



Consent, Coercion, and Culpability: Is Prostitution Stigmatized Work or an Exploitive and Violent Practice Rooted in Sex, Race, and Class Inequality?

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Received: 29 November 2018 / Accepted: 3 December 2018
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While calling for facts rather than opinion in their Target Article, Benoit, Smith, Jansson, Healey, and Magnuson (2018) have omitted evidence and made conceptual errors. They erroneously claim that those of us who understand prostitution as sex inequality, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence also ignore prostitution's race and class inequality. We don't. Poverty, racist lack of opportunity/education, targeting of marginalized women of color, those with disabilities, or those who have experienced prior sexual abuse and emotional and physical neglect—all of these factors channel women into prostitution, which is the business of sexual exploitation. Prostitution exists *because of* the male demand for it, and racial and economic inequalities render women vulnerable to it. This means that prostitution is produced from an entwinement of sex, race, and economic inequalities (Frye, 1983; MacKinnon, 2011). Prostitution is also connected with childhood abuse and neglect (Farley, 2018; Moran, 2013). Yet Benoit et al. erroneously described the following perspectives as mutually exclusive: (1) "prostitution is principally an institution of hierarchal gender relations that legitimizes the sexual exploitation of women by men" and (2) "prostitution is a form of exploited labor where multiple forms of social inequality (including class, gender, and race) intersect in neoliberal capitalist societies."

From a feminist abolitionist perspective, prostitution's sex hierarchy is one of several inequalities that are intrinsic to prostitution. Economic inequality and race/ethnic inequality *coexist*

with sex inequality. These inequalities were foundational to the 1999 Swedish law on prostitution. At the law's implementation, Minister for Gender Equality Margareta Winberg asked: "Shall we accept the fact that certain women and children, primarily girls, often those who are most economically and ethnically marginalized, are treated as a lower class, whose purpose is to serve men sexually?" (D'Cunha, 2002). We repeatedly address these inequalities as structural elements of the sex trade, for example, "Prostitution formalizes women's subordination by sex, race, and class thus poverty, racism, and sexism are inextricably connected in prostitution" (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014, p. 111).

Links Between Trafficking and Prostitution

Benoit et al. (2018) fail to mention empirical studies, reports, and government data that provide important information about prostitution. Are trafficking and prostitution the same thing? Some place all prostitution under the "trafficking" umbrella and others place all trafficking under the "prostitution" umbrella. Neither perspective is accurate. Trafficking is coerced/non-chosen/involuntary/pimped prostitution. Noting the impossibility of separating prostitution from trafficking in the real world, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Aspects of the Victims of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, observed that prostitution as it is practiced "usually satisfies the legal elements for the definition of trafficking" (United Nations, 2006, p. 23).

Benoit et al. (2018) fail to include compelling evidence for the overlap between prostitution and trafficking. Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer (2013) found that across 150 countries, when prostitution was legal, there was increased trafficking. Similar overlaps between legal prostitution and trafficking have been reported in the European Union (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2013; Leem & Persson, 2013; Osmanaj, 2014) and in the U.S.

This Commentary refers to the article available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1276-6>.

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(Heiges, 2009). In a review of reports on adults in prostitution, 84% were trafficked or under pimp control (Farley et al., 2014).

The numbers of women who choose prostitution from a position of safety, equality, and genuine alternatives is minimal. O'Connell Davidson (1998, p. 5) noted that only a "tiny minority of individuals" choose prostitution because of the "intrinsic qualities of sex work." Prostitution has to do with one person's sexual desires and the other person's economic needs. The money coerces the performance of sex (MacKinnon, 2011). Having to smile as multiple men your grandfather's age come on your face cannot accurately be described as "freely chosen sex work." In thousands of interviews, we have heard prostituted women, men, and transwomen¹ describe prostitution as paid rape, voluntary slavery, signing a contract to be raped (in legal prostitution), the choice that is not a choice, and as domestic violence taken to the extreme. These are more accurate descriptions of prostitution than consenting sex or unpleasant work. Sex buyers' descriptions of prostitution mirror the women's: "renting an organ for ten minutes," "like a cup of coffee—when you're done with it you throw it out," "I use them like I might use any other amenity, a restaurant, or a public convenience," "You get what you pay for without the 'no.'"

