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Sex Work and Class

Abstract

Prostitution scandals stigmatize workers for their entire lives, but the politician involved is marred for only one news cycle. “White knight” feminists shame women for sexually catering to the patriarchy but talk from a place of economic privilege. Religious organizations engage in misguided attempts to “save” women who use the industry as a job. Exploitive policies aimed at curtailing sex work hurt the individuals who wish to practice safe sex for their own protection. In the guise of aiding sex workers, or saving them from themselves, those that would advocate for more restrictive policies ignore the ramifications of what these laws would entail.

Keywords

Sex work, class

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Prostitution scandals stigmatize workers for their entire lives, but the politician involved is marred for only one news cycle. “White knight” feminists shame women for sexually catering to the patriarchy but talk from a place of economic privilege. Religious organizations engage in misguided attempts to “save” women who use the industry as a job. Exploitive policies aimed at curtailing sex work hurt the individuals who wish to practice safe sex for their own protection. In the guise of aiding sex workers, or saving them from themselves, those that would advocate for more restrictive policies ignore the ramifications of what these laws would entail.

Simply put, most see sex work through a conservative lens and elevate sex to a higher plane than your average 9 to 5 desk job. Sex workers, however, are not “selling their souls” – they are providing a service. Slut shaming – guilting people, particularly women, for sexual behavior, desire, dress that deviates from societal expectations, or even being sexually assaulted¹ – is pervasive in our culture, so it is no surprise that women and men who pursue all forms of sex work get stigmatized. Still, not all individuals in sex work are stigmatized to the same extent, particularly based upon contact with their customers: camera models are afforded a barrier between consumer and worker, stripping less so, and street level prostitution is therefore viewed as “the dirtiest” as it is direct contact.

One must account for the economic aspect. When a person expresses their disappointment that an individual turns to sex work rather than college or another job, it smacks of classism. Not all are afforded the opportunity to pursue any of these avenues, and even if they were, it may not fit their schedule or lifestyle. When looking at it with an intersectional lens, there are also class dynamics coupled with race, ageism, and ableism. Even with legalization, commercialization of bodies favors thin, cis, white, young, able bodies (it only takes looking at the current darlings of porn in America, James Deen and Sasha Grey, to verify the veracity of this) and those that do not fit have their capital exploited, are not afforded places such as brothels that would make work more expedient and safer, are harassed by policemen, or even killed. Rich clientele seek privacy and are less prone to violence, which is quite clearly an advantage for these workers. Sex work behind the camera, too, is a manifestation of a certain level of privilege as no physical interaction with the consumer is necessary and it could be done from the safety of one’s own residence; furthermore, it requires capital to invest in the necessary technology to even begin. Hence, punishment for individuals as the work becomes more street oriented, is more regressive.

Oppression by the state causes risk of violence and when sex workers are hurt, raped, or killed, they are viewed as lesser beings in court. Trans individuals, if arrested, are misgendered and get placed in incorrect facilities. In their pursuit of anonymity or simply victims of circumstance, these individuals can be transients and as such are prime prey to killers. By not only criminalizing the sex act, but access to safe means of perpetrating it, the state also extends criminal consequences to other aspects of these people’s lives, such as denying them access to other jobs, or taking away their children. The spread of STIs is

¹ [SlutWalk](#), a coordinated protest that continues to take place which came to fruition when Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti made the comment: “... women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized”, is one instance of retaliation against these unfair norms which perpetuate victim blaming.

of concern, with cities such as New York having invasive stop and frisk procedures coupled with bills that enable possession of condoms as evidence in a trial, denying the ability of these individuals to practice safe sex.²

Furthermore, women are disproportionately targeted for arrest while those who profit from their labor often are not.³ The class and power relationship that exists when one does not have immediate access to the earnings of one's labor coupled with the added insult of the workers themselves bearing the brunt of criminalization is unacceptable. Norton-Hawk's (2004) analysis of the differences between pimp and non-pimp controlled sex workers finds a demographic difference between the two groups. Pimp-controlled women were more likely to be single (85% to 70%), non-white (60% to 53%), less likely to have completed high school (60% to 53% and more likely to have had no job experience in the legal economy (30% to 10%); non-pimp controlled women had higher rates of some job-related experience (67% to 40%).⁴ The social, economic, and class circumstances of these women lead those with more privilege to have less exposure to violence.⁵

For individuals who wish to better their circumstances, sex work is a means to an end. If we are truly concerned about bettering their quality of life, forcing these women, men, and intersex individuals to lesser paid, inflexible labor positions is not the way to go about it. Sex workers have been organizing throughout the world⁶, and it is their voices that need to be heard. For example, a conference organized by groups such as the UK Collective of Prostitutes (UKCP) allows sex workers to speak of their experiences and struggles for rights in a public venue.⁷ Sex workers need the means to engage in collective interest representation. To date, sex worker unionization projects have faced difficulties – from the non-fixed nature of their jobs to the attitudes of the workers involved that place a higher premium on entrepreneurial rather than collectivist goals (which does not necessarily rule out non-labor unionism through collective self-help and self-reliance).⁸ At the very least, decriminalization is absolutely necessary, as we need to stop fueling the prison industrial complex and allow these individuals the ability to do their jobs without the fear of going to prison. This very basic step is needed if more individuals are to come forward with their own experiences and articulate how best to go forward from this point. An acknowledgement needs to be made that coming forward is difficult, made ever more so due to opportunity and circumstance, and their relationship to extant power structures. Social constraints and stigma surrounds these individuals.

