



A Moral Analysis of Prostitution

Sotonye Big-Alabo

University of Port Harcourt

Corresponding Author: Sotonye Big-Alabo sotonzopapaz@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Morality,
Prostitution, Drug Use, Sex,
Women, Dominance, Conset

Received : 18 January

Revised : 19 February

Accepted : 25 March

©2023 Aloba: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



ABSTRACT

The debate on the morality of prostitution has been a trending contemporary ethical issue. Some have argued for and some against prostitution. Prostitution, as I have defined it in the study, is the conscious act of any gender exchanging sex for financial or material gain. The study looked at the historical antecedents of prostitution, concepts and types of prostitution, and also brought forth various views or conceptions of prostitution. The views looked at include the feminist position for and against prostitution, the contractarian position for prostitution, and the liberalist and conservative positions on prostitution. The study adopted the qualitative method, and thus only secondary sources were used to carry out this research. The secondary sources used are from texts and journal articles. The study concludes that prostitution is neither coercive nor immoral if valid consent is obtained. Any sex act that takes place between two freely consenting adults is morally acceptable. Prostitution combines consenting sex with a contractual exchange. Hence, this dual aspect of the act serves as the foundation for any governing set of rules or morals that govern prostitution.

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution and the various practices within the domain of commercialized sex are hotly debated topics, and contemporary ethical perspectives such as social contract ethics and feminist ethics address the question of prostitution's moral implications and moral legitimacy. Within these perspectives, there are differing viewpoints on whether prostitution is morally acceptable. As a result, a key moral question could be raised, such as: is there anything unethical about exchanging sexual services for money? It is frowned upon by a large number of people. Traditional, conservative moralists consider it a taboo, some feminist scholars believe it exemplifies and contributes to a culture of male dominance, and even proponents of liberalization and decriminalization stigmatize (or look down on) those who engage in the sex trade.

Prostitution is a well-known issue, but it still feels fresh and exciting to discuss. Prostitution is a social problem because its presence in society frequently causes unrest and disrupts social life; in addition to being blamed for moral degradation, prostitution is also a major cause of the spread of venereal diseases. Prostitution, when viewed in a broader context, cannot be viewed as a purely cultural moral issue, because it is inextricably linked to social reality and the economic and political conditions that surround it. Because it demonstrates that prostitution has a place in society's social system. This is demonstrated by the fact that it has existed for centuries with no single power capable of eradicating prostitution from the planet.

Sex work regulation is a contentious issue in both low and high-income countries, and sex work continues with varying degrees of legality around the world (Farmer and Horowitz, 2013). Amnesty International sparked the debate in 2015 when it passed a resolution calling for the decriminalization of sex work, arguing that decriminalization is the best way to protect sex workers' human rights from abuses like being denied health care (Amnesty International 2015). According to a Lancet series, decriminalizing sex work would have the greatest impact on the course of HIV epidemics in all settings, preventing 33-46% of HIV infections over the next decade (Lancet 2015).

Abortion, rape, and sterilization, all of which affect women's bodily integrity and autonomy, are hotly debated topics that result in equally heated political policies. Prostitution discourse, like other issues involving women's bodies, is primarily concerned with determining whether this social practice is exploitative, empowering, or a result of immorality. The majority of people have one of three main perspectives on prostitution. Prostitution, according to the first viewpoint, is a result of a lack of moral character. This viewpoint is based on patriarchal and religious traditions that associate female sexuality with temptation, while male sexuality is associated with dominance and sanctioned insatiability. The "sex work" position, on the other hand, asserts that prostitution is a legitimate form of labor and that it is not inherently harmful to women. This viewpoint also asserts that women have the right to choose what they do with their bodies, and that sex work, while oppressive for some, can be

lucrative and empowering for others. Prostitution, according to the third position, is a result of social, political, and economic inequality, and women are disproportionately conscripted into prostitution because of their social vulnerability.

According to the researcher, prostitution is defined as the conscious act of any gender exchanging sex for financial or material gain. I chose this narrow definition for clarity in my exposition because I do not want to attempt to define prostitution but rather evaluate its morality. The study adopted the qualitative method, and thus only secondary sources were used to carry out this research. The secondary sources used are from texts and journal articles.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Prostitution?

