this study.

<sup>2</sup> In data analysis using NVIVO 7, conceptually similar data are grouped together into respective nodes. Free nodes are those not associated with a structured framework of concepts, while tree nodes are codes organised in a hierarchical structure (see Wong 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Mandarin is the official language of Mainland China, but Cantonese is a language spoken by the majority in Hong Kong. During the interviews, two sex workers from Mainland China spoke in Mandarin Chinese, though one of them could speak good Cantonese and another worker could speak simple Cantonese.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Methodology (2): Experience in the field**

Fieldwork is like sex: It is often messy. It can be awkward, especially at first. It requires some flexibility. It is best when spontaneous and, no matter what one's proposal may say, simply cannot be planned. Like sex, even bad sex, fieldwork is always productive; it produces sensations, emotions, intimate knowledge of oneself and others.

(Kelly 2004, p.16)

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 5 discussed the research design of this study, the plan which I brought with me when I entered the field. Before doing so, I carefully developed the research design and considered the potential problems and risks that I might encounter in the field. But as McKeganey and Barnard (1997) point out, the field contains both “real” and “imagined threats”. Likewise, the “real” and “imagined” situations of the field can be rather different. Here I turn to a discussion of my experiences in the field, describing the problems which I encountered there. It brings up issues which have received little attention in the existing literature, in particular that from East Asia, including the problems of gaining access through gatekeepers in the sex industry, the experience of earning acceptance from the participants and the emotional experiences of the fieldworker.

In her essay cited above on the fieldwork for her study of sex work in urban Mexico, Patty Kelly (2004) compares fieldwork to sex. For her, the fieldwork is as “messy” as sex, in the sense that it cannot be planned and may be full of surprises. In other words, though the fieldworker may go to the field with a plan, the actual situation of the field and the interaction with individuals there can be rather different from what the researcher has learned from textbooks. To the fieldworker, it is a reflexive journey because it produces more than new knowledge about the topic. Perhaps more importantly, intimate



knowledge of oneself as the fieldworker and of others has also been created during the process of the fieldwork. The following sections start by discussing why I was attracted by the topic of sex work.

### **“Have you ever talked to a sex worker?”**

My first encounter with women involved in the sex industry was in autumn 1996. As a young undergraduate student, I was ignorant enough to believe that *all* women involved in the sex industry were *sex objects* and *passive victims*. I was also naïve enough to believe they were *stuck* and needed someone to *help* them *out* of their situations. I thought I could make a small contribution by offering services to such people.

With these ideas in mind, one afternoon a poster caught my eye on my way to the student canteen. It said that the Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong (see note 1 in Chapter 5), a non-governmental organisation which supported sex workers, was recruiting volunteers at the university. This was the first time I had ever seen the term “sex worker”. To me it was simply a term synonymous with “prostitutes” – at that time I did not realise the sophisticated difference between “sex work/sex workers” and “prostitution/prostitutes” (see Chapter 4). The poster said that the organisation aimed to assist sex workers. I took it for granted that it meant that the organisation helped prostitutes out of the sex industry, as I thought this was the only way to *help* them. I saw it as an opportunity for me to get involved in *helping a vulnerable group* and so I approached the staff of the organisation.

During the first training meeting for volunteers, I soon found out that the organisation had very different ideas about how to assist women. A member of staff, Yang, asked why we had volunteered with the organisation. The majority of us said that we wanted to “help women out”. Many “rescue plans” had been mentioned during the discussion. We were very enthusiastic about helping women “to quit the business” and “to find alternative employment”. Yang looked at us and smiled, “You all said that you wanted to help women.

But who told you that they need help? How do you know that they want to quit? Have any of you ever talked to a sex worker?"

At this time I personally knew no one who was involved in the sex industry and instead had looked at prostitutes through the lens of the media. What the member of staff said, however, made me realise that I was looking at women only through a telescope. The seemingly obvious "fact" was merely my interpretation of popular accounts of prostitution. While I could not confidently refute her implied claim, I was not entirely convinced by what Yang said – for me it was difficult to imagine that anyone would be willing to stay in the sex industry. In my eagerness to know what I could do *for* women, I joined an outreach team of the Alliance and was assigned to deliver newsletters, leaflets or booklets with information about occupational health to flat-working women. Later, I volunteered with the Hong Kong AIDS Support Group and worked with staff at an outreach project, which aimed at raising awareness about safe sex among female sex workers.

Volunteering with both organisations provided me with opportunities to have face-to-face encounters with women involved in the sex industry. When the women were not busy and in a good mood, they sometimes offered us drinks and chatted with us in their working flats. The interactions with women allowed me to have a glimpse of the world behind the doors of working premises, which provided me with new perspectives for looking at prostitution.

To my surprise, only a few women said that they were forced or lured into the sex industry. More interestingly, their perceptions of prostitution were often different from popular accounts. In contrast to what I had imagined, for example, many women said that they wanted to remain in the sex industry and to my surprise were not necessarily motivated by economic need.

The interactions with these women led me to question my unexamined assumptions about prostitution. I realised that the space between the polar opposites of women's agency and victimhood was far more complex than I

had thought. It was my first exposure to the concept of “voluntary sex work” (see Chapter 4). Women’s accounts made me realise that my views about the sex economy and women involved in the sex industry were too simplistic and problematic.

Flat-working women might not need others to help them leave the trade, though, like workers in other business sectors, these women faced various occupational hazards at work. The more I listened to their stories, the more I felt that the concentration in empirical studies on disease, human trafficking, and the control of prostitutes seems to have distorted the realities of prostitution for many flat-working women (see Chapter 3). It seemed to me that there was a gap between these women’s accounts and what was noted in previous research.

As discussed in Chapter 3, in many analytical writings and empirical studies there has been a tendency to equate all sex work with street prostitution, a comparatively visible subgroup in the sex industry (Day 2007; Weitzer 2000b, 2009). Undoubtedly these studies have contributed to the scholarship on sex work. The sex industry is highly stratified and sex work is a “segmented occupation” (Plumridge and Abel 2001). Generalising the findings of studies on street sex work to other types of sex work can be problematic, because women in different sectors are likely to be in different situations and therefore to encounter dissimilar occupational hazards. In considering the fact that much of the literature on prostitution suffers serious bias because of a particular focus on street sex work, it was perhaps not a surprise to me that flat-working women’s accounts of their work did not fit into the pattern presented in existing studies.

The gap in the literature suggests that in the research on occupational risks, there is a need to place sex workers’ own experiences and the meaning of risks to workers at the centre of the study. More importantly, as Stanko argues, “what violence means is embedded within its context” (2003, p.11). Likewise, the interactional, cultural and social context plays a significant part in shaping the meanings of different types of occupational risk. Theories

developed from previous research may help us to conceptualise the meanings of occupational risks. Nevertheless, theories developed in the Western context may not be able to accurately explain phenomena in a non-Western context. In particular, theories of prostitution/sex work which are framed in terms of an opposition between “First World” and “Third World women” may not be fully able to explain the situation of women in South East Asia, as they do not fall into either of these categories. Therefore, it seems that there is a need to explore how we can make use of ideas developed within Western cultures but take cultural differences into account in order to refine our understanding of women’s lives in their specific context (Ding and Ho 2008).

The awareness of this void in the literature encouraged me to conduct this research study on indoor sex workers in Hong Kong. The following section describes the situation of flat-based sex work in Hong Kong. It moves next to describing how I approached the women.

### **Demographic data of flatwork in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, flat-based sex work, which is commonly called ‘one-apartment-one-phoenix’,<sup>1</sup> is one of the most common forms of commercial sex work. These apartments can be found in different districts of Hong Kong, but are highly concentrated in the urban areas. The estimated population of flat-working women during the period of this research totalled approximately 1,500 (see Chapter 5, p.123).

A general profile of these workers can be found in a survey on flat-based sex work, which was conducted by Kong and Zi Teng from 2000 to 2001. Of the 150 interviewed workers, about half were Hong Kong-born Chinese (58.4%). The age range of these women was 21-55, many in the over 30 (52.3%) or over 40 age-range (32.3%). Most of them worked for themselves (80.8%), although a few of them (10.3%) worked with an agent. On average, these women worked from 9 to 12 hours a day (69.4%) and took less than four days off a month (37.5%). Their average net income was HK\$4,500 (£300)

per month. Many women (70.8%) reported that taking care of family members was their major burden (Kong & Zi Teng 2003).

The women in this study have similar characteristics to the women described above. The 30 respondents described their engagement in the sex business as voluntary. Their ages ranged from 22-60, but many of them were in their mid-thirties or early forties. As noted in Chapter 5, half of the women in this study were migrant sex workers from Mainland China. The number of migrant sex workers from China has increased rapidly in the last two decades. This is reflected in the advertisements posed on the adult entertainment websites “Sex 141” and “Sex 161”. In October 2009, 1,073 flat-working women advertised sexual services on these two websites. 799 of these women claimed that they were from China, while 192 were local, from Hong Kong. Other women were from Asian countries including Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Korea, Indonesia and Singapore. With the aim of exploring whether there was any difference between migrant and local sex workers in terms of their experiences of risk in the course of their work, I deliberately interviewed women from both Mainland China and Hong Kong. All women were either residents of or with legal resident status in Hong Kong.

Most of the apartments/rooms are rented. According to the law, letting premises for use as a vice establishment is illegal (Cap 200 s143; see Chapter 2, p.53). Nevertheless, many women can still rent a place from an owner who knows exactly what business his/her tenant runs and sometimes charges sex workers more than others. Basically many flats have one to two bedrooms and a bathroom with a shower. Some of them have a sitting room and a kitchen, depending on the size of the apartment.

In recent years, landlords of working-flats have increasingly divided these flats into several rooms with en-suite showers and toilets. All these rooms have their own exit. As theoretically women worked independently in their own places, their practices did not contravene the law which allows only one woman to work from an establishment at any time. On the one hand, the landlords' income is increased by renting rooms to different sex workers

(rather than a flat to one woman). On the other hand, and more importantly, sex workers might prefer a room to a flat because the rent was relatively low.

The settings of these flats/rooms were usually very simple: they were basically equipped with a TV set for entertainment and a CCTV system for observing the situation outside the flat or the room. Women often used the CCTV to observe potential clients while they were waiting outside the establishment. Figure 6.1 is a floor-plan of one of the establishments that I visited during my fieldwork, which was a typical working flat in Hong Kong.

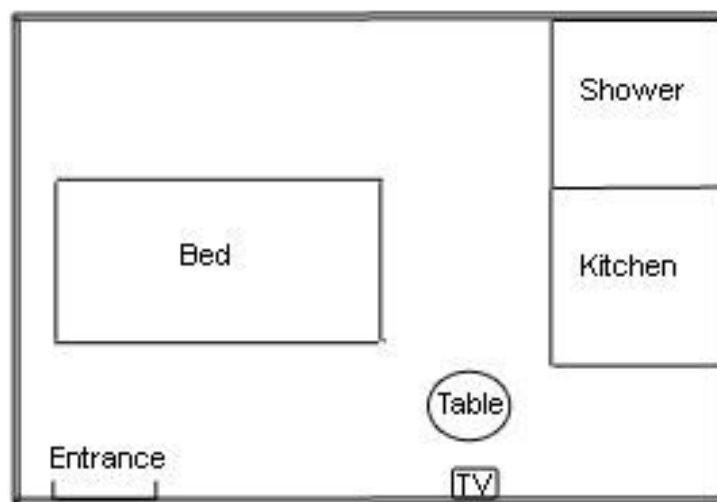


Figure 6.1 The floor plan of a working flat

Usually flat-working women, especially those who have a family, do not live in the working flat and the establishment is exclusively used for sexual transactions with their clients. Among the women interviewed for this study, only one of them lived in the flat. Another woman reported that because of the late finishing time (11:00 pm to mid-night), she stayed in the working flat overnight but went home early in the morning to look after her children before they went to school.

Since women in this study were independent workers, they were able to choose how to manage many aspects of their occupation. As a result, their working time was flexible. Women in this study usually began work at 12 noon or 1:00 pm. Some of the flats closed at 8:00pm, but many of them

stayed open until 11:00pm. A worker told me that she knew some flats which stayed open for 24 hours. In other words, many flat-working women worked from 9 to 11 hours a day. But obviously their actual working hours depended on the number of clients they saw per day (see below).

Many women took a day off each week (usually Sunday). However, a respondent said that she only stopped working during menstruation, while another woman claimed she did not even take a single day off. Unlike those who worked as employees in the sex industry, flat-working women had to cover their own business costs including rent, water and electricity, condoms, telephone, advertisements and so forth.

Prices charged by the women vary from about HK\$200 to HK\$500 (£17 to £42), according to their age, appearance and the services provided. For those who provided special services such as S&M sex, the prices could go up to HK\$600 (£50). Basically, flat-based sex workers provided such services as having a bath with clients, oral sex and vaginal sex. Each sexual encounter usually lasted for 30-45 minutes. Clients had to pay extra money above the basic fees if they asked for special services or extra time. In order to cover the substantial outgoing expenses and earn money, workers usually set a minimum number of clients per day. The interviewed workers said that they very often saw 3 to 4 clients a day. According to the data from my interviews, the average net income of the respondents was around HK\$8,000 to HK\$10,000 (£670 to £839) per month. <sup>2</sup>

### **Gaining access to flat-working women**

The following section describes how I gained access to the women in this study. In the opening stage of the research, I started by informal networking. As a result of volunteering with agencies, I knew some flat-working women and we developed friendships. I assumed they might know women involved in the business and could possibly “form the links of the referral chain” (Lee 1993, p.67). I asked participants to act as intermediaries and refer me to women in the business. Rather than asking women to provide information or

contact details of individuals whom they knew, I left them with my phone number, believing that women might hesitate to reveal their information to a stranger.

This strategy worked, but not without some difficulty. Like members in other vulnerable groups (for example, young unemployed men or disabled people, see Atkinson and Flint 2001), many sex workers had deliberately isolated themselves from their peers in order to avoid the whore stigma. In other words, they did not actively interact with other sex workers (see Chapter 9). Some participants refused to act as intermediaries or assumed that their colleagues were unlikely to want to be interviewed by a stranger. Some potential participants were successfully recruited by referrals, though they turned out not to be eligible.

### ***Key informants***

In this study, two individual women whom I identified as key informants provided support which smoothed the path of access to the participants. Both of them were local sex workers. Mandy had worked as a sex worker for more than ten years. She was an active member of the Sex Workers' Alliance of Hong Kong. I first came across her in a meeting at the office of the Alliance when I was volunteering with the organisation. The Alliance once started an oral history book project and recruited volunteers to interview sex workers. I worked with Mandy for several months and a trusting relationship has grown up between us ever since.

Mandy introduced me to two flat-working women. The women made it clear that they had agreed to talk to me not because of the payment which I offered them as a small token of thanks (see p.163), but because Mandy had urged them to help me. Moreover, during the research Mandy provided relevant information, invited me to join in activities organised by the Alliance or the women themselves and clarified my doubts during the process of collecting data.



Likewise, Rose was an experienced sex worker who had worked in the sex industry for nearly twenty years. I was introduced to her by the Alliance. When my research began, Rose played a significant role, in the sense that she explained the organisation of different types of sex work (she had worked in karaoke nightclubs and massage parlours before she became a flat-working woman). She also explained the general situations of flat-working women and the norms of the sexual encounter between the woman and the client. This information was particularly helpful at the beginning when I was not familiar with the actual organisation of flat-work and the sites.

### ***Gatekeepers***

Guided by the work of others, I attempted to gain a “ticket” to enter the setting by approaching four agencies which provided services to sex workers. In the Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong and Sex Workers Concern were established sex worker support groups in Hong Kong; both of them actively reach out to local and migrant female sex workers in the indoor and the outdoor sex markets. Access was also be negotiated through the Hong Kong AIDS Support Group and Red Ribbon. Both organisations provided HIV/AIDS health care services. They developed different research projects related to the sex industry and provided various services to the women involved in selling sex and their clients.

As noted above, I had volunteered with two of these agencies before conducting this study. This experience helped me to identify which people to contact. Learning from others, I approached the senior members of staff in these organisations (Feldman *et al.* 2003) and presented my research proposal to them. Initially the gatekeeper strategy did not work effectively, for various reasons, despite the fact that the staff knew me and understood that I was genuinely conducting academic research. First, budget constraints stopped the Hong Kong AIDS Support Group from offering health care services to sex workers during the time of my research. Second, the gatekeepers of other agencies were very keen on protecting their members’ privacy and therefore hesitated to grant access. For example, the acting director of the Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong explained that many

students attempted to approach sex workers through the agency. In order to protect women from being “harassed” by outsiders, the agency often refused to grant access. She did not want to treat me as an exception, due to concerns about fairness, though she understood that I was a genuine researcher.

Berger (2003, p.67) suggests that when adopting a gatekeeper strategy, the researcher should think about “the hidden agendas, ideologies and culture that shape institutions and organizations”. Researchers in general seldom review failure to gain access (Lee 1993/1990); Berger (2003) however stresses that it is important for researchers to think about and to classify the rejections they receive and to learn lessons when making further plans. Also, researchers should be flexible and prepared to change their strategies if gatekeeper refused to grant access (ibid).

Primed by others, I informally discussed issues regarding my research with the staff of the Alliance. The “friend-to-friend” talk made me realise that the support group was seemingly haunted by the “potentially exploitative scenario of taking information from vulnerable women” (Sanders 2005a). First, the senior members of staff were deeply concerned about the consequences of conducting a study on sex workers, both emotional and financial. For example, as my research examines different types of occupational hazard, the staff worried that women might experience negative feelings during interviews. Also, the staff of the Alliance conceived that the research process itself would have contributed to the women’s financial pressures by taking time away from business.

The issue of financial payment is likely to be raised when the research targets poor individuals (Thompson 1996). This was evident in an article written by a senior member of staff in an agency (Yim & Chan 2003): Yim recalls that once she talked to an MPhil student who hoped to interview sex workers. She was concerned that the research process might interfere with the women’s business and suggested that the student should make payments to the respondents. For her, offering an exchange indicated

“sincerity and understanding”. Nevertheless, the student refused to do so, in the belief that the women should be grateful to him for his help in giving them a voice. Yim was upset by his attitude. She used this case as an example to condemn many scholars for lacking a reflexive consciousness of the power relationships between the researcher and the researched.

Not surprisingly, although the response I received from the staff seemed supportive, the agencies did not at first offer much help. Access was finally granted by the Alliance after I proposed to pay respondents in order to avoid exploitation (see p.163). Nevertheless, the agency was very keen to protect the women’s privacy. I was allowed to conduct interviews only at the site of the Alliance. As intermediaries, the staff of the Alliance contacted the participants, scheduled a meeting time and informed me afterwards. After conducting several interviews, however, I soon encountered various problems.

As noted above, some interviews were conducted at the site of Sex Workers Alliance. Originally this was a residential flat. The living room was used for meetings and training. There was an open working area on one side of the living room. The only other room in the flat was for volunteer medical staff providing services to women. In order to protect the research participants’ privacy, I planned to conduct the interviews in the room. The staff claimed that the room was frequently used – though later I found that during the time of the research the room was always empty – and suggested that I met the women in the “private zone”. The agency decided to leave some space between a set of shelves and the wall in the living room and so created a “private zone”. People in the living room or the working area could not see those who stayed in the “private zone” but could probably overhear what they said. Many participants introduced by the Alliance agreed to be interviewed at the office of the Alliance. I noticed, however, that the women sometimes lowered their voices when the conversation involved sensitive topics, in particular when they criticised the policy or agenda of the Alliance.

As noted in Chapter 5, and as I told the staff of the Alliance, the interviews were estimated to last for 1 to 1.5 hours. Nevertheless, due to the style of interviewing, the interviews often ran over time. As a result, many sessions lasted to 2 to 3.5 hours. In the first interview, a member of staff interrupted, telling the interviewee that there was no more time for the interview. In fact I had already reminded the interviewee about the time; but the woman said that she had enjoyed the conversation and was willing to give me extra time.

Obviously, what the member of staff did disturbed the interview. After the interview finished, I promised her that I would keep an eye on the time and emphasised that it was important for the interviews not to be disturbed. This however happened again in later interviews. Some women ignored the member of staff and continued the conversation, but some of them stopped talking immediately. After the staff left, several women explained to me that they did not want to upset the member of staff, though they were happy to continue the interview. Once a woman started to give me her contact number and suggested that we continue the interview somewhere. The member of staff, however, stopped her from doing so. What the member of staff had done made me concerned, for not only had she disrupted the flow of conversation. More importantly, she had risked invading the privacy of the participants as the interviews involved some sensitive and personal issues.

Judging that the problems of conducting interviews at the site of the Sex Workers Alliance and the sample could be homogeneous, in the sense that the responders were all connected to the agency, I went on to negotiate access via individual women.

### ***Individual sex workers***

It is widely recognised that because of their stigmatised conditions, sex workers are hard-to-reach populations which may pose a range of methodological challenges to researchers who attempt to investigate their lives (Atkinson and Flint 2001). In parallel with the experience of McKeganey and Barnard (1997), before I entered the field I was already anxious about approaching individual sex workers and what their reactions might be.

However, it was surprisingly easy to contact the women and the main strategy that I adopted was snowball sampling.

As noted above, I started by informal networking. Accessing individual women was smooth, but not wholly straightforward. In order to access different groups of clients, many women moved frequently and worked in different areas. Theoretically, most flat-working women could be contacted by cell phone but on some occasions I experienced difficulty in getting in touch with them, as they repeatedly changed or disconnected their phones.

Many women whom I contacted saw me as the informants' friend, which helped significantly to establish a trust-based relationship between us. This provided me with opportunities to stay in women's working flats or to "hang around" with these women. Sometimes we went shopping or visited restaurants with their friends, who were also involved in the sex industry. This increased my chances not only to become familiar with the field, but also to collect data from different sources.

The help of individual women undoubtedly smoothed the path to potential participants. However, the intermediary occasionally produced difficulties. As Lee (1993/1990) notes, it could happen that individual intermediaries sometimes gave a misleading account of the project to potential participants, or introduced me to ineligible participants. As a result, on some occasions participants apparently (mis)understood that this study aimed to "collect sex workers' stories". During the research they talked about their entry into the sex industry and their relationships with clients and family, but were not prepared to share their risk-related experiences. Moreover, sometimes the intermediary did not realise that this study was interested only in flat-working women. I was introduced to women who worked in other sectors in the indoor sex market, such as massage parlours or nightclubs. If I noticed before the interview that a participant was ineligible, I would cancel the interview session and asked the intermediary to send my apologies to the person concerned. On a few occasions I realised during the interview that the participant was ineligible. I viewed those as chances to explore other

aspects of the sex industry and would follow the usual practice and pay the participant.

### **Earning acceptance**

As noted above, guided by previous research studies, I offered to work with the organisation as a volunteer. I attempted to negotiate observation opportunities by providing services. On the one hand this helped to build an exchange relationship with the gatekeeper. On the other, working as a volunteer gained me opportunities to take part in some activities held by the agency. For example, I was allowed access to the activities which were exclusively organised for sex workers, including workshops on health-related issues and meetings with sex workers from foreign countries, which gave me the chance to observe how women interacted with their peers. Adopting the role of “research student” also enabled me to earn acceptance from sex workers. Some participants agreed to participate in the current research because they believed that this project could help women involved in the business.

Apparently, both roles enabled me to gain legitimacy in the field. However, this did not necessarily mean that I had succeeded in earning the women’s acceptance. In fact, as Sanders points out, earning women’s acceptance implies that I would need to “undergo various forms of initiation rituals or tests of [my] character, credibility or principles” (2006b).

Although I adopted the role of volunteer, I was always deemed by the women an “outsider” since I was not a sex worker. Because of my background, the women saw me as well educated (a PhD student) and middle class (given that apparently I could afford to study overseas, in particular London, in the UK). As a result, I noticed that when they talked to me, they often paid attention to their language and talked in a relatively polite manner. For example, they smiled and looked at me in embarrassment if they swore in their interview and made an effort during the rest of the time not to do this again. Moreover, they tried to use formal words when they accounted for

their experiences. This not only contributed to the tension and anxiety for both parties, but may also have affected the quality of the data. In most of the interviews, therefore, I deliberately swore or used informal words (for example, I used “*ceot-je* (出嘢)” to refer to the formal term “*se-zing* (射精)”, meaning “ejaculation”). What I did seems to have given the participants the impression that I “was not so different from them”, though I was still identified as a “student”.

Some women apparently produced an awkward situation or account to test how I perceived sex work. For example, a sex worker showed me her pictures posted on an adult entertainment website and asked me to “comment” on the pictures. In the pictures she was almost naked, held a dildo in her mouth or held a vibrator in her hands. It felt strange to be looking at the pictures when she was around. I talked with her in a relaxed manner, however, and suggested some ways to make the pictures more attractive by adopting other poses or using an airbrush. On another occasion, a woman described the “sick behaviours of her crazy clients”. I felt uncomfortable when I heard the stories, but I tried not to be judgemental about their behaviour. At the end of the interview, the woman said that she was surprised to find that I was “pretty open” and she “felt good” talking to me.

### **Conducting the interviews**

Given that the participants came not only from Hong Kong but from different parts of Mainland China, they could all choose to be interviewed in either Cantonese or Mandarin (see Chapter 5, Note 3). Cantonese is my first language but I am fluent in Mandarin. The advantage of conducting the interview in the interviewee’s primary language is that it minimises the possibility of missing nuanced meanings (Rossman & Rallis 2003). Initially, all the migrant sex workers tried to talk in Cantonese because this was the language spoken by most people in Hong Kong. Many women in this study could speak good Cantonese, but I encouraged them to use Mandarin if they found that it would be easier for them to express themselves. This strategy seemingly worked in the current research, in the sense that although only

two respondents from Mainland China chose to use Mandarin throughout, they appeared to feel relaxed when they understood that they could use the two languages interchangeably during the interview. This is perhaps particularly important in the current research in the sense that it puts the emphasis on the meanings held by the participants. Most importantly, as noted in previous chapters, Hong Kong sex workers' voices have always been silent in academic research, quantitative studies in particular. Accounts of occupational risks given by sex workers are therefore significant resources for us to understand their complex and varied experiences.

The approach that I adopted in conducting the interviews was similar to the one which Angrosino (1992) used in his research on mentally retarded adults. While I prepared a guide with a list of related topics (see Appendix 8), I used it in a flexible way. At the beginning of the interview, I suggested to the respondents that they might see this as a conversation between two friends. The participants were allowed to set the agenda. My role as an interviewer was not only to ask the participants about the issues that I was interested in, but also to listen to them and explore experiences which have been ignored. I gave the respondents the freedom and space to express their feelings, but guided the conversation back to relevant topics when it seemed appropriate.

The interviewing approach adopted in this study allowed data to be generated in the natural flow of the conversation. This might allow more space for the women's own voices in the sense that the themes that emerged in the conversation-like interviews included, but were not limited to, those listed in the research guide. Yet this approach was time-consuming (see p.156). At an early stage of the study, I had concerns about the length of the interviews, particularly as I was worried that the time could damage their business. However, most participants were prepared to spend extra time on the interview. A few interviews had to be cut as the participants had appointments with their clients, or they were approached by the latter during the interviews. Sometimes I resumed interviewing the women after the encounter with their clients. Alternatively, they offered me the chance of a second interview. Most interviews were conducted in a relaxed atmosphere.



The women seemed to enjoy the process. At the end of the interviews, many women said that they had found it interesting to talk to me.

As noted above, using a conversational style to conduct an interview was time-consuming. It sometimes was difficult to ask related questions without interrupting the flow of the conversation, and so, it took time to engage the respondents in talking about their experiences, in particular on sensitive issues. Moreover, the accounts given by the women might be influenced by the fact that discussions of sex-related issues are traditionally taboo in Chinese culture. Individuals may discuss these issues privately with someone close to them, but feel uneasy to talk about them with a stranger. As a result, it was sometimes difficult to persuade the women to share some of their experiences on issues such as sexually transmitted infections, the use of condoms and the sexual services provided by them. Despite the women in this study understanding that they would be asked to talk about these issues after we went through the information sheet together, there was still a risk that raising these topics might offend them. During the interviews, most women were willing to respond to sensitive questions, but they might initially be reluctant to describe their experiences in detail. For example, when Judy was first asked about her experiences of sexually transmitted infections, she gave only vague answers, such as “yes, I got an STD when I was young”; “I got it from a client”. She looked embarrassed and did not want to go into further detail explain about what happened to her. She spent a lot of time talking about other work-related issues, but Judy did not reveal the details of having unprotected sex with a client until the second interview (see p.179 below). In fact, it was sometimes not possible to address these in the first interview. All the participants promised to participate in another interview if it was necessary. However, I did not manage to contact all of them after the first interview. As noted above (see p.157), some women’s phones were disconnected afterwards. It is not unusual for sex workers to have several different phone numbers or to keep replacing them. As a result, I lost contact with four participants.

As noted above, the current research places women's meanings when they discuss occupational risk at the centre of the risk analysis. The accounts given by the workers were undoubtedly a rich source for the researcher to explore issues of occupational risk. Data generated through observation, as is discussed in the following section, are also important in the sense that they can help to achieve a better understanding of the women's accounts.

### **(Non)-participant observation**

As a sex workers support group, the Sex Workers' Alliance of Hong Kong often organised activities exclusively for sex workers, which included workshops, meetings and socializing. In order to protect the women's privacy, these activities were not open to the general public. The agency usually advertised activities in the newsletter sent to flat-working women, or the staff members of the organisation invited individual women to attend the activities. Women were encouraged to spread the news to their peers. As an outsider, adopting the role of the volunteer not only granted me access to these activities, but, more importantly, doing this allowed me to earn the women's acceptance.

Another advantage of this strategy was that it enabled me to conduct observations in natural settings: the role of volunteer gave me legitimacy and provided me with access to the sex worker-only space. Women might notice my presence; however, they might not view me as entirely an outsider or feel that they were being observed by alien eyes.

As noted in the section on interviewing, the women generally enjoyed the process of the interviews and I managed to build relationships of trust with many of them. Some of them invited me to join their activities outside work, such as eating out, shopping or dining with them in their working-flat. These gave me the chance to observe how the women interacted with their peers and how they managed their stigmatised identity outside. I also visited working premises and chatted with the women as they waited for clients. On some occasions, I could observe how sex workers negotiated with their

clients. As noted above, in the interviews women sometimes avoided revealing sensitive information; the observational data, however, filled missing parts in their accounts.

The main concern of this research is the meanings held by sex workers of occupational risk, their experiences of risks in the course of their work and their response to risk. Initially this research aimed to explore these issues by examining accounts given by the sex workers. Nevertheless, the data generated from observations, as demonstrated in the following empirical chapters, may enhance the quality of the research by increasing its internal validity, in the sense that they may refine our understanding of the ways in which occupational risk was conceptualised in the context of sex work.

As it will be revisited in the conclusion of this chapter, using these data in the risk analysis could be problematic. Because this research involved a stigmatised group and a sensitive topic, as demonstrated in the discussion in Chapter 5 and above, I carefully adopted different strategies to ensure that the participants could make informed decisions at all times in the research. In contrast to interviewing, however, it could be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain consent from the participants during my observation. As Lee (2000) writes:

Observational studies potentially negate the principle of informed consent. The obtaining of prior written consent, or even the debriefing of research subjects after the event, are rarely feasible in public settings. As a result, those studies cannot refuse their involvement.

(Lee 2000, p.57)

Although the women participating in the activities were aware of my presence and they all knew that I was a volunteer of the Alliance, not all of them knew that I was conducting a research study and might include observational data in the analysis. This could be problematic, because, as Lee (2000) points out, the participants were not informed and, perhaps more seriously, the women were not offered a chance to refuse their participation.

Obviously this was not ideal, in particular given the specific concern of the current study with the power issue between the participants and the researcher (see Chapter 5).

### **Paying respondents**

The above section describes the difficulties I encountered when I contacted gatekeepers at the initial stage of the research. In the follow-up meetings with the senior members of staff, the focus was on the “research bargain” (Barnard 1993) that I was prepared to offer. In this study, I adopted a method which has traditionally been criticised as causing bias, though it has increasingly been considered by qualitative researchers – paying participants for engaging in interviews.

In this study all the women were told that they would be paid for participating in interviews. I offered to pay participants for two main reasons. First, it is taken for granted that experts are paid in order to compensate for their time, knowledge, values, skills and experience, but this is not always applied to those from less powerful groups (Thompson 1996). In this study, payment was used as a way of indicating that the value of the knowledge possessed by the sex workers and the contribution that they made to this research were recognised.

Second, in Western societies many streetwalkers are in a desperate situation, in particular those using illegal drugs or who are illegal migrants. Similarly, in Hong Kong many migrant streetwalkers experienced difficulty in using the health service (Wong 2006b). Offering necessities or services hence often plays an important role in the recruitment of research participants in street sex markets. In contrast to streetwalkers, women working in indoor markets are likely to be in a better situation and to have more resources. Hence, free gifts or medical check-ups are not necessarily an incentive to potential participants.

Third, sex workers in the Hong Kong have often been paid for participating in qualitative research. As noted above, local agencies have regarded the

exploiting of women involved in research as a serious matter. Hence, they adopt different measures to protect women. For example, the Sex Workers Alliance granted access to researchers but with conditions. The agency usually suggested an amount and suggested the researcher make a nominal payment to the women. As a result, paying participants has become a normal practice and a successful incentive to participants.

In her earlier work, Thompson (1996) points out that in designing qualitative research payments to participants are rarely considered. In the conventional approach, it is believed that payments are likely to increase the possibility of bias, in the sense that participants may provide the answers that they assume the researcher wants. However, Thompson (*ibid*) argues that bias can be minimised by adopting this strategy: as payment is used as compensation, it may encourage individuals who set great value on their time, energy and views to participate in the study. Nevertheless, I took into account the issue of introducing bias by paying respondents and tried to minimise it through setting the amount of payment. The staff of the Sex Workers' Alliance agreed that they would introduce me to women if the latter were paid in the equivalent of the amount that a client would be charged for a sexual encounter, which was HK\$300 (approximately £22.69). I did not want to give women the impression that I was offering to exchange money for information. Hence, I suggested paying each participant a "transportation allowance" of HK\$200 (approximately £15.13) at the end of the interview, in cash.

Payment proved to be a successful incentive to participants in this study. Many women said that their participating in the research was *partly* driven by the payment. They said that the main reason for them to participate in the research was that they knew that this project was conducted by a student researcher and they wanted to show their support, though they would not make a special trip to the agency's office if their travelling expenses were not covered. Some women were concerned about the source of the funding. After they were told that it was a self-funded doctoral project, four women expressed their hesitation in receiving the money. Two participants refused

payment. I managed to convince the respondents that they deserved to be paid, though one respondent insisted on taking only half the suggested amount.

The above sections discuss the problems which I encounter in the field in the different stages of the research. In the last section I will discuss an area which has drawn relatively little attention – leaving the field.

### **Leaving the field**

In the scholarship of sex work, it seems that the topic “leaving the field” has received less attention than that of “entering the field”. As discussed in Chapter 5, conducting a study on sex work has widely been conceived as risky, because prostitution is often considered to be associated with “deviant behaviour” such as drug use, human trafficking and that transmission of disease (see Chapter 4). Therefore, it is no surprise that the fieldwork is viewed to be potentially dangerous to researchers’ safety and emotions.

When I developed my research design, I carefully considered the potential danger of my fieldwork. In parallel with the experiences of some scholars who conducted studies on sex work (for Britain, see McKeganey & Barnard 1997; Sanders 2005a; for Mexico, see Kelly 2004; for Peru, see Nencel 2001; for Taiwan, see Chen 2003), I did not encounter any explicit threats in the field. As a female researcher, I was aware of the potential dangers of physical or sexual assault when I was in the field, especially when I visited the working flats with which I was unfamiliar in terms of the setting of the establishment and the interviewees. My experiences can be explained by the fact that my research was about a relatively safe type of sex work, though, as is further discussed in Chapter 8, many women of this study had experienced different types of violence against them. Most importantly, my experiences, with other scholars’ experiences, may suggest that our “fear” of the potential danger of the fieldwork perhaps reflects the ways in which sex work is perceived in both the popular and the academic mind.

In the existing literature on leaving the field, the focus has been on *when* to leave the field (for instance, at the point when the researcher felt that no new data could be found in the field; see Altheide 1980). Other less concern has been directed to issues of “attachment” on leaving the field (Watts 2008). For example, in a book chapter on ethnography, Bryman and Bell (2003/2007) discusses in detail how to enter the field. In the section “The end”, he suggests “[t]he farewells have to be managed and in an orderly fashion”, as “over a long period of time,...people may forget that the ethnographer’s presence is finite” (p.466). But exactly what should the researcher do? Leaving the field could be both a practical and ethical challenges to researchers, in particular those conducting ethnographic studies.

In this study I built a relationship of trust with the women and maintained a good rapport with them during the time that I was in the field. The role of researcher and the principle that “objectivity is maintained by the distance between observer and observed” (Bryman 1984, p.77) always reminded me that I should keep an appropriate distance from the women. In other words, during the research I identified them as “the researched”. Some women however seemingly viewed me as their “mate”; however, as a researcher, I could not see them as my “mates” but as “research subjects” (at least when I was in the field). We went shopping together; they invited me to their birthday parties; some women showed me the pictures of their children; some told me their real names; we frequently chatted by phone. To me, these were good opportunities to collect data. When I participated in the activities, however, I always found that I was struggling to maintain an “emotional balance” (Watts 2008): as a researcher, I questioned whether I was being too close (to the researched); as an ordinary person, I questioned whether I was being too distant (to the people I knew).

The feelings of researchers in relation to leaving the field have received little attention. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that the emphasis is on creating a trusting rapport with respondents in this ethnographic study, these relationships can be stressful for the researchers. As Lee writes:

Because respondents feel grateful for the opportunity to express their feelings, they often respond by overwhelming the researcher with gifts of various kinds. Over time this may lead to a growing closeness which creates a blurred line between the role of friend and that of research participant. Because of this blurring it becomes difficult not to worry that the friendship aspect of the relationship is being exploited for research purposes.

Lee (1993/1999, p.107)

As noted above, many sex workers whom I encountered in the field apparently conceived of me as their “mate” rather than a researcher. The relationship with one of the women, Jade, particularly contributed to my feelings of stress. Jade told me that her left breast looked “funny” during the interview. She showed me a picture of her chest and I was shocked to see the lump in her breast. I suggested she see a doctor (she suspected that she had breast cancer but did not have medical check-ups). A few weeks later she told me that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. As none of her family members was available on the day she received treatment, I accompanied her to the hospital. It was four weeks before I left the field and went back to the UK. During that period I did not meet up with her, but we kept in touch by phone. She had extremely short hair when I met her for the last time. She said that she could foresee that she would lose her hair soon and therefore she cut it short. Before I left Hong Kong, I phoned her, wanting to say goodbye. Her phone, however, was disconnected and I could not find her afterwards. I do not know what happened to her. Despite having planned and attempted to manage the farewell, following what the textbooks say, this did not seem to ease my feelings on leaving the field (Watts 2008): theoretically, as a researcher, perhaps I should have treated the rapport with my subjects in an objective and distant manner. In practice, however, I found that it was not easy to ignore the friendship aspect of the relationship and consequently to manage the feelings that the relationship was “being exploited for research purposes”, although I understood that my research might make a contribution to the scholarship on sex work.



## **Conclusion**

This chapter focused on my experiences as a researcher in the field. In sum, I described in it the difficulties encountered when I conducted my fieldwork in Hong Kong.

As noted above, it is widely recognised that a study on sex work is a potentially dangerous field to work in. My own experience in Hong Kong, as well as the work of other researchers on the sex industry in other places, seems to suggest that the actual settings in which the researcher works (for example, the environment of the site, the type of sex work investigated) have a significant impact on the degree of risk that the researcher may face in the field. As a female researcher, in this study I did not encounter explicit threats in any form. This may be explained by the fact that the site of my fieldwork was relatively safe compared with studies on prostitution involving “deviant behaviour” such as human trafficking or injecting drug use. In other words, I argue that the actual setting, and not the personal characteristics of the researcher, may play the more important role in affecting a researcher’s safety. Researchers may find it too sweeping to apply the word “risky” to research on a particular activity (in this case, selling sexual services) and may prefer to distinguish between situations of real and imagined threat in their writings, so as to avoid reinforcing further stigma associated with sex work.

In the case of approaching hard-to-reach populations such as sex workers, theoretically it was easier for a researcher to gain access to the group through the gatekeepers in the industry. My experiences, however, serve to demonstrate that because these gatekeepers may have their own agendas, their policies may sometimes impede the researcher from establishing effective relationships with participants. For example, in the present study, the Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong offered to grant me access to some sex workers who had connections with the organisation. This appeared to present a chance to approach the women. Nevertheless, their policies of protecting the women (which led them to forbid the researcher to contact the

women privately, or to interrupt an interview when it over-ran) affected my attempts to create trusting relationships with the interviewees and therefore had a negative impact on the quality of the interviews.

In contrast, gaining access to the hidden population through negotiating relationships with individual women allowed me more space to establish such trusting relationships. Here, I use the term “trusting relationships” to highlight the fact that many women in this study said that they participated in this study because they wanted to show their support to a researcher (see p.165 above), in particular someone who they could trust. Lily, for example, refused payment (see p.163 above) and emphasised that she agreed to talk to me only because she trusted someone from the Sex Workers Alliance. Apparently, the building up of “trusting relationships” might encourage women to participate in this study or to give detailed narrative accounts of their working experiences (see p.161 above). However, these relationships might also influence their narrative accounts. As is further discussed in Chapter 7, Fung suggested that women might not report the non-use of condoms to others because of the associated stigma (see p.203 below). This suggested that the participants might hesitate to give information which they think might negatively affect my opinion of them. In other words, being positioned as a “volunteer” and associated with the Alliance might have negative effects on my research, as well as advantages.

