

## The female body in the sex business: Feminist perceptions from a historical perspective

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### Abstract

In this paper, we examine feminist perceptions on the experiences and portrayal of women in sex commerce including pornography, prostitution, trafficking in persons and the use of sexual images of women to promote products and entertainment. This paper is largely a conceptual discussion of related literature, and thus data was generated through desktop review of related literature and previous empirical studies on sex markets. We establish that feminist theorists are divided on the question of whether markets in sexually explicit materials and sexual services are generally harmful to women. As a result, some feminist scholars have explored and developed arguments for restricting sex markets, while others have investigated political movements that aim to advance the rights of sex workers.

**Key words:** Feminists, perspectives, theorists, sex markets, pornography, prostitution, trafficking.

**DOI:** 10.7176/IKM/9-4-06

**Publication date:** April 30<sup>th</sup> 2019

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine feminist perspectives on sex markets with the aim of awakening and sensitising communities on some of their behaviours and treatment of women especially during crises as in Zimbabwe today. We start by looking at pornography before discussing prostitution and human trafficking.

### 2. Pornography

According to Longino (1980), pornography shows men and women taking pleasure in activities that objectify women and treat women as less than human. By portraying female subjects as dehumanized objects, pornography promotes the idea that women can be treated without moral regard as in the sex with dogs case which went viral in Zimbabwe in the late 1990s when some women were forced to have sex with dogs by a visiting white doctor. With the current rampant poverty in the country today such demeaning cases may not be surprising. “What’s wrong with pornography, then, is its degrading and dehumanizing portrayal of women, and not its sexual content. Pornography, by its very nature, requires that women be subordinate to men and mere instruments for the fulfilment of male fantasies” (Longino, 1980: 45). Longino believes that sex is morally problematic because it is difficult to have sex without treating another person as a “mere means” to our own satisfaction. Sexual desire is irrational and leads us to reduce others to their sexual body parts, and thus is objectifying, dehumanizing, and degrading. Longino argues that, because men have greater social power than women, men are able to use women as instruments to satisfy their sexual ends.

According to MacKinnon (1987), heterosexual acts are inherently violent to women in that they involve men treating women as interchangeable objects whose integrity and boundaries are not respected. Ordinary heterosexual acts involve men invading and occupying women’s bodies (Dworkin, 1987). Pornography is equated with visual evidence and documentation of the abuse of women. According to MacKinnon (1987), women in patriarchal societies are not free to refuse sex with men, and therefore their participation in sex with men is not fully consensual. Sex with persons incapable of giving genuine consent, made into a public spectacle via pornography, expands the temporal and spatial parameters of the crime (MacKinnon, 1987). When women view pornography they often relive their own violation and public humiliation (Dworkin, 1987). Therefore, pornography has the power to repeatedly traumatize women. MacKinnon, 1987: 187) believes that pornography represents:

sex forced on real women so that it can be sold at a profit to be forced on other real women; women’s bodies trussed and maimed and raped and made into things to be hurt and obtained and accessed, and this presented as the nature of women; the coercion that is visible and the coercion that has become invisible—this and more bothers feminists about pornography ... pornography causes attitudes and behaviours of violence and discrimination that define the treatment and status of half of the population.

For these reasons, anti-pornography feminists hold that pornography is not simply a sexist nuisance that can be addressed by calls for consumer boycotts and corporate responsibility. Instead, they believe that pornography nourishes sexism and disrespect for women in ways that eventuate in violations of women's basic moral and civil rights (Longino, 1980). Therefore, pornography should be restricted, not as a form of obscene expression, but as a product that can cause serious injuries to women. MacKinnon (1987) and Dworkin (1987) allege that pornography records acts of criminal rape and, therefore, its dissemination further compounds the injuries of such criminal acts. A typical example is the forced bestiality case of women having sex with dogs in Zimbabwe referred to above.

