Feminist Issues In Prostitution

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Introduction

Radical feminism opposes prostitution on the grounds that it degrades women and furthers the power politics of the male gender. Feminists seek to be supportive of sex workers while deploiring the work itself as inherently wrong. While they do not admit to taking an ethical position in contemporary moral terms, radical feminists are in fact making a moral statement. Once their arguments are evaluated in an ethical light they tend to break down logically. Much of the problem stems from a lack of understanding of ethical concepts such as virtue, morality, and degradation. Other problems with their position, as exemplified in Kathleen Barry’s writings, evolve from a political theory that is oververbalized, generalized, and too often uses stereotypical notions of what a prostitute is. The radical feminist views are thoughtful but not always delineated sufficiently to support a credible theory that prostitution degrades all women.

There are many forms of feminism. Five have expressed strong views on the issue of prostitution, namely: Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, existentialist feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism. A chart is included on page 29 to attempt to clarify the
relationships between the various categories of feminism. This is necessary because feminism is vibrant and changing, particularly in the case of radical feminism and liberal feminism, which either reinvent themselves or transform with time. An additional difficulty in forming a clear view of feminism is the fact that some feminists may ascribe to one ideology yet borrow ideas from another form of feminism. Feminists may embrace most of the tenets of a particular form of feminist theory, while rejecting a few of its precepts outright. In all cases, one thing is certain: feminism is about promoting a world in which women enjoy an equal share of the rights and power.

Women perceive that they have historically been—and still are—victims of both direct and subtle forms of male oppression. Feminist beliefs vary widely as to the most effective way to end this oppression. The practice of prostitution in society is thought by radical feminists to reinforce and perpetuate this climate of oppression. Radicals and liberals, however, are divided about the role of prostitution, seeing it in a range of perspectives from that of an ordinary business transaction to an activity that degrades all women. It follows then that there is also a difference of opinion on whether prostitutes are victims—and should be protected by eliminating the source of prostitution—or should be considered free agents pursuing their legitimate economic interests.

Radical feminism in this writing is discussed at greater length than other forms of feminism because of the nature of certain beliefs radical feminists hold about prostitutes. They tend to be mechanical in their analysis of prostitution, separating the moral and spiritual forces of relationships from the temporal forces. In doing so they present an incomplete view of relationships between men and women, as well as the intricate relationships between prostitutes and their clients.
In spite of their tendency to misrepresent and exaggerate the meaning of words such as degradation and rape, radical feminists make a philosophical case for the idea that men’s aggressive sexual nature is not biological, but rather culturally engendered and therefore capable of being modified. Many men believe their sexual inclinations are inherited traits, and therefore a birthright. This belief serves to perpetuate the myth of their natural dominance. Radical feminists promote the idea that changing men’s attitude towards women to a more enlightened one is an important goal for all feminists. Their argument that male attitudes can be changed enjoys some credibility as a result of biological studies which show that all human behaviors are not necessarily inherited; that many behaviors potentially arise as a function of human cultures.

With the exception of existentialist feminism, the other four feminisms discussed rely all too often on stereotypical notions of the personal lives of prostitutes by focusing too much attention on one socio-economic group at the expense of examining the wide diversity of experiences, values, and beliefs of prostitutes. In an effort to shed some light on prostitution, nine categories of prostitution are discussed. Basic to this writing is the idea that a climate of immorality is everywhere evident in the society, and obviously not only in the lives of prostitutes. This pervasive cultural climate of immorality (cheating, lying, manipulating, and exploiting others to serve one’s own ends) contributes to the oppressions that feminists condemn. The common belief that the manipulation of people in pursuit of one’s ends is an acceptable behavior reinforces and perpetuates a myth that such behavior is right. The problem is that once such a belief becomes embedded in the society, more forceful forms of exploitation can arise. Thus, it is reasonable to posit the idea that a multiplicity of influences leads to the oppression of women, not simply the aggressive impulses of men.
Radical Feminism, Prostitution, and Morality

