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Attitudes Towards Buyers and Sellers in Prostitution and Gun Transactions

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ABSTRACT

This study examines attitudes towards the buyers and sellers of sex in comparison to attitudes toward buyers and sellers of illegal firearms. Respondents were presented with one of four vignettes and asked to recommend punishment or to indicate their moral judgment of the participants. The manipulated variables were the genders of the buyer and seller as well as the type of crime. The study also examined how the gender of respondents and their self-identification as a feminist affected their judgements. Respondents gave lighter sentences to buyers and sellers of sex, but there was no significant effects caused by the genders of the buyer or seller. Nor were their sentencing decisions influenced by their gender or identification as feminist. Greater moral blame was assigned to sellers than buyers in gun scenarios, but moral blame was assigned more equally in prostitution scenarios. It could be that sellers are generally blamed more than buyers regardless of gender, but that people make an exception in the case of prostitution. The gender of respondents did not have a significant effect on moral judgements. A three-way interaction indicated that feminists were less likely to blame female prostitutes, whereas in other scenarios they acted similarly to non-feminists.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Prostitution has remained a controversial topic in America. It is illegal in the majority of states in the United States, although its legal status has been put under scrutiny as social attitudes have changed. Some see prostitution as a simple exchange between two consenting adults, whereas others associate prostitutes with human trafficking or abusive pimps. Attitudes towards prostitution can depend greatly on which framework is used when thinking about the two actors, the buyer and the seller.

Much research has been done on attitudes towards prostitution and its legal status. But these studies do not make distinctions between the buyers and sellers of sex, and instead measure attitudes towards prostitution more generally. Some research has been done comparing sentencing data for those arrested for prostitution. But these studies often make no distinction between buyers and sellers of sex. Moreover, they cannot make conclusions about moral judgments.

The purpose of this research is to evaluate attitudes towards the buyer and sellers of sex and compare them to buyers and sellers of other illegal goods. I presented vignettes which described an illegal exchange which ended in the arrest of both buyer and seller. I manipulated the genders of the buyer and seller, as well as whether the good being sold was sex or an illegal firearm.

For the sale of illegal firearms, I expect to see harsher moral judgements and sentences for the seller than the buyer. A seller is usually going to be involved in more illegal transactions than a buyer, so I expect that respondents will be more interested in punishing them. The seller may also be seen as irresponsible, as they are selling an illegal firearm to someone who could cause harm. I have tried to mitigate this effect by indicating that the buyer is a collector, and that they have purchased from this seller before. Regardless, I am expecting harsher moral judgements and sentences for the buyer. While there is strong evidence of women receiving lighter sentences across the justice system (Daly and Bordt 2006), I believe that this effect will not be strong enough to outweigh the importance of the role of buyer or seller.

For prostitution, I expect that the gender of the buyer and seller will have an impact on moral judgements and sentencing. I expect the scenario involving a male seller (prostitute) and female buyer to be like the sale of illegal firearms. That is, I expect that the male seller will be punished more harshly than the female buyer. However, I predict that the standard case of prostitution, which involves a female seller and a male buyer, will be unique. In this case, the female seller will receive less harsh moral judgements and sentences than the buyer. The most popular understanding of prostitution involves seeing prostitutes as victims of exploitation, abuse, or some other harm (Weitzer 2007). I contend that this view, which is sympathetic towards sellers of sex, will not extend to male prostitutes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The Impact of the Genders of Buyer and Seller

The gender of a criminal can have an important impact on sentencing. The previously mentioned analysis by Kathleen Daly and Rebecca Bordt found that women are generally favored in sentencing, particularly in the decision to incarcerate or not (2006). This is very relevant to the case of prostitution because prostitution almost exclusively involves a female prostitute with a male customer (Atchison, Fraser, Lowman 1998). Even in the rare case of male prostitutes, customers tend to be male as well.

However, prostitution is a unique crime that may cause this effect to be weakened. Women are generally judged more harshly when it comes to having casual sex (England and Bearak 2014). This could potentially affect judgement in prostitution. Female sellers and buyers of sex may actually be punished more harshly than their male counterparts due to this sexual double standard. However, judgements against casual sex may not extend to prostitutes if respondents consider them to be victims of human trafficking or abusive pimps.