Harm Reduction Strategies Do Not Reduce Most of Prostitution's Harm

Research in the 1990s more often recognized the social vulnerabilities that funnel women into prostitution. Greater poverty and longer time in prostitution were associated with more STD and greater violence (Parriott, 1994; Vanwesenbeeck, 1994). The World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control noted that women's primary risk factor for HIV was violence (Aral & Mann, 1998; Piot, 1999). Both groups emphasized the importance of addressing social factors as contributing to STD/HIV, noting that since women enter prostitution as a result of poverty, rape, infertility, or divorce, public health programs must address these social risk factors which are linked to the violence of prostitution. A 3–4% increased risk of HIV was noted for each month spent in a brothel (Silverman et al., 2007).

In any legal context, prostitution places women at high risk for HIV. Current science regarding HIV is that women with multiple partners are at highest risk (Coles, 2006; Larson & Narain, 2001). Since women in prostitution are used sexually by many men, some having serviced thousands of them, they are at high risk for HIV. Women in prostitution are frequently raped, adding to their risk for HIV, among other harms (Giobbe, 1991; Jeffreys, 1997; Rossler et al., 2010).

¹ We use the words chosen by the women themselves to describe themselves.

Women's poverty is a root cause of HIV because it leaves women vulnerable to demands for unsafe sex acts. Given the poverty and homelessness associated with prostitution—75% of women in prostitution had been homeless in a study conducted in 9 countries—women in prostitution are vulnerable to being coerced by sex buyers and pimps into not using condoms (Farley et al., 2003). Because sex buyers paid more money for not using condoms, extremely risky sex acts "can always be purchased" (Loff, Overs, & Longo, 2003). An analysis of condom use in India found that when prostituting women insisted on condom use, sex buyers paid them 66–79% less (Rao, Gupta, Lokshin, & Jana, 2003). A number of studies indicate that a majority of sex buyers do not use condoms; for example, 89% of Canadian sex buyers refused condoms in one study (Cunningham & Christensen, 2001). Men offered to pay more for condomless sex acts according to 73% of women in a multi-country study (Raymond et al., 2002). Today, German legal brothels advertise the sale of sex acts without condoms for a higher price.²

Despite evidence for the association of poverty, sexual violence, and HIV, one study found that fewer than 50% of the epidemiological studies on HIV risk among women in prostitution considered structural determinants (Shannon et al., 2015). Argento et al. (2014, p. 2) observed "...a surprising dearth of research on IPV [interpersonal violence] experiences among marginalized and stigmatized populations, such as sex workers." Why this failure to address factors channeling women into prostitution? Why the failure of researchers to ask about partner violence in prostitution? When the only approach to prostitution is harm reduction, and when harm *elimination* is not seen as an option, then sex work advocates pop down a rabbit hole where prostitution is assumed to be unpleasant but inevitable. "Wouldn't it be at least a little bit better if it were legalized?" they ask. "Wouldn't there be less stigma, and wouldn't prostitutes somehow be protected?" New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark stated that prostitution is "abhorrent" but at the same time supported her Labour Party's prostitution decriminalization law as a way to reduce the harm of prostitution (Banks, 2003).³

Sex work advocates focus on reducing prostitution's social stigma. While we acknowledge social prejudice against the humanity of the prostituted who are seen as commodities rather than fully human, nonetheless we think that there is an

² No-condom sex acts have been posted at traumaaenlein.de and multiple other websites advertising prostitution. Some of these were discussed by Heiliger (2014).

³ A risk reduction-only approach is dismissive of the alternatives for risk elimination: not entering prostitution or helping individuals to completely avoid these highly risky behaviors. At its extreme, a harm reduction approach becomes a *laissez-faire* ideology more concerned with protecting individual rights to certain behaviors, no matter how risky, than with protecting the health of these same individuals and the public (Green, Farley, & Herling-Ruark, 2009).

over-emphasis on social stigma as the primary harm of prostitution, usually to the exclusion of other harms. These other harms include sexual harassment, sexual abuse, assaults and rapes by sex buyers, and manipulation and control by pimps.⁴ When social stigma is the only harm addressed, it appears that the goal is to obscure the more severe harms and focus on the less severe, so that prostitution can be promoted as labor. Some sex work advocates themselves earn profits from others in the sex trade and fail to mention this fact. Some who name themselves sex trade advocates are, in fact, pimps (Bindel, 2017; Farley, 2016).

Legal Prostitution Does Not Reduce the Harms of Prostitution

Harm reduction legal approaches to prostitution originated in harm reduction approaches in public health. Prostitution harm reduction such as female and male condom distribution is a no-brainer. But the impossible question is asked: how can we reduce sexual exploitation and rape while someone is *in prostitution*? The answer: we can't.