In this chapter, I also described the problems of interviewing sex workers in the office of the Alliance. On the surface, I saw no significant differences between the responses of the sex workers being interviewed in different settings. Interviewees in either the office of the Alliance or at other sites were willing to talk about their experiences of occupational risk. Nevertheless, I noticed that on some occasions, when our conversations involved the policies or the staff of the Alliance, the respondents seemed to feel uncomfortable, in the sense that they lowered their voices or avoided the topic. This may suggest that the circumstances of the interview may affect the quality of the data.

The following three chapters are about the findings of the current study. Drawing upon the data collected in the field, I explore the ways in which the sex workers in this study accounted for the occupational risks that they experienced in the course of their work, the meanings which risk held for them and strategies they developed to manage risks.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This translation is cited from the work of Kong and Zi Teng (2003). In Hong Kong, a rather insulting term, “gail” (雞, meaning chicken), is used in spoken Cantonese for sex workers. In Putonghua (the current Chinese official language), the pronunciation of the word for “prostitute” is “ji”, which is similar to “gail”. Gradually, “gail” has become a synonym for “prostitute” in spoken Cantonese (see Yang 2001). While a phoenix looks like a chicken, the former, because of its uniqueness, connotes a “higher status” than the latter. In order to “show respect”, people use “fung” (meaning “phoenix” in Cantonese) instead of “gail” to address female sex workers. According to the law, a flat-working woman can work only in an apartment on her own (see Chapter 2). Flat-based sex work has therefore been commonly called “*jat-lau-jat-fung*” (one-apartment-one-phoenix), sometimes abbreviated to “*jat-lau-jat*”.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Information Services Department, Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, the median monthly domestic household income in mid-2009 was \$17,500.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Sexual Health Risk and Sex Work**

Even prior to the first reports of AIDS, there is evidence to suggest that the medical profession was already pathologizing the anus of homosexuals in much the same way as the vaginas of prostitutes or other promiscuous females were pathologized in the nineteenth century.

(Spongberg 1997, p.188)

By the mid 1980s, concerns about AIDS had forced sex workers to address the associations between prostitution and disease, and to focus almost exclusively on public health once more. The difference between sex workers and other women were exaggerated again and sex worker politics were increasingly formulated in reaction to HIV.

(Day 2007, p. 8)

#### **Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to explore female sex workers' experiences of sexually transmitted infections and their understanding of this type of occupational risk. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, in the existing literature on sex work, in particular that from Hong Kong, most of the studies adopted a quantitative approach to investigating issues of disease. But, so long as women's fluid and ambiguous experiences were forced into pre-determined categories, the survey research might not be able to capture the complexity of the phenomena. Most importantly, in surveys research workers' understandings of the risk of disease might not be captured (in fact it was probably not the main interest of survey researchers), and the women's risk-taking (or risk-avoiding) behaviour was not conceptualised in context.

This chapter is about sexual health and diseases, one of the themes which often emerge in sex workers' accounts. The main focus is on the flat-working women's accounts of themselves and their risk-taking (or risk-avoiding) behaviour in (potentially) risky situations, where, for example, unprotected sex has occurred. It begins with a brief account of the history of defining

female sex workers as causal agents in the spreading of venereal diseases in the West in the nineteenth century; this serves as a resource for a later discussion on the impact of AIDS on female sex workers in terms of their experiences of stigmatisation and the organisation of sex work.

### **Abolitionism and the “disease problem” of sex work**

The historical review of the regulation of prostitution in Hong Kong in Chapter 2 reveals that the regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong was largely affected by the prostitution policy adopted by Britain at the time. Regulations in the nineteenth century “were intended to deal with prostitution at a practical level, primarily through attempting to control the spread of disease” (Kilvington *et al.* 2001, p.79). Abolitionists by that time were opposed to the registration system and argued that the state should not condone vice. Feminists also criticised the system for making women, sex workers in particular, “responsible for prostitution in general and venereal disease in particular” (*ibid.*, p.79; see also Chapter 2).

As a result, regulation was replaced by an abolitionist approach in Britain, and consequently also in Hong Kong. Today, in regions adopting an abolitionist approach, prostitution itself is not criminalised. It is however perceived as a social problem, which is harmful to all the parties involved (Kilvington *et al.* 2001, p.80). The spread of disease is considered as one of the major problems of sex work, in the sense that it is likely to affect the public health of the community. The history of the regulation of prostitution in colonial Hong Kong and the prostitution policy partly explain why disease has become the main health issue relevant to sex workers in Hong Kong, and also why the risk of exposure to and transmission of disease and HIV is still the primary focus of research on prostitution today. As discussed in previous chapters, the recent literature from Hong Kong indicates that female sex workers are still considered a potential source of the spread of disease, HIV/AIDS in particular.

The phenomenon of defining sex workers as causal agents in the transmission and spread of HIV/AIDS is of course not new, and this idea has been challenged by sociological work (see for example Day 2007; May & Hunter 2006; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Scambler & Paoli 2008; Ward & Day 2004). Early work by Scambler and his colleagues (1990), which adopted a sociological approach to investigate the impact of the AIDS pandemic on female sex workers and their work, was already arguing that sex workers had become candidates for scapegoating after AIDS was recognised from the mid-1980s as a disease which could be transmitted heterosexually. More recently, it has been increasingly documented that female sex workers in many European countries, and likewise in Hong Kong, take no major part in spreading either sexually transmitted diseases or HIV. However, the focus of research in this field has seemingly moved to migrant sex workers (see Chapter 4, above).

### **Diseases and HIV/AIDS: A problem of migrant sex workers?**

This blaming of migrant sex workers may be seen as a response to globalisation. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, under the influence of the process of globalisation, the migration of women has become a significant phenomenon. Many individuals migrate from the south to the north (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002), as a response to the demands of the rich countries:

The lifestyles of the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife's traditional role – child care, home-making, and sex – from poor countries to rich ones.

(Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002, p.4)

The strident demand for women's domestic, caring and sexual labour in Europe and other rich countries has encouraged women from Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union, or other poor countries, to migrate in search of jobs (Agustín 2003). Since usually these women are not only at a disadvantage from being poor, but also often lack formal qualifications (Ward & Day 2004), they are generally deemed to be in

a desperate situation and therefore join the sex industry. Moreover, they are often perceived and stereotyped as “victims” who are forced or lured into the sex industry and controlled by a third party, the trafficker (Agustín 2003, 2006a; Scambler 2007; Day & Ward 2004c).

On the basis of these understandings, migrant sex workers are generally conceived to be in a more disadvantaged position and therefore are more likely to engage in risky behaviour during the sexual encounter with their clients. In addition, the countries from which these women originate often have a higher incidence of HIV/AIDS than the countries in which the migrant women work. As a result, this group of women is seen as at risk of disease and of posing a threat to the general population, although it is evident in empirical research that the rates of STI and HIV/AIDS among migrant sex workers remain low in cities such as London (Day & Ward 2004c; Scambler 2007).

A similar phenomenon is also found in Hong Kong. The colonial history of the city contributed to the economic difference between Hong Kong and Mainland China. To a certain extent, the lifestyles in Hong Kong are parallel to those in many European and other rich countries. The demand for women’s sexual labour has promoted migration from Mainland China, and the number of migrant sex workers has dramatically increased as a result of changes in policy for Mainland residents visiting or moving to Hong Kong (see Chapter 3).

As noted, like many other countries in the “First World”, Hong Kong has a low incidence of diseases and HIV among sex workers. Researchers argue that sex workers from Mainland China, in particular opportunists (see the typology of sex workers in Chapter 1), are more likely to be at risk of disease and HIV, in the sense that sex workers in Mainland China have a higher prevalence of injecting drug use and inconsistency of condom use (see Chapter 4). In addition, migrations from Mainland China to Hong Kong are often conceived as economically motivated; migrant sex workers in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, are defined as at a disadvantage position. All these

factors have contributed the shifting of the research focus in the field of HIV/AIDS to migrant workers from Mainland China.

In sum, despite the fact that rates of HIV/AIDS are low among female sex workers in Hong Kong, this group of women are broadly seen in academic accounts as at risk of disease, in particular in the medical literature (see Chapter 4). By investigating the interview accounts of sexual health risks and risk management by the sex workers in Hong Kong, this chapter explores the ways in which workers conceptualised this type of occupational risk and seeks to understand women's risk-taking (or risk-avoiding) behaviour in context, a topic which has been largely ignored in the existing survey research in the literature from Hong Kong. The discussion begins with a brief introduction to the sexual health of the women in this study.

### **The prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among the women**

When my respondents were asked to talk about risks related to selling sexual services, many of them mentioned the risks of disease, in particular HIV/AIDS. As presented below, in their accounts, women described their fear of being infected by diseases from their clients, which apparently suggested that they conceptualised sexual health-related risks as an occupational hazard. Interestingly, however, many women emphasised that they did not see themselves as at risk of disease, because of their very regular use of condoms with their clients. The seeming ambivalence of women's accounts, as further elaborated in the following sections, may suggest that women's understanding of the relationship between sexual health-related risks and sex work was affected not only by their own experiences, but also by the popular perceptions and "official" representations of sex workers (which were significantly shaped by experts' or academic accounts).

Because the rates of HIV/AIDS among sex workers in Hong Kong remain low, it is no surprise that none of the women in this study identified themselves as HIV positive. Six women reported that they had been infected with sexually transmitted diseases by their clients, three being local Hong Kong sex



workers and three migrant workers. For those who seemingly saw sex work as a permanent job (see Chapter 1), working in different segments of the sex industry in the course of their careers seemed to be a common experience. “Workers” in this study typically worked from nightclubs or karaoke clubs when they were younger, then moved to dance halls or sauna/massage parlours in their early thirties, and became flat-working women in their mid- or late thirties. The women described that the incidents occurred at an early stage of their career, before the mid-1980s, when they worked from other segments of the indoor sex market, such as nightclubs.

### ***Unprotected sex: Risk-taking behaviour?***

The following section explores the ways in which women described their involvement in unprotected sex. The discussion first explores the accounts by workers who reported their past experiences, in particular, unprotected sex occurring before AIDS became a popular subject in mid-1985.

### **The lack of knowledge of STI and HIV prevention**

A typical reply to the question, “Have you ever had any diseases?” was given by Helen. She entered the sex industry in the early 1970s and worked from nightclubs and karaoke clubs in the early stages of her career. Like many other female sex workers, she was in and out of the business. She married a client whom she met at a nightclub, but their marriage ended in divorce. After she separated from her husband, Helen became a tea lady and later worked in a fast-food shop. Helen described her jobs in other employment sectors as “quite good” and “interesting”, but the relatively high income from selling sexual services appeared to be a strong pull factor in motivating her to re-enter the sex business again. At the time of the interview, she had just worked from a rented flat for a few days.

In response to the question about diseases, Helen’s first reaction was to touch the table and said, “Touch wood, so far I am lucky.” She then recalled her experience of being infected with genital warts when she worked in a nightclub:

When I worked in China Palace,<sup>1</sup> I met someone who had (a sexually transmitted disease [STD])...I was innocent. It was ten, twenty years ago. You can imagine how innocent I was. I met an architect, and slept with him once. I was not sure whether I gave it to him or he gave it to me. Anyway, he called me afterwards. He said that he got so and so and asked me to see a doctor as soon as possible.

(Helen, Hong Kong)

“Being innocent” – and more specifically not knowing how to prevent sexually transmitted diseases – was emphasised in the women’s accounts and appeared to be an important factor in the issue of having unprotected sex with clients during commercial sexual encounters.

A similar account was provided by Judy. She was infected with gonorrhoea after having unprotected sex with a client in the early 1980s. At this time she was seventeen years old; it was just a month after she had started her first job in the sex industry, at a massage parlour.

Judy said that the job description of the advertisement simply stated that the establishment offered massage services exclusively. She was not aware that she was expected to offer any sexual services until she met the manager. During the job interview she was told that the massage parlour was a *fei-gei-coeng* (飛機場), which offered not only massage but sexual services to clients.

Broadly speaking, in Hong Kong there are two types of massage parlour where sexual services are available. In some establishments, workers offered “full service”, which generally meant sexual intercourse with oral sex, along with body massage. Other establishments, which are commonly referred to as *fei-gei-coeng* in Hong Kong, provide exclusively body massages and hand relief. The term of “*fei-gei-coeng*”, which literally means “airport”, comes from a slang phrase “*daa-fei-gei*” (打飛機) literally “hitting the plane”, and means “male masturbation”. *Fei-gei-coeng* hence refers to the massage parlour which offers hand relief alongside massage. But sometimes workers in a *fei-gei-coeng* also provide “extra services” such as cuddling

(fondling breasts and touching the genitals) and fellatio (depending upon negotiation with their clients). The sexual transaction in *fei gei coeng* is not supposed to involve sexual intercourse, but this again depends upon negotiation between the client and the worker (usually the woman charges more money for offering “extra services”). It also depends upon what is or is not acceptable, or desirable, to an individual worker. The following is the account given by Judy (J: Judy, OC: Olive Cheung):

J: I usually told clients that I would give them hand jobs, which meant “no sex”. But actually I did this with a client. It’s probably because I was young. People lured me. Perhaps I was greedy and so I wanted to offer sex. Usually I did not do that with people. Just one time and I got an STD.

OC: Oh really?

J: Yeah. It was an STD. Yeah. I was extremely shocked at the time. I mean when I had a test, I was absolutely shocked.

(Judy, Hong Kong)

The above account initially suggests that extra income motivated Judy to offer unprotected sex with the client (“I was greedy”). Nevertheless, in her account she also stressed that it was an incident (in the sense that the unprotected sex with the client occurred only once), and emphasised that for her “health was more important than money”. As in Helen’s account, Judy highlighted that she was young and, most importantly, had “a lack of knowledge” not only of diseases but also of sex, which appears to explain the occurrence of unprotected sex:

Nobody mentioned about using condoms. I didn’t know anything about this. When I was young, I knew absolutely nothing about STDs. I mean my knowledge was extremely poor. I didn’t know (about having a STD) until I realised that there was something wrong with my body.

(Judy, Hong Kong)

Judy said that she thought it was a skin problem until the doctor diagnosed gonorrhoea. She explained that before AIDS became a public issue in the 1980s, information on such subjects was very limited. This was also evident

in other women's accounts. Judy reasoned that the low risk awareness did not encourage female sex workers to equip themselves with the relevant knowledge. The massage parlour did not provide workers with any STD prevention information, and the managers there never reminded workers to use protection during sexual transactions. As is further elaborated in the following sections, similar accounts were given by other workers when they described their experiences of working in other segments of the industry.

"Sex as taboo" in the Chinese context was also suggested as a reason why knowledge about STDs or their prevention was inadequate. Until the 1980s, sexual health was not a subject of conversation between female sex workers, in particular those working in sex markets where "full services" (see p.178) were not supposed to be offered. Rita explained that in *fei-gei-coeng*, for example, sexual intercourse was an "unspeakable service":

We didn't tell others that we did a big project, which means having sex with a client. You're not supposed to shag clients on the premises. If other girls found out what you did, they'd say bad things about you. They'd say that you were cheap; you'd do anything for money. They would not say this to your face, but of course no one wants to be seen as cheap.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

As noted above, theoretically *fei-gei-coeng* provided only hand relief and massage, but in practice the services offered by workers were always negotiable. Workers might sometimes be involved in a "big project" (offering sexual intercourse along with body massage), and they knew that their colleagues behaved in the same way. Although "doing a big project" appeared to be an open secret in *fei-gei-coeng*, Rita said that women avoided talking openly about this practice. As a result, it was perhaps unsurprising that until the 1980s sex workers tended not to share information on STD prevention or their experiences of diseases:

Why'd they tell others? It's not something honourable. If a girl told others that she's got a disease, people would know that she had had sex with her clients.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

Interestingly, the account given by Rita seems to suggest that what concerned individual women at this time, was not STD-related stigma (see below for further elaboration), but whore stigma. As discussed in Chapter 3, an individual woman is likely to be stigmatised if she offers to hire her body for “indiscriminate sexual intercourse” (Pheterson 1993). Using the concept of “bad whore”, Pheterson argues that, for many sex workers, being a “whore” is not by definition shameful. Dishonour is not “attached to sex work per se, but to a lack of competence and integrity in one’s work” (ibid, p.47). Obviously as Pheterson argues, “standards of work quality vary between whores and with different preferences, different job requirements, and different cultural norms” (p.46). But “competence” and “integrity” might broadly include business skills, sexual skills, therapeutic skills, language skills (this will be revisited later), and also discrimination, in the sense that the worker has certain sexual preferences and does not have sex “with anyone” (ibid).

In the context of *fei-gei-coeng* in Hong Kong, a “good whore” therefore was one who never had sexual intercourse with clients during the transaction, as this was against the norms of *fei-gei-coeng*, where supposedly the services offered were exclusively massage and hand relief. Sex workers who did not attempt to find information about STD prevention appeared to be “fatalists” who found the idea of “a high-risk lifestyle ... an acceptable norm” (Douglas 1992, p.118). Findings of this study however suggest that women working in *fei-gei-coeng* did not actively seek knowledge of ways to prevent STD, least of all from their colleagues, because they did not want others to learn that they had offered to hire their body for “indiscriminate sexual intercourse”. Their apparently “risk-taking” behaviour, therefore, might be seen as a strategy to manage their identity and avoid the stigma of being a “bad whore”.

In sum, sex workers attributed their infection with STDs to their lack of relevant knowledge. In their accounts, the women emphasised that they were young when they became infected with the diseases, which implicitly attributed their lack of knowledge to the limited information on sexual health available in the pre-AIDS period. In Mei’s account about her experience

when she worked from a brothel in the mid-1970s, she suggests that her risk-taking behaviour was a result of the lack of agency. At this time, Mei was controlled by a pimp:

He taught the girls to take pills. He taught us how to douche there (vagina) after finishing (the transaction). That's it. He didn't mention (the use of) condoms. As he expected the girls to make money for him, he was unlikely to teach them to use condoms.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

Mei's experience was parallel to that of the other women, noted above, in the sense that she emphasised that she was young and her knowledge was inadequate. In her account, Mei further highlighted that women who were controlled by a third party, in her case by a pimp, had their agency denied, which hampered their search for knowledge of ways to prevent infection. According to Mei, the information which the pimp sent to workers was selective. What concerned him most was not the health of the female sex workers, but "conception", as this might have stopped the women from working.

In the mid-1970s Hong Kong, women working from brothels generally had unprotected sex with their clients. Because of their lack of knowledge, Mei said that workers were not aware of their vulnerability to infection. Consequently, some women were not aware that they were infected, which contributed to their unknowing transmission of disease:

Sometimes clients told the manager of the brothel that girls had diseases and so on. Those girls would be told to take a break and to see a doctor, but would not be told to use condoms.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

Being infected sometimes provided an opportunity for workers to receive health education. In the pre-AIDS era, when information on STDs was not widely available, female sex workers received information on sexual health mainly from the public healthcare sector but in a passive manner (M: Mei, OC: Olive Cheung):

M: Some girls did not realise that they were infected until a nurse found them and told them to see a doctor.

OC: How could the nurse know that the girls got diseases?

M: Clients got infected, and they went to government clinics. They had to tell the nurse which girls they had visited. Nurses would go and find the girls, and asked them to go to the clinic. Then the hospital, I mean the Health Department, would teach the girls that it was a must for them to use condoms, or they would get so and so diseases.

The Government Social Hygiene Service (SHS) in Hong Kong provides medical check-ups for women in five Social Hygiene Clinics. It also offers health education, treatment and counselling to patients who are diagnosed with STIs. Contacts are traced by patients' referral. The clinics offer the contacts empirical epidemiological treatment, health education and counselling on the disease and methods of safe sex.

To some respondents, the outreach worker from the social hygiene clinic was the main source of information on sexual health, in particular in the pre-AIDS period, as demonstrated in Helen's account about her experiences in early 1980s (H: Helen, OC: Olive Cheung):

H: Initially I didn't know these services. I didn't know that there were clinics to deal with STDs. A nurse found my address, and she visited my flat. Since then I learned that there is an organisation (SHS). She told me that the Government provides such and such services, and there are clinics providing free (medical) check-ups to *gail* (means whores, see Chapter 6, Note 1).

OC: You hadn't heard about the services before?

H: No. I didn't know about this when I worked in the karaoke club and the nightclub. I knew absolutely nothing until I worked from a flat. A nurse came to visit me and told me that there is free service for us. I previously thought that I could only go to the private (health sector). But now of course I'll go to the Government (clinics).

(Helen, Hong Kong)

As suggested by Mei and Helen, the SHS in Hong Kong promotes STD prevention to female sex workers through outreaching work. In the tradition that the group of sex workers has been defined by diseases, it is perhaps to be expected that the SHS identifies workers, along with other groups “from the socially marginalised sector of the community” such as men who have sex with men and marginal young people, as high-risk groups for STI (SHS 2006).

Mei’s account demonstrates that in the mid-1970s female sex workers, rather than their clients, were the target of health surveillance. After the clients reported that they were infected, nurses visited the workers and asked them to have medical check-ups. At first glance, the services provided to female sex workers by the SHS in the twenty-first century, such as confidential medical consultations, health education and routine screening and counselling, are similar to those provided to the any other attendees of Social Hygiene Clinics. Nevertheless, what needs to be highlighted is that the SHS still adopts the approach of contacting and visiting the sex partners of STD patients through partner referral. The Anti-Venereal Disease Office under the SHS makes regular health visits to sex workers at their workplaces and invites them to clinics to be regularly screened for STIs (SHS 2006). *This service is exclusively for sex workers.*

This practice should be understood in the historical context. As noted in Chapter 2, the system of regulation in nineteenth century colonial Hong Kong reflects that the authorities found it unacceptable that clients, in particular, British soldiers and sailors, should be subject to regular health checks. As a result, female sex workers in Hong Kong, like those in Britain, were made the ones responsible for venereal disease (also see Kilvington 2001). Although in the twenty-first century female sex workers in Hong Kong are not subjected to compulsory medical check-ups, the system in the nineteenth century apparently still shapes the health services provided for sex workers. Following the tradition of pathologising women, in particular sex workers, women in the sex industry are still deemed to be responsible for diseases.



In summary, in their accounts respondents explained that the lack of knowledge of STD prevention contributed to their being infected. Women emphasised that in the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the available information on diseases was very limited. For respondents, the lack of knowledge, and consequently the low risk awareness, explained their past infections. Moreover, respondents also suggested that because of their lack of agency, they were restricted from adopting any preventive measures against diseases but left to have unprotected sex with their clients. In these accounts of “lack of knowledge” and “lack of agency”, respondents seemingly place themselves in a passive position, in the sense that the lack of knowledge or agency is held to have constrained the situations they were in.

For many respondents, the public issue made of AIDS in the mid-1980s served as a watershed in terms of risk awareness among sex workers. Respondents said that individuals’ awareness of and attitudes towards disease have changed significantly in the AIDS era. Before further elaborating on this point, the section below first explores the meanings of condom use held by individuals in the pre-AIDS period.

### **Condoms as a contraceptive tool**

As noted in Chapter 4, nowadays condom use appears to be higher than it used to be in the indoor sex market in Hong Kong and elsewhere. As accounts in a later section demonstrate, the use of protection is seen as essential. Nevertheless, women’s accounts suggest that this was not taken for granted in the pre-AIDS era. While condom use is associated with STD and HIV prevention, and in the commercial sexual encounter it is widely conceived as a symbol of individuals’ risk awareness and avoidance, women’s accounts show that the meaning of condom use held by individuals involved in commercial sex was rather different, in the era before HIV prevention became a popular issue in Hong Kong.

During the period when she worked from the brothel, Mei was not infected with any STDs. She was however alarmed by the experiences of her

colleagues. In her account, as noted above, Mei said that her knowledge of sexual health came mainly from the pimp. Obviously, what concerned the pimp was not the well-being of the workers, but whether workers were healthy enough to provide sexual services. As a result, although later Mei knew that condoms could help to prevent diseases, she could not use such protection because she had no control over the sexual encounter with clients:

Guys do not like to use condoms. It's true that condoms cut sensation, isn't it? Of course the boss did not want girls to do anything which might affect their business. It's just simple. [...] We had no control over ourselves. [...] Even if you want to use (condoms) ... if the boss did not allow you to do so, most likely you would continue not to use it.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

In line with Helen and Judy's, Mei attributed women's unprotected sex with clients to a lack of knowledge about STIs. Here, she explained how the lack of agency experienced by sex workers was not only an obstacle to obtaining adequate knowledge, but also to practicing protected sex itself. Even after she learnt from infected colleagues who had been advised by medical staff that condoms could reduce the risk she faced, Mei could not practice safe sex with clients. Working in the brothel, Mei was controlled by the pimp and had no bargaining power during the transaction. Her account demonstrates how the level of control that female sex workers had over the sexual encounter might affect condom use during the commercial sexual encounter (see p.183, above).

Mei's account also suggests that clients' refusal to use condoms acted as a main factor contributing to the occurrence of unprotected sex. Maggie, who worked from a nightclub in Hong Kong in the mid-1970s, suggested that, in contrast to nowadays, the use of condoms with clients was not encouraged in the past by the management of the establishment. She recalled that none of her colleagues used protection when they had penetrative sex with their clients:

Girls didn't see the need of using condoms. In fact we didn't always sleep with clients (but) only regulars. [...] We all took pills anyways.

(Maggie, Hong Kong)

Maggie's accounts seemingly suggests that in the mid-1970s, workers did not necessarily identify having unprotected sex with clients as risk-taking behaviour, in the sense that, first, they did not offer themselves for indiscriminate sexual intercourse. The account of having sex only with regular clients seemingly implies that women conceived that the level of risk which they faced was low because of the limited number of their sexual partners and they had always had unprotected sex with someone they "knew" rather than strangers. Second, in the mid-1970s women were not apparently aware that unprotected sex carried the risk of STD transmission. Consequently, condom use was seen as purely a contraceptive measure but was not associated with disease prevention. Those workers who took birth control pills did not perceive unprotected sex with clients to be risky, except for the risk of pregnancy.

Jeffery Weeks (1989) suggests that 1985 was the turning point in the history of AIDS. This year saw the death of Rock Hudson, a famous Hollywood star who had openly announced that he was an HIV carrier in the early 1980s. Weeks argued that this well publicised incident "dramatised the impact of the disease", which demonstrated that AIDS "was not just a disease of execrated minorities but a health threat on a global scale, and one which, in world terms, largely affected heterosexuals" (1989, p. 7).

In Hong Kong, AIDS as a disease had become clearer to individuals by the mid-1980s. The first case of AIDS in Hong Kong was reported in 1985. A Chinese man from New York was diagnosed as HIV positive four months after coming back to Hong Kong. He admitted to heterosexual encounters with sex workers in New York and Miami (Chan & Ng, 1985). By the end of 1985, fifty-five people had been found to be infected with HIV.

From the late 1970s, Maggie worked for nearly ten years in different nightclubs. In contrast to her account noted above, Maggie's account of the situation in the mid-1980s suggests that individuals' perceptions of the use of condoms started to change:

The manager of the second nightclub I worked for briefly mentioned about the condom thing. At that time AIDS was a hot issue. In fact we were not quite sure what AIDS was. Just knew that you'd definitely die if you got it ... I tried (to use condoms) once or twice with a client. He complained and refused to use them. He said that he had no diseases, and also I took pills. That's nothing to worry about. At that time I thought "he's right" and I said OK.  
(Maggie, Hong Kong)

The above accounts suggest that though, in the mid-1970s, individual workers' risk awareness was seemingly low due, as they explained, to lack of knowledge and agency, it did not mean that the individuals involved in the sex business were entirely unaware the risk of disease. For example, Mei's account reveals that her pimp taught women how to douche their vaginas after having sex with their clients, which suggests that the pimp was seemingly aware of and sought to reduce the risk faced by workers. Not surprisingly, what concerned the pimp or the manager was not the well-being of the workers, but protecting the bodies of the women and keeping them "workable" for the sake of their earnings. Therefore, the pimp perhaps predictably adopted a passive approach to deal with the problem of disease (telling the workers "to take a break and see a doctor" if they were infected).

Maggie's account, however, suggests that individuals' attitudes towards condom use changed significantly in the mid-1980s. As noted above, on the issue of the consequence of unprotected sex, the main concern of workers, along with the managers of sex establishments and pimps, was how to avoid the woman from getting pregnant. The concept of "HIV prevention" emerges in Maggie's account, above. The manager of the nightclub "briefly mentioned about the condom thing" and linked protected sex to AIDS prevention rather than contraception. At this time sex workers still appeared to have no clear

concept about the disease (“we were not quite sure what AIDS was”), but were aware of the risk they faced (“you’d definitely die if you got it”).

In contrast to workers who worked in brothels and were controlled by pimps, workers in the nightclubs in the mid-1980s were encouraged to use protection when having sexual intercourse with clients, and supposedly could make their choice regarding condom use (for example, Maggie said that she tried to use condoms with a client). In this context, unprotected sex occurred not merely because of the lack of knowledge. Workers’ decisions were also shaped by the decisions of their clients. In parallel with Mei’s account (p.186), Maggie’s account reveals that in the mid-1980s, after AIDS became a popular issue, clients’ refusal to use condoms still served as an explanation for unprotected sex. In fact, by this time Maggie seemingly did not see unprotected sex with clients as risky, in the sense that she could trust the client when he claimed that he had no disease. Moreover, the contraceptive function of condoms was still highlighted in Maggie’s account, which seemingly suggests that the consequence of pregnancy, rather than disease prevention, was still the primary concern of the worker.

In sum, the accounts noted in this section suggest that for some respondents, the meaning of condom use was rather different in the pre-AIDS period than was subsequently. Compared with accounts about the period before AIDS emerged and became an issue, workers and also those involved in the sex business, such as the managers of the sex establishments, seem to have had higher risk awareness. Until the mid-1980s, condom use appears still to have been widely supposed to be a contraceptive measure, though sex workers’ accounts demonstrate their risk awareness and intention of risk avoidance. The following section moves to exploring how women accounted for their understanding of unprotected sex with (regular) clients in the pre-AIDS era.

### **Unprotected sex with regular clients**

As noted above, some of the women in this study did not perceive having sex with clients as risk-taking behaviour. In their accounts, most women emphasised that they had unprotected sex only with their regular clients, who claimed that they were not infected (see Maggie's account, pp.187–188, above).

In the respondents' accounts, apart from workers' knowledge of disease prevention and the level of contract over the sexual encounter, "trust" between sex workers and their clients was a crucial factor in determining their behaviour during the transaction. In her account, for example, Judy emphasised that most sexual encounters did not involve intercourse. She had unprotected sex with clients only if they could convince her that they were healthy:

I was young. That guy told me that he didn't have any disease. He claimed that he's clean and so I trusted him. I was innocent. I shouldn't listen to people without thinking carefully about what they said. Some clients always tell lies. They claimed that they were clean, but in fact they always fooled around.

(Judy, Hong Kong)

As noted above, Judy was infected with gonorrhoea after having sex with this regular client. She explained that she trusted the client only because she was young and inexperienced. After she caught the disease, she left the sauna and worked as an office clerk. A few years later, in the late 1980s, she returned to the business due to economic necessity. She worked in different sectors of the sex industry, and at the time of the interview she worked from a rented flat. In her account, Judy repeated that "the incident" happened only because she was young and simply trusted what she was told. She stressed that she would never offer unprotected intercourse to any client and said that if clients refused to use condoms, she would "use a broom to sweep them out of my flat".

In the women's accounts, the "trust relationship" between workers and their regular clients was adopted as an explanation for unprotected sex. Of the respondents who engaged in unsafe sex, in particular in the pre-AIDS period, most emphasised that they had unprotected sex only with regular clients who were seen as at low risk of STDs:

When I worked in a karaoke club, I had many regular clients. I knew them very well. I did have unprotected sex with one or two guys. They were married, and just occasionally fooled around with girls. So far nothing bad happened. But I did this with only one or two guys.

(Cindy, Hong Kong)

The above accounts demonstrate that the nature of the relationship established between female sex workers and clients is a factor influencing the likelihood that unprotected sex will be practised. Nevertheless, this reason, along with the lack of knowledge or agency, were used by women to explain past unprotected sex with their clients, in particular encounters which occurred in the initial stages of their career or before AIDS became a popular issue.

### ***Unprotected sex as risk-taking behaviour***

As demonstrated in the following sections, for many sex workers in this study, individuals' attitudes towards disease prevention changed significantly after the mid-1980s when AIDS became widely known and sex workers were seen as at risk of disease.

### **Condom use as STD or HIV prevention**

While the above accounts suggest that sex workers used to work without condoms, women said that the use of protection became popular once AIDS became a popular issue in the mid-1980s. In contrast to the past, the rationale for women to use protection was now often framed in terms of HIV and prevention, rather than avoiding conception. Lily was from Mainland China and worked as a flat-working woman in the early 1990s. In her advertisement posted on the Internet, Lily stated that she mainly offered

body massage and hand relief. But like many sex workers, sexual services were negotiable.

I always use condoms. Getting pregnant is not a big deal. But catching a disease is scary. If I get pregnant...in the worst situation I will just have an abortion. But you'll be in big trouble if you catch a disease. [...] It's scary. Some diseases are incurable. If you catch them, you will definitely die!

(Lily, Mainland China)

In contrast to the accounts noted previously, which suggested that the use of condoms was negotiable until the mid-1980s, Fung's accounts of her experience of working as a flat-working woman since the late 1980s mentioned that the use of protection has become an "underlying rule" of the commercial sexual encounter:

We always stick to the practice. All of us stick to this practice. When clients come to us, there is an understanding between us that the use of condoms is a must. Not all the girls use condoms when they give blow jobs, but there is no exception when they have sex with clients. Why? Girls won't take the risk for HK\$300 or HK\$400. If you catch (an STD) from a client, even if it is not a fatal disease, you will have to take a break! It's not worth it to do so! Those clients (who refuse to use protection) are not the only choice, and girls can always find other clients. If a client claims that he is clean, that means that he is not clean. If he refused to use condoms with you, he will probably do the same thing with other girls. We must stick to the practice. When a client finds that all girls do the same thing, he has no choice but to follow what they tell him to do.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Compared with the accounts noted above about the situation before the mid-1980s, Fung's account showed a new attitude. First, her account demonstrated a strong sense of "risk awareness": Fung saw unprotected sex with clients as risk-taking behaviour. Second, sex workers saw the need for condom use, and had a higher level of control over it. In her account, clients' refusal to use a condom could not serve as a proper explanation for the occurrence of unprotected sex, in the sense that women should be able to



“stick to the practice” and to terminate the transaction if a client refused to use protection:

We always stick to this practice. If a client suddenly says that he will not use a condom after taking a shower, I will ask him, “Why didn’t you say this earlier? I won’t do it if you don’t wear a condom. As I’ve already taken my clothes off, I will refund you half (of the service charge). That’s it.”

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Fung’s account is a good example of the significant change of meaning of condom use in the context of sex work after the mid-1980s. Rather than seeing the condom as a “contraceptive tool”, workers deemed it to be protective against HIV or disease. Another significant change identified in Fung’s account is that the consistent use of condoms in the sexual encounter, at least that which occurs in working flats, has become a collective practice and a norm. Now that it has become a norm, for sex workers using protection is implied to be non-negotiable. In this context, as demonstrated in Fung’s account, sex workers attempted to achieve as high a degree of control over the encounter as possible.

In their accounts, many women demonstrated their risk awareness of having unprotected sex with their clients. The emergence of AIDS in the mid-1980s was an apparent watershed in their accounts. In the pre-AIDS era, women were aware of sexually transmitted diseases. Nevertheless, the major risk of having sex with clients was previously understood as becoming pregnant. Since the mid-1980s, the link between STIs and unprotected sex has gradually been emphasised. This has seemingly affected the ways in which women conceptualise the risk that unprotected sex can carry. In their accounts women stressed their risk awareness of diseases, in particular HIV. Many of them attributed risky sexual behaviour to their lack of knowledge. Consequently, as demonstrated in the following section, the emphasis on sexual health emerges as another main theme in women’s accounts. This echoes the argument put forward by experts that improvements in HIV-related knowledge might minimise risky behaviour (see Chapter 4). The later part of this chapter draw on the concept of “moral career”, as developed by

Erving Goffman, for a better understanding of un/safe sex practices among sex workers.

### **The importance of keeping healthy**

In their accounts, some women emphasise their awareness of the risk of sexual health which they faced at work. In this sense, HIV or STD transmission was seemingly understood as an occupational risk. Risk avoidance, in this context comprising, regular condom use, was described as a choice as a result of risk awareness. In these accounts, women took an active role to protect themselves from infection. What respondents stressed, as found in Joey and Wing-tong's account, was that keeping healthy is always their priority:

Fuck you! It's HK\$ 400 (approximately £33.5) only! It's not worth it, as you will probably get syphilis or something else.

(Joey, Mainland China)

To be honest, you enter the business for money. But it doesn't mean that you have to risk your life.

(Wing-tong, Mainland China)

As noted above, in the accounts of their experiences before the mid-1980s, respondents tended to explain the occurrence of unprotected sex as a result of low risk awareness or the lack of agency. Conversely, in accounts about their experiences in the AIDS era, sex workers emphasised their awareness of the risk. They said that they had the power to control the sexual encounter, and highlighted that they would never risk their lives for money. In other words, in these accounts women demonstrated that they were likely to consistently use condoms, given that good working conditions (for example, in terms of achieving a high level of control over the sexual encounter) were available. The image of the sex worker presented here can be contrasted with that of popular accounts, which often construct sex workers as offering sexual services indiscriminately for money.

In the AIDS era, Bloor (1995a, 1995b) points out that individuals' accounts tend to emphasise their vulnerability to infection from others, but not their propensity to infect others unknowingly. This is evident in these respondents' accounts, where women generally understood risk as that of infection *from* their clients. This may be explained by the fact that, since most respondents said that they insisted on having protected sex with clients, it was reasonable for them to deny that they themselves were a source of infection. Moreover, as noted above, the ways in which sex workers conceptualised and accounted for themselves were inevitably affected by other social factors, as demonstrated in Helen's account:

It's crucial for girls to have a clear idea of what they are doing. Making money is important, but the most important point is to keep your body healthy. It's because our job, it's just like a snowball which gets bigger and bigger. I (have sex) with a client; he has sex with her; she has sex with another man. The consequence can have a harmful effect on other people and me. So you have to be very careful. If you feel something is wrong, you'd better send a message to those who you had contacted previously.

(Helen, Hong Kong)

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, and also discussed in previous chapters, sex workers rather than clients have traditionally been seen as responsible for diseases. Helen's account seemingly suggested that sex workers should insist on practising safe sex not only for their own well-being, but also because sex workers could be a source of disease which might affect the sexual health of a wider population. She even suggested that a worker should be responsible for informing clients who could be infected. This account clearly positions the sex worker as a moral subject – the worker has the responsibility to prevent the transmission of the disease to a wider population (see below for further details).

While most of the respondents said that they were aware of the risk of unsafe sex and hence they insisted on using protection during the transaction, the following accounts suggested that clients might have different ideas about the practice of safe sex:

A regular client once suggested that we had sex without a condom. I said no. He said that as both of us were “clean”, there shouldn’t be a problem. I asked him how he knew about this. He said that I was his only sex partner, and he knew that I always use condoms when I had sex with other clients. I said that I didn’t want to get pregnant and turned him down.

(Lisa, Mainland China)

A guy said he would pay me double if I let him take the condom off. I asked him, “Don’t you feel it’s risky? You know I shag many guys.” He said that I looked healthy and should be OK. He just wanted to know how it felt without a condom, and wouldn’t blame me if something went wrong.

(Ying, Hong Kong)

These accounts seemingly suggest that despite the fact that consistent condom use has become a norm in the commercial sexual encounter, clients tended to think that female sex workers would offer unprotected penetrative sex for extra rewards. Apart from Judy, who admitted that she was motivated by economic rewards to offer unprotected sex (see p.179–180), none of the women in this study said that they would accept such an offer for money.

The above accounts suggested that, when talking about recent working experiences, the respondents tended to emphasise that they prioritised health over economic reward. For many women in this study, AIDS was different from most other STDs. They were aware of the risk of STDs; in the worst scenario, they would have to “take a break” if they were infected (see Fung’s account, p.192). Conversely, AIDS was seen as a fatal disease, for one would “definitely die” if infected (see Maggie’s account, p.188). Thus it may be argued that the change in sex workers’ perceptions of disease since the mid-1980s could explain the change in their attitudes towards unprotected sex as presented in their accounts.

The emerging of AIDS also had an impact on the ways in which women understood their relationships with their clients. As noted above, in some accounts women attributed their unprotected sex to their clients’ refusal to use a condom. In accounts of their more recent experiences, clients proposed having unprotected sex but their suggestions were often rejected

by the workers. This may reflect the impact of AIDS on workers' understanding of their relationships with clients: in the pre-AIDS period, workers might agree to have unprotected sex if the client claimed that she was "clean", but as demonstrated in Lisa's account (p.196), for many workers in the AIDS era no clients can be trusted.

