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The Social Implications of Prostitution

Melody Pruitt

Crime and Deviance

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Prostitution is the exchange of some kind of sexual service for money. Prostitution is a significant institution to study because it holds a distinct place in a wide variety of societies across the globe. In the United States alone, prostitutes serve approximately 1.5 million customers a week (Pateman 53). It is a historical profession that has lasted, with high demand, for hundreds of years. In the modern era, the issue of prostitution should be a pivotal conversation. Movements such as the Me Too Movement have brought to light the sheer prevalence of sexual assault in American society. Women's rights are a popular topic, not only within the United States, but throughout the world. Sex trafficking and slavery are at an all-time high, and societies are beginning to acknowledge this as a serious problem. It is interesting, though, that issues such as reproductive rights or sexual assault are promulgated in the media and every day conversation, but prostitution is typically not. Prostitution is an equally important topic within women's issues as sex trafficking or equal pay. It can have just as devastating consequences to both women and society as a whole.

The greatest debate within the literature appears to be whether or not prostitution should be legalized. Different authors have distinct opinions on the consequences of either legalizing or prohibiting prostitution. Some argue that prostitution should be completely abolished due to its nature of exploitation and objectification of women. Prostitution is just another method by which men assert their dominance over women, and thus, in the modern era, it should be eliminated according to the evolving ideas of gender equality. Others, though, view prostitution as a means by which women are actually empowered. Women have the right to choose what they do with their bodies, including selling them. To restrict this freedom through legislation would be to

actually oppress women and thus promote inequality between the genders (Storkey 109).

Although the literature may vary slightly between the two camps, these arguments appear to be the general divide. Either way, it appears that many agree that prostitution is rooted in further social issues such as gender equality and women's rights to their own bodies.

There is also differing opinions on whether prostitution is actually harmful. Some assert that prostitution is a victimless institution in which both parties involved mutually benefit from the transaction (Goldman 90). Others argue for its harmlessness by saying prostitution is analogous to casual sex, and since casual sex is not viewed as harmful by society anymore, then neither should prostitution (Moen 73). The sentiment that since prostitutes make a fair profit for their services, then the methods of doing so can't be inherently harmful, is also popular. (Moen 76). Many often promote that since a prostitute signed up for her job, then she inherently consents to whatever sex act she participates in. Therefore, since the sex act is consensual, it cannot possibly be harmful. However, as eloquently stated by Moen, "consent is insufficient to ensure harmlessness" (80). In other words, just because a sex worker might consent to, and be paid for, sex does not mean that prostitution is inherently harmless.

Obviously, the debate surrounding the issue of prostitution has significant economic undertones. Many proponents of prostitution view it as simply a business transaction like any other merchant-customer relationship. A prostitute is commonly viewed as just another laborer in a capitalist society. She does not sell herself, but sells her services just like any other merchant would (Pateman 54). Although within society prostitution is viewed as an unacceptable institution, it has significant economic ties to the society as a whole. Prostitution is an economic relationship at its most basic level, so, particularly in a capitalist society, it obviously ties into the

entire economic system (Davis 749). However, although prostitution has significant economic underpinnings, it is not purely the consequence of economic factors.

Prostitution has been a key institution in varying societies for hundreds of years. Historically, although it has been highly popular, prostitution and prostitutes have had a reputation as being the lowest of society. Teela Sanders articulates this historically negative view well when she describes viewing sex workers as “purveyors of disease, a social evil, and a public nuisance” (Moen 74). Some argue that the reason why prostitution is such a universal feature of human societies is rooted in the male sexual urge (Pateman 57). Perhaps, though, prostitution is a symptom of higher sociological qualms, such as capitalism, imperialism, racism and sexism (Goldman 90). Prostitutes have always been separated from the larger society through some form of spatial control or segregation. This allows for prostitution to be seemingly out of the picture, while still accessible due to the high demand for it (Matthews 884).

Kingsley Davis on his article, “The Sociology of Prostitution,” gives a generic overview of the sociological function that prostitution has. He summarizes a lot of the issues discussed in the literature above while analyzing the implications of prostitution on society as whole. According to Davis, if prostitution is broken down into its basic component, which is the exchange of sex, then it resembles basic sociological functions, such as marriage or even a modern dating relationship (747). He discusses, then, why prostitution is seen as sociologically negative when it has the basic foundations of a socially acceptable, and even promoted, practice such as marriage. It appears, he argues, that it is the consequence of these actions that make them distinctly positive or negative within society. For example, the basic consequence of sex within a marriage is procreation, while the basic consequence of sex within a prostitution contract is one

gains material benefits while the other gains some kind of pleasure (Davis 748). Another difference he points to between prostitution and socially acceptable sexual institutions is the relationship between the two parties. Typically, in a socially promoted sexual relationship there is at least some level of intimacy, while the prostitution relationship is impersonal, a means to a desired end (Davis 749).

Davis also discusses the loss of social capital within prostitution. Typically, there are no social consequences of prostitution for the client. Davis notes that one argument in regards to the issue of prostitution is that sex workers suffer no real loss from selling their bodies, but actually gain quite a lot. Many ignorantly believe that the general income for prostitutes is higher than any other service-level job. This can be the case for some private sex workers, but generally it is untrue. Instead, not only do women suffer numerous psychological and physical issues when engaging in prostitution, but they also lose their social capital. Their reward is not only monetary, although classifying it as a reward is somewhat disturbing, but also “the loss of social standing” (Davis 750). A woman or girl’s choice to prostitute herself, then, comes with a significant moral decision of whether she wants to be labeled as socially unfit or deviant for the rest of her life while her client faces no such decision.