The harm reduction approach has had a major influence on harm reduction legislation, that is, legal or decriminalized prostitution. Prostitution was decriminalized in New Zealand (NZ) by a one-vote majority of its Parliament (May 2003). Four of the five reasons proposed for the decriminalization of prostitution in NZ had to do with public health. Despite a lack of evidence, the argument in favor of decriminalizing prostitution is that it reduces HIV by reducing violence and increasing condom use. While everyone agrees that decriminalization of the person being sold for sex is a positive step, most do not agree that decriminalizing pimps/traffickers and naming them “managers” is a good idea. Violence from sex buyers, pimp control, and social stigma do not decrease under legal prostitution.

Benoit et al. (2018) fail to cite significant evidence regarding the negative consequences of legal/decriminalized prostitution. Contrary to expectations, the decriminalization or legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands, Germany, and New Zealand did not make prostitution safer (Rothman, 2017). After legalization in Amsterdam, organized crime spiraled out of control and women in prostitution were no safer than when prostitution was illegal (Charter, 2008). Explaining that legal prostitution did not reduce crime as the Dutch had hoped it would, Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen explained that it was “impossible to create a safe and controllable zone for women that was not open to

⁴ These harms have been documented in an extensive global literature (for example, see Barry, 1995; Brody, Potterat, Muth, & Woodhouse, 2005; Cho, 2018; Deering et al., 2014; Farley, 2017; Farley & Kelly, 2000; Giobbe, 1991; Højgård & Finstad, 1986; Ling, Wong, Holroyd, & Gray, 2007; MacKinnon, 2011; MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997; Moran, 2013; Oram, Stöckl, Busza, Howard, & Zimmerman, 2012; Potterat et al., 2004; Rothman, 2017; Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, 1985; Walby et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2006).

abuse by organised crime” (Expatica, 2003). A 2007 Dutch government report on legal prostitution found that pimps were still a “common phenomenon...the fact that the number of prostitutes with pimps has not decreased is a cause for concern” (Daalder, 2007, p. 67, cited by Watson, in press).

In Germany, Paulus (2014) observed that 95% of the women in legal prostitution were under the control of others, often organized criminals. Similar findings regarding German legal prostitution have been reported by Kavemann, Rabe, and Fischer (2007) and also Spiegel (2013, cited by Watson, in press). Concluding that “prostitution should not be considered to be a reasonable means for securing one’s living,” a government report found that the 2002 Prostitution Act had not made improvements to the protection of women in prostitution, had not reduced crime, and had not offered women any means of escaping prostitution (German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2007).

Sporer (2013) described the consequences of the 2002 German law on prostitution. Pimps moved impoverished women to German cities from Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. While police charged pimps with extortion, kidnapping, and trafficking, the women were so terrified of the criminals that they were only willing to testify after the pimps were jailed. Even before 2002, prostitution was considered to be “against good morals and customs”—“sittenwidrig.” Although prostituted women were marginalized, they were not entirely devoid of rights. Some criminal laws protected her; the law protected her freedom of action while prostituting. If someone tried to control her, to tell her what sex acts she had to perform, how much she had to charge, how long she was to work, or how she was supposed to be dressed, then that person could be charged with crimes of pimping, trafficking or the aiding and abetting of prostitution and they risked a high prison sentence. Sporer further explained:

The new Prostitution Act of 2002, turned the same actions, the very same rules set by brothel operators and pimps, from punishable offences into legal practices—overnight. The new law gave them a “right of direction” [Weisungsrecht, the right of legal employers to exercise authority over employees and to issue binding instructions] over women in prostitution. They can now legally give orders to the women. Only the worst kind of orders, e.g. that a woman has to engage in specific sexual practices with a specific punter, remain illegal. Practically all other forms of influence are well within the limits of this law. They are now part of the “right of direction” exerted by those who run the brothel. The women are no longer sufficiently protected from these people, and for legal reasons, the police can no longer intervene.

