

*The World's Oldest Profession Gets a Makeover:
Sex Work, OnlyFans, and Celebrity Participation*

Sophie Sanchez
Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA



Abstract: On August 19, 2020, celebrity Bella Thorne announced on social media that she would be making an OnlyFans account. In the first 24 hours after making her account, Bella Thorne earned \$1 million. Founded in 2016, OnlyFans is a novel digital subscription service that has become home to thousands of sex workers—and a few celebrities that make millions of dollars per month. Although most people are engaged in sex work out of financial necessity, wealthy influencers and celebrities like Bella Thorne have joined the platform whilst perpetuating substantial earning gaps. Surrounding controversy, Bella Thorne argued that the publicity high-profile content creators bring to OnlyFans would destigmatize sex work. Given the centuries of criminalization, discrimination, exploitation, and stigmatization of sex work, should celebrities be on OnlyFans? Or will celebrity participation and media attention destigmatize sex work and ultimately improve conditions for marginalized sex workers?

What is Sex Work?

Carol Leigh coined the term “sex work” in the late 1970s at a Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media conference (Leigh 1998, 223). As a sex worker and activist, Leigh “positions women sex workers as having agency, which places her in the feminist camp that believes sex work is a choice (albeit a choice made under structural conditions of inequality, as is the case for other kinds of labor)” (Brooks 2020, n.p.). The term ‘sex work’ functions as an alternative to stigmatized language like ‘prostitution,’ which has historically implied criminality and immorality. Furthermore, “this *work* rhetoric offers a welcome reprieve from the anti-sex-work rhetoric in which sex workers appear as voiceless victims” (Berg 2014, 693). Sex workers offer consensual sexual services or erotic performances in exchange for money or goods (Open Society Foundations 2018, n.p.). It is not to be conflated with forced prostitution, human trafficking, or the sexual exploitation of children, which are human rights violations (Open Society Foundations 2018). Sex work encompasses street sex work, brothels, escort services, phone sex lines, lap dancing, massage parlors, pornography, instant messaging, and webcamming, among other services (Harcourt 2005; Cunningham 2018). Like any other form of labor under capitalism, people trade sex for reasons that exist on a continuum of choice, circumstance, or coercion (Luo 2020). Most sex workers trade sex because of circumstance (Luo 2020).

Four basic legal frameworks exist regarding sex work: criminalization, legalization, the Entrapment Model (otherwise known as the End Demand Model or the Nordic Model), and decriminalization (Campaign to Decriminalize Sex Work 2021). The criminalization framework includes laws that make sex work or activities associated with sex work a crime (Global Network

of Sex Work Projects). The legalization framework permits some types of sex work; for example, some counties in the state of Nevada authorize sanctioned brothels to operate while other types of sex work are outlawed (Lutnick et al. 2009). The Entrapment Model imposes criminal penalties on clients but not sex workers themselves (Campaign to Decriminalize Sex Work 2021). Conversely, decriminalization policies would remove the civil and criminal penalties for both the buyers and sellers of sexual services (Campaign to Decriminalize Sex Work 2021). Sex work decriminalization has been endorsed by various highly esteemed organizations worldwide, including the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International, Human Rights Campaign, and the World Health Organization. The United States operates under the criminalization model, though as of 2021, decriminalization bills have been introduced in multiple states, including Massachusetts, Oregon, and Louisiana (Grant 2021). Decades of grassroots activism and community organizing by sex workers have enabled this cultural shift. According to a 2020 report published by Data for Progress, sex work decriminalization is supported “somewhat” or “strongly” by 52 percent of American voters (Luo 2020, 22).

Why Sex Work?

The primary reason people turn to sex work is out of financial necessity (Monroe 2008, 69). The majority of those arrested for prostitution-related offenses are low-income African American women (Monroe 2008, 72). Transgender people are also more likely to be sex workers due to high rates of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness (Fitzgerald 2015). In a 2017 study of Black transgender participants, 21 percent of respondents reported participating in the sex trade for income (James 2017). Sex work is often described as a safety net that catches people before they fall into absolute destitution (Baume 2020, n.p.). According to former sex worker and *New York Times* bestselling author, Bryn Greenwood, “[Sex work] is not merely the last resort, but the last salvation for people trapped in low-wage work or long-term unemployment. Sex work has the power to lift people out of poverty, because you don’t need a college degree, and it almost always pays more than minimum wage” (Greenwood 2019, n.p.).

