Swirsky, Ruth, and Celia Jenkins. "All in a Day's Work? (1997)." *The Trouble & Strife Reader*. Ed. Deborah Cameron and Joan Scanlon. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010. 54–61. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849662956.ch-008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 05:51 UTC.

Copyright © Deborah Cameron, Joan Scanlon and the contributors 2010. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

8. All in a day's work? (1997)

Ruth Swirsky and Celia Jenkins

The logic of the position that prostitution is 'sex-work', an occupation comparable to any other, would be to offer jobs in the sex industry to the unemployed. This is exactly what has happened. In 1996, British Job Centres advertised work in massage parlours, escort agencies and strip clubs. Following complaints from the unemployed who feared they might lose their jobseeker's allowance if they turned down these jobs, the Employment Service banned such adverts. Yet this is the logic of constituting prostitution as sex-work, little different from other gendered female occupations.

There are two major feminist approaches to prostitution. The first views prostitution as epitomising the use and abuse of women by men, while the second views it as a legitimate form of labour which is freely chosen by women who earn their living as prostitutes. Those who subscribe to the latter position argue that their starting-point is the experiences and needs of women working as prostitutes, in keeping with the feminist principle of respect for the realities of women's lives. There is, however, no necessary and inevitable progression from seeking to understand the experiences of prostitutes and supporting their needs, to viewing prostitution as a legitimate form of labour.

We want to expose the implications of promoting prostitution as 'sex work', to question whose interests are being served, and to reinstate a definition of prostitution that extends beyond individual women's experiences to challenge the *institution* of prostitution. In short, we are against prostitution and for the rights of women in prostitution.

In defining prostitution as the sexual exploitation of women, we attempt to keep the definition broad and inclusive, while at the same time as recognising different women's experiences of prostitution, in a way that defining prostitution as 'sex work' does not. For example, it may be pragmatic to define child prostitution as abuse, insofar as it allows for harsher legal sanctions against the offender/client. But if child prostitution is defined as abuse, that seems to imply that at some notional age coercion is transformed into free choice. It is this connection between age and choice which has to be severed to promote an effective feminist analysis of prostitution, one which acknowledges the different constituencies of women and children involved, without losing sight of the exploitation prostitution entails.

Prostitution as work

The argument that prostitution is work is exemplified in Mary McIntosh's paper 'Feminist Debates on Prostitution', which suggests that prostitution is 'an activity with its own skills and ways of operating', and that '[prostitutes] are women who are paid for what they do, who earn their living by sex...what they do should be respected as a skilled and effortful activity'. This view is gaining widespread currency: for example, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognises prostitution as work. It is suggested that sex work simply entails using different parts of the body from other workers. In the February 1994 issue of *New Internationalist*, which was devoted to prostitution, a prostitute is quoted by Nikki van der Gaag as saying, 'You might sell your brain, you might sell your back, you might sell your fingers for typewriting. Whatever it is that do, you are selling one part of your body... I choose to sell my vagina.' But this side-steps any analysis of the relationship between gender, sexuality and power. Only by denying the potency of sexuality in gendered power relations could one equate physical, mental and sexual activity in this way.

The conceptualisation of prostitution as a form of 'legitimate' work, in some ways comparable to service work, and conditioned by women's general economic disadvantage, depends on a distinction between 'enforced' and 'free-choice' prostitution. Within this framework, enforced prostitution is narrowly defined as trafficking in women and especially child prostitution, while British (and other Western) prostitutes would fall into the 'free choice' category. In support of this position, there is a tendency to draw upon the views expressed by individual prostitutes. For example, a prostitute is quoted by Claire Sanders in *New Statesman and Society* (1990), as saying, 'I want to work with feminists who understand that I have a right to do what I wish with my body'.

Advocates of 'free-choice' prostitution focus mainly on women in the elite forms of prostitution, those working in escort agencies, massage-parlours, hotels and flats. An article by David Watson in the same issue of *New Statesman and Society* suggested a leakage from public sector work into prostitution, with women claiming to prefer prostitution, not only because it paid better but also because of the greater fun, freedom and autonomy they enjoyed. These women said they felt less exploited and more in control than in their former professional work. In particular, ex-nurses pointed out similarities between nursing and sex work, both in terms of physical contact with men's genitals and emotional labour in humouring them.

