



Sex Work

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Note: all my lectures involve us thinking together about sensitive and difficult issues relating to sex, violence, and (often disruptive) desires. Please exercise caution when reading or listening to my research. I don't include graphic descriptions, but I do quote some sensationalist texts and discuss selling sex, racism, coercion, and sexual choice. Knowing our history, I believe, helps unmake harmful and traumatic practices.

To whom does a woman's body belong? In mid-nineteenth century Britain, this question provoked impassioned debates between moralists, liberals, feminists, and other social commentators. Were girls the property of their fathers, to be 'given' in marriage? Once married, was a woman allowed to refuse her husband access to her body or had she prostituted herself to him for life in exchange for food, lodging, the possibility of motherhood, and respectability? Progressives and radicals who had fought for the abolition of Black chattel slavery employed its rhetoric when talking about women's subjugation. Philosopher John Stuart Mill issued a trenchant critique in his 1859 essay entitled 'The Subjection of Women'. He maintained that a married woman was little more than a 'personal body-servant of a despot' who, at any time, could 'claim from her and enforce the lowest degradation of a human being'. In Britain, he provocatively claimed, there were 'no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house'. In the context of the most vulnerable of women – poor, minoritized ones – these radicals saw women's degraded position as resulting in sexual slavery or street prostitution.

Heated denunciations of the oppression of women peaked with the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs) in 1864, 1866, and 1869. These Acts allowed policemen in certain designated towns to take any woman they suspected of prostitution before a magistrate who could then order her to be intimately examined for evidence of sexually transmitted infections. If the woman was found to be ill, she could be forcibly detained. It was a blatant example of the double standard of sexual morality, which ruthlessly punished women who *performed* sex work rather than the men who *procured* their services.

The stigmatisation of prostitutes was one thing; these Acts went further in dehumanising them altogether. Liberal politician Lyon Playfair is an example. In 1870, he appealed to his fellow parliamentarians in the House of Commons to approve an extension of the Acts on the grounds that prostitutes possessed 'the habits of beasts'. They were 'fallen creatures' who needed to be 'redeemed from savagery to something approaching civilization'. Disregarding the views of the girls and women who would be affected by the legislation, Playfair believed that the good men of Parliament and the Church knew best: women who sold sex required the 'humanizing influences' of these punitive laws.

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In this lecture, I start with the debates between the 1860s to the 1910s about claims of legitimate authority over women's bodies, in order to provide an historical context to the sex-wars which erupted again from the 1970s. This is not to suggest that there is a seamless narrative, universal and repeated in similar ways over more than a century. Indeed, the opposite is the case. But it *is* to draw attention to some underlying tensions revolving around gender, class, 'race', and ethnicity. Playfair's comment in 1870 about the 'humanizing influences' of punitive laws is especially apposite for thinking about more recent debates, when carceral humanitarianism (that is, policing and prison being seen as the 'solution' to the 'problem' of sex work) has once again been invoked in human rights discourses.

Playfair and the militaristic moralism of his colleagues were deaf to the voices of the girls and women they hounded. To whom does a woman's body belong? In the 1860s, women who sold sex on the streets of London had an answer. They angrily resisted the claims made by their 'betters' concerning their rights to bodily integrity. For some women who sold sex, the medical certification that was introduced by the Contagious Diseases Acts was used instrumentally to increase their trade: after all, women who could show their clients a certificate that they were not diseased attracted more work. But others found the forcible medical examination morally as well as physically humiliating. This puzzled one male reformer. What was the difference between 'exposing themselves to any man who came to have connexion with them, and showing themselves to the doctor to see that they were free from disease', R. B. Williams (a member of the Rescue Society) asked one woman in the early 1870s? She responded with fury:

"I should have thought you'd have known better not that. Ain't one in the way of natur', and the other ain't natur' at all. Ain't it a different thing what a woman's obliged to do for a living because she has to keep body and soul together, and going up there to be pulled about by a man as if you was cattle and hadn't no feelins, and to have an instrument pushed up you, not to make you well (because you ain't ill), but just that men may come to you and use you to please theirsels. I call it right down beastly altogether."