Many people have found that the sex industry has fewer barriers to entry than other professions (Luo 2020, 11). Although many people turn to sex work when they are out of options, some have found monetizing their sexuality to be empowering. Karmenife, a Black dominatrix sex worker, stated in an interview with *Paper* magazine:

I feel like as a Black woman in this society I have been fetishized and objectified since I've left the womb. Being able to reclaim my sexuality and my body for myself... [has] taught me you're not entitled to me or my time and if you want it, you pay for it...I hate when people say that I'm doing this because I'm stupid and that I'm a slut. It always makes me laugh because at the end of the day, we're all sluts because we're all getting fucked by capitalism. I'm just smart enough to collect a check; you're doing it for free, so that's on you (Sells 2018, n.p.).

Exploitation, Discrimination, and Stigma in the Sex Industry

Although sex work has often been described as a social safety net for marginalized people, sex workers are particularly vulnerable to violence. These acts of violence include extortion, stalking, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, battery, kidnapping, and murder (Global Network of Sex Work Projects). The criminalization of sex work creates a culture of impunity that makes sex workers targets for abuse (Global Network of Sex Work Projects). Based on a review of 28

research studies scholars estimated that sex workers have a 45-75 percent chance of experiencing sexual violence at some point in their careers (Deering 2014). Two studies conducted by the Sex Workers' Project of the Urban Justice Center in New York City found that 17 percent of respondents experienced some form of sexual harassment or abuse by police (2003). A 2002 study conducted in Chicago found that 30 percent of exotic dancers and 24 percent of street-based sex workers who had been raped identified a police officer as their rapist (Incite National 2017). Furthermore, studies have shown that frequent exposure to abusive police practices contribute to an environment that is conducive to client-perpetrated violence (Footer 2018). Brenda Myers-Powell recounted the violence she experienced in her 25 years as a sex worker:

I've been shot five times, stabbed 13 times. I don't know why those men attacked me, all I know is that society made it comfortable for them to do so... They decided to wreak havoc on a prostitute, knowing I couldn't go to the police and if I did I wouldn't be taken seriously...I count myself very lucky. I knew some beautiful girls who were murdered out there on the streets (Myers-Powell 2015, n.p.).

Sex workers also face discrimination from law enforcement. 'Loitering for the purpose of prostitution' statutes in some states allow police to profile women of color, especially transgender women of color, for existing in public even if they are not participating in the sex trade (Campaign to Decriminalize Sex Work, n.p.). In 2018, 91 percent of New York arrests for 'loitering for the purpose of prostitution' were of Black or Latinx individuals (Luo 2020). In 2013, Black women made up 66 percent of all prostitution-related arrests in San Francisco, California, despite making up only 6 percent of the female population (Males 2015). Consequently, criminal records can leave sex workers vulnerable to employment and housing discrimination. Knowledge of a person's status as a sex worker can also be used against them by abusive partners for blackmail or in custody battles (Stardust 2017).

Sex workers are commonly perceived as sexually and morally deviant. They are subjected to whorephobia, otherwise known as "the hatred, fear, and dehumanization of sex workers" (Mgbako 2020, n.p.). Whorephobia supports the damaging fallacy that sex workers are incapable of being sexually assaulted because they do not fit into narrow cultural conceptions of the "perfect victim" (Cooney 2018, n.p.). In fact, the defense of convicted sex offender and former Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw argued that the Black women he targeted were not credible because they were drug users and sex workers (Grant 2020). In many states, survivors of sexual violence with a prostitution conviction can have their criminal records used as evidence against them at trial (Luo 2020, 9). New Jersey serial killer and rapist Khalil Wheeler-Weaver targeted Black sex workers because he assumed "no one would notice if they disappeared" (Luo 2020, 9).

In addition to physical vulnerability, sex workers are subjected to dangerous stereotypes. Sex worker Pluma Sumaq wrote in *A Disgrace Reserved for Prostitutes: Complicity and the Beloved Community*:

[Sex workers] are confronted with the weight of racism, sexism, and classism at the same time as they are being told by the world that they have no self-respect, that they are destructive, reckless, responsible for the decline of the nuclear family, culpable for the downfall of society. We are made into invisible, disposable targets for violence through the stigma of prostitution, through the illusion that it is prostitution and not targeted violence that violates, rapes and murders us (Sumaq 2015, n.p.).

Sexual E-Commerce

Innovations in electronic commerce have revolutionized the sex industry by digitizing the market for buying and selling sexual services. Furthermore, the digital commercial sex market has expanded beyond sex workers advertising their in-person services to clients on the internet; now, sex workers can offer sexual services without ever engaging in often dangerous physical contact. Scholars have coined the term “technology-mediated indirect services,” which includes instant messaging, phone sex, and webcamming (Cunningham 2018, n.p.). With mounting technological advancement, it is also possible for sex workers to capitalize on the industry without exploitative third-party management, like pimps or pornography directors. The newfound dispensability of intermediaries has allowed sex workers to develop and control their own business and production models (Bernstein 2007). In traditional pornography, the aspects of development, production, and dissemination are dictated by those holding positions of power in the organizational hierarchy (Berg 2014). Conversely, technology-mediated sex work like webcamming provides sex workers with the autonomy to control their own schedules, how they will market themselves, and what services they will offer to their customers (Jones 2015).

