

Human Sex Trafficking and Prostitution:

What are the opposing viewpoints and which ones have the victims' needs in mind?

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What are the different viewpoints and which ones have the victims' needs in mind?

With many facets to consider that are involved in the topic of the global sex industry, a broad understanding of the issue is needed to create better solutions for workers and potential victims. Understanding the issue may be achieved through the exploration of the opposing perspectives of the sex industry that subsequently drive legislation. To limit the extensive amount of research, the perspectives included in this study are the Feminist perspectives, the Pro-sex work perspective, the Political Economy perspective, and the Prohibitionist perspective. Within these perspectives, the facets of economic opportunities, women's rights to self-determination, and moral/religious implications.

This topic is important to discuss because it is a prevalent, yet understudied, issue. All too often, individuals take a biased stance on the issue based on perceived moral obligations, without fully understanding the issue first. It is a global issue that affects women and vulnerable populations such as children and the impoverished. With implications as great as these, it is evident why this topic is important for study.

As the writer, I, Savannah Grignon, have never been directly affected by this issue. As a woman and a future social worker, however, I believe I am, and will continue to be, affected by this issue in immeasurable ways. This is because it is a problem that affects my gender around the world everyday. Every day, 3,287 people are sold, or kidnapped, and forced into sex slavery. That is 136 people every hour. The global sex slavery market generates \$32 billion in profits each year. The only crime higher in profit is illegal drugs. However, the U.S. government spends 300 times more money per year to fight drug trafficking than it does to fight human trafficking (Force 4 Compassion, 2016). Women and children involved in the sex industry are subjected to a

crude lifestyle including drugs, infectious diseases, and physical endangerment. This is the case for both prostitutes and trafficked individuals.

Feminist Perspectives

Within the framework of the feminist perspectives are two sub perspectives known as the Radical and Marxist Feminists approach to abolition. It is the belief of the Radical Feminist approach that social organization and structure is inherently patriarchal, and sexism exists to perpetuate male privilege and a patriarchal social structure (Loue, 2001). This perspective frames the issue of violence against women on a long line of institutional and structural sexism and paternalistic views (Gerassi, 2015) and, therefore, advocates that its proponents should be inclined to ban all forms of sex work and sex industry from existence (Weitzer, 2007). The Marxist Feminist perspective views all forms of sexual commerce as a form of violence against women and promotes that as long as capitalism exists, women will continue to live in a patriarchal state and depend on men economically. This perspective condemns the use of all voluntary and involuntary sexual exchanges for money (Gerassi, 2015).

Critiques. Both forms of the Abolitionist Feminist perspective (Radical and Marxist Feminism) are criticized for their focus on sexual exploitation and a lack of women's rights to choose the sex industry as a valid line of work (Wolken, 2006). Ironically, a second criticism of these perspectives is that it is paternalistic for this approach to say that the abolishment of prostitution is good for the prostitutes (Meyers, 2014).

Case Study. Sweden became the first country in 1999 to criminalize the purchase of sex, but not the sale of it. Since then, Norway, Iceland, Canada, and Northern Ireland have followed a similar approach. In the Swedish model, early signs of the Swedish law indicate that the criminalization of purchased sex has a deterrent effect, which resulted in a reduction of

trafficking and street prostitution. In combination with the criminalization of buyers, the provision of social welfare to prostituted individuals has yielded positive results on prostituted women in Sweden (Bindel, 2003). Unfortunately, although the criminalization of purchased sex has been a deterrent for buyers, it is likely that those who cannot escape the industry, such as trafficked victims, may be subjected to even greater harm due to its illegal and secretive nature.

Pro-Sex Work Perspective

The Pro-Sex Work perspective is also known as a pro-decriminalization or legalization stance because it believes that paid sex is consensual in many cases and a woman should be free to make her own decision about the type of work she engages in. It argues that the notion of intimacy, and what actions are considered intimate, should be decided by the woman (Gerassi, 2015). Therefore, any perspective that tells women that their choice of work is wrong is patriarchal (Kesler, 2002).