This is precisely what we had to experience in the course of investigations against a brothel run in Augsburg a few years ago. We had found the women had been subjected

to very strict rules and regulations by the brothel operators. For example, they had to be at the disposal of the punters for 13 hours running, they weren't allowed to leave the brothel earlier, they had to walk around stark naked, they weren't even allowed to decide on the prices for their services. Prices were unified and set. They sometimes had to offer unprotected sex. And they had to pay fines to the brothel for violation of any of these rules. These conditions are degrading and are of course incompatible with human dignity. But the court declared all of this to be legal now, because of the new Prostitution Act. It has led to a massive erosion of women's rights. What has developed is a legally instituted relationship of superiority and subordination that is being exploited by profiteers in the sex trade. You could therefore say it is a new form of slavery, under state supervision." (Sporer, 2013, pp. 2–3)

Prostitution was decriminalized in New Zealand in 2003. A 2008 government Report on the NZ law found that after decriminalization of prostitution, the violence and sexual abuse continued as before (Prostitution Law Review Committee (PLRC), 2008, p. 121): "The majority of sex workers felt that the law could do little about violence that occurred" and that it was an inevitable element of the sex trade (PLRC, 2008, pp. 14, 57). More than a third of women interviewed post-decriminalization reported that they had been coerced (PLRC, 2008, p. 46). The highest rate of coercion by sex buyers was reported by pimp-controlled or "managed" women in massage parlor prostitution. As in Germany and the Netherlands, the social stigma of prostitution persisted after decriminalization in New Zealand. The number of sex buyers in the streets doubled after NZ decriminalization and an Auckland outreach agency's staff reported that they were more often harassed by the men (Farley, 2009). The New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, a lobbyist for the law, offered no programmatic support such as job training or housing advocacy for the large majority of those in prostitution who wanted to escape it. Instead, viewing prostitution as a reasonable job for poor women, The Prostitution Law Review Committee concluded, "For people whose employment options may be limited, sex work, and particularly street-based sex work, can offer a quick means of achieving financial gains..." (PLRC, 2008, p. 121).

Harms Perpetrated by Sex Buyers

Recent research demonstrates links between the attitudes and behaviors of sex buyers, on the one hand, and sexual aggression including criminal behavior (Cho, 2018; Farley, Golding, Matthews, Malamuth, & Jarrett, 2015; Heilman, Hebert, & Paul-Gera, 2014). Heilman et al. (2014) interviewed 1000 men each in Chile, Croatia, India, Mexico, and Rwanda. In all five countries, men who bought sex were more likely to commit

rape. In another series of studies, sex buyers were found to generally prefer impersonal or nonrelational sex, fear rejection by women, had committed sexually aggressive acts in the past, and had a hostile masculine self-identification (Farley et al., 2015). More often than men who chose not to buy sex, sex buyers learned about sex from pornography. Like other sexually aggressive men, sex buyers lacked empathy for women in prostitution. The more often men bought sex, the less empathy they had for prostituted women (Farley, Macleod, Anderson, & Golding, 2011). "I don't want to know about her," said a sex buyer, "I don't want her to cry or this and that because that spoils the idea for me" (Farley, Bindel, & Golding, 2009). Men create a sexually arousing version of what a prostitute thinks and feels that has little basis in reality (Jeffreys, 1997). Against common sense, many sex buyers believed that prostituting women were sexually satisfied by the men's sexual performances. Interviews with the women, on the other hand, show that women are not sexually aroused by prostitution and, over time, prostitution damages women's sexuality (Barry, 1995; Funari, 1997; Giobbe, 1991; Høigård & Finstad, 1986).

Coercion

Ne' Cole Moore, a member of SPACE International⁵ noted:

Something to consider: most of us who have been in the "Life" have experienced early sexual assault, have come from dysfunctional family systems, were in the system, i.e., foster care and juvenile justice. Had inadequate support and supervision, and exposed to violence. People don't have to be chained up to be trapped in prostitution. Fraud, force, and coercion. Because pimps use various tactics to control a woman or child (Moore, 2016).

Prostituted sex is coerced sex by its nature. The cash is the coercive force. If we think about the scenario of a loaded gun pointed at somebody, we will have no problem identifying that gun as an instrument of coercion. Because of the capitalist structure of our world, which surrounds us with the reality of money in everything we see, do, and experience, we have a great deal more trouble identifying cash as a coercive force, but that is exactly what cash is. This is not an indictment of capitalism necessarily; there is a very great deal of difference between coercing someone to make a sandwich and coercing them to bend over and tolerate unwanted sex.

Unwanted sex in every other conceivable scenario is identified as sexually abusive. It is only in prostitution that the abusive

⁵ SPACE International—Survivors of Prostitution and Abuse Calling for Enlightenment. SPACE is an international organization, formed to give voice to women who have survived the abusive reality of prostitution. www.spaceintl.org.

nature of the sex is denied, and it is denied because the coercion itself is not identified. Prostitution will never be recognized as sexual abuse until the cash transaction integral to it is identified as coercive by its nature.