A new development to the technology-mediated sex industry is OnlyFans, a digital subscription service that allows creators to directly monetize through consumer subscription. Moreover, the platform allows content creators to keep 80 percent of their earnings, including subscription fees, pay-per-view fees, and tips from viewers (Bernstein 2019, n.p.). The founder of OnlyFans, Tim Stokely, created the company in 2016 with social media influencers in mind; he intended to streamline how creators were compensated for their content, although everyone from low-income sex workers to A-list celebrities have been known to utilize the platform (Bernstein 2019). In the 2021 Hulu documentary, *OnlyFans: Selling Sexy*, Jason Barham explained, “While on Instagram you have influencers selling products, on OnlyFans the person themselves is the product” (ABC News 2021, n.p.). While sexually explicit streaming services are not a new phenomenon in the digital age, OnlyFans’s selling point is the agency it offers its creators. Content creators set their own monthly subscription rates and can independently produce their own personalized content for audiences (Rimm 2020). According to Heather Berg, who studies labor issues in pornography, “The decentralization of the [pornography] industry is giving workers more power... It’s now so easy to produce and distribute your own content that workers are a lot less dependent on the boss” (Hess 2018, n.p.).

Digital Sex Work and the Coronavirus Pandemic

In-person sex workers have been disproportionately affected by the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019. The profession requires close physical contact for extended periods of time, thus it is considerably high-risk. Fera Lorde, a chapter representative with Sex Workers Outreach Project in Brooklyn, explained: “Our livelihood depends on our ability to be healthy, as we have no sick pay” (Baume 2020, n.p.). Furthermore, the criminalization of the industry prevents sex workers from receiving government financial relief benefits or other labor protections (Brouwers 2020). With the proliferation of platforms like OnlyFans, some sex workers have shifted to technology-mediated sex work, although high rates of destitution among sex workers have made OnlyFans an option for a privileged few (since it requires a computer and internet connection) (Bernstein 2019, n.p.). Additionally, people facing unemployment or lost wages as a result of the economic recession have turned to OnlyFans as a mode of survival. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women, particularly women of color, lost more jobs than men during the pandemic as woman-dominated industries have been hit the hardest (Boesch 2021).

From March to December 2020, OnlyFans saw its account numbers triple, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing unemployment rates throughout the country (Cook 2020). According to Angela Jones, an associate professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Farmingdale, “A lot of people are migrating to OnlyFans out of desperation. These are people who are worried about eating, they’re worried about keeping the lights on, they’re worried about not being evicted” (Friedman 2021, n.p.). According to interviews of OnlyFans sex workers conducted by the Huffington Post, “all [interviewees] described OnlyFans as a lifeline amid a global catastrophe in which they feel like their government has abandoned them” (Cook 2020, n.p.). In December of 2020, New York Democratic Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez famously responded to a *New York Post* article that exposed 23-year-old paramedic Lauren Caitlyn Kwei for supplementing her income as an OnlyFans creator. The Congresswoman posted on Twitter in the paramedic’s defense, “Leave her alone. The actual scandalous headline here is ‘Medics in the United States need two jobs to survive’” (Woodward 2020, n.p.).

While thousands of desperate workers have flocked to the platform for survival, making a living off OnlyFans is not easy. Many OnlyFans creators do not have a preexisting social media presence and want to maintain anonymity for fear of their families, friends, and current or future employers finding out about their accounts, like in the case of paramedic Lauren Caitlyn Kwei. Consequently, some creators cannot drum up business by directing their followers from other social media platforms to subscribe to their OnlyFans for exclusive content. Moreover, the profession of digital sex work requires a time investment, and business can be slow-going, which can be especially challenging for users who have turned to OnlyFans as a last resort. Content creators may also be subjected to shame and stigma through “doxxing,” which is a form of online harassment that involves a user publishing private information about someone without their consent (Friedman 2021, n.p.). Another risk to digital sex workers is “capping,” which occurs when subscribers take unauthorized screenshots or recordings of a creator’s content and post them online (Friedman 2021, n.p.). Some OnlyFans creators have also received rape and death threats via social media instant messaging (Friedman 2021).