Prostitution Sentencing

Three studies done in Texas analyzed the arrests and judicial processing of those charged with prostitution. Rebecca Pfeffer found that women were more likely to be arrested for prostitution than men (2018). This study was not able to distinguish between buyers and sellers, so it is unclear whether the difference was because of gender or because of the roles of buyer and seller. However, an earlier study had found that at the point of sentencing, there was no difference in treatment between women and men (Lindquist 1989). That is, once someone was found guilty of prostitution, their gender did not affect the severity of their sentence. In 2015,

Texas law created separate offense codes for buyers and sellers of sex. A study done after this distinction was made found that sellers received harsher sentences than buyers. However, when controlling for the role of buyer or seller, men were less likely to have their cases dismissed (Updegrave 2019). This conflicts with the study done in 1989, although the difference could be explained by the different time periods or location within Texas.

The Impact of Respondent Gender and Self-Identification as Feminist

The two main predictors in attitudes towards buyers and sellers I am considering is the respondent gender and whether they identify as a feminist. Women have a stronger in-group bias compared to men (Rudman 2004). This would result in female respondents giving lighter sentences and moral judgements towards female sellers and buyers. This may or may not conflict with the general trend of women being opposed to prostitution. If the dislike of prostitution originates from concerns of women being victimized, then one would expect to see women give lighter sentences for female sellers of sex compared to female sellers of weapons. But if the dislike of prostitution comes more from the sexual double standard discussed earlier, the gender in-group bias effect may be overwhelmed.

Baumeister and Vohs offer an explanation as to why women judge other women more harshly for engaging in casual sex. They look at sexual activity through the lens of a marketplace, wherein men acquire sex from women in exchange for resources (2004). While men might prefer sex with a girlfriend to a prostitute, a prostitute is a safer bet for the money they spend. Men having the option to pay prostitutes for sex negatively impacts the standing of women in the sexual marketplace, because prostitution helps satisfy some of the male demand for sex. This would lead women to be more punitive towards the female prostitute, as she is unwanted competition.

Men, on the other hand, generally hold more favorable views towards prostitution than women (Jakobsson and Kotsadam 2011). They are more likely to find prostitution to be morally acceptable, as well as more likely to think it should be legalized. This is likely because men have stronger sex drives than women. Men are more likely to desire sex, and that desire is stronger than women's desire for sex (Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs 2001). Prostitution is a simple way to satisfy that desire, so it is understandable that men are more likely to support prostitution. This should result in men giving less harsh sentences and moral judgements towards prostitutes and customers than women.

Prostitution has been a frequent topic of consideration for feminists, since prostitution is one of few crimes where women are highly involved. A study from 1990 found that feminist students were more likely to be opposed to prostitution and see it as a means by which women are exploited (Basow and Companile). But what it means to be a feminist has changed since 1990. There are growing movements to reframe sex work as a positive thing for women instead of negative. It is possible that self-identification as a feminist might lead to lighter sentences and more favorable moral judgements of female prostitutes or female buyers of sex that is not reflected in female buyers and sellers of guns.

Chapter 3

Data and Methods

Subjects

The participants for this study were recruited from various undergraduate criminology and sociology courses at Penn State. 197 of the 411 total respondents received an invitation via e-mail to complete the survey. The remaining 214 respondents were recruited via a QR code that was projected on the screen at the beginning of their classes.

Vignettes

In the survey, respondents received one of four possible vignettes. Two vignettes described an exchange between a prostitute and a customer. The other two vignettes described an exchange between a gun collector and a seller. I manipulated the genders of the buyer and the seller in such a way that the participants were of the opposite sex.

Vignette #1/2 (Prostitution): (John/Jane) has been working as a prostitute for the last few years, although prostitution is illegal within (his/her) state. One night, (he/she) agrees to have sex with a (woman/man) named (Jane/John) for a cash payment. The two of them are caught by the police and arrested.

Vignette #3/4 (Guns): (John/Jane) is a gun collector who wants to buy an illegal gun for (his/her) collection. (He/She) purchases the gun from a (woman/man) named (Jane/John), who has sold (him/her) weapons for (his/her) collection before. The police catch them during the transaction and arrest them both.

Measures

The study utilizes a 2x2 factorial design. The independent variables are the type of crime (prostitution or sale of illegal weapons) and the genders of buyer and seller (male seller and female customer or female seller and male customer). To measure punishment, respondents were asked, “Which punishment should John receive?” and “What punishment should Jane receive?”. The order of the questions was randomized. Respondents were given 5 options for punishment: No punishment, a fine, probation, a shorter jail sentence (3 months for prostitution, 6 months for illegal weapons), or a longer jail sentence (6 months for prostitution, 1 year for illegal weapons). To measure moral blame, respondents were asked, “Morally, whose behavior is worse?” The options for this question were: Jane, John, John’s and Jane’s behavior was equally wrong, or neither John’s nor Jane’s behavior was morally wrong.