In sum, the accounts noted in the above sections suggest that, with an increasing awareness of risk, in sex workers' accounts risk avoidance appeared to an inevitable choice. Nevertheless, as discussed in the following sections, a few respondents reported that they had unsafe sex with their clients although they were aware of the risk that they faced.

### **"They couldn't put the condom on. What could we do?"**

The accounts given by sex workers stressed that they were very unlikely to offer unprotected penetrative sex for extra financial reward. Some respondents, however, reported that they had unprotected sex with their clients in situations which were beyond their calculation or control. For example, Betty said that her clients could not use condoms during the sexual intercourse.

The interview with Betty was conducted in her working flat. We started the interview at six o'clock in the evening, and I did not leave until midnight. While the interview appeared to have lasted for about five hours, it was in fact interrupted several times as clients came to her flat. Eventually two of them requested that she provided services. Initially, Betty had said that she insisted on using condoms when she had sex with her clients. We started the interview again after the second client left. When we talked about safe sex practices, she then said that in fact the use of condoms was not consistent:

The old guy just came here was a regular. In fact he's unable to do it. I mean, his thing (penis) cannot get hard. Usually he just petted me or asked for a blow job. Occasionally he said he wanted to have (sex), I would let him do it. In fact he couldn't do anything. His thing (penis) was soft and could not enter

there (her vagina). I didn't ask him to use a condom, as it was impossible for him to put it on.

(Betty, Hong Kong)

In her account, Betty emphasised that she insisted on using protection with clients, which seemingly suggests that she was aware of the risk. Here, unprotected sex is presented as a choice involving careful risk calculations: she understood the risk of having unprotected sex with clients, but on the basis of the understanding that she would not have full penetrative sex with the old client, she might have envisaged that it was a taking a risk, though for her the risk was low: "I think it shouldn't be a problem. We didn't really do it (have sex) anyway."

A few weeks after the interview, a respondent from this study, Natalie, phoned me. She had introduced me to Betty and asked me how the interview was going. She then told me that Betty had had an abortion a few days ago. Natalie said that she knew that Betty had some old clients, and they usually had sex without condoms. When I said that having unprotected sex could be risky, Natalie's response was similar to the one given by Betty: "They couldn't put the condom on. What could we do?"

While some accounts noted in previous sections seemingly suggest that condom use has become a norm in sexual encounters between flat-working women and their clients, Betty's and Natalie's accounts suggest that unprotected sex could be "negotiable". As is discussed in Chapter 6, the role I adopted in the research might have influenced the narrative accounts given by the respondents. Here my comment that "having unprotected sex could be risky" might remind the women the fact that I was a researcher and an outsider who had a different opinion on the non-use of condoms. Women might have thought that telling me this kind of information would affect my opinion of them. They therefore emphasised that unprotected sex became "negotiable" only because some of the clients "could not put the condom on", which implied that they did not wish to break the norm but had no choice. It appeared that for them clients should be the one to be blamed. More

interestingly, the following example demonstrates accounts given by clients sometimes contradicted those given by the sex workers in this study.

After our interview, Wing-tong introduced me to one of her regular clients, Mr Leung. They had lunch in a Chinese restaurant the day after the interview, and Wing-tong invited me to join them. At the meeting, Wing-tong explained my research project to Mr Leung and we talked about the issues of buying sex. At some point Wing-tong left to order some take-away food. I raised the issue of unprotected sex. Mr Leung told me that he never used condoms, and claimed that he was allergic to latex. When talking about the issue of infection, he said:

You can tell by looking at the girls. Once I slept with a girl. I could see that her (private) part was red. When I entered her body, I could feel that there (her vagina) was very hot. It was weird but at the time I didn't really think about it. After a week there (he pointed to his penis) felt a bit funny. I went to see a doctor, and he said that I had caught a (sexually transmitted) disease.

(Mr Leung)

Mr Leung said that he could not remember what the doctor told him and did not know what the disease was. When Wing-tong went to the washroom later, I asked Mr Leung whether he used condoms when he had sex with Wing-tong. He shook his head. I then asked whether he had other sex partners; he told me that he visited Wing-tong two to three days a week, and sometimes he would see other sex workers. He asked me not to tell Wing-tong about this, as Wing-tong thought she was his only sex partner.

Mr Leung's account seems to contradict Wing-tong's account (see p.194). While in her account Wing-tong explained that she insisted on using protection because she saw health as her priority, Mr Leung said that Wing-tong had unprotected sex with him. Both accounts may suggest that, although the norm of using protection has been established among flat-working women, in some situations the practice is still negotiable. Nevertheless, in contrast to the popular view that sex workers are likely to be motivated by economic reward and offer indiscriminate sexual intercourse, in

particular unprotected sex, these accounts seemingly suggest that economic factors may not be the main motivation.

On the basis of Mr Leung's account, presumably Wing-tong offered him unprotected sex. Wing-tong's experiences may be in parallel with Betty's, in the sense that her involvement in the "risk-taking" behaviour was a rational choice on the basis of risk calculation. In this context, unprotected sex appeared to be an outcome of the lack of choice (i.e. clients could only perform sex acts if they did not use condoms). But, for Wing-tong, it may instead have been a choice on the basis of risk calculation: that is, on the basis of her trust in Mr Leung's claim that Wing-tong was his only sexual partner, Wing-tong might not see having unprotected sex with him as "risk-taking behaviour". While some accounts suggest that AIDS has had an impact on workers in their relationships with clients, in the sense that they might find that no clients could be trusted (see p.196), the example of Wing-tong suggests that some workers may treat their regular clients as exceptions.

In the following accounts, sex workers explained unprotected sex as a consequence of condom failure. These accounts suggest that women had high risk awareness and adopted measures to avoid risk. Unprotected sex, therefore, was understood as an "accident".

### **Condom failure**

Condom failure was another reason which respondents gave to explain why they engaged in unprotected sex. In their accounts respondents emphasised that they insisted on using condoms. Unprotected sex was an outcome in which for various reasons the condom did not work properly:

I always asked clients to use condoms. But you can't really keep everything under control. Once I had sex with a client. After we finished I got up and tried to help him to remove the condom. I touched his penis but the condom was not there. I turned the light on, but there was nothing. I panicked. I asked what he had done to the condom, and he swore that he hadn't done



anything. After he left I went to take a shower. I put my fingers inside there (the vagina) and I found it! I think it slipped off when we had sex.

(Sa-Sa, Mainland China)

Sa-Sa felt itching around the vagina and pain when passing urine a week later. She was diagnosed with *trichomonas vaginalis*. Likewise, Joey caught an STD from a client after engaging in unsafe sex due to condom failure:

Once when I had sex with a client, I suddenly felt wet and warm lower down. I jumped off him and turned the light on. I saw the condom had burst. I rushed to the bathroom and washed lower down, and asked the client to get out of my flat. [...] A week later I started to feel pain lower down when I went to the toilet. [...] The doctor told me that it was the clap. I was very angry – I always use condoms but still I caught a disease from the client!

(Joey, Mainland China)

In contrast to the accounts given by Betty and Wing-tong, these accounts emphasised that unprotected sex was an accident. Condom failure was often put forward as a reason to explain how unprotected sex occurred, in a context where sex workers were aware of the risk, used to “stick to” the norm of condom use and, most importantly, had control over the sexual encounter. These accounts seemingly suggest that risk-taking behaviour was not a “choice” – sex workers intended to avoid risk and had no intention of engaging in risk-taking behaviour. They were “forced” to have unprotected sex because of factors which were beyond their control and calculation. For some respondents, unprotected sex appeared to be an incalculable accident. As the account given by Lisa suggests:

I honestly had no idea what had happened. I used condoms every time when I had sex with clients and even with my boyfriend. One day I felt unwell lower down. I thought it was simply an infection, as sometimes the bed sheets and towels provided in the rent flats were not clean. I was shocked when I was told that I had *cauliflower* (genital warts). I did not know when and where I got them from.

(Lisa, Mainland China)

In her account, Lisa said that she carefully adopted every single measure to avoid risk – she never had unprotected sex not only with clients but also with her boyfriend. For her, being infected was an outcome of errors in calculation, though apparently she did not know what the error was.

While the accounts noted above stress that “condom failure” was either an incalculable incident or an error in risk calculation, other accounts suggested that condom failure could also be a result of client violence or because women understood unprotected sex with specific clients, in particular regular clients, to be an acceptable risk. These accounts explained that unprotected sex occurred when: 1) clients deliberately removed or burst the condom during the sexual intercourse; or 2) female sex workers offered unprotected sex for sexual pleasure. The first reason will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, as I argue that removing or bursting condoms should not be merely seen as a sexual health issue, but also as an issue of violence. The second characteristic will be discussed in Chapter 9. While the use of condoms is generally identified as a mechanism adopted by female sex workers to keep an emotional distance between them and their clients, it will be demonstrated in Chapter 9 that some women may conceptualise the sex worker-client relationship in a different way and consequently see the condom as a symbolic barrier to intimacy.

In sum, the above section discussed accounts which suggest that unprotected sex was understood as an “accident”, and in many cases it was explained as an outcome of condom failure. In contrast to the accounts of experiences which occurred in the mid-1980s, respondents’ accounts demonstrated that the emergence of AIDS has had a significant impact, according to them, on their behaviour associated with unprotected sex. In describing recent experiences, respondents tended to position themselves as a subject with high risk awareness, who was consistent in condom use (for some women not only with clients but also with partners in private relationship) and had control over the sexual encounter. The occurrence of unprotected sex, therefore, was not a consequence of lack of knowledge or agency. Rather, it was presented as an error of calculation, or an “accident”

which was incalculable. For some women, unprotected sex was an acceptable risk. They might not see having unprotected sex with specific clients, in particular regular clients, as risky, on the basis that they trusted these clients not to be likely carriers of STD or HIV (since they claimed that to be free from disease and had limited sexual partners) or believed that at such times the sex act itself was not risky (for example, some aged clients could not perform full penetrative sex).

### **Unprotected sex and migrant sex workers**

As noted in Chapter 4, and again at the beginning of this chapter migrant sex workers from Mainland China have been defined in academic accounts as a high risk group. Likewise, accounts given by local Hong Kong sex workers seemingly presented the same idea: that migrant sex workers in China were deemed to be more likely to engage in unprotected sex.

While accounts given by sex workers in this study suggest that many women did not offer unprotected penetrative sex to their clients, as noted above, unprotected sex reportedly did occur during the sexual encounter. Moreover, the findings of Ding's research (2005) on the messages posted by clients on the forums of adult entertainment websites in Hong Kong, suggest that some flat-working women were willing to offer unprotected sex for extra financial reward. This issue was addressed during the interviews. In response to this question, Fung emphasised that she never accepted such an offer, and said that she believed that most female sex workers in Hong Kong would not provide such a service. Nevertheless, she also pointed out that accounts given by other female sex workers might not entirely reflect the situation:

There could be some exceptional cases which even insiders don't know about. The reason is that girls are unlikely to tell others that their clients did not use condoms. This practice is criticised in the (sex) business. (If you were found out), people will say, "How come you did this?"

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Fung's account, as is further elaborated in the following sections, suggests that when sex workers accounted for themselves and their behaviour during

the sexual encounter, they might choose not to talk about unprotected sex or risk-taking behaviour. As noted above, the use of condoms has become a norm of sexual encounters between flat-working women and their clients (see p.198). Rita and twenty-two other women in this study said that clients were unlikely to ask for unprotected sex because they “knew the rules of the game” (see below); twenty-eight respondents emphasised the consistent use of condoms in the sexual service. Nevertheless, narrative accounts given by some respondents suggested that clients might sometimes think that they could have unprotected sex with sex workers by offering extra rewards (see p.196, above). The narrative account given by Wing-tong and the rather different narrative provided by her client, Mr Leung, suggested that sex workers have unsafe sex with their clients but prefer not to discuss this in the interview.

The account provided by Fung suggests that women who did not use condoms might fear being criticised by other women for making business difficult for them, in the sense that clients might think that the use of condoms was negotiable (“If he refused to use condoms with you, he will probably do the same thing with other girls”, see p.192 above). This might explain the reluctance to admit to unsafe sex to the researcher in this study: women were unlikely to want to be criticised for having unprotected sex with clients.

The non-vebalisation of unsafe sex to others might also be understood as a strategy to manage their stigmatised identity. As is discussed in Chapter 3, being seen as offering to hire one’s body for “indiscriminate sexual intercourse” is likely to contribute to the “whore stigma” (Pheterson 1993; see p.74 above). The narrative accounts given by Rita (p.180 above) suggested that since having sex with clients on the premises was seen as improper in the context of *fei-gei-coen*, those who were willing to offer sexual services would be criticised; women who “did anything for money” were seen as “cheap”. Therefore, sexual intercourse became an “unspeakable service” and women usually did not discuss this issue. Likewise, flat-working women’s experiences were parallel to that of those worked in *fei-gei-coen*, in the sense that since the consistent use of condoms in the commercial sexual

encounter was understood as a norm between flat-working women, offering unprotected sex was considered morally unacceptable. This is evident in the narrative account provided by Rita. She emphasised that local Hong Kong sex workers were unlikely to do so, but migrant sex workers “might be OK with this if clients were willing to pay extra money for that” (see below). It seems that there was a assumption that only those who were financially desperate, in particular women from Mainland China, were likely to have unprotected sex with clients. The narrative account given by Fung suggested that like those who offered to hire their bodies for “indiscriminate sexual intercourse”, women who engaged in this practice were stigmatised (see p.203, above).

While some sex workers suggest that some women might not admit the occurrence of unprotected sex during the commercial sexual encounter, there was a tendency of local Hong Kong workers to point the finger at Mainland Chinese female sex workers. As noted above, after Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, the change to immigration policy contributed to a dramatic increase in the number of migrant sex workers from Mainland China. Because of the difference in the economic situation between China and Hong Kong, migrant workers were often conceived as motivated by economic factors, and deemed to be more willing to provide “specific services” (such as unprotected sex or “kinky” sex) for extra financial reward. For example, Rita said:

No clients asked me this question (asking for unprotected sex). They knew the rules of the game. But it's not a surprise that some girls might do so (offering unprotected sex service). I can't say that this never happened. For many girls who came to Hong Kong and worked (in the sex business), money was the most important thing. They might be OK with that if clients were willing to pay extra money for that. But to local girls, this is impossible.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

In the advertisements posted on the Internet, most women clearly identified themselves as “*To-dei*” (Hong Kong girls) or from Mainland China or elsewhere. Moreover, clients often could distinguish migrant workers from

local workers by accent or appearance. For Rita, condom use was an established norm which was widely recognised by flat-working women. On the basis of the assumption that migrant workers were desperate in terms of financial need, Rita deemed this group of women to be more likely than local women to engage in risk-taking behaviour. Likewise, Bei also perceived migrant workers as a “risk” group, but associated their behaviour with their (imagined) past history:

Many Mainland girls working in Hong Kong had worked (in the sex industry) in China before they came to Hong Kong. They offered sex without a condom there, and they did this with clients when they worked here.

(Bei, Hong Kong)

As noted above, Fung emphasised that flat working women “stuck to” the practice of safe sex in the commercial transaction. She initially explained that, despite the fact that some women might offer unprotected sex services to their clients when they were in Mainland China, they were likely to insist on the use of condoms in Hong Kong. She explained that, there was more information on AIDS and STI available in Hong Kong than in Mainland China. Apparently what she suggested was that once women had a clearer idea about infection, they were unlikely to risk their lives. Nevertheless, in the later part of her account, she suggested that “there could be some exceptional cases which even insiders (sex workers) don’t know”. What her account implied was that migrant workers from Mainland China were more likely to be the “exceptional cases”.

The findings of research studies on cross-border commercial sex suggest that the frequency of condom use is highly dependent on the geographical location where the sexual encounter takes place. It is found that, compared with clients who patronised female sex workers only in Hong Kong, those who patronised female sex workers in “Mainland China only” or in “Mainland China and other places” were more likely not to use condoms consistently (Lau *et al.* 2002; Lau *et al.* 2003a, 2003b; Lau & Siah 2001). These studies argue that female sex workers in China were rarely consistent in their

condom use compared with those in Hong Kong, and argue that this could be due to their lower HIV awareness, higher financial pressure and lower negotiating power. As noted in Chapter 4, some researchers further argue that, since many migrant workers from Mainland China might have engaged in the sex business before they travelled to Hong Kong, they were more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour and therefore at higher risk than local Hong Kong sex workers (Lau *et al.* 2002; Lau *et al.* 2003).

In contrast to the academic accounts which suggest that migrant sex workers are a high risk group, accounts given by respondents in this study suggest that unprotected sex occurred in the sexual encounters of both local and migrant sex workers. Accounts given by the women in this study did not show that migrant sex workers from Mainland China were more likely to be motivated by financial reward and to offer unprotected sex. Moreover, there is seemingly no significant difference between migrant and local sex workers in terms of their accounts of their behaviour in the sexual encounter and their sexual health risk.

By using the case of Hong Kong, I argue that the ethnicity of female sex workers may not have a significant impact on the ways in which they conceptualise risk and consequently their behaviour in the sexual encounter with clients. Also, there is no evidence that clients were more likely to propose having unprotected sex when they approached migrant sex workers than local ones. This may be explained by the fact that, as suggested in accounts given by the flat-working women in this study, once the norm of condom use is established, the consistency of condom use among workers tended to be high. More importantly, the accounts given by workers suggest that this norm was seemingly accepted by most clients. Although some clients might propose having unprotected sex, women seemingly could have more power to control the encounter and could refuse the offer. This may explain why the use of condoms was more regular when the transaction took place in Hong Kong. In other words, the social norms existing among sex workers and their clients play a significant part in enabling female sex workers to gain a high degree of control over the sexual encounter.

## Conclusion

This chapter explores how flat-working women accounted for risk-taking behaviour, in particular, unprotected sex, with their clients. In their research on accounts of unprotected sex by HIV positive people, Rhodes and Cusick (2002, p.212) identify two forms of accounts given by HIV positive people: “stories of agency”, which “conform to perceived orthodox conceptions of risk acceptability, but seek to deny agency, thus [abdicating] responsibility, for actions deviating from the accepted norm” (ibid, p.213); and, conversely, “stories of acceptability”, which are “alternative accounts of risk rationality to those perceived as orthodox”, in which subjects intend to challenge the meanings attached to the act in question. The researchers argue that “accounts of risk management are risk managed”: stigmatised individuals are likely to adopt different reasons to explain their behaviour, which may widely be conceived as inappropriate in a specific context.

To a certain extent, the accounts given by the sex workers in this study are paralleled by those given by HIV positive people. Sex workers, as discussed in previous chapters, are broadly stigmatised. Early work in the 1990s by Scambler and his colleagues (1990) already points out that the emergence and medical labelling of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s contributed to the tendency to define sex workers in the West as causal agents in the transmission and spread of the disease, although it was evident in medical or epidemiological research that sex workers were not a source of infection. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, in the last two decades the primary research focus of studies on sex work from Hong Kong and elsewhere has still been on the risk of infection by HIV and STDS.

Goffman’s (1961) concept the “moral career” may provide a new insight into women’s understandings of sexual health risk. According to Goffman:

Traditionally the term *career* has been reserved for those who expect to enjoy the rises laid out within a respectable profession. The term is coming to be used, however, in a broadened sense to refer to any social strand of any person’s course through life...The main concern will be with the moral



aspects of career – that is, the regular sequence of changes that career entails in the person's self and in his framework of imagery for judging himself and others.

Goffman (1961, pp.127-128; original italic):

Goffman's concerns surround the "moral" aspects of careers: the ways in which a change in careers affects an individual's self, and how this affects their framework for judging the self and others (ibid; see p.414). It is the relationship between social norms and social deviations that particularly interests Goffman.

Selling sex, like any other social deviations, is still largely marginalised in Hong Kong. As noted at the beginning of this chapter and in Chapter 3, sex workers are widely conceived as diseased. In the AIDS era, sex workers are labelled as a high risk group, given their multiple sexual partners. Sex workers in Hong Kong reported that they consistently had protected sex with their clients. Nevertheless, as Scambler (2008, p.1086) argues, individuals are stigmatised not because of "what they *do* but what they *are*" (also see Goffman's argument of stigma [1963/1990]). The HIV-related stigma has further reinforced the sex work stigma.

After AIDS became a popular issue in the mid-1980s, sex workers appeared to see themselves as the ones who were responsible for HIV prevention [as with the prevention of pregnancy]. In their accounts, sex workers seemingly admitted that having unprotected sex with their clients was inappropriate, and emphasised that condom use had become a norm among flat-working women. Their accounts seemingly suggested that they would not engage in risk-taking behaviour if they had adequate knowledge of ways to prevent STDs or power to control the sexual encounter. What respondents have said seems to echo experts' accounts, suggesting that improvements in HIV-related knowledge contributes to individuals' practice of safe sex (see Chapter 3). Unprotected sex has been widely conceived as "inappropriate behaviour" in the context of commercial sexual encounter. Using protection has become a social norm, which seemingly affects women's work practice.

According to Goffman (1961), however, the traditional view, that individuals conform to social norms because of the operation of various social controls, is limited. He highlights the role of social interaction, and focuses on the “social control of everyday behaviour and interaction with others [which] is satisfied by a show of conformity with social norms” (Burns 1992, p.173). In his study of mental illness, Goffman (1961) demonstrates the ways in which individuals change their prior selves as a result of entering deviant careers, and eventually accept and internalise new, deviant-conceptions (see Herman-Kinney 2003, p.714).

Accounts given by sex workers in this study seem to suggest that women were aware of the HIV-related stigma attached to their working identities. Even though many of these women did not experience infection by STD and none identified themselves as HIV positive, they mentioned diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS when asked about occupational hazards. Narratives provided by Wing-tong (pp.199-200, above) suggest that women might attempt to construct themselves as “moral subjects” in their accounts. Flat-working women who had unprotected sex with their clients were criticised and their behaviour was equivalent to having “indiscriminate sexual intercourse” which was associated with “whore stigma” (see Chapter 9 for further discussion of women’s stigmatised identity). Echoing the findings of Rhodes and Cusick’s (2002) study of accounts of unprotected sex from HIV positive people and their sexual partners, most of the accounts in this study demonstrate that respondents tended to admit that unprotected sex was an inappropriate act in the context of commercial sex, and attempted to deny full responsibility. As a result in their accounts, specifically those concerning the occurrence of unprotected sex in the pre-AIDS era, respondents mostly explained their behaviour as an outcome of the lack of knowledge or agency. When sex workers described the occurrence of unprotected sex in the course of their work in the AIDS era, they did not attribute their behaviour to the lack of knowledge or agency. Rather, they attributed their behaviour to errors of risk calculation or incalculable risk. In several cases respondents may have had control over their sexual encounters (and therefore the use of

condoms was consistent), however, unprotected sex was typically the outcome of accidents, such as condom failure.

Nevertheless, reflexivity is visible in the respondents' accounts, in the sense that individuals challenged the concept of the "diseased body". These respondents associated sex work with HIV/STDs, but they did not see themselves as at risk of the disease. Some accounts appeared to *indirectly* challenge the orthodox conceptions of risk. For example, in some situations unprotected sex was seen to be a "rational" choice of sex workers, in the sense that they did not perceive that having unprotected sex with a specific client was necessarily risky (see the accounts given by Betty on p.197, and also the example of Wing-tong on pp.199-200). Most women in this study might not entirely agree with the orthodox conceptions of risk (which appear to be reflected in their practice). Yet, in their accounts, respondents apparently did not challenge the orthodox conception of unprotected sex. As noted above, social interaction plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's behaviour.

When an individual presents her/himself, s/he is likely to expect that others will think highly of her/him (Goffman 1959). S/he may express her/himself in a specific way in order to give others the impression which s/he expects them to have. If giving an account is considered as a means for presenting oneself as a "moral subject", as Goffman suggests, respondents are likely to highlight an adherence to social norms, specially, having protected sex with clients, in their accounts. Most respondents agreed that having unprotected sex with clients was risky. Given the context, it therefore comes as little surprise that respondents avoided describing their involvement in unprotected sex with clients, or rationalised their behaviour as the outcome of accidents. Also, respondents stressed that they had engaged in unprotected sex only with clients who they found to be trusted not to be infected with any STDs or HIV. Here, sex workers justified having unprotected sex in this context as "safe" by reasoning that the risk of infection was low.

As noted above and in previous chapter, it is evident in previous research, and in the findings in this study, that the prevalence of disease amongst sex workers in Hong Kong is low. In fact, using protection has become a social norm in the context of commercial sex. In contrast to the view that migrant sex workers are more likely to offer unprotected sex (see Chapter 3), accounts given by women in this study demonstrate that both local and migrant sex workers are aware of risk and disease prevention. In this research, the change of sex workers' perceptions of sexual health risk, and consequently the alternation of their behaviour, is not merely attributed to the consequences of improvements in knowledge. Rather, the sociological perspective of this study leads us to consider sex workers' emphasis on using protection in their accounts as a result of attempting to present themselves as "moral subjects"; a strategy to manage their stigmatised identity.

By considering sex workers' accounts of sexual health risk and their behaviour in the commercial sexual encounter, this chapter demonstrates that the meanings of unprotected sex among sex workers are ambiguous and may be contradictory to the orthodox conceptions of risk. As this will be revisited in the concluding chapter, the meaning of sexual health risk, as with the meanings of other types of occupational risk with sex work, are embedded in context. The next chapter turns to the subject of violence against sex workers.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I provide pseudonyms for the establishments involved in this study, as the way to treat the organisations mentioned in the text (see Chapter 5, Note 1), for the purpose of protecting the research participants' anonymity.

## Chapter 8

### Violence and Sex Work

Seeing prostitution as a form of male sexual violence enables researchers to hear and take seriously what prostituted women say about the damage they suffer, and throws light on what the consequences may be. It brings the john into view as the perpetrator, instead of just a man acting naturally.

(Jeffreys 1997/2008, p.275)

The core of the current radical feminist position is the assertion that sex work is “in and of itself violence against women” ... It is important to realise that “violence” in the radical feminist discourse does *not* mean the beatings, rapes and murders inflicted on sex workers. Instead the commodification of women’s bodies through charging for sexual acts or performances (e.g. pole dancing) is deemed the essential harm, the “violence” which damages women.

(Kinnell 2008, p.27–28)

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter 7 I documented flat-working women’s experiences of, and the ways in which they understood and managed sexual health hazards. Accounts given by the women suggested that, despite the low prevalence of STD or HIV/AIDS among sex workers in Hong Kong, women seemingly understood disease as a potential occupational hazard. The high awareness of the risk contributed to women’s consistent use of protection during the sexual encounter. Despite the impression that clients were not keen to use protection when they purchased sexual services, women in this study conceptualised condom use as a norm and believed that they could control the sexual encounter. Consequently, although women accounted for their fear of disease, they appeared not to identify themselves as at risk of disease.

In this chapter, the study turns to a discussion of violence against sex workers, another theme which emerges in accounts given by these women

of occupational hazards. As noted in Chapter 4, over the last two decades there has been an increasing interest in violence against sex workers. Empirical evidence suggests that sex workers are routinely at risk of client violence (Barnard 1993; Brooks-Gordon 2006; Church *et al.* 2001; Day 2007; Hart and Barnard 2003; Høigard 1992; Kinnell 2006; Sanders 2005a; Whittaker and Hart 1996). A link between victimisation and female sex workers has been established in these studies, which suggests that women involved in the sex industry are vulnerable to attack, physical assaults in particular, from the people whom they meet at work, including clients, partners, pimps, police and robbers. In previous studies, the main concern has been on the types of violence against workers or the level of harm done to women in violent acts. This chapter focuses on an aspect which has received less attention in the research on sex work to date – the ways in which flat-working women conceptualise violence against sex workers.

The chapter begins with a discussion about the understanding of violence. First, it explores how violence has been conceptualised in the existing literature about sex work. Second, it explains why the meaning and context of violence are crucial in understanding this type of occupational risk that might be faced by sex workers. Finally the chapter discusses the respondents' views of violence at work, which they raised in their accounts during the interviews.

### **Is sex work itself “violence against women”?**

In the light of its two epigraphs, Chapter 3 discussed the ways in which “violence” is conceptualised in the context of sex work by two major approaches. For commentators who adopt an anti-prostitution perspective, prostitution inevitably reinforces the cultural construction of gender roles in terms of male dominance and female submission. Moreover, these commentators essentially connect prostitution with sexism, oppression by men and female poverty (see Chapter 3, p.69, above), and therefore conceptualise it as a form of slavery (Barry 1996; Jeffreys 1997/2008; Pateman 1988; Sullivan 2007). Prostitution is understood by them as

violence because “in and of itself [it] is an abuse of a woman’s body” (Dworkin 1993, 1994), and therefore is a form of sexual abuse (Dworkin 1999/2004). They argue that prostitution is equivalent to sexual harassment (MacKinnon 1979, p. 59), and even (repeated) rape (Brownmiller 1975; Dworkin 1993, 1994; Parker 2004).

While anti-prostitution perspectives suggest that the commodification of women’s bodies denies women’s agency, some accounts given by women in this study seemingly challenge this idea. As introduced in Chapter 1, flat-working women in this study were independent workers who define their involvement in the business as voluntary (see also the discussion of “voluntary prostitution” in Chapter 3, p.73, above). Entering the sex business, like any other choice, is constructed. Drawing upon Brannen and Nilsen (2005), Scambler (2007, p.1092) argues that “structural forces such as class, command and gender become ‘invisible’” but all contribute to shape the choices of individuals. Nevertheless, individual workers’ agency should not be denied. As Scambler argues, there is agency even among women who are abducted or trafficked (“the cored”) and those who enter the sex business because of their family or peers in trade (“the destined”; *ibid*, see the discussion of “a typology of sex work careers” in Chapter 1, p.28).

For example, Fung said that her entering of the sex business could be described as no different from workers in a business, in the sense that she approached the manager of a nightclub after she saw the job advertisement in a newspaper. She went through the interview and then entered the business. After she became a flat-working woman, she commented that she had achieved a high level of control over her work in terms of working time:

For me ... It’s really free. Take me as an example – (after the interview) I’ll go back and start my work at 1(pm). In the advertisement, I’ve stated that (the flat opens at) 12 (noon) and closes at 11 (pm). However, how many girls stay (in their flats) from 12 to 11? Nope. Tonight I’ll have dinner with someone; tomorrow I may have a day off.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

As noted in Chapter 5 (see p.123), most of the flat-working women in Hong Kong posted advertisements about the sexual services offered. These advertisements usually give details of personal information (for example, age, nationality, height, measurements), pictures (some women choose not to show their faces), contact numbers, location and opening times. Moreover, pricing was also given alongside the range of services available. Services usually included:

BM	Body massage (the sex worker uses her breasts or genitals to massage the client's body)
<i>Cyun-tou</i> (全套), translated as "whole package" on the adult entertainment websites	Generally means sexual intercourse with oral sex and hand relief
DUP	Massage
HJ	Handjob or hand relief
ML	Making love

Table 8.1 General services available from flat-working women

As noted in Chapter 7, in contrast to the popular perception that sex workers offer "indiscriminate sexual intercourse" (Pheterson 1993; see p.181, above) most women in this study did not offer unprotected sex. Pheterson further argues that "indiscrimination" is a myth of prostitution, in the sense that a woman being available for hire does not necessarily mean that she is available to provide any sexual service to any man:

In practice, the sexual activity, like the fees, is open to negotiation. The whore makes an offer or the customer makes a request; she is the one who must agree to the final terms.

Pheterson (1993, p.41)

Accounts given by flat-working women demonstrate that women could choose what types of services to offer and what prices to charge. The



services offered were largely a matter of personal preference. Most workers provided the services listed in the table above, but some might also provide “special services” such as anal sex, kinky sex (referring to sadomasochistic (S/M) sex, such as spanking or whipping, fetishes, practices involving sex toys or other rituals). The services provided in each sexual encounter might be different, the result of negotiation with a different client at the beginning of the sexual transaction. As Fung said:

The advertisement listed what services I offered and also the prices. Like many other workers, I charged HK\$330 or HK\$350 (approximately £27 or £29) for “whole package” (see p.216), and a client should bring with him this amount of money when he approached me. He should know what services I provided. Say on the list I did not say that I offer *ngaan-se* (顏射)<sup>1</sup>. If a client requests this service, I’ll see if I want to do so. If I think it’s OK, I’ll tell him how much I charge for that. As this service is not on the list, of course I’ll ask for extra money.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

In contrast to the ways in which anti-prostitution perspectives understand prostitution, the accounts given by women seemingly suggest that the commodification of women’s bodies does not necessarily mean the denial of their agency. The example of Fung, along with other flat-working women, demonstrates that most women in this study had full control of the services provided. Workers commodified their bodies, offered them for hire and offered sexual services for money. In the whole process, these women took an active role, in the sense that they *chose* which types of service were offered and which parts of the body were available for hire (this issue is returned to later in this chapter).

The accounts given by the women suggest that their control was sophisticated. Apart from services and prices, the transaction usually has a procedure for the client to follow. When clients purchase sex from sex workers, they are “buying into a set of expectations and practices that are cogent with similar commercial transactions available throughout the regional, local and even international market” (Sanders 2005a, p.161). In fact, it is

evident in accounts given by flat-working women that a “strictly scripted” routine (Murphy 2003, cited in Sanders 2005) was to be found in the transaction. The client and the flat-working woman often negotiated the services and fees at the entrance of the working flat (see Chapter 9, the example of Mo-mo). In most situations, once the worker agreed to offer the services, she would lead the client into the flat and ask for money in advance. Then she would show him where to get undressed and leave his belongings, and would take him to the bathroom and help him shower. Then the sex worker would provide the services accordingly. If the client could not finish within the time negotiated, the worker would ask if he needed extra time (for an extra fee). After finishing, the worker might help the client get dressed and see him off. As is further discussed in the sections below, the procedure was a mechanism for risk management. As clients become socialised into observing consistent rules, their activities are likely to be limited to the “strictly scripted” routine constructed by the flat-working woman. By doing so sex workers might expect that they could achieve a high level of control. However, the level of control was also affected by other factors. As is further discussed in the following sections, working alone was seen as likely to increase women’s vulnerability.

Adopting a dominant role over the sexual encounter is crucial in terms of minimising the risk of violence that they face, as demonstrated in the following sections. While Fung’s account demonstrates the agency of the sex worker in terms of her ability to control the business, Rita’s account may challenge the idea suggested by the anti-prostitution perspectives that prostitution reinforces the cultural construction of gender roles in terms of male dominance and female submission. Rita offered S/M sex to her clients, including spanking, whipping, bondage and discipline. Most of the time, Rita adopted the dominant role of “master”, or in her words “the queen”, while her clients adopted the submissive role of “slave”. During the transaction, most of the time Rita was the one who beat, whipped or tidied up the client. Being a “master”, in some situations she “punished” her “slaves” (i.e. the clients) by asking them to do housework for her:

Some clients came to me and asked me to treat them like slaves. Some would tell me [exactly] what they wanted, but some just wanted me to punish them. There was one client that was so funny (she laughed). I was so busy and the flat was very messy. It so happened he came to visit me. I didn't ask what he wanted but told him, "Great! It's good to have you here today. Mama is so tired. Be a good boy and clean the bathroom for me. Work hard and make sure that you clean it all through. Otherwise you'll have to stay here overnight!"

(Rita, Hong Kong)

According to her account, Rita not only adopted a dominant role when she performed S/M sex with her clients, but also in other sexual encounters with clients. For example, in her accounts about offering hand relief for a client, she said:

The session was supposed to finish once a client shot his load (ejaculated semen). On some occasions it took a very long time to get it done, which was very tiring. When it was almost there, I told the client, "Well, why don't you go to the bathroom and get it done by yourself?"

(Rita, Hong Kong)

The account noted above suggested that, apart from specifying the type of services offered, sex workers also attempted to regulate the sexual encounter by careful time management. The time taken by the transaction, like other rules, is scripted in the sexual encounter. Like asking for extra services, asking for extra time mostly involves clients in extra fees. For sex workers, the meaning of time management may go beyond simply maximizing income (Brewis & Linstead 2000). Most importantly, they can achieve dominance through regulating the experience for the client; as in the example of Rita, through time management the worker effectively controls the sexual encounter and so she can ensure that the session finishes on time. It was the worker who dominated the transaction because when the transaction finished was not defined by the client (i.e. by the point he had reached in the sex act) but by the worker (i.e. by the point when the negotiated time had elapsed).

The extraordinarily high level of control over the sexual encounter that Rita achieved may be better understood in the context of the characteristics of her clientele as a whole. Their (sexual) preferences for being “submissive” may largely contribute to Rita’s assumption of dominance over the sexual encounter. Nevertheless, Rita’s example, along with other workers’ accounts of their experiences, demonstrates that the prostitution-client encounter may not be exclusively understandable in terms of “male dominance and female submission”. In other words, the commodification of women’s bodies does not necessarily mirror or reinforce the socially constructed gender role.

In sum, anti-prostitution perspectives conceptualise prostitution as “in and of itself ... an abuse of a woman’s body” (Dworkin 1993/1994). Women’s agency is deemed to be denied in such commodification. Prostitution is defined as a social institution which is an essential part of patriarchal capitalism. By using the concept of the “sexual contract”, for example, Pateman (1988) argues the institution of prostitution ensures that men can get access to a woman’s body in a way which normalises men’s use of women’s bodies for the sake of the satisfaction of their “natural” urges. On the basis of this understanding, for Pateman, sex workers within the structure of the institution of prostitution are inevitably subject to clients (see also Chapter 3). In other words, anti-prostitution perspectives conceptualise commercial sex in terms of the framework of “male (client) dominance and female (sex worker) submission”. The practice is deemed to be harmful, a kind of “violence” which damages women.

Nevertheless, the accounts given by flat-working women suggest that the lack of choice and the denial of agency are not necessarily inherent in the commodification of women’s bodies. These accounts suggest that such sex workers are subjects with agency who adopt different strategies to control the sexual encounter. When clients purchase sexual services, they are expected to follow the “strictly scripted” routine developed by sex workers (see p.218, above). Consequently, their expectations and practices are largely shaped by sex workers. In this sense, it is the worker, rather than the client, who dominates the sexual encounter.

As discussed in Chapter 4, anti-prostitution perspectives argue that, in commercial sex, women are objectified by synecdoche, as a part of their body, such as “the mouth” or “the vagina” and are penetrated by many men with “a penis”, sometimes “hands”, sometimes “objects” (Dworkin 1993; 1994). The accounts given by the sex workers demonstrate that, as subjects with agency, they could choose which parts of body and the ways in which they are for hire. A sex worker may offer to hire her face for *ngaan-se* (see Note 1). A sex worker who prefers not to offer to hire her vagina for penetrative sex, like those who worked from the *fei-gei-coeng* (see Chapter 7, p.178), may offer to hire her hands for massage and hand relief. As the commentator who held a pro-sex work perspective points out, “all work involves selling some parts of one’s body” (Rosta, cited in Pheterson 1989a, p.146; also see p.58, above). Sex workers’ experience is parallel to other workers’, in the sense that like any other workers living in a capitalist economy, flat-working women choose to offer some parts of their body for financial reward. Like any other workers, women make their choice of what to and how to sell, with their own constraints. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the lack of choice or agency is inherent not in prostitution, but in “abuse, poverty, poor working conditions, inexperience, or despair” (Rosta, cited in Pheterson 1989a, p.146).

The limitation of the perspective which sees sex work itself as violence against women is that it denies the agency of sex workers. While anti-prostitution perspectives emphasise the ways in which the structure of the institution of prostitution enables (male) clients to exploit female sex workers, the experiences of individual flat based sex workers suggest that such women manage to control the sexual encounter with their clients by “various stratagems and tricks of the trade” (Pateman 1988) in the micro-social contexts of sex work.

As Kinnell (2006) remarks, that “sex work itself is violence” fails to differentiate *consensual acts* from violent behaviour which causes damage to sex workers. When prostitution itself is considered as violence, the discussion focuses mainly on eradicating prostitution. As a result, little

attempt has been made to understand the ways in which sex workers conceptualise and manage violence as an occupational hazard in the course of their work, not least indoor sex workers (Brewis & Linstead 2000; Sanders 2005, 2006; Whitaker & Hart 1996; see also Chapter 4, p.95, above). In this chapter, therefore, the primary focus is to answer these questions: how do flat-working women understand the violence which they experience in the course of their work? Consequently, how do they respond to and manage the risk?

### **Conceptualising violence**

In the following analysis, I draw on findings from my study to illustrate how indoor sex workers accounted for their experiences of violence and the meanings which it holds for them. I start by discussing the approach used to explore the sex workers' own definitions and perceptions of the meanings and effects of violence and go on to consider the problems of categorising the data.

#### ***Violent behaviour as a situated transaction***

Individuals interpret violence from various perspectives, and they define or conceptualise violence subjectively. In other words, their perceptions of what counts as violent may not resemble common understandings or legalistic definitions of violence. In order to avoid discounting individuals' experiences, I drew upon a framework for understanding violence which was developed in previous studies (Blok 2001; Burman *et al* 2003; Stanko 2003) to avoid pre-defining what kind of behaviour or acts should be identified as "violent". Burman *et al* (2003) emphasise the importance of context, and argue that the meanings of a violent act or an incident are influenced by interactional, contextual, cultural and social situational factors. The meanings of violence should not be divorced from contextual factors (see Elston *et al*. 2002; Gabe *et al*. 2001). Similarly Stanko (2003, p. 11) highlights the significant role of context in understanding violence, and then argues that there are four key elements to be considered in examining the meanings of violence: 1) the act

itself; 2) the relationship of the participants to each other; 3) the location of the act; and 4) the outcome or the resultant damage.

