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Sex

From "*Revolting Prostitutes: the Fight for Sex Workers Rights*"
by Juno Mac and Molly Smith

We are anxious about sex. For us as women, sex can be as much a site of trauma – or uneasy compromise – as a site of joy or intimacy. Feminist conversations about sex work are often seen as arguments between those who are ‘sex positive’ and those who are ‘sex negative.’ The reasons for this will be explored in this chapter. We have no interest in positioning ourselves within that terrain. Instead, we assert the right for all women to be ‘sex-ambivalent’. That said, the hatred of sex workers is rooted in very old and misogynist ideas about sex. Understanding those visceral responses of disgust is a key starting point for understanding all kinds of things about prostitution – including criminal law.

Is Sex Bad?

People are preoccupied with the *sexual* dimension of sex work. These anxieties manifest in ideas of bodily degradation and the threat that sex workers pose as the vectors of such degradation. The prostitute is seen as a disease-spreader, associated with putrefaction and death. We are envisioned both as removing corruption from society (a nineteenth-century French physician spoke of the ‘seminal drain’)[1] and as a source of contamination, disease, and death in our own right.[2] *Puta*, the Spanish word for prostitute, has links with the English *putrid*.* Another preoccupation holds that to have sex (or to have sex in the wrong ways – too much, with the wrong person, or for the wrong reason) brings about some kind of *loss*. Often, contradictory ideas about sex and these visceral threats or losses are intertwined in cultural depictions of the sex worker – forming a figure that Melissa Gira Grant names the ‘prostitute imaginary’.[3]

Sometimes the connection between these ideas is obvious. For the Victorians, the 'loss of virginity' risks ruin and a grim death from syphilis. The ruined woman is reconfigured as an agent of destruction, spreading disease in her wake. Sometimes the loss is a spiritual decline she precipitates in others; in 1870, for example, journalist William Acton wrote that prostitutes are 'ministers of evil passions, [who] not only gratify desire, but also arouse it [and] suggest evil thoughts and desires which might otherwise remain undeveloped'.[4] In *The Whore's Last Shift*, a 1779 painting by James Gillway, the tragic figure of a heavily made-up nude woman with hair piled high stands by a broken chamber pot in a dirty room, washing her filthy – and clumsily symbolic – white dress by hand.

Attitudes towards the prostitute imaginary can be read in context with the more familiar paradox around a specific body part. Ugly, stretched, odorous, unclean, potentially infected, desirable, mysterious, tantalising – the patriarchy's ambivalence towards vaginas is well established and has a lot in common with attitudes around sex work. On the one hand, the lure of the vagina is a threat; it's seen as a place where a penis might risk encountering the traces of another man or a full set of gnashing teeth. At the same time, it's viewed as an inherently submissive body part that must be 'broken in' to bring about sexual maturity. The idea of the vagina as fundamentally compromised or pitiful is helped along in part by a longstanding feminist perception of the penetrative sexual act as indicative of subjugation.[5]

The nineteenth century Contagious Diseases Act gave police the power to subject any suspected prostitute to a forced pelvic exam with a speculum – a device, still in use today, invented by a doctor who found gynaecological contact repellent, and who purchased enslaved Black women to experiment on.[6] In London in 1893, Cesare Lombroso studied the bodies of women from the 'dangerous classes', mostly prostitutes and other working class women, and women of colour, all of whom he described as 'primitive'. He asserted that prostitutes experienced increased pubic-hair growth, hypertrophy of the clitoris, and permanent distention of the labia and vagina, clearly believing that their unnatural deeds and their unnatural bodies were two sides of the same coin.[7] To him, the social and moral degradation they represented became legible in their physical bodies.