Cameron and Frazer (2000) argue that the idea that men simply imitate what they see in pornography implies that men are not able to interpret pornographic materials. Although some men may unthinkingly copy what they see, or may even become addicted to sexual violence through pornography, these men are the exception, not the rule (Cameron & Frazer, 2000). By treating sexual violence as a product of exposure to pornography, feminists promote a view that relieves sexual predators of responsibility for their actions, and blames their actions instead on expressive materials or the pathological conditions they allegedly cause. Although causal theories invoking the loss of individual control through "imitation" and "addiction" may be useful to defendants in sexual assault and murder cases, Cameron and Frazer point out that these theories undermine the feminist goal of showing that sexual violence is a function of cultural norms and structural inequalities, rather than mental debilitation or disease (Cameron & Frazer, 2000). Ironically, causal models may engender social sympathy for the perpetrators of sexual violence and make it difficult to punish them (Cameron and Frazer, 2000).

Garry (1979) questions whether treating a woman as a sex object is always bad, and suggests that pornography succeeds in harming women, in part, because viewers assume that sex is generally harmful to women. Garry encourages feminists to support the production of non-sexist pornography rather than try to suppress pornographic materials.

## 2.1 Sexual objectification

Assiter (1988) invokes Hegel's analysis of the political dynamic between a master and slave to critique pornography. She writes, "the Master-Slave dialectic seems to capture the relation between people in pornographic eroticism. In much pornography, people, usually women, become objects for another ... In the case of pornography, what happens is that the one person becomes a body desired by the other, but this is not reciprocated" (Assiter, 1988: 65). To treat someone as merely a body for another's use, without recognizing that she too is a subject with desires, is to treat someone as a slave, as a subhuman creature or object, and therefore violates her dignity as a human being. Assiter (1988: 65) also argues that "the role of the wife in marriage is very like that of the Slave" for the wife's social identity is subsumed by her husband, who holds social power, and thus she is not a social subject in her own right.

For MacKinnon (1987), pornography involves men treating women as mere instruments in order to satisfy their sexual desires. Such treatment, at best, fails to recognize women as free and equal persons and, at worst, dehumanizes women and encourages their victimization. In response to MacKinnon's claims about the role of sexual objectification in women's lives, Nussbaum (1999) has asked whether sexual objectification is always morally objectionable or whether it is only so in certain contexts. She identifies seven distinct kinds of actions that may or may not be part of objectification in any given instance, including instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Some of these actions are always morally problematic, but some of them are acceptable when they are part of a larger relationship involving mutual respect.

LeMoncheck (1997) argues that the sexual fantasies depicted in pornography imply that women's subjectivities are recognized by the consumers of this material. The fantasy of overcoming a woman's will assumes that she has a will to overcome, and the fantasy that women enjoy being sexually exploited assumes that they have desires that men's sexual use fulfills (LeMoncheck, 1997). She writes, "sex work is not merely about treating a woman as an object nor merely about dehumanizing her. Sex work is a complex dialectic between subject and object in which a woman's dehumanization is successful precisely because she is perceived as a person whose will, seductiveness, and power is properly subordinate to men" (LeMoncheck 1997, 134). On this view, pornographic materials and porn consumers recognize women's agency while imagining subduing it. Women are thus recognized as subjects with ends of their own and are not depicted as mere subhuman objects. Bordo (1994) similarly recognizes that women are constructed as subjects in pornography, but she argues that they are subjects whose agency expresses itself only as a desire to please the projected male viewer. She writes, "an essential ingredient in porn ... is the depiction of a subjectivity (or personality) that willingly contracts its possibilities and

pleasure to one — the acceptance and gratification of the male ... The woman in porn abdicates her will, her sexual discrimination, her independence, but not to become a mute body for the man” (Bordo 1994, 276). For Bordo, there is a mind inside the pornographic female body, but it communicates only a limited range of nonthreatening desires, and therefore it exists as a truncated self.

