

Behind the Words, the Reality of Sexual Exploitation

A dramatic global phenomenon founded on violence and coercion, prostitution is responsible for the degradation and sacrifice of the most vulnerable members of society. These people are sacrificed simply to satisfy the primitive urges of some, using the guise of sexual liberty, and to generate considerable profit, estimated at 99 billion US\$ (close to 91 billion €) per year (*ILO*, 2014). The reality of prostitution is that of exploitation and the trafficking of tens of millions of human beings, of shorter life expectancy of children sold younger and younger into prostitution, slavery, training camps, torture at the hands of brothels, rape, and murder. Prostitution is governed by criminal organizations and sometimes even by the terrorism that it finances.

And yet, the image today of modern prostitution worldwide fails to reflect these realities. This is largely because the sex industry has hidden these cruel realities behind a fictional narrative of prostitution that makes the unacceptable, acceptable. To develop and increase its profits, this “industry” has tried to create an attractive image of prostitution in recent years. Through a global communication strategy and aggressive marketing techniques, the prostitution lobby has created a new story of prostitution, one that depicts prostitution as an acceptable “job”, a sexual liberty, a mercantile agreement between consenting adults, an emancipation from the patriarchy, a viable solution to economic problems, and even as a human right. This new tale elevates, or at least normalizes prostitution with the objective of decriminalizing its activities and its participants alike, thus to liberalizing the entire “sex market”.

The world of prostitution is one of vulnerability, which targets the most fragile and discriminated-against people in the world: 98% of girls and women, transgender individuals, poverty-stricken people, asylum seekers fleeing situations of war and conflict, victims of sexual violence as minors or within a romantic relationship, those with health problems, and those with an addiction to drugs or alcohol. Prostitution perpetuates and aggravates these vulnerabilities due to the violent nature of the “industry”, the implicated constraints for its actors, as well as the severe physical and psychological damage that it causes.

This vulnerability, however, has no place in the story created by the sex industry, where the heroine is never a victim of devastating circumstances but is rather a prosperous “sex worker”, a “sex seller” who is strong, independent, invulnerable, and free. Missing in this story are the oppressive figures of clients and procurers. Instead, the sex industry gives the role of main enemy to the State, supported by its accomplices, feminists and abolitionists, who make “sex workers” more vulnerable and subject to punishment.

The tale told by the sex industry does not include the violence, constraints, physical harm, victims, or aggressors in its story, as it has to reassure public opinion. It does so by presenting prostituted persons as entrepreneurs, by clearing the names of the clients of these free “sex workers,” and by arguing that the State does not have a responsibility to protect prostituted persons, nor to penalize them, but conversely, should take the opportunity to profit from the industry. They never mention vulnerability, which implies a need for social protection, solidarity, and the creation of a more just society.

Instead, to ignore vulnerability is to accept the social order the way it is, to legitimize inequalities between sexes, as well as those between classes and castes. This tale consequently argues that we should accept prostitution as an inevitable outcome of this inescapable inequality. But to accept this fact is to abandon the principles that constitute a community; it is a renunciation of human values.

When prostitution rhymes with liberty

The sex industry officially condemns coercion, violence and abuse, human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. But in the narrative that the sex industry presents, prostitution is exempt from coercion and exploitation. This story puts forth a free “sex worker”, who has rationally chosen “sex work”. If pro-prostitution discourse recognizes alienation, it is not the alienation caused by the system of prostitution, but that of work itself. It argues that if prostituted persons are exposed to exploitation, so are factory workers.

If it is true that a small proportion of prostituted persons choose “sex work” without coercion, this minority has been presented by the sex industry as the norm. Through this rhetorical offensive, the pro-prostitution lobby has imposed the notion that in reality, prostitution is a free-trafficking industry, while forced prostitution and trafficking only concern a small proportion of prostituted persons.

The supposed “liberty” of the prostituted person is given great value. It ignores the harsh realities of prostitution and demonstrates a return to reactionary measures. This logic recalls Karl Marx’ conception of liberty of the free fox in a free henhouse. What is liberty worth for the most vulnerable? What do we say to the 85-95% of prostituted persons who wish to escape the industry?

Prostitution always results from a rational choice

In the scenario presented by the pro-prostitution lobby, prostitution is always the result of a “free choice” or at least a “rational choice”. This discourse ignores completely coercion and the social and psychological vulnerabilities that cause prostitution. The question of consent, that is not raised here except in economic terms, is never posed.