Her companion added, 'it's only the men as they cares for, an this makes it hurtful to a woman's feelins to go up there, becous we ain't cattle, but women, and has got our feelins as well as other people'. They were eloquent retorts by women who were making choices within the social and economic constraints imposed upon them. Their comments revealed their strong sense of right and wrong, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power, and the value they placed on their own bodies and selves.

However, such eloquence provided no protection from those who sought to 'speak for' them, even if these interlocutors had the best of intentions. Feminists – both male and female – actively opposed the CDAs, forming societies to overturn them. In so doing, however, they also claimed authority over the bodies of their significantly poorer sisters. As their journal, *The Shield* explained, the Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was the equivalent to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals: both societies were required to 'interfere for the protection of dumb creatures who cannot protect themselves'. 'Dumb' is being used here to mean 'unable to speak'. Or, as Josephine Butler (the leading activist in the movement to repeal the CDAs) succinctly put it, the 'poor creature, cannot tell'. It was a rhetoric that precariously weighed up the respective importance that should be given to gender, class, and age. On the one hand, the Acts were evil because they potentially treated *all* women as if they were animals, bypassing their free-will, forcing them to undergo compulsory medical inspections, and, if found to be ill, quarantining or subjecting them to a physical (nonhuman animals) or social (human women) death. On the other hand, the 'mute creatures' were understood in terms of class and age. Working-class, young women were 'dumb beasts', ripe for 'rescue'; middle-class, older women-reformers had a voice and were the humanity to which these working-class girls and women should aspire.

There was a broadly shared understanding, though, between working women, feminists, and other 'rescuers' about the fundamental *causes* of prostitution. The women interviewed by Williams in 1870 were clear. They told him that their punitive treatment under the CDAs was a 'beastly affair'. One lamented that 'She didn't know what England was coming to, for a woman to be dragged up through the streets in the middle of the day, just in the working hours, with men holloaing after you, and you got to show your private parts to a drunken old beast', meaning the doctor. Another added that the shame of the certification process meant that she 'never went with a man till she could endure hunger no longer. She had several times nearly fainted with starvation before she could make her mind up to come out at night to seek men'.

It was an argument accepted by reformers like Butler. In a speech she gave in October 1874, Butler observed that underprivileged women were forced into prostitution because they had been denied full employment opportunities and would not otherwise be able to feed their families. Criminalising these women, without reforming employment practices, could only harm them and their dependents.

But Butler also harnessed the rhetoric of animal protection societies, which were closely allied to societies for the protection of children and other progressive causes. Butler compared the treatment of women in the sex trade to the way 'sentimental naturalists' treated dogs. She elaborated at length. Dogs had powerful maternal instincts, Butler contended, and, on freezing winter nights, those 'maternal instincts' meant that the dog would 'tear off its own fur for the protection of its young'. 'Sentimental naturalists' might see this behaviour and, becoming distressed, would muzzle the dog, 'so as effectually to prevent her denuding her own breast in order to protect her nest'. However, the sentimentalist

“neglects to furnish her with any material in place of her own coat; and she, poor creature, cannot tell him ‘If I do not tear off my own fur, my offspring will perish’. She can only inarticulately fret and rage against the restraint put upon her, and her young do perish.”

In other words, by adopting punitive measures against prostitution (muzzling dogs), legislators risked causing *greater* distress to working women and their dependents. Like nonhuman animals, these women were unable to communicate their misery. It required socially privileged women like Butler to speak on their behalf, directing indignation towards the roots of women’s poverty, that is, constrained employment opportunities and low wages.

Campaigners against the CDAs were joined by other feminists and moral crusaders who were becoming aware that many of the people who sold sex on the streets and in brothels were, in fact, children. The age at which a girl could legally consent to having sex was only twelve years. In working-class homes, where children even younger than twelve years were required to contribute financially to their family’s livelihood, sex work could be a preferred and more profitable alternative to highly exploitative and dangerous domestic or factory labour. This fact was deemed an insult to middle-class beliefs that childhood should be a time of purity and passivity.