Some researchers understand violent events as “situated transactions” (c.f. Luckenbill 1977; Swatt & He 2006). This situational or transactional approach is derived from Goffman’s work on human interaction. Goffman (1959, p.26) defines (face-to-face) interaction as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence”. Viewing violent incidents as interactions implies that the meanings of violence are created through the interaction between individuals. It suggests that transactions resulting in violent incidents involve the joint contribution of participants, which moves beyond the “offenders vs. victims” model and may allow us to challenge the widespread argument that all clients of sex workers are (potentially) violent. The advantages of this approach are that it does not attempt to fit sex workers’ experiences into familiar categories of violence. Approaching violence against sex workers from a situational perspective allows more space in which to understand the complexities of violence.

### ***Categorising types of violence***

Within the context of sex work, some researchers observe that categorising types of violence presents problems (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2004). In the existing literature, individuals’ experiences of violence are frequently classified into various types of violent acts/behaviour. As indicated above, the way in which individuals understand violence is subjective and respondents may perceive violent behaviours differently. When they account for violent incidents, they may not identify them as violent (Elston *et al.* 2002). Moreover, to sex workers the meanings of violence are always contextual. They do not necessarily accept the existing definitions. For instance, some women perceived being robbed at knifepoint as robbery, but it also involved threats of physical violence. It is problematic if the behaviour is simply categorized as robbery. This study aims to explore how sex workers account for violence and their *own* definitions and perceptions of violence. A

classification which is based on *violent acts* may not be able to provide an accurate picture on women's experiences.

Context again is important here. Accounts given by sex workers suggested that the interactions between the sex worker, clients or predators involved in violent incidents had a significant impact on the meanings of the violence to sex workers. Two broad categories of violence were identified: predatory violence and client violence.

### **The meanings of violence to sex workers**

The following section will explore the meanings of violence to flat-working women by considering what the violent behaviour was, the relationship and the interactions between the participants, the situation in which the incidents happened, and the damaging effect or impact on respondents.

#### ***Predatory violence: robbery***

Most sex workers stated that being robbed was their main concern. Because most flat-working women received only money as the financial reward for offering sexual services, it was generally conceived that flat-working women kept a large amount of money with them. As Mei commented:

It's undoubtedly dangerous. They (perpetrators) know that we usually stay in the flat for the whole day by ourselves, which means we must have kept the money with us.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

Some women living in their working premises viewed themselves as particularly at risk of predatory violence. For example, Helen had been robbed twice at her working premises/home:

It's true that robberies happened quite often at that time. All my Tudor (watches) and diamond rings had been taken by people. It was because I worked and lived in the same place.

(Helen, Hong Kong)



Working alone also made some women aware of their vulnerability. For example, Wing-tong explained:

This is the only (working) premises in this building. My neighbours know what I'm doing but they don't like it. I'm not sure whether they'll come and help if something happens to me.

(Wing-tong, Mainland China)

Since sex work is stigmatised and people are frequently opposed to prostitution, respondents presumed that they were unlikely to get help from their neighbours. The feeling of being isolated also fuelled the fear of being robbed. Gender plays a crucial role here. Accounts of violence against women are frequently framed by a discourse of gender. Men are considered to be physically strong, aggressive and potentially violent. In contrast, women are commonly perceived as comparatively weak and passive. Consequently, when respondents accounted for robbery, they frequently adopted a passive victim role. For example, when Wing-tong talked about break-ins at other premises, she said:

Of course I do worry about myself, but what can I do?

(Wing-tong, Mainland China)

Likewise, Xiu-hung (from China) perceived herself as vulnerable to robbery: "I did think about it. If I am robbed, there is nothing I can do. It's due to bad luck."

(Xiu-hung, Mainland China)

Apparently sex workers "normalised" violence and suggested that being robbed at work was inevitable. In fact, women did adopt different strategies to minimise the risk that they face. But if the violent incidents happened and they had to face the perpetrator on their own, women *actively* adopted a passive victim role to avoid conflicts with perpetrators, since this might result in physical damage.

Among the respondents, 18 women had experienced robbery. The degree of violence facing them varied. Women had usually been threatened with

weapons (in most cases, they had been robbed at knifepoint) or other forms of physical violence. Two respondents reported that they suffered physical damage, having been punched, slapped, beaten or tied up. Although women generally agreed that robbery was a risk, many of them did not see that the act itself was necessarily dangerous. For example, Ah-Lai (Hong Kong) suggested that “the most dangerous thing is that you resist. You just give him what he wants. You just give it to him and you’ll be OK”. For these respondents, how women interacted with the perpetrators was important, since the interaction had a significant impact on their experiences of danger and safety.

Because of the contextual and social situational factors discussed above, sex workers perceived robbery as an occupational risk. For most of them, this type of violence was apparently acceptable. However, such acceptance may not come from a “denial of the harm of this work”, as Stanko (2003) argues. Women were aware of the risk of harm from robbery, and they frequently linked this to physical harm. They found this type of violence acceptable because they considered that they could manage the risk (i.e. avoiding being physically damaged) through a seemingly passive strategy (avoiding conflicts and “just [giving the thief] what he wants”).

A consistent theme emerging from sex workers’ accounts was that robbery was an ever-present risk. Although nearly half the respondents had not experienced robbery, they still perceived that they could be victims. For most of the respondents, then, robbery was a risk due to the characteristics of their job. The risk was inherent in the transaction because they had to receive strangers (who were potentially dangerous), frequently worked alone and were likely to be keeping a certain amount of money in their flat.

### ***Client violence***

In contrast to studies which claim that clients “are responsible for most of the violence against prostitutes” (Høigard & Finstad 1992, p.57), some respondents apparently did not see their clients as violent or dangerous:

I think clients are unlikely to hurt girls. All they want is to have fun. What's the point to hurt girls and get themselves into trouble?

(Wing-tong, Mainland China)

It's very unlikely that clients attack girls....If they're not happy with the girl or the service, they'll just go and not go to see the girl again. There're so many girls out there and they can always pick a new girl. Why do they bother?

(Xiu-qing, Mainland China)

My clients are quite gentle and polite. I don't know. Maybe because the majority of them are white collar. Yeah. I have clients who are doctors and lawyers. They are nice people and I don't think they'll beat me up or kill me.

(Ying, Hong Kong)

Clients do not bully every girl...they bully but it depends on the girl. It really depends on the girl. If you are...I mean they can tell. They picked on those who are not tough and bully them.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

The quotations above suggest that respondents tend to associate client violence with physical assaults. When they talked about this type of violence, the acts which they mentioned (such as "hurt", "attack", "beating", "killing") were mainly physical actions. As later sections further elaborate, this may be explained by the fact that the connotation of the term *bao-li* (暴力, means violence) in the Chinese context is narrowly restricted to physical assault. When women accounted for "client violence", they tended to interpret this type of violence as some form of physical attack. In a study of violence against caring professionals in the UK (including police officers, medical workers and social workers) who frequently interact with strangers at work, Waddington (2006) finds that physical assault is uncommon among these professionals. The findings of my research suggest a similar picture: physical assault was uncommon among respondents, only two out of thirty women reporting that they had had experiences of this kind. Not surprisingly, in their accounts the majority of respondents did not perceive themselves to be at risk of (physical) violence from clients.

As indicated in the section above, this chapter applies the concept of “situated transaction” to the case of violence against sex workers. It is argued that violent incidents are jointly contributed by the parties to it, in this case the sex worker and the client. The image of the client produced in popular culture, media representations and academic analysis, is of them being violent, dangerous and exploitative (Sanders 2008). Yet the accounts given by these flat-working women suggest that in their eyes clients were not abusive but “gentle and polite”. Therefore, it was unlikely that clients deliberately attacked sex workers. If a violent incident happened, interestingly, respondents seemingly tended to presume that the sex worker should be the one who bore the responsibility.

This may be explained by the correlations between class and violence which are well established in society. It assumes that working-class men are more likely to commit violent acts than professionals. For example, Ying (see p. 229, above) mentioned that her clients were ‘nice’ because most of them were professionals. Obviously in her account she tried to create a link between clients’ attitude and their careers. In theory clients could come from different social classes. In reality, however, women in this sector of the sex industry usually have clients with similar backgrounds. In the case of flat-working women, most of their clients are middle class, professional or white collar. Due to the general perception of these people, some respondents might therefore perceive that their clients were non-violent, although, as shown in the following sections, some women’s experiences contradicted and challenged this stereotypical perception.

Moreover, respondents also suggested that sex workers are more likely to be bullied by clients if they appear new to prostitution, weak, or unable to control the sexual encounter. Respondents use the term “being bullied” to refer to workers being forced to do something against their will by clients, such as engaging in unwanted sexual acts, or receiving less money than was negotiated.

I used to have a *ze-mui* (姊妹, sister)<sup>2</sup> who always complained about her clients. They always made her cry.... She complained that clients inserted (their fingers) in her part down there which was extremely painful; they grabbed her tits hard. Er...also...they kept trying to kiss her. She always cried when she talked to us. She said that she didn't understand why clients always picked on her.

(Lily, Mainland China)

Like most other sex workers, Maggie insisted that only a few clients used violence. As a flat-working woman who had worked in the industry for decades, she did not consider that her working environment was dangerous or that she was at risk of being attacked. She had heard that some women had been bullied by clients, but explained that women's ethnicity contributed significantly to their experiences of being bullied:

I think in general clients do not dare to bully we *to-dei* (陀地, local female sex workers). Most of them know that we have been in the business for years, and it's not easy to take advantage of us. The clients only do this to *bak-gu* (北姑, Chinese female sex workers)... Chinese girls may know nothing (about working rules) when they are new. Some of them do not have (ID) cards. So the clients take the chance to do whatever they want. They know that these girls will not go to the police. But if *to-dei* get attacked or something goes wrong, they will certainly call the police. We're legal (residents). We aren't afraid of cops. Clients may bully *bak-gu*, but they dare not to bully *to-dei*.

(Maggie, Hong Kong)

The accounts given by sex workers however, seemingly offer no evidence to support Maggie's claim. Both the local and migrant sex workers in this study experienced robbery. As noted above, migrant sex workers from China did not see themselves as particularly at risk compared with *to-dei*. Rather, like many local sex workers, they attributed their experiences to their working environment (always working alone and seeing strangers).

### **Client violence as physical assault**

Although most respondents did not perceive themselves as vulnerable to (physical) violence from clients, rumours of violent incidents which happened to their colleagues often made them aware that they themselves could be attacked. But, as we will see in the accounts cited in the following section, respondents generally viewed those violent clients as exceptional cases. In this study, two respondents reported that they experienced client violence, having been physically attacked during a transaction.

L: ...Once I was punched by a client.

OC: What exactly did he do to you?

L: He first punched me in my face, and then my chest.

OC Why did he do this?

L: At that time...he came to see me. He was in a bad mood. He asked me to do something I don't like. He frenziedly licked me. Licking me all over my body with (his) tongue. I don't like it. I deliberately showed an angry face. Then he punched me in the face...He punched me. Wow! How painful it was! He punched me once and it really hurt. I did my best to bear it. He was such a bastard. Despite this, I had to pretend that nothing happened. If he made a complaint, I would not get the money!

(Ling, Hong Kong)

Ling had worked in different sectors of the sex industry, and this incident happened when she was working through an agency as a call girl. Usually the client pays a fee to the agency, and the worker receives a percentage of this fee. She explained that if the agency received a complaint from the client, they would always put the blame on the sex workers. The agency might even refuse to give the money to the worker, to punish her for her failure to deliver satisfactory services to the client. Therefore, Ling did not report this to the agency or ask the client to leave, but stayed and continued to "get the job done". Ling described the incident as "scary", but she did not see herself to be in danger or needing to take extra precautions to ensure her safety: "I don't think it's dangerous to stay with clients. So far over the

years I was only beaten once. It so happened that I was unlucky. I don't think it'll happen to me again."

Natalie experienced a severe physical assault a few weeks after I interviewed her. We had planned a half-day trip to Shenzhen<sup>3</sup> on a Friday. Natalie is a frequent traveller to Shenzhen. She made the plan after she learned that I had not been there for years. In the afternoon of that day, however, she phoned me and said that she wanted to cancel the evening trip. As my fieldwork diary recalls:

Today when I did some research in the library, I received a call from Natalie. At first I did not want to take the call, but I rushed to the washroom and answered the phone when I saw her number. Her voice was so soft that I could barely hear her. She said, "I think I can't go to Shenzhen this evening. Can we go another time?" I said that it was fine with me if she could not make it. She then told me that she was in the hospital, as she had been beaten by a client at work. I was extremely shocked, and asked if she needed a companion. She said that she would have tests shortly and preferred to be alone, as she did not want anyone to see her face.

I asked her what happened. She told me that a client visited her in the afternoon. At first she did not want to let him in, as she wanted to finish the day early. But she changed her mind after she saw his face on the CCTV. She recognized that the man had visited her one or two times before. She did not want to lose a potentially regular client, and so she let him in.

Natalie said that he looked normal at the beginning, and everything went well. After having sex, she left the bed and prepared to get dressed. When she bent down to pick up a towel which had dropped on the floor, the man suddenly punched her in the back of her head. She felt dizzy and fell on the floor. The man kicked her, made her stand up and pushed her to the bed. He held her neck and strangled her. She felt that he intended to strangle her to death. Natalie struggled, tried to resist and screamed out for help. The man covered her mouth and punched her in the face. Natalie rolled and fell off the bed. She was trapped in a gap between the bed and the wall. The man punched her and wanted to strangle her again. Natalie begged him to stop and reminded him that he would be in great trouble if he killed her. She

begged him to leave her, and promised that she would not report him to the police...Before he left the flat, he warned Natalie not to go to the police.

Natalie said that she felt panic and was exhausted. She wanted to leave the gap but she lay there for about half an hour before she could do so. After she made sure that the man had gone, she called the police. She did not want to stay in the flat alone. She went to the working-flat next door, but no one answered the door. She said that she was scared when she was waiting for the police. She worried that the man would return to the flat. Later some police officers came to the flat and took her to the hospital.

During the conversation, Natalie repeated that she was very unlucky – she guessed that the girl working from that flat had gone to China with her boyfriend, and therefore was not working this morning. She thought she might have had help from the girl if she had been there. She also suspected that the man had planned to attack this other girl, but changed his mind when he found she was not there...//...Natalie was very upset....I asked again if she wanted me to go to the hospital. I told her that I could bring some food to her if she wanted. She said that there were bruises on her face, and she did not want anyone to see her. She then told me that she had got to go. I asked her to ring me anytime if she needed help.

Natalie worked from the rented flat for nearly six years. A few years before she had been attacked and robbed by a client; she was beaten by the robber because he could not find much cash on the premises. Natalie reported this to the police, and stopped working for a week. She was anxious and felt insecure about staying in the flat, and so she worked from her friend's rented flat downtown. But Natalie found that her income dropped significantly from the fall in the number of clients. She then moved back to her rented flat. In order to increase her personal safety, Natalie installed CCTV at the entrance to monitor potential clients and she checked the genuineness of clients with great care. For her, the working environment was safe once she perceived that her personal safety was protected by technology and the screening strategies that she adopted.

I talked to Natalie two weeks after she was physically attacked. She told me that she had had to wait until the bruises faded before she could “do



business” again, and so she rested for ten days. I asked if she would move to another flat but she said that she would stay where she was. After she had been robbed or attacked twice in the same flat, Natalie had a degree of concern about her personal safety. However, she did not perceive herself to be “at risk” in relation to her position as a sex worker or the working environment, but tended to attribute these experiences to “bad luck”.

### **“Scary stories” about (physical) client violence**

While most of the respondents did not have direct experiences of physical violence, they often said that they knew other women who had been exposed to violence and had some “scary stories” to tell:

I haven’t encountered violent clients.... I heard that a girl has been punched by a client, but I think it’s just an exceptional case. I think the guy was mental...Most clients are normal. Normal people do not attack others without reason, do they?

(Ying, Hong Kong).

I’ve never been attacked by clients. But my friend told me that her friend had been slapped by a client. After they finished, the guy suddenly slapped her twice, pushed her back to the bed, grabbed her cell phone and went away. He slapped her so hard that the girl felt dizzy and couldn’t do anything.

(Crystal, Mainland China)

A girl working in Lee Garden Road was stabbed to death by a thief...a mental guy....It’s already one or two years.... A long time ago a girl, I dunno how, was killed in Fu-si,<sup>4</sup> and (her body) was squeezed into a washing machine.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

As indicated in the previous section, respondents often did not identify themselves as at risk of client violence, in particular, those who had never been exposed to any form of violence. They viewed most of the clients as peaceful and therefore unlikely to attack sex workers. Respondents were aware that some women had been physically attacked by their clients, but they tended to identify these as exceptional cases and perceived that those

who used violence were not “normal”, but “mad men” and “sick guys”. For these women, client violence is not routine but an exceptional experience, as will be discussed in detail below. In this section I explore the meanings of these “scary stories” by applying the sociological concept of the “atrocious story” to them.

The “scary stories” told by the respondents can be interpreted from two standpoints: within the context of 1) the researcher–respondent relationship and 2) the sex worker-client relationship.

In previous section I discussed Goffman’s (1959) concept of interaction. When a researcher conducts an interview with a respondent, obviously it is a face-to-face interaction. According to Goffman, individuals are likely to act differently when they are aware of the physical presence of others:

Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself [*sic*] in a given way solely in order to give the kind impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain.

*(ibid, p.17)*

If we apply the concept of the “atrocious story” to investigate the “scary stories”, we could argue that these respondents used stories to illustrate their perceptions of client violence. Simultaneously they presented themselves in the interview/interaction and attempted to give some specific kinds of impression to the interviewer by telling stories of a specific kind.

According to Dingwall (1977), the term “atrocious story” was first used by Stimson and Webb (1975) in their work on patients’ talk about doctors:

Stimson and Webb argue that atrocious stories can be seen as devices whereby patients retrospectively interpret their encounters with the medical profession, negotiate norms for the behaviour of patients and doctors, and redress the imbalance in the relationship between doctors and patients by voicing complaints, albeit at a safe distance.

*(Dingwall 1977, p.375)*

Bury and Elston (1997, p. 94) point out that the main contribution of Stimson and Webb's study was to provide a new perspective from which to investigate the doctor-patient relationship (assumed to be an active/passive relationship). Patients could gain "countervailing power" through telling "atrocious stories", which enabled them to be "involved" in the consultation. In his work on the relationships between health visitors and doctors, Dingwall (1977) argues that the former are in an insecure position as their status as professionals is arguable. Although both health visitors and other health or medical workers (such as doctors, nurses and social workers) are professionals and they supposedly share the same status, in practice the former is excluded from the category of professions. In order to show that they are competent members of the health profession, health visitors exchange atrocious stories about other professionals with their colleagues, in order to maintain the boundary of their work.

The concept of "atrocious story" can perhaps be applied in order to understand the function of sex workers in telling atrocious stories about clients. Telling "scary stories" seemingly helped the women to present themselves as competent sex workers who were able to control the sexual encounter with clients. As sex work is widely recognised as a risky business and women are presumably vulnerable to client violence, being involved in sex work can be viewed as a risky behaviour. In this context, sex workers can be seen as "taking risks" and others may see them as irrational. During the interview, respondents are likely to present themselves as "rational" by demonstrating that they are able to manage the risk.

Sex workers usually adopted various working practices. They used them to protect themselves from violence and set up the boundaries between themselves and clients. During the sexual encounter, clients were supposed to follow the rules given by sex workers, including what sexual activities they could engage in, what fee to pay, which parts of the premises they could enter, and so on. Power relationships were involved in these "scary" (atrocious) stories: when sex workers blamed clients for violating the rules of the transaction, it implied that women were the ones who had the power to frame

what should be done and what activities counted as correct in the transaction. In other words, telling “scary” stories allowed sex workers to be actively involved in the encounter. Moreover, they could also present themselves as competent sex workers who were involved in (controlling) the sexual encounter by telling the scary stories to the researcher during the interviews. A prominent theme in the three “scary stories” cited above was the “madness” of perpetrators (“I think the guy was *mental*”; “A girl...was stabbed to death by ...a *mental* guy”). For them, only those who were “bad” (see the discussion in the next section) or “mad” would attack sex workers. Interestingly, another similarity is found between the medical professionals and sex workers in terms of the typology of violent patients or clients. In a study on work-related violence against doctors (Elston 2002 *et al.*), it was found that doctors tend to give a medicalised interpretation when they talked about violent incidents. They typified the potential or actual perpetrators of violence as people suffering from mental disorders, and those with substance dependency or addiction problems. Doctors also distinguished the (mentally) ill from the bad, and tended to have a higher tolerance for the former.

In contrast to doctors who gave a medicalised interpretation when they accounted for work-related violence (Elston *et al.* 2002), in their scary stories sex workers used the term “mental” loosely to describe clients who were different from “normal” clients, in the sense that the latter had seemingly lost control during the sexual encounter (and therefore failed to follow the rules given by sex workers). Nevertheless, the respondents might not have genuinely thought that these clients were suffering from mental illness. In other words, women attributed violent incidents to perpetrators’ “mental illness”, rather than to their own failure to control the sexual encounter.

### **“*Seoi-haak* /Bad clients” or perpetrators of the physical violence?**

In spite of women saying that they did not have any direct experience of violence, during the initial interviews I however noticed that they often mentioned the encounter with *seoi-haak* (衰客, means bad clients). In later

interviews, I modified the questions and deliberately avoided using the term *bao-li* (means violence) during the interviews. Rather, I asked the respondents to tell me their experiences with *seoi-haak*. In women's accounts of their experiences with *seoi-haak*, I identified various themes related to non-physical violence. Asking respondents to describe their experiences with *seoi-haak* implies that in the interviews I adopted a broader definition of violence, which contributed to uncovering a greater amount of violence (Gabe *et al.* 2001; Smiths 1994).

As indicated above, respondents used the terms "mental (illness)", "mad men" and "sick guys" to describe those who were different from "normal" clients and who refused to follow the rules of the sexual encounter. In this context, therefore, women used the term "mental (illness)" to describe those clients who seemed to them irrational. What these clients did may also have resulted in (physical or psychological) damage. Nevertheless, respondents apparently distinguished these clients from *seoi-haak*/bad clients because for them the former did not cause the damage intentionally. In contrast, bad clients deliberately engaged in violent behaviour, and sought intentionally (physically and/or psychologically) to harm women.

Rita, for example, remarked that clients were rarely violent, but women "have *seoi-haak*/bad clients when they have bad luck". She gave a typology when I asked how those clients behave during the sexual encounter. She said that bad clients are "rude, take every chance to take advantage of girls", and "don't respect girls", "don't consider girls' feelings" and "don't treat girls as human beings". Likewise, Lisa said that some clients "think that they can do whatever they like to girls simply because they have money", and intentionally violate the rules set by workers during the encounter, as they deem "girls not to care as they sell (sex) anyway".

### **Non-consensual sexual acts?**

As noted above, sex workers are widely conceived as being available for indiscriminate sexual intercourse (Pheterson 1993; see Chapter 4, above).

Some clients may deem that they are entitled to gain access to the whole body of the sex worker, despite workers clearly indicating that certain body parts or sexual acts are excluded.

I told the guy that I only do normal (sex) beforehand....He was at my back, and used his thing to rub my asshole. I yelled, "Hey, what the hell are you doing?" I knew that he wanted to do anal, and did this to see how I'd react. I asked him to stop, but he just kept rubbing. I struggled to turn around, sat on the bed and told him that I would rather give him back the money if he kept doing this to me (Anne, Mainland China).

Some clients, although you refused to do kissing with them, they just did it to you. I mean they kissed (you). Their saliva made me worry....Some people are bastards. They grabbed you if you refused to let them kiss you. (Lily, Mainland China)

Apart from being forced to engage in unwanted acts, in women's accounts taking off or damaging the condom deliberately during the sexual encounter is widely considered "bad behaviour" in the context of commercial sex, although only 3 respondents of this study reported that they had related experiences.

In this study, most respondents did not offer indiscriminate sexual services, but created a boundary between public and private body zones. For example, for Anne and Lily, while certain body parts such as the vagina and breasts are commodified, access is denied for others including the anus and lips/mouth. Even though clients gain the right to use certain parts of the woman's body in the transaction, they are expected to follow the rules laid down by the worker. For instance, Lily's colleague was upset when a client violated the rule of the transaction. The woman offered to hire her vagina, but it was exclusively used for sexual intercourse. Likewise, for Crystal her breasts were identified as public body zones. They were available for access, but not without limitations:

Once a client savagely grabbed here (she pointed to her breast). I said that it's painful and asked him to be gentle. He stopped, but did it again later. It

was really painful and I almost cried. I told him to stop but he didn't listen to me. After we finished, he left me an extra HK\$20 (£1.30). I was very angry. I threw the money back at him. "Don't come here again," I said. "How much do you think the money is? It's only HK\$20! You think you can do whatever you want simply because you have money? Go! I don't want to see you again!" The client left without taking the money back. I was so angry that I slammed the door. I still felt the pain after a couple of hours. A few days later the client showed up again but I didn't let him in.

(Crystal, Mainland China)

In summary, sex workers offer to hire certain parts of the body and provide specific sexual service for monetary and/or material favours. Like other commercial transactions, services provided by workers are always subject to terms and conditions. When clients use the service, they are supposed to be bound by the terms and conditions. Kinnell (2006, p.142) argues that "commercial sex can be consensual or non-consensual; if the latter, it is a crime of violence". In her view, if women are forced to perform unwanted acts, it should be identified as a crime of violence. This issue will be further discussed in the next section.

### **"Min-fai-caan" (免費餐): Free Meal**

In this study, eight interviewees related *seoi-haak* (bad clients) to those who intended to get a *min-fai-caan*, which literally means "having a free meal". At the start of each commercial sexual encounter, women attempt to clarify clearly what services they offer and the price when they negotiate with the client. Nevertheless, clients may take advantage of sex workers by paying less than the negotiated amount if the latter were not "professional" and it appeared that they could not control the transaction.

I met my first client at my friend's place. She was working (as a sex worker) at that time. She said that doing this could definitely make good money. I could get HK\$300 (about £24) from each client, and could earn at least HK\$3000 (about £247) per week, she said. It would take me a year to earn this amount (if I work in China). I was very excited when I heard about this. After discussing it with her for a couple of times, I decided to have a go. A

week later she went back to Mainland (China) for a few days, and I worked from her flat. The first client asked me “how much?” I just said that I dunno. I knew that I should ask for HK\$300, HK\$350, but I just said I dunno. He suggested HK\$150 (about £10). I said okay. After we finished, he didn’t give me the money! The guy was in his 40s. He was strong and looked ferocious. He asked me to let him go, or he would call the police. I didn’t want to get into trouble, and so I let him leave.

(Fong, Mainland China)

Hart and Barnard (2003) argue that confidence in relating to clients is an important strategy employed by women to achieve power over the sexual encounter with them. In most cases, the sex worker is the more experienced of the two in sexual encounters and she guides the client through the process. In order to secure the power of control, women actively display *confidence* throughout the encounter. For those women such as Fong who had just started working in the business, displaying confidence could be difficult because the client was more experienced than she was in commercial sex. In the transaction above, Fong did not guide the client. Rather, in the negotiation the client adopted an active role and he was the one who established the rules in this episode. By doing so, the client gained the power of control which enabled him to achieve his aim: having a free meal.

Sex workers’ social characteristics, such as ethnicity, could contribute to increasing women’s vulnerability. As a respondent pointed out, women from Mainland China could be relatively vulnerable, since they are not familiar with the environment and many hesitate to get help from the police. In this study, among those who had been forced to give a free sexual service to clients, nearly half had come from Mainland China. They did not report their cases to the police, and their explanations were similar to the one given by Fong: they sought to avoid “getting into trouble”. In China, prostitution is illegal and women will be punished if the police catch them. This may explain why these respondents hesitated to look for legal protection, although all of them were legal residents.



Despite the fact that experienced sex workers are usually able to take an active role in the encounter with clients, interactional factors should be also taken into account. Sex workers usually negotiate sexual services and the fee before they start the transaction. However, the negotiation in this context can be flexible; this offers opportunities for *seoi-haak*/bad clients to break the rules:

At the beginning the client asked for a hand job only. I took the money before we started. When I was doing my job, he changed his mind and asked me to do a full session. I told him the price and he agreed, but said that he would pay me later. I was a bit hesitant 'cos *ze-mui* (sisters, see Note 4) always say that we should take the money before we start to do anything. But at that moment I didn't feel right to ask the client to go and get the money for me, as we were in the middle (of the transaction). I said okay and did it. But after it's done, the bastard said that he thought he had the money but he didn't. He claimed that he would get the money from a cash machine. He left his bag with me, and said that he would definitely be back. I had no choice but to let him go. After half an hour, I knew that something was wrong. I opened his bag and only found some magazines and fliers. Then I realized that the bastard would not come back.

(Crystal, Mainland China)

In their own interests, flat-working women generally insist that the client pays before he begins to receive the service. Nevertheless, regular clients may be the exception to this working rule. Such a client abused the trust of Betty and got a "free meal" as what she described below:

He's a regular. That old guy, he had come to me three, four times. That day he said that he wanted to pay me afterward. I agreed as he's a regular. After we finished, he told me that he had only HK\$100 (£8.20) with him and that's all he had. He was supposed to pay me HK\$150 (£12.37). He gave me the HK\$100, and said that he would give me the rest next time. That old guy...he looked so miserable when he showed me his empty wallet. I gave HK\$50 back to him, told him to use the money to take a bus and go home. I even asked him if he had anything at home for lunch. He said he had nothing to eat, and I gave him two bowls of instant noodles.

(Betty, Hong Kong)

The client did not keep his promise and did not visit Betty afterwards. Betty said she was not angry with the client, as she did not expect that he would return the money. For her, "it's not a big deal", as she considered the services she provided as a treat: "I offer to sell (sex) anyway. It doesn't happen every day, but only once or twice. It's all right. I see it as I treated the old guy to a free meal." In contrast to Betty's view, many respondents expressed their hatred of clients who deliberately take advantage of workers. As detailed in the following chapter, they adopted different strategies to protect their own interests. Clients, or men who pretended to be clients, may find it difficult to cheat the woman and obtain free sexual services from them. However, they may still be able to take advantage of workers in other ways. For example, Monica reported that some men do not genuinely seek a commercial transaction, but they still frequently visit working premises:

Some guys always go to the premises, but actually they're not prepared to do any transaction. They just wanted to watch the girls. Sometimes they pretend that they're interested in a girl, and take the chance to look closely at her or even touch her when they negotiate the price....Once a guy came to my flat. He kept asking me what I did and how much I asked for, and he left and turned to other girls. After he did this several times, I found him suspicious but I couldn't figure out why he did this. Later the girl who worked from the next room told me that she saw him on the staircase and he was masturbating. Then I understand that he came here to get free meals.

(Monica, Hong Kong)

Monica's account confirmed what I observed in working premises. On an evening in September I was visiting a woman in a working flat with Mui, whom I had got to know when I was volunteering with a sex working group. The woman and Mui were from the same home town. Mui thought that this woman was a potential respondent for my study, and therefore she brought me to the premises. The woman did not want to be interviewed. We stayed there and chatted with each other, while she was lying on her bed and waiting for clients. I stayed there for around two hours, during which time about 11 potential clients rang the doorbell. Each time she answered the door, the woman took off her jacket and wore only a bra and a mini-skirt to

see the client. The men looked at her closely from front to back when they negotiated the service; some attempted to touch her breasts and lifted up her skirt but the woman avoided them. No transactions happened over the two hours, and the woman described it as a normal evening. She described how only one in ten of clients genuinely sought a commercial sexual encounter, while most of them saw watching or talking to women as “free entertainment”.

In the previous section I discussed the issue of consensual or non-consensual sex. According to the legal definitions, much of the behaviour of clients mentioned in the accounts cited above should be defined as non-consensual sex acts. In the “Procedural guidelines for handling sexual violence cases (July 2002)”, sexual violence is defined as:

[A] person [being] ... subjected to a non-consensual sexual act or non-consensual exposure to such an act. The subjugation can take the form of physical or non-physical force, threat of force, coercion, intimidation, duress or deceit. It can also happen when the victim is unable to give consent owing to his/her age, mental capacity, fear, the influence of alcohol, drugs or other substances. It includes rape, attempted rape and marital rape, indecent assault, incest, being forced to engage in masturbation or oral sex, buggery, indecent exposure, etc. It may occur in public or in private. The perpetrators can be members of the family, relatives, acquaintances or strangers. A victim of sexual violence can be any person regardless of his/her age, sex, race occupation, marital or sexual orientation.

However, commercial sex is complicated and sometimes it could be difficult to draw a clear line between consensual and non-consensual sex acts. Some women reported that clients violated the rules of the transaction and practiced non-consensual behaviours (for example, fingers inserted vaginally), but they made clients pay extra money afterwards for doing so. Was this consensual? Some women viewed this as consensual, since the sex act was paid for eventually. However, they reported that this act caused physical harm and they were upset about what had happened to them. Apparently women gave their consent, but given the harmful effects of this act, should it be categorised as violence?

## Verbal abuse

Being insulted by clients is a common experience of sex workers. This often occurs if clients disagree about the appearance of workers, the quality of service or the financial agreement. Rita worked in massage parlours, before moving to work from rented flats in 1998. On the day of the interview, she wore a light green flower-print blouse and a pair of black trousers. She intentionally dressed, in her words, “as typical middle-aged *si-naai* (師奶, housewife)” outside work, but wore makeup and put on her “uniform”, a tight vest and pants, when she was working. To me, she appeared in her late 40’s, whereas in fact she was 60 years old:

At our age...sometimes people walked in and use...they looked surprised, and looked you up and down from head to toe, and said, “you are working?!” I said, “of course I am the one working here. Some would just walk away, but some would say something nasty to insult you. Just a few days ago, a guy shouted at me, “Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror? I think you are probably older than my Mom! Aunt, do you feel ashamed?”

(Rita, Hong Kong)

Likewise, Bei, who was 51 years old, was also verbally attacked by a client because of her appearance. She posted an advertisement on an adult website, which included pictures of her. In order to protect her identity, the pictures were retouched and her face was blurred. All the pictures were airbrushed, and she appeared to be a sexy woman at her late 20s. A client, however, posted a message on the forum of the website, and used abusive language to attack Bei after the transaction. He described her as a “scary old woman”. He was “shocked” when she opened the door as she looked entirely different from the pictures. He claimed that he nearly threw up after she took off her clothes, because her “saggy breasts”, “big belly” and wrinkles made him sick. Hence, he did not have intercourse with her but gave her the money and left. He strongly suggested that clients should not visit Bei, unless they “fancy a woman as old as their grandmas”.

In recent years, while the Internet has been widely used by the women as a tool to promote their services, it has simultaneously become a platform for

clients to share their experiences of buying sex. Clients write reports to evaluate the appearance of sex workers, and the quality of the service that they provided. From these reports, I found that clients who have had bad experiences with buying sex appear to behave peacefully during the sexual encounter, but express their dissatisfaction with specific women by using strong language to attack them in their reports. In other words, in the context of commercial sex, we may argue that verbal abuse does not only take place while the woman is working. Clients may not verbally abuse sex workers face-to-face, but do this by placing messages on the Internet. This may result in a greater emotional impact on women than verbal abuse when they are at work. As the messages are entirely public, what has happened during the commercial transaction is no longer confidential to the client and the woman. I helped Bei to get access to the adult website in her working flat. When she read the message left by the client on the forum, she looked embarrassed. She described her feeling as “standing in street naked and laughed by others”, which was “humiliating”. The account provided by Bei suggests that when clients left abusive messages on the Internet, women might feel that they were insulted in public.

Verbal abuse also ensues if clients are not satisfied with the service provided by the women, or when women refuse to practice certain sex acts:

The guy suggested doing anal. I refused. He then said that he wanted to do *ngaan-se*<sup>5</sup> (顏射) or *hau-baa*<sup>6</sup> (口爆). I also said no to him. He was not happy with me, and said: ‘who do you think you are? You are only a *gai*<sup>7</sup> (雞)’.

(Vivian, Mainland China)

Because the popular tendency is to see sex workers as women who offer their bodies for indiscriminate sexual intercourse, clients may think that they can make sex workers carry out any sex acts whatever, provided they are paid to do so. In this study, eleven women reported that they were verbally attacked by clients during the sexual encounter. Accounts provided by Rita and Vivian seemingly suggest that when clients find that they were not

entirely satisfied with the sexual encounter, they might insult and devalue the woman.

### **Threats**

While the discussion of violence against sex workers seemingly focuses heavily on incidents of physical assault, the findings from this study suggest that most women did not have direct experience of physical violence, but they may have been threatened at work. For example, Xiu-hung was threatened by a client who claimed to be a gang member:

That day I was very tired. I wanted to close earlier and go home. The guy came when I was about to leave. I told him that I was closing and told him to come the next day. He insisted, and asked me if I knew who he was. I said I didn't recognize him, and he claimed that he was a member of 14K (triad), and he was under Brother so and so. He said that he gave me one more chance to think clearly if I really wanted to close. At that time I had just moved to Hong Kong a few months before. I didn't really understand what he said. But I saw that he had tattoos all over his arms, and my instinct told me that I could be in trouble if I rejected him. I didn't want to but I did it anyway. A few days later I saw him in a fruit market near the premises. He was delivering fruit with a trolley, and he looked like a porter. I dunno. He might be a gang member. Maybe not. I dunno.

(Xiu-hung, Mainland China)

Clients may also pass themselves off as police officers and threaten sex workers. In a transaction, Joey (Mainland China) received less than the negotiated amount. The client showed her a "police ID card", and claimed that he was a police officer. He put the ID card back so fast that Joey could not see it clearly, and she did not know whether he was a genuine police officer or not. He threatened Joey that if she did not listen to him, he would send a police officer to her flat every day. The officer would stand at the entrance in order to "protect" her personal safety. Joey understood clearly that if this happened, it would be unlikely for her to be able to "do business". She found the client suspicious, but she did not want to get herself into trouble: "I could ask him to let me see the card again. But what if he is a

genuine cop? If he is genuine and he takes revenge, I won't be able to run my business.”

Threats were not limited to clients, but also came from neighbours. In the building where she worked, Bei was the only sex worker. She lied to the landlord when she moved in, but her neighbour found out what she was doing after a few weeks when they saw her advertisement posted on the Internet. Since then she had received insulting phone calls and was threatened with being beaten or raped if she did not move out. On the gate to her flat, she also found abusive words and pictures, which indicated that she was *gail* (see Chapter 6, Note 1). Bei worried about her personal safety, as she did not know who was doing this to her. She wanted to move out, but she could not find another working-flat to rent. Hence she had no choice but to stay.

In summary, sex workers' experiences with *seoi-haak* (bad clients) can be categorized into 1) sexual assaults, in the sense that women were forced to practice non-consensual sexual acts or forced to give sexual services without being paid; 2) verbal abuse; and 3) threats; however, the respondents did not use these terms when they discussed these experiences. Women did not see these experiences as violence against them, which may be explained by the fact that these incidents did not result in (serious) physical harm, and also because of the limited use of the term 'violence' in Chinese society.

As noted, in my study most respondents concluded that they had had relatively little direct experience of violence. In a study of violence against women in the context of Chinese societies, Tang and her colleagues (2000) observe that Western societies use the term 'violence' differently from Chinese societies. As noted earlier, in Western societies this term is used to describe a continuum of behaviours ranging from verbal abuse, bullying, threats, intimidation, emotional or psychological harm, sexual abuse, physical assault and killing. Findings from a focus group study in Hong Kong suggest in contrast that respondents tend to confine the term to the use of physical force and to acts which consequently cause physical harm (*ibid.*).

Tang *et al.* (2000) justify this by arguing that the term *bao-li*, the translation which is widely used in Chinese societies, has a different emphasis from the term 'violence' in English or from any of its equivalents in Western countries:

The word *bao* means brute, and the word *li* means strength or force. The Chinese translation of *violence against women*, hence, becomes the use of brute force against women. This translation focuses more on the use of physical violence than the harmful effects produced by an act. When presented with the Chinese translation of violence against women, people tend to think of physical assaults, such as beating, hitting, or pushing.

(Tang *et al.* 2000)

Narrow definitions of *bao-li/violence* appear to have an impact on the accounts of violence by professional bodies. In another study, Tang and her colleagues (2002) find that Chinese service professionals<sup>8</sup> residing in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China generally viewed physical assault as violence against women, but apparently hesitated to identify acts in the same way if they did not involve physical harm, such as foul language, pornography and sexual discrimination at work. Moreover, findings suggest that professionals from Mainland China held a comparatively traditional view of violence and focused more on physical harm. In contrast, professionals from Taiwan placed a heavier emphasis on psychological harm and were more likely to see it as a determining criterion for violence against women. Professionals from Hong Kong were somewhere between those from Taiwan and Mainland China in terms of their perception of violence against women.

The above studies suggest that the characteristic of the term *bao-li*, has seemingly limited Chinese people's interpretation of violence against women largely to physical harm and they may subsequently have overlooked women's experiences involving non-physical violence. There is no reason to suppose that the limited use of *bao-li/violence* applies exclusively to the discussion of violence against women. Nevertheless, because the term *bao-li* (暴力) emphasizes the use of physical strength, women tend to restrict its use to incidents which may cause physical harm. However, if definitions of violence against sex workers focus only on events of physical assault, the



findings may become distorted, in the sense that most of flat-working women may not have experienced physical violence at work, but had been victims of non-physical violence, such as verbal abuse and threats, and also of minor physical violence. In other words, how the term violence is defined has a significant impact on our understanding of women's experiences of violence against them.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of the accounts given by sex workers, this chapter has explored the ways in which flat-working women conceptualise their experiences of violence in the course of their work. Accounts given by workers suggest that they were aware that they might face violence at work. Although being robbed appeared to be customary among flat-working women, and some women attributed this to the nature of their work and its environment, many women considered this to be an outcome of "bad luck" (this is further analysed in the concluding chapter).