Respondents also received a series of demographic and attitudinal questions. Respondents were asked their race and gender first. Religiosity was measured by whether respondents engage in religious activities at least once a month. Feminist status was determined by asking, “Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?”. Political orientation was measured on a scale coded as 1=Very liberal to 5=Very conservative. Respondents were asked to agree with a statement to determine whether they believe prostitution should be legalized. The options were: “Prostitution should be legal”, “It should be legal to sell sex but illegal to purchase it”, “It should be illegal to sell sex but legal to purchase it”, or “Prostitution should be illegal”. Finally, respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements, coded 1=Strongly disagree to 5=Strongly agree. The statement “It is okay to have sex with someone you just met,” measured their attitudes towards casual sex. The statement “Sex work is empowering for women,” measured whether respondents generally found sex work to be degrading or empowering for women.

Chapter 4

Results

To begin, I looked at the sentences given to buyers and sellers. The two regressions showed that respondents generally gave lighter sentences to buyers and sellers in prostitution scenarios than in gun scenarios, but the gender of respondents and the genders of the buyer and seller did not have a significant effect.

Table 1: Punishment Towards Seller

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1 (Constant)	2.921	.114		25.537	<.001
Respondent Gender	.109	.114	.040	.958	.339
Prostitution	-1.370	.103	-.560	-13.266	<.001
Male Seller / Female Buyer	.116	.103	.047	1.124	.262

a. Dependent Variable: PunishSeller

Table 2: Punishment Towards Buyer

Independent Variable	Unstandardized		Standardized		Sig.
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1 (Constant)	2.639	.116		22.793	<.001
Respondent Gender	.122	.115	.047	1.064	.288
Prostitution	-1.191	.105	-.501	-11.392	<.001
Male Seller / Female Buyer	-.010	.105	-.004	-.092	.927

a. Dependent Variable: PunishBuyer

Moral Judgements

In the survey, respondents were also given the option to assign greater moral blame to the man or woman, assign equal blame, or determine that neither person acted in a morally wrong manner. I created a new variable where responses which treated the man and woman the same were coded to the same number. I then ran a linear regression with the same independent variables I used when looking at punishment. The results are presented in Table 3.

I also created interaction terms using the independent variables of respondent gender, vignette type, and genders of buyer and seller. There was a significant effect for the two-way variable of Male Seller by Prostitution. The pattern of means can be seen in Figure 1. In gun cases, the seller was much more likely to receive blame than the buyer. In prostitution, moral

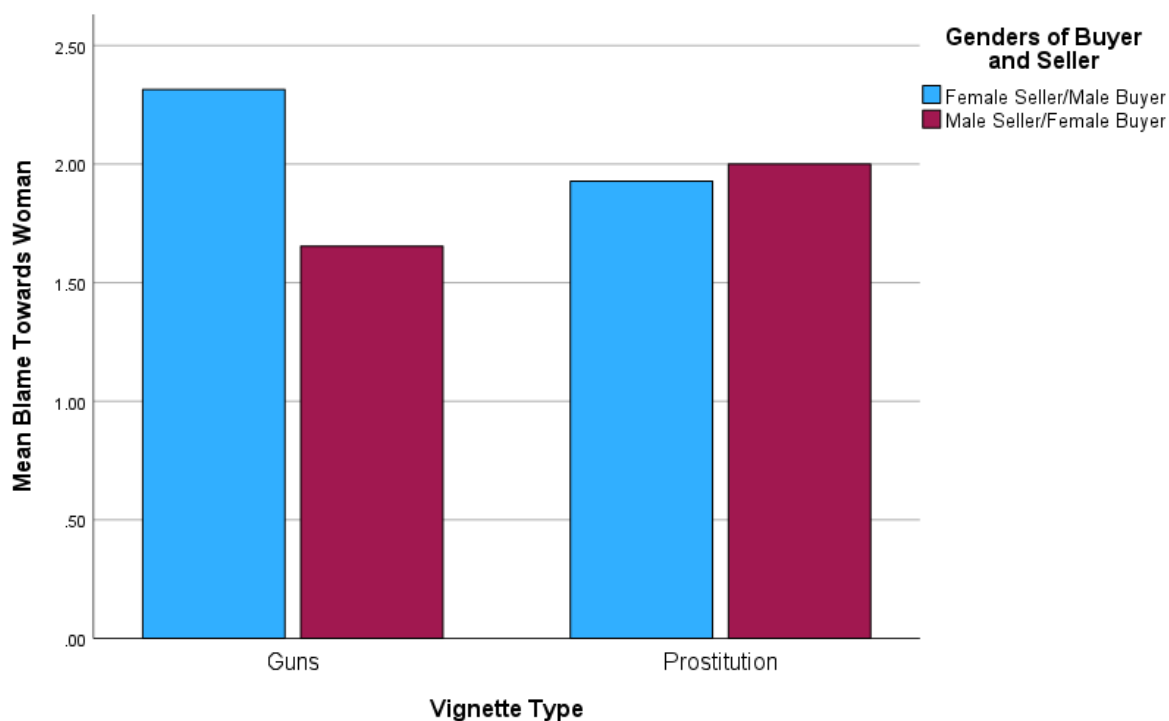
blame was assigned much more equally between buyer and seller, suggesting gender did not matter.