Shrage (2005) contests the Kantian notion that sex is morally problematic because it involves using another as a mere instrument. The agency of sexual actors does not have a greater potential to immorally objectify others than the agency of employers, consumers, and numerous agents who exploit the capacities of people to achieve their own ends. Shrage argues that the use of others involved in pornography is not immorally objectifying, as long as consumers and producers respect the ends of the actors and models employed. These ends include the desire to exploit for economic gain others' sexual interest in them and their bodies within the conventional boundaries set by various genres of sexual representation and entertainment. The relationship between porn stars and consumers of their images are market relationships and should be held to the norms of those relationships, not the norms of friendships and romance (Shrage, 2005). Similarly, Marino (2008) argues that respect for another's autonomy and consent are what is crucial for avoiding immoral sexual objectification, and not whether the sexual use is mutual or whether it takes place within an ongoing adult relationship. A person avoids treating another as a mere object or instrument if he is attentive to whether his partner is giving, tacitly or overtly, ongoing consent to the type of use and the particular instance of it. Moreover, the background conditions must be such that the person who is used as a means to another's ends can be judged to be voluntarily and genuinely consenting. When these criteria are met in a one-sided commercial or casual exchange, then the instrumental use is not immoral (Marino, 2008).

Saul (2006) explores the possible connection between objectification and personification. Saul (2006) critiques earlier feminist claims that men's use of pornographic images involves treating pieces of paper like women, and therefore involves conflating women with inanimate instruments. The inclusion of real women and pornography in a single category (e.g., the category of entities that can arouse and satisfy sexual desire) can undermine respect for women and promote oppressive practices. Saul argues that personification and objectification are only linked in troubling ways if some conditions for morally problematic objectification are already met. Saul contends that women's use of vibrators to achieve sexual pleasure and orgasm represents a form of personification. For some women, vibrators eventually replaced a service that had been provided by doctors. Yet this is not a troubling form of personification because doctors are not likely to be confused with sex toys as a result of women's masturbatory use of vibrating technology.

## 2.2 Feminist erotica

Some feminists claim that women are consumers of pornography, and are not merely the objects on view. Some argue that women, like men, take pleasure in looking at depictions of sex. To explore women's use of pornography, feminist scholars studied soft-core pornographic genres that are marketed to women, such as pulp romance fiction (Radway, 1991). Some studied lesbian pornography to challenge the idea that pornography always involves men subordinating women (Ross, 2000). In 1986, a group of feminists published *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography, and Censorship*, which argues that feminists have targeted pornography out of frustration with their lack of progress in reducing violence against women. The book showcases a variety of pornographic imagery in order to illustrate the types of materials that may be restricted under feminist-supported legal regulations (Duggan, Hunter, & Vance, 1986).

Butler (2000) examines the role of fantasy in feminist politics and argues for maintaining conditions that permit diverse representations of women. She believes that anti-pornography feminists uncritically assume a representational realist ontology in which depictions imitate and can causally affect some pre-existing reality. Butler argues for a more complex understanding of the relation between representations and their referents, focusing both on the ways that representations can call into question the ontological status of entities and on how the real is produced through social action. In Butler's (2000: 490) words, “certain kinds of efforts to restrict practices of representation in the hopes of reigning in the imaginary, controlling the phantasmatic, end up reproducing and proliferating the phantasmatic in inadvertent ways, indeed, in ways that contradict the intended purposes of the restrictions itself”. Butler (2000) points out that efforts to censor homoerotic images have led to their greater production and exposure. She concludes that, “Feminist theory and politics cannot regulate the representation of women without producing that very ‘representation’: and if that is in some sense a discursive inevitability of representational politics, then the task must be to safeguard the open productivity of those categories, whatever the risk” (Butler, 2000: 503).

Butler's view fits in well with feminists who call for more speech as the answer to noxious speech. On this view, disturbing representations of “real sex” should be contested by different representations of sexuality. Cornell (2000: 551) develops this approach by arguing that “political action, not legal action, should be the main mode of intervention in the *production* of pornography”. By political action, Cornell means that feminists should form alliances with feminists in the pornography industry to create representations of sexuality that will benefit women. Like Snitow, Cornell (2000: 551) argues that feminist activism should focus “on unleashing the feminine imaginary, rather than on constraining men”.

