

# ***Sex work in the suburbs: A critical discourse analysis of representations of women working on the streets in historically white suburbs of Cape Town***

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Sex work is a key livelihood for many across the globe. Yet, such work remains 'othered' in many contexts, with social representations frequently reflecting and reiterating national and global raced and classed inequalities and dominant discourses, and with sex workers often the target of stigmatization and violence. Even within feminist readings, where sex work has long been a contested subject, transactional sexual practices are frequently assumed an exploitative practice for women, especially poor women, with women constructed as passive victims of what is viewed as an inherently abusive engagement. In the South African context where gender justice has been key to the democratization of the country post-apartheid, sex work remains illegal and highly stigmatized. Dominant responses to sex work are further interwoven with other stigmatizing and othering discourses on the basis of race, class, citizenship, sexual preference, gender identity, and so on. Middle class suburbs in South African contexts are frequently the site of transactional sexual practices, despite the negative and moralistic construction of such practices being. Those who visibly do not 'belong' in such suburbs, including sex workers who enter these areas to serve the sexual desires of suburban residents, are therefore multiply 'othered' and vulnerable to abuse and violence. A case in point is the well-publicized story of a white male resident in one such Cape Town suburb who assaulted a black domestic worker, citing his reason as mistaking her for a sex worker. The abuse, harassment and violence towards sex workers from so-called 'entitled, violent suburban residents' (Ferguson, 2014) is not uncommon, though often silenced given the criminalization of sex work in South Africa. This paper reports on the experiences of female sex workers, through a feminist qualitative methodology informed by discourse analysis and located within a social constructionist and intersectional paradigm, of online news agencies, local newspapers, and other online reports. This paper seeks to explore the experiences of sex workers, the spaces of the suburb in Cape Town where they occupy the complex position of being 'othered' outsiders, of transgressing both geographical and legal boundaries/constraints, yet also 'invited' in to provide sexual and care services for the residents. The paper draws on local and online sources foregrounding sex workers' experiences of fear and violence in South Africa.

**Key Words:** sex workers, middle class, suburbs, poor, black, women, safe, unsafe, violence, feminist qualitative study, discourse analysis, transgression.

## Reference

Ferguson, S. (2014). "Why Sex Workers can't Trust the Police". Originally published on Women24. Available on: [m.women24.com/women24/Wellness/BodyAndSpirit/Why-sex-workers-can't-trust-the-poli](http://m.women24.com/women24/Wellness/BodyAndSpirit/Why-sex-workers-can't-trust-the-poli)

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