Bella Thorne: Crusader or Colonizer?

Although OnlyFans is often viewed as a safer and more lucrative alternative to direct in-person sex work, economic stratification within the platform is still pervasive. The top 1 percent of accounts earn 33 percent of the money (“OnlyFans Stats” 2019). While the average OnlyFans creator makes \$180 per month, high profile influencers and celebrities have made millions. For example, American celebrity Bella Thorne makes around \$11 million per month on the platform, second only to Blac Chyna, who earns about \$20 million per month (Gupta 2021). Bella Thorne is an American actress, model, producer, and musician. She starred in the Disney Channel television show, *Shake It Up*, and was subsequently featured in a variety of films, including *Blended*, *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Road Chip*, and *The Babysitter* movie series. Thorne also directed *Her & Him*, an award-winning pornographic film that debuted in 2019 (Kircher 2020). Amongst controversy surrounding the legitimacy of sex work, Bella Thorne took it upon herself to challenge the stigma surrounding the industry by making an OnlyFans account in August of 2020. According to Bella Thorne’s Twitter account, she intended to “remove the stigma behind sex [and] sex work” by joining OnlyFans (@bellathorne 2020). As a celebrity with 6.6 million Twitter followers and 24 million Instagram followers, she certainly possessed the platform to further her sex-positive agenda. In the first 24 hours of making an account, Thorne grossed \$1 million (Dickson 2020).

Despite Bella Thorne's alleged intentions to destigmatize the commercial sex industry, she immediately faced backlash from OnlyFans sex workers themselves. After a week on the platform, she earned \$2 million in total by charging her subscribers \$200 for falsely advertised nude pay-per-view photos (Russon 2020). Due to the false advertising, Thorne's disappointed subscribers requested refunds from the platform in extremely high numbers. Following an influx of processing costs at the expense of OnlyFans, the platform immediately changed their pricing policies, although the company's spokespeople claimed it was unrelated to any single content creator. Subsequently, pay-per-view photos were capped at \$50 and tips were capped at \$100, both of which did not previously have maximum amounts (Carter 2020). Additionally, the time period for content creator payouts increased from seven days to 30 days. Naturally, sex workers expressed widespread outrage as they witnessed a substantial delay in their payments and a decrease in their earning potentials (Carter 2020). In response to the incident, OnlyFans creator Erika Heidewald explained on Twitter:

Previously, the funds you made on [OnlyFans] were only pending for a week, so most creators got paid at least once a week. Imagine suddenly going from a weekly paycheck to a monthly paycheck. That's what's happening to 450,000 content creators... People have bills to pay. Kids to feed. Many people, including content creators and sex workers, live paycheck to paycheck. How are they going to pay their bills this month? How are they going to feed themselves and their families? This is REAL HARM (Heidewald 2020, n.p.).

While OnlyFans's management publicly maintained that the pricing policy changes were not connected to the Bella Thorne incident, sex workers were not convinced. Sex workers also pointed out that Bella Thorne did not face repercussions for her misconduct because of her celebrity status (Manavis 2020). Underneath the informal apology that she issued on Twitter days later, sex workers blamed Bella Thorne for ruining OnlyFans, vilifying her as a scammer. An account under the username @olivertryst posted on Twitter, "We don't want people who are not sex workers telling our stories because you believed the stereotype about us all being scammers and followed suit, which resulted in a loss of income for everyone on the platform. Get out" (@olivertryst 2020, n.p.).

Users also urged Thorne to redistribute her earnings to the sex workers that depend on OnlyFans for their livelihoods, citing Thorne's alleged \$12 million net worth (Noor 2020). A Twitter account under the username @godlyanii posted, "If you really did this to try and help sex workers, go and donate the money you just made... Donate it to the people you've hurt. You're sitting in a mansion in [California] while other sex workers can't afford food" (@godlyanii 2020, n.p.). Ultimately, Bella Thorne did not redistribute her earnings to other content creators. Her account remains active as she continues to create content for OnlyFans.

Bella Thorne's critics argue that she is guilty of "gentrifying" OnlyFans (Halvax 2020, n.p.). They fear that celebrities will worsen working conditions on OnlyFans and ultimately displace the sex workers who rely on the platform as their main source of income. After all, an OnlyFans account allows Bella Thorne to temporarily play the role of sex worker without having to fully assume the risks. While most people turn to sex work to access the resources they need for survival, celebrities have been accused of treating OnlyFans like a hobby (Manavis 2020). Professional cosplayer and OnlyFans content creator Stephanie Michelle told BBC News, "Bella Thorne has no right to speak for us and could never know the challenges we face every day" (Russon 2020, n.p.). These challenges that sex workers face disproportionately harm women of

color, low-income women, and transgender women. As a white female celebrity, does Bella Thorne have the cultural competency to be an advocate for sex workers? Should she be making a profit off of a platform that many marginalized women turn to for survival? Can her actions constitute advocacy if they are simultaneously making her a millionaire?