Echoing findings of previous research on violence against sex workers, accounts given by women in this study demonstrate the low prevalence of physical violence against flat-working women. In line with the majority of academic findings, it is evident in respondents' accounts that the working environments of flat-working women were relatively safe, like those of sex workers working in indoor sex markets elsewhere. This may explain that in contrast to the fact that client violence has been widely considered as an occupational hazard of sex work in previous studies (see Chapter 4, p.95), the workers in this study seemingly did not conceive it as a major type of occupational hazard. Nevertheless, this study argues here that the ways in which flat-women understood their experiences were shaped by how the term 'violence' is understood in the Chinese context.

In existing publications from Hong Kong and elsewhere, the focus is mainly on physical assault (see Chapter 4, p.98). The findings from this study, however, show that most flat-working women do not have direct experience

of physical violence. In addition, the limited Chinese meaning of *bao-  
//*violence, which refers merely to physical assault, also affects the ways in  
which the women interpreted their experience. Consequently, most  
respondents did not see themselves as at risk of violence.

How violence against sex workers is defined affects the interpretation by  
individuals of their experiences. As noted in Chapter 4, in recent years  
'violence' has received increasing attention in studies on commercial sex. A  
considerable number of sociologists, psychologists, feminists and medical  
researchers have recorded female sex workers' experiences of violence  
against them. Most of the research aims to identify the extent and nature of  
sex workers' experiences of such violence against them and their  
management of it. There is a voluminous literature which argues that women  
are at risk of violence, but there is relatively less discussion of ways to define  
violence against sex workers and little attempt so far to investigate how sex  
workers themselves define and conceptualise the term "violence against sex  
workers". As noted, the physical assault of flat-working women appeared to  
be uncommon. Their experiences are seemingly parallel to other professions  
who frequently interact with strangers (such as police officers, medical  
workers and social workers), in the sense that these workers also found that  
physical assault is rather an uncommon work-related risk (Waddington 2006).  
Here, I argue that research on violence against sex workers in Hong Kong  
should move beyond physical assault and consider on other types of  
violence.

From the respondents' accounts, we can identify that sex workers frequently  
experience non-physical violence. In these situations the clients did not  
physically attack sex workers, but the behaviour of bad clients might cause  
emotionally damaging effects (see Chapter 9 for further discussion). So long  
as legal enforcement agencies adopt a narrow definition of violence (see  
p.243), it may be implied that sex workers experiencing non-physical  
violence could have difficulty in obtaining help from these agencies.

The limitation of the Chinese meanings of *bao-li*/violence and sex workers' social characteristics, in particular their working identity, also impacts on my respondents' interpretation of their experiences related to non-consensual (sexual) acts, a theme which is frequently found in their accounts. In society, it is universally agreed that if a woman is forced to practise unwanted sex acts, the behaviour will be identified as sexual assault or rape. However, in this study, the findings seemingly suggest that respondents do not define non-consensual sexual acts as violence or identify them as criminal. Apparently, this can be explained by the concept "rape myths", in the sense that it is taken for granted that sex workers "cannot" be raped (see p.96, above). Here, it is argued in this study that one of the explanations can be that *bao-li*/violence refers to *physical* assault, and hence respondents may not see sexual assault as a type of *bao-li*. When women talked about their experiences of being forced to engage in unwanted sex acts, they do not see themselves as being sexually assaulted. Rather, they frequently use the term *min-fai-caan*/free meals to categorise various non-consensual sexual acts. The term seems to imply that in the context of commercial sex, women see the related experience from an economic perspective, and emphasize the monetary loss. In contrast to non-prostitute women, these respondents apparently did not identify themselves as victims and seemingly have no intention of demanding accountability.

This may be explained if we consider the example of "marital rape": the act was invisible until the term was invented. As Barnard (1993) points out, women who violate the gender role expectation are seen as putting themselves at risk of male violence. Therefore, "good" women who experience sexual violence against them are more likely to be seen as victims and earn sympathy from the public. Conversely, it is suggested that women who offer sexual services for money cannot be raped, because they violate norms of appropriate female behaviour and offer to have sex with strangers. As a result, it seems that sex workers do not have a term which allows them to talk legitimately about their experiences of non-consensual sexual acts. To fill this gap and in order to capture the experiences of women more accurately, definitions of violence against sex workers should not focus

mainly on physical assault; rather, violence should be broadly defined and should include threats, verbal abuse and sexual assault.

The next chapter moves on to discuss the emotional experiences of flat-working women. While violence against sex workers has received increasing attention in more recent research, women's emotional experiences, in particular the ways in which sex workers conceptualise and manage their emotions in offering sexual services, has still received little attention. The next chapter will explore this issue.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The term *ngaan-se* is adopted from Japanese. "*ngaan*" means face, and "*se*" means ejaculation. It describes the sex act which the man ejaculates on the woman's face.

<sup>2</sup> When literally translated, *Ze-mui* means "sisters", which is widely used by female sex workers to address their colleagues. In the sex workers' movements, this term is used in its political context in order to establish a sense of sisterhood and solidarity. However, for most respondents, using this term did not necessarily mean that they shared the same ideas as activists.

<sup>3</sup> Shenzhen is a city on the Mainland which is adjacent to Hong Kong. In recent years, it has become a popular place for Hong Kong people to eat, drink, go shopping and have massage, as its prices are low compared with Hong Kong's.

<sup>4</sup> *Fu-si* is the name of a 22-storey commercial building. Most of the flats were used as working premises.

<sup>5</sup> See Note 1.

<sup>6</sup> "*Hau*" means mouth; "*baau*" means explosion. The term describes the sex act where a man ejaculates in the mouth of the woman.

<sup>7</sup> In Hong Kong, *Gail* is slang for women involved in selling sex. See note 1 in Chapter 6.

<sup>8</sup> 3,540 service professionals participated in this study. 2,605 of them were from Hong Kong, 520 were from Taiwan and 415 from Mainland China. The sample included psychologists, social workers, police officers, doctors, nurses, elementary and high school teachers and lawyers.

## Chapter 9

### The emotional labour of sex work

The problem is, there is still this real virgin/whore thing for most people. I was very aware when I got into prostitution that I couldn't tell certain people about it. If they saw me as a sex worker, that would be all they would see. It wasn't that I minded if people found out; if they knew, they knew. But I didn't want to be defined by it.

(Maryann, nurse and former prostitute 1995, cited in Chapkis 1997, p.85)

#### Introduction

This chapter explores sex workers' accounts of their emotional experiences at work, an area which has received less attention than the sexual health hazards and violence against women. As discussed in Chapter 4, the focus of studies from Hong Kong, as elsewhere, is mostly on the psychological harm to the worker of selling sexual services. The picture presented in the literature, however, suggests that worker's experiences are ambivalent. On the one hand, medical or psychological studies tend to emphasise the emotional health consequences of being involved in sex work, and a link between psychological harm and selling sexual services has been established. On the other hand, some studies argue on the basis of empirical findings that selling sexual services may not contribute to undesired emotional consequences.

While the literature focusing on the *consequences* of selling sex, less attention has been given to the ways in which sex workers conceptualise the feelings produced in the course of sex work. In other words, sex workers' emotional experiences have been categorised into different types of harm, such as "stress", "depression" or "low self-esteem" and it has been concluded that selling sexual services contributes to psychological harm. What has been ignored in these studies is the ways in which women conceptualise their emotions and manage their emotions and feelings. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 4, some sex workers report that they have not experienced any harmful emotional or psychological consequences but

describe the sexual encounter as enjoyable (Sanders 2005). Rather than treating these experiences as exceptions, this study explores what factors contribute to women's different emotional experiences at work.

In other words, this chapter attempts to fill the gap in the existing literature by connecting the sociology of emotions with sex work. By examining sex workers' accounts of their emotional experiences at work, it explores how social and cultural factors influence individuals' interpretation and accounts of their emotions. In addition, drawing on the theory of the presentation of self (Goffman 1959) and emotional labour (Hochschild 1983), this chapter considers the way in which sex workers commercialised and adopted various strategies to manage their feelings. In this account of the risks associated with commercial sex, the emphasis is on individuals' resilience, a concept which has been neglected in academic accounts of emotions at work, in particular in much of the psychological literature.

Drawing on Erving Goffman and Arlie Hochschild, this chapter explores the ways in which sex workers conceptualise and account for their feelings about their behaviour as it occurs in the course of their work. The next chapter explores the ways in which women manage their feelings during the commercial sexual encounter.

### **Providing services as a performance**

The contemporary (Western) accounts of commercial sex seemingly focus on sexual labour. In contrast, as discussed in Chapter 2, traditional Chinese accounts pay relatively equal attention to the various forms of labour involved. This is evident in the Chinese language. For example, the traditional terms *maai-siu* (賣笑, literally means "selling laughter") and *maai-san* (賣身, literally means "selling the body") were in Chinese society the equivalent of "selling sexual services". Nevertheless, women did not necessarily perform sexual labour: the expression *maai-siu-bat maai-san* (賣笑不賣身, literally meaning selling laughter but not the body) was widely used to describe those *gei-neoi* (妓女/prostitutes) in ancient Chinese society who did not offer sexual

intercourse to clients. This expression highlights the fact that *maai-siu*/selling laughter is the essential element in the traditional idea of commercial transaction – a *gei-neoi*/prostitute might refuse to sell sexual services, but as a *gei-neoi*/prostitute an individual woman must “sell laughter”.

It seems that the term *maai-siu*/selling laughter is interestingly paralleled by the concept of the commercialisation of human feelings in contemporary society. Like workers who engage in providing services to clients, during the transaction sex workers try to give an impression that they are pleased to meet clients and provide them with services. In order to do so, women may need to pretend that they do feel what they do not, or deceive clients about what they really feel. In Fung’s account, she used the term “performance” to describe the interaction with her clients during the encounter.

Clients come to us and seek fun. We have to learn how to read their minds, and give them what they want. At the same time we need to provide them with something new, as we want them to come back to us again. For clients (the encounter) is an enjoyment, for us it is entirely a performance. We need to put some innovative ideas into our performance. We do not merely lie dead on the bed with our legs wide open, but lead clients through the whole process.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Interestingly, Fung’s use of the term “performance” echoes Goffman’s theory of impression management. In his influential work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) argues that when an individual enters the presence of others, the expectation of those involved become a crucial factor in shaping the interaction, here, expectation being understood in terms of what the individual expects of others and what others may expect of the individual. Therefore, others attempt to understand what the expectation is by analysing information about the individual derived from his/her appearance, attitudes and so forth. If such information is limited, others may apply their previous experience of encountering people who resemble the individual to construct their expectation; untested stereotypes may be applied to an individual. Therefore, Goffman (ibid) argues that the individual’s activity



is likely to have “a promissory character” with which s/he appears before others, in order to project the expectation that s/he would like others to have. Goffman (ibid) further argues that the experience of other’s expectation of an individual’s group or social status may affect the ways in which the individual creates a particular kind of impression for others to receive. The management of the impression, therefore, mostly involves performance.

Goffman (ibid) defines the term “performance” as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (ibid, p.32). He argues that sometimes individuals perform some acts in a “calculating manner” in order to give others a particular impression. Individuals employ expressive equipment, or what Goffman terms a “front”, during the performance:

Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.

(Goffman 1959, p. 32)

The front includes the scenic parts (i.e. the “setting”) and “personal front” (i.e. signs that help observers to identify the performer, such as clothing, physical characteristics, facial expression, bodily gestures and so on). It also includes the social front, which is institutionalised: abstract stereotyped expectations are attached to the front, and an established social role is always linked to a particular front.

In her account Fung addressed two important issues relating to performance in the context of commercial sex. First, women do not just “lie down” passively on the bed during the sexual encounter, but are actively involved in the sexual encounter by “acting”. Second, the encounter involves various kinds of labour, and sexual labour is only part of it. How do sex workers act during the encounter? Drawing on Hochschild (1983), the following sections attempt to answer this question.

### ***Doing small acts: Surface acting***

My meetings with some respondents during the fieldwork perhaps provide some clues to this question. In this study some interviews were conducted in respondents' working flats. The meetings provided me with opportunities to observe how women interpreted "performance" during the encounter with clients. For example, the interview with Mo-mo (Mainland China) was conducted in her working flat while she was expecting clients. Like many other respondents, Mo-mo talked in a serious manner during the interview. The advent of a client, however, brought a dramatic change in her attitude. Before going to answer the door, Mo-mo asked me to hide myself in the kitchen. As the door of the kitchen did not close tightly, I could see what was happening in the living room.

A guy came to see Mo-mo in the middle of the interview. Mo-mo took off her jacket. She only wore a black bra and a mini-skirt. She smiled, opened the door and asked the man if he wanted to come in. The man stepped in, lifted her skirt a little and looked at her bottom. Mo-mo slapped his hand and moved away from him. She was smiling when she asked the man what he was trying to do. The guy asked if Mo-mo did anal, but she said no. The guy put his hand on her back, and asked what services she provided. Mo-mo held his hand and so the man couldn't touch her back. She explained to him the prices for services in a friendly way. While she was speaking the man stared at her body. Mo-mo stood still, smiled and asked what he thought. After a while the client said that the price was too expensive and left. Mo-mo closed the door, put the jacket on and asked me to come out. She looked at the screen of the CCTV, lowered her voice and said that the "bastard" was not a genuine client but just wanted to take advantage of her. She asked me to continue the interview. But, after about ten to fifteen minutes, the man came back. She took the jacket off again and opened the door to the client after I'd ducked into the kitchen. Mo-mo, still friendly, asked what the man wanted; the man named a sum of money and Mo-mo let him in.

(Fieldwork note)

In this performance, Mo-mo took on the role of a sex worker. The performance started at the moment when Mo-mo decided to answer the door. As noted above, clothing is an important personal front. In the context of

commercial sex, the first step to performing the role of a “whore” is to “dress like a whore” (Chen 2008, p.107). Mo-mo deliberately took off the jacket and presented a typical “whore image”: being dressed in a black bra and a mini-skirt. Other than the symbolic connotation, the clothes also had an important function: to show off Mo-mo’s body in an explicit manner in order to attract the client.

The coherence of the front was found in the encounter: there is obviously a consistency between Mo-mo’s calculated manner and her appearance. The typical “whore image” provided the client with an understanding that she was ready to provide sexual services. Moreover, the smile that Mo-mo put on her face apparently hinted that the client was welcome to look at her body, and she was pleased to be looked at. By this act, she presented a submissive image which was most probably expected by the client. Obviously Mo-mo was offended at some point by the behaviour of the client (lifting her skirt and touching her back). Rather than blaming him, she stopped him by holding his hand and smiled as she asked him what he wanted. By her bodily gestures, Mo-mo was able to portray a pleasant and friendly image.

In sum, at the point when Mo-mo took off her jacket, she created a “whore image” which obviously followed the tradition of the other’s stereotyped expectations of sex workers. The impression was also created through demonstrating the expected behaviour of sex workers. Apparently, as a “whore” Mo-mo took a submissive role and let the client dominate the negotiation, and therefore the client could “[lift] her skirt a little” and look at her commodified body. At the same time, as a sex *worker*, Mo-mo attempted to create the impression that she did not offer indiscriminate sexual intercourse (see Chapter 7). She slapped the client’s hand and moved away from him when he behaved inappropriately, in the sense that during the negotiation he was supposed to look at, but not touch, the commodified body. At this point, Mo-mo was likely to experience unpleasant emotions, but she still “smiled” and acted in a “friendly” way in order to maintain the submissive “whore” impression.

Likewise, in order to give the client the impression that she was pleased to see him, Mei explained how she deliberately started with “some small acts” at the beginning of the encounter:

When a client comes in, I hold his hand and lead him to the sofa. I massage his shoulders a bit. I chat with him and at the same time grope his back, leg and his willy. I ask him what he likes to do, and tell him that there is no need to worry about time, as I will give him extra time if necessary.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

Similarly, in their accounts other respondents said that during the encounter they welcomed clients with “smiles”, “sweet words”, “tender attitudes” and “patience”. In her research on stripping, Wood (2000, p.23) notes that “the stripper’s job is to make customers feel cared about” and the client was viewed as wanting “something more personal”. This idea applies to the case of flat-working women. Obviously the women intended to arouse clients sexually by massaging and fondling their body; these acts were also used to create the feeling of intimacy. In the encounter, sex workers offer their clients a performance which is illuminated with dramatic expressions of kindness and intimacy. This involves women’s providing emotional labour.

In line with Goffman’s concept of performance, Hochschild (1983) argues that individuals express their feelings by employing the methods of professional actors. Drawing on Constantin Stanislavski’s theories of acting, Hochschild argues that individuals show their feelings through *surface acting* and *deep acting*. In surface acting, an individual uses signs such as body language and facial expressions to *act* as if s/he is feeling something (see p.265, below for detailed discussion). During the encounter, Mo-mo and other respondents tended to create the impression that they liked the client and enjoyed the interaction with him. Like other workers engaged in service occupations, sex workers cannot be expected to like every single client and it is hard for them to serve all clients with genuinely sincere feelings. In order to make clients “feel cared about”, sex workers need by their surface acting to display the feelings which clients expect.

As Hochschild suggests, in surface acting an individual woman does not necessarily experience a particular feeling. Rather, she merely *works* at seeming to do so. In other words, the feelings displayed by the sex workers during the encounter may not reflect their true feelings. During the encounter sex workers have to commercialise and manage their feelings. For example, Mo-mo displayed different types of emotion in front of and away from the client: the cheerfulness displayed during the encounter contrasted sharply with the seriousness displayed during the interview and the anger displayed after the client walked away from her. The performance, therefore, always involves managing feelings or at least the expression of feelings.

In her account, Fung pointed out that conflict with clients was unavoidable, but sex workers have to control themselves and do not display their true feeling during the transaction, negative feeling about their clients least of all:

There are different kinds of clients out there, and girls are likely to have conflict with their clients anyway. You have to watch your words. If a girl says something offensive, she may get a slap from clients. Girls really need to know what to say and what they should not say. You never know who these clients are, and will definitely get yourself into trouble if you offend them. I always tell girls that if there is a conflict, it'd be better for them to say that it's their fault and say sorry to clients. It's between you and the client and no one knows what you said.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

The clients were viewed as considering the encounter as something to enjoy; hence, the sex workers believed that they should “*maai-siu/sell* laughter” during the transaction. In the context of the sexual transaction, negative feelings about their clients or sex acts were likely to be seen as “inappropriate” feelings, which workers had to suppress or control. In Mo-mo’s case, for example, she suppressed her anger when she found the client’s behaviour offensive. Fung’s account suggested that women needed to control themselves and should not display their negative feelings about their clients, in particular when there is a conflict between the two parties.

Most of the respondents said that they worked on their emotions and comforted the client. Crystal explained:

They were only clients and I won't stay with them forever. There's no need to take things seriously. [...] If I was unhappy, I would just do it, finish the transaction and kick him out. The client can be nasty. He can see himself as the master as he pays you. But I can choose not to pick him next time, can't I?

(Crystal, Mainland China)

Only two respondents said that they would “fight back” if they were attacked; both of them said that they found it difficult to suppress their feelings and said that they scolded clients for being rude. The tendency of sex workers to take a seemingly submissive position may to some extent be attributed to the social organisation of sex work. Factors such as gender (since the women perceived that they were physically weaker than male clients), working alone and lack of support contributed to their fear of client violence (see Chapter 8). Those respondents who saw the encounter as a performance tended to draw a boundary between their *true* feelings and the feelings which they *displayed*. Using their terminology, what they displayed during the encounter was “*heoicing gaa-ji*” (虛情假意), which means “a hypocritical show of cordiality”. Some respondents attempted to explain that it was unlikely, if not impossible, for a sex worker to *truly* enjoy commercial sex. For example, Cindy said that, as the client was not her boyfriend, “it is impossible to have feelings” when she had sex with him. Similarly, Joey said, “Working is working. [...] I don't like clients. I merely do it with them for money. How would I enjoy it?” Respondents did not explicitly state in their accounts, but they implied that only private sex with their romantic partner aroused enjoyable and *true* feelings. Their accounts seemingly echo the popular perception of sex that the only legitimate sex is between (heterosexual) lovers.

Considering the fact that sex workers are not isolated from society but are “socialized in a world where particular meanings are attached to human sexuality” (Davidson 1995, p. 9; 1996, p. 193–4), it is perhaps not a surprise that women interpreted apparently enjoyable feelings during the commercial

sexual encounter as “*heoi-cing gaa-ji*”, or false feelings, which they had *created* through surface acting.

In sum, this section demonstrates that, for some sex workers, the sexual encounter was viewed as a performance which aimed to entertain clients by “selling laughter”. Hence, feeling negative about their clients was interpreted as a “wrong” feeling and sex workers struggled to suppress negative emotions such as anger or being upset and deliberately put on a “smiling” face before adverse conditions. This group of women consciously distinguished what they displayed from what their inner feelings were. Conversely, as the following section discusses, some sex workers claimed that their displayed feelings were true, though they identified the sexual encounter with clients as a performance.

#### ***“I do love have sex with clients”*: Deep acting**

Despite the fact that drawing the boundary between work sex and private sex is a universal practice among sex workers (Edwards 1993), for some women the divide is not necessarily rigid (Brewis & Linstead, 2000). Four women in the present study said that they gained sexual pleasure from having sex with their clients, which echoes the findings of earlier work (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Exner *et al.* 1977; McKeganey & Barnard 1996; Sanders 2005a). For example, Helen argued that it was natural “for a woman to have feelings when a man laid his hand on her body”; she suggested that women lied about their feelings if they claimed that they “felt nothing” or did not get sexually aroused during the sexual encounter with clients. Ying said that she heard that some sex workers “got turned on” when clients did some particular sex acts:

Some clients like to eat abalone.<sup>1</sup> I know some girls let their clients do it to them. [...] Some clients really know how to lick you out”.

(Ying, Hong Kong)

In the above accounts, respondents used *others’* experience to illustrate that women might actually experience pleasure and intimacy during the encounter with clients. When I asked about *their* experiences, Helen and

Ying smiled in an embarrassed way and gave only short answers (“erm...yeah”; “sometimes”) and avoided giving details. Two respondents, however, explained exactly why they found the encounter enjoyable. Fong was in her late forties. She became a flat-working woman after she divorced her husband:

People may think I’m insane. But I do love having sex with clients. [...] I know some women think that it’s weird to enjoy sex at work. But what’s wrong? You get paid and you can have fun.... Some of my clients are in their twenties or thirties. I don’t think they will bother to look at me if we meet on the street. You know, I’m in my forties and I’m not really attractive. But now these handsome guys pay me and ask me to have sex with them. Think about it! (She laughs) I don’t know why other girls always feel unhappy about what they’re doing, but I do enjoy it.

(Fong, Mainland China)

Fong described her ex-husband as “a decent man” and “felt bored” when she was with him. She found sex was enjoyable only after she entered the business and she particularly enjoyed the sexual encounter with a few regular clients:

I really love to do this (have sex). Therefore I feel that I’m happy in my work. Maybe because of my sexual needs, I do love to do this. People pay me to do it ... er, to be honest, among my clients, at least six, seven of them are in their 20s and 30. Some are over 40. Most of them are good. I am not satisfied with one or two clients. The sex was not satisfactory. But when I consider that they give me money...I am happy when I see the money. My happiness will be double if we have good sex.

(Fong, Mainland China)

Rose was married when she worked from a private flat. She said that her sex life with her husband was not enjoyable:

My feelings towards my husband...I don’t like him. I don’t want to sleep with him. Anyway, I don’t want to make love with him. I feel like I can do it with anyone but not him. I don’t even want to be touched by him. I feel uncomfortable when he touches me. [...] Unlike many of my clients, my



husband, for example, when he fondled down there...In the past I didn't say a word about this. But recently I said this to his face. I said, "I have taught you but you just can't get it." When he fondled down there, he was very rude. I asked him be gentle. I held his hand, and told him how to do it. I asked him to be gentle, and told him that I felt very uncomfortable. He couldn't do it. Sometimes he bit me and it was painful. I told him to leave me alone. How come he's so silly? Every client can do it better than him.

(Rose, Mainland China)

Occasionally Rose had sex with her husband because she felt that she was obligated to do so: "It's very uncomfortable. It's very unpleasant. But because he's my husband, I kissed him. I did it. That's it." For Rose, however, sex with clients was more satisfactory:

I don't understand why girls always complain about their clients. I think they treat me pretty well. I mean, at least better than my husband. I quite like them. I mean, not all, but a few of them. They treat me like a princess when we are together.... Honestly I didn't like sex before I entered the business. Before I met my husband, I had some boyfriends but...hmm...they only know how to do it in a general way, and I always want more (laughed). Clients are pretty different. They know how to do it. You know what I mean? I enjoy my work. I do enjoy it. I always tell my friend that I am grateful because she suggested I work as a *jie jie* (姐姐, the term means "female sex worker").

(Rose, Mainland China)

In contrast to other respondents, these two women said that they did not fake their feelings towards their clients. They believed that clients "knew whether it is *zan-cing zan-ji* (真情真意, the term means "a genuine show of cordiality") or *heoi-cing gaa-ji* (虛情假意 meaning "a hypocritical show of cordiality") (Fong, Mainland China) and emphasised that they *had* cheerful feelings during the encounter:

I treat every single client well, no matter if he is a builder or a cleaner; or he has bad breath, his body stinks, or he is very dirty. I am enthusiastic and always treat them with passion. There were many clients, at least 70, 80

clients who said that they had the feeling of first love when they were with me. It's because I treated them from my heart. I did not fake it.

(Rose, Mainland China)

Unlike other women in this study, Rose and Fong said that work sex was better than private sex. Apparently this explained why they found that sex working was relatively enjoyable. In the later part of the interview Rose contradicted her former view of sex work:

In fact I am not willing to do so. If I had money, I definitely wouldn't do the job and would hate these people (clients). I'm not eager to make love, or have to sleep with men. [...] Even when I was intimate with boyfriends when I was young, I didn't always have an orgasm. [...] It's different now. Sometimes I found it weird. I felt passion when I was with every client and I got wet straight away. I never used KY (gel) at work.

(Rose, Mainland China)

It was however not easy to feel passion with some clients. Rose admitted that bad breath and a smelly body made her sick, but she felt that she “*should be nice and passionate*” and behave *as if* she “loves the client very much”. She explained:

Because I feel this is my job. Clients came to me and expected that they would enjoy themselves. I took HK\$300 from them. My service should warrant HK\$300. They arrived in high spirits, and I wanted them to leave satisfied.

(Rose, Mainland China)

The account given by Rose suggested that she felt ambivalent towards sex as work. She said that she had “determined to be professional” since she entered the industry. Viewing herself as a “professional sex worker” who was “enthusiastic” in her work, Rose believed she *ought to feel* that she enjoyed sex with clients and *should* “treat clients with passion” in every single encounter. But how could she express her *true* happiness in adverse conditions, for example when she found that a filthy client had bad breath or a smelly body?

In this situation, Rose needed to do emotional work to control the underlying feeling of nausea. Although she repeatedly emphasised that she did not pretend to have feelings, Rose interestingly described herself as an “actor”:

Like an actor, you should act from deep in your heart. If you want the audience to be moved by what you do, you must do it from your heart. He will not be moved when he sees you pretending to cry.

(Rose, Mainland China)

As noted above, the social front is institutionalised. When an actor takes on a social role, s/he presents a particular social front. The manner and appearance of an actor is expected to be consistent (Goffman 1959). In fact, a social setting not only shapes how an individual acts, but also how *s/he should feel*. The above sections examine how sex workers undertook either surface or deep acting to feel what they were expected to feel in the sexual encounter.

## **Conclusion**

Until fairly recently, sociologists had paid little attention to the emotional experiences of sex workers in the international literature, though sociologists opened a theoretical space to explore the significant role of emotion in the interpersonal relationships between individuals and the ways in which emotion affects the interaction or interactional communication (Layder 2004). Emotion is conceived as a product of the interaction between individuals. Leary (2000) argues that some emotions are social emotions, in the sense that they are produced in the process of interaction. They occur “as a result of real, remembered, or imagined encounters with other people” (ibid, p.333). The “social-evaluative” emotions are social emotions, which come from our feelings towards other people. Moreover, the ways in which individuals perceive how others judge them also results in social emotions. Consequently, social emotions shape individuals’ reactions. In sum, social emotions are about individuals’ feelings, produced in the process of the interaction with others.

Like any other social encounter, the encounter between sex workers and their clients in the context of transaction involves impression management. There is a fairly substantial body of literature on work which suggests that certain jobs are naturalised as “women’s work”, involving more or less “the exploitation of female sexuality for profits through the sexualisation of dress and appearance and the expected behaviour of women” (Sanders 2005b). One of the classic examples is Hochschild’s study (1983) of air hostesses. Like other women engaged in “women’s work”, the women involved in the sex business are expected to appear before their (potential) clients with particular types of appearance and the expected behaviour of sex workers. In other words, sex work always involves impression management. During the sexual encounter with the client, the woman has to create an impression which follows the lines laid down by the other’s expectation of sex workers, but simultaneously, the sex worker may attempt to achieve control over the client’s responsive treatment of her. Impression management in sex work, like any other “women’s work”, involves the sexualisation of dress and appearance. In the situation of commercial sexual encounters, sex workers are expected to be “[dressed] like a whore” (Chen 2008). As noted above, in this study Mo-mo serves as a good example of the ways in which sex workers create the expected impression by their dress code (see p.257, above).

Similarly, the example of Mo-mo suggests that respondents might also manage their emotions for the researcher when they are aware that they are observed. In the methods section, I discussed the issues of membership: I positioned myself as a “volunteer” with the aim of being considered as a legitimate outsider, which I hoped would enable myself to conduct observations in natural settings. Despite the fact that I attempted to establish close relationships with the women by spending time and socialising with them, the case of Mo-mo seemingly suggests that it was difficult in practice to eliminate distance between me as a researcher and the women. As noted above, clothing is an important personal front (p.258). Like the black-bra and the mini-skirt, the jacket which Mo-mo put on during the interview also had the symbolic connotation. If being dressed in a black-bra and a mini-skirt is a

crucial step to create a “whore image” and to performing the role of a “whore”, putting on the jacket and covering her body may be understood as a way in which Mo-mo took on the role of a “decent woman” in her dealings with me. By doing so, Mo-mo might have been trying to project the impression that her essential character was different from the front required to provide sexual services; despite the fact that she was in the sex business, she was in fact a decent woman and being a “whore” was merely a performance. As is further discussed in the next chapter, this may be understood as one of the ways in which women manage a stigmatised identity.

The accounts given by the women suggested that different types of emotions occurred in the interaction with their clients. As is further discussed in Chapter 10, many of the emotions found in their accounts appeared to be unpleasant. This could have resulted from the emotional labour that they entailed. As Hochschild (1983) argues, performing emotional labour and managing feelings enable individuals to mentally detach themselves, and therefore empower them to survive in their jobs. Nevertheless, there is a cost to emotional work, in the sense that it may affect individuals’ capacity to feel (ibid, p.21). The accounts given by workers in this study seemingly do not show that the women experienced unpleasant emotion as a result of performing emotional or erotic labour. Rather, most of these unpleasant emotions appeared to be the outcomes of their feeling stigma associated with their work – according to Goffman (1963/1990), managing information is a strategy commonly adopted by individuals to manage their stigmatised identities. That all the women in this study worked in secret seems to confirm that they felt the “whore stigma”.

Apparently the findings in this study echo those of others which examine the consequences of selling sex and suggest that this practice might result in negative feelings (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, what needs to be emphasised is that, as is further explained in Chapter 10, accounts given by respondents demonstrate that women’s “unpleasant feelings”, could also be a result of performing emotional labour. Women might display feelings of misery during the commercial sexual encounter with their clients. When sex

workers were “on stage”, they were expected to be “cheerful” and friendly” (see p.259, above). Nevertheless, feelings of desperate or miserable might also be, in Hochschild’s (1983) term, expected affect.

In the next Chapter, the discussion moves from respondents ‘accounts of their feelings during the “performance”, to focusing on their accounts of their inner emotions and what they felt (or were expected to feel) when they were offstage.

## **Notes**

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- <sup>1</sup> In Cantonese slang, an “abalone” refers to female genitals. “Eating abalone” means performing oral sex on a woman. It is equivalent to “eating pussy” in English slang.

## Chapter 10

### The emotional experience of sex work

How would we represent ourselves if given the opportunity? In ten years of working in the business and meeting other whores, the one thing that's become apparent is that none of us can agree on a take on any aspect of the work. Even within ourselves, feelings and convictions can shift several times over the course of a night. Sometimes you see the best of people and yourself, and everything seems so easy and attainable, and the money feels like it's rolling in for free. Other times it's the worst job you've ever had and you can't believe the ugliness of humanity and you want to get out and never come back. ....The possible experiences in the sex industry are so complicated and contradictory[.] [T]here is no way to describe it without a multiplicity of voices.

(Oakley 2007, p.12-13)

#### Introduction

Chapter 9 discussed in the context of sex work, the sexual service provider role of the sex worker calls for displaying feelings of enjoyment when they faced clients. Accounts given by sex workers demonstrate that the ways in which women offered their clients a performance that was illuminated with dramatic expressions of patience, being friendly and enjoying sex. This chapter examines how the sex workers accounted for their emotional experiences when they were “offstage”, or, more precisely, in situations when the women were not expected to “sell laughter”.

As will be discussed in the following sections, participants tended to define their emotional experiences as negative when “offstage”. Some respondents used a Chinese expression “*deoi-jan-fun-siu-bui- jan-sau*” (對人歡笑背人愁), which means “smiling in front of people but being sad behind their backs”, to describe their “offstage” emotional experiences. Apparently the findings echo those of previous research that selling sexual services contributes to harmful emotional or psychological consequences (see p.101). Nevertheless, the

quotation cited above suggests that sex workers' feelings towards selling sexual services could be ambivalent and might change over time. As a result, their accounts of emotional experiences were likely to be complicated. This chapter first explores respondents' accounts of their feelings when they were offstage. Then it moves to examine the ways in which women managed their feelings

### ***Stress as living a double life***

In their accounts of their "offstage" emotional experiences, respondents frequently described themselves as "stressed out". Many participants considered that stress was unavoidable for individuals working in the business and related this to working in secrecy. Previous studies have examined how women live a double life in order to cover up their career (Castañeda *et al.* 1996; Kong & Zi Teng 2003; Nencel 2001; 2005; Sanders 2005a). As sex work is stigmatized, for obvious reasons most sex workers choose to cover up their careers. For instance, drawing on the findings of empirical research conducted in Mexico, Castañeda *et al.* (1996) report that only a minority of respondents discuss their employment with their family and friends and have "created myths" about their employment in order to conceal their involvement in sex work. Similar findings are reported by women working in the UK (Sanders 2005) and New Zealand (Romans *et al.* 2001). In their research on the working experiences of female sex workers in Hong Kong, Kong *et al.* (2003) also find that most of their respondents worked in secret.

The findings of my research echo previous studies – most of the participants hide the nature of their work. Four women in this study were married and claimed that their partners did not know that they were involved in the sex industry. In recent years many people had become unemployed or experienced a salary reduction due to the economic recession in Hong Kong. Sa-sa's husband was a senior staff member of a telecom company, but had been dismissed the year before the study started. He had a new job at the time of the interview, but his salary was decreased by 70% compared with his previous earnings. Sa-sa had worked at a karaoke club before she



married. A few months before the interview, she started to work again in order to support the family financially. Her husband knew that she had been involved in the sex industry in the past, but she kept her current employment secret:

My husband doesn't mind my past. We met in the karaoke club anyway. I quit after we got married. He doesn't mind that, but it could be embarrassing if I bumped into his colleagues at work. So I quit and stayed home.... I started working in a karaoke (club) again a few months ago. I didn't let my husband know this. You know, no one wants his wife to do this. Hmm... I can't let my father-in-law know about this. We live with him and I can't let him know what I'm doing. He didn't know about this and I have to be careful. Yeah. I feel very nervous every time he looks at me when I leave home for work.

(Sa-sa, Mainland China)

Sa-sa and her family lived in a one-bedroom flat. Her father-in-law used the living room as his bedroom. To Sa-sa, the living environment was stressful – her father-in-law spent most of his time at home. Sa-sa's "very nervous" feelings when her father-in-law looked at her seemingly suggest that the limited space in the flat and the lack of privacy were potential causes of stress, in particular for women working in secret. Unlike the custom in Western countries, it is traditional for Chinese married couples to live with their family. People may also do so if they cannot afford to have a home of their own. Living a double life was stressful, in particular for those respondents who lived with their family in small residential flats. Although women usually worked from a flat which was in a different geographical area from their home in order to avoid discovery of their involvement in the sex business, they could find it difficult to keep their privacy and their work secret from others.

Women's experience of the double burden of jobs and housework is also a potential cause of stress. Some participants "pass it off" by pretending that they are full-time housewives, but working in the business inevitably means

that they have less time to finish the routine housework. Rose described what happened after work:

When I got into home at night, I moved carefully and made sure that I didn't make any noise. I worried that they knew what time I arrived home. It was very stressful. [...] I didn't want them to find out what I'm doing. Working in this business is not something honourable. [...] Say sometimes I wanted to mop the floor and so the next day I didn't need to work like crazy before I left home. I did not dare to do anything in the flat, as my husband might hear the noise. [...] I usually wake up at 9, 10 and leave home at 12. I am very busy in the morning because I need to get the housework done in two, three hours.

(Rose, Mainland China)

In the accounts of most of the work on emotional experiences associated with sex work, women have been seemingly occupied a *single* status – that in the occupational sphere. Women's status and roles in other spheres have been neglected. Obviously, this is an incomplete reflection, in the sense that like many other women at work, women in the sex business have many statuses (e.g. as sex workers, married women, single mothers) in different spheres (e.g. in the occupational sphere and in the family sphere). The conflicting demands of different statuses have been well recognised. According to Merton and Barber (1976), “[s]ociological ambivalence is essentially a pattern of a ‘conflict of interests or of values’” in which the interests and values are incorporated in *different* statuses occupied by the same person” (p. 9). When we consider married women at work, we find that facing the conflict between their statuses in the occupational spheres and in the family spheres is a familiar case. In this account of the emotional experiences associated with sex work, no evaluation would be complete without positing sex workers at the border of social relations.

In the literature of gender division and household work, it is widely recognised that women are mainly responsible for the latter. As a result, working wives experience the double burden of job and housework (Glass & Fujimoto 1992; Hochschild & Machung, 1989/2003). Drawing on various

studies, Bianchi *et al.* (2000) note that the hours of domestic labour could be related to various factors such as individuals' hours spent in market labour and the level of their financial contribution to the family. Consequently, an increased participation of married women in the labour market has been perceived as one cause of the decline in the hours which working wives devote to housework. This, however, may not apply to sex workers who work in secret. Many married sex workers such as Rose shouldered the double burden of labour and domestic work. Working in secret means that sex workers are unlikely to use their contributions to bargain their way out of doing domestic work. In this situation, they experience a heavier burden than do women working in other businesses. This probably contributes to sex workers' feelings of stress.

Moreover, women's accounts suggest that their experiences of stress may be attributed to the geographical characteristics of Hong Kong (a small city with a high population density), though working in secret has been viewed as an effective strategy offered by big cities to help sex workers reduce the risk of identification (Sanders 2005a). Despite the fact that only one participant in the study ever said that she had been identified in public by a family member, the fear that their secret would be discovered by their family contributed to their feelings of stress.

Rita's account is a good example of the need to relate women's feelings of stress to the physical environment of the city. The previous chapter mentioned that using CCTV was adopted as a strategy to manage the risk of violence and the technology also provides a psychological barrier for women who want to avoid being identified. Sitting behind the screen, women could control each time whether they would reveal their working (and stigmatised) identity. Unlike most of the respondents in this study, Rita did not have a CCTV in her working flat. She did not know who was standing outside her flat until she opened the door:

I am always stressed out. I always fear that I will run into people I know. But there is nothing I can do. So far it wasn't happened to me. Usually I don't

open the door wide. I hide myself behind the door, open it and look at the client. I won't let him in until I make sure that he is not someone I know ... This happened once when I worked in a massage parlour. The client was waiting in the room. I saw him through the window on the door and I recognised that he was my husband's friend. I quickly turned away and told my manager, "I won't go in there. The client is someone I know." I told him that the client was my friend and the manager sent another girl in.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

In their work on the stigma associated with epilepsy, Scambler and Hopkins (1986) introduce two concepts: enacted and felt stigma. Enacted stigma refers to the situation in which individuals experience discrimination because they are seen to be perceived as unacceptable or inferior. Felt stigma refers to the fear of enacted stigma and the feeling of shame associated with the individual's medical condition. The authors argue that individuals seeing epilepsy as stigmatizing is not necessarily related to experiencing negative discrimination. Rather, felt stigma more likely contributes to the individuals' negative emotional experiences, including anxiety and self-doubt.