Revelations of widespread child prostitution shocked the sensibilities of moralists and social reformers alike. An illustration can be found in the evidence presented before the ‘Select Committee of the House of Lords to Inquire into State of Law Relating to Protection of Young Girls from Artifices to Induce Them to Lead Corrupt Life’ in 1881. It was a revealing title, gesturing towards issues of economic exploitation while conveying a moralistic message about working-class girls being seduced into prostitution through their avarice. Indeed, the committee was obsessed by their belief that working-class girls turned to prostitution because of ‘envy’ for ‘the luxuries that these girls obtain’. When questioned by the commissioners, Superintendent Joseph Dunlop of the Metropolitan Police described observing a girl under the age of thirteen whose ‘fingers were covered with rings’. She wore ‘high boots buttoned halfway up her legs; she had very short petticoats, her hair was down her back, and she wore a tight-fitting polonaise’. She laughingly told him that she was waiting outside the court ‘to see her man go down’ (that is, taken to prison). Dunlop contended that the two young people lived together in sin and ‘she was assisting in keeping him’. This image of a girl-child who ‘laughed’ and enjoyed the ‘luxuries’ afforded through sex work offended the sensibilities of those lobbying to increase the age of consent, since it suggested that the girls might not be as needing of ‘rescue’ as they had imagined.

Girlish innocence was (rhetorically) restored in 1885, after Butler met up with William T. Stead, the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and convinced him to write a series of articles about ‘white slavery’, or the forced sex trafficking of ‘white English’ girls. Stead went undercover in the trafficking trade for a month and, over a series of weeks in 1885, drip-fed the British public with lurid stories of young girls drugged, raped, and trafficked into sex work in the U.K. and Europe. Under the title ‘The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon’, London was transformed into the Cretan labyrinth of Greek myth, into which, every nine years, the ancient Athenians sent seven virgin maids as a sacrifice to the Minotaur. According to Stead, the only difference was that, in his time, wealthy men were demanding ‘not seven maidens only, but many times seven.... served up as dainty morsels to minister to the passions of the rich’. In grisly prose, Stead described young girls who had been ‘snared, trapped and outraged either when under the influence of drugs or after a prolonged struggle in a locked room’. These girls’ ‘shriek of torture is the essence of [rich men’s] delight, and they would not silence by a single note the cry of agony over which they gloat’. Stead then described how he posed as an ‘immoral man’ and bought a thirteen-year-old girl named Lily Armstrong on the pretence of raping her. His account on the 6th July 1885, concluded with Lily Armstrong being taken to a brothel. The sensationalist and semi-pornographic tale concluded with these words:

“the innocent girl [Lily Armstrong] was taken to a house of ill fame.... She was taken up stairs, undressed, and put to bed.... She was rather restless, but under the influence of chloroform she soon went over. Then the woman withdrew. All was quiet and still. A few moments later the door opened, and the purchaser entered the bedroom. He closed and locked the door. There was a brief silence. And then there rose a wild and piteous cry – not a loud shriek, but a helpless, startled scream like the bleat of a frightened lamb. And the child’s voice was heard crying, in accents of terror, ‘There’s a man in the room! Take me home; oh, take me home!’ And then all once more was still.”

This was gothic fiction and Victorian pornography masquerading as journalism. It encouraged a tidal wave of similarly sensationalist journalism, fiction, and purported first-person narratives using the moralistic framing

of 'white slavery' to titillate readers and evade the censor.

Stead achieved his aim, although he was sentenced to three months in prison on charges of abduction and indecent assault (he had failed to ensure that Lily Armstrong's father consented to his subterfuge – who owns a girl's body? Her father). 'The Maiden Tribute to Modern Babylon' created a scandal. On the one side, there were powerful political figures who were virulently opposed to any curtailment in their sexual access to young girls and women of the working classes. As Lord Oranmore and Browne in the House of Lords explained in 1884,

"He believed that there were very few of their Lordships who had not, when young men, been guilty of immorality. He hoped they would pause before passing a clause within the range of which their sons might come. He would ask them whether their class was so desperately moral that they were entitled to insist upon all people being moral?.... The more they attempted to prevent the indulgence of natural passion, the more they would force unnatural crime."