² While there is talk that the NYPD will limit seizing condoms, the law still allows utilization of condoms as evidence during trial. See: [Marc, Santora. 2014. "New York Police to Limit Seizing of Condoms in Prostitution Cases." *New York Times* \(May 12, 2014\).](#)

³ Fraser Commission. 1985. *Report on Pornography and Prostitution in Canada*. 390.

⁴ Norton-Hawk, Maureen. 2004. "A Comparison of Pimp- and Non-Pimp Controlled Women." *Violence Against Women*. 10: 189.

⁵ Norton-Hawk, 2004. 193.

⁶ For a list of sex worker organizations, see: <http://www.bayswan.org/orgs.html>

⁷ See: <http://prostitutescollective.net/2014/09/07/sex-workers-rights-prisma/>

⁸ Gall, Gregor. 2012. *An Agency of Their Own: Sex Worker Union Organising*. London: Zero Books.

While sex positivity should be espoused, it needs to be placed in the correct context. The opportunity to engage in sex work as a job should be distinguished from having no other recourse. Sex work is not trafficking, and some individuals choose this as a job because it simply fits their schedule and needs. To not acknowledge the place of class, economic disadvantage, and capitalism in general, however, is foolish. Freedom to and freedom from are two different things, and uncritical sex positivity is harmful; true freedom must include the freedom to do what one wants to but also the freedom from oppressive structures and demands, or negative liberty. Sex workers' placement within a choice or no choice dichotomy does not take into account the flux in position these agents find themselves in. Sex workers have political agency (defined as both capacity and action), but operate within various social, political, legal, structures and depending on specific, variable contexts.⁹ The constraints of capitalism limits job availabilities in general, so within a "mixed" capitalist economy and government that favors the interest of transnational corporations, individuals are viewed only as useful as they contribute to the economy. The state of social welfare in the U.S. for the most part does not allow for existence without utility. In this sense, underprivileged individuals slip between the cracks of the "social safety net" and must somehow come up with funds to make a living. In this sense, there is little choice as to how to come up with funds – either illicitly, or the fatal alternative, not at all.

The United States policy design conceptualizes sex workers as victims: females who don't know any better and can't speak up for themselves. Therefore, the victim mentality is not compatible with efforts to legitimize the work. The fact that America is the global leader in efforts to combat human trafficking has led to policy discourse and has led to funding in the international sphere to be dominated by the state.¹⁰ There is a serious issue in conflating human trafficking where individuals have absolutely no power over their decision and bodies, to prostitution. Moreover, delegitimization of sex work allowed an expansion of state police power.¹¹ It is easy to justify an expansion of police presence and funds when framing the sex worker as a hapless migrant in need of saving, or the act as a criminal offense in need of seeking out and punishing.

A state response to the framework of sex work can be conceivably put together without inadvertently hurting the individuals within it. Rather than pursue abolitionist policies as the United States has done that seeks to outlaw the practice as a universally victimizing activity, or the flip side, Swedish law that criminalizes the buyers of sexual services from the perspective that this practice upholds patriarchal notions of men buying women (which doesn't take into perspective a woman's own choice in the matter), the Netherlands provides a good example of both legitimizing sex workers as individuals and recognizing sex work as labor. Netherlands uses a combination of harm reduction and economic rights promotion (legalization and regulatory mechanisms) to reshape sex

⁹ Showden, Carisa R. and Samantha Majic. 2014. *Negotiating Sex Work*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. xiv.

¹⁰ One example was the 2003 'Global AIDS Act' passed by Congress, barring the use of federal funds to "promote, support, or advocate the legalization of the practice of prostitution" (Public Law 108-25 2003).

¹¹ Showden and Majic. xix.

workers' economic and political standing.¹² A few examples include decriminalization, municipal governments using zoning powers to create *tippelzones* (safe parks) until the legalization of brothels, and an increase of health resources and basic amenities. However, the state must also address the negative liberty aspect – the freedom from. Funds and social programs that give individuals (at the very least) enough to subsist on would be a must.

Sex work should be made as safe as possible, in tandem with a serious discussion of the value of humanity in a capitalist society. In this endeavor, we need to tear apart sexism, racism, classism, and ableism. Support all gendered and a-gendered people's agencies. Empower them to choose what they want to do, and recognize that even if individuals have little other choice but to turn to sex work, these people do not need the added pressure of criminalization for something that allows them to continue to exist. Acknowledgement of the experiences of these individuals and their voices rather than those who have no conception of the reality of their day-to-day existence would be the most fundamental and necessary step in the right direction. Kept in mind should be the reality that most individuals in the sex industry, because of legal circumstances and the stigma surrounding this line of work, will be unable or unwilling to come forward. It is our responsibility as a society to create a climate that legitimizes sex work as labor; only then can we engage in serious, thoughtful, nonjudgmental discourse to better address this issue.

“Criminalizing prostitution does not eradicate it. It drives it underground, putting the women at risk and giving customers an unfair advantage. An ex-prostitute in Italy, where prostitution is illegal, told me of women who were beaten by their clients when they demanded payment. She had horrible stories of women being threatened with knives. She told me of a Nigerian prostitute who was believed to have been killed by a customer. That is an extreme case, but the fact remains that criminalizing prostitution puts the women at the power of their customers. And we know how absolute power can corrupt absolutely.”¹³

¹² Showden and Majic. xxi.

¹³ [Unigwe, Chika. 2013. “Legality Brings Protection and Better Care.” *New York Times*. \(September 19, 2013\).](#)