Prostitution is the act of engaging in sexual activity with people who are not your spouse or friend in exchange for immediate monetary or other valuable payment. Prostitutes can be either male or female, and they can engage in heterosexual or homosexual activity, but historically, the majority of prostitution has been done by females for male clients. Prostitution, according to Garner (1999), is defined as the act or practice of engaging in sexual activities for money or its equivalent. Hobson (1987) wonders if prostitution is a sexual relationship or a job, a private act or a public business. For him, prostitution entails the indiscriminate exchange of sex for money or goods with strangers.

Types of Prostitution

1. **Street:** Clients are being approached on the street, in parks, and in other public places. Serviced on side streets, in vehicles, or in short-term accommodations. The prostitute solicits customers while waiting at street corners or walking alongside a street, usually dressed in revealing, suggestive clothing. To distinguish themselves from other sex workers, the prostitute (commonly referred to as a "hooker," "street hooker," or "street walker") appears to be minding his or her own business and waits for the customers to initiate contact. Call girls, escort agencies, and workers in bars, brothels, and massage parlors are all examples of "indoor prostitution," which includes call girls, escort agencies, and workers in bars, brothels, and massage parlors. Indoor prostitution is generally safer for the workers because it has little or no negative impact on the surrounding community, it pays well, and the workers are more satisfied with their work than street prostitutes (Weitzer 2000).
2. **Brothel:** Sites that are solely dedicated to the provision of sex. Security is superior to that of the street. Authorities frequently issue licenses.
3. **Escort:** The client makes contact with the sex worker over the phone or through hotel staff. The most shady type of sex work. Because of the low client turnover, it is relatively expensive. The service is provided at the client's residence or in their hotel room. Escort agencies keep a database

of employees of various types in order to serve a larger clientele. Some organizations may specialize in a specific type of prostitution. Male-to-male, female-to-male, and female-to-female escort agencies exist, as well as a few male-to-female escort agencies. Typically, agencies specialize in only one sex. Some escort agencies have transsexual prostitutes available.

4. **Private:** The client calls the sex worker. Similar to escorts, but services are provided on the premises of the sex worker. 'Flat' prostitution – high-cost services in rented, serviced inner-city units – is a variant in London and other major cities.
5. **Window or doorway:** Brothels with sex workers on display in public places. In cold climates, windows are preferred, while in warmer climates, doorways are preferred.
6. **Club, pub, bar, karaoke bar, dance hall:** Clients who are met at alcohol vending machines and served on-site or elsewhere.
7. **Other all-male venues:** Men-only establishments such as barbershops, bathhouses, saunas, and mining camps were used to recruit clients. On-site or off-site maintenance is available.
8. **Transport (ship, truck, train):** Sex workers may board vehicles to provide service to the crew or passengers, as well as pick up clients from stations and terminals.
9. **Sex tourism:** Some sex tourism groups form around a number of websites where they brag about their conquests, share photos of their sex partners, and discuss how to find prostitution at the best possible price in foreign countries while avoiding detection both at home and abroad.
10. **Other methods of solicitation:** Through a variety of media, such as noticeboard and newspaper advertisements, 'sex worker catalogues' with phone numbers, the internet via virtual brothels, and so on. The majority of services are provided in brothels and other indoor locations.

RESULTS

Historical Antecedents of Prostitution

Prostitution is frequently referred to as "the world's oldest profession." At least in the modern sense, prostitution cannot have emerged before the emergence of money, which can only have occurred after the emergence of several trades. However, prostitution has been observed in Bonobo chimp behavior based on access to food and gifts, as well as in penguin behavior based on access to suitable stones for nest building. Until the age of industrialization, the world was primarily agrarian, so goods and services were obtained primarily through barter. Any item that would normally be exchanged for other goods was most likely acceptable in exchange for a prostitute's sexual services.

Sacred prostitution, which is said to be practiced among Samaritans, is one of the earliest forms of prostitution. Many traces of sacred prostitution have been found in ancient sources, possibly beginning with Babylon, where each woman was required to visit the sanctuary of "Militia" at least once in her life and have sex with a foreigner as a sign of hospitality for a symbolic price. It was

also common in Israel, but some prophets, such as Hosea and Ezekiel, stood firm against it. It was assumed that a large number of the prostitutes were male members of the Canaan cults.

