

The FLESH TRADE

How tech tools—BlackBerrys, personal web pages, and Facebook—transformed New York prostitution.

BY SUDHIR VENKATESH • MAPS BY MICHAEL NEWHOUSE

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A PROSTITUTE? The answer depends on whether you work out of a client's car or a \$500-a-night hotel room. In 1999, I set out to study the effects of efforts to bring the suburban middle class back to New York City. The gentrification of Times Square made for a unique social experiment: What happens to sex workers when they are pushed off the streets and into the outer boroughs? I had little idea at the time that I'd be documenting the rise of an entirely new, upper-end "indoor" market, in which streetwalkers have given way to a professional class.

The economies of big cities have been reshaped by a demand for high-end entertainment, cuisine, and "wellness" goods. In the process, "dating," "massage," "escort," and "dancing" have replaced hustling and streetwalking. A luxury brand has been born.

These changes have made sex for hire more expensive. But luxe pricing has in turn helped make prostitution, well ... somewhat respectable. Whereas men once looked for a secretive tryst, now they seek a mistress with no strings attached, a "girlfriend experience," and they are willing to pay top dollar for it.

Technology has played a fundamental role in this change. No self-respecting cosmopolitan man looking for an evening of companionship is going to lean out his car window and call out to a woman at a traffic light. The Internet and the rise of mobile phones have enabled some sex workers to professionalize their trade. Today they can control their image, set their prices, and sidestep some of the pimps, madams, and other intermediaries who once took a share of the revenue. As the trade has grown less risky and more lucrative, it has attracted some middle-class women seeking quick tax-free income.

I followed 290 women, 170 of whom made enough (at least \$30,000) to separate them from streetwalkers. I spent at least 12 months earning their trust, trying not to ask a lot

of prying questions. Once they realized I wasn't a cop or social worker, they usually told me their stories. I focused on financial questions first, because it made them feel validated as workers. How much did you earn this week? What expenses did you have? Do you save any money?

The figures on these pages highlight some of the contrasts between old-world prostitutes and new-age sex workers. Yet they also suggest that some things haven't changed: Even women who don't work on the street report hiding their activities from their families and being abused.

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SEX IN THE CITY: THEN AND NOW