Table 3: Blame Towards Woman

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	
1 (Constant)	2.299	.088		26.165	<.001
Respondent Gender	.025	.104	.018	.238	.812
Prostitution	-.300	.122	-.242	-2.457	.014
Male Seller / Female Buyer	-.729	.119	-.588	-6.102	<.001
Male Seller by Prostitution	.733	.117	.520	6.275	<.001
Respondent Gender by Prostitution	-.110	.129	-.084	-.850	.396
Respondent Gender by Male Seller	.095	.128	.075	.743	.458

a. Dependent Variable: Blaming the Woman

Figure 1: Blame Towards Woman (Vignette Type by Gender of Participants)



From the previous regression, I knew that the difference in moral judgements between prostitution cases and gun cases was not caused by the respondent's gender. So, I began to run some linear regressions for the standard cases of prostitution, i.e., a female prostitute and male customer, to see if any other variables I collected could explain the difference. One candidate I considered was whether a respondent considered themselves to be a feminist or not. Of course, feminists are more likely to be female than male. In this sample, 67% of self-identified feminists were female. But I found a significant effect when looking at whether respondents self-identified as feminists even when controlling for gender of the respondent; feminists were less likely to blame women in these cases.

Table 4: Blame Towards Woman (Standard Prostitution Only)

Independent Variable	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.
	Coefficients		Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.142	.109		19.729	<.001
Respondent Gender	-.034	.129	-.031	-.264	.792
Feminist	-.301	.121	-.290	-2.495	.015

a. Dependent Variable: Blaming the Woman

b. Selecting only for standard cases of prostitution

With this new information, I redid the linear regression for moral blame adding feminist status to the equation. If the standard prostitution scenario is unique, then one should observe a three-way interaction. The results (bottom line of the table) presented in Table 5 show a statistically significant interaction between self-identification as feminist, the genders of the buyer and seller, and the type of crime. In the standard case of prostitution, feminists assign less moral blame to the female seller (prostitute). The pattern of means is presented in Figure 2. This means that the standard prostitution scenario creates a unique effect. In gun scenarios, feminists and non-feminists assign blame in the same way. But in the standard prostitution scenario, feminists assign more blame to male sellers than female sellers. In the bottom right corner of

