REFRAMING PROSTITUTION

From Discourse to Description, from Moralisation to Normalisation?

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Chapter 14.
Prostitution undressed: From discourse to description, from moralisation to normalisation?

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Commercial sex work, and in particular prostitution, is a divisive social issue (Outshoorn, 2004, Munro & Marina Della Giusta, 2008). Public and policy-related discussions are often caught up in a paralyzing dichotomy between interpretations of the prostitution phenomenon through opposed normative or moral values and opinions. Academic research on prostitution is mostly written through the perspective of a single research discipline, a single normative framework, or a particular stakeholder. Only to a minor extent, prostitution research relies on facts and fully unbiased empirical evidence. The compilation of findings and analyses in this book challenges this flawed research tradition. Instead of selecting empirical findings and instrumentalising them from and for a given normative perspective, we have aimed at overcoming such bias. None of the involved authors normatively views prostitution as intrinsically problematic. They all have open-mindedly explored the phenomenon and the policy around it, thus adding substantially to the “normalisation” of prostitution as a research topic, without however turning a blind eye to the various problems in the sex industry. The latter are not used as ammunition for the contra-prostitution debate, but simply as realities to be dealt with, in need of solutions.

1. MULTIDISCIPLINARITY

The book actively steps away from the traditional monodisciplinarity of publications on prostitution. It aims at enriching prostitution research and fructifying it by combining findings and analyses from a range of disciplines – history, political science, moral philosophy, sexology, sociology, law, criminology, victimology, health sciences and legal philosophy – in a single, truly multidisciplinary volume. Still, at least one particular research discipline is largely absent in this book, but also quite generally in prostitution research: economics. Even if the dearth of economic research on the subject of prostitution could be believed to be explainable, at least in part, by the difficulty of obtaining reliable data (Levitt & Alladi Venkatesh, 2007), prostitution demand and supply dimensions, the relationship between them and the elasticity degree of both, as well as the economy of prostitution careers and the prostitution industries require focused research attention. More empirical economic research would certainly contribute greatly to the current discussion on criminalising deliberate clients of exploited prostitutes.
In theory, the added value thereof would be that clients would choose sexual servicing more carefully and responsibly. Such a shift towards "ethical consumerism" could constitute a meaningful attack on the demand side of unreasonably cheap sexual services and the sexual exploitation (and related human trafficking) market. An increased client risk is likely to prompt a negative economic impact on the exploitative sexual service market, as rational clients would favour risk-free sexual services (Van Damme & Vermueen, 2012). Empirical testing of such application of economic theory and getting detailed insights in the economy of prostitution (industries) would be much relevant for underpinning realistic, evidence-based prostitution policies in Europe and beyond.