Further to this, we must look behind the cash at the willful intention of the person using it as a means of coercion, because coercion is a chain that starts with human intention. In prostitution, men are well aware that the sex involved is unwanted, that it must be coerced with cash before the woman will capitulate to it. The physical act of handing over cash is evidence in itself of the understanding that the sexual situation wouldn't otherwise happen; it is evidence of the intentional nature of the coercion. The coercion is designed to create capitulation. When we bring any form of force to bear in order to create sexual capitulation, that capitulation is not to be confused with sexual consent. The "consent" here is not to have sex, but to tolerate it. This reality removes prostituted sex from the realm of sex that could even be considered consensual, because coercion itself renders sexual consent impossible.

Culpability

The sexually abusive nature of prostitution has an additional element not commonly found across other forms of sexual abuse. Although many survivors of sexual abuse report experiencing strong feelings of guilt and shame, seldom are those feelings rooted in behaviors or material realities that would be received by society as concrete evidence of culpability on the part of the abused. In the sexual abuse of prostitution, the tolerance of unwanted sex for material gain is absolutely received as evidence of culpability, and women in prostitution are routinely shamed and shunned for it. Some sex trade survivor testimony lays out a distinction between the forms of trauma experienced in prostitution as compared with socially understood forms of sexual abuse, and some contend that the psychic anguish of prostitution abuse is compounded many times by the sense of culpability contained within it.

There is general agreement that almost all women, transwomen, and men in prostitution want to escape it. Why then do pro-sex work advocates like Vanwesenbeeck (2017) and Benoit et al. (2018) doggedly pursue legal/decriminalized prostitution rather than responding to the stated preference of prostituted individuals to escape prostitution? Mystified by a "resurgence in sex work rejection" Vanwesenbeeck (2017, p. 1638) and Benoit et al. (2018) don't seem to understand that prostitution isn't work and it isn't sex, that almost everyone wants out, and when they can't escape because of their poverty and the sexism, racism, and other structural oppressions that cage them in, then they seek out anyone who can offer them the choice they seek: to survive without prostitution. Choice-based exit

services should be highest on the list of priorities for *both* feminist abolitionists and pro-sex work advocates. Yet in locations where legal prostitution still exists, the concrete options for escape are decreased, not increased (Bindel, 2017). Walby et al. (2016) documented a severe lack of funding for exit and rehabilitation services. The Immigrant Council of Ireland (2018) recommended that states ensure adequate long-term funding for prostitution exit programs. Progressive thought on this issue suggests that these exit services must be available prior to (or at least coincidental with) arrests of sex buyers in order to provide a safe, sustainable existence for vulnerable women (M. Baldwin, personal communication, August 2018).

Alternatives to the harm reduction/legalization laws on prostitution are the harm *elimination* laws passed by a number of countries that now recognize prostitution as sexual exploitation: Sweden (1999), Iceland, (2008), Norway (2009), Canada (2014), Northern Ireland (2015), France (2016), and Republic of Ireland (2017). These laws are based on evidence regarding the harms of prostitution. This harm elimination/abolitionist model holds sex buyers (punters) and pimps accountable for harms perpetrated against those in prostitution, while it decriminalizes those in prostitution and offers women the choice to exit via provision of services.

The notion that "bodily services"—that is prostitution—can be provided under "humane conditions, . . . fully consensual, worker-controlled, free from discrimination and violence, and no more exploitative than the average job" (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017, p. 1632) is a myth. "Once upon a time," wrote US Congresswoman Maloney (2004, p. xiii), "there was the naive belief that legalized prostitution would improve life for prostitutes, eliminate prostitution in areas where it remained illegal and remove organized crime from the business. . . . Like all fairy tales, this turns out to be sheer fantasy." Sabrinna Vallisce, a New Zealand survivor explained:

When New Zealand passed full decriminalisation, things changed in unexpected ways and I came to understand that the myths of legal protection, autonomy, increased choice and greater community acceptance were unfounded. The myth of health being better was proved false in less than 6 months of the law reform. Women were kissing and risking herpes, doing oral sex without condoms with the risk of throat warts, doing rougher and riskier practices just to get the jobs. I dealt with punters changing expectations. I had no choice but to fight against this model ever spreading to another country (Vallisce, 2017).

Acknowledgements Thank you Inge Kleine and Ingeborg Kraus for information about locations in Germany where condomless sex is promoted. Thank you Katharina Bracher for assistance in translation of Detective Inspector Helmut Sporer's *Reality of Prostitution*, 2013.

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