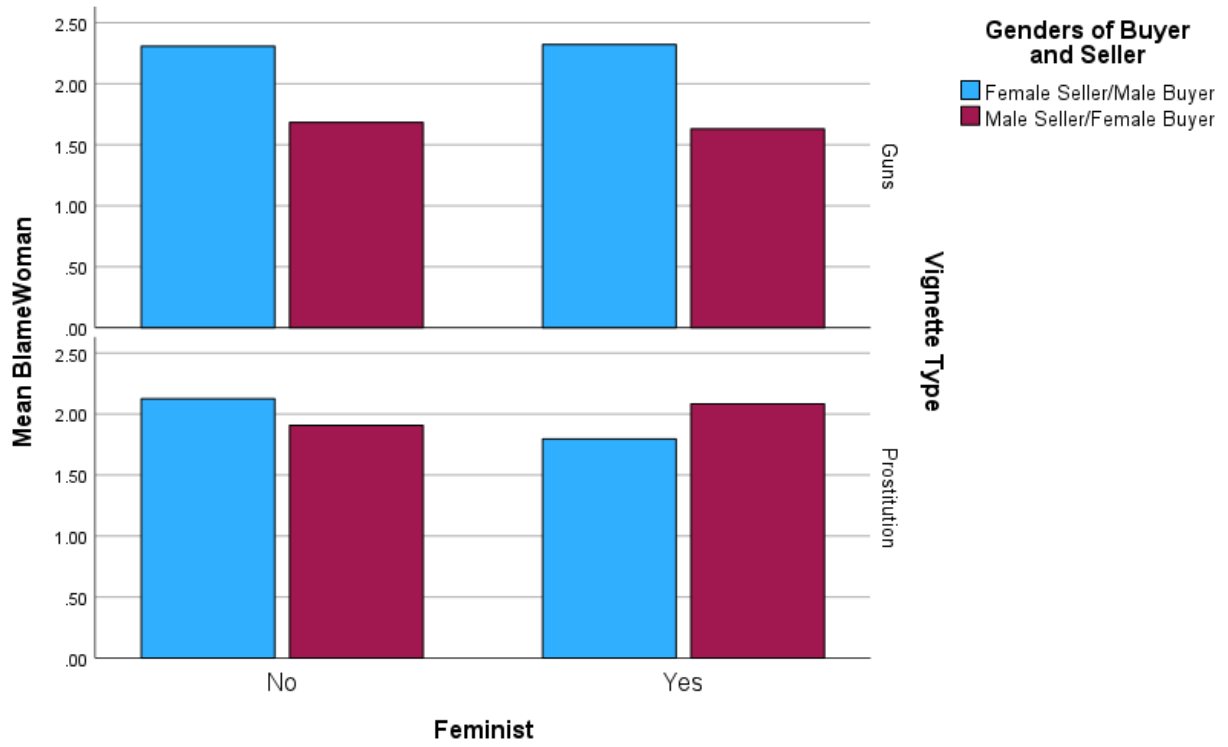
Figure 2, the blue bar which indicates a standard prostitution scenario is lower for the female seller than the male seller. In all other scenarios the opposite is observed.

Table 5: Blame Towards Woman (Feminism)

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.308	.079		29.175	<.001
	Prostitution	-.183	.128	-.147	-1.426	.155
	Male Seller/ Female Buyer	-.625	.119	-.504	-5.244	<.001
	Feminist	.014	.110	.011	.125	.901
	Feminist by Male Seller	-.057	.159	-.043	-.360	.719
	Feminist by Prostitution	-.326	.170	-.235	-1.915	.056
	Male Seller by Prostitution	.407	.179	.289	2.276	.023
	Feminist by Male Seller by Prostitution	.546	.235	.317	2.323	.021

a. Dependent Variable: Blaming the Woman

Figure 2: Blame Towards Woman (Feminism by Vignette Type by Gender of Participants)



Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to determine how the genders of buyers and sellers, as well as the type of illegal good being sold, affected sentencing and moral judgement.

Unsurprisingly, respondents generally gave lighter punishments to buyers and sellers in prostitution as opposed to guns. The sample consisted entirely of undergraduate students, who I suspect are more concerned about guns than prostitution, particularly if the guns in question are part of an illegal transaction. It is possible that this effect might be weakened with a sample more representative of the United States population. The genders of the buyer and seller did not have a significant effect.

The moral judgements, however, were affected by a two-way interaction between the genders of buyer and seller and type of crime. Gun scenarios resulted in sellers being more likely to receive blame than buyers. This effect did not occur in prostitution, as moral blame was assigned more equally there. A limitation of this study is that the buyer and seller in every vignette were opposite genders. Different interactions may occur if the buyer and seller are both female or both male. For example, if a woman purchased sex from a female prostitute, there may be less concerns about the patriarchal exploitation of the prostitute.

The gender of the respondents did not have a significant effect on moral blame. However, any potential effects from respondent gender may be hidden due to flaws of the study. 280 of the 394 respondents were female, or 71.1%. Moreover, the option to assign moral blame equally to the man and woman was frequently chosen. This means that data concerning men who blame the seller more harshly than the buyer, or vice versa, is low in number. This flaw could be addressed in a few ways. One, measures could be taken to ensure a sample with a more equal distribution

of gender. Or the sample size could be significantly increased. Future research could also force respondents to choose to assign more blame to either the buyer or seller by not giving an option to assign equal blame.

