

Prostitution: A Reflective Analysis

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In chapter seven of *Politics and Sex: Exploring the Connections Between Gender, Sexuality, and the State*, Edna Keeble stresses that prostitution, through its immediate association with exploitation, remains a widely criticized practice to this day. This association, however, is far too simplistic and undermines the agency of women who willingly choose to engage in sex work by automatically deeming them victims. Equally concerning are the laws that several countries, including Canada, have set in place to reflect these social attitudes, further validating the stigmatization of prostitution and placing legal restrictions on women's sexuality. This reality is problematic for women who are sex workers by choice, but also for those who face genuine sexual exploitation. The stigmatization and criminalization of all sex work inevitably leads to less transparency and regulation, meaning that it becomes more difficult to track and prosecute the perpetrators of sexual exploitation when it actually occurs. My belief is very much in line with the feminist liberal perspective expressed in the chapter, that consenting adults should be able to freely express their sexuality as long as no harm is done in the process. The selling and buying of non-exploitative sex should be possible without social ostracism and legal penalty. Exploitative sex, on the other hand, should be treated separately from the overall practice of sex work, coming with its own social and legal consequences. The themes covered throughout this chapter, such as the disentangling of sex trafficking from sex work, the madonna/whore dichotomy, and diverse prostitution systems, clearly demonstrate why prostitution should be decriminalized.

When analyzing prostitution as a matter of choice for women, it is extremely important to recognize the widespread, global issue of sexual exploitation. The feminist liberal perspective acknowledges this. However, as expressed throughout the chapter, it is crucial to distinguish between the two issues. The text perhaps best exemplifies this by referencing the United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. It is noted that the passing of this protocol has been a great step forward, as the document recognizes the difference between free and forced prostitution, and acknowledges that human trafficking not only occurs through sexual exploitation, but also other means like organ removal and forced labor (Keeble, pg. 21). Yet, even though this international recognition has taken place, prostitution often continues to be equated with sex trafficking by those who oppose sex work in general (Keeble, pg. 21). As mentioned above, I take the stance that women can indeed engage in sex work by choice. The attitude that prostitution and trafficking are the same thing is highly problematic, because it does not acknowledge that some sex workers do practice free choice and are not forced into unwanted circumstances. I would argue that laws around prostitution should be tailored according to this truth, while laws pertaining to exploitation should be kept separate.

Current stigmatization and resultant criminalization of prostitution within western society can be understood through an analysis of the madonna/whore dichotomy. Ironically, while sex workers are often viewed as victims of exploitation, the madonna/whore dichotomy shows that they are also frequently shunned. The text explains that "...the idea of the madonna represents the sexual purity of women as wives because they are mothers" (Keeble, pg. 7). This contrasts with the characterization of the whore, who provides a sexual release for uncontrollable male desires (Keeble, pg. 7-8). According to this logic, whores corrupt otherwise upstanding men, making them powerless to control their sexual desires. As enablers of indecency, whores are consequently stigmatized. It is not difficult to see, however, that the glorification of the madonna and ostracization of the whore is problematic. This type of conservative thinking pigeonholes women, leaving little room for them to extend beyond simple categorizations based on the premise of their sexual choices. It fails to take into account that some women might choose to wholly embrace a role like motherhood while still engaging in non-procreative sex outside of marriage. Because a woman cannot fit into the role of the madonna while also engaging in sex work, prostitutes are stigmatized for not behaving the way that many believe they should. Through this conceptualization, a sharp division is formed between the unacceptable woman who chooses to engage in prostitution and the acceptable woman who does not. This division is used to determine what it means to be a woman who is worthy of appreciation and respect based on her alignment with patriarchal ideas around sex.

With that being said, it is vital to note that a woman's identity entails much more than just her sexuality. Her individual choice on whether or not to conform to these idealizations should not determine how much appreciation and respect she gets from others, her overall character should. Perhaps the association of sex work with exploitation is merely a means by which the shunning of female sexuality can be justified, without backlash, through social and legal control. Characterizing sex work as exploitation allows for restrictions on female sexuality to be excused because resultant social and legal responses are viewed as protective measures, whereas characterizing it as an indecent act might be challenged by those who want full control over what they do with their bodies.