Critiques. Criticisms of this perspective include that the Pro-Sex Work perspective directly argues with the main principal of the Abolitionist feminists' views (Metcalfe, 2012). Pro-sex work and the issue of consent cannot be addressed without consideration of the high rates of sexual assault and abuse histories, in addition to a lack of economic options (Gerassi, 2015). Additionally, some religious organizations promote that the commercialization of sex jeopardizes sexual integrity on a national level and damages moral culture with this framework (Weitzer, 2007).

Case Study. New Zealand is one of the countries that have legalized prostitution. In a study of the decriminalization's effects, it was found that the legalization of prostitution has reinforced the ability to ensure safe sex and secure sex workers' environment through the provision of occupational, employment, and legal rights. When discussed by the prostitutes

themselves, they regarded emotional safety with high regard. This is due to the emotional risks attached to their line of work because of the stigmatization of their field. Decriminalization has increased the physical safety of sex workers in the region, but has done nothing to lessen the emotional risks of sex work (Abel, Fitzgerald, Healy, & Taylor, 2010).

Political Economy Perspective

This perspective shares the notion with Marxist Feminism that the political economy and lower economic status may drive sexual commerce; however, the Political Economy perspective promotes more implications to differences in wealth. It describes the relationship between the state and economy and argues that violence against women occurs because of the economic welfare and political processes that drive the state (Adleman, 2008). This perspective postulates that it is the gendered, unequal opportunities of the economy that drive women to find ways to survive, such as prostitution.

Critiques. The critiques of the Political Economy perspective include that the ideas of this perspective remove the ability for a woman to independently chose sex-work by saying that she had no other economic choice (Weitzer, 2012). A woman's ability to choose is called into question with this approach (Gerassi, 2015). As a result, personal empowerment is removed (Wolken, 2006).

Case Study. In a 2011 article, Wolf-Watz, Pettersson, and Wixe discuss child prostitution in Thailand from an economic perspective. They found that children become engaged in child prostitution either from their own volition or from that of adults close to them as a result of several economic factors. The distribution of income and relative wages in Thailand affect the supply of children within the industry. Aside from manufacturing and education, it was found that prostitution held the highest returns for women. As a result, for children either who are poor

enough to prioritize present over future earnings or who, for some reason, are excluded from education, prostitution becomes the rational choice (Wolf-Watz, Pettersson, & Wixe, 2011).

Prohibitionist Perspective

In this perspective, anyone who participates in the selling or participating of sexual activities for profit may be charged with prostitution. There is no difference between those who buy, sell, or facilitate the sale of sex: all are guilty. The only exceptions are minors and adult cases where force or coercion is suspected. This is the current stance of the U.S. on the issue of the sex industry (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

Critiques. Criticisms of this perspective include that this perspective sets a high standard for trafficking victims and criminalizes other women who sell sex that also may be in need of social welfare services (Wolken, 2006). Additionally, some argue that these ideals are harmful to women, because women are regarded and treated as criminals unless there is proof of force or coercion (Vance, 2011).

Case Study. Prostitution and commercialized sex have been previously prioritized as urban crime problems across U.S. history. In response, lawmakers have historically been guided by a prohibitionist view where people selling, buying, or facilitating the sale of sex are considered to be immoral and criminal (Farrell & Cronin, 2015). The U.S. federal government has passed legislation where the people who are forced or coerced to sell sex are now seen as victims. Because of this, confusion now exists about how sex trafficking differs from prostitution and creates the need for different types of responses from law enforcement. The findings presented here indicate that passage of federal and state human trafficking laws decreased prostitution arrests (Farrell & Cronin, 2015).

Limitations. During my research, it was widely substantiated that the major gaps in research are simply due to the fact that the nature of this topic is highly secretive, which makes it hard to find accurate statistical evidence.