An 1880s novel describes a sex worker as 'a shovel full of putrid flesh', continuing: 'It was as if the poison she had picked up in the gases from the

carcasses left by the roadside that ferment – with which she had poisoned a whole people – had risen to her face and rotted it.'[8] The body of the prostitute is out to hurt innocents: she is 'carrying contamination and foulness to every quarter', where '[she] creeps … no precautions used … and poisons half the young'.[9]

During World War II, the disease-ridden prostitute was imagined as the enemy's secret biological weapon. Posters depicted her as an archetypal femme fatale – with a cigarette between her red lips, a tight dress, and a wicked smile – above slogans warning that she and other 'pickups' were dangerous: traps, loaded guns, 'juke joint snipers', Axis agents, enemies of the Allied forces, and friends of Hitler.[10]

These questions about the duplicity of the sexualised body also come up around queer and gender non-conforming people. Trans women are often questioned about their 'biological' status: a demand that invariably reveals an obsessive focus on their genitals. A trans woman is constantly targeted for public harassment; at the same time, if she is 'read' as trans, she is seen to be as threatening as a man – accused of trespassing into bathrooms to commit sexual violence.[11] Conversely, if she can pass for cisgender, she is regarded as dangerous, liable to 'trap' someone into having sex with her unawares.*

Gay men have also been historically perceived through this mistrustful lens. Queer theorist Leo Bersani argues that gay men provoke the same sets of fears long embodied by the prostitute: a person who could either 'turn' decent men immoral or destroy them. The HIV crisis brought new virulence to these homophobic fears. An HIV researcher wrote at the time of the epidemic that, 'These people have sex twenty to thirty times a night … A man comes along and goes from anus to anus and in a single night will act as a mosquito transferring infected cells on his penis.'[12] These fears about gay men as malevolent and reckless persist today. A Christian hate group that advocates against 'sodomist and homosexualist propaganda' was invited to the UN in 2017, and a feminist writer recently described a male HIV-positive sex worker as 'spreading AIDS.'[13]

To be associated with prostitution signifies moral loss. In 1910, US district attorney Edwin Sim wrote that 'the characteristic which distinguishes the white slave from immorality … is that the women who are victims of the traffic are forced unwillingly to live an immoral life'.[14] This

belief – that to be a sex worker is to live an ‘immoral life’ – has persisted. Mark Lagon, who led the US State Department’s anti-prostitution work during the George W. Bush era (and went on to run the biggest anti-trafficking organisation in the US), wrote in 2009 that women who sell sex lead ‘nasty, immoral lives’ for which they should only not be held ‘culpable’ because ‘they may not have a choice’.[15]

In the 2000s, the blog *Diary of a London Call Girl*, written by escort and anonymous blogger ‘Belle de Jour’, was a smash hit, leading to books and a TV show. After its author was named in 2009 as the research scientist Brooke Magnanti, journalists, like Lombroso before them, attempted to read her supposed moral loss in her physical body: ‘I scrutinize [Magnanti’s] face without quite knowing what I’m looking for … dead eyes, maybe … or something a bit grim and hard around the mouth.’[16] Sex work, categorised as the wrong kind of sex, is seen as taking something from you – the life in your eyes. In her imagined loss, Magnanti is transformed in the journalist’s eyes into a threat, a hardened woman.

This supposed sexual excess, and the loss that accompanies it, delineates the prostitute as ‘other’. The ‘good’ woman, on the other hand, is defined by her whiteness, her class, and her ‘appropriate’ sexual modesty, whether maidenly or maternal. Campaigns for women’s suffrage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew on the connection between women’s bodies and honour and the honour and body politic of the nation. These campaigns were intimately linked with efforts to tackle prostitution, with British suffragists engaging in anti-prostitution work ‘on behalf’ of women in colonised India to make the case that British women’s enfranchisement would ‘purify the imperial nation-state’.[17]

This sense that people (particularly women) are changed and degraded through sex crops up in contemporary feminist thought about prostitution, too. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, who runs a diversion programme for arrested sex workers in Arizona, claims that ‘once you’ve prostituted, you can never not have prostituted … having that many body parts in your body parts, having that many body fluids near you, and doing things that are freaky and weird really messes up your ideas of what a relationship looks like, and intimacy’.[18] Sex workers who go through that programme have to abstain not only from *selling* sex but also from sex with a partner.[19]

Even more punitive responses were common in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries. Orders of nuns across the world ran workhouses and laundries for 'fallen women' – prostitutes, unmarried mothers, and other women whose sexualities made their communities uneasy.[20] Conditions in these 'Magdalene laundries' were primitive at best and often brutal; even in the twentieth century, women could be confined within them for their whole lives, imprisoned without trial for the 'moral crime' of sex outside of marriage. Many women and their children died through neglect or overwork and were buried in unmarked graves. In Tuam, Ireland, 796 dead children were secretly buried in a septic tank between 1925 and 1961.[21] The last Magdalene laundry in Ireland closed only in 1996.