The sex industry recognizes the vulnerability of prostituted persons but believes this vulnerability is solely a result of the discrimination, marginalization, and oppression of which they are victims, such as gender inequality, racism, and poverty. These so-called “imperfect” contexts, can also give individuals limited choices and influence their decision to become “sex workers”. In reality, “in a world where 3 billion people live on less than 2.50 US\$ a day, and where 80% of the worldwide population lives in countries where income gaps are widening, individuals make economic transactions for sexual relations that are not always a

question of direct coercion, but rather a reflection of limited options” (*Amnesty International*, 2014).

In the pro-prostitution narrative, however, these vulnerable situations never lead to acts of coercion or desperation, as it never affects the agency of prostituted persons; in other words, their vulnerable situations affect neither their autonomy nor their capacity to choose and to act. This “indirect coercion” does not present an obstacle to the “free choice” to sell “sexual services” with the goal of supporting a family, an education, or an addiction to drugs (*CHCDDH*, 2012). Here, consent is an absolute.

To help the most vulnerable, we must support their capacity to decide, and never contest or judge them for it, “because this would ignore the ways in which individuals act in a deliberate and reflective manner, to at least survive or to self-empower (*Amnesty International*, 2014). Respect for free judgment, for the freedom and dignity of prostituted persons forbids, the denial that prostitution is a voluntary and rational decision, and the denial that people's right to choose “sex work” in their own best interests. It also forbids compromising their choices and their security by criminalizing the context in which they live. Coercion thus disappears behind the illusion that a rational, reflective and deliberate choice has been made by the “sex worker,” an “agent” in their life.

This narrative transforms prostitution into an alternative to poverty and social exclusion. Prostitution appears as the only economic opportunity for certain people who are discriminated against in the work force such as transgender individuals. Prostitution is also presented as a more appealing job due to its flexibility and its profitability, even for victims of trafficking, who it allows to escape the exploitative and precarious situations they were in originally.

Procuring is only a form of support for prostituted persons

In the pro-prostitution narrative, coercion by a third party is rarely, if ever, spoken about. Procuring is not seen as exploitative, but is simply seen as an element of “sex work”. The procurer becomes the supporter, manager, or organizer of prostituted persons. The sex industry transforms procurers into protectors and honorable managers that provide a service for prostituted persons. Under the title of “third party” we find chauffeurs, receptionists, bodyguards and even employers. The pro-prostitution rhetoric neutralizes completely the criminality of procuring by ignoring the violent and sexually exploitive nature of the job.

In this representation, it is the State that causes exploitation by penalizing prostituted persons. Therefore, the penalization of “clients” increases the influence of the procurers and pushes prostituted persons into secrecy, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, and forces them to turn to trafficking networks who serve as intermediaries. Similarly, this narrative maintains that penalizing procurers indirectly condemns prostituted persons, as they are forced to either collaborate amongst each other for their security or call on a third party for a taxi fare or the lease of an apartment. This narrative insists that the decriminalization of procuring and buying sex protects the rights of prostituted persons who can thus continue their work without constraints.

Sex trafficking is a myth

In the sex industry's libertarian conception of prostitution, even the victims of sex trafficking have freely chosen to be prostituted. Since the middle of the 1990's, the pro-prostitution lobby has argued for the individual's right to migrate for "sex work". They invented the concept of "voluntary sex trafficking", and renamed it as "sex work migration" that is presented as a banal business, practiced without violence, with consent of the prostituted person and to their profit.

The pro-prostitution narrative does not consider the person who knows they are going to be prostituted in their destination country as a victim of trafficking, even when the conditions upon their arrival are far from what they had envisioned. Regardless of if someone is exploited, violently assaulted, held captive, or receives no profit, they are nevertheless seen as a "voluntary worker" who has chosen to migrate for "sex work" in the hopes of a better life.

In this narrative, exploitation is used to describe only those who are *forced* into prostitution, whereas "free" trafficking (i.e. sex work migration) is perceived as exercising one's right to freedom of movement. In this narrative, sex trafficking is presented as simply a myth meant to justify the repression of prostitution and migration; because trafficking only affects a minority of "sex workers", it should only be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Vulnerability, violence, and coercion are assumed to be only pretexts used by the State to put in place repressive laws. Rather than being presented as endemic among prostituted persons, sex trafficking is presented as a by-product affecting only 5-10% of migrant prostituted persons.