From the beginning, prostitutes and radical feminists have appeared to be at odds with each other. Laurie Shrage makes a case for the radical feminist perspective when she says “female prostitution oppresses women, not because some women who participate in it ‘suffer in the eyes of society’ but because its organized practice testifies to and perpetuates socially hegemonic beliefs which oppress all women in many domains of their lives.”¹ Such views of radical feminists are seemingly well-thought-out and difficult to dismiss. However, if some of their arguments are analyzed in the context of classical and contemporary ethics, they begin to take on a different light and lose their integral character. Even though the argument that prostitution corrupts women appeals to logic, it is a position driven by highly charged emotions that ultimately corrupt its logic. The position further deteriorates, as exemplified in the first two chapters of The Prostitution of Sexuality, because it oververbalizes² the issue and overemphasizes statistical information in an attempt to paint a real-world view of prostitution. Gail Pheterson, in her book The Prostitution Prism, touches on other research abuses and the misuse of statistics to define what a prostitute is.³ This is perhaps the greatest failing of the radical feminists who have built a theory of social right and wrong on a stereotypical notion of what constitutes a prostitute. Statistics about a person or group of persons obviously are not the actual person or group. In relation to this, linguist S.I. Hayakawa reminds us in Language In Thought and Action that “the word is not the thing,” that “the habitual confusion of symbols with things symbolized, whether on the part of individuals or societies, is a perennial human problem.”⁴

Radical feminist Kathleen Barry, in The Prostitution of Sexuality, envisions prostitution
as connected to a darkened world of sex, abuse, and violence. But to others more connected to the world of sex work, common sense and ordinary experience show that the world of prostitution is not a grim and humorless world of only pain, suffering, and abuse. Some of what Barry has to say is relevant and has elements of truth to it, but there are other important aspects of prostitution that are positive and life-affirming. Barry’s book largely paints prostitution in the light of a violent, thankless, and grim occupation that degrades not only the prostitutes themselves but the whole feminine gender as well. It is her statistical analysis of many facts that seems to guide her conclusions rather than a deep understanding or intimacy of the world of sex work. The way prostitutes are analyzed—in some instances—objectifies, dehumanizes, and strips them of any personality, like so many flies pinned to a board for an entomologist to study. She reduces prostitutes in moral stature by objectifying them in the same way she charges that men objectify and reduce women.

Radical feminism does not view prostitution as a victimless crime, but as a situation where men have reduced women to an image of being mere sexual objects. This allows men to unconscionably oppress and coerce women in order to satisfy their own fantasies through prostitution. Political and economic power seems unfairly divided in the world to these feminists. Men are in the position of dominance, demanding and getting what they want. “According to the radical feminist view, men are socialized to have sexual desires and to feel entitled to have those desires met, whereas women are socialized to meet those desires and to internalize accepted definitions of femininity and sexual objectification.”

From the radical feminists’ standpoint, the issue of prostitution is an extension of the power politics that govern social intercourse between men and women. They assert the inherent immorality of prostitution by defining its
wrongness in terms of its corrupting influence on the dignity of all women. They also seize the higher ground in a battle between men and women, using prostitutes as pawns in a struggle to assert their world view. In the heat of this battle, the idea of prostitution is oversimplified and subsequently molded into a form that fits well into the political views of the radical feminist. Oversimplifying an issue frequently produces a logical outcome that can support just about any political position. Prostitution is an enormously diverse and complex issue. Lumping virtually all prostitutes into one general category will yield an inaccurate and insensitive view of their lives.

In constructing theories about prostitutes and prostitution, radical feminists would do well to take into account the diversity of reasons why people enter the profession. They also need to take into account the corrupting effect of any deviant behavior as it makes an impact on society. Moral degeneration of any sort affects people both individually and collectively. It could be argued that prostitution, while it undoubtedly degrades women to some extent, is not necessarily as degrading as many other forms of degeneracy.