The Irish nuns who ran the Magdalene laundries did not disappear.[22] Instead, they set up an anti-prostitution organisation, Ruhama, which has become a major force in campaigning to criminalise sex work in Ireland, and now couches its work in feminist language.[23] The Good Shepherd Sisters and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity continue to make money from the real estate where the Magdalene laundries stood, while largely stonewalling survivors' efforts to document or account for the abuses that took place there – and refusing to contribute to the compensation scheme for survivors.[24] There is a direct line between these religious orders and the supposedly feminist prostitution policy implemented in Ireland in 2016 (see chapter 7).[25]

Tropes about the prostitute body as a carrier of sexually transmitted destruction recur in ostensibly progressive spaces, as when a 'feminist' anti-prostitution organisation reuses World War II–era public-health posters, or when a prominent anti-prostitution activist tells sex workers' rights advocates that they could 'rot in HIV-infected pits'.[26] Sex workers observe such conversations to be laden with misogynist contempt, a ritual of political humiliation where our bodies are laid bare for comment. When we defend ourselves, our resistance outrages non-prostitute feminists, who seize on our obstinacy as proof that we love the sex industry and we love selling sex to men, that we're out to corrupt, and that we hate other women.

Witness, for example, a commenter on Mumsnet, the UK's most popular parenting forum, addressing a fellow community member with:

> You whores pander to men, you undermine women, you steal our husbands, you spread disease, you are a constant threat to society and morals. How can women ever be judged on their intellect when sluts make money selling their bodies? … What you do is disgusting, letting men cum on your face? Vile and evil.[27]

Norwegian academics Cecilie Høigård and Liv Finstad write that the sex worker's vagina is 'a garbage can for hordes of anonymous men's ejaculations'.[28] We once witnessed a sex worker in an online feminist discussion being asked:

> What is the condition of your rectum and the fibrous wall between your rectum and your vagina? Any issues of prolapse? Incontinence? Lack of control? You may discover that things start falling down/out when you're a little older. Are you able to achieve orgasm? Do you have nightmares?[29]

Such interrogation and commentary feels far from sisterly. It doesn't comfort or uplift sex workers to know that our being likened to toilets, loaves of bread, meat, dogs or robots is all part of a project apparently more important than our dignity.[30] Feminist women describe us as 'things' for which one can purchase a 'single-use license to penetrate'.[31] They gleefully reference the 'jizz' we've presumably encountered and our 'orifices' and tell us to stick to 'sucking and fucking' and leave feminist policy discussions to 'those of us who read the facts'.[32] Sex workers are associated with sex, and to be associated with sex is to be dismissible.

As Jo Doezema writes, within anti-prostitution feminism

> the echo … of the pornographic is notable. The prostitute not only lacks … she *is* lack. What [these] feminists most want of sex workers is that they close their holes – shut their mouths, cross their legs – to prevent the taking in and spilling out of substances and words they find noxious.[33]

Sometimes feminists' jibes are subtler than calling us 'holes', and these responses have much in common with the ways Victorians disciplined prostitutes into 'appropriate' modes of femininity and sexual continence. Contemptuous articles link sex workers with 'trivial', feminine-coded practices such as fashion, shopping, and selfies, or mock sex workers' discussions of 'empowerment'.[34] In an article expressing her feminist objections to the sex trade, one journalist writes that young women who 'dress like slags' in 'tiny skirts' *deserve* not to be taken seriously.[35] Rejecting a woman because of her appearance is simple misogyny, based on the idea that women who embody a particular kind of femininity are stupid,

shallow or somehow inferior. The focus on feminine frivolities draws on pre-twentieth-century depictions of the prostitute as deviant and degraded in her rampant femininity, obsessed with luxury goods and sex. Through this lens, it's easy for non-prostitute feminists to portray sex workers as having no political literacy at all.[36] (Indeed, it is likely that a reviewer of this book will report that we claimed the sex industry to be *empowering* – and a conduit, presumably, to shoe shopping.)