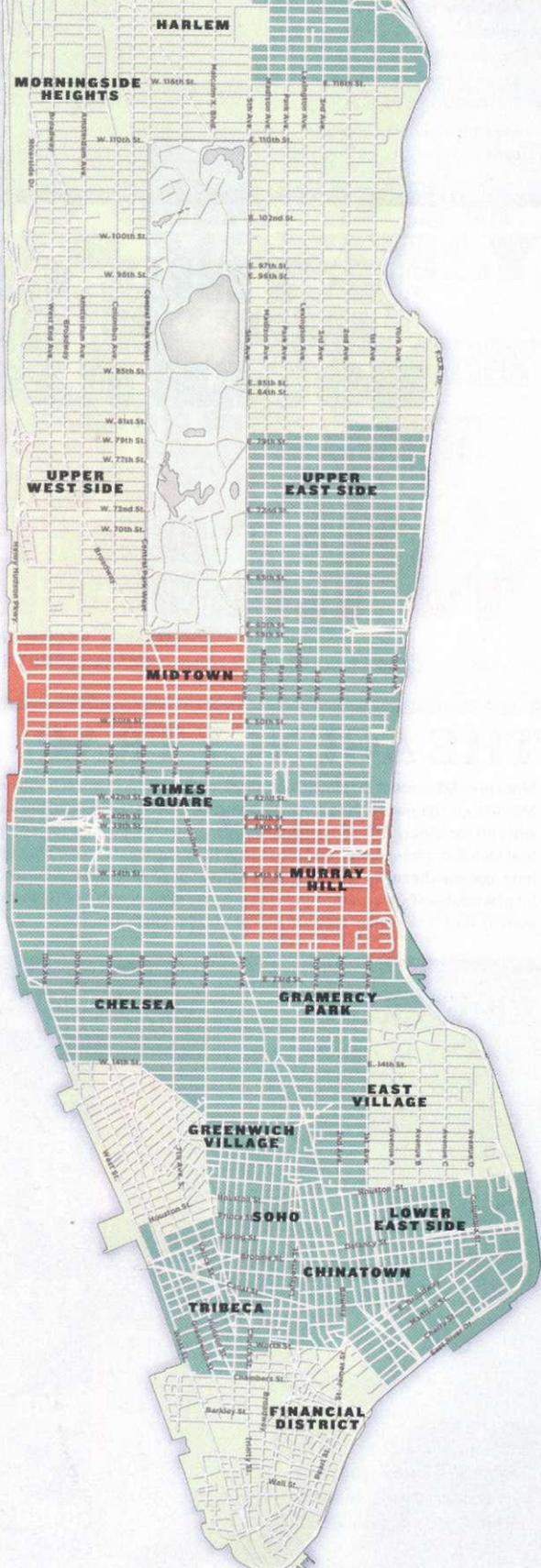
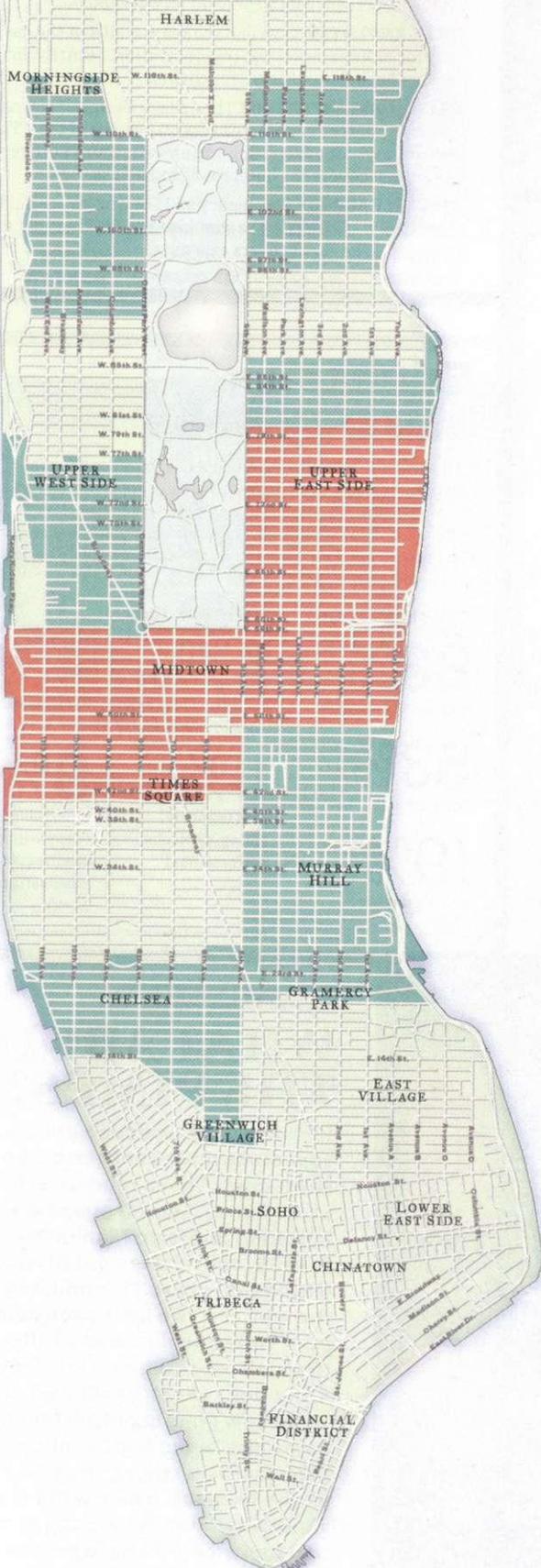
Red-light districts were commonplace in big cities throughout the 20th century. But in recent years, New York City has seen the midtown areas with high concentrations of sex workers empty out. The trade has moved indoors and diffused into more-upscale districts downtown.