Decriminalisation of prostitution is favoured (where it is treated as a matter of free choice) for two reasons. First, it is argued that all that differentiates prostitution from other work is the way it is perceived. Robin Gorna contends that the lives of

prostitutes are rendered more complex than other women's *only* (our emphasis) by factors that influence their work as prostitutes (such as drug use, for some) and the stigmatisation they experience from the 'moral' minority and also feminists. Secondly, public resources (including police protection and funding) are less accessible to prostitutes because they are seen as less deserving. Prostitution is not prioritised when it comes to allocating public funds for health projects, except in relation to the perceived threat to male clients of sexually transmitted diseases, in particular HIV. The advantages of treating prostitution as work are stressed by health-care professionals who constantly struggle for funds to support projects with prostitutes. It was primarily for this reason that the Royal College of Nursing voted to decriminalise prostitution at their annual congress in 1995. Experiments in zoning in Holland have been presented as providing a safer environment for prostitution where health services can be offered and the area can be policed — though in fact, it seems that these areas have become no-go areas for the police, and women are harassed entering them. Alternatively, zoning may be seen simply as a measure to keep prostitution away from 'respectable' residential areas, without any concern for the safety of the prostitutes.

The phrase 'commercial sex work' has been promoted by prostitutes' organisations in response to the stigmatisation of prostitutes. Indeed the preferred terms for prostitutes and prostitution in much contemporary sociological literature are 'sex-worker' and 'sex-industry'. Robin Gorna argues that these terms are helpful, not only in focusing on the fact that these activities are work, but also in cutting across moral judgements of the women who work as prostitutes. However, the terms also obscure the exploitative nature of the institution of prostitution and the experiences of prostitutes. We therefore prefer to talk about 'women involved in prostitution' as a means of focusing critical attention on the institution.

Prostitution as exploitation

Although it was a contentious issue, the Beijing conference on women made the distinction between free and forced prostitution, viewing only the latter as a violation of the rights of women. This lends some urgency to the need to re-examine the arguments on prostitution as work. The notion of prostitution as a 'free choice' is hugely problematic in a capitalist economic system characterised by patriarchal institutional and ideological relations. And as Janice Raymond argued at the international conference on Violence, Abuse and Women's Citizenship held in Brighton in 1996, how could force be proved in court and how feasible would it be for women to prosecute pimps and traffickers? Raymond argued that there are

significant dangers in the redefinition of prostitution as commercialised sex work, which implies professionalisation. This dignifies not women but the sex industry, which is controlled by and benefits men.

Prostitution-as-work supporters argue that the worst thing about prostitution is the stigmatisation. Norma Hotaling, an ex-prostitute who addressed the Brighton conference, asked how we are trained not to see the harm done to the women involved in prostitution. In any other work setting, what women in prostitution endure would be described as abuse or harassment. But the exchange of money apparently transforms sexual harassment and sexual violence into work.

Cecilie Høigård and Liv Finstad's study of street prostitution in Norway, *Backstreets*, describes the impoverishment and destruction of the women's emotional lives. The emotional costs involved in being a prostitute are not so much the fear and the experience of physical violence — though that is considerable — as the loss of a sense of self. Women describe the various strategies they employ in attempting to protect themselves against this, strategies which essentially involve maintaining a split between the 'public' and 'private', dissociating themselves from their bodies. This is exemplified by Lisa saying, 'Ugh, the whole thing is sickening. I close my eyes and ears. I cut all my feelings off. It's never, never okay.' But in the longer term, these strategies cannot be wholly effective, as Anna indicates when she says, 'My body isn't mine when I work there. Anyway I'm a dirty slut. When I myself feel so dirty there's nothing okay about having a relationship.' Or when Inga says, 'I'm bitter, I think I've been misused. I'm getting more wasted and worn out.' Høigård and Finstad conclude that 'regaining self-respect and recreating an emotional life is ... as hard as reconstructing a hundred crown note from ashes.'