Sex, in these discussions, is positioned as something intrinsically too special to be sold – something intimate reserved for meaningful relationships. Implicit in this view is the sense that sex is a volatile substance for women and must be controlled or legitimised by an emotional connection. One young feminist, for example, writes disapprovingly that sex work is increasingly acceptable to other young feminists because of 'hookup culture', adding, 'It's old-fashioned these days – almost prudish, perhaps – to believe that sex is somehow … inherently linked to your emotions or necessarily intimate.'[37] Yet for many people, sex can indeed be recreational, casual, or in some way 'meaningless'. The meaning and purpose of sex varies wildly for different people in different contexts or at different times in their lives. The sense that sex is *intrinsically, always* special rebounds on women, who are disproportionately seen as losing something when they have sex that is 'too casual'.* It is no coincidence that men who sell sex are not the focus of the same kinds of anxieties – men are seen as able to have casual, meaningless, or transactional sex with much less risk to their 'essential selves'.†

In the UK, women 'rescued from brothels' are still sent to live with nuns.[38] The ultimate fallen women are sent to 'restore their dignity' among the ultimate chaste women. Women 'diverted' from the sex trade in the twenty-first century are overwhelmingly taught traditionally 'feminine' forms of employment – especially garment manufacture, but also baking, candle-making, and jewellery-making.[39] Motifs of purity are common in the jewellery produced by such projects.[40]

Is Sex Good?

In this context, where sex represents loss, threat, and bodily degradation, it is no surprise that some sex workers – and those who advocate for us – have

responded by emphasising the *value* of sex. Sex work, they agree, *is* sex – but sex is, in fact, good. In agreeing that sex work is sex, they place commercial sex in a category with other kinds of sex which have traditionally been considered 'wrong' or degrading – for instance, queer sex or women having sex outside of relationships. These advocates push back against narratives that associate bodily or moral degradation with 'the wrong kinds of sex', instead asserting that sexual pleasure is a personal and social good. They position sex work as an adventurous, fulfilling, and sexy experience for the worker.

These politics are familiar in other contexts. For example, Jeannie Ludlow, an abortion rights advocate, notes that within pro-choice advocacy, there is a 'hierarchy of abortion narratives' and a category of 'things we cannot say':[41]

> There is a politically and socially constructed gap between what we experience at our clinics and how we talk about those experiences in public. When I began to notice this gap in my own speaking about abortion, I realized that it had been constructed in part out of political necessity. I was reluctant to close this gap for fear that I might, as one academic colleague accusingly put it, 'provide fodder for the other side'.[42]

This 'defensive stance' leads to an emphasis on abortion stories deemed 'hyper-deserving' – for example, when the pregnancy results from rape. And in response to anti-choice narratives of grief and regret, we get feminist writing that describes an abortion as 'the happiest day of my life'.[43] Likewise, it is easy to find sex workers asserting, 'I love sex. I fucking love it.'[44] Sex workers who stray too far from this line fear being told that their stories are 'what gives those opposed to sex work their ammunition'.[45]

'Sex positive' advocacy gained increased momentum in the early 2000s in part because blogging emerged during the George W. Bush administration. The US government he led was propagating cartoonishly bad policies around contraception, sex education, LGBTQ young people, and sexual health. In response, liberal and feminist bloggers became particularly invested in producing non-judgemental information about sex and sexual health, and defences of pleasure, masturbation, queer sex, and sex outside of marriage. The increased accessibility and attractiveness of blogging technology made it possible to talk more openly about sex and pleasure. As a result, many sex worker writers became embedded in a

blogging culture that was (perhaps rather too uncomplicatedly) pro-sex and pro-pleasure.

This discourse of sex positivity helped produce the figure we term the 'Erotic Professional'. Easily identifiable as one of the more vocal, visible figures of the sex worker movement, the Erotic Professional positions herself as answering a vocational 'calling' that seems to have barely anything to do with being paid.