In other words, rich men were entitled to free access to the bodies of poorer girls and women; if denied, they might turn to the 'unnatural crime' of homosexuality. This was one answer to the question of who owns a woman's body.

On the other side, however, Stead's focus on the innocence, even naïvety, of young working-class girls, in contrast to vicious assertions of sexual entitlement by aristocratic and upper-class men, generated fury amongst the wider public. Around 20,000 people demonstrated in Hyde Park, demanding changes to the age of consent. As a result, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was passed, raising the age of consent of girls from twelve to sixteen years. The Act had the effect of dramatically increasing police powers over working-class girls, boys (who were also sexually exploited), and women. Further, it had sex between consenting adult men made a criminal offense (it remained a crime for another 82 years). The Act was a classic example of punishing sex workers, rather than their clients. Brothels were forcibly closed. Prostitutes were harassed; they were forced out of their homes and into lodging house where they were more vulnerable to abuse. Male pimps became increasingly necessary if girls and women were to continue in sex work. As historian Judith Walkowitz argues in her landmark article entitled 'Male Vice and Feminist Virtue',

"The 1885 Act drove a wedge between prostitutes and the poor working-class community. It effectively destroyed the brothel as a family industry and centre of a specific female subculture; further undermined the social and economic autonomy of prostitutes; and increasingly rendered them social outcasts."

Campaigns against the Contagious Diseases Acts and child prostitution are interesting for many reasons, but I will focus on five today: their formulaic nature, the recourse to policing and other punitive responses, the strategic alliances forged between feminists and conservative moralists, their use of the trope of 'white slavery', and their ties to the imperial mission.

First, the literature generated by the two movements reproduced time and again a formulaic gothic, sexualized plot. They typically invoked a naïve and virginal white girl or young woman being wooed by a foreigner (usually Jewish, Greek, or Italian); she is drugged with wine, beer, ether, or chloroform; when she regains consciousness, she is in a locked bedroom in a brothel; later that night, a male stranger enters the room and rapes her. She cries. Forever onwards, the victim is 'fallen', unable to free herself from being trafficked to numerous men.

Such formulaic tales led feminist Teresa Billington-Greig to exclaim in her 1913 article entitled 'The Truth about White Slavery' that the tales must strain 'the credulity of the most willing believer'. She observed that the girls and young women reportedly trafficked were portrayed as 'impotent and imbecile weaklings incapable of resisting'. Why weren't more of these male abusers 'brained with fenders, or injured with chairs, pictures, or other articles of furniture'? Why weren't windows broken and 'the night rent with screams'? She scorned the sensationalist and pornographic *denouements* of these stories, in which the invader was revealed to be the girl's father, brother, or friend. The stories typically ended with the 'detestable final tag, "The door opened. It was the girl's father!"' or 'A young man friend stood before her flushed with shame. He got her out'. Not only were the victims totally passive, in these accounts, but they all required being 'saved' by white men. Billington-Greig sarcastically observed that the 'tales of drugged handkerchiefs, sweets, and flowers had so many variants as to create the impression that the homes of the country must be decimated of their daughters by drugging'.

Billington-Greig's demolition of the genre was matched by her scorn for the feminists and other so-called progressives who advocated carceral and other punitive responses to prostitution. This is the second point I

want to make. Billington-Greig reminded readers that demanding the reintroduction of ‘the barbarity of flogging’ ignored the ‘commonplace [knowledge] that the law is of very little value in the underworld of sexual trading’. Such stories alleviated the consciences of feminists and reformers while doing nothing to help ‘the victims of exploited prostitution’.

Third, Billington-Greig was troubled by the fact that progressive feminists had forged alliances with political conservatives and moralists. This was evidence that they were just as interested in controlling the sexuality and working lives of poor men and women as they were in alleviating conditions of deprivation.