Self-identification as feminist was also observed to affect moral blame. The standard prostitution scenario was found to have a unique influence on feminists' moral judgements. Feminists were less likely to blame the female prostitute. Earlier in the paper, I noted that there has been a growing movement towards viewing sex work as empowering. I suspect that this extends only to female sex workers, which could help explain the three-way interaction in which the standard prostitution scenario is unique. It is also possible that feminists tend to view female sex workers as victims of patriarchal exploitation. Feminists determining prostitutes to be victims would also result in them giving less harsh moral judgements. Given the unique effect, future research could look more in-depth at how feminist attitudes affect moral judgements in prostitution. This study allowed respondents to self-identify as feminist, but studies focused more explicitly on feminism, such as the one by Susan Basow and Florence Campanile, utilizes scales which measure attitudes towards feminism instead. This could provide additional insights as to what it is about feminists that causes this unique interaction.

While moral blame was affected by various factors, such as the genders of buyer and seller or identification as feminist, punishment was not. I suspect that this is because while people may have biases that affect their judgement, they do their best to avoid them when giving out punishment. A negative moral judgement makes much less impact on the people being judged when compared to fines, probation, or jail time. So respondents may feel more free to single out a participant as being more blameworthy if it will not affect their sentence. The structure of the study may also have an effect here. Respondents were asked in one question to

assign moral blame to John or Jane or to assign blame equally. With punishment, respondents received one question listing a variety of sentences for John and a separate question listing potential sentences for Jane. Future research could collapse these two questions into one question which asks, “Who should receive a harsher sentence?”, and then ask them to choose John or Jane or to assign an equal sentence. This could result in greater differences in sentencing, as was observed in moral judgements.

Prior research indicates that women receive lighter sentences and less harsh moral judgements when compared to men. For prostitution, double standards about sexual activity could have mitigated or even reversed this effect. But lenient treatment towards women did not occur even in the gun scenarios, where double standards around sexual activity have no effect. It could be a reflection of my sample; perhaps the younger generation is more egalitarian in their sentencing and moral judgements. However, the sale of illegal firearms may be causing a unique effect here. According to attribution theory, blame may be assigned more harshly when people believe an action to be caused by internal factors as opposed to external factors (Manusov and Spitzberg 2008). For example, society may be less harsh in judging a young man who gets drunk and causes trouble at a bar, because this fits with social expectations of young men. But a middle-aged woman getting drunk and causing trouble at the bar would receive harsher judgement, as her actions are more likely to be seen as an internal character flaw. Generally, society does not expect to see women involved in the sale of illegal firearms, which are heavily associated with men. This would result in harsher sentences and judgement towards female buyers and sellers of illegal guns. This could be cancelling out the general tendency to treat women more leniently. If the effect is particularly strong, it could be an alternative explanation as to why sellers were treated more harshly than buyers in gun scenarios.

Generally, sellers of illegal goods are judged more harshly than buyers for different reasons depending on the crime. Certain types of illegal goods can create different reasons for why this is the case. For example, a buyer of illegal drugs may be seen as addicted and therefore in less control of their actions. For the sale of illegal weapons, sellers may be seen as irresponsible for potentially providing an illegal firearm to a buyer who could be planning mass murder. I attempted to mitigate this effect by indicating that the buyer was simply a collector and that the seller had sold him weapons before, therefore knowing that the collector has not carried out any mass shootings. But for any type of illegal good, there is good reason to target sellers more than buyers. It helps to stop future instances of the same crime to punish sellers more harshly than buyers, since a single seller is usually engaged in many more transactions than a single buyer.

Sellers were assigned more blame than buyers in gun scenarios, as I expected. Contrary to my hypothesis, sellers and buyers were assigned blame much more equally in all cases of prostitution, regardless of the gender of the prostitute. This indicates something unique about sex as an illegal good. Perhaps prostitution is not seen as serious enough to warrant assigning more blame to either the buyer or seller. Only 41% of respondents wished to legalize prostitution though, so at least some of respondents must have believed there to be some negative repercussions caused by prostitution. Prostitutes are selling sex, which is a unique kind of illegal good. Sex is the most intimate way that humans interact. While prostitution eliminates the emotional intimacy, the physical intimacy that remains in prostitution could make it more likely that buyers and sellers are seen as equally culpable. Future research could provide greater insight into the unique nature of prostitution by comparing it to a greater variety of illegal transactions.

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