In downplaying economic coercion and instead emphasising her pleasure and desire, the Erotic Professional attempts to make commercial sex more closely resemble the sex life that society is more ready to endorse – that for which women receive no payment. One escort, for example, is quoted in an interview as saying:

> A prostitute will do everything for money. Not me … I try to forget about the money … it's very affectionate … I don't even think about [payment] until the very end. I don't demand payment up front, because the guys I go with are always good people … I also adore sex. I wouldn't be in this profession if I didn't like it. So, I found a way to make money doing something that I like.[46]

Often the Erotic Professional is a dominatrix or 'companion' – types of sex work in which the act of penetration is downplayed until it's practically incidental.

Blurring the lines between paid sex and recreational sex is a narrative readily available to many sex workers, as it is already present in much of the marketing directed at clients. Little is more consistently tempting for clients than the fiction that they are the object of the workers' genuine, irrepressible sex drive. The bored, libidinous housewife, the authentic 'girlfriend experience', ('It's very affectionate … I also adore sex') and the powerful, formidable dominatrix are socially palatable fantasy characters designed to entice and impress customers.

These sex positive politics create the illusion that worker and client are united in their interests. Both, we are told, are there for an erotic experience, for intimacy, for hot sex. Raising the subject of the worker's needs (for safety, money, or negotiating power) would spoil the illusion that the worker and client are erotically in tune, and that she's just as sexually invested in their encounter as he is.

In this rhetoric, the focus can easily shift to the needs and enjoyment of the client. Carol Queen's influential 1997 essay on sex positivity and sex workers' rights describes sex work as a 'life of sexual generosity' and has a

subsection titled 'Why Johns Need Sex-Positive Prostitutes' – a subtitle it is hard for us to read without wondering, *who cares*.[47]

This approach reaches its apex in the 2011 documentary *Scarlet Road*, which follows sex worker Rachel Wotton in her relationships with two disabled clients. Rachel's advocacy makes little distinction between sex workers and sex buyers, and indeed focuses on the sexual rights of her clients. In the trailer for the film, Rachel tells us, 'I like the fact that my job always entails pleasure' and ends with 'I think there's a right to sexual expression' – eliding that what is being talked about is the sexual expression of *the client*, not the worker.[48]

This elision is harmful. The worker's interests are not identical to those of the client. Ultimately, the worker is there because they are interested in getting paid, and this economic imperative is *materially different* from the client's interest in recreational sex.* Losing sight of that leads to a politics that is inadequate in its approach to *workers*' material needs in the workplace.

As sex workers, we sympathise with the wish to over-emphasise pleasure, freedom, or power. This narrative may feel much better than being stigmatised as damaged, an animal or a piece of meat.

However, there is an obvious conflict of interest between a fantasy persona who loves their job and an activist who demands policy intervention to remedy the abuse of their human rights in the workplace. Using just one persona to assure your clients that you love your working conditions and *also* to highlight how inadequate they are is a difficult line to walk.

When sex workers market themselves as 'upscale' or 'exclusive', journalists often read this at face value and dismiss their voices as unrepresentative or privileged.[49] Honorifics like 'Mistress' or 'Domina' signal to the public that the politics of the sex workers' rights movement dovetail with the sexual roles we perform at work.[†] It suggests that these politics can be consumed *as sex*. Sex worker Lori Adorable writes, 'If we continue to play the same role outside the dungeon as we do within it, we will remain alienated from our basic labor rights as well as our labor.'[50]

These politics produce a further category of 'things we cannot say' – the perspectives of sex workers who hate sex work. For the Erotic Professional, the figure of the unhappy sex worker becomes the unacceptable 'other' who

must be disavowed at all costs in their own fight for social acceptance. The idea of sex as a site of trauma prompts a knee-jerk dismissal, where anti-prostitution politics are discredited as mere ‘prudishness’.* One activist writes, in response to sex workers discussing trauma,

> I am not a victim. My clients do not victimize me. If you are an independent provider not being forced, perhaps you should consider another line of work. How can your sex work be healthy if you resent men so deeply? … You shouldn’t be doing sex work!! *Healthy* sex work requires that you be empowered.[51]

Another sex worker activist responds callously to a former sex worker’s claims that high numbers of people are raped in sex work, writing: ‘Guess again, honey – I haven’t been … If you love yourself and believe that you deserve to be loved by others, when you choose to become a sex worker, then you’ll probably be just fine. But if you don’t, then you’ll probably run into trouble.’[52] Like any victim-blaming politics, this is both harmful, *and* a misdirected attempt to feel ‘in control’ – to fend off the possibility of sexual violence.