Fourth, the coalition of conservatives, moralists, and feminists drew upon the highly problematic language of ‘white slavery’. Both ‘white’ and ‘slavery’ were increasingly being used as *literal* rather than metaphorical descriptions. Blackness became a metaphor for white suffering. As Edwin W. Sims (legal expert who assisted in the formulation of the repressive Mann Act of 1910, which prohibited transporting women for ‘immoral’ purposes) put it in ‘The White Slave Trade of Today’ (1910), the ‘white slave traffic’ made ‘the congo slave traders of the old days appear like Good Samaritans’. It was routine for this literature to assert that the enslavement of white girls and women was *more* heinous than Black slavery. In the introduction to a book entitled *Horrors of the White Slave Trade* (1911), readers were informed that the White Slave trade was ‘infinitely more inhuman than the black slave trade, for the suppression of which so much of America’s best blood was willingly shed half a century ago’. This not only minimized the horrors of chattel slavery but also positioned the heroes of the anti-slavery movement as the white, male abolitionists. The ‘white slavery’ trope was rhetorically effective in white circles precisely because it inverted the racial implications of slavery. As historian Jessica Pliley argues, ‘white slavery’ discourses underscored ‘the grotesque nature of the white women’s entrapment’ by ‘highlighting the perversity of the race reversal that left black men and women free and white girls enslaved’. It was a narrative that ignored not only the historical exploitation of male and female Black slaves but also the continued sexual abuse of women of colour.

Fifth, the abolitionist anti-prostitution movements in Britain allied themselves with imperialism. The leading protagonists were white women who saw sex trafficking as a ‘problem’ to be solved through interventions by women like themselves, who came from a more enlightened ‘west’. Antoinette Burton explores this in her *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*. She argues that white British women’s campaigns to gain the vote relied on portraying themselves as guardians of economically poor prostitutes in India as well as the U.K. Separate spheres feminism (that is, the view that women have distinctive spheres of influence to men) emboldened them to insist that they could empathize with their ‘suffering sisters’ in the empire and ‘give’ them the liberties possessed by women in the West. The abolitionist labour of white women would ‘cleanse’ the imperial process. In so doing, these white feminists portrayed Indian women as little more than victims of their own oppressive and backward ‘cultures’. They presented sex workers in the empire as doubly oppressed: their bodies did not belong to themselves, and they could not be agents in their own survival. By definition, Indian women were unable to consent. The men in their lives were *in essence* pimps and exploiters. This racialized hierarchy posited ‘backward’ cultures as black and brown ones, while the enlightened ‘rescuers’ were white heroes, sacrificing themselves in order to bring knowledge of pain to the world. This was imperialism masquerading as ‘rescue’.

Of course, there were feminists and other radicals during these decades who produced particularly robust *critiques* of this unholy alliance between conservative moralists, imperialists, and feminists. They were concerned that responding to prostitution (whether coerced or not) by law, enhanced policing, and imprisonment was inappropriate, if not damaging, because sex work was fundamentally a social and economic problems. As we will see in the second half of this lecture, this view was shared by many late twentieth century feminists. The earlier generation of socialist and anarchist-orientated feminists contended that the 1885 Act worsened women’s suffering. Eleanor Marx (youngest daughter of Karl) reminded the authors of the legislation that ‘laws are not applied equally’. They would be used to prosecute and harass working women rather than the men who purchased their sexual labour. Still other feminist critics linked male sexual privilege in the *public* sphere to male privilege in the *private* sphere. This was what John Stuart Mill (with whom I started this lecture) had been doing as early as 1859. It was taken up by socialist and anarchist feminists between the 1890s and 1910s. There were only two options available to women, claimed a woman writing in *Freedom*: ‘married or unmarried prostitution’. An extended version of this argument was made by Emma Goldman in ‘The Traffic in Women’ (1910). She reflected on the injustices experienced by *all* women, none of whose bodies belonged to themselves. She argued that social evils, such as low wages, drove women into many forms of ‘slavery’. This might mean prostitution, but it also included marriage, which was ‘sanctified by law and public opinion’ but also involved exchanging sexual services for ‘monetary considerations’. In Goldman’s words, ‘it is merely a question of degree whether she sells herself to one man,

in or out of marriage, or to many men'. Goldman also fiercely reminded her readers that it was not only *white* women who were traded. Women of all skin colours and backgrounds were exploited by 'the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor, thus driving thousands of women and girls into prostitution'. Rather than praising reformers who 'rescued' downtrodden women working in brothels and on the street, Goldman branded them 'parasites who stalk about the world as inspectors, investigators, detectives, and so forth'.