All women in the present study worked in secret, and hid the nature of their work from their families and friends. As a result, they were unlikely to directly experience whore stigma-related discrimination in their private life. However, the accounts given by the women often demonstrate their fear of "disapproval, rejection and shame if loved ones discover their involvement in prostitution" (Sanders 2005a, p.116). As is demonstrated in Rita's account above, women might experience negative emotions because of their fear of whore stigma. The main reason for Rita to carefully screen the clients was that she wanted to be sure that they did not know her personally. What she did demonstrated the fear of revealing her activities. In her account Maggie was more explicit in explaining the motivation behind covering up her career. She hid what she did from her son and claimed that she worked at a beauty salon (see p.280 below):

Sometimes he just stared at me when I talked about my job. He didn't say anything and just stared at me. When this happens, I feel like I'm doing something wrong.

(Maggie, Hong Kong)

The accounts provided by Maggie suggest that for sex workers, the fear of whore stigma is always present. She assumed that her son did not know that she was in the business, but described often feeling "uncomfortable" when her son looked at her. For Maggie, the fear was associated with being found out by her son about her involvement in selling sex, an activity which she viewed as "wrong" (see below).

Working in secret implies that women are discreditable. According to Goffman (1963/1990), if an individual's differentness, or stigma, is not known by the other person, his/her main concern is likely to be managing the stigmatising information. As the following sections clarify, despite the fact that most participants did not suffer from enacted stigma and were able to reduce the risk of identification by adopting a coping mechanism, their accounts indicate that both environmental and cultural factors contribute to the women's sense of felt stigma, which results in their experiencing emotional stress.

In sum, this section has attempted to examine the link between sex workers' experiences of stress and living a double life. Most commentators on the emotional experience associated with selling sex have assumed that the act itself contributes to negative emotions or emotional harm. On the basis of the findings, I argue that an approach taking into account structural, social and cultural factors appears to have more explanatory power than the one merely focusing on an individual's single status (i.e. as sex worker) in a single sphere (i.e. the working sphere). The next section considers another theme which is frequently found in women's accounts: the feeling of guilt or shame.

### ***Shame as wrong doing***

The previous section suggests that felt stigma is a potential cause of stress. It is more complex, in the sense that felt stigma also encompasses a feeling of shame associated with the individual's condition (Scambler and Hopkins 1986). It appears that the feeling that working in the sex industry was not "honourable", as Rose indicated in her account, was the main reason why women in this study worked in secret. In this study, women's accounts echo the findings of previous research, in the sense that participants linked their feelings of guilt and shame to sex work (see Jackman *et al.* 1963; Sanders 2005a; Warr & Pett 1999).

Shame and also guilt, as discussed in the next section, have been perceived as "self-conscious"; it is assumed that these emotions involve an individual's understanding and evaluation of the self (Eisenberg 2000). It is suggested that guilt and shame are two different emotions, though both of them "involve a sense of responsibility and the feeling that one has violated a moral standard". Drawing on Niedenthal *et al.* (1994) and Ferguson *et al.* (1999), Eisenberg (2000) suggests that guilt refers to regret over wrongdoing "but does not affect one's core identity", whilst shame "is related to discrepancies between one's beliefs about the self and beliefs about what the self ought to be or what the ideal self would be" (p. 668).

As noted above, some women in this study viewed working in the business as not "honourable". Apparently, they identified with the popular perception of sex work as immoral behaviour:

You feel, hm, it's immoral; it's disgraceful. Only disgraceful people do this. Also you feel like, in the past you also looked down on those people; you blamed them for this and that. But now you were doing the same thing too.

(Joey, Mainland China)

Joey started to work from a flat about two years before the time of the interview. She was a clerk in a shipping company and a housewife after she married, but was motivated by financial need to enter the sex industry after

she divorced her husband. Joey worked in different sectors of the sex industry; she mostly worked from massage parlours, where she mainly provided massage and hand relief to her clients. Although she had been in the business for five years, she did not consider herself an “experienced” sex worker, as she did not view providing non-sexual intercourse (i.e. hand relief) as “selling sex”.

A similar view emerges from other accounts. For example, Lily came from Mainland China and started working from a flat after she divorced and became a single mother less than two years before. She said:

I will leave the business and find another job after a few years. Doing this...it is not right to do, no matter what you think of it.

(Lily, Mainland China)

She said that she preferred providing massage to sexual intercourse, but the decline in business in massage parlours limited her choices. She viewed working from the flat as a transitional job and would have left the sector, given the chance.

Goffman’s “moral career” (1961; see p.209, above) is perhaps a useful concept to explain participants’ different perspectives on the association between morality and selling sex. He investigates the processes by which mental patients interpret and accept their conditions and adjust and live with the illness. His work provides a theoretical framework to understand how individuals adjust and cope with stigma. It suggests that individuals’ attitudes towards their social position affect their understanding of stigma-related experiences.

Eleven women in this study apparently perceive selling sexual services as morally wrong (“it’s immoral; it’s disgraceful”; “it is not right to do”). This indicates that women may be affected by the mainstream society’s perception. Cultural factors significantly influence how individuals understand their behaviour. Considering the legal status of prostitution in Hong Kong and Mainland China, it is perhaps no surprise that some women in this study

associated selling sex with “immorality”, in particular, those who had not been long in the business.

Interestingly, some experienced sex workers seemingly had a different idea about selling sex. In the study, four sex workers apparently did not think that working in the sex industry was morally wrong. Fung had worked in the industry for over ten years. During the interviews, she adopted a line from a song written by the Sex Worker’s Alliance of Hong Kong, “I don’t steal; I don’t rob; I’m proud of myself” to describe her feeling in offering sexual services. In the later part of her account, however, she said:

As a sex worker, actually it’s difficult to feel proud of yourself. Even if you didn’t steal from or rob people but earned every single dollar by yourself, you would still feel shame because of what you’re doing. Hong Kong is a Chinese society, which is not as open as foreign countries.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

In the quotation cited above (see p.271), Annie Oakley, a former sex worker and current activist suggested that for women “feelings and convictions (about sex work) can shift several times over the course of a night” (Oakley 2007, p.12). This is also evident in the account given by Fung. At the beginning of the interview Fung denied the idea of “sex work as wrong doing” by differentiating selling sex from stealing and robbing, behaviour which is criminalised and universally recognised as “wrong doing”. Here, she seemingly developed an explanation and attempt to rationalise women’s behaviour. In the later part of the interview, however, Fung described that she found that “it’s difficult to feel proud” of herself, due to the general attitude towards selling sex in Hong Kong, which resulted in the feeling of shame. The example of Fung indicated that the ambivalence faced by sex workers: even though women might be able to legitimate their activities, cultural factors still influenced their feelings about working in the sex industry. As a result, their accounts of their emotional experiences at work could be complicated and contradictory. The next section turns to another theme which often emerged in women’s accounts: the feeling of guilt.



### ***Guilt as covering up***

Goffman (1963/1990) suggests that individuals are likely to feel guilty if they keep a stigma secret from people who are close to them. Some respondents successfully avoided stigma by adopting the strategy of passing. Nevertheless, guilt can be generated as a result of covering up their career.

I feel OK about what I'm doing, but I have to consider the feeling of my family. Being a whore...you know. I don't want what I do to have any negative impact on my family.

(Mei, Hong Kong)

Some respondents said that hiding what they did from their family and friends brought a sense of guilt. Maggie said that she did not see working in the sex industry as wrong. Financial independence gave her a "good feeling". She said that she did not mind letting her friends know what she was doing, but she lied to her eight-year-old son. She explained that she did so because "he's still too young to understand":

I told my boy that I'm working at a beauty salon. He said a couple of times that he wants to go there. I told him that I couldn't see him when I worked. He then asked me to take a picture of it. I promised him but I kept pretending that I had forgotten to do so. I felt guilty every time when he asked me about the picture.

(Maggie, Hong Kong)

Apparently Maggie felt guilty because she disapproval

ointed her son when she was unable to show him a picture of the non-existent beauty salon, but part of her guilt seemed to come from the fact that she had to cover up what she did (see also p.276, above).

### ***Disgust as exposure to body fluid***

Many respondents experienced negative emotions when they had physical contact with clients, in particular when they were exposed to bodily emissions. They confessed that saliva aroused their feelings of disgust. Most respondents avoided touching the saliva of their clients and explained that this was the main reason why they did not kiss mouth-to-mouth. For example, Joey said:

You'll get AIDS if you kiss someone. I don't do it. AIDS can be transmitted by kissing. [...] 9 out of 10 guys have a bad smell from their mouth! The smell of saliva is disgusting! I definitely don't do kissing.

(Joey, Mainland China)

Likewise, Lisa associated saliva with disease and a bad smell:

Sometimes the client, even if you didn't allow them to kiss you, they grabbed you when you refused to let them do so.... I'm a bit fearful of their saliva.... I felt very dirty! Yeah, very dirty. It's because you didn't have any feelings for him! It's very dirty and disgusting!...Apart from saliva, people may have things like...some people have bad breath. Moreover, some have mouth ulcers, or, they may have things such as tuberculosis. These are all infectious. Other than HIV, many diseases are infectious, aren't they? I want to be healthy.

(Lisa, Mainland China)

An interesting point is found in Lisa's account. She found the saliva was "very dirty" and she attributed this to the fact that she did not like the client. This implies that for her, kissing was an intimate act which she undertook with intimate partners or someone she liked.

Rose was among the few respondents who kissed clients. But, like other respondents, she also said that the smell of saliva disgusted her. As noted above, however, Rose believed that as a sex worker, she should do as much as she could to satisfy her clients' requests:

One of my clients had an extraordinarily smelly mouth. The smell was...  
(laughing). Anyway, I still needed to be passionate. I still kissed him.

(Rose, Mainland China)

In their accounts, saliva was frequently linked to diseases, pollution (“it’s dirty”) and a bad smell. Apparently respondents viewed it as a source of impurity (Douglas 2002/1996, p.42) and, as a consequence, any contact with saliva created a sense of disgust (see below for details). A few respondents also told me that they were disgusted by touching clients’ semen. As noted in Chapter 7, the use of condoms among flat-working women in Hong Kong was standard practice. To a great extent, this practice protects sex workers from exposure to clients’ sexual fluid during vaginal or anal intercourse. This may explain why respondents rarely described their feelings of exposure to semen and more often described their response to saliva. Nevertheless, some respondents were unexpectedly exposed to semen, due to condom failure. For example, as Crystal described:

When we had sex, he suddenly tried to remove the condom. I stopped him but he just pushed my hands away. I shouted, “No! No! Don’t do this!” and started to cry. I told him if he really wanted to shoot his load, “don’t shoot inside me. Shoot over my belly”. He did that and I sobbed. It’s disgusting. I immediately used toilet paper to wipe the dirty thing off and scolded him.

(Crystal, Mainland China)

While women often viewed bodily fluids as a source of disease, Crystal understood that in this case she was unlikely to be infected with anything. Her negative feelings did not come from fear of disease, but because her client’s semen had come into contact with her body.

Apart from the case of condom failure, sex workers were most likely to be exposed to clients’ semen when they offered clients hand relief or fellatio. Many respondents said that they did not have negative feelings when they touched the semen of clients. But some respondents were particularly repulsed by situations in which clients’ bodily fluids entered their bodies. Joey, for example, said that once when she offered a client oral sex, he did not use a condom and he ejaculated in her mouth:

I pushed him away, rushed to the bathroom and vomited. I rinsed my mouth a couple of times, but I could still sense the smell.

(Joey, Mainland China)

Rose, in contrast, offered clients *ha-baau* (口爆, ejaculation into the mouth). In Hong Kong, flat-working women offer clients oral sex, but many of them do not offer *ha-baau*. It is identified as a kinky act and workers may charge a higher price for doing so. In this study, Rose was the only respondent who offered this service:

When I first did it I found that it was quite unpleasant. Men's thing down there, I mean the testicle, that, the smell was very unpleasant. No matter how hard I washed it and it looked clean, I still felt very dirty. The smell of semen also made me sick. Sometimes I fear I'll get diseases. But I also feel this is my job. I need to get the job done.

(Rose, Mainland China)

Accounts given by respondents in this study echo the findings of previous research (e.g. Sanders 2005a). Body emissions have long been identified as polluting (Meigs 1978) and are perceived as a potential health threat (Curtis *et al.* 2004). Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (2002/1996) suggests that bodily emissions are "sources of impurity" (*ibid.*, p.41), in particular those which "[relate] to the bodily functions of digestion or procreation" (*ibid.*, p.35). Using the example of Indian caste structure, Douglas argues that sexual behaviour has a significant impact on preserving the purity of caste. Consequently, "in higher castes, boundary pollution focuses particularly on sexuality".

Following this line of thinking, we may argue that pollution rules about bodily emissions related to procreation reflect individual anxieties about maintaining a social hierarchy. In the context of sex work, sex is separated from procreation. Unlike individuals in the caste system, sex workers and their clients are clearly not concerned to maintain the purity of the hierarchy or a blood line. Rather, women's negative feelings about being exposed to clients' bodily fluids may be attributed to their fear of diseases, in particular AIDS.

Interestingly, whilst many respondents reported that saliva disgusted them, only a few respondents said that they had negative feelings when they were exposed to semen. Considering the fact that semen carries a higher risk of transmission, how can we explain that women were more disgusted by saliva?

Hence, I argue that, to understand their feelings, the symbolic meanings attached to bodily emissions in the context of sex work should be taken into account. If we treat the bodily orifices as the symbolic exits and entrances to the human body, apparently the client can “enter” the sex worker’s body through intercourse and mouth-to-mouth kissing. In other words, the acts are associated with the symbolism of crossing body boundaries. During intercourse, a condom acts as a barrier which prevents flesh-to-flesh contact and protects women from exposure to the clients’ bodily fluid. Hence, even though the client apparently “enters” a woman’s body with his genitalia, a boundary between the two individual bodies is still maintained. However, when a client’s bodily fluids enter a woman’s body, the boundary is blurred: the client’s bodily fluid is now *inside* the sex worker’s body. Therefore, I argue that women’s disgust at bodily emissions may reflect individual anxieties about maintaining a boundary between her true self and her work role. Consequently, as will be discussed in the following section, women’s feelings affect the organisation of their sex work.

The next section turns to exploring the link between the work environment, social relations and the emotional experiences of sex workers, with a main focus on a theme often found in women’s accounts: isolation.

### ***Isolation***

As noted above, I examined the influence of the geographical characteristics of Hong Kong on sex workers’ emotional experiences. Here I attempt to investigate the link between the work environment and women’s feeling of being isolated. The laws in Hong Kong allow only one sex worker to work from each flat. As a consequence, isolation is a common experience for sex workers, in particular flat-working women. Fung described her work routine;

her account well demonstrates what a typical working day of a flat-working woman is like:

Every day I wake up very early in the morning. I take a shower. Then I will go to the market. Buy some fruit or just walk around. Then I have lunch. I mean, a brunch. Then I go back to the flat. Clean the floor. Tidy the place. Put on makeup. Then I turn the TV on. After the news programme on this channel finishes, I switch to another channel and watch their news programme. Then I start to read a newspaper. I work if there is a client. Otherwise I read books. At about three o'clock, I call other girls and chat with them. Then I do one or two clients or so. Then it's time to watch the news at night. After that I watch TV dramas until 11 o'clock. Then it's time to close. I go out and walk the dog.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Considering the long business hours (working flats are open for ten to twelve hours a day) but the short actual working hours (on average women in this study had two to three clients every day, each transaction lasting for around forty-five minutes), it was not unexpected that respondents felt that they were "stuck in the flat" and "cut off from others". The phrase "feeling bored" was used repeatedly by respondents when they described their feelings about working from a flat.

### **Isolation as lack of trust**

During the time when sex workers are waiting for clients, many of them spend their time on the phone chatting to others. The evidence to support this is the fact that interviews with respondents were frequently interrupted by phone calls, a substantial number of which came from other sex workers. Many respondents worked in secret and lied about their job. In order to prevent their family or friends from finding out about their activities, women usually contacted other sex workers or their clients only when they were at work.

As Fung said, women described calling and chatting to other women as part of the routine. Nevertheless, the apparently frequent contact did not necessarily mean that they had a close relationship. Despite addressing

other sex workers as *zei-mui* (姊妹, means sisters in Cantonese), many respondents admitted that they did not see other *zei-mui* as their real friends. Working as a flat-working woman for seven years, Rita said that she was inclined to avoid associating with other workers. The number of women from the industry whom she knew was fewer than ten:

Maybe it's because of my personality. I mean, I think people in the business are...most of them are very selfish. I don't think I can share my secrets with them. No, I can't tell them what I think. They will envy me if I have (clients). It's true. They will say something bad behind my back. So I don't contact those people.

Rita had ambivalent feelings towards other sex workers. Working in secret, she felt that there were only a few sex workers whom she could associate with. Nevertheless, she was not convinced that these women saw her as a real friend:

Sometimes they asked me, "How many (clients) did you do today?" Occasionally my business was good. I told them, "Not bad. I did five." "Really? Are you serious?" They talked in this sort of tone. If they didn't trust me, why did they ask me? It made me angry. Hence, sometimes when they called me, I told them, "There were too many clients and I couldn't manage to see all of them!" "I've got to go now. I'm very busy at the moment." Then I put the phone down. I don't want to tell them the truth. Sometimes I had no clients, but I didn't tell them that. They wouldn't show their sympathy to me if I told them the truth. They may even have felt happy to hear what I said! So why would I tell them the truth?

(Rita, Hong Kong)

Weber and Carter (2002) link trust to interactions between people and argue that trust emerges from and maintains itself in interaction and the interaction is supported by social structural forces. Drawing on Barber (1983), these commentators note that the expectation that people will give priority to another person's interests is a crucial factor in the development of trust. In the case of sex work, the competitive nature of the business seemingly influences how women interpret the relationship between sex workers and

can result in a distrust of their colleagues. For example, seeing other sex workers as competitors, participants sometimes lied about their situation to prevent leaking too much information about their own business. As Betty said,

Whenever *zei-mui* called and asked how many clients I had, I would tell them that I had two, three clients per night. In the past when my business was really good, sometimes I had seven, eight clients each day. I told some *zei-mui* about this. They kept asking me to introduce the clients to them. Some asked me if there were any flats available in my building.

(Betty, Hong Kong)

Goffman argues that “[a]mong members of the team we find that familiarity prevails, solidarity is likely to develop and that secrets that could give the show away are shared and kept” (1959, p.231). If we look at prostitution through the lens of sisterhood and sex workers as a team of performers, it may be tempting to see that women could easily build trust among themselves (Sanders 2005a).

Nevertheless, my study findings show that although women were members of a stigmatized group in a loose sense, any solidarity among them was not developed. This may be attributed to the fact that the social structure of sex work affects the development of trust; working independently from their flats, flat-working women can learn how other women are situated only through their accounts. Assuming that participants viewed other women as their competitors and that the latter might lie about their business, trust could be difficult to develop in the interactions between them. The dynamic of distrust tends to lead to atomism (Lewis and Weigert, 1985), which contributes to women’s feeling of being isolated.



### **Isolation as social withdrawal**

Many respondents said that they had no friends. For example, Betty avoided seeing her old friends after entering the business:

I knew some girls when I worked in a restaurant. We were quite close to each other. Later I quit the job but we still kept in touch. I didn't tell them that I worked in this business. I told them I worked in a beauty salon. They asked me where it was and they wanted to try it and see. I made up some excuses, but I worried that they would find out the truth. Eventually I didn't take their calls; I didn't go out with them.

(Betty, Hong Kong)

In his work on unemployed individuals and stigma management, Letkemann (2002) uses the concept "derivative stigmata" to describe the consequences which arise from coping with the initial stigma of unemployment. He finds that one of the management techniques adopted by unemployed individuals is "social withdrawal" – an individual consistently avoids his/her "family, friends and members of social support groups and may extend [this] to avoidance of public places" (p.518). Letkemann argues that social withdrawal is a form of self-isolation, which is a consequence of practising stigma management.

Similarly, many respondents such as Betty withdraw from their social network in order to avoid the "whore stigma". Some sex workers not only avoided their family and friends, but also limited their interaction with women involved in the sex industry. For example, Rita said that she stayed in contact with a few *zei-mui* through frequent phone calls, but she seldom met them in a public place:

I worried that we would be seen by others. Some of them have worked for 20, 30 years. They have worked in different areas. They must be recognised by people. [...] Sometimes I saw regular clients on the street. I just walked away from them. Some women have done this (job) for a very long time. If I met them in a restaurant...people could tell what they did from their appearances...If my friends saw us, they would definitely ask me, "Why did you meet these women? They were this and that!" I would said, "Oh really? I

didn't know about this." But still it's not good. I will talk to them over the phone, but I won't go out with them.

(Rita, Hong Kong)

Many other respondents said that they avoided going to public places after they entered the business. They avoided attending dinner parties, family gatherings and banquets, as they feared that their clients were also invited. For example, at her nephew's wedding banquet, Judy found that the bride's father was her client:

We were shocked when we saw each other. I pretended that I didn't recognise him. Unfortunately my table was next to his. For the whole night I could see him from my side. I was scared. My husband asked me what's wrong but I said nothing. That was the most horrific night of my life.

(Judy, Hong Kong)

Learning from her past experience, Judy avoided the public domain. As a strategy, social withdrawal may help individuals to manage their initial "whore stigma". Nevertheless, this practice seemingly affected women's sense of identity. Judy said that she felt that she "was a mouse who couldn't stay in the light". Likewise, Sa-sa (Mainland China) said that sometimes when she walked in the street and men looked at her, she did not know whether they were her clients or simply strangers. She however felt "ashamed", as it seemed to her that "the whole world [knew]" what she was doing.

Social isolation also contributes to women's expectation of being able to get social support. For example, during the interview, Mo-mo burst into tears when she described how she had felt in a desperate situation:

I have no friends since I entered the business. I haven't seen my old friends since I started the job, cos' I don't want to explain what I'm doing. I've become distant from them. I met some girls when I worked in a massage parlour, but they're different from my old friends. I mean, I don't think I can get help from them. I sometimes felt miserable...I needed help but nobody cared about me.

(Mo-mo, Mainland China)

This section demonstrates that the social organisation of sex work contributed to women's sense of being isolated. Nevertheless, self-isolation could be viewed as a strategy which women used to cope with the "whore stigma". Findings appear to suggest that for respondents isolation can be a negative or a positive experience. As a strategy, social withdrawal or self-isolation was an effective way to manage stigma. Nevertheless, this technique seems to generate derivative stigmata. Women experienced negative emotions such as low self-esteem or shame as a consequence of avoiding the public domain. Social withdrawal also contributed to a limited social support network. As a result, women might feel helpless, unable to obtain support from family or friends.

### ***Misery as financial burden***

Misery is another main theme found in respondents' accounts. Many women said that they felt miserable, in particular when they talked about family burdens. In this study, many respondents said that supporting the family was the main motive for their entering the business. Most women were divorced and needed to support one or two children. Most of them were migrants from Mainland China. A few respondents said that they needed to take care of their parents and siblings.

For the respondents who came from Mainland China, migration to Hong Kong was mostly linked with marriage. To understand these women's experiences, it was important to take into account Mainland Chinese women's desire to marry Hongkongese men. Ding and Ho (2008) observe that for a Chinese woman rural-urban migration means leaving behind a rural life and dependence on a man for a decent life. Not all Mainland Chinese women in this study were from rural areas. But because of the difference between the economic situations of Hong Kong and Mainland China, like mail-order brides in other developing countries, many women in Mainland China assumed that migration to Hong Kong through marriage gave them the entrée to a better life. These women were usually introduced to Hongkongese men through their friends, but knew little about their husbands' situation in Hong Kong. They were soon disillusioned by the brutal reality of

poverty. Soon after moving to Hong Kong, many women found that their husbands' financial status was not as sound as they had claimed. Their relationships soon turned sour and the women divorced their husbands, but then they needed to find a job to support themselves.

Due to various factors such as language barriers and educational level, migrants may encounter difficulties in employment. Of the fifteen Mainland Chinese women in this study, eight gave a similar account of their experiences of entering the sex industry. This may explain why many respondents described the emotion of misery, in particular those who were divorced and had children to take care of. Despite certain respondents' accounts showing that the women were positive about what they were doing, they paradoxically said that they felt miserable. It appears that for these women the emotion of misery was a consequence of disillusion with their new life in Hong Kong, rather than of entering the sex industry.

As noted above, many participants in my study were from low-income groups and were the breadwinners of the family. It was unlikely for these women to receive financial support from their family or friends, but most of them refused to apply for social security assistance. Social stigma has long been associated with participation in public assistance schemes. Individuals who receive financial assistance are stigmatised and perceived as lacking the motivation to become economically independent (Jarrett 1996). Not surprisingly, some respondents made a link between morality and the use of public assistance programmes and believed that it was immoral for individuals to claim social security benefits unless they were disabled or could not work.

When talking about entering the sex industry, certain respondents used the same expression: *xiao pin bu xiao chang* (笑貧不笑娼), which literally means “([society] laughs at the poor but not at prostitutes” to explain their choice. It is used to satirize a society that values money above anything else. While mainstream culture identifies some activities such as selling sex as wrong or

immoral, individuals such as sex workers can still gain respect from others if they can earn a decent income from what they do. Apparently respondents used this originally ironic expression to rationalize their behaviour, but it may also explain why respondents are positive about their work.

Certain respondents described their unpleasant experiences with friends or relatives when they faced financial difficulties and recalled how they were scorned by others and as a result had felt inferior and depressed. After marrying a Hong Kong resident, Crystal left Mainland China and settled in Hong Kong. Their marriage, however, ended in divorce. Crystal said that as a migrant she had limited job choices:

I once worked as a salesgirl in a stationer's shop. I worked from nine (in the morning) till eleven at night (at night) but the salary was extremely low. I needed to feed my son but the money was just not good enough. I needed to pay bills, rent, my son's tuition fees and so on. I was so desperate and asked a friend to help. I didn't want to beg for help, but I needed the money. I thought we were good friends and could get help from her. She however refused, gave me a look and said, "I don't have money myself. Why don't you apply for comprehensive (social security) assistance?" I needed money but I didn't want to ask for money from the Government. Do you understand?

(Crystal, Mainland China)

Later Crystal found a job in a massage parlour and became a masseuse. She did not join the Comprehensive (Social Security) Assistance scheme because she worried that if she did her son would be laughed at by his classmates and friends. Four years after, she left the massage parlour and worked from a rented flat. Crystal commented that she was satisfied with her work:

The income was not very high but good enough to support the family. At least now I need not worry about the rent and so on. If my friend knew that I didn't apply for the assistance but worked here, she would say that I was insane. People may think that I was insane. Hmm...I honestly think that this job is OK. I earn every cent by myself. I am not a burden on the government.

(Crystal, Mainland China)

Two women described selling sex as a positive experience. Their accounts contradict the popular discourse that selling sex often leads to a miserable life for the women involved. This provided them with the chance to prove that they were self-reliant and capable of supporting their dependents. These two deviant cases may not represent the views of most of the women in this study. A further investigation is out of the scope of the research project because of the limited data about this issue. However, as is further explained in the conclusion of this thesis (see Chapter 11), the deviant cases should not be ignored in the sense that they may challenge the view that selling sex is essentially linked to miserable or negative emotional experiences.

In the previous sections I described women's emotions when they were "offstage". The following sections move to describe the strategies which flat-working women adopted to manage their emotions.

### **Emotional management**

Previous sections discussed how cultural and social structural factors affect sex workers' interpretation of their work and hence their accounts of emotional experiences at work. As noted above, an individual's capacity for reflection should not be neglected. Its role influences not only the way in which sex workers interpret their emotional experiences, but also the ways in which they develop coping strategies. In the following sections, I explore the ways in which the women in this study managed their feelings.

#### ***Acting as a "professional"***

Adopting the role of professional sex worker was an important strategy which respondents used to manage their emotions. For example, in the context of sex work the exposure of the female body is often linked to losing dignity. However, when respondents adopted the role of sex worker, the exposure of the body in front of a stranger was understood as a task which they had to undertake in the course of their work. In fact, "acting as a professional" is not confined to sex work, but is common in other businesses. For instance, Fung compared sex workers' working experiences with "professional models". She

used modelling as an example to explain that being undressed in front of a client was not necessarily equivalent to losing one's dignity:

I didn't find it easy the first time I got undressed. It's just like what happens to a model the first time she gets undressed. [...] In our case, after a client enters the room, we start to get undressed. We see it as something natural but not something special. However, it doesn't mean that I can get undressed in front of my friends. I don't find it easy to get undressed in front of people when I am off work.

(Fung, Hong Kong)

When Fung adopted the role of a professional sex worker during the sexual encounter with the client, she drew a boundary between her private self and her work self. She exposed her body in front of a client as a *sex worker*. By adopting the "sex worker role", Fung's public self was separated from her true self. As a sex worker, the respondent believed that it was *her job* to display her body in front of a client. The meaning of clothing also changed. For a sex worker, clothing was not "the outward sign of dignity" (as a woman). Rather, relinquishing her clothing was the personal front employed by Fung (as a sex worker) during her performance/sexual encounter with the client. In this sense, the client can get access to the sex worker's body, but the woman still keeps control of her private self and her body.

### ***Establishing body exclusion zones during the commercial sexual encounter***

The previous section explained that respondents distinguished the private self from the public self by adopting a professional role. Previous studies documented that sex workers exclude certain sex acts or limit access to certain body parts during the commercial sexual encounter (Chapkis 1997; Høigard & Finstad 1992; Ning 2004; Sanders 2005a). These are seen as a coping mechanism which sex workers adopt to protect their true self and true feelings:

Prostituting yourself is providing something of value for money; [...] The vagina is rented out. But nothing more. You never get my thoughts. Not my

mind, not my soul, not my mouth. There's something that is mine alone and that you'll never get hold of. I'm not really there. Prostitutes have worked out an ingenious, complex system to protect "the real me," the self, the personality from being invaded and destroyed by customers.

(Hoigard & Finstad 1992, p.64)

Many respondents in this study said that they did not kiss their clients mouth-to-mouth. In contrast to sexual intercourse, it is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the body boundary in mouth-to-mouth kissing. Unlike sexual intercourse or oral sex, it is not easy for sex workers to adopt any psychological barriers (such as condoms and dental dams) when they kiss their clients. In other words, while the use of condoms is viewed as a symbol to keep work sex separate from private sex, it is relatively difficult to draw a boundary between a "work kiss" and a "private kiss". This may explain why sex workers are less willing to kiss their clients mouth-to-mouth.

Many respondents said that they did not allow clients put their fingers into their vagina. For them, although the vagina was rented out this did not mean that clients could do whatever they liked. As Joey said:

If a client wanted to fuck me, that's fine. He paid me and I was prepared to do so. I didn't allow him touch me down there with his stinking hands. His hands were dirty and I didn't want him to touch me.

(Joey, Mainland China)

When the client puts his fingers inside the woman's body, the woman is inevitably touched by the flesh of the client. As indicated in the participants' accounts presented above, the client's behaviour appeared to be interpreted by the participant as crossing the symbolic boundary between the two parties. Hence, for some respondents this act was never acceptable at work.

Some sex acts were excluded because the cultural meanings attached to them are universally recognised. For example, many sex workers in this study said that they did not offer anal sex; all women offered vaginal intercourse, but only one woman said that she was prepared to allow the client to ejaculate on her face or in her mouth. Some women said that anal



sex was “dirty” and “abnormal”. Many women believed that “only those girls who are really desperate and have no choice” would offer these services.

Pheterson (1993) argues that, in contrast to the popular discourse, sex workers do not necessarily see selling sex as shameful, but they have their own interpretation of dishonour. She notes that sex workers are divided into “good whores” and “bad whores”. Women may have various ideas for defining these two terms. In my research, many respondents described that they exclusively offered what they defined as “normal” sexual services (which usually referred to vaginal sex with protection). They refused to engage in “abnormal” or “unsafe” sexual practices, as they appeared to find it degrading to be involved in so-called kinky sex. The next section will discuss how sex workers manage their ambivalent feelings about sex work by adopting the role of miserable victim.

### **Creating a victim image**

Previous sections indicate that some women in this study appeared to view engaging in selling sexual services (sexual intercourse) as “wrong-doing”. Some interpreted their activities in a different way. While some women developed explanations to legitimise what they were doing, others deliberately adopted the “victim role” and used “miserable narratives” to justify their engagement in sex work.

Natalie was once interviewed by reporters. In the interview, she explained that she had been abandoned by her husband. As a single mother who had two young children to take care of, she said that she was desperate and felt miserable. I discussed this article with her during the interview; she said, however:

In fact my life was not that miserable. If I was really desperate, I could definitely get help from the government. For us, say if we can have three clients, we will get HK\$1000 (£82.40) daily. Roughly we earn HK\$30000 (£2473.49) per month. It's not bad, is it?

(Natalie, Hong Kong)

The income that Natalie estimated was on the basis of a worker who had three clients a day and worked 30 days a month. The account given by Fung in Chapter 8 (see p.215), however, suggests that the worker was unlikely to work every single day and not many women in this study had as many as three clients daily. In fact, the monthly income of flat-working women is around HK\$15,000 to HK\$20,000 (£1,239 to £1,652). After deducting the cost of running the business (such as rent, condoms, fees for washing towels and bed sheets), the average net income of a flat-working woman, as noted in Chapter 1, is around HK\$8,000 to HK\$10,000 (£670 to £839) per month. By the time of the interview, Natalie did not need to support her children, as both of them had finished school. Nevertheless, she still told her clients the “miserable story” which she had reported to the newspaper:

People want to hear miserable stories. They think that we're miserable. So we pretend that we are. If we don't do that, they will not sympathise with us. Hence we made up miserable stories. In fact we are not miserable at all.

(Natalie, Hong Kong)

Likewise, Fung argued that the miserable stories might not reflect the real situation of sex workers. A sex worker support group filmed a “documentary” about sex workers in Hong Kong. The producers claimed that the stories were collected from sex workers. But in order to protect their privacy, all the sex workers who appeared in the “documentary” were professional actors. Fung criticised the film:

When they sang the theme song (of the support group) in the film, they all sang with a long face. It looked like they were at a funeral (laughing). Why the hell that they sang the song in this way? Why couldn't they sing it with a big smile? A couple of months ago they filmed a movie. There were no young girls in the film. I told them that they should find some young girls. Showing audiences that she goes to work happily and finishes work happily. Why did they keep telling the same old stories?

(Fung, Hong Kong)

Similarly, Wing-tong said that the life of a sex worker might not be as miserable as the “documentary” made out. However, she admitted that adopting a “miserable image” had a positive impact on her work:

If you told a client that you didn't need to support your family or you didn't really care about money, it'd be difficult to persuade them to give you what you wanted. [...] Sometimes my clients gave me some money, because they believed that I don't earn much by doing this.

(Wing-tong, Mainland China)

The previous sections have discussed coping mechanisms that participants adopted to manage their feelings. Compared with the rich data on women's feelings at work, these women's accounts appear to offer less information on this area. But bearing in mind that the women's accounts indicated that they had developed various strategies to manage the risks associated with sexual health and violence against sex workers, it seems that women may not associate emotions with their well-being.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examines sex workers' accounts of their emotional experiences. Findings of previous research widely suggested that selling sexual services might result in negative feelings (see Chapter 4). This appeared to be evident in respondents' accounts that they often experienced negative emotions when they were "offstage". On the basis of the findings of this research, this chapter emphasises that accounts given by respondents demonstrate that women's "unpleasant feelings" could also be a result of performing emotional labour. They might display feelings of desperate or miserable during the commercial sexual encounter with their clients. In other words, when sex workers were "on stage", they were expected to be "cheerful" and friendly" (see p.258, above). Nevertheless, feelings of desperate or miserable might also be, in Hochschild's (1983) term, expected affect.

Some women assumed their clients might want to hear "miserable stories" because sex workers were widely conceived as "victims". As Hochschild (ibid) suggests, we "receive rule reminders from others who ask us to *account* for what we feel" (p.58, original emphasis). Sex workers might describe feelings of miserable when they gave accounts about their work because this was

what others think sex workers should feel. This might explain the reason why the majority of academic findings on sex work establish a relationship between undesired emotional consequences and selling sex, although some women reported pleasure as an emotion (see p.263, above). On the basis of the findings presented above, this study argues that the miserable stories provided by the sex workers could be viewed as a performance, or part of the front of sex work. Like the creating of the “whore image”, sex workers might adopt the “victim role” which followed the tradition of the other’s stereotyped expectations of women involved in the sex industry.

Nevertheless, this study does not deny the presence of “whore stigma”, and the emotional consequence of it. In the last few decades, in parallel with the experience of homosexuals, adult “prostitutes” in Hong Kong today, as elsewhere, seem to have been more easily accepted than they were in the past. Nevertheless, women supplying sexual services in many places still feel stigma and the unpleasant emotions such as shame attributed to the “whore” stigma (Scambler 2007). In his research on opportunist migrant sex workers in London, Scambler found that these workers were apparently “able to switch sets of identities” easily; because these women “*were and were not* in the trade, so the stigma they experienced *was and was not* at the core of their self-identities” (ibid, p.1091, italics in the original). It is evident in previous research that creating geographical space between home and the working location is one of the strategies adopted by sex workers to manage information and consequently their stigmatised identities (Sanders 2005a). This may explain the apparent ease with which migrant sex workers move from one set of identities to another.

Conversely, the women in the current study, the local sex workers in particular, may find it hard to create geographical space between home and their working location in such a small city as Hong Kong. For them, sex work was seemingly a permanent job (in terms of the length of time that they stayed in the business). They were likely to find it difficult to “switch sets of identities”, and consequently they felt stigma which they experienced became the core of their self-identities. Moreover, for those workers who had

children, being “whores” (or “bad girls”) at work was sharply contrasted to being “Madonnas” (or “good girls”) at home. All these factors are likely to contribute to women’s feeling of stigma and consequently to their experiences of unpleasant emotions.

In the current study, apparently there is no significant difference between the migrant and local sex workers in terms of emotional experiences. This may suggest that cultural factors to do with the perception of female sexuality in Chinese societies, have played a significant role in shaping the worker’s understandings of selling sexual services. Hong Kong and Mainland China are sexually conservative societies. As Chan (2008) points out, although Hong Kong and Mainland China have undergone significant changes in the past fifty years or so, women’s sexuality is conceptualised as dangerous rather than pleasurable. Women’s demand for sex as pleasure is considered unacceptable, since women’s sexuality is required in the patriarchal culture to serve the social function of reproduction. As a result, “[t]he normalising of the marginalising of women’s sexualities has resulted in limited space for alternative female sexualities to develop” (ibid, p.196).

Apparently, adult “prostitutes” have been more easily accepted in the last decade – the mass media in Hong Kong, for example, mostly use the term “*Sing-gung-zok-ze*” to replace the stigmatised term “*Gei-neoi*” to refer to women in the sex business (see the discussion of the two terms in Chapter 2) – but since commercial sex is divorced from reproduction and is mainly used for pleasure (see Chapter 3), for obvious reasons selling sexual services is not considered acceptable in Chinese societies. On the basis of her research on Hong Kong female sexualities, Chan (2008) argues that despite the significant social and economic changes in Hong Kong, which contribute to women’s economic independence and consequently have an incalculable impact on their social and familial status, traditional norms regarding women’s sexuality still operate in this city.

For most women in this study, engaging in the sex industry was an informed “rational choice” (Chapkis 1997). In addition, they were able to achieve a

high degree of control over the sexual encounter and therefore efficiently managed such occupational risks as diseases and violence. Nevertheless, the meaning of sex (and also sex work) for sex workers, as for other women, is largely shaped by the social norms that have developed. In Chinese patriarchal societies including Hong Kong, non-reproductive and commodified sex is marginalised. Scambler observes that “the shame accruing almost ubiquitously to women supplying sexual services has rarely extended to their male clientele” (2008, p.1079). This may also apply to other unpleasant emotions experienced by sex workers. In a Chinese context. The reason for this may be that in China’s patriarchal culture it is female sexualities, rather than men’s alternatives, that are conceptualised as dangerous.

Together with the previous two empirical chapters on sexual health and violence, this chapter presents the findings of the present study on emotional hazards, and other types of occupational hazard which emerged in the accounts of the women whom I interviewed. The concluding chapter, below, discusses the implications of my work for theory, policy, practice and research into sex work.

## Chapter 11

### Conclusion

#### **Introduction: Sex work, Risk and Sociology**

As it is widely believed that selling sexual services is inherently dangerous, risk has become a dominant theme in research on prostitution. Scientific approaches to the risks in prostitution have mostly treated risk as an objective phenomenon. Biological, medical and psychological research on commercial sex is, for example, concerned with types of occupational hazard, assessing related risks and the consequent harm to sex workers. What researchers attempt to do is to categorise and quantify hazards. A key assumption in these approaches is that risk in commercial sex is *inevitable*.

Alternatively, sociological approaches to risk emphasise instead the ways in which other social, cultural and structural factors shape the meanings of risk, aspects which have been neglected in biomedical and psychological approaches. A sociological framework for conceptualising the risks of prostitution should help to open up theoretical spaces in which to explore how risks of commercial sex are constructed and legitimated by scientists and other authorities. Sociologists would prefer to problematise and rethink the taken-for-granted relationship between risks and selling sexual services which the existing scientific approaches to commercial sex have set up. This concluding chapter begins by summarising the rationale for adopting a qualitative approach in the present research, the current research trend among Chinese studies of prostitution and the ways in which this study may contribute to the literature. Second, it discusses the implications of my work for theory, future and policy.