Davis concludes his analysis by examining the legal ramifications of either outlawing or permitting prostitution in society. In societies where prostitution is legal, it falls into a distinct category of crime. One party, the client, is seen as a law-abiding citizen, while the other party, the prostitute, is seen as the deviant. This makes prostitution a difficult crime to deal with because although participation in the service is seen negatively by society, the one who solicits it, the client, can not be held responsible. Thus, finding someone guilty for a certain vice or habit in

this scenario would disrupt society by making it deviant to have a particular vice or habit. In other words, blaming the client in the prostitution contract, Davis argues, would disturb the society by labeling particular vices or habits as inherently deviant (752). However, Davis also acknowledges the practical impossibility of completely legalizing prostitution. For this to occur, he posits, the society would have to lose its motivation to even have prostitution within it. This happens only when a society promotes complete sexual freedom, where sex is simply for purposes of pleasure and no other. By deinstitutionalizing the control of sexuality and sexual expression and creating an environment of mutual sexual desire between all parties, Davis argues, is the method by which a society could achieve this. Obviously, this is as impossible of an occurrence as it sounds for several reasons, among them the deeply rooted institutions of sexuality in society and the sheer unattractiveness of some individuals (Davis 753-754). Davis does note that although the institutionalization of sexuality by society will most likely never end, the type of institutionalization can change. Thus, he argues, as society allows for more causal sexual relationships to be permitted within its bounds, the demand for prostitution will decline. Prostitution will probably never be truly eradicated within society, but it can certainly be less prevalent (Davis 754).

Prostitution has been stigmatized as a form of anti-social behavior (Matthews 883). There has been much support in feminist and liberal camps for declassifying prostitution as a form of deviance. Instead, the emphasis is being placed on prostitutes as workers, or wage laborers. They, too, are simply trying to make ends meet just as any other person in the working class would. Prostitutes choose to work in this field, so their actions truly can not be classified as deviant (Jesson 520). Prostitution has been argued to actually reduce deviance within a society because it

minimizes the risk of rape and different forms of sexual assault for other women (Jesson 520). Some assert that a woman's views of her own sexuality is indicative of her becoming a prostitute. That is, how a woman views her own concept of sexuality is key in her decision to prostitute her body, therefore her deviance is rooted in a skewed view of her own self-concept (Jesson 522). However, it is quite a stretch to label someone who is so dehumanized and de-individualized as deviant (Storkey 117). There are many internal and external factors that lead one into prostitution. Assuming their actions as deviant is simply not justifiable.

The problem with prostitution, though, is not only the selling of sex, but the sexism that supports it. Men have utilized prostitution for hundreds of years to assert their dominance over women and this helps affirm a male-dominated society (Moen 77). This ignorant thinking is epitomized in the thoughts of Irving Singer, who claims that "there is nothing in the nature of sexuality as such that necessarily... reduces persons to things" because, as he argues, "there is something fundamentally reciprocal to sex" (Moen 76). The fact of the matter is, prostitution does not promote a pleasurable exchange between two consenting adults. Instead, it is fundamentally "the unilateral use of a woman's body by a man in exchange for money" (Pateman 57). The prostitute, much like the sex slave or the young girl who experiences sexual assault, epitomizes male-dominated society (Pateman 55). Prostitution is an avenue in which men can continue to assert dominance over women without any strings attached or really any social consequences. Even the term 'prostitute' has slowly evolved into the term 'sex worker,' not to de-stigmatize prostitutes themselves, but as a way to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere to solicit clients (Matthews 880). It exhibits this misogynistic idea of the male sex right, meaning that men are entitled to women's bodies simply because women are seen as

subordinate (Pateman 56). Essentially, prostitution allows for public acknowledgment of the man being the dominant actor in society; an affirmation of men as sexual masters (Pateman 62).

There is certainly a double standard in society when it comes to sex workers. As discussed earlier, within countries in which prostitution is illegal, it falls into a distinct category of crime. Within the prostitution contract, the client is seen as the law-abiding citizen while the prostitute is seen as the deviant under the law (Davis 752). It can be said that a crime such as rape could also be categorized similarly, with one party, the victim, being a normal, law-abiding citizen, and the other party being the sexually deviant criminal. The question becomes, then, why is the prostitute the one seen as deviant in one scenario and the rape victim seen as not when they both experience traumatic sexual events? Certainly, the argument can be made for choice, where the prostitute chooses to be in that situation, therefore making her deviant, while the victim definitely did not choose to be in her position. That begs the question, though, of whether prostitution is actually chosen.

Prostitution is certainly a very real and prevalent issue in today's society. As a Christian, I believe that sex is to be between husband and wife in a monogamous relationship. I cannot recall a class that I have taken that has truly altered or solidified my views on this issue. Perhaps a class over prostitution or women's issues in general would be beneficial to this school. I believe that prostitution is wrong not only because of my Christian values, though, but because it is an institution that promotes gender inequality and the objectification of women. The problem with how society faces prostitution today, though, is that it separates it from other institutions that demean women and widen the gender gap as well. It seems as though society can agree that sex trafficking, unequal pay, and sexual assault, among others, are serious women's issues, but

prostitution doesn't appear to make the cut. Even further, as seen in some of the literature, some members of society even believe that prostitution empowers women and allows them to make a profit while working in a field of their choice. I find it difficult, though, to affirm that prostitution truly is a choice. It has been discussed in the literature that multiple factors lead women into prostitution, including sexual assault experienced as a child, poor economic conditions, drug abuse, and others. Perhaps some women truly make a conscious choice with no other external push factor to sell their bodies, but it is certainly ignorant to apply that generalization to every sex worker. As stated previously, the issue at hand is sexism. It is what promotes and supports prostitution and what keeps it alive in modern society. The problem of prostitution won't be solved through legislation or evolving ideas about sexuality. Prostitution will only be eradicated through the empowerment of women and the achievement of true gender equality.

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