### 3. Prostitution

According to Lerner (1986: 125) “the most widespread and accepted explanation of the origin of prostitution” is that it began with temple prostitution in places such as ancient Mesopotamia. Lerner analyzes “cultic sexual service” in ancient Babylon, in which temple workers and patrons offered sexual services to the gods, often as part of fertility rituals. “What seems to have happened was that sexual activity for and in behalf of the god or goddesses was considered beneficial to the people and sacred. The practices varied with the gods, the different places and different periods. There was also, especially in the later period, commercial prostitution, which flourished near or within the temple” (Lerner, 1986, 125). Lerner argues that scholars have conflated cultic and commercial prostitution, ignoring their distinct social purposes and organizational structures. Moreover, she argues that to understand how prostitution evolved historically, we need to understand “its relationship to the sexual regulation of all women in archaic states and its relationship to the enslavement of females” (Lerner, 1986: 124). She writes, “It is likely that commercial prostitution derived directly from the enslavement of women and the consolidation and formation of classes. Military conquest led, in the third millennium B.C., to the enslavement and sexual abuse of captive women. As slavery became an established institution, slave-owners rented out their female slaves as prostitutes, and some masters set up commercial brothels staffed by slaves” (Lerner, 1986: 133). She suggests that prostitutes and concubines were used by rulers as symbols of wealth and power, and this practice was then emulated by other men of wealth and status. Paupers were often forced to sell children, adding to the supply of labour for this purpose. Furthermore, “as the sexual regulation of women of the propertied class became more firmly entrenched, the virginity of respectable daughters became a financial asset for the family. Thus, commercial prostitution came to be seen as a social necessity for meeting the sexual needs of men” (Lerner, 1986: 134). These practices created social hierarchies among women, in which women were distinguished on the basis of their sexual availability. At the high end were married women and their marriage-eligible virgin daughters, in the middle were concubines, and at the low end were unmarried temple prostitutes and slave women (Lerner, 1986). Although female slavery, concubinage and temple prostitution are less common today, commercial prostitution and the custom of measuring a woman's social status in terms of her virginity and monogamy carry over to modern societies.

Lerner's account connects modern forms of prostitution to oppressive social practices: the enslavement of women and the treatment of non-slave females as sexual property to be exchanged both in and out of marriage. By contrast, rather than attributing the rise of commercial prostitution to slavery and capitalist class formation, Rubin (1975) traces the origins of prostitution to kinship systems in which women are exchanged as gifts among families to cement social bonds. She writes, “If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges — social organization” (Rubin, 1975: 174).

Both Lerner's and Rubin's accounts link the rise of prostitution to the subordination of women, and overlook the enslavement and prostitution of men, both in ancient and modern societies. Lerner's account fails to explain why female slaves were sexually exploited more than male slaves. Rubin's does not explain why women, rather than men or opposite-sex pairs, were exchanged or “trafficked” in early kinship systems, and thus it does not explain the rise of patriarchal kinship and political systems (Shrage, 1994). While consumers of commercial sexual services have been predominantly male throughout history, in some contexts, class, race, ethnicity and nationality influenced whose sexual labour was bartered or sold (Kempadoo, 1999). By trying to explain contemporary sex commerce in terms of the subordination of women, these accounts overlook important historical and cultural discontinuities. For example, commercial sex providers have not always been regarded as ineligible for marriage and have, in some places, been integrated into their communities to a high degree (Shrage, 1994; White, 1990; Rossiaud, 1988).

For Pateman (1988) in the patriarchal social order, there is an implicit agreement among men granting them sexual access to women. Men acquire rights to particular women through formal marital and informal

prostitution contracts. They have a class privilege, a right to sexual relief from women, which they can exercise by asserting their rights as husbands. Like Lerner and Rubin, Pateman challenges the notion that prostitution results from men's biologically driven behaviour, and instead explains prostitution as the incorporation of a particular conception of masculinity into modern political and social structures (Pateman, 1988). Both traditional marriage and prostitution, for Pateman, Lerner, and Rubin, give men access to and control over the sexual capacities of women.