Theoretical Perspective

Understanding the theoretical perspective of *person-in-environment* can help me understand this issue. The person-in-environment perspective sees people as constantly interacting with the various systems around them such as family, friends, work, social services, politics, and religion among others. The person is seen as being dynamically involved with each. As a result, social work practice is directed at improving the interactions between the person and the various systems. This framework can help me understand the issue, because if I can understand the concept that each individual is dynamically involved with many systems, then I can try to improve these relationships as a social worker while working with individuals involved in the sex industry. I can help improve these relationships with the intent of helping a prostituted individual find other means of work or to help a trafficked victim receive the services she needs. There are many ways in which I can use this perspective to understand this issue and subsequently help those who are involved.

Gaps in Literature

Gerassi (2015) proposed that theories of causation remain highly underdeveloped at the micro and individual levels. The majority of research and discussion is centered around the macro and structural level theories of causation. He said that even with the extensive theoretical and legal writing at the macro level, the amount of empirically tested work remains limited (Gerassi, 2015). In addition to these gaps, I believe another gap in my personal research is the integration of moral/religious biases. This aspect was briefly touched on under the critiques

section of the Pro-Sex Work perspective, but it would be beneficial to study the full implications of these biases and how they affect the various perspectives.

Conclusion

The Abolitionist Feminist perspective views all forms of sexual commerce as a form of violence against women (Gerassi, 2015) and promotes that its advocates should be inclined to ban all forms of sex work and sex industry from existence (Weitzer, 2007). Oppositely, the Pro-Sex Work perspective postulates that women should have the freedom to make her decision about what work she participates in, and argues that the notion of intimacy and what actions or sexual acts are considered intimate should be decided by the woman (Gerassi, 2015). The Political Economy Perspective suggests that it is the unequal distribution of economic opportunities that drives women to find ways to survive, including prostitution (Adelman, 2008). Finally, the Prohibitionist perspective criminalizes the entire industry, making no distinction between those who buy, sell, or facilitate the selling of sex acts, aside from minors and those who are forced or coerced (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

The tension that I faced in my research centered around my previous personal biases. Growing up, I was taught that prostitution was bad and there was nothing more to it. I came from a background of religious implications that caused me to view the sex industry this way. I was taught that if a prostitute really did not want to sell herself, then she would find a way not to. Now, I understand that it is not that simple. To address any possible tension, I began my research with an open mind and put aside any feelings I have on the matter. As a result, I have learned so much about the issue that I might not have if I began my research already planning my conclusion.

My conclusion on the matter is that a new perspective must be created on the issue. The Feminist, Political Economy, and Prohibitionist perspectives limit women's freedom and ability to choose to engage in commercial sex and subsequently lowers self-determination. On the other hand, the Pro-Sex perspective promotes that all women have the choice to choose. This limits the idea that while some women make this choice, many others are forced into this line of work. It is my position that a medium must be found that allows for self-determination for those that really chose this line of work, and help for those who are being forced or have no other economic option.

I believe that simply understanding the issue is not enough. Professionals must work to create change in the sex industry. It is important to challenge one's way of thinking about sexuality when working with this population and work to create better economic opportunities for those who maybe do have no other choice. Change can be facilitated in various ways such as improved legislation, the provision of services to both trafficked victims and willing workers, societal education on this issue, and further study to fill the identified gaps in the current research.

This issue can be addressed on a micro level by meeting individual needs of those involved. Society often take a "one size fits all" approach to the sex industry, even though it is not that simple. Realizing that each individual has a different background and different needs, and then working to meet those needs is a way to address this issue from a micro level perspective. From a meso level perspective, this issue can be addressed through group efforts. Organizations, such as churches, can reach out to help potential victims. Additionally, professionals can set up half-way houses and agencies to help women become economically independent of prostitution if that is their desire. This issue can be addressed on a macro level through improved legislation

and societal education. If the biased society can think objectively about the issue, then the legislators can truly make decisions with the workers' best interests in mind.

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