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Why are these historical debates important? The question 'To whom does a woman's body belong?' excites as much debate today as it did in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the last lecture in this series, I explored the 'sex wars' that took place from the 1980s around pornography. I argued that a certain wing of the feminist movement aligned themselves with moralists and evangelicals in policing the bodies of (other) women – primarily those who sought to make a living through porn industries. Like some of the nineteenth century feminists and progressives who 'spoke for' the 'mute' working women affected by the Contagious Diseases Acts (with largely positive effects) and against the heightened policing of the 1885 Act (with negative effects), their sisters a century later also attempted to assert their authority over other women's bodies. Central to their rhetoric was their claim that sex workers were incapable of 'rescuing' themselves. These radical feminists positioned themselves as protectors of their 'lesser' sisters. In this, they ignored the 'constrained agency' (but agency nonetheless) of marginalized women like the prostitutes interviewed by R. B. Williams in 1870, who were more than capable of articulating their values and vision of their bodies/selves in the world.

The crucial argument of this group of feminists from the 1970s onwards was that *all* forms of commercial sex (including pornography and prostitution) were forms of patriarchal violence. *By definition*, this sex was exploitative and degrading. Questions of 'consent' to sex work were rendered irrelevant. Sex workers who claimed to have 'chosen' the job or to 'enjoy' it were suffering from a form of false consciousness, unaware of or unable to articulate their own suffering.

A prominent example of this radical or 'governance feminism' (a term coined by Janet Halley and referring to a politics that moves 'off the streets and into the state') can be seen in the work of Kathleen Barry. Her book *Female Sexual Slavery* was published in 1979 and, in different editions, continues to exert influence. Like nineteenth century abolitionists, Barry draws on the problematic concept of 'slavery' (although the 'white slavery' trope of the earlier period was translated into the more inclusive 'sexual slavery', a form of exploitation acknowledged to disproportionality harm women of colour). Barry also conflates all forms of sex work into the paradigm of forced sex trafficking. In her words, 'the only distinction that can be made between traffic in women and street prostitution is that the former involves crossing international borders'. For Barry, the sexual oppression of women is the original oppression upon which women-as-a-class are kept in bondage. In the words of a Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, the global sex industry is 'not labor or work, but an institution of male dominance at its most virulent, a system of power and control that keeps women and girls inside it in conditions of perennial gang rape'. It is a view espoused by organizations as different as the National Organization of Women, Catholics for Free Choice, Equality Now, and the Feminist Majority.

Again, this specific radical feminist vision has been contested by other feminists, specifically socialist ones and those concerned with intersectionality. They point out that the universalist tendency of governance feminism threatens to reduce the entirety of a person's life to her sex-work including her relationships with male 'pimps' or 'traffickers'. Socio-economic contexts, complex intersectional identities, and vastly different working conditions are erased, along with distinctions between 'sugar daters', street walkers, call girls, escorts, exotic dancers, masseuses, fetish specialists, strippers, and women who work in different media, including digital. Ironically, by espousing a universalized conception of sex work as the paradigm of female oppression, these commentators silence the very people they believe need 'rescuing'. In seeking to expose the horrors of 'sexual slavery', they can also employ dehumanizing rhetoric, mirroring (in a late twentieth century mode) the sensationalist prose of reformers like Stead. A particularly telling example is Vednita Carter and Evelina Giobbe's 'Duet: Prostitution, Racism, and Feminist Discourse' (1999). They contend that

"A good prostitute is devoid of a unique and personal identity. She is empty space surrounded by flesh into which men deposit evidence of their masculinity. She does not exist so that he can. Prostitution done correctly begins with theft and ends with the subsequent abandonment of self. What remains is essential to the job: the mouth, the genitals, anus, breasts... and the label."

Like the 'rescuers' of the 1880s, they argue that prostitution is 'literal sexual slavery'. Such analysis leaves

no room for alternative experiences of sex work, including by those who claim a neutral affect or even insist that they find it liberatory.”