#### **Sex work as a sensitive topic and qualitative research**

As noted in Chapter 3 and 4, the literature on sex work from Hong Kong is fairly limited (see below for details); most of them are quantitative studies. As

Lee (1993/1999) argues, qualitative research, which is widely used in empirical sociology, is more likely to retrieve valid data when the research topic is sensitive. For instance, Hershatter (1997) found that in the historical record on prostitution in Shanghai (Chapter 1), different issues including regulations, the trafficking of women and sexually transmitted diseases were addressed. However, existing documents have shown only “the classificatory strategies of the authors” (Hershatter 1997, p.3), or the perceptions of their authors about prostitution and prostitutes. Hershatter argues that prostitutes’ “daily lives, struggles and self-perception were...constructed in part by...other voices and institutions” (1997, p.4). I would agree with Hershatter, however, that women’s accounts of their experiences are important (see Chapter 1). Qualitative research, which is widely used in empirical sociology, mostly concerns individuals’ own accounts of their perceptions, motivations and behaviour (Hakim 1987/2000; see also Chapter 5). The qualitative research approach which is adopted in the present study has seemed therefore more suitable for this sensitive topic. The following section summarises the ways in which prostitution is explored and conceptualised in the literature from Hong Kong.

### **An alternative research on female sexualities**

In a study on women’s sexuality in contemporary Hong Kong, Chan (2008) points out that although Hong Kong and Mainland China have undergone significant changes in the last decades, women’s sexuality is conceptualised as dangerous rather than pleasurable. Women’s demand for sex as pleasure is considered unacceptable, since women’s sexuality is required in the patriarchal culture to serve the social function of reproduction. As a result, “[t]he normalising of the marginalising of women’s sexualities has resulted in limited space for alternative female sexualities to develop” (ibid, p.196).

In line with this thinking, it is perhaps not surprising that, despite the fairly substantial body of literature on prostitution available in the West, little academic research has been done on the sex industries in the East Asian context. Selling sexual services and other alternative (female) sexualities



which do not serve the aim of reproduction, are still largely marginalised and stigmatised in the East Asian context. As Wong and his colleagues (2011) point out, while social and cultural influences shape the process of stigmatising sex workers, sex workers are generally subjected to stigma regardless of different cultures. Nevertheless, there is, of course, no one unique East Asian understanding of sexuality. Hong Kong serves as a good example of one of the ways in which female sexuality, and consequently prostitution, are conceptualised in the Chinese context and its patriarchal culture.

Yu and Ho (2008) observe that in contemporary Chinese studies of prostitution, the most popular areas of concern are the reasons for entering the business and the ways in which women do so. Stemming from the experiences of the West and from those of other Chinese societies such as Taiwan (Chen 2008; Ho 2003a), two main perspectives have developed in the academic research in Hong Kong. On the one hand, prostitution is understood as a “social problem” and is understood as gender oppression or violence against women. Women sex workers receive attention in this perspective only because they are identified as a group of “others” who engage in deviant behaviour (Yu & Ho 2008). What concerns the scholars most is diseases and, next, violence (see Chapter 4). On the other hand, sex work is conceptualised as work. Like workers in other business, sex workers commodify their body parts or feelings, for financial reward. Consequently the focus is mainly on issues such as performing emotional or erotic labour and risk-avoidance strategies (Chan 2003; Kong 2006).

As discussed in Chapter 4, many of these studies adopt a quantitative approach. This approach may identify trends of a phenomenon. Nevertheless, as Lee (1993/1999) and Hershatter (1997) point out, women’s complex experiences could be forced into categories which reflect scholars’ perceptions on related issues. In this study, the main concern is the fluid and ambiguous meanings of the risks related to sex work; it attempts to understand various meanings from the perspective of sex workers, which are unlikely to be captured by quantitative surveys. The present study has

therefore aimed to make a contribution in terms of broadening the scholarship beyond the issues of sexual health and also in terms of placing women's accounts and experiences at the centre of the research. It has sought to explore the ways in which women conceptualise the risks experienced in the course of their work and their risk management. The key findings of this research are discussed below.

### **Key findings**

The main concern of this study was the ways in which flat-working women conceptualise different risks in the course of their work. The discussion begins with the way in which these women understand "selling sexual services".

#### ***Sex work as work?: Are they Gei-neoi or Sing-gung-zok-ze?***

Chapter 3 reviews different perspectives on prostitution. These perspectives open a theoretical space to understand this phenomenon, but as Scambler and Scambler (1997b) argue, sex work must be conceptualised in context:

Female sex work in Britain has to be understood against the background of the privileging of hierarchic heterosexuality in a capitalist economic system formed and consolidated in accordance with patriarchal relations.

(Scambler & Scambler 1997b, p.xiv)

This, of course, also applies to female sex work in Hong Kong. Rather than conceptualising this business as deviant behaviour and fundamentally different from other forms of service business, a perspective which is widely adopted by Chinese studies in this field (see below for details), in the present study prostitution is understood as a phenomenon in a capitalist culture and economy. Consequently, female prostitution is conceptualised as a form of bodywork (Twigg 2000) and service work (Brents & Hausbeck 2007). It involves the commercialisation of women's body parts and their feelings and the consumption of services provided by workers, which are open to negotiation. Not all the transactions include sexual intercourse (see the example of *fei-gei-coeng*), although in some segments of the sex market

such as *Jat-lau-jat-fung* in Hong Kong, women working there broadly offer this service.

On the basis of this understanding and also because the terms “sex work” and “sex workers” were broadly used by women in their accounts, these two terms are used throughout the text. In line with the thinking of Brewis and Linstead (2000), what concerns this study most is the *work* aspect rather than the *sex* aspect. Viewing “prostitution as a work activity, as a job that people do” (ibid, p.309) and focusing on the ways in which women conceptualise *occupational* hazards and consequently organise their work to manage risk, the discussion moves beyond the tradition that deems prostitution to be deviant. Emphasising sex workers’ agency, which is demonstrated in the accounts given by women in this study, the aim has been to shed light on sex workers’ reflexive understandings of prostitution and their occupational risk in a Chinese context.

The meanings of sex work held by sex workers are always embedded in a patriarchal context. For anti-sex work feminists, such as Shrage (1989, p.37), women who offer sexual services for (financial) reward “submit to sexual domination by men and suffer degradation by being treated as sexual commodities”. The findings of this study, however, suggest that sex workers may not necessarily occupy a passive position. In parallel with women who are involved in selling physical or emotional labour, most of the respondents in this study were motivated by economic incentives. The accounts given by women in this study demonstrated that for them prostitution is a form of body or service work. They viewed selling sex as a “performance”, and took on the role of sex workers during the commercial sexual encounter. By displaying expected behaviour of sex workers, women established whore images which enabled them to establish that they provided sexual services but not gave free sex to their clients. Nevertheless, all of the women in this study worked in secret. This suggests that sex workers identify that sex work is work but it is different from other business. They adopted different strategies to manage a stigmatised identity, and to establish a boundary to separate their working life from their personal life.

This finding echoes those of previous research: sex work is not “ordinary work” but a stigmatised form of work (see Ding & Ho 2008; Twigg 2000). Commentators reason that this is due to the work’s being seen as “low” because “it involves body serving in a directly subordinated way in relation to sex” (Twigg 2000, p.391). By definition it inescapably involves the commodification of sex; in the process “women are exploited for the purpose of serving men’s desires” (Overall 1992, p.717). Sex work is deemed to be a product of a patriarchal capitalist system in which male customers are privileged and female workers are socially disadvantaged by gender, race, class and age (Overall 1992; see also Chapter 3).

On the basis of the findings, this study however argues that the commercialisation of body parts and emotions and the commodification of sex do not necessarily mean that women are placed in subordinate roles. Flat-working women in Hong Kong, for example, attempted to achieve a high level of control in their work. Most women in this study described their entering and remaining in the sex business as personal choices. More importantly, the findings suggest that women could achieve a high level of control over the commercial sexual encounter in terms of the types of service provided and the developing of effective strategies to manage risk in the course of their work.

At first glance, sex work involves the commercialisation of women’s bodies, which appear to be objectified in this process. It is therefore argued that sex work is essentially not “ordinary work” because what women sell and consequently what clients buy is the woman’s body and they buy it for direct sexual use (Pateman 1988). As noted above, flat-working women in this study did indeed offer their body parts for hire. However, the accounts given by women in this study suggested that the transaction did not essentially involve sexual intercourse (for example, see Rita’s account).

More importantly, this study argues that the commercialisation of body parts does not necessarily mean that the woman turns into an object, as many commentators suggest (see Chapter 3). Rather, the accounts given by

women in this study show the possibility of the sex worker being an economic agent who rationally chooses which parts of her body are for hire, for what purposes and at what prices. The transaction is a routine rationalization (Letiche & van Mens 2002; see also Chapter 8). Sex workers in theory “serve” men’s desires, but in practice the clients’ desires are actually shaped by a “strictly scripted” routine. Workers appear to be submissive during the encounter, but it is merely acting. In other words, women’s seeming submissiveness during the sexual encounter is an outcome of performing emotional labour (see Chapter 9). The findings of this study suggest that it is the worker, rather than the client, who dominates the encounter.

While many commentators argue that the objectification of the body contributes to turning the woman into an object in the context of sex work, this study argues that the objectification of the body is a strategy developed by the worker with the aim of establishing a boundary between work sex and private sex (see Chapter 10). What the worker sells, therefore, are body parts which she *deliberately turns into an object*; the objectified body part is *manipulated by the worker*. By doing so, she sets a boundary between the private self and the work self. Therefore, for example, in the commercial sexual encounter a woman may offer to hire her mouth exclusively for oral sex, while kissing occurs only in private sex.

In this sense, what is involved in sex work is not the sale of the self (Pateman 1988), as anti-prostitution perspectives suggest, but services which involve (objectified) body parts. Høigard and Finstad (1992) argue that a sex worker “must have learned to split herself into an object and a subject” (p.180) conjecturing that this split is unlikely to be “voluntary on the part of the prostitute” and is “a result of society’s influences” (ibid). On this point, the present study argues that this split is an important mechanism developed and established by the worker to separate the body (parts) for sale from the body of the subject. In other words, the worker’s turning her body parts into objects does not necessarily turn the worker herself into an object.

Undoubtedly, the issue of female prostitution has to be understood in the context of higher levels of poverty among women, the limited job opportunities faced by women from specific backgrounds (for example, low education levels, low skills or immigrant status). Nevertheless, what has been ignored in this argument is that the meanings of prostitution differ from place to place, because they are shaped by the different social contexts of a range of patriarchal capitalist societies. As noted in Chapter 9 and Chapter 10, the stigmatisation of sex work in Hong Kong has to be understood in the context of Chinese patriarchal society.

As is explained in Chapter 2, using the stigmatised term “*gei-neo*” (prostitutes) is likely to produce and reproduce the “whore stigma”. In recent years the term “*sing-gung-zok-ze*” (sex workers) has been widely used to replace the stigmatised term “*gei-neo*”. The theoretical position of “sex work as work” is in fact challenged by scholars from East Asia. For example, Ding and Ho (2008) argue that the term “sex worker” tends to emphasise only the aspect of “*sing*” (sex), which is misleading in the sense that workers perform not only erotic labour but also emotional labour. The focus on “sex” is likely to increase the stigma attached to those involved in the sex business. From the findings of her research on Taiwanese sex workers, Chen (2003, 2008) argues that the “sexualisation, stigmatization and criminalization of sex work make it impossible for it to be ‘just’ like some other jobs” (2008, p.119). Nevertheless, women in this study widely used the term “*sing-gung-zok-ze*” to identify themselves; what they stressed was the aspect of “*gung-zok*” (work). For sex workers, emphasising the work aspect was important in the sense that this differentiated selling sexual services from criminalised behaviour such as stealing and robbing. As “*gung-zok-ze*” (workers), women highlighted that they provided sexual services for financial gain, and compared themselves to workers in other business who exchanged labour for money (for example, see the accounts provided by Fung, p.280, above). By doing so, women challenged the tradition that views prostitution as deviant. For them, identifying themselves as “*gung-zok-ze*” and normalising prostitution would minimise the stigma which has traditionally linked to selling sex.

Conversely, while the selling of sexual services has not been widely conceived as “ordinary work” in the Chinese context, in the sense that sex workers are still stigmatised, using the term may help to change the focus from the deviant aspect of prostitution to the work aspect. In this context, the risks related to selling sexual services can be conceptualised as “occupational risks”, but not understood as hazards in prostitution and unavoidable. Rather, like any other work, sex work has occupational hazards. Like workers in any other business, sex workers have their own insights into the risks that they face in the course of their work and consequently develop different strategies to manage risks. A representation of selling sex as work can therefore move on from a tradition that sees “prostitutes” as passive victims who inevitably suffer from diseases, violence and emotional consequences, to sex workers as economic agents who actively respond to risks on the basis of their understanding of occupational hazards.

### ***Sexual health: the (imagined) diseased body?***

As noted in Chapters 4 and 7, the experiences of sex workers in Hong Kong are parallel to those in the “First World”: sex workers in Hong Kong do not play a key role in spreading diseases. This point is widely recognised by many scholars. In the last decade, the focus has moved to mobile populations, among which migrant sex workers from China have been identified as a bridge population.

The conceptualisation of migrant Chinese sex workers as a diseased body in the literature from Hong Kong can be explained by the high inconsistency of condom use with clients, which is reported by sex workers in the developing world. Bloor suggests that “patterns of unsafe commercial sex are largely shaped by features of the prostitute-client relationship” (1995b, p.106). Although workers in Hong Kong and China are reported as highly knowledgeable about HIV transmission and are motivated to use protection during sexual encounters with clients, the client’s domination of the encounter is conceived as a main factor in the occurrence of unsafe sex. Likewise, scholars in Hong Kong suggest that many clients when they purchase sexual services in Mainland China, in particular, are not keen on

using protection. As a result, migrant sex workers are assumed to be a source of diseases (see Chapter 4).

Accounts presented in this study suggest that there is no significant difference between local Hong Kong and migrant Chinese sex workers in terms of the consistency of condom use. Moreover, there is no evidence to suggest that clients are more likely to refuse to use condoms when they purchase sexual services from migrants than from local sex workers. This may be explained by the fact that, as noted in Chapter 7, condom use has become a norm in Hong Kong and broadly speaking, it is the worker, rather than the client, who dominates the encounter.

It is more interesting to consider the ways in which the sex workers accounted for risk-taking behaviour. While scholars conclude that it is economic need or the lack of knowledge that mainly contribute to the incidence of unprotected sex, in particular in the case of migrant workers (for example, AFRO 2007, Choi *et al.* 2008; Kong & Zi Teng 2003; Lau *et al.* 2001), women's accounts suggest that this analysis oversimplifies the dynamics of individuals' motivation to engage in unprotected sex in the context of commercial sex.

First, when women accounted for their practising of unprotected sex, they attributed their risk-taking behaviour to lack of knowledge. Apparently this echoes what scholars have suggested in previous research (see Lau *et al.* 2002; Lau *et al.* 2003a, 2003b; Lau *et al.* 2007a, 2007b). Nevertheless, women in this study use this factor only to explain their risk-taking behaviour in the era before AIDS. Many women said that they had become aware of the risk of diseases, in particular AIDS, only since the mid-1980s after HIV/AIDS became a general issue, and they emphasised that as a result they were motivated to use condoms to protect themselves. This explains the low rates of HIV/AIDS and other diseases among sex workers in Hong Kong. But, more interestingly, it is argued in this study that their emphasising the consistent use of condoms was a strategy which workers adopted to manage their stigmatised identity. Condom use is a norm established in the context of



*jat-lau-jat-fung*, and it is evident in both the women's accounts and academic research that flat-working women consistently use protection during the sexual encounter. Nevertheless, sex workers are still vulnerable to AIDS related stigma, and (migrant) workers are still identified as a risk group in academic and popular accounts (see Chapter 4). Emphasising their awareness of the risk and consistency of condom use with clients, women seemingly attempted to construct themselves in their accounts as "moral subjects". I interpret it as a way to manage their stigmatised identities in terms of not only AIDS-related stigma but also "whore" stigma – workers presented themselves as a "good whore" and differentiated themselves from those who provided "indiscriminate sexual intercourse" to clients (Chapter 7).

This may explain why, although some workers might have unprotected sex with their clients, in their accounts the women whom I interviewed claimed that they consistently used protection with clients. The literature from Hong Kong, as elsewhere, tends to attribute the occasions of unsafe sex to clients' domination of the encounter and refusal to use a condom. Some scholars therefore suggest that sexual health projects in Hong Kong should focus on (cross-border) clients. It is reported, for example, that cross-border truck drivers have used protection more consistently after receiving voluntary counselling (Lau *et al.* 2009, 2010a; see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, what is seemingly missed out in the findings of these surveys is the point that these drivers have attempted to construct themselves as "moral subjects" in their accounts, just as some women in this study did (see Chapter 9).

Aldridge (2005, p.59) suggests that "people normally act so as to achieve their goals in the most efficient way they can in the light of their preferences and knowledge". Therefore, as noted in Chapter 7, sex workers seemingly felt that they had a responsibility to use protection after AIDS had become a public issue and they were supposed to be aware of the risk of contracting or transmitting it. What is ignored in this theory is that there are situational factors which may affect individuals' behaviour (*ibid*, p.101). As noted in Chapter 7, for example, the accounts given by some women, which echo the account given by a client, suggest that some clients may have difficulties in

using protection. This information may not be revealed in survey research but is crucial to understanding individuals' risk-taking behaviour. Most importantly, on the basis of the present findings, this study argues that a "situational view of rationality" (ibid, p.60), rather than the rational theory, is more likely to enable us to conceptualise the complex risk-taking behaviour of sex workers and their clients. The next section turns to the findings about violence against sex workers.

### ***Violence against sex workers***

While client violence has increasingly received the attention of Western commentators in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Hart & Barnard 2003), this topic has as yet received relatively little attention in Hong Kong. One of the ways to explain this is that while street sex workers broadly experience high levels of violence in the course of work in the West, this may not apply to the context of Hong Kong with its different practices; for example, street sex workers in Hong Kong usually bring their clients to an establishment, such as a motel or a rented flat, rather than having transactions with their clients in car parks or remote places. In this sense, the differences between street and indoor sex work are not as significant as they are in the context of the West in terms of the level of risk faced by sex workers. Indoor sex work, as found in previous research (Hart & Barnard 2003; Kinnell 2008; see also Chapter 8), has traditionally been conceived as much safer than street sex work.

In parallel with the experiences of sex workers elsewhere, flat-working women in Hong Kong perceived that they were relatively safe. Their sense of safety may come from the fact that only a few of women in this study experienced *physical violence* against them. The ways in which workers conceptualise violence related to sex work may be shaped by the connotation of the term "*bao li*" (violence) in Chinese society. As discussed in Chapter 8, the literal meaning of the term emphasises the use of brute physical force (see Tang *et al.* 2002). As a result, many of the women seemingly did not see themselves, as flat-working women, to be at risk of client *bao li* in the course of their work.

Most importantly, the ways in which flat-working women organise their work and the characteristics of the clientele may significantly affect the level of violence faced by workers (Whittaker & Hart 1996). The accounts given by women in this study, as noted above and in Chapter 7, demonstrate that many of them could achieve a high level of control in the encounter. The scripted routine, of course, effectively controls not only the use of protection. The accounts noted in Chapter 8 demonstrate that many flat-working women effectively manage the risk of violence through their organisation of their work, since clients are expected, and most of them are likely, to follow the scripted routine (see above). In this context, the behaviour of the client is largely scripted and under the control of the sex worker. As a result, the worker is more likely to be alarmed by any suspicious behaviour on the part of clients. This may minimise the risk of violence risk faced by these women.

Although the flat-working women in this study seemingly did not conceptualise client *bao li* (physical violence) as an occupational risk, their accounts suggest that workers may experience crimes of violence perpetrated not by clients, but by vigilantes, muggers and robbers (see also Kinnell 2006; 2008).

Robbery was the main concern of the women in this study. In parallel with indoor sex workers elsewhere, flat-working women in Hong Kong appear to have become targets of robbery (Brooks-Gordon 2006; Kinnell 2008; Sanders *et al.* 2009). Violent crimes such as robbery were viewed ambivalently by the women in my sample. As noted in Chapter 8, women adopted various strategies to manage the risk and many believed that they could effectively manage the risk. Yet they frequently mentioned their fear of robbery.

Sex workers' experiences of violence in the course of their work are parallel to those of workers in other business. For example, Fisher and Gunnison (2001) found that women are more likely than men to experience robbery when they work in business areas such as the retail sector. Drawing on the findings of previous research (Jenkins 1996), Shannon *et al.* (2002) argue

that the nature of retail and service positions put women at greater risk of violence, because individuals are more likely to experience violence in the workplace when they work alone or in small groups. Individuals who work at night or work with cash are also at greater risk of violence than most (see also Shannon *et al.* 2008; Shannon *et al.* 2009). These characteristics are found not only in the retail positions in which women work, as Shannon *et al.* (2002) suggest. As demonstrated (in Chapter 8), the work of flat-working women also shares the same characteristics. This explains why flat-working women were often robbed in their working flats.

Although robbery is widely and legally conceived as a crime, interestingly, many flat-working women appear to *normalise* the violent crime they experience in the course of their work. Likewise, when flat-working women accounted for non-consensual acts occurring in the commercial sexual encounter, they described their experiences by the term “*min-fai-caan*” (free meal) and seemingly did not conceptualise their experiences as “sexual assault” or “rape”. When women accounted for robbery or non-consensual acts, some of them described what they experienced as “unlucky”, which seemingly implied that for them the risks were always present; they might be minimised through adopting different strategies, but were unpreventable in the context of sex work (and therefore they held that it was a matter of bad luck if they were robbed). But, conversely, there is no evidence to suggest that female workers in other retail and service positions normalise the risk of violent crime which they face at work. In other words, for female workers in other retail and service work, violent crime is conceptualised as *working place violence*, which is avoidable by adopting violence prevention strategies. Accounts given by flat-working women however, appear to suggest that for them robbery is inevitable and is *embedded in sex work* itself.

If flat-working women conceptualise sex work as *work*, and themselves as *sex workers*, why do they have different perceptions of violent crime when it is experienced in the course of their work? Here, Anton Blok’s concept (2001) of “infamous occupations” and “violence” may shed light on the issue. Blok argues that there are some occupations in society which are considered to

be “infamous”. The rationale for some occupations becoming “infamous” (as professional acting or chimney-sweeping used to be in Western Europe) may need to be understood in a more specific cultural context, but other professions, such as sex work, are widely conceived as “infamous” across cultures in most contemporary societies.

Speaking of “violence”, Blok (ibid) argues that, rather than dismissing “violence” as “senseless”, it should be conceptualised as symbolic or meaningful action. The social action, in this sense, potentially has something to say (p.108). In the context of flat sex work, it is the instrumental aspects of robberies that seem to dominate. Nevertheless, what this violent crime may indicate that, although sex work appears to be increasingly conceived as work, it is still considered an “infamous occupation” rather than “ordinary work”. Considering the fact that “members of these occupational groups were despised, treated with contempt and set apart from ordinary social life” (p.45), what violent crime symbolise in the context of sex work is that some women are beneath contempt because of their working identity. It is more “acceptable” to perpetrate violence against sex workers because this group is set apart from women in other service occupations, (though these two groups of occupations share some similarities, as noted above).

Goffman argues that “[b]y definition ... we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (1963/1990, p.15). In line with this thinking, sex workers in Chinese societies are stigmatised, and therefore they are not “quite human”. Some acts, such as robbery and sexual assault, are considered as a violation of a human being. It is not a coincidence that many serial murderers kill only sex workers and no other women. But because society does not quite conceive sex workers as human, this may act as a justification for engaging in violence or violent crime against them. Here, it is argued in this study that while the difference in working conditions explains the various levels of violence faced by sex workers in different segments of sex work, the concept of “infamous occupations” may help us to understand why sex workers are more likely to be victimised than women in retail or other service occupations.

Moreover, this concept may also explain why women normalise the violent crime they experience in the course of their work. As noted above, the ways in which women conceptualise sex work is shaped by the social meaning of prostitution. Despite women describing themselves as *sing-gung-zok-ze*, their use of the term *sing-gung-zok* suggests that they may understand sex work as “work”. Nevertheless, they may not conceptualise it as “ordinary work” but as an “infamous occupation”. Violence or violent crime is consequently conceptualised and normalised as an essential element to be reckoned with in sex work.

While sex workers in Western societies, in particular, street sex workers, often reported violence from communities (Kinnell 2008; Matthews 2008), flat-working women in Hong Kong seemed not to share the same experience. As noted in Chapter 1, in Hong Kong working flats are often found in residential buildings, and more than one such flat can be found on a floor. In this sense, flat-working women worked from their flats independently, but concurrently in a collective environment. If working alone is understood as a main factor contributing to a higher level of risk of violence, in theory these women are able to obtain help from their colleagues or their neighbours if they are attacked. In practice, some women envisaged that they might be helped by their colleagues, but less probably by their neighbours. Again, this may be explained by the fact that sex work is widely conceptualised as an “infamous occupation”. As members of a stigmatised group, women are treated with contempt and this is why they believed it unlikely that their neighbours would help them. The next section turns to the findings related to flat-working women’s accounts of their emotional experiences in the course of work.

### ***Emotional experience and emotional labour***

For most women in this study, engaging in the sex industry was seemingly an informed “rational choice” (Chapkis 1997), in the sense that, as an economic subject, the worker chose to engage in the business in terms of such advantages as its relatively high income and flexibility (compared to other jobs available to them). Furthermore, they defined their involvement in

the business as “voluntary”, and were able to achieve a high degree of control over the sexual encounter and therefore efficiently managed such occupational risks as diseases and violence.

The women’s accounts noted in Chapter 9 explored the ways in which they as flat-working women managed their feelings and engaged in emotional labour in the work. This chapter discussed how workers developed different mechanisms to commercialise their feelings and body (parts) without selling themselves or turning themselves into an object. Nevertheless, women’s accounts suggest that many of them seemingly experienced unpleasant emotions, which, however, were mostly related to the “whore” stigma. As noted above, the meaning of sex (and therefore also sex work) for individuals in society, including sex workers, is largely shaped by the social norms which have developed. In Chinese patriarchal societies, including Hong Kong, non-reproductive and commodified sex is still marginalised. Nevertheless, Scambler observes that “the shame accruing almost ubiquitously to women supplying sexual services has rarely extended to their male clientele” (2007, p.1079). This may also apply to other unpleasant emotions experienced by sex workers in a Chinese context. The reason for this may be that in China’s patriarchal culture it is female sexualities, rather than men’s, that are conceptualised as dangerous, undesirable and morally wrong (when their aim is not reproduction but pleasure).

How can we understand the ambivalent emotional experiences of flat-working women? This study argues that Everett Hughes’ (1962) concept of “dirty work” may shed light on this issue. In his work about the Holocaust, what concerns Hughes is the ways in which individuals conceptualise the “dirty work” done in the concentration camp to Jews and others by ordinary Germans or “good people”. What dirty workers did was broadly conceived as morally wrong. Hughes conceptualises Germans’ common silence on this issue as a ritual expression of their collective guilt. Nevertheless, Hughes (1962) argues that if a society is considered as a network of in-groups and out-groups, we may sacrifice the out-groups to uphold the well-being of the in-groups. In this sense, “we do our own dirty work on those closest to us”

(ibid, p.8). In other words, the meanings of dirty work held by dirty workers are ambivalent: privately dirty workers do not necessarily perceive what they have done as wrong. Nevertheless, because the dirty work is widely recognised as morally wrong, they may express their “guilt” rather than defend themselves.

Likewise, flat-working women in this study may conceptualise sex work as an (infamous) occupation, even when they have made a rational choice to engage in this segment of the sex market, as this was the better, if not the best, job opportunity of all those available for them. This explains how, for many women in this study, they seemingly did not conceive their involvement in the sex business as “wrong”. Nevertheless, because sex work is still largely marginalised and stigmatised in Chinese societies, therefore women’s accounts do not challenge the traditional understanding of prostitution. Some women in this study even deliberately created a victim image, which resembles the stereotype of “prostitutes as victims” (see Chapter 10, p.297).

While many sex workers spoke of the unpleasant emotions that they experienced in the course of their work, a few of them commented that they enjoyed the sex they had with their clients. Similar findings have been found in previous studies, but mostly commentators have treated these as the exceptions (Sanders 2005a). Nevertheless, Giddens’ concepts of “plastic sexuality” (1992) may shed light on this phenomenon. Giddens defines “plastic sexuality” as “decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction ... it frees sexuality from the rule of the phallus, from the overweening importance of male sexual experience”. It is plastic because it is not male- or reproductive-centric but fluid. The term “plastic sexuality” enables alternative sexualities to occur (for example non-heterosexual, non-coitus-centred), and free from the needs of reproduction; this means that women can have sex for the sake of pleasure. In other words, the emergence of “plastic sexuality” affects the ways in which female sexuality is perceived in society, which consequently shapes the ways in which women, including sex workers, of course, conceptualise sexuality.

The change of perceptions of female sexuality may explain why a few flat-working women described the sex with their clients as enjoyable, in the sense that women



are now more likely to be able to enjoy the pleasure of sex rather than repressing their feelings (p.262). The women's unwillingness to discuss this issue (which was reflected in the fact that only a few women were willing to talk about it and some appeared to feel embarrassed in giving their accounts) may be explained by the normalising of women's marginalised sexuality in the Chinese context. In Hong Kong, traditional norms regarding women's sexuality still operate. It has been taken for granted that women's sexuality is about danger rather than pleasure (Chan 2008). Therefore, it is "inappropriate" for women to talk about their experiences of sexual pleasure, in the context of commercial sex in particular, as to many sex workers it is crucial to establish and maintain the symbolic boundary in order to manage their stigmatised identity (see Chapter 9).

### **Implications for sex work research**

While most studies on the occupational risks of sex work in Hong Kong are quantitative in approach, the present qualitative research may contribute to this body of literature, in the sense that it explores issues which have not been explored in previous studies. The survey study, as discussed in previous chapters, may not be the most suitable approach to studying a sensitive topic (Lee 1993/1999), and sex work is a good example. The accounts given by women in this study demonstrate that women's experiences of risks in the course of their work are complex and perceived ambivalently. Consequently, the meanings of risks held by sex workers are always ambiguous and fluid. This complexity makes it difficult, if not impossible to fit their experiences into a pre-categorised study approach.

As noted above, and also as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the Chinese studies of sex work mostly define prostitution as a "social problem" rather than "work". As a result, the focus tends to be on the undesired consequences of selling sexual services, in particular, diseases and HIV/AIDS. There is no doubt that sex workers face risks, as workers in other employment sectors face occupational hazards. However, the focusing on undesired consequences may produce and reproduce the "whore" stigma. While sex workers, in particular migrant sex workers in Hong Kong, have

been considered as more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour, this research suggests that disease is not the main concern of the women in question. Rather, on the basis of the findings, this study argues that more attention should be paid to issues of violence and workers' emotional experiences.

Of course, there is a substantial body of international literature on violence against sex and the emotional health of sex workers, though these areas have still received little attention in Chinese studies. Nevertheless, many writers tend to focus on client violence. The findings of this study, which echo those of studies from other countries (for example, see Brooks-Gordon [2006] for the UK), suggest that many sex workers were not attacked by their clients but by other predators. The emphasis on client violence in academic research is likely to produce and reproduce the stigma of purchasing sexual services, which consequently contributes to the stigma of sex work. Therefore, it is argued that the research focus should not be concentrated on client violence, in particular, in the indoor sex market, but on violent crimes committed by other predators.

Here, this study considers prostitution as work, and argues that this approach may take the debate about risk of sex work forward by emphasising the work aspect, rather than the sex aspect, of the issue. In this sense, hazards faced by sex workers in the course of work are consequently conceptualised as "occupational risks" rather than "risks of deviant behaviour". The approach of seeing selling sexual services as deviant behaviour is likely to produce and reproduce the commercial sex related stigma. Conversely, considering "sex work as work" enables us to take the debate forward – in this context, conceptualising risks as occupational hazards implies that sex worker, like workers in other jobs, may experience occupational hazards, have their understandings of risks and developed different strategies to manage risks accordingly.

In some Chinese studies of prostitution, some scholars argue that the trend to frame prostitution either as "just sex" (with an emphasis on gender oppression) or as "just work" "is misleading and fails to theorise prostitution

adequately (Chen 2008). Moreover, it is also argued that there is a stigma attached to the identification of “sex worker”, because the term apparently emphasises “erotic labour”, and suggests that sex work is not only about sex but also love labour and emotional work. The approach “sex work as work” has been developed in the West and should be understood in a specific cultural context (for example, the Western feminist movement). Nevertheless, here it is argued in this study that “the sex work as work” approach enables us to take the debate of sex work forward. Emphasising the work aspect enables us to conceptualise prostitution as “commercial behaviour” (rather than deviant behaviour) which is involved in the commercialisation of feelings, sex and body (parts). In this sense, the sex worker does not sell sex but sexual *services*; “sex” therefore may not be separated from the worker’s sexuality and their body, which may involve the selling of “self”. In contrast, conceptualising workers’ behaviour as selling sexual *services* enables us to open a new theoretical space to understand sex work. As a sex worker, the woman commodifies her sex and feelings to provide sexual services to her client. As an economic subject, she objectifies her body parts to perform erotic labour during the commercial sexual encounter. In this sense, the woman does not turn herself into an object, as the anti-prostitution perspectives argue, because the sex worker as a subject with agency dominates the sexual encounter. Most importantly, this approach challenges the traditional view that “prostitution is a stigmatised form of work”, which is “low” because “it involves body servicing the desires of a dominant customer” (Twigg 2000, p.389). The approach of seeing “sex work as work”, therefore, may avoid producing and reproducing “sex work stigma” in academic research.

Considering the fact that selling sexual services, along with other alternative female sexualities, is still marginalised and stigmatised in Chinese societies, the concepts of “infamous occupations” and “dirty work” are used to explore the ways in which selling sexual services is conceptualised in the Chinese context. Although in contemporary Chinese societies, sex work may not be widely considered as “ordinary work”, emphasising the work aspect however

may, as explained in this concluding chapter, take the debates about sex work and issues like occupational risks forward.

### **Implications for policy**

In some recent studies, commentators argue that there is a need to develop new frameworks for understanding the sex industry (Ditmore *et al.* 2010; Hardy *et al.* 2010). Brents and Hausbeck (2010), for example, argue that sex work should be understood in the context of the sexualisation of culture. At a time when “pleasure, sexuality, and the erotic have become central components of globalised late capitalist leisure culture” (p.11), sex work, among diverse sexualised practices, identities, and values are becoming more acceptable in America (Brents and Hausbeck 2010) and elsewhere including Hong Kong (see p.297, above). However, in America only those feminists and activists who support abolitionist perspectives on prostitution had been funded, in particular in the Bush Era. Consequently, global discourses on sex trafficking have been mobilised, and laws have been increasingly used against sex workers. These policies have forced the sex industry underground, and therefore prevented harm reduction programs and restrict condom distribution, and HIV/AIDS education (Brents and Hausbeck 2010).

Likewise, sex worker support groups in Hong Kong have received limited support from the government. Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong, the agency granting me access to the sex workers in this study, never received any funds from the government. Also budget constraints prevented a semi-official organisation, Hong Kong AIDS Support Group, from offering health care services to sex workers (see p.153, above). As noted in Chapter 2, the regulatory framework adopted in Hong Kong is a modified form of prohibition. In the last decade Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong and Sex Workers Concern launched campaigns to change the law, and argued that laws should protect sex workers rather than prohibiting prostitution. Nevertheless, the law related to prostitution in Hong Kong did not change significantly since the Crimes (Amendment) Bill was passed in 1978 (see p.51, above). Staff of Sex Workers’ Alliance of Hong Kong recounted how they struggled to make

politicians publicly supporting reforms. Difficulties faced by sex workers may be explained by the fact that many NGOs are likely to have difficulties to secure funds for a research project if a proposal is not about topics such as “AIDS prevention”, “trafficking” or “violence against women” (Agustín 2010). Nevertheless, as noted in previous chapters, framing women as victims may not necessarily reflect the reality of women’s experiences. Despite the fact that AIDS prevention may be important to sex workers, findings of this study suggest that they may also need other services such as emotional support (see Chapter 9).

Brents and Hausbeck (2010) suggest that norms surrounding sexuality have been changed as a result of the sexualisation of culture. Consumers are more likely to accept the consumption of sexuality as a “legitimate market transaction” as a result of changing attitudes and increasingly sexualised culture (p.13). In the Chinese context, selling sex is still stigmatised. Nevertheless, in the last decade the adult commercial sex industry has rapidly expanded in China (Jeffreys 2004; Zheng 2009). As noted in Chapter 9, accounts of some women in this study demonstrated that they might not necessarily think that working in the sex industry is morally wrong (see p.277). Despite all these changes, the regulatory framework adopted in Hong Kong is still a prohibition, which aims to downplay prostitution because selling sexual services is conceived to be immoral. In order to respond to these changes, it is argued in this study that there is a need to reform the prostitution laws.

In recent years, sex worker support groups in Hong Kong launched campaigns and demanded the decriminalization of prostitution and the same rights. In a comparative study of the regulating policies of the sex industry in different regions, Cheung (2009) suggests that the current regulatory framework in Hong Kong may force prostitution underground. As a result, sex workers have been further marginalised and have become increasingly vulnerable. In line with previous studies (AFRO 2007; Kong & Zi Teng 2003), she argues that decriminalization may minimise the risk of violence faced by sex workers. For example, women can choose to work in the same flat to

enhance their safety (see also West 2000). Moreover, the agency may find it easier to gain support from the government and develop health and safety programs in the context of decriminalization of prostitution.

This research explores meanings of occupational risk by examining the accounts given by sex workers: an area which has been largely ignored in previous research from Hong Kong, and likewise elsewhere in other East Asian countries. As noted in Chapter 5, what is emphasised in this study is that research on sex work should reflect the voices of participants and various experiences (see also Sanders *et al.* 2009). Accounts of these women demonstrate that their subjective experiences are crucial to our understanding of some of the ignored aspects of sex work.

Last but not the least, although findings of previous research seemingly suggest that the decriminalization of prostitution may reduce the level of occupational risks faced by sex workers, in future research scholars need to do more work to investigate the actual needs of sex workers and encourage these women to participate in the policy-making process.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Hong Kong**

#### **Re Regulations concerning Prostitution.**

- 1857. First Contagious Disease Ordinance enacted in Hong Kong.
- 1867. Contagious Disease Ordinance amended.
- 1877. Commission of Enquiry into the working of the Ordinances appointed.
- 1877. British Abolitionists publish extracts from the report of the Commission of Enquiry.
- 1880. Mr. Stansfeld, Treasurer of the Abolitionists asked for production of correspondence relating to the C.D. Ordinances in Hong Kong.
- 1881. Correspondence was represented to Parliament.
- 1882. British Abolitionists publish not only the correspondence but added there to full comments drawn from the report of the committee of Enquiry and also drawn from the evidence given before the Committee of Enquiry, which evidence the colonial Secretary had refused to submit to the House of Commons.
- 1887. The Contagious Disease Ordinances were repealed.
- 1889. The Women and Girls Protection Ordinances were passed.
- 1894. Women and Girls Protection Ordinances were amended.
- 1894. Registration of Brothels repealed.
- 1890. Women and Girls Protection Ordinances were further amended.
- 1897. A Consolidation W. & G. P. Ordinance was passed.
- 1891. (Small further amendments.)