Carol Queen, in the same sex positivity essay quoted earlier, explicitly excludes those who are not having fun, writing: ‘I do not intend to encompass the experience of those whores … who are not sex positive, and who act out the negative expectations imposed on them by a sexist and sex negative culture.’[53] Queen seems to position the workers’ dissatisfaction at work as their own fault for being ‘unenlightened’. A sex worker who is living precariously or in poverty, who is at risk of criminalisation or police violence, or who is being exploited by a manager or lacks negotiating power is not likely to be particularly ‘sex positive’ at work. These factors are structural, not a function of the worker’s state of enlightenment.

Some activists become so invested in defending sexually empowered prostitutes that they downplay or even deny that the sex industry can be a site of abuse. This can quickly devolve into personal attacks, as typified by one North American sex worker and blogger who has written of the ‘tragedy porn’ of ‘so-called survivors’ with testimonies ‘conveniently years or decades in the past, long enough for the evidentiary trail to have been washed away by their bucketfuls of crocodile tears’.*

Rape denialism is unconscionable and completely contrary to feminism. Those who are being exploited or harmed within commercial sex should be the central concern of the sex workers’ rights movement, yet such politics

actively push them away. Exited survivor Rachel Moran has spoken about the hurt such attacks have caused her, writing, 'My truths do not suit them, so my truths must be silenced.'[54]

Sex positive sex work politics are useful for the Erotic Professionals who advocate them *and* for carceral feminists who push for criminalisation. These groups *share an interest* in glossing over the material conditions of sex workers' workplaces. For Erotic Professionals, to raise such topics either spoils the advertising illusion or is detrimental to the self protective identity they've created. For carceral feminists, arguing about the 'meaning' of sex usefully conceals practical, granular questions about sex workers' access to power and resources at work – questions which, if examined, inevitably reveal that criminalisation cannot improve sex workers' lives.

Both sometimes represent the debate as a simplified binary opposition: 'Happy Hookers' (who enjoys sex work and thus support decriminalisation) versus 'Exited Women' (who experienced harm in the sex industry and therefore support criminalisation). For instance, anti-prostitution feminist and theatre-maker Grace Dyas characterises the debate thusly:

> The exited perspective says, *you need to see the harm done to me and the harm done to women every day*. The other side is like, *you need to see I am enjoying it* … So many women involved in sex work don't want to be there … But the others are saying, '*We're also here; we're enjoying it*'.[55]

Dyas fails to acknowledge the prostitute experiencing harm or coercion who disagrees that criminalising commercial sex will necessarily bring her justice. She neglects to consider any concrete reason for this disagreement, attributing it instead to 'enjoyment'.

Similarly, anti-prostitution campaigner Julie Bindel described the group 'Survivors for Decrim' as 'the pro-prostitution lobby, co-opting the language of abolitionists to further your cause'. The group's representative explained in reply, 'We're people who currently or formerly have sold/traded sex, who are survivors of violence or trauma, and who have a different perspective from you on how to deliver safety for people selling sex. That's not pro-prostitution or co-opting.' Bindel then claims, 'Your wording implies you describe yourselves as survivors of the sex trade, which clearly is not true … You're intentionally misleading the public.'[56] The implication seems to be that to 'legitimately' be a survivor requires you

to agree with certain politics around the sex industry. Those who support the decriminalisation of commercial sex are cast as 'illegitimate' survivors.