Governance feminism has excited other critiques. It is accused of *increasing* the vulnerability of girls and women by raising their risk of imprisonment or deportation. Trafficking is conceived of as a ‘human or women’s rights’ issue but is then prosecuted through criminal law rather than human rights protocols. This has led to a focus on people evading border controls, undocumented migrants, and perpetual victims who have one primary right: the right to be rescued by men and women who ‘know better’. An expansive carceral state and militarized nationalism that polices borders disproportionately harms people without cultural or financial capital. People of colour, undocumented migrants, trans, the homeless, and those on low wages are subjected to heightened policing, including police violence, arrests, and discrimination in housing, employment, and medical care. Hyper-policing of people involved in the sex industry has damning outcomes for minoritized people, including exclusion from employment, eviction from rented accommodation, and increased scrutiny by child protection services. The carceral focus diverts government attention and funding away from tackling the underlying problems (employment, health, and housing) and towards policing and prisons. As Eleanor Marx had put it a century earlier, ‘laws are not applied equally’.

Further, by conflating sex work, sexual slavery, and human trafficking, this kind of approach sidelines the fact that the most common forms of trafficking are in domestic labour and the hospitality, farming, fisheries, and manufacturing industries. These are the forms of labour where some of the most systemic and pernicious aspects of neo-liberal capitalism are found. It forgets the insights of early feminists such as Emma Goldman that women of all backgrounds are exploited by ‘the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor’.

From the 1990s, however, governance feminism has been a dominant voice in anti-sex work movements. Melodramatic stories have been revived in high profile exposés, TV dramas, and sensationalist newspaper reports. Evangelicals team up with feminists to fight the ‘evil’, fusing questions of morality, ‘the family’, and human/women’s ‘rights’. Within this paradigm, distinctions were made between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ victims. As with the debates in the 1880s about prostitution, there are innocent victims (gullible or naïve, like Lily Armstrong) who are deserving of ‘rescue’. And then there are ‘undeserving’ ones, who are agentic within the options available to them, and sometime even take pleasure from their job. In the earlier period, this might include the young girl who so dismayed Superintendent Dunlop: she laughed and wore ‘a tight-fitting polonaise’ while waiting outside the court for her man to be ‘taken down’. From the late twentieth century, such tropes of deserving and undeserving have been translated into the language of anti-trafficking legislation. To be ‘worthy’ of rescue, ‘good’ sex workers must satisfy certain narrow requirements. They must have been forcibly coerced into work, express abhorrence of it, be easily distinguishable from ‘economic migrants’, be prepared to accept (much more) lower paid work, never have committed a crime, and be eager to cooperate totally with law enforcement, despite the serious risks that this poses, especially for undocumented migrants. They must also be totally under the control of ‘traffickers’: evidence that they might have engaged in negotiations (such as improvements of their working conditions) is a damning indication that they possess agency and are therefore not ‘true’ victims.

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Sex workers fight such characterizations. Indeed, from the 1970s onwards, their voices can be heard – and loudly. A central intervention was made by Carol Leigh (aka Scarlot Harlot), a member of COYOTE (or Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), which was founded in 1973 and is the best-known prostitutes’ rights organization in the U.S. Based on the fundamental insight that words determine what people think about the world and how they experience it, Leigh substituted the term ‘sex work’ for ‘prostitution’. The term not only opened ways to think of pro-sex orientations, but it also drew attention to sex work as professional labour, which, like other forms of work, might be either exploitative or fulfilling – or, more typically, something in-between. The term implicitly acknowledges that workers are differently situated: those who have greater control over their conditions of labour can flourish more than others. Empowerment and political labour is central, which is why many sex workers have been important in movements opposed to coercive prostitution. Intersectional as well as social and economic, contexts matter.

This is where the analysis of Carter and Giobbe is astute. They chastise certain sections of the pro-sex worker lobby for treating all prostitutes as if they were ‘independent business women’ who should be allowed to ‘do what ever they choose with their bodies (sell sex) and their money (give it to pimps)’. They point out that this ‘ignores the social context in which prostitution occurs, especially the race/class power differential that exists between prostitutes and their customers’.

