SEX FOR SALE

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For a woman to trade sex for cash or other material benefits has traditionally been regarded as shameful. Like the man who would auction his military capacities to the highest bidder rather than devoting them to his King, or the money-lender who would charge interest on a loan, the female prostitute was regarded as a mercenary – someone who recognized no social obligations, but simply pursued personal advantage. Indeed, in early modern Europe, usury was sometimes compared to the 'beastly trade of courtesans'. This comparison shows us that cultural ideas about what can properly be given a price often alter over time. The market in credit, once disdained and partly criminalized, was gradually normalized from the 17th century on (only to be partly re-stigmatized following the crash of 2008). Opera itself provides another example of how attitudes towards what may honourably be treated as a commodity can shift. Today, opera singers command great respect, reverence even. But in his 1776 *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith explained that the 'exorbitant rewards' of opera singers derived not simply from the 'rarity and beauty of their talents', but also from 'the discredit of employing them in this manner'. Willingness to sell a God-given talent indiscriminately across a public market suggested something venal about the professional opera singer historically, especially when the singer was a woman whose 'natural' place was in the private realm of the home.

Opprobrium for the woman who treated her sexuality as a commodity was greater still. In a patriarchal society, women were supposed to live under the protection of their fathers until transferred through marriage into the husband's household to live under his dominion. Women were objects of exchange between men (father and husband), gifted with a view to forging or maintaining social alliances between male-led households and families. To retain their value as 'gifts', women had to be sexually pure, innocent and untouched, and from this grew the norms of gender that required girls and women to be modest, virtuous, passive and bidable. The female prostitute violated these norms. She was seemingly sexually voracious, immodest and active; she was 'a woman with half the woman gone, and that half containing all that elevates her nature, leaving her a mere instrument of impurity', as William Acton put it in 1870.

The irony (and the hypocrisy) of this was well captured by Simone de Beauvoir when she observed that, from the standpoint of economics, the prostitute's position actually corresponded with that of the married woman:

> The only difference between women who sell themselves in prostitution and those who sell themselves in marriage is in the price and the length of time the contract runs. For both the sexual act is a service; the one is hired for life by one man; the other has several clients who pay her by the piece. The one is protected by one male against all others; the other is defended by all against the exclusive tyranny of each.

Despite these correspondences, the female prostitute has traditionally been profoundly stigmatized for her transgression of gender and sexual codes. The 'good' woman was regarded as good because she meekly accepted her status as property, her banishment to the private, domestic world, and the class position dealt to her by the hand of fate. The 'bad' woman was considered bad because she refused all this, rejected a life of drudgery and sought to author her own destiny through independent market action or strategic use of her sexuality to climb the social scale. The 'whore' was damned by her 'good' sisters as much as by men, and over the centuries the message that women who exercise sexual agency must be punished has been endlessly repeated in plays, novels and other cultural forms. It is rare to find a story in which things end happily for the 'whore'. By the same token, however, there has also been great sympathy for any female prostitute perceived to have been tricked or forced into the trade, rather than having actively chosen it. She has been robbed of her 'innocence', and though the story invariably ends just as badly for her, popular narratives construct her as a passive victim, and therefore worthy of our pity.

It is often assumed that attitudes towards sexuality and gender in 21st-century Western liberal societies are radically different from those of our early modern, or even 19th- and early 20th-century forebears. But are they? Consider reactions to what is described as 'sex trafficking'. It's true that the sex industry can be the site of appalling violence and exploitation. But so too can domestic work, and agricultural labour. And so can marriage. However, groups that are opposed to a market in sexual services on moral or political grounds have lobbied very effectively over the past two decades to get 'sex trafficking' onto the political agenda as a uniquely horrible problem. The campaigning materials they produce often feature images of trafficked women as puppet-like objects or slabs of meat, as bodies barcoded or packed in tins, even as decapitated heads packaged as sex toys, reflecting a vision of 'the prostitute' as object, victim and slave. Though anti-sex-trafficking activists make use of sensational imagery and worst-case examples for campaign purposes, they also actually believe that *all* female prostitution is coerced in the sense that women lack choice under patriarchy, and therefore *all* prostitutes are victims deserving of protection and assistance. Policy makers and front-line anti-trafficking actors tend to be rather more selective in their view of who is a 'sex slave', however.