For anti-prostitution feminists, survivors who advocate decriminalisation constitute a category that cannot – or should not – exist. Those who experience sex work as miserable, violent, or exploitative *but continue doing it* are left politically bereft, pushed out by pro-sex politics in the sex worker movement and invisible to (or strategically unacknowledged by) carceral feminists, who consider the only legitimate victim to be one who has exited or will imminently exit prostitution. As Canadian prostitute and writer Sarah Mann argues, 'Unhappy whores are stuck seeking political representation among either a camp that disavows their experiences or a camp that disavows their rights.'[57]

While the idea of selling sex as joyful sexuality is entirely at odds with the experiences of most prostitutes, we are not arguing for the focus on the sexual act to be completely discarded. (By the end of the following chapter, the tension between understanding sex work as *sex* and understanding sex work as *work* will become clearer.) As sex worker Pluma Sumaq writes:

> Looking at the sexual nature of prostitution is essential to understanding prostitution. How could it not be? … Intimacy, sex and sexuality not only activate some of our deepest fears, but also some of our deepest woundings … Prostitution presents us with a reality that is sometimes too emotionally painful to unravel because as we attempt to do so, we begin to realize that it is our reality too. Sex and intimacy are personally also our own struggle.[58]

Being critical about sex positivity in the sex worker movement should not mean pretending sex is incidental. We can explore the sexual experiences of people in the sex trade in a way that respects the diversity of those experiences – whether they are bad or good – and doesn't overwhelm the conversation about labour rights.

Thinking about sex work only as sex also allows any survivor of any sexual violence to claim the (real or imagined) traumas of sex workers as their own. In an article about brothel work in Germany, journalist Sarah Ditum imputes that a sex worker named Josie is experiencing daily trauma – based on the disclosure that she brings numbing cream to work in case a client is heavy-handed with a vibrator. In response, Ditum writes, 'Prostitution [is] an institution that insists on the dehumanisation of women, the grinding away of our souls so we become easier to fuck, easier to use, easier to kill.'[59] The use of 'we' and 'are' suggests that the experiences of a sex worker – in this case, Josie – are a struggle shared with all women. (Of

course, the same cannot be said in reverse; 'women's liberation' is not always shared with prostitutes.)[60] So eager is she to link her own feelings to the vibrator story that Ditum neglects to ask whether the worker would like to see her workplace criminalised or not.

Feminist writer Gloria Steinem, too, typifies this when she writes: 'Our spirits … break a little each time we see ourselves in chains or full labial display for the conquering male viewer, bruised or on our knees.'[61] The language of the paragraph flickers between two perspectives: Steinem-as-viewer ('our spirits break a little each time we see') and Steinem-as-performer ('ourselves in chains or full labial display'). Rendering the sex worker a symbol enables anti-prostitution campaigners to treat themselves and their concerns as interchangeable with those of sex workers, re-inscribing these concerns as representational rather than asking more granular questions of labour rights. As Melissa Gira Grant writes,

> An image of a woman in porn can be seen to stand in for 'all women', whereas an actual woman performing in porn is understood as essentially other. So 'defending women from images of women in porn' is a project that's understood (by some feminists) as a broader political project, whereas the labor rights of women who perform in porn are considered marginal.[62]

A sex worker may describe a bad experience as a labour-rights violation, sexual abuse, or simply a shitty day at work. Regardless, their testimonials are not merely symbols to be interpreted by non-prostitute feminists, especially not as part of rallying for the criminalisation of their income. Current workers are the experts on what *current working conditions* in the sex industry are like. It is frustrating to sex workers when the exited or non-prostitute perspective are centred, and our voices are treated as optional extras.

The difference between prostitutes and non-prostitutes and between current and former sex workers is fundamental not because of *identities*, but because of the *material conditions* of those who sell and trade sex. Only some people are *actually having sex for money* in the here and now – and others are not. No matter what stake they feel they have in the debate, non-prostitute and exited survivors cannot justifiably talk over sex workers who are still selling sex.

The difficult truth is that harm will come to people selling sex tonight, tomorrow, and for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, for many people, doing so remains the only viable way to survive. The politics of Happy

Hookers and Exited Women have no space for the existence of the unhappy sex worker, whose inconvenient truths disrupt the comforting delusion that prostitution is a sexual orientation. Instead, she is forced – usually by economic necessity – to continue choosing survival over a noble exit, and she reminds us that capitalism cannot be magicked away with liberal or carceral solutions. For this person, sex work *may* be sex – but it is also *work*, in a world that allows no alternative. Understanding what work is, however, is easier said than done.