Prostitution has to be understood within a context of the privileging of heterosexuality premised on an inequality of power between men and women, in a capitalist economic system developed in articulation with patriarchal relations. In the context of the pervasive ideology of hierarchic heterosexuality, when men purchase sexual services from prostitutes for money they transform female sexuality into a commodity. Although far less research has been done on male clients than on prostitutes, a New Zealand project undertaken by Elizabeth Plumridge and her colleagues, in co-operation with the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective (NZPC), provides fascinating insights into men's self-serving interpretations of how they benefit from patronising prostitutes. These men posit such encounters as emotional relationships, while at the same time asserting that all the obligations associated with relationships are discharged by payment. Payment apparently absolves them from responsibility for the emotional damage to women wrought by prostitution.

Prostitution and marriage

One of the curious features of the new discourse on prostitution as legitimate work is the way it uses the familiar juxtaposition of prostitution and marriage to define sex as a form of currency, on a continuum from marital obligation to commercial sex. Twenty years ago in a different political climate, this same juxtaposition was used by feminists as part of a critique of marriage as an institution. Today in a climate of 'moral indifference', the analogy is used to legitimate prostitution as not much different from other contexts in which women engage in sexual activities—a clear reversal of more familiar feminist analyses.

Becoming either a wife or a prostitute might be seen as part of an economic, social and sexual bargain. It is a familiar argument that in marriage, a man acquires rights to a woman's body and to her labour for open-ended usage, whereas in the prostitution transaction (in Britain, at least) sexual services are generally sold by the piece, in a commercial exchange which involves an explicit agreement to perform a specified and limited service or task. Indeed male clients frequently complain of the cold-bloodedness of the transaction: they would prefer to believe they can buy a brief relationship involving women's emotions and their desire. In a sense, both prostitution and marriage are ways in which women can gain some measure of economic security. But in neither case is security guaranteed. The wife may find herself beaten, raped and thrown out, while the prostitute constantly risks rape and violence, and it certainly isn't a career with security and a pension. And in both marriage and prostitution, it is men who benefit.

The point is not to criticise either group of women — those who marry or those who enter prostitution — but to consider points of continuity between the two institutions. Just as any analysis of marriage must distinguish between the relation of any one particular husband and wife and the structure of the institution of marriage, so the relation of any particular prostitute and client must be distinguished from that of the institution of prostitution.

One of the great achievements of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s was to develop a critique of violence against women and the institution of marriage. Feminists set up refuges for women escaping domestic violence, and campaigned for legal recognition of rape in marriage. In fact, these early critiques of male violence described the experience of battered wives in terms that contemporary research would recognise as consistent with the experience of prostitutes. Some women who sought refuge from the violence they experienced from their husbands and partners later returned to the men they had left. Those women apparently made a 'free' choice. However, that did not invalidate feminist critiques of marriage and

male violence. Similarly, many women who work as prostitutes may have decided pragmatically that this was the best, or least worst, option available to them. That individual women have made that choice does not in itself close the debate.

Campaigning against prostitution as work

The debate about whether prostitution should be seen as sex work or as exploitation has political ramifications for feminist activism. Prostitutes' rights organisations such as the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) and the NZPC campaign vigorously to improve the working conditions of prostitutes. Their perspective is informed by prostitution-as-work arguments, which logically lead to support for the decriminalisation of prostitution. It is clear that historically, the main British laws addressing prostitution serve to punish prostitutes, especially street prostitutes. Even the Sexual Offences Act of 1985, aimed at kerb-crawlers, rarely hits its target. In fact, it causes problems for women working on the streets: they are more likely to get into cars quickly so that clients are not prosecuted, but this reduces the time they have to assess the risk of going with a client. Attempts to decriminalise prostitution need to be carefully scrutinised to find out whose interests are served; but moves to reduce the intrusive controlling strategies directed at women, in conjunction with greater regulation and punishment of male users of prostitutes, would be welcomed by feminists opposing the institution of prostitution too.