### 3.1 Harms to women

Regardless of its social origins, many feminists claim that contemporary sex work is harmful to women in ways that marriage is not or has ceased to be. Some allege that the harm results from inherent features of sex work, while others allege that the harm results from contingent features of the social environment in which it is performed. Pateman (1988) argues that the work of a female prostitute is different from other jobs, as it expresses the inferior social and political status of women. Moreover, because people's bodies and sexual capacities are an integral part of their identity as men and women, the woman who works as a prostitute sells her womanhood and therefore herself (Pateman, 1988). Overall (1992) similarly argues that prostitution is a transaction in which one person must be defined as a social subordinate who caters to the desires of another. She claims that the prostitute's work differs from that of other low-status workers in that it is a form of labour that cannot be reciprocated. Anderson (1993: 154-5) develops this idea and argues that the good of sex is "realized only when each partner reciprocates the other's gift *in kind*, offering her own sexuality in the same spirit in which she received the other's — as a genuine offering of the self. The commodification of sexual 'services' destroys the kind of reciprocity required to realize human sexuality as a shared good," and may corrupt non-market sexual relationships by promoting the valuation of women in terms of their market worth.

While Pateman, Overall, and Anderson see sexual labour as inherently degrading and oppressive, other feminists argue that the harmful consequences are a result of contingent features of the work. Rather than make universal claims about the purpose of sex or our sexual capacities, Shrager (1989) argues that sex markets, like other markets, often exploit sexist ideas that relegate women to subservient roles. By tolerating their existence in this form, they perpetuate social myths about sexuality that stigmatize women. Satz (1995: 78) writes that "If prostitution is wrong it is because of its effects on how men perceive women and on how women perceive themselves. In our society, prostitution represents women as the sexual servants of men". She suggests that the negative image of women promoted by prostitution "shapes and influences the way women as a whole are seen" (Satz, 1995: 79).

Nussbaum (1999) questions whether the sale of sexual services genuinely damages the persons who provide them or women as a whole. She points out that, two centuries ago, the use of one's artistic talents for pay, such as singing or acting, was regarded as a form of prostitution. She acknowledges that sex workers are stigmatized for their profession, but questions whether the stigma that attaches to their work is justified. By tracing this stigma both to aristocratic prejudice toward waged labourers and to moralistic attitudes and anxieties regarding female sexual expression, she challenges the rational basis of the stigma. She concludes that feminists should oppose the stigmatization of sex work, rather than oppose sex work for its contribution to the stigmatization of women. Nussbaum also questions seven common claims against prostitution: it involves excessive risks, the prostitute has little autonomy, it violates the prostitute's bodily integrity, prostitution has a destructive effect on non-commercial intimate relationships, prostitution violates a person's inalienable right to her sexuality, it contributes to a male-dominated social order, and it relies on the economic coercion of workers. Nussbaum argues that the problems associated with prostitution are components of many other kinds of work and social practices, and that these problems are not inherent to the work but are often a function of the prostitute's working conditions and treatment by others (Nussbaum, 1999).

Scott Anderson (2006) resists the move to treat prostitution like other forms of work. He argues that normalizing prostitution undermines a person's right to sexual autonomy, which is an important value defended by radical feminists. Prostitutes waive their right to sexual autonomy because their jobs place them under contractual obligations to have sex, and thus diminish their control over when and with whom they have sex. Anderson acknowledges that all jobs, to some degree, diminish various forms of autonomy. He contends that sexual autonomy should be valued differently from other forms, such as a person's control over when and to whom they serve food, provide a massage or dance, offer expert advice, or talk philosophy. Anderson here echoes Pateman's contention that our sexual capacities and practices are an integral part of who we are as men and women. For this reason, a person's sexual autonomy should be non-alienable, because to alienate it is to destroy a person's wholeness or integrity.