There is not just one, but at least nine, categories of description that prostitute women appear to fall into.\(^7\) First, there are women who inadvertently fall into poverty and turn to prostitution but have the emotional fiber to withstand the hardships of the profession until they can find something else to do. Second, there are women born poor into families with a long history of poverty and a lack of education. Third, a woman may be abducted against her will for no reasons of defect in her character and be forced into prostitution. Fourth, a woman might voluntarily enter the profession because of defects in her moral character that allow her to fall into association with violent and exploitative social predators, who, like her, do not wish to
follow the rules of any legal or moral system. She associates with people in an intimate way, well beyond the protection of the police or the assistance of social agencies that can effectively assist her in fighting off abuse. She underestimates her intelligence and skills and ends up being pimped or trafficked as a prostitute. As illustrated in a subsequent chapter, there is a relationship between working within the social value system(s) and abuse. Thus, it can be said there is potentially a cost for deviating too far from social values.\(^8\) This is where Kathleen Barry’s statement that “most women would leave if they could”\(^9\) is most relevant to the issue of prostitution. Fifth, a woman may have been “distanced”\(^10\) and demoralized by a fiercely competitive childhood in which she was unable to compete successfully for sufficient attention from parents, teachers, or employers for her to find acceptance and develop direction. Many prostitutes who have their rational faculties intact are able to resist the intimidations of pimps and avoid a considerable amount of abuse. Sixth, low intelligence and physical and mental problems may lead a woman to find a viable way to be part of a productive society through prostitution. Some of these women might be so unpredictable or incorrigible that they would not make “good women” for pimps. They would be difficult people to get close enough to for exploitation by a pimp trying to establish a relationship by way of feigned intimacy. Some, on the other hand, are perhaps easily guided by the more intelligent pimp. Such women might feel protected by a pimp in spite of low-level abuse which might be considered acceptable by the standards of their experience. Seventh, some women perhaps find that they take to prostitution naturally like “fish take to water.”\(^11\) This category may include prostitutes whose mothers or relatives were prostitutes through several generations. Such women often know what they are doing and are confident that they can handle most of the dangers. Knowing how to derive value and
meaning from what they do, they overcome hardship, obstacles, and abuse. Eighth, in the smallest category, that of attractive women who are very smart. These women recognize an opportunity to make an extraordinarily high income as prostitutes. They place themselves out of danger with wealthy, influential, and intelligent men who can afford a premium price for sexual service. Finally, ninth, some people are irrepressible personalities who seek the challenge of the most dangerous of undertakings. This category, includes artists, poets, writers, and political activists of many descriptions who are of adventurous spirit, testing the limits of their society. These are intelligent" members of the high culture of prostitution that promotes the profession on a higher spiritual and intellectual plane than other categories. They, with their many supporters in mainstream society, often see prostitution in a different light than that of oppression, abuse, and despair. They are on the cutting edge of change for prostitutes and are its main moralizing force gradually evoking openness in the hearts and minds of ordinary people.

Most of the violence and abuse radical feminists talk about fall into the first four categories. Abuse in the sixth category, that of physical and mental problems, is a special consideration of its own. The women of the first four categories at greatest risk are those lacking moral fiber, who, with an outlaw attitude, try to tackle the world on their own terms only to be outsmarted by cunning social predators. Their lives perhaps look grim and bleak, but they often voluntarily lead themselves into danger. An analogy could be made comparing prostitution with mountain climbing. It appears easy to do, but in the end it is an occupation fraught with hazards that only the best and the brightest appear to overcome. This inherent danger is mirrored in the moral device of stigma. Stigma of certain descriptions serves to warn unwary people of the inherent dangers of any entry into a particular area of social life. In this instance, it
serves not so much to pronounce on morality but to dissuade people from climbing mountains they are unskilled at climbing. The many fine points of stigma are too involved to discuss here but are dealt with in subsequent writings.

Radical feminists do not generally subscribe to this broader view of prostitution as outlined in the above nine categories. It seems almost imperative for such individuals to find a link between pimps as oppressors and a generalized theory of male dominance that views men as perpetuating their power by being oppressors. By narrowing their view of prostitution, radical feminists make a point. Moreover, by reducing social dynamics to sexual oppression as the central focus of male-female relationships, radical feminism attempts to make an end run around conventional and classical ethical views of right and wrong. Constructing a theory for the restriction of the rights of prostitutes in terms of oppression, not morality, is simply another creatively conceived method of rejecting prostitution as a valid way of life.

The focus of Barry’s writing, which can in some senses be seen as representative of radical feminists, appears to be a heroic intervention on behalf of prostitutes and women in general to save them from violence and degradation. The extensive abuse that Barry cites can be viewed as a statement on the condition of human civilization in which it is clear that humans are not nearly as moral as they believe themselves to be. She cites numerous instances where violence perpetrated by pimps is the rule rather than the exception in prostitution.”¹³ Violence and abuse are about immorality. Political dialogue constructed in terms of oppression is a second-order attempt to solve a first-order problem better resolved in conventional moral terms. Contemporary and classical ethics have built, over centuries of ethical discourse, a fairly stable foundation (or foundations) from which to evaluate self-serving and exploitative behaviors. On the other hand, the social theory
of Barry, which assigns the cardinal value of moral discernment to be sexual oppression, does not have a substantial foundation on which to build and integrate well into other areas of credible thinking. Theory that is held to be superior is generally theory that integrates well into a broad spectrum of human experience, scientific fact and other theoretical views. Theory that is narrowly subjective usually has a limited scope of application. In my view Barry’s assessment of the moral nature of prostitution falls into this limited category.