DISTRIBUTION OF PROSTITUTION

Low density Medium density High density

1991

2010



1
2
3
4
5
6
7

LOCATION

Indoor vs. Outdoor Sex Work

STREETWALKERS ...

- Earn \$75 per typical transaction
- Are jailed at least twice a year
- Are beaten an average of four times a year
- Carry a small pocketknife as a security measure
- Keep working to support drug habits
- Pay shopkeepers to hold their cash for them

ESCORTS ...

- Earn about 50 percent more per transaction than a streetwalker
- Rarely interact with police
- Are beaten twice a year, on average
- Try to deduce a client's place of employment as a security measure
- Keep working to pay for clothing and shoes
- Form Subchapter-S corporations

“IF THEY GET ROUGH, GET ROUGH BACK. THEY’LL HAVE TO EXPLAIN THAT BRUISE TO THEIR WIFE.”

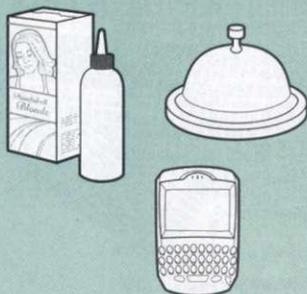
—MELISSA, A SEX WORKER SINCE 1995 (MAKES ABOUT \$100,000 A YEAR)

THE AGENCY TRAP

More than **60 percent of women** in the high-end trade have worked with escort agencies. Men like going through the agencies because it feels less dirty and because they can often write off the expense. (For example, the agency might give them an “entertainment” receipt that includes dinner, hotel, and other seemingly legitimate costs.) But many sex workers hate agencies because they take a cut without providing much security or support. So a lot of women self-incorporate and create a fake agency web page with swiped photos that make it appear as though they are part of a bigger operation.

TOP UPGRADES

“You’ll make about 50 percent more with a good boob job,” one woman said. Other things that can increase a sex worker’s earning power:



1. Dying her hair blond.
2. Befriending hotel clerks to obtain free room upgrades to suites.
3. BlackBerrys. To clients, this symbol of professional life suggests the worker is drug- and disease-free.

THE COST OF A PARTICULAR ACT DEPENDS ON THE PART OF TOWN

	WALL STREET /TRIBECA	CHINATOWN /SOHO	NORTH OF 14TH STREET	THE BRONX
HAND JOB	\$225	\$175	\$125	\$75*
MESSAGE A TROIS (EACH WOMAN)	\$750	\$500	\$300	\$200
MOMMY ROLE-PLAY SEX	\$400	\$400	\$250	\$75*

* Plus a shot at the bar

FREAKONOMICS

WHAT SEX WORKERS CHARGE (AND KEEP) FOR TRADITIONAL INTERCOURSE

STREETWALKER Charges an average of \$75, but her pimp gets a 25 percent cut (30 percent on weekends).

SELF-EMPLOYED \$150, and she keeps it all, but she has to pay for online marketing, transportation, security, bribes to shopkeepers, and drugs for clients.

“BLUE-COLLAR” AGENCY The agency charges \$350 on average, and the sex worker gets 60 percent of that. The agency pays for advertising and on-call security officers. The client covers the hotel room and drinks.

UPSCALE AGENCY The agency and sex worker are paid separately—if one gets the standard \$2,000, the other gets the same. The client covers expenses.

Education and Day Jobs

Of the escorts I talked to, 63 percent had moved to New York City from another state after high school. But people rarely come to the big city to become prostitutes: Nearly all have held a legitimate job, but not necessarily the glamorous one they came to New York to get. Three worked as street vendors. Two appeared on daytime soap operas.