When prostitution is harmless

Prostitution involves significant physical and psychological abuse that does not exist in any other activity and that constitutes the first cause of death among prostituted persons. Yet in the many mystifying arguments for the decriminalization of prostitution, even those of groups such as Médecins du Monde (MDM), violence is absent. Only the institutional violence created by the State as well as laws that penalize prostituted persons recognized; the sex industry advises to respond only by reducing the State's harmful effects and by fighting against HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

This narrative insists again that violence in the prostitution industry is dramatized, that physical and psychological abuses of prostituted persons are imaginary, and that sexual abuse of children is overstated. The sex industry denounces statistics by arguing they are generalized and represent only a small portion of "sex workers," those most affected by social and psychological problems, and are the most exposed to medical and police problems (*Pheterson, 2001*).

The relativist story of the sex industry prohibits the definition of prostitution with a single reality that is violent in nature. The situations and experiences of prostituted persons are presented as diverse. The nature of a sexual relation is thus dependent on the individual, social, cultural and geographic context. In Heather Montgomery's report, "Global Sex Workers," a study of prostituted children in a Thai village near a tourist attraction, she maintained that prostitution is neither harmful nor identity changing for the children, because

the link between sexuality and identity is not as strong in Thailand as it is in the West (*Montgomery, 1998*).

Prostitution is not violent

The pro-prostitution narrative seeks to deconstruct the image of prostitution as devastating and humiliating, and it completely glosses over the world of prostitution. It thus does not speak about the physical and psychological violence that are intrinsically linked to prostitution, or about the violation of prostituted persons' bodily integrity. It also ignores the violence on the part of the principal aggressors of prostituted persons, "clients" and procurers, as well as the daily risks of attack, rape, torture, imprisonment, and murder for prostituted persons. The pro-prostitution narrative negates the psycho-traumatic impact of prostitution as well as the sexual violence that prostituted persons often faced during their childhoods, which makes them more likely targets.

The sexual violence inherent to prostitution due to the repetition of unwanted, often violent, sexual acts is transformed into a free and thriving sexuality. The sex industry turns sex into a banal activity, and makes prostitution an avant-garde sexuality, despite the fact that sexual violence is extremely traumatic and comparable to torture. The harm done to prostituted persons is further intensified by the permanence of their situation of aggression.

In the scenario presented by the sex industry, the psychological harm done by prostitution does not exist. The sex industry completely reinterprets the notion of traumatic "dissociation" that refers to the universal defense mechanism used by at least 70% of prostituted persons to "survive" the repetition of undesired sexual acts. Prostituted persons psychologically separate their two personalities, between their prostituted personality and their "private" personality. This psychological disassociation, which actually causes prostituted persons to lose bodily sensation, allows them to separate from themselves in order to protect themselves from an intolerable experience. The sex industry turns this strategy of disassociating one's self from their body into a "sexual commercial service". In this narrative, the disassociation is simply presented as a way for a free and rational individual to conduct their work and to earn a living. The prostituted persons still have complete ownership of their body, and their work never affects their bodily integrity.

The recognition that 68% of prostituted persons suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder is presented in this narrative as an ideological belief rather than fact¹. The sex industry, which is unable to dispute scientific fact, actually recognized that prostitution causes significant psychological damages² comparable to that of Vietnam veterans or victims of repeated rape. These traumas that are intrinsically linked with the act of prostitution have no place in a discourse founded on autonomy and liberty.

Violence would be institutionalized

Pro-prostitution lobbyists always make a distinction between the activity of prostitution and the conditions in which this activity takes place. According to pro-prostitution lobbyists,

¹ Bedford v. Attorney General of Canada, Ontario Superior Court of Justice, Judge Himel, 2010.

² Melissa Farley, American psychologist, is the first person to have initiated a survey on the prevalence of this phenomenon amongst prostituted persons in the mid 1990's.

prostitution is not intrinsically violent. The conditions in which prostitution is criminalized, however, make it violent.

This narrative maintains that prostituted persons are subject to violence due to discrimination, stigmatization and a lack of recognition of “sex work”. Through its legislation, police, and institutions, the State is responsible for the violence endured by prostituted persons. This violence includes, but is not limited to, harassment, extortion, police brutality, arrests, arbitrary detention and expulsion. Repressive laws, which lead to secrecy, heightened risks as well as more client aggression, aggravate this violence. These pro-prostitution lobbyists denounce the “dangerous practices” of the State, such as confiscating condoms and using them as proof of prostitution, which consequently increases the health risks and the vulnerability of prostituted persons. The State, however, considers that violence is intrinsically linked to the act of prostitution as well as to its clients and its procurers and thus sidesteps responsibility.

