

# "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?"

Shrage

## Strategy

- To argue that feminists should oppose prostitution
- Argues that the sex industry is like other industries in American society in that it includes deeply ingrained attitudes and values that are oppressive to women

## Definitions

- **Prostitution:** the practice involving the purchase of sexual services from women by men
  - Intended to specifically reference modern Western society
  - Analysis is not intended to include “to prostitute oneself”
- **Prostitute:** one who provides commercial sexual services

## Prostitution and Cultural Contexts

- Does prostitution in all cultural contexts lead to degrading women and an undesirable form of sexuality?
  - Examples:
    - Babylonian temple prostitution
    - 15th-century France and commercial sex
    - New Guinea and the Etoro
  - What's the point of each of these examples?

## Sexuality and Social Meaning

- In each of these examples, cultural settings and cultural contexts determine how sex is viewed and by extension how prostitution is viewed.
- "...the social meaning this activity has may differ substantially from the social significance it has in our own society." (72)
- "The point is that there is no practice, such as 'sex,' which can be morally evaluated apart from a cultural framework." (73)

## Determining Moral Status

- If there are no moral absolutes, then how does one determine moral status?
  - Analogy of eating cats and dogs
    - Is one acting immorally if one eats a dog or cat?
  - "In short, how actions are widely perceived and interpreted by others, even if wrongly or seemingly irrationally, is crucial to determining the moral status because, though such interpretations may not hold up against some 'objective reality,' they are part of the 'social reality' in which we live." (73)
- What makes prostitution wrong, then, is that it reinforces cultural assumptions which "serve to legitimate women's social subordination." (74)

## Beliefs Leading to Women's Oppression

- Beliefs that lead to women's oppression and attempt to legitimate prostitution:
  1. Belief that humans possess, although repress, strong sexual appetites;
  2. Assumption that men are naturally suited for dominant social roles;
  3. Assumption that contact with male genitalia pollutes women;
  4. Belief that a person's sexual practices determine the type of person he or she is.

## 1. Belief That Humans Possess Strong Sexual Appetites

- Philosophers, psychologists, and many others assume that humans have strong sexual urges
- This assumption has been used to justify or argue for the need to commercialize sex
- Shrage disagrees and thinks this view is a cultural rationalization
  - Dani: New Guinea tribe which participates in 5-year postpartum abstinence

## 2. Assumption That Men Are Naturally Suited for Dominant Social Roles

- The sex trade predominantly serves men
- This fact reflects the prevailing assumption that it is appropriate and natural for men to dominate social and business roles
  - Rubin: men are dominant in the business world because they've been dominant in the reproductive world
  - Shrage thinks this reflects cultural norms and not absolutes or universal causal mechanisms

## 3. Assumption That Contact with Male Genitalia Pollutes Women

- The prevailing view in Western culture is that sexually experienced women are not prized
  - What is prized is sexual innocence
- Metaphors and descriptions of sexual activity implicitly and explicitly express the damage to and domination of women by men during sex
- Garry: "... we can see that to treat a woman as a sex object is automatically to treat her as less than fully human." (76)

## 4. Belief That a Person's Sexual Practices Determine the Type of Person

- That one has sex or with whom one has sex determines the type of person he or she is
  - Labels include "homosexual," "bisexual," "whore," "virgin," "pervert," etc.
- Despite some attempts to relabel some individuals and their sexual practices (for example, a promiscuous woman is a "liberated woman"), the persistent view is that one's sexual relations make one a certain type of person
  - For women, these labels are often negative

## Social Implications of Prostitution

1. If commercial sex and those who provide commercial sex services were considered a legitimate professional service like other professions (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.), then the commercial sex profession and its participants would be viewed as socially equivalent to other professions.
  2. But, because most members of Western society perceive people in terms of their sexual practices and sex is damaging to women, then the social implications of commercial sex are not equivalent to the social implications of other "legitimate" professions. "Unlike other female subordinates in our society, the prostitute is viewed as a defiled creature...." (76)
  3. So, prostitution is not considered a legitimate professional service.
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4. So, prostitution oppresses the women who participate.

## Prostitution and Marriage

- If marriage depends upon or assumes the subordination of women, then marriage is a form of prostitution.
- Shrage thinks that marriage can be founded on principles that don't involve the subordination of women, and thus marriage can be reformed
- However, prostitution cannot be reformed
  - “Since commercial sex, unlike marriage, is not reformable, feminists should seek to undermine the beliefs and values which underlie our acceptance of it.” (78)