In response to Anderson, Hallie Liberto (2009) distinguishes three ways of alienating a right or good. First, one can waive a right to x (in a weak sense) by granting someone access to x with the understanding that, at any moment, permission to use x can be revoked. Second, one can waive a right to x (in a strong sense) by granting someone access to x for a duration of time, with the understanding that permission to use x cannot be revoked during this period (presumably if other terms of the lease are met). Third, one can relinquish a right to x by transferring that right, as through a sale or gift. In this case, permission to use x is granted permanently and cannot be revoked if other terms of the transfer are met. Liberto points out that those who consider the marketing of sexual services a legitimate form of work assume that the sex worker, like other workers, will only be alienating her right of control over her body and sexual labour in a weak sense. In a society in which any form of forced labour is prohibited, workers are generally permitted to back out of labour contracts, although in doing so they typically relinquish all expected benefits.

Sex worker activists and advocates have long argued that they are not permanently alienating (selling) their sexual capacities, but rather are exchanging sexual labour for benefits (Schwarzenbach, 1991). A sex worker's right to sexual autonomy is not undermined if she retains the right to withdraw from her labour contracts at any time (Tuana and Shrage 2003). Indeed, some argue that anti-prostitution laws undermine sexual autonomy by not allowing adults to enter mutually advantageous sexual agreements (Leigh, 2004; Almodovar, 2002). De Marneffe (2010) argues for limiting sex worker contracts in ways similar to other forms of dangerous and potentially harmful work. Restricting and regulating prostitution would balance respect for the autonomy of service providers (and consumers of sexual services) with society's interest in protecting its members from harm (De Marneffe, 2010).

### 3.2 Legal status

Trafficking in persons, for any purpose including sex commerce, is universally condemned. Feminists disagree about whether all forms of sex work involve forced sex and labour. Those who regard commerce in sex categorically as a form of involuntary servitude and coerced sex support laws that aim to eliminate such commerce (Jeffreys, 1998; Barry, 1996; Stark and Whisnant, 2004). Feminists who hold that some sex work is performed voluntarily, and that the women who perform it are not victims, generally support removing most restrictions where sex commerce involves consenting adults (Shrage, 1996; Nussbaum, 1999; Ditmore, 2005; Leigh 2004).

De Marneffe (2010) distinguishes four approaches to laws governing prostitution:

- prohibition involves criminalizing both the sale and purchase of sexual services, along with related activities, such as soliciting and operating a brothel;
- abolition involves criminalizing only the purchase of sexual services, along with related activities such as curb crawling and operating a brothel;
- regulation involves imposing restrictions on the sale and purchase of sexual services that do not apply to other businesses, such as age and zoning restrictions, and health protections; and
- decriminalization involves applying to the sale and purchase of sexual services the same laws and restrictions that apply to the sale and purchase of other goods and services.

Feminists who oppose all sex commerce generally support abolition, because this approach treats the provider of sexual services as a victim rather than a criminal. To prosecute women for selling sex, some argue, just compounds their victimization and oppression. Sweden is the first country to adopt this approach. Other feminists support regulation because abolition can endanger sex workers by forcing their work underground in order to protect their customers. The Netherlands and Germany have adopted this approach, which basically aims to reduce the harms of prostitution rather than eliminate it. Some feminists support decriminalization because, they argue, restricting prostitution through abolition and most forms of regulation undermines the autonomy of women who choose this work. Zoning restrictions, registration, and health laws primarily aim to protect customers and third parties, not sex workers, and contribute to the stigmatization of prostitutes as diseased and sinful (Nagle 1997; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Almodovar 2002; Leigh 2004). Some feminists propose regulations aimed at protecting sex workers, as well as clients and third parties, such as age restrictions, mandatory condom use rather than mandatory health exams, and licensing providers rather than brothels in order to empower workers (Shrage, 1994; 1996).