While many sex workers were critical of Thorne, some were hopeful that the publicity would demystify an industry that tends to operate in the shadows. In response to the controversy, OnlyFans content creator Kelly Jean admitted, "It's going to make people more suspicious of my content, but we can hope Bella Thorne is bringing more people to the platform and normalizing it" (Russon 2020, n.p.). As Bella Thorne mentioned in her apology statement on Twitter, she believed her "mainstream" celebrity would bring publicity to OnlyFans. The documentary, *Only Fans: Selling Sexy* highlights how Thorne joining OnlyFans made headlines, inciting an influx of public attention (2020). In the same documentary, Wynter Mosely, a top-earning OnlyFans sex worker, explained that Thorne joining the platform allowed users to be "recognized" by the general public (ABC News 2021, n.p.). Amongst heated controversy, did the publicity Bella Thorne generated for OnlyFans ultimately contribute to destigmatizing sex work? Should celebrities be responsible for using their platforms to deconstruct and raise awareness for social problems, or is their position as outsiders inherently conducive to causing harm? Is the Bella Thorne scandal just another instance of white female celebrities co-opting social movements built on the backs of women of color?

Should Celebrities Be on OnlyFans?

As a result of the scandal, Bella Thorne has become the most controversial celebrity on OnlyFans. Yet, she is not the only high-profile user capitalizing on a platform that many people depend on for survival. For celebrities, having an OnlyFans account is the cultural equivalent of a Playboy centerfold; it is a way to express grandiose sexuality in the name of sensationalism (ABC News 2020). Although she does not post sexually explicit content, wildly successful rapper Cardi B has an OnlyFans account. She joined the platform in 2020 to promote her new song, "WAP" featuring Megan Thee Stallion, as well as to offer exclusive behind-the-scenes content of her career and personal life. Cardi B charges her subscribers \$4.99/month, compared to Bella Thorne's \$20/month subscription fee (Page Six 2021). While Cardi B is currently a Grammy award-winning millionaire, she first rose to prominence through social media by publicly discussing her experiences as a former stripper. As a teenager, Cardi B was allegedly a member of the Bloods gang in the Bronx, New York, until she started working as a stripper to escape poverty and an abusive relationship. In 2017, Cardi B released her commercial debut single, "Bodak Yellow," which initially went viral and subsequently turned triple platinum ("Cardi B" 2020). As of 2021, Cardi B holds the record for the most chart-topping songs by a female rapper and has an estimated net worth of \$24 million with no indication of slowing down (Western 2021). Cardi B is also the third highest paid creator on OnlyFans, earning \$9 million a month (Gupta 2021). Cardi B stated in an interview on the Howard Stern Show:

You wanna know something? I feel like a lot of people want me to lie and be like, 'I hated [stripping]. I went through so much. I don't recommend it.' I don't tell girls to go do it. But I'm not even gonna front: it really saved me. Before I was working in a strip club I was a cashier at Amish Market. (Stern 2018, n.p.)

Surmounting both Bella Thorne and Cardi B, Blac Chyna is the number one top earner on OnlyFans. Blac Chyna is a reality TV star, entrepreneur, and model. She was a stunt double for Nicki Minaj in the music video for the song “Monster” by Kanye West, starred in the “Rack City” music video by American rapper Tyga, and was name-dropped by Drake in the song “Miss Me.” She is also known for her appearances on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and for her makeup company, Lashed Cosmetics. Similar to Cardi B, Blac Chyna was a stripper for six years. She produces sexually explicit content for her OnlyFans subscribers, including weekly foot fetishist videos for a series entitled “Foot Freak Mondays.” She also charges subscribers \$950 to talk with her on FaceTime (Lopez 2020).

While all of these women experience some level of celebrity, are the cases of Cardi B and Blac Chyna different from Bella Thorne? Do Cardi B and Blac Chyna’s former careers as strippers exempt them from accusations of celebrity gentrification on OnlyFans, despite their respective fortunes? Does celebrity participation in OnlyFans help or harm sex workers? Should we be gatekeeping these women from participating in OnlyFans, or celebrating them for capitalizing on the sex industry that disproportionately marginalizes and exploits Black women? Moreover, are definitions of sex work evolving as sexual attitudes are changing - in other words, are those who engage in sex work outside of financial necessity (and in spite of financial excess) still sex workers?

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