The sex industry defends the idea that improving the conditions in which prostitution occurs, through both the decriminalization and the professionalization of “sex work”, would resolve health and violence problems. It would thus suffice to stop stigmatizing prostitution, to legalize it, and to offer workers rights to prostituted persons, so they would no longer be subject to the atrocities of their current trade.

When the “sex worker” becomes invulnerable

The pro-prostitution narrative neglects to mention the violence and coercion intrinsically linked to the act of prostitution and therefore claims that the prostituted person is never a victim. The “sex worker” becomes an invulnerable hero or heroine who is fighting for sexual freedom, economic independence, the right to a “job”, and the right to mobilize against a State who seeks to weaken them.

The sex industry has invented the idea of an “induced vulnerability” caused by legislation, judiciary institutions, and police hostile to prostituted persons. Legislation penalizing prostituted persons makes them more vulnerable.

In the absence of a victim, the aggressors also disappear too in the pro-prostitution discourse. Procurers and “clients” are exonerated, and their desire for sex, power and money is legitimized. If the sex industry recognizes any aggression, it is always to describe it in neutral terms.

Prostituted persons would never be victims...

The neo-liberal scenario presented by the sex industry systematically renounces the idea of vulnerability and the notion of a “victim”. The pro-prostitution lobby developed an ideology that maintains that “sex workers” are being shamed, and rather, should be depicted as strong individuals. According to the pro-prostitution lobbyist, it is disparaging to consider someone a “victim”. Moreover, by labeling a prostitute a “victim”, one is in turn, making prostituted persons more vulnerable.

The pro-prostitution narrative redefines a “victim” so that the prostituted individual is strong, active, and invulnerable. Being a “victim” does not mean being subject to violence perpetrated by others, but rather references a character trait. To be a “victim” signifies that

one is weak, passive, powerless, and incapable, in opposition to the “active subject.” The prostitution narrative makes the prostituted person a voluntarist subject and an invulnerable hero or heroine, who represents action, liberty, and power. By definition, the prostituted person can never be a victim. The status of victim is an identity that must be combatted at all costs; the liberal individual in the sex industry must be responsible and invulnerable.

Pro-prostitution arguments overflow with the recurring theme of “the prostituted person as subject rather than victim,” presenting these terms as being mutually exclusive. In fact, the “victim-subject” opposition is false, because to the victim is generally opposed the aggressor, and to the subject is generally opposed the object. This opposition is used to impose the false idea that the victim is an object, and not a human being (*Ekman, 2013*). This narrative thus establishes a false identity of the “victim” because in reality, the term victim does not seek to describe weak or incapable individuals, but rather aims to reveal harm done and to define a situation of exploitation.

...even when they are exploited or raped several times a day

The “sex worker” exists without context, which is to say without exploitation. Regardless of what is done to the prostituted person, even if they are raped several times a day, given HIV/AIDS, subject to physical abuse, or are even tortured, they nevertheless remain an “active subject” who exercises control and resists exploitation. In this narrative, passivity is seen as a form of resisting exploitation. It is the attitude of the prostituted person that determines whether or not they are a victim. Making decisions, developing strategies to deal with the realities of prostitution, or even “actively” choosing submissiveness, qualifies a person as a subject rather than a victim. Whatever may be the degree of exploitation, if a person acts or submits “freely” as a means of surviving, they are not vulnerable.

The discourse dismisses the role of power and exploitation; it is simply a question of empowerment as it all depends on the prostituted person and their attitude. It is always the most vulnerable person who is depicted as the strongest. Thus, in her study of prostituted children in Thailand, anthropologist Heather Montgomery does not describe the children as “victims” of sexual exploitation but rather as “active, rational subjects”. To refuse them this status, according to Montgomery, is to deny them this “way of intelligently using the little control they have effectively”. If these children do not want to be prostituted, they develop strategies to accept prostitution. The child is always an “active subject” who resists and exercises control. If the children do not protest when strangers rape them, it is because they have “chosen” to ignore this aggression, and thus resist through passivity.

In this situation, prostitution is an opportunity; it is an opportunity for older children to become the procurers of younger children. These children knew how to acquire power and social prestige amongst their limited options as, without prostitution, these children would have become miserable and obliged to have a job that pays much less than prostitution (*Ekman, 2013*).

Finally, according to the sex industry, the only possible violence against a prostituted person is to identify them as a victim. This is how one truly condemns them to be so. According to the pro-prostitution lobby, it is in identifying “migrant sex workers” as victims of trafficking, that the State deprives prostituted persons of their autonomy and their

opportunity to live a better life. Therefore, it consequently condemns them to a situation of exploitation.

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