Some feminists point out that, under various legal regimes, male customers and providers typically receive lighter penalties than female providers (Jaggard, 1993). In the USA, many sexual service providers work for escort agencies, and thereby manage to get around anti-prostitution laws. Because the client pays the agency for

the escort's time, and because the provider does not take money directly from the client but is paid by the agency, sex negotiated between a professional escort and her client is not technically prostitution. The brunt of prostitution laws, therefore, tends to fall on women who are often too destitute or drug-addicted to find work at an escort agency, and who often work on the streets. In this way, prostitution laws are often used to prosecute drug addicts who need medical attention, homeless women, or young women who are not savvy or old enough to work legally. Anti-prostitution laws are also used to prosecute men who sexually and economically exploit marginal and disempowered women. They are sometimes used to prosecute the boyfriends and co-workers of prostitutes with whom they have consensual and supportive relationships (Almodovar, 1993).

Some feminists view prostitution and trafficking in women as components of global, neo-colonialist systems in which women from poor countries are conscripted to provide “comfort and recreation” for men, often military personnel, from rich and powerful nations. Moreover, social elites in poor countries often tolerate local sex trades in order to promote tourism and attract foreign capital (Enloe, 1989; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Bishop and Robinson, 1998). The organization of labour in many industries manifests deep social inequalities and injustices, and it is far from certain that criminalizing prostitution, rather than alleviating poverty, will address the lack of economic and social opportunities many women face (Leigh, 2004). Some feminists view sex workers both as likely victims of injustice and violence and as agents who negotiate and make choices among difficult and limited options. These theorists tend to support regulations aimed both at reducing violence against women and at empowering them (Kotiswaran, 2011; Rajan, 2003; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Shrage 1994).

Agustin (2007) cautions feminists not to conflate voluntary (though illegal) migrants who are seeking more lucrative forms of sex work with trafficked women. Though poor, third-world women are often exploited by traffickers, some may be choosing to migrate and work in sex businesses over other occupations available to them both in their home and target countries. Harsh laws against trafficking often exacerbate the plight of voluntary migrant sex workers who may be undocumented and working illegally. Anti-trafficking and anti-prostitution efforts should focus on eliminating forced work and migration, child labour, exploitative working conditions, and hostile legal environments for migrants and sex workers (Kotiswaran 2011).

#### **4. Middle-ground Feminism and Sex Work**

Kotiswaran (2011) carves out a middle-ground feminist position that pays attention to the empirical realities of various sex trades and the efforts and proposals of sex worker organizations to protect the civil and economic rights of their members. Middle-ground feminists are aware of how the sex industry is gendered. They sometimes, critically and respectfully engage with the proposals of sex worker advocates. For example, middle-ground feminists may be skeptical of the alleged needs of men that the sex industry aims to serve, while recognizing that sex workers are not passive dupes but agents who exploit less than ideal background conditions. Middle-ground feminists do not treat sex commerce as monolithic, but pay attention to the different ways that labour and capital are organized in different trades. They recognize that much of sex work, like other low status service work, is menial and sometimes unpleasant, but it is not work that is inherently degrading or violent to those who perform it. Middle-ground feminists recognize that sex work is continuous with much of the caregiving work women perform, as wives, mothers, nurses, teachers, nannies, and domestics, and do not single out the sex industry for assigning to women a disproportionate share of caregiving work in society. In this way, middle-ground feminists do not treat sex work as exceptional in terms of its risks, difficulty, and larger societal effects. Middle-ground feminists are less likely to make common cause with anti-feminist sexual moralists and anti-immigrant conservatives, and more likely to find common cause with unions of sex workers that are grappling with the practical trade-offs among different policies (e.g. brothel work provides more personal security, but less control over working conditions and compensation than independent contract work) (Kotiswaran, 2011).

#### **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have shown that feminist debates over sex commerce extend to a number of social practices, including pornography, prostitution, trafficking in persons and the use of sexual images of women to promote products and entertainment. We established that feminist theorists are divided on the question of whether markets in sexually explicit materials and sexual services are generally harmful to women. Accordingly, some feminist scholars have explored and developed arguments for restricting sex markets, while others have investigated political movements that aim to advance the rights of sex workers.

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