In most countries, to stand any chance of being identified and assisted as a 'Victim of Trafficking' by the authorities, a migrant woman working in the sex trade needs to demonstrate first that she did not originally choose or consent to work in prostitution, and second that she has been locked in and/or subject to extreme violence or its threat. Having 'merely' been cheated of pay, required to work in extremely poor conditions and unable to quit due to the pressure to repay debts incurred to migrate is not enough. She needs, in effect, to show that she is a 'good' woman who has been robbed of her 'innocence', not a 'whore' who willingly commodified her sexuality and ran into trouble as a result. This helps to explain the significant gap between the huge estimated numbers of victims of trafficking and the tiny numbers actually identified as such in the UK. Because although many sex workers (migrant and non-migrant) could be described as economically exploited by the owners of indoor prostitution establishments, academic research suggests only a small minority are controlled by means of physical violence or

its threat. The compulsion that drives most women into prostitution and prevents them from quitting even appalling conditions is the lack of alternative employment possibilities, especially for undocumented migrants. So, upon contact with the authorities, the many 'victims of sex trafficking' in need of rescue and assistance who exist at the level of political rhetoric conveniently transmogrify into 'illegal immigrants' who brought misfortune on themselves and need only to be deported. In the courts, too, women who are seen to have actively used their sexuality as a means to an end are less likely to be perceived as deserving victims. Criminal injury compensation has been denied or reduced in the case of violent attacks on prostitute women on grounds that their 'character' or previous conduct makes them less than blameless for their own assault.

Because a value is still attached to sexuality, its commodification still offers a means by which to earn, often substantially more than could be earned through other available opportunities. For some, it barely or merely covers subsistence needs, or funds a drug habit or services otherwise insupportable debt (including student debt). But it can also be a means to acquire otherwise unattainable goods, or to access a more glamorous lifestyle. There are also continuums within prostitution that stretch from violent exploitation at one pole through to excellent pay and working conditions and an extremely high level of discretion and control on the part of the sex worker at the other end of the spectrum. And the subjective experience and evaluation of selling sex also varies. Some say they have actively chosen the work, a few even describe it as empowering. Others describe themselves as victims of circumstances that have compelled them into a trade they would not willingly have chosen. But even they do not necessarily experience sex work as unremitting misery. As with other jobs, there may be moments of humour or camaraderie that are valued, alongside other aspects of work that are boring, repetitive and demeaning.

Social reality is always more messy, complicated and contradictory than the narratives and categories we use to represent it. In the case of female prostitution, the reality is also often much more mundane than its representation. The lives of those who sell sex are not exclusively and entirely defined by their work. They are also mothers, daughters, partners, wives, friends, colleagues; and the working day of indoor sex workers is not exclusively and entirely filled with sex – they make cups of tea, tidy up, keep accounts, watch TV while waiting for clients and other such humdrum things. These ordinary aspects of sex workers' lives rarely appear in the stories told about prostitution, and this both reflects and reinforces the cultural perception of the prostitute woman as Other. Whether presented as downtrodden victims, or scheming mercenaries, prostitutes are invariably constructed as entirely different from 'normal' women. The prostitute has to be explained, and must explain herself in ways that other women are not required to. Was she sexually abused in childhood? Is she a drug addict? Does she have low self-esteem? Such questions are not routinely put to women in other jobs, or to women who choose to be stay-at-home wives or mothers.

It seems the idea of a boundary between women who are willing to commodify their sexuality and those who are not remains significant in dominant, heterosexual culture. And traditional notions of mercenaries, whores and victims still have resonance. Female

sex workers may no longer be damned as 'instruments of impurity', but their trade continues to be widely viewed as 'beastly', and women continue to be discredited if they are perceived to use their sexuality for instrumental reasons. Even women who succeed in careers other than prostitution are compromised by suggestions that they 'slept their way to the top'.

Historically, the line between 'madonnas' and 'whores' presented women with a choice between being relegated to the private sphere, unable to chart their own course through life, subservient to but protected by a husband; or being independent but unprotected market actors choosing their own road – but one that inevitably led to social isolation. Today, women can choose to be market actors as well as wives or partners (indeed, few households can survive without them making this choice). But for many women, the economic value placed upon their sexuality remains far higher than that placed upon any other skill, talent or capacity they might sell across a market. Meanwhile, their access to 'ordinary' labour markets and ability to fly high in 'respectable' careers continues to be curtailed by social expectations that they should and will put their 'natural' duties as mothers and homemakers first. If they do not, and if they take advantage of the value placed on their sexuality, they still run the risk of falling on the wrong side of the line, and becoming objects of either pity or contempt.

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