There are other reasons for being skeptical of her strong case against prostitution. First is the hasty way in which she develops her ideas and second is the way in which she holds out a pitiful view of the prostitute’s life without distinguishing a wide spectrum of experiences relating to prostitution. She frequently moves from premise to conclusion with great rapidity, and employs strong, emotionally laden language to assert the authority of a premise. This kind of reasoning guides one down a selected pathway rather than conveying an understanding of the situation. Appeal, however subtle, to the wretchedness, despair, and abuse of prostitutes can support a theoretical position only so far. Quite a few of Barry’s ideas are presented well, but the constant hammering away at oppression eventually paints a portrait of wretchedness and despair afflicting prostitute women without any counterbalancing concepts. Observations that might include enjoyment of prostitution in repartee with clients, or experience that might show pimps in a different light, are totally absent from her work.

If The Prostitution of Sexuality does in fact inspire a sense of pathos for women to make a point, it commits an informal fallacy of logic because the issue becomes clouded with emotions that prevent an objective analysis of the situation. Observing poverty is almost always a situation that evokes emotions. Mixing poverty and prostitution together as one thing
may give prostitution a different emotional appeal than if it were analyzed on its own. In an over-populated world, there may simply be situations that leave no other choices to women. The pain and suffering they experience might perhaps be realized with any choice they might make. Many probably enjoy what they do. In spite of the seemingly tragic aura of some of their lives, many prostitutes might be more accurately described as being friendly, warm, and sensitive human beings; not as women whose greatest value is to be pawns in a game of political chess for the empowerment of one political group over another. If the primary cause of predatory practices and trafficking is a function of over-population, educational deficiency, feudal social policy, or fierce social competition for attention at school, wealth, and jobs, the fact that prostitution thrives and subsequently degrades women is beside the point. Feminists are likely blaming the wrong people for the existence of a degradation that is a part of a vicious cycle of degradation that has its sources elsewhere.

The corruption of conscience is endemic to human life without regard to gender. Possessing power demonstrably exacerbates the misuse of it no matter who possesses it. Whether men or women were in the dominant position, the situation might not be much different. The heart of the issue is not to be found in vivid descriptions of oppressions and wrongdoing by this party or that, but rather in the wider context of morality itself. Barry, as well as many other feminist writers, cites a seemingly endless list of human rights violations. Such violations are not new to people dedicated to attempting to lead the “moral life” and commonly experiencing a world in which “morality is always a struggle.”

Where there is unfairness, there is often immorality at work. Morality attempts to bring reason and fairness to an unreasoning world, but it is a difficult struggle. Ethicists have endured consciousness of many forms of
unfairness for centuries, but this is a brand new form of injustice to some feminists.

Prostitution should not always bear the brunt of condemnation for abuse or inspiring abuse. The sheer folly of getting involved with people so obviously unscrupulous has to be noted as a contribution to scenarios of abuse. The mean and complex balances of power, greed, dominance and dependency between prostitutes and pimps give rise to abusive interactions, a subject surprisingly undiscussed in Barry’s work. In contrast, Priscilla Alexander’s essays in Sex Work show more awareness of the larger world of prostitution. She utilizes more restraint than Barry does in the matter of leaping from premise to conclusion or in oververbalizing ideas.