Critical analysis of prostitution has been attacked as being inconsistent with the commitment of feminism to reflecting the reality of women's lives and listening to women's own versions of reality. Confrontations between feminists opposed to prostitution and prostitutes' rights organisations are legendary; coupled with accounts from women who claim they are better off in sex work than other professional work available to women, the effect has been to silence feminist critiques. But for every woman who may feel empowered by her experience of prostitution, there are many others for whom it is not empowering — which calls into question which women's accounts are privileged. Feminist activism opposing the institution of prostitution and its legitimisation as work must resolve the contradiction inherent in this position by also finding ways of supporting the rights of women working as prostitutes.

Norma Hotaling, speaking at the Brighton conference as an ex-prostitute, argued that if we promote prostitution, we ultimately endorse trafficking in women. She stresses that male perceptions of women change as a result of using prostitutes and that many men using adult prostitutes eventually go on to pay for sex with children. Hotaling asks whether in supporting prostitutes' rights we aren't supporting pimps and punters' rights to abuse, exploit, damage and kill women. As a survivor,

she emphasises the importance of women in prostitution having access to the same services as other women, as well as support to exit from prostitution, and also argues for a shift in focus onto men's engagement in the abuse of women in prostitution.

One effective US example which focuses on men is the SAGE project (Standing Against Global Exploitation), which contributes to a programme for men prosecuted for using prostitutes; ex-prostitutes (such as Hotaling) give their perspective to counter male fantasies of their own power and women's enjoyment. The project is funded by the fines men pay, and used to assist women to exit from prostitution. Exit strategies include safe houses, alternative training and employment as well as medical, social and emotional support. In the Midlands there has been an example of successful feminist activism by a voluntary organisation, Prostitute Outreach Work (POW). Women in prostitution played a crucial role in developing multi-agency services which more effectively meet their needs, facilitate exit strategies and promote useful, women-centred research and activism to change the laws surrounding prostitution.

Following the Brighton conference, there have been two feminist initiatives in relation to prostitution in 1997: a national conference on violence against women and children in prostitution organised by the Research Centre on Violence, Abuse and Gender Relations (based at Leeds Metropolitan University) and a national network, Women Against the Prostitution of Women (WAPOW), formed to provide a national voice against the institution of prostitution whilst supporting the rights of women in prostitution. Both initiatives attempt to drown out the clamour for prostitution to be seen as a job like any other, whilst trying to bridge divisions between women working as prostitutes and feminist activists. In its first newsletter, WAPOW has identified its general aims as promoting the safety of, and services for, women and children in prostitution; developing exit strategies; opposing legalised brothels; removing the life-long labelling of women as 'common prostitutes'; and campaigning for the prostitution of young people to be treated as a child protection issue.

It is claimed that the advantages of treating prostitution simply as work are that it removes the stigma, decriminalises prostitutes, recognises the skills women bring to their work and attributes them employment status with the attendant rights to welfare services and benefits. However, the disadvantages are greater. In the first place it depends on the distinction between 'free' and 'forced' prostitution. In defending a notion of prostitution as a freely chosen occupation, the burden of proof is shifted onto women working in prostitution to demonstrate that they have been forced into it. The reality is likely to be somewhere between the kind of

force that might be recognised in a court of law and truly free choice. Secondly, the reduction of prostitution to an economic transaction involving women's labour effaces the exploitative and emotionally damaging effects of prostitution. The sale of sex to men by women cannot be understood separately from the wider patriarchal organisation of socio-sexual relationships; the transformation of female sexuality into a commodity necessarily entails exploitation.

References

- Gaag, Nikki van der (1994), 'Prostitution: soliciting for change' *New Internationalist* 252, February.
- Gorna, Robin (1996) *Vamps, Virgins and Victims. How can women fight AIDS?* London: Cassell.
- Høigård, Cecilie and Liv Finstad (1992), *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money and Love*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McIntosh, Mary (1996), 'Feminist Debates on Prostitution', in Lisa Adkins and Vicky Merchant (eds), *Sexualizing the Social: Power and the Organisation of Sexuality*, London: Macmillan.
- Plumridge, Elizabeth et al. (1997), 'Discourses of emotionality in commercial sex: the missing client voice.' *Feminism and Psychology* 7.2.
- Sanders, Claire (1990) 'Tis Pity she's no whore', *New Statesman & Society* 9 February.
- Watson, David (1990) 'Birmingham is second sex city', *New Statesman & Society* 9 February.