The chapter goes on to show that the conservative thought process at the root of the madonna/whore dichotomy is also evident within a number of prostitution systems across the world, as there are often legal restrictions placed on female sexuality. The reality is that "...the idea of paying for sex remains outside of the legal norm in some countries, including Canada..." (Keeble, pg. 11). In fact, Canada has adopted the Nordic model also found in Sweden, Norway and Iceland as a way of dealing with prostitution—a system that views sex work as an inherent form of exploitation toward women, criminalizing buyers and third parties while decriminalizing sellers (Keeble, pg. 17). Such an approach is inappropriate in that it assumes all women are engaging in sex work against their will. It turns a blind eye to the fact that some women love being prostitutes, as is shown through the example of Megan in Meredith Ralston's film "Selling Sex" (2015). Megan describes sex work as being fun, rewarding and something that she willingly chose to get involved in from the start (Ralston, 2015). To undermine the autonomy of a capable person like Megan in making her decision to become a prostitute is to take away from her overall agency as a human being. She is clearly not a victim of exploitation and should therefore not be treated as such.

For many like Megan, the Nordic model is restrictive. While the laws surrounding prostitution in Canada target buyers, they also have inadvertent consequences for those who choose to sell sex. Rather than meeting under circumstances that the seller has chosen to ensure safety, johns may only agree to meet in isolated places to protect themselves from legal consequences. Meeting in secluded areas means that prostitutes have less assurance of safe and predictable customer interactions, as there are minimal witnesses and little opportunity for proper screening, thus increasing the risk of physical and sexual assault against sex workers. On the other hand, johns may be too wary of the law to buy sex in the first place. This results in a dwindling customer base for prostitutes, meaning that their options become limited and they may have to meet with buyers who make them feel unsafe in order to make enough money to sustain themselves through sex work. This is not only an issue for people like Megan, who live comfortably enough to choose prostitution from an array of options, but also for those who are in more vulnerable social positions and might not have the privilege of making such a choice.

In other words, it is important to look at how a system like the Nordic model also serves as an unfit solution for those who have limited options due to oppression, namely prostitutes who are “...engaged in what is referred to as ‘survival sex,’ selling sex in the worst conditions due to poverty or addiction, or just for the basic necessity to survive” (Keeble, pg. 14). Survival sex, because it is a response to socio-economic issues that are beyond the control of the seller, is exploitative. However, targeting buyers of survival sex is not going to end the exploitation of workers. In fact, the attempt to eradicate the customer base of a marginalized sex worker largely restricts her options in terms of income (Keeble, pg. 30). Considering this, it seems that the Nordic model—while attempting to put an end to exploitation—actually further marginalizes those being exploited. It leaves women whose income is limited to begin with at an even greater disadvantage, as they may not be able to find other work. A better solution would be for the government to provide stronger social safety nets so those who feel that their survival is at stake have other choices. The extent to which prostitutes must work in secrecy in order to avoid legal penalty for their buyers might lead to more abuse and harm towards those who are already victims of oppression, as their status as sex workers further contributes to their being seen as throwaways. For such reasons, I agree with the argument made throughout the text that decriminalization is the best way to go when addressing prostitution—a belief that is shared among many sex workers and their advocates (Keeble, pg. 16).

Through my reading of this chapter, I have learned the extent to which my own ideas around sex work align with the feminist liberal perspective. The text has given me a thorough understanding of the equating of sex trafficking to sex work, the madonna/whore dichotomy, and prostitution systems, validating my perception that prostitution should not be criminalized and helping me to shape better arguments against the stigmatization of it. My view is that being able to read, discuss and better understand issues involving prostitution through the feminist liberal perspective is most definitely a step toward gender equality within society. This is because the feminist liberal perspective ultimately creates a space for challenging the existing barriers women have to face when it comes to freely expressing their sexuality. The widespread stigmatization and resultant legislation that works against the interests of sex workers is very much a feminist issue. In the grand scheme of things, sex workers’ rights are

indeed women's rights. Redefining prostitution to more accurately reflect reality, especially in countries like Canada, whose laws support conservative values, is something that I strongly support.

I hope that future generations will become more progressive and accepting in their discussions, policies and practices around prostitution. As more people continue to become advocates of feminism, I am confident that the feminist liberal perspective will gain greater recognition. It is important to remain optimistic that sex work will eventually become less stigmatized and that more countries will choose to adopt decriminalization as their approach.

References

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