Footnotes
2. S.I. Hayakawa, Language In Thought and Action, 4th ed. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1978). Oververbalization “If our intentional orientations are serious, therefore, we can manufacture verbally a whole system of values...out of connotations informative and affective...That is to say, once the term is given, we can, by proceeding from connotation to connotation, keep going indefinitely.” p. 254.
4. Language In Thought and Action, p. 24. Also see the section on the process of abstracting, “...leaping a huge chasm: from the dynamic process...to a relatively static idea...” p. 154.
6. Ibid., 194.
7. Prostitutes are generally described in these writings as being women. They are by far the largest group by gender of all prostitutes. Men and transgenders, of course, are also prostitutes, but the focus here is on women. Some of these nine categories can also be applied to men and transgenders.
8. By flaunting society’s values and behaving immorally, a person believes he or she is getting away with something, but they are not. They become less valuable people. See Robert Nozick, “Philosophical Explanations,” (Belknap Harvard, 1981), p. 409.
10. Kathleen Barry, The Prostitution of Sexuality (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), p. 30. “Distancing can also be thought of as the result of the abuse caring people experience as they withdraw from a society that takes their kindness as a sign of weakness. Distancing may also result because every time a person gets socially intimate he or she has no defenses to keep from being exploited by that closeness.
11. Terri Goodsen coined the phrase in reference to her relationship to prostitution and reasons why she felt some women became prostitutes.
12. Women in the eighth category are described as smart and those in the ninth intelligent. Smart denotes purely optimizing strategies at work in thinking that is self-serving, while intelligence implies to some degree altruistic and non-optimific thinking. The former are in it for the money, because that is where the money is substantial compared with any other career they might choose. The intelligent women are in it for the money but
on a higher level of social integration that includes helping other prostitutes and helping each other overcome political and social obstacles.

13. In one study that appears representative of her view of the pervasiveness of violence, 65% of women in a study said they were horribly beaten by their pimps. (The Prostitution of Sexuality), p. 202. Another study by feminist Catharine MacKinnon in The Problems of Pornography, says that only 7.8% of all women have not been sexually assaulted. The pervasiveness of violence and pimping needs to be examined more closely with better research methods, p. 58.

14. The pathetic fallacy is an informal fallacy in philosophy. If an argument appeals to pity it is considered fallacious. There is a subtle, not exaggerated, sense of this in Barry’s descriptions.

15. Paul Tillich.
Feminist thinking casts sexual issues in a new light, providing new theoretical insights and practical approaches to old problems. This paper applies these feminist insights to a. WOMEN'S RIGHTS LAW REPORTER [Vol. 11:99 (1989)].

5. Prostitution has received less attention from radical feminists, whose central issue has been pornography. See, e.g., C. MACKINNON, FEMINISM UNMODIFIED 146-162 (1987) [hereinafter C. MACKINNON, FEMINISM UNMODIFIED]. This may be the result of the unique problem prostitution poses for feminism. See infra pp. 56-57; see also B. HOBSON, UNEASY VIRTUE 222 (1987) [hereinafter B. HOBSON]. Yet many of the issues most important to feminists are embodied in prostitution. This article reviews the feminist critique of prostitution and current issues in feminist literature. Changes in policies and social practices are discussed as well as clinical considerations for family therapists working with this vulnerable population. Discover the world's research.

Unlike other research focusing on the reasons and factors behind prostitution, this research will not only focus on the reasons and factors behind women who are involved in prostitution but will also highlight the issue why these women are not socially and economically acceptable like other women of the society despite men being equally involved in this evil. There must be a way to separate the prostitutes from prostitution by the feminists of the society (Kissil & Davey, 2010). There exists a diversity of feminist views on prostitution. Many of these positions can be loosely arranged into an overarching standpoint that is generally either critical or supportive of prostitution and sex work. The discourse surrounding prostitution is often discussed in terms of sex workers who are women, but those in the field of sex work and prostitution are not always women. Radical feminism also criticizes prostitution because it increases the power politics that is played by the male members of the society. Feminism aims at having the world where women and men have an equal share of the privileges, authority, and rights that the society provides. Active Organizations and Individuals Very many organizations and individuals play an active role in discouraging prostitution in the American society. It will be surely known as one of grand feminist success it seems worthwhile mentioning that prostitution is a new feminist issue.

According to “Women Have the Rights” many sex workers and feminist activists see the decriminalization of prostitution as a human rights initiative for women to regain control over their bodies. Anti-prostitution feminists hold that prostitution is a form of exploitation of women and male dominance over women, and a practice which is the result of the existing patriarchal societal order. These feminists argue that prostitution has a very negative effect, both on the prostitutes themselves and on society as a whole, as it reinforces stereotypical views about women, who are seen as sex objects which can be used and abused by men. Pro-prostitution feminists hold that prostitution and other forms of sex work can be valid choices for women and men who choose to engage in it. They go on to identify three main feminist views on the issue of prostitution. The sex work perspective, the abolitionist perspective and the outlaw perspective.