1897. A Consolidation W. & G. P. Ordinance was passed.
1899. The Government received Memorial from the China Association etc. petitioning for a re-enactment of the Contagious Disease Ordinances.
1899. Mr. Chamberlain replied saying that public opinion (at home) would not tolerate such a thing but that some of their complaints might be met by certain amendments of the Women and Girls Protection Ordinances.
1899. Women and Girls Protection Ordinances were further amended.
1904. Women and Girls Protection Ordinances were further amended.
1919. Mr. and Mrs. Haslewood began agitation in Hong Kong against mui tsai.
1920. N.C.C.V.D. sent out their Commission to the Far Eastern ports.
1922. Government announces proclamation of freedom to the Mui Tsai in March. Hong Kong.
1923. Letter from Colonial Office to Lord Henry Bentinck re Tolerated Sept. Brothels defending same.
1924. Above letter published in Anti Slavery Magazine. Jan

## Appendix 2

### Summary of the Regulation of Sex Work in Hong Kong

年份 Year	事件 Events	
1844	港督戴維斯驅逐女性工作者 Sir Davis expelled female sex workers.	
1845	第一次性工作規範化 First Regulation of Sex Work	港英政府向性工作場所及性工作者徵稅 Hong Kong Colonial Government started taxing brothels and sex workers.
1847		港英政府停止向性工作場所及性工作者徵稅 Government stopped taxing brothels and sex workers.
1857	第二次性工作規範化 Second Regulation of Sex Work	港英政府頒佈〈性病條例〉，向性工作場所徵稅 Enactment of Venereal Diseases Ordinance: Government started taxing brothels.
1867		港英政府以〈傳染病條例〉取代〈性病條例〉 Venereal Diseases Ordinance was replaced by Contagious Disease Ordinance.
1887		〈傳染病條例〉取消：第二次性工作規範化暫時中斷 Repeal of Contagious Disease Ordinance: temporary halt of second regulation of sex work
1889		港英政府頒佈〈保護婦孺條例〉，繼續性工作規範化政策 Enactment of Protection of Women and Girls Ordinance: second regulation of sex work resumed.
1932		國聯「販賣婦女委員會」反對香港性工作規範化政策，性工作規範化政策中止 Due to the objection of Traffic in Women Committee, League of Nation, second regulation of sex work was cancelled.
.1942	第三次性工作規範化 (日佔時期) Third Regulation of Sex Work (Japanese Occupation)	灣仔及西區成立紅燈區 Establishment of 'Red Light' Districts in Wanchai and Western District
1945		紅燈區取消 Abolishment of 'Red Light' Districts
1978	性工作非刑事化：〈刑事罪行(修訂)草案〉通過 Decriminalization of Sex Work: Enactment of Crimes Amendment Bill	



## Appendix 3

### Laws Relating to Prostitution in Hong Kong

#### Crime Ordinance, Chapter 200

<p>Cap 200 s 130 第 130 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who-</p> <p>(a) procures another person to become, in Hong Kong or elsewhere, a prostitute; or</p> <p>(b) procures another person to leave Hong Kong, intending that other person to become, elsewhere, an inmate of or frequent any premises, vessel or place kept as a vice establishment; or</p> <p>(c) procures another person to leave her or his usual place of abode in Hong Kong, intending that other person to become an inmate of or frequent any premises, vessel or place kept as a vice establishment, in Hong Kong or elsewhere, for the purpose of prostitution, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 10 years.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人—</p> <p>(a) 促致另一人在香港或外地成為娼妓；或</p> <p>(b) 促致另一人離開香港，意圖使該另一人在外地居住於或經常出入於經營作賣淫場所的處所、船隻或地方；或</p> <p>(c) 促致另一人離開她或他在香港的經常居住地方，意圖使該另一人在香港或外地居住於或經常出入於經營作賣淫場所的處所、船隻或地方，目的在於賣淫， 即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 10 年。</p>
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<p>Cap 200 s 131 第 131 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who-</p> <p>(a) harbours another person or exercises control or direction over another person with the intention that that person shall do unlawful sexual acts with others; or</p> <p>(b) harbours another person or exercises control, direction or influence over another person for the purpose of or with a view to that person's prostitution, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 14 years.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人—</p> <p>(a) 窩藏、控制或指示另一人，意圖使該人與他人作出非法的性行為；或</p> <p>(b) 窩藏、控制、指示或影響另一人，目的在於或旨在使該人賣淫，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 14 年。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 132 第 132 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who procures a girl under the age of 21 to have unlawful sexual intercourse in Hong Kong or elsewhere with a third person shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 5 years.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人促致一名年齡在 21 歲以下的女童在香港或外地與第三者非法性交，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 5 年。</p>

<p>Cap 200 s 133 第 133 條</p>	<p>(1) Subject to subsection (2), a person who procures a woman who is a mentally incapacitated person to have unlawful sexual intercourse in Hong Kong or elsewhere with a third person shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 10 years. (Amended 31 of 1997 s. 9)</p> <p>(2) A person shall not be guilty of an offence under this section because he procures a mentally incapacitated person to have unlawful sexual intercourse, if he does not know and has no reason to suspect her to be a mentally incapacitated person.</p>	<p>(1) 除第(2)款另有規定外，任何人促致一名屬精神上無行為能力的女子在香港或外地與第三者非法性交，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 10 年。</p> <p>(2) 任何人如不知道亦無理由懷疑一名女子是精神上無行為能力的人，則不會因促致該女子非法性交而犯本條所訂罪行。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 134 第 134 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who in any manner or by any means detains another person against her or his will-</p> <p>(a) with the intention that the other person shall do an unlawful sexual act; or</p> <p>(b) on any premises or vessel, or in any place, kept as a vice establishment, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 14 years.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人以任何方式或方法，違反另一人的意願而將其禁錮—</p> <p>(a) 意圖使該另一人作非法的性行為；或</p> <p>(b) 在經營作賣淫場所的處所、船隻或地方，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 14 年。</p>

<p>Cap 200 s 134 第 134 條</p>	<p>(2) Where a person is on any premises or vessel for the purpose of doing an unlawful sexual act or is on any premises or vessel, or in any place, kept as a vice establishment, another person shall be deemed for the purposes of subsection (1) to detain that person there if, with the intention of compelling or inducing that person to remain there, the other person-</p> <p>(a) withholds from that person any of that person's clothes or other property; or</p> <p>(b) threatens that person with legal proceedings in the event of that person taking away clothes provided for that person by the other person or on the other person's directions.</p> <p>(3) A person shall not be liable to any legal proceedings, whether civil or criminal, for taking away or being found in possession of any clothes she or he needed to enable her or him to leave premises or a vessel on which she or he was being detained for the purpose of doing an unlawful sexual act or to leave any premises, vessel or place kept as a vice establishment.</p>	<p>(2) 凡有任何人在任何處所或船隻而目的在於作非法的性行為，或有任何人在經營作賣淫場所的任何處所、船隻或地方，則就第(1)款而言，另一人如意圖強逼或誘使該人留在該處而一</p> <p>(a) 扣起該人的衣服或其他財產；或</p> <p>(b) 威脅該人不得取去由該另一人供給或指示供給的衣服，否則提出法律程序，即須當作將該人禁錮於該處。</p> <p>(3) 任何人取去或被人發現管有衣服，而該等衣服是該人為得以離開其被禁錮而目的在於作非法的性行為的處所或船隻，或得以離開經營作賣淫場所的處所、船隻或地方而需用的，則該人無須負上循任何民事或刑事法律程序而被追究的責任。</p>
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<p>Cap 200 s 136 第 136 條</p>	<p>(1) Subject to subsection (2), a person who causes or encourages the prostitution in Hong Kong or elsewhere of a mentally incapacitated person shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 10 years.</p> <p>(2) A person who causes or encourages the prostitution of another is not guilty of an offence under this section if that person does not know and has no reason to suspect the other to be a mentally incapacitated person.</p>	<p>(1) 除第(2)款另有規定外，任何人導致或鼓勵一名精神上無行為能力的人在香港或外地賣淫，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 10 年。</p> <p>(2) 任何人如不知道亦無理由懷疑另一人是精神上無行為能力的人，則不會因導致或鼓勵該另一人賣淫而犯本條所訂罪行。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 137 第 137 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who knowingly lives wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution of another shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 10 years. (Amended 31 of 1997 s. 11)</p> <p>(2) For the purposes of subsection (1), a person who lives with or is habitually in the company of a prostitute, or who exercises control, direction or influence over another person's movements in a way which shows he or she is aiding, abetting or compelling that other person's prostitution with others, shall be presumed</p>	<p>(1) 任何人明知而完全或部分依靠另一人賣淫的收入為生，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 10 年。</p> <p>(2) 就第(1)款而言，任何人與一名娼妓同居或慣常在一起，或控制、指示或影響另一人的行動而所採用方式顯示他或她正在協助、教唆或強逼該另一人向他人賣淫，則須被推定為明知而依靠賣淫的收入為生，除非他或她證明並非如此。</p>

	to be knowingly living on the earnings of prostitution, unless he or she proves the contrary.	
Cap 200 s 139 第 139 條	<p>(1) A person who on any occasion-</p> <p>(a) keeps any premises, vessel or place as a vice establishment; or</p> <p>(b) manages or assists in the management, or is otherwise in charge or control, of any premises, vessel or place kept as a vice establishment, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable-</p> <p>(i) on summary conviction to imprisonment for 3 years; or</p> <p>(ii) on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 10 years.</p> <p>(2) Where-</p> <p>(a) a charge under this section is preferred against a person or is withdrawn; or</p> <p>(b) a person is acquitted or convicted of, or successfully appeals against a conviction for, an offence under this section, section 145A applies.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人於任何時候—</p> <p>(a) 將任何處所、船隻或地方經營作賣淫場所；或</p> <p>(b) 管理或協助管理，或以其他方式掌管或控制經營作賣淫場所的處所、船隻或地方，即屬犯罪—</p> <p>(i) 一經循簡易程序定罪，可處監禁 3 年；或</p> <p>(ii) 一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 10 年。</p> <p>(2) 凡—</p> <p>(a) 對某人提出本條所指的控罪，或本條所指的控罪被撤回；或</p> <p>(b) 某人被裁定本條所訂罪行罪名不成立或罪名成立，或就本條所訂罪行的定罪上訴成功，則第 145A 條即行適用。</p>

<p>Cap 200 s 143 第 143 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who, being the owner or tenant of any premises or his agent-</p> <p>(a) lets the whole or part of the premises with the knowledge that it is to be kept, in whole or in part, as a vice establishment; or</p> <p>(b) where the whole or part of the premises is used as a vice establishment, is wilfully a party to that use continuing, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 7 years. (Amended 31 of 1997 s. 13)</p> <p>(2) Where-</p> <p>(a) a charge under this section is preferred against a person or is withdrawn; or</p> <p>(b) a person is acquitted or convicted of, or successfully appeals against a conviction for, an offence under this section, section 145A applies.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人身為處所的擁有人或租客或其代理人—</p> <p>(a) 將處所全部或部分出租，而知道其全部或部分將經營作賣淫場所；或</p> <p>(b) 如處所全部或部分已用作賣淫場所，故意參其繼續作此用途，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 7 年。</p> <p>(2) 凡—</p> <p>(a) 對某人提出本條所指的控罪，或本條所指的控罪被撤回；或</p> <p>(b) 某人被裁定本條所訂罪行罪名不成立或罪名成立，或就本條所訂罪行的定罪上訴成功，則第 145A 條即行適用。</p>
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<p>Cap 200 s 144 第 144 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who-</p> <p>(a) being the tenant or occupier, or person in charge, of any premises permits or suffers the whole or part of the premises to be kept as a vice establishment; or</p> <p>(b) being the owner, or the master or other person in charge, of any vessel permits or suffers the whole or part of the vessel to be kept as a vice establishment, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 7 years.</p> <p>(2) Where-</p> <p>(a) a charge under this section is preferred against a person or is withdrawn; or</p> <p>(b) a person is acquitted or convicted of, or successfully appeals against a conviction for, an offence under this section, section 145A applies.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人</p> <p>(a) 身為處所的租客、佔用人或掌管人，准許或容受處所全部或部分經營作賣淫場所；或</p> <p>(b) 身為船隻的船東、船長或其他掌管人，准許或容受船隻全部或部分經營作賣淫場所，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 7 年。</p> <p>(2) 凡—</p> <p>(a) 對某人提出本條所指的控罪，或本條所指的控罪被撤回；或</p> <p>(b) 某人被裁定本條所訂罪行罪名不成立或罪名成立，或就本條所訂罪行的定罪上訴成功，則第 145A 條即行適用。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 145 第 145 條</p>	<p>(1) A person who-</p> <p>(a) being the tenant or occupier, or person in charge, of any premises permits or suffers the whole or part of the premises to be used for the purposes of habitual prostitution; or</p>	<p>(1) 任何人—</p> <p>(a) 身為處所的租客、佔用人或掌管人，准許或容受處所全部或部分經常用作賣淫；或</p>



	<p>(b) being the owner, or the master or other person in charge, of any vessel permits or suffers the whole or part of the vessel to be used for the purpose of habitual prostitution, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for 7 years.</p> <p>(2) Where-</p> <p>(a) a charge under this section is preferred against a person or is withdrawn; or</p> <p>(b) a person is acquitted or convicted of, or successfully appeals against a conviction for, an offence under this section, section 145A applies.</p>	<p>(b) 身為船隻的船東、船長或其他掌管人，准許或容受船隻全部或部分經常用作賣淫，即屬犯罪，一經循公訴程序定罪，可處監禁 7 年。</p> <p>(2) 凡 —</p> <p>(a) 對某人提出本條所指的控罪，或本條所指的控罪被撤回；或</p> <p>(b) 某人被裁定本條所訂罪行罪名不成立或罪名成立，或就本條所訂罪行的定罪上訴成功，則第 145A 條即行適用。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 145A 第 145A 條</p>	<p>(1) Where a charge under section 139, 143, 144 or 145 is preferred against a person or is withdrawn, the Commissioner of Police shall as soon as reasonably practicable send to the appropriate person a notice in writing stating that fact and the date on which it occurred and setting out the specified information.</p>	<p>第 145A 條</p> <p>(1) 凡提出第 139、143、144 或 145 條所指的控罪，或該等控罪被撤回，警務處處長須在合理的切實可行範圍內，盡快向適當的人送交書面通知，以述明該項事實及其發生的日期，並列明指明的資料。</p>

<p>Cap 200 s 145A 第 145A 條</p>	<p>(2) Where a person is acquitted or convicted by a court or magistrate of, or successfully appeals against a conviction for, an offence under section 139, 143, 144 or 145, the court or magistrate or the appellate court (as the case may be) shall as soon as reasonably practicable send a notice in writing to the appropriate person stating that fact and the date on which it occurred and setting out the specified information.</p> <p>(3) In this section- "appropriate person" (適當的人) means-</p> <p>(a) in the case of an offence alleged or proved to have been committed in relation to any premises or place other than a vessel, the Land Registrar; and (Amended 8 of 1993 s. 3)</p> <p>(b) in the case of an offence alleged or proved to have been committed in relation to a vessel, the Director of Marine;</p> <p>"specified information" (指明的資料) means the address of the premises or place, or the identity of the vessel, in relation to which the offence is or was alleged or proved to have been committed and, where the alleged offence or the offence related to part of any</p>	<p>(2) 凡某人被法庭或裁判官裁定第 139、143、144 或 145 條罪行罪名不成立或罪名成立，或就該等罪行的定罪上訴成功，則該法庭或裁判官或審理上訴的法院(視屬何情況而定)須在合理的切實可行範圍內，盡快向適當的人送交書面通知，以述明該項事實及其發生的日期，並列明指明的資料。</p> <p>(3) 在本條中— “指明的資料”(specified information) 指在有關的罪行是或曾是被指稱或證實為在與某處所、地方或船隻有關的情況下所犯時，有關的處所或地方的地址，或有關的船隻的識別資料；凡該項指稱的罪行或該項罪行與任何處所、地方或船隻的某部分有關，則亦指該部分的位置；</p> <p>“適當的人”(appropriate person) 指以下的人—</p> <p>(a) 就指稱或證實為在與任何處所或地方(船隻除外)有關的情況下所犯的罪行而言，則指土地註冊處處長；及</p> <p>(b) 就指稱或證實為在與船隻有關的情況下所犯的罪行而言，則指海事處處長。</p>
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	premises, place or vessel, the location of that part.	
Cap 200 s 147 第 147 條	<p>(1) A person who in a public place or in view of the public-</p> <p>(a) solicits for any immoral purpose; or</p> <p>(b) loiters for the purpose of soliciting for any immoral purpose, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of \$10000 and to imprisonment for 6 months.</p> <p>(2) For the purposes of subsection (1) but without prejudice to the generality of the expression "any immoral purpose", each of the following is immoral-</p> <p>(a) buggery by a man with another man;</p> <p>(b) an act of gross indecency by a man with another man.</p>	<p>(1) 任何人在公眾地方或在公眾可見的情況下—</p> <p>(a) 為不道德目的而唆使他人；或</p> <p>(b) 遊蕩而目的在於為不道德目的而唆使他人，即屬犯罪，一經定罪，可處罰款\$10000 及監禁 6 個月。</p> <p>(2) 就第(1)款而言，在不損害“不道德目的”一詞的概括性的原則下，下列各種情況均屬不道德—</p> <p>(a) 一名男子與另一名男子作出肛交；</p> <p>(b) 一名男子與另一名男子作出嚴重猥褻作為。</p>

<p>Cap 200 s 147A 第 147A 條</p>	<p>(1) Any person who publicly displays, or causes or permits the public display of, a sign that advertises, or may reasonably be understood to advertise, the services of a prostitute or of a person who organizes or arranges prostitution shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction to imprisonment for 12 months.</p> <p>(2) Where a sign displayed in contravention of subsection (1) advertises, or may reasonably be understood to advertise, that the services of a prostitute or of a person who organizes or arranges prostitution are available at a place, any person who keeps, or manages or is otherwise in charge or control of, that place shall, until the contrary is proved, be presumed to have caused the display of the sign.</p> <p>(3) For the purposes of this section-</p> <p>(a) a sign is publicly displayed if, and only if, it can be seen from-</p> <p>(i) any place to which for the time being the public or a section of the public are entitled or permitted to have access, whether on payment or otherwise; or</p>	<p>(1) 任何人公開地展示，或導致或准許公開地展示任何宣傳或可合理地被理解為宣傳由娼妓或由組織或安排賣淫的人所提供的服務的標誌，即屬犯罪，一經定罪，可處監禁 12 個月。</p> <p>(2) 凡違反第(1)款而展示的標誌，宣傳或可合理地被理解為宣傳由娼妓或由組織或安排賣淫的人所提供的服務可在某地方獲得，則直至相反證明成立為止，經營、管理或以其他方式掌管或控制該地方的人，須被推定為導致展示該標誌者。</p> <p>(3) 就本條而言—</p> <p>(a) 標誌如在以下地方可見即屬公開地展示，亦只有在以下地方可見方屬公開地展示—</p> <p>(i) 公眾或任何一類公眾，不論是憑付費或其他方式，於當其時有權進入或獲准進入的地方；或</p>
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<p>Cap 200 s 147A 第 147A 條</p>	<p>(ii) a common part of any premises notwithstanding that the public or a section of the public are not entitled or permitted to have access to that common part or those premises; and</p> <p>(b) in deciding how a sign may reasonably be understood regard may be had to-</p> <p>(i) all aspects of the sign, including its size, colour, shape and design; (ii) the location of the sign; (iii) the user of any place that the sign advertises; and (iv) the services offered by any person whose services the sign advertises, and to any other relevant circumstances.</p>	<p>(ii) 任何處所的共用部分，即使公眾或任何一類公眾無權或不獲准進入該共用部分或該等處所亦然；及</p> <p>(b) 在決定標誌可如何合理地理解時，可顧及以下各點—</p> <p>(i) 該標誌的各方面，包括其大小、顏色、形狀及設計； (ii) 該標誌的位置； (iii) 該標誌所宣傳的任何地方的用途；及 (iv) 提供該標誌所宣傳服務的人所提供的服務，以及其他有關情況。</p>
<p>Cap 200 s 147B 第 147B 條</p>	<p>(1) Without prejudice to section 152 or 153, where a police officer of the rank of chief inspector or above reasonably believes that a sign is displayed in contravention of section 147A, he may in writing authorize any other police officer to cause the sign to be taken away or effaced.</p> <p>(2) A police officer authorizing another police officer under subsection (1) to cause a sign to be taken away may in writing authorize him to cause any structure supporting the sign to be taken away and, where he does so, a reference in this section or in section 147C, 147D,</p>	<p>(1) 在不損害第 152 或 153 條的規定的原則下，凡總督察或以上職級的警務人員合理地相信標誌的展示違反第 147A 條，則可以書面形式授權其他警務人員安排將該標誌取去或抹除。</p> <p>(2) 凡警務人員根據第(1)款授權另一名警務人員安排將標誌取去，可以書面形式授權該另一名警務人員安排將支承該標誌的任何構築物取去，而凡有如此作出書面授權，則在本條或第 147C、147D、147E 或 147F 條中凡提述標誌時，須包括提述該支承構築物。</p>

	<p>147E or 147F to a sign shall include a reference to the supporting structure.</p> <p>(3) A police officer authorized under subsection (1), and any person whose assistance he may require, may take such measures as are necessary in order to take away or efface the sign, as the case may be, but may enter any premises or place by virtue of this subsection only under a warrant issued under subsection (4).</p> <p>(4) A magistrate may, if satisfied by information on oath that-</p> <p>(a) there is reasonable cause to believe that a sign is displayed in contravention of section 147A; and</p> <p>(b) entry into any premises or place is reasonably necessary in order to take away or efface that sign, issue a warrant authorizing a police officer, and any person whose assistance that officer may require, to enter such premises or place, by force if necessary.</p>	<p>(3) 根據第(1)款獲授權的警務人員，以及該警務人員需要其協助的人，均可採取所需的措施以取去或抹除該標誌(視屬何情況而定)，但必須根據在第(4)款下發出的手令方可憑藉本款進入任何處所或地方。</p> <p>(4) 如裁判官根據經宣誓而作的告發，信納—</p> <p>(a) 有合理理由相信標誌的展示違反第 147A 條；及</p> <p>(b) 為取去或抹除該標誌是有合理需要進入任何處所或地方的，則可發出手令，授權一名警務人員及任何該警務人員需要其協助的人進入該處所或地方，在有需要時並可使用武力進入。</p>
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	<p>(5) Where a sign is taken away under subsection (3), the Commissioner of Police-</p> <p>(a) may, subject to paragraph (b) and sections 147C and 147D, detain the sign;</p> <p>(b) shall give possession of the sign to any person who satisfies the Commissioner that-</p> <p>(i) he is the owner of the sign or was, before the sign was taken away, entitled to possession of the sign; and</p> <p>(ii) the sign was not, before being taken away, being displayed in contravention of section 147A;</p> <p>(c) may, if-</p> <p>(i) he has detained the sign for at least one month;</p> <p>(ii) he is not obliged under paragraph (b) or section 147C or 147D to give possession of the sign to any person; and</p> <p>(iii) he is not aware of any pending application under section 147C for the recovery of the sign, or of any pending charge under section 147A, order the sign to be destroyed, sold or otherwise disposed of as he thinks fit.</p> <p>(6) Where a sign is sold under subsection (5)(c)</p>	<p>(5) 凡已根據第(3)款取去標誌，則—</p> <p>(a) 除(b)段及第 147C 及 147D 條另有規定外，警務處處長可扣留該標誌；</p> <p>(b) 如任何人令警務處處長信納—</p> <p>(i) 他是該標誌的擁有人，或在該標誌被取去前，他有權管有該標誌；及</p> <p>(ii) 在該標誌被取去前，該標誌的展示並無違反第 147A 條，則處長須將對該標誌的管有交予該人；</p> <p>(c) 如警務處處長—</p> <p>(i) 已扣留該標誌至少 1 個月；</p> <p>(ii) 無須根據(b)段或第 147C 或 147D 條將對該標誌的管有交予任何人；及</p> <p>(iii) 並不知悉有任何根據第 147C 條提出取回該標誌的待決申請，或有任何根據第 147A 條提出的待決控罪，則可命令將該標誌毀滅、出售或以其認為適當的其他方式處置。</p> <p>(6) 凡標誌已根據第(5)(c)款出售，其出售得益須撥歸政府一般收入。</p>
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	the sale proceeds shall be paid into the general revenue.	
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## 研究背景資料

**研究題目：** 女性性工作者在香港：邊緣化及抗衡性

**研究員：** 張雅茵  
博士生

### 導言

你被邀請參與一項探索香港女性性工作者經驗的研究；研究範圍包括：

- 1) 管理賣淫的政策；
- 2) 性工作者所要面對的風險，例如感染性病，受客人暴力對待等；
- 3) 性工作者所承受的污名；
- 4) 性工作者如何處理她們面對的問題。

估計現時香港大約有 200,000 名性工作者，有關這方面的研究為數不多。是次研究的目的是對有關性交易的資料作出補充。

### 程序

如果你同意參與是次研究，研究員會與你進行訪談。在訪談中，你會被問及一些有關性交易的問題。你可以選擇以廣東話或國語進行訪談，預計時間為 1 個小時。日後研究員會將一份訪問稿交給你，請按個人意願增刪有關內容。

### 保密

所有採集到的資料均會保密，同時只會用於學術研究用途。為了保障你的私隱，在相關的文字紀錄中會使用化名。所有可導致識別個人身份的資料，包括電郵地址、聯絡電話等均不會於任何與是項研究相關的報告或文章刊出。

### 退出研究的權利

即使你已簽下同意書，你仍然有權隨時退出是項研究而無須給予任何解釋。如你決定退出，研究員會交出所有有關是次訪問的紀錄。



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### 查詢

如果你對是次研究有任何疑問，歡迎你隨時聯絡我，即負責是次研究計劃的研究員。你可以致電 93731502，或電郵至 [N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk)。另外，你亦可聯絡我的兩位論文指導老師，Jonathan Gabe 教授 ([j.gabe@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:j.gabe@rhul.ac.uk)) 以及 Raymond Lee 教授 ([r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk))。除透過電郵，你亦可以郵遞方式與他們聯絡。他們的通訊地址為：Department of Health & Social Care, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20, 9EQ, UK。

### 簽署同意書

研究員將會請你簽署同意書。在簽署有關文件前，請你考慮是否已經完全明白是次研究之目的，以及你是否了解作為受訪者的權利。在表格上簽署將代表你同意參加是項研究；在簽署前，請仔細閱讀表格。研究員會請你簽署兩份一式一樣的同同意書，其中一份會交還給你，另一份則由研究員存檔。

### 或

#### 以錄音形式記錄同意參與是次研究

研究員將會請你以口述形式，表達你願意參與是次研究的意向。如研究員在開始時曾提及，你的同意參與是次研究的意向會被錄音，證明你同意參與是項研究。

在同意接受訪問前，請確定你明白是次研究的性質、程序及目的，你可以在隨時就研究提問。研究員對訪談內容進行錄音。你所提供的資料將會在相關的研究報告中刊登，但在文本中會使用化名。所有提供的資料均會以保密形式存檔，一切可供識別個人身份的資料將不會在相關的報告或文章刊出。換句話說，你的身份將受保護，不會被公開。你可以在無須給予任何理由的情況下，隨時退出是項研究。

如果你同意參與是項研究，同時明白參與任憑自願，現在請清楚表明你的意向。

**參與是次研究全憑自願。如你對研究有任何疑問，歡迎你隨時提出。**

## Appendix 5



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### Explanatory Statement

**Title of Research:** Female sex workers in Hong Kong: Marginalisation and Resistance

**Researcher:** Olive Nga Yan Cheung  
PhD student

#### Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a research study which aims to look at the experiences of the female sex workers in Hong Kong. My concern is about:

- 1) The regulation of prostitution;
- 2) Risks they may face at work, such as sexually transmitted infections, client violence;
- 3) The stigma experienced by sex workers;
- 4) How sex workers deal with problems they face.

It is estimated that there are 200,000 sex workers in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, there are only a small number of studies which have been carried in Hong Kong regarding sex work. This study aims to increase current understanding of commercial sex.

#### Procedures

If you decide to participate, the researcher will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include some questions about the commercial sexual encounter. It is expected that the interview will last for around 1 hour. It will be conducted by using either Cantonese or Mandarin, whichever you prefer. A copy of the interview transcript will be forward to you afterwards. Please feel free to comment on it.

#### Confidentiality

The data collected will be treated as strictly confidential and used for academic study only. In order to protect your anonymity, pseudonyms will be used throughout the text. All identifying information such as names, email addresses or contact numbers will not be included in any reports of the study, and further publications.

#### Freedom of withdrawal

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason, even after signing a consent form. All records relating to the interview will be returned to you if you decide to discontinue participation in this project.



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### **Enquiries**

If you have any questions about this study, you are more than welcomed to contact me, the researcher of this study. I can be reached at 93731502 or at N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk. You may also contact my supervisors, Prof Jonathan Gabe at j.gabe@rhul.ac.uk or Prof Raymond Lee at r.m.lee@rhul.ac.uk. You may also write to my supervisors at Department of Health & Social Care, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 9EQ, UK.

### **Signing a Consent Form**

You are going to be asked to sign an informed consent form. Before signing the form, please make sure that you understand the purpose of the study, and you are aware of your rights as a participant. Please read carefully before signing the form, which will indicate that you agree to participate this study. You will be asked to sign two copies of informed consent form. One of them will be given to you, while the researcher will keep another copy.

### **OR**

### **Recording the Consent**

You are going to be asked to confirm verbally that you agree to participate this study. As I told you at the beginning of the introduction, your consent will be tape-recorded, and this will indicate that you agree to participate this study.

Please make sure that you understand the nature, procedures and purpose of the study before you agree to be interviewed. You are free to ask any questions about the study. The interview will be audiotaped. The information you provided will be used in academic reports and publications. However, a pseudonym will be used in the text. The data collected during the research will be treated as strictly confidential. No personal information will be disclosed in any reports of the project, and further publications. Therefore, your identity will be protected from being made public. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving any reason.

If you agree to participate in this study, and understand that your participation is voluntary, please state this clearly now.

**Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Always feel free to raise any questions you may have regarding the research.**



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## 同意書

研究題目： 女性性工作者在香港：邊緣化及抗衡性

研究員： 張雅茵  
博士生

你被邀請參與一項探索香港女性性工作者經驗的研究，作為其中一位參與者，研究員將會請你簽署一份同意書。

如果你同意參與研究，研究員將會與你進行預計為一個小時的訪談，訪問內容會被錄音。在訪問進行時，研究員會向你提出一些有關性交易的問題。**參與是次研究全憑自願，在無須給予任何理由的情況下，你可隨時退出是項研究。**

為保護你的身份，在紀錄有關內容時，研究員會使用化名。你所提供的資料將會在相關的研究報告中刊登，一切可供識別個人身份的資料將不會在文本中出現。所有提供的資料均會以保密形式存檔，在未獲得你的同意前，一切可供識別個人身份的資料，將不會在相關的報告或文章刊出。換句話說，你的身份將受保護，不會被公開。

如果你對是次研究有任何疑問，歡迎你隨時聯絡我；你可以致電 93731502，或電郵至 [N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk)。你亦可聯絡我的兩位論文指導老師，聯絡他們的方法見於有關研究背景資料的文件中。

你現正考慮是否參與是項研究。在簽署同意書前，請確定你明白是次研究的目的，而及清楚知道你作為參與者的權利。簽署同意書代表你同意參與研究。你可以在隨時就研究提問。研究員會請你簽署兩份一式一樣的同同意書，其中一份會交還給你，另一份則由研究員存檔。

\_\_\_\_\_  
簽署

\_\_\_\_\_  
日期

\_\_\_\_\_  
姓名(可用化名，請以正楷填寫)



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### **Informed Consent Form**

**Title of Research:** Female sex workers in Hong Kong: Marginalisation and Resistance

**Researcher:** Olive Nga Yan Cheung  
PhD student

You are invited to participate in a study of in a research study which aims to look at the experiences of female sex workers in Hong Kong. You have been selected as one of the participants in this study and are going to be asked to sign an informed consent form.

If you decide to participate, the researcher will conduct an interview with you. The interview will last for around 1 hour, which will be audiotaped. During the interview, you will be asked some questions about commercial sex. **Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason.**

Your anonymity will be protected by using pseudonyms. The information you provide will be used in academic reports and publications. However, no identifiable personal data will be included in the text. The data collected during the research will be treated as strictly confidential. No personal information will be disclosed in any reports of the project, and further publications without your permission. Therefore your identity will be protected from being made public.

If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me at 93731502 or at N.Y.Cheung@rhul.ac.uk. You may also contact my supervisors, and their contact details can be found on the explanatory statement that I have given you.



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**You are making a decision whether or not to participate in this study. Before signing the form, please make sure that you understand the purpose of the study, and you are aware of your rights as a participant. Please notice that signing the form will indicate that you agree to participate this study. You will be asked to sign two copies of informed consent form. One of them will be given to you, while the researcher will keep another copy.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (you may use a pseudonym, please print)

## Interview Guide

Interviewee (pseudonym): \_\_\_\_\_

Place of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date/Time: \_\_\_\_\_

I am conducting a research study which aims to look at the experiences of female sex workers in Hong Kong. My concern is about:

- 5) The regulation of prostitution;
- 6) Risks they may face at work, such as sexually transmitted infections or client violence;
- 7) The stigma experienced by sex workers;
- 8) How sex workers deal with problems they face.

### 1. Working Experience

- Experience of working in other sectors
- Whether worked
  - When started
- Types of services provided
- When left previous sector
  - Why?
- How do you feel about the job(s)
  - Why?
  
- Reason(s) for engaging into flat-working sex work
  - When started
  - Types of services provided
  - Why?
  
- Feelings about the job



2. The respondent will be shown some pictures about some activities organized by sex workers in Taiwan.

*Some sex workers in Taiwan “came out” and organized a march in the capital, Taipei to demand that they should be allowed to continue to work legally when the government closed brothels in 2001. For them “sex work is work”, and the women should have the right to remain in the industry.*



(Sources: [members.tripod.com/~cawhk/9804/9804art13.htm](http://members.tripod.com/~cawhk/9804/9804art13.htm))

On the banner, it states: International Women’s Day 1999, Anti-stigmatization march, and the names of three organizations which support sex workers.

- Do you agree with them?
  - What do you think?
  - Why?
  - General situation in Hong Kong
    - Forced
    - Voluntary
    - Self-employed
    - Controlled by others [such as pimps, gangs, partners, boyfriends]
  - Why?
- Feelings
  - How do you feel about yourself?
  - What do you think how others saw you?
  - Feelings about the job
  - Why?
- Difficulties
  - Difficulties you face at work
  - Impact on your life
  - Why?

- Coping strategies
  - How did they deal with the problems?
  - Whether needed help form other people
  - Whether got help from other people/ organizations
  - Who were they?
  - How?
  - Whether these people/ organizations can help to solve the problems

### 3. Relationships

#### Family

- Partners/boyfriends
- Children
  
- Living together
- Close or not
- Whether they know about your work
  - Why?
  - Why told them? [**Or**] Why not?

#### Friendships

- Sex workers
  - Whether important
  - Why?
  
- Clients
  - Whether important
  - Why?
  
- People work in the sex industry
  - Whether important
  - Why?
  
- People outside the sex industry
  - Whether important
  - Why?
  - Whether they know about your work
  - Why?
  - Why told them? [**Or**] Why not?
  
  - Any changes after engaging in the job?
  - What are the changes?
    - Time of work
    - Relationship with family
    - Relationship with friends
    - Other changes

#### **4. Problems at work**

##### Using of illegal drugs

- Experience
  
- Effects
  
- Feelings
  - How do you feel about yourself?
  - What do you think about how others see you?
  - Why?

##### Client violence

- Experience of violence
  - Whether is difficult to deal with clients
  - How to deal with the problem?
  
- Violence incidents
  - Robbery
  - Murder
  - Physical assault threats
  - Verbal abuse
  - Other incidents
  
- Experience
  - How often do they happen?
    - Robbery
    - Physical assault threats
    - Verbal abuse
    - Other incidents
  
- Feelings
  - How do you feel about working alone?
  - Whether protected from other people
  
- Coping strategies
  - How did you deal with the problems?
  - Whether needed help from other people
  - Whether got help from other people
  - Who were they?
  - How?
  - Whether these people/ organizations can help to solve the problems

### Infection and transmission of STIs

- Experience
- Feelings
  - How did you feel about yourself?
  - How did you feel others see you?
  - Experience of practicing safe sex
  - How often?
  - With whom?
    - partners
    - boyfriends
    - clients
  - Why?
- Clients' attitude towards safe sex
  - Experience
- Coping strategies
  - How did you deal with the problems?
  - Whether needed help from other people
  - Whether got help from other people
  - Who were they?
  - How?
  - Whether these people/ organizations can help to solve the problems

### Other problems at work

- Experience
  - How often do they happen?
- Feelings
- Coping strategies
  - How did you deal with the problems?
  - Whether needed help from other people
  - Whether got help from other people
  - Who were they?
  - How?
  - Whether these people/ organizations can help to solve the problems

**5. I will show the respondent an article from a magazine which suggests that Mainland Chinese workers are more “open” (that means it suggests that the women are willing to provide different kinds of sexual services) and are likely to have unprotected sex with clients.**

- Whether know Mainland Chinese sex workers
- Feelings
  - Impacts on respondents' business
  - What?
  - How?
  - In general what do you think about these women?

- Why?

## **6. The regulation of prostitution**

*I will discuss with the respondent about the recent proposed change of policy in England and Wales (two sex workers are allowed to work together in a brothel and the government may tighten the regulation on street sex work).*

- Comments on this proposed change
  - Why?
- General feelings about current working situation
  - Why?
- Feelings about the current regulation policy
  - Things needs to be done
    - More protection from the police
      - Why?
    - Changes to the current policy on commercial sex
      - What?
      - Why?
    - More relevant services
      - What?
      - Why?
    - Changing of regulation policy
      - What?
      - Why?
    - Others
      - What?
      - Why?
      - How?

**7. Other than the issues we talked about, is there anything else you want to discuss?**

**8. Do you have any questions about this interview?**

**9. What did you feel about being interviewed?**

**10. Present Circumstances (move to the end)**

- Age
- Martial status
- Place of birth
- Length of time living in Hong Kong
- Educational level
- Number of children

## Appendix 9

### Codes used in qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews

#### Tree Nodes: 30

- 1 bad clients
- 2 characteristic of sex workers
- 3 client violence
- 4 condom use
- 5 control over the sexual encounter
- 6 coping strategies
- 7 emotional consequences
- 8 emotional labour
- 9 emotional management
- 10 experiences of working in other business
- 11 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry
- 12 (non-) consensual sexual act
- 13 norms of sex work
- 14 norms of sexuality
- 15 perceptions about those involved in sex work
- 16 perceptions about sex work
- 17 policy
- 18 predatory violence
- 19 problems encountered at work
- 20 reasons for entering the sex business
- 21 reasons for leaving previous working sectors
- 22 relationships with clients/co-workers/family
- 23 sex worker support services
- 24 sexual health
- 25 sexually transmitted infections
- 26 sexual services provided
- 27 stigmatisation
- 28 unprotected sex
- 29 working practice
- 30 working environments

## Free Nodes: 98

- 1 bad clients/ behaviour
- 2 bad clients/ behaviour/ free meal
- 3 bad clients/ behaviour/ threats
- 4 bad clients/ behaviour/ verbal abuse
- 5 characteristic of sex workers/ age
- 6 characteristic of sex workers/ educational level
- 7 characteristic of sex workers/ length of time living in Hong Kong
- 8 characteristic of sex workers/ marital status
- 9 characteristic of sex workers/ children
- 10 characteristic of sex workers/ place of birth
- 11 client violence/ physical assault
- 12 client violence/ physical assault/ scary stories
- 13 client violence/ sexual assault
- 14 client violence/ sexual assault/ rape
- 15 client violence/ threats
- 16 condom use/ failure/ accident
- 17 condom use/ failure/ premature removal of condoms
- 18 condom use/ failure/ refusal
- 19 condom use/ meanings/ contraceptive tools
- 20 condom use/ meanings/ STIs prevention
- 21 condom use/ meanings/ drawing boundary
- 22 condom use/ norms
- 23 control over the sexual encounter/ norms
- 24 control over the sexual encounter/ norms/ safe sex practice
- 25 control over the sexual encounter/ norms/ minimising risk of violence
- 26 control over the sexual encounter/ norms/ emotional management
- 27 coping strategies/ minimising risk of STIs
- 28 coping strategies/ minimising risk of violence
- 29 coping strategies/ minimising risk of violence/ picking punters
- 30 coping strategies/ managing stigma
- 31 coping strategies/ managing feelings
- 32 emotional consequences/ disgust
- 33 emotional consequences/ disgust/ body fluid
- 34 emotional consequences/ guilt
- 35 emotional consequences/ isolation
- 36 emotional consequences/ isolation/ social withdrawal
- 37 emotional consequences/ isolation/ trust
- 38 emotional consequences/ misery
- 39 emotional consequences/ misery/ financial burden
- 40 emotional consequences/ pleasure
- 41 emotional management/ acting
- 42 emotional management/ body exclusion zones
- 43 emotional consequences/ shame
- 44 emotional consequences/ shame/ wrong doing

45 emotional consequences/ stress  
 46 emotional labour/ acting  
 47 emotional labour/ surface acting  
 48 emotional labour/ deep acting  
 49 experiences of working in other business/ full time  
 50 experiences of working in other business/ part-time  
 51 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry/ leaving  
 52 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry/ brothels  
 53 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry/ karaoke  
 54 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry /massage  
 parlours  
 55 experiences of working in other sectors in the sex industry /nightclubs  
 56 management of feelings in the encounter/acting/surface acting  
 57 management of feelings in the encounter/acting/deep acting  
 58 (non-) consensual sexual act/ unwanted acts  
 59 (non-) consensual sexual act/ taking off condoms  
 60 norms of sex work/ paying in advance  
 61 norms of sex work/ time  
 62 norms of sex work/ using condoms  
 63 norms of sexuality/ taboo  
 64 norms of sexuality/  
 65 perceptions about those involved in sex work  
 66 perceptions about sex work. normal business service  
 67 perceptions about sex work. wrong  
 68 predatory violence/robbery  
 69 predatory violence/physical assault  
 70 predatory violence/ homicide  
 71 problems encountered at work  
 72 reasons for entering the sex business  
 73 reasons for leaving previous working sectors  
 74 relationships with clients/ lies  
 75 relationships with co-workers/ lies  
 76 relationships with family/ isolation  
 77 relationships with family/ lies  
 78 sex worker support services/ government/ sexual health  
 79 sex worker support services/ NGO/ sexual health  
 80 sexual health/ knowledge of STIs  
 81 sexual health/ medical examination  
 82 sexually transmitted infections/ prevalence  
 83 sexual services provided/ *Cyun-tou*  
 84 sexual services provided/ DUP  
 85 sexual services provided/ HJ  
 86 sexual services provided/ ML  
 87 sexual services provided/ S/M  
 88 unprotected sex/ STIs  
 89 unprotected sex/ intimacy  
 90 unprotected sex/ pregnant  
 91 victim image/ miserable



- 92 victim image/ miserable/ sympathy
- 93 whore image/ clothes
- 94 whore image/ cosmetic surgery
- 95 working environments /flats
- 96 working environments /flats/ collective environment
- 97 victim image/ miserable
- 98 whore image/ clothes