THEIR EDUCATION

86%
High school diploma

53%
Some college

19%
College degree

THEIR DAY JOBS

47%
Food services (catering and restaurants)

11%
Arts (dancing, acting, or musical performance)

43%
Retail sales

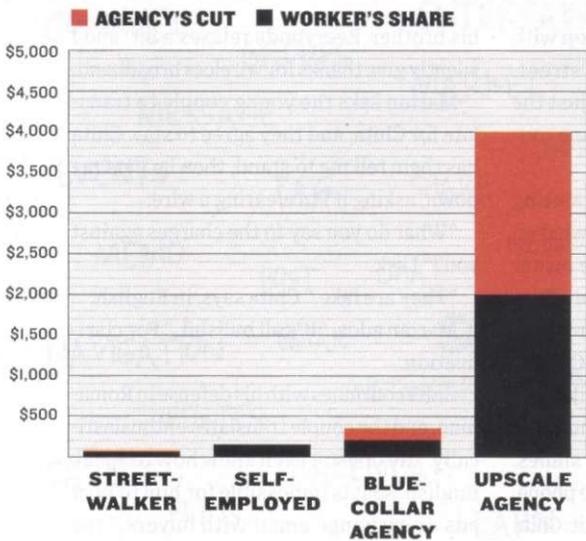
9%
Publishing (copywriting, proofreading, administrative work)

Numbers exceed 100% because of overlaps in work experience.

DISINTERMEDIATION

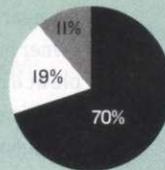
WHAT ABOUT THE PIMPS?

It’s hard out there for a pimp—especially now. Changes in the sex industry have rendered them superfluous. I met 11 pimps working out of midtown Manhattan in 1999, and all were out of work within four years. One enlisted in the military; two have been homeless. Only one now has a full-time job, working as a janitor in a charter school. I asked one of them how pimping experience helps him in the legit economy: “You learn one thing,” he said. “For a good blow job, a man will do just about anything. What can I do with that knowledge? I have no idea.”



SEX WORKER MOBILE DEVICE USAGE

■ BlackBerry
 ■ iPhone
 ■ Other smartphone



High-End Escorts

They might maintain four to six clients—each of whom pays at least \$20,000 a year. They often rent an apartment just for sessions.

“SHOES ADD TWO GRAND TO YOUR MONTHLY BUDGET, BUT THE INVESTMENT IS WORTH IT. MEN LIKE YOU TO KEEP THEM ON WHILE THEY GET LAID.”

—CAITLYN, 24 (MAKES ABOUT \$75,000 A YEAR)

Tools of the Trade

A SEX WORKER ALWAYS CARRIES:



Two cell phones. Guys sometimes grab a woman's mobile to gain a sense of power and control.



Extra panties. “Always bring them—men pay for souvenirs.”



Band-Aids and cortisone cream for rashes, rawness, and bruises.



Gum (Orbit and Trident are favorites). Some swear by those dissolving Listerine strips.



Condoms and lubricant. If the client wants to skip the condom, there's usually a 25 percent surcharge.

A SEX WORKER NEVER CARRIES:



A cell phone with any form of contact information.



Any form of ID. They sometimes have fake state IDs with an alternate address.



Bank cards or credit cards (or anything a client could use to find out where they live).



Large bills. “Men dumb enough to pay in hundreds don't deserve change.”



Small bills. A john who wants change for a \$20 bill will want to rob you.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY Kate Francis

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

WHERE THE ACTION IS

Of the women I talked to, 61 percent said they've used craigslist, mostly for advertising. But even before the crack-down on the site's adult-services section, sex workers were turning to Facebook: 83 percent have a Facebook page, and I estimate that by the end of 2011, Facebook will be the leading on-line recruitment space.

SOURCE OF REGULAR CLIENTS