Their point is well made. The idea that there is a universal or 'essential' female experience is demonstrably wrong: class, 'race', indigenous status, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, religion, generation, and so on, are as significant in any individual's lived experience as their designated sex. The predominantly white, middle-class, and well-educated members of COYOTE is not representative of most sex workers. Their calling-cards are free choice, fulfilling work, and the bearer of rights, none of which are available to most women, especially those from minoritized groups. For too many people (of all genders), engaging in sex work is damaging and dangerous. Workers are harassed and beaten up by club proprietors, brothel owners, 'pimps', and customers. There are kidnappings, coercion, and rape. Sexually transmitted infections are an occupational hazard. They are often denied health, insurance, and retirement benefits.

But sex workers throughout the world have been active in forging communities where they can access medical and legal advice. Unionization and community-creation has not been easy: workers in industries based on independent contractors, high employee turnover, and poor wages typically experience such difficulties. However, from the 1970s onwards, powerful self-help associations managed for and by sex workers have flourished. To name just a few, these include the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (based in the Netherlands from the mid-1970s), the English Collective of Prostitutes (which emerged in 1975 from sex workers involved in the International Wages for Housework campaign), 'Pros' (which was established in Birmingham in the late 1970s), the Red Thread (a civil rights group established in 1985), the Prostitutes' Information Centre (1994), and the International Union of Sex Workers (2000). These groups thought in terms of constrained choice, dignity in earning a living, sensual pleasure, and empowerment. They were not only involved in movements to decriminalize sex work and remove the stigma attached to it, but also to establish pride and community. They insisted that they were political subjects with social rights.

Crucially, they scorn the 'saviour mentalities' of abolitionists. It is no coincidence that the most trenchant critiques were formulated by Third World feminists, multiply oppressed by global capitalism, First World militarism, and white, carceral feminism. An example is the First National Conference of Sex Workers of 1997, which took place in Calcutta and was attended by over 3,000 sex workers. Their 'Sex Workers' Manifesto' lamented that fact that sex workers continued to be 'targets of [the] moralizing impulses of dominant social groups, through missions of cleansing and sanitizing, both materially and symbolically'. They criticized NGOs and feminist movements for setting out to 'rescue, rehabilitate, improve, discipline, control, or police us'. 'Pity' was demeaning, as were attempts to 'rehabilitate' sex workers by redirecting their labour into 'meagre income generation activities'. Why should 'white saviours' think they were helping sex workers by 'giving' them demeaning jobs making trinkets and other cheap commodities for tourists, while the bulk of the profits go to the 'rescuers'?

The Empower Foundation was similarly dismissive. Their 'Hit and Run' report highlights how 'reformers' from a range of political perspectives (including abolitionist, liberal, and neoliberal) *increase* distress and harm to sex workers, rather than aiding or 'rescuing' them from the profession. At its launch on 21 February 2012, Chantawipa (Noi) Apisuk (the Director) argued that 'We have now reached a point in history where there are more women in the Thai sex industry being abused by anti-trafficking practices than there are women exploited by traffickers.' As one sex worker and researcher from Burma explained, 'I did so many jobs before sex work. I was exploited in every one of them. Sex work gives me the most independence, freedom and the best conditions. It's the same for all my friends. We are grateful and thank you for your concern, but please don't rescue us'.

In conclusion, why is history important? It is a reminder that answers to the question 'To whom does a woman's body belong?' are complex, political, and personal. The dichotomy between choice and coercion is not a helpful one. The dehumanizing rhetoric of Lyon Playfair in 1870 and the vicious appeal to the sexual entitlement of the bodies of working-class women Lord Oranmore and Browne in the 1880s were forcibly countered by feminists of those times. Solutions to social and economic oppression are not easy, though. The reformers who Goldman condemned for 'stalk[ing] about the world as inspectors, investigators, detectives, and so forth' were well-meaning. But the historian, feminist, social commentator, and sex worker today (and some of us are all of these) do well to consider the sex workers are historical actors, located within numerous intersecting and even contradictory political, economic, social, and cultural frames of being. There is nothing in common between the working women protesting the 'beastly' Contagious Diseases Acts and those scorning the partiality of white, privileged men and women to 'rescue' them, other than an assertion of dignity and a knowledge (always constrained) of the world.

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