2. MULTI-FRAME ANALYSIS

Thinking, researching and writing through one-sided or single-minded normative frames is a much prevailing flaw in prostitution (policy) literature, irrespective of the discipline concerned. Strongly subjective and biased empirical research has been conducted on the issue, mostly not (adequately) reflecting experiences/behaviour nor normative attitudes of sex workers and clients themselves (Kantola & Squires, 2004; Outshoorn, 2005; Brooks-Gordon, 2006; Pitcher, O'Neil & Sanders, 2009; Outshoorn, 2012b). An important contribution of this book is that it analyses, questions or falsifies a broad range of frames through which prostitution is typically viewed or through which the prostitution "problem" is often shaped, while at the same overcoming the one-sided- or single-mindedness that tend to underlie these, by bringing them together in a joint effort by authors. A first example of such a frame is the victims frame, through which commercial sex work is often viewed as inherently problematic and sex workers as victims of coercion and exploitation, as nobody can ever really choose this line of work, which is considered to be inherently harmful (Outshoorn, 2005; De Marneffe, 2009; Weitzer, 2010; Peršak, 2010; discussed critically also in chapters 9, 10 and 13 in this volume). From this perspective, the moral function of consent is minimalized. Voices fitting this frame are often (newly) feminist in nature, inspiring gender-based policies and currently inspiring the "male" criminalisation debate (Barry, 1979, 1995; Dworkin, 1981; Outshoorn, 2005; Simmons, Lehmann & Collier-Tenison, 2008; Keren-Paz & Levenkron, 2009). The "gendered" connotation of voices fitting this frame label (female) sex workers as weak and easily exploitable individuals who come from deprived social backgrounds (Stoltz, Shannon, Kerr, Zhang, Montaner & Wood, 2007; Pitcher, O'Neil & Sanders, 2009; Kramer & Berg, 2003). A second example is the social order frame, also viewing commercial sex work as inherently problematic (Phoenix & Oerton, 2005; Hubbard, 2002; Hubbard & Whowell, 2008; Hubbard, 2009; Bellis et al., 2007; Hubbard & Prior, 2012; see also chapters 3, 6 and 7 in this volume), in that a link
with crime, drugs, anti-social behaviour, un-safety and nuisance is assumed and the focus of empirical research is to prove this link (Letherby, Williams, Birch & Cain, 2008; Scoular & O’Neill, 2007; Baseman, Ross & Williams, 1999; Belcher & Herr, 2005). From this perspective, the moral and social problem lie with the sex workers themselves and the nuisance that sex work generates. Sex workers are seen as deviant individuals who do not live up to social standards and, hence, responsible themselves for prostitution-related problems (Sanders, 2005; Sanders, 2009). A third example is the agency frame, not viewing commercial sex work as inherently a social and/or moral problem, realising, however, that its context may turn it into one (Maher & Pickering, 2013; Outshoorn, 2001; 2005; 2004; Kantola & Squires, 2004; Scoular, 2004; Vermeulen, 2005; Peršak, 2005; Vermeulen, 2007a-b; Munro, 2008; Hardy, Kingston, & Sanders, 2010; Skrivankova, 2010; Carson & Edwards, 2011; Van Damme & Vermeulen, 2012; see also chapters 4, 5, 8 and 11 in this volume). Harm comes from the working conditions and possibly from clients’ dealing with the sex worker (Sanders, 2004; Campbell & O’Neill, 2006; Moen, 2012). From this perspective, consent may make the commercial sexual transaction a morally defensible one (Primoratz, 1993; Fabre, 2006; Comte, 2014). The fact that commercial sex work is seen as illegal is considered one of the main reasons if not the main reason for the problems surrounding sex work (Sanders, 2004; Scoular, 2004; Outshoorn, 2005, Pitcher, O’Neil & Sanders, 2009; Van Damme & Vermeulen, 2012; Peršak, 2013; see also chapter 2 in this volume for some historical evidence). Sex workers are seen as free individuals who should have the right to choose whichever line of work they want to pursue to earn their income or even use it as a strategy to raise their living standard (Agustín, 2006; Rosen & Venkatesh, 2008). Yet another relevant frame is human trafficking frame, which is a good example of the existing dichotomy between interpretations of commercial sex as forced/exploitative on the one hand and as free/agentic on the other hand. Both dichotomous perspectives can suffer from methodological deficiencies in that they are selective by prioritizing specific groups of sex workers and clients and types of sex work (Bernstein, 2007), ideologically laden by starting out from opposing viewpoints on the very eligibility of sex as a type of work (Stark & Whisnant, 2004; Nagle, 1997) and hyperbolic in their interpretation of the quality of the choices involved (Barry, 1979; Delacoste & Alexander, 1987). In the scientific literature, specifically on human trafficking, the dichotomy between forced/exploitative and free/agentic sex work is even more problematic (Abramson, 2003; Aromaa, 2007; Haynes, 2009; Davidson, 2010; Skrivankova, 2010). Often, strongly subjective and biased empirical research has been conducted on the matter, departing from either the normative premise that a genuine choice is possible or impossible (Kantola & Squires, 2004; Outshoorn, 2005; Brooks-Gordon, 2006; Pitcher, O’Neil & Sanders, 2009; Outshoorn, 2012a). Other prostitution frames used, analysed or criticised in
the book are the *harm frame*, the *labour market-protection frame*, the *gender frame* and the *migration frame*, all of which are rather self-explanatory by name. The book not just uses, analyses, questions, falsifies or criticises these various single-sided or selective frames but deliberately brings them together, thus trying to overcome differences in perspectives or frames and contributing to their combination into a neutral, multi-frame analysis of prostitution (related problems and policies). The prostitution topic would benefit research-wise from being perceived and approached through the lens of a multitude of frames at the same time, since mono-framing inherently curtails the debate and research advancement. By largely adhering to this multiple-frame standard, the present volume aims to avoid stepping into the trap of one-sided approaches and to contribute to fine-grained, nuanced results.

3. **MULTI-ACTOR PERSPECTIVE**

This book also overcomes the traditional single-actor perspective in prostitution research, linked to the single normative frame tradition. Within the agency or trafficking frame, courts are an important stakeholder in that they have to pass a judgment on voluntariness or exploitation. The victims frame necessarily chooses the “vulnerable prostitute” perspective. Residents of certain prostitution areas or citizens of a certain municipality play the typical stakeholders in the social order frame that often focuses on nuisance. In general, prostitution research often one-sidedly reports on prostitution from the perspective of (or in the interest of) either clients, sex workers, pimps, brothel owners, traffickers, smugglers, migrant workers, sex industries, law enforcement, prosecutors, courts, policy makers, health organizations, NGOs or lobby groups. What is important is to grasp and approach realities from a multitude of actors and stakeholders, including the examination of their discourses, while giving priority to “description”, i.e. portrayal of the realities of prostitution, from which various “discourses” may (and often do) deviate in pursuit of the interests and goals of those who use them.

4. **CONCLUSION**

We hope that prostitution research would build further on the zest of this book in that multidisciplinarity, multi-frame analysis and a multi-actor perspective should become the norm rather than the exception. Researchers from fairly different disciplines need to actively join forces by, for example, setting up large-scale, multidisciplinary research projects. Also, it is valid to recommend that in order to overcome the selectiveness of many a prostitution-related research, the focus should shift to a broader spectrum of commercial sex work, ranging from prostitution and escort work to stripping, lap dancing, phone and webcam sex, acting in the porn industry, working in
massage parlours, social erotic care etc. That will allow for more nuanced insights in the lived complexities of commercial sex work and consumption, and into how these possibly relate to life choices, opportunities problems, agency issues and normative values. Furthermore, attention needs to be directed also towards specific groups or populations that spur prostitution-related questions urgently needing answers, such as irregular migrants and students, to name just a few. While such research would be primarily empirical, it should not neglect to include the critical examination of the theoretical, cultural, normative and ethical concepts that inform much of the empirical work, policy and politics behind prostitution.

5. REFERENCES


Concluding thoughts