In the Bible, a woman named Tamar poses as a false prostitute in order to allegedly commit incest with her father-in-law Judah. She was actually performing a levirate marriage, but Judah mistook her for a harlot and offered her a kid from the flocks in exchange for sleeping with her. In Jericho, a prostitute named Rehab assisted Israelite spies, and she eventually married a Jewish man. While there were some similarities between the Greek and Roman systems, as the Empire grew, foreign slaves were often caught, bought, or raised for that purpose, sometimes by large-scale prostitute farmers. As a result, criminal free women were sometimes enslaved into prostitution as a legal punishment (Alobo & Ndifon 2014).

Feminist Position for Prostitution

The fundamental distinction between consented commercialized sex and forced commercialized sex is conditionally rooted in the feminist moral approach in favor of prostitution. As a result, autonomy in order to make informed decisions could be seen as critical to the feminist viewpoint, which morally favors commercialized sex. Pro-commercial sex feminists challenge the presumption that commercial sex is associated with negative outcomes such as coercion, exploitation, and dominance (Bromberg 1997), arguing that prostitution does not have to be a negative experience.

Martha Nussbaum, a feminist proponent of commercialized sex, broadens the debate on commercialized sex by addressing broader issues of sex and social justice, arguing that feminism and social justice share common goals. She examines the similarities and differences between a commercial sex worker (a prostitute) and a variety of other occupations, including factory workers, domestic servants, nightclub singers, philosophy professors, masseuses, and colonoscopy (!) artists. According to Nussbaum, the most significant distinction between commercial sex and the other professions is that commercial sex, in the form of prostitution, is stigmatized for reasons that do not apply to the other professions. She claims that the stigmatization of prostitutes is due to two major factors: intrinsic immorality (prostitution is inherently immoral) and gender hierarchical factors. The former reason is dismissed by Nussbaum because non-reproductive sex, which is not dependent on prostitution, is morally acceptable or at least not as morally stigmatized as prostitution.

Certain pro-commercialized sex radical feminists also address the reasons for social stigma and the status of commercialized sex. These feminists are interested in what they perceive to be inconsistencies between liberal moral theory and traditional feminist attitudes (Green 1989). The stigmatization of commercialized sex, not sex itself, is the central moral issue in this more radical feminist position. Traditional family conceptions are the target of this radical feminist critique, which sees commercial sex workers as victims of an immoral societal structure that can be changed. The radical feminist justification for this

stance is that if commercial sex were elevated to the same moral status and set of rights as any other profession, female commercial sex workers would be empowered and morally positioned on par with employees in any other profession (Nussbaum 1998). The argument is based on the premise that commercial sex is no different from any other profession, and that recognizing commercial sex as a "regular job" would also acknowledge the commercial sex worker's right to individual autonomy. Advocates of this position equate female sexual autonomy and bodily control with established female abortion rights, a notion that resonates with contractarian views on individual rights. The patriarchal structures would dissolve and the subjugation and perceived exploitation of commercial sex workers in society would end as soon as we succeeded in leveling negative conceptions of commercialized sex and elevating commercial sex workers to the same status level as any other worker in society.

Feminist Position Against Prostitution

Debra Satz (1995) presents a viewpoint that incorporates some of the most important feminist arguments against commercialized sex. The importance of creating and promoting mechanisms for gender equality in society is the general construct for this feminist viewpoint. Her arguments are aimed at the pervasive assumptions about women and their opportunities in society. Satz discusses and describes the moral view that the practices of buying and selling sexual services are inappropriate and unfit to be compared to those in any other labor market. The "asymmetry thesis" describes the fundamental difference and distinction between the commercialized sex market and other markets (Satz 1995). Although Satz speculates on how we might not have any moral problems with prostitution in a utopian world free of gender inequality structures, she emphasizes that such hypothetical speculations do not solve current societal problems. The author believes that commercialized sex is a social institution in and of itself that stifles conditions for societal development that promotes gender equality. Commercialized sex is thus harmful to gender equality within an egalitarian societal development, and Satz (1995) attacks commercialized sex as a major impediment to the development of an equal society.

Contractarian Position for Prostitution

Market liberal perspectives and a strong emphasis on rights are one of the main arguments used by proponents of social contract theory to justify morally legitimizing commercialized sex. The attempt to evaluate the philosophical grounds for prostitution by Lars O. Ericsson (1980) includes social contract arguments in favor of prostitution. Although Ericsson (1980) does not believe that the commercialized sex practice of prostitution is always desirable, he believes that it is an unavoidable result of our imperfect (but real) societies. According to Ericsson, societal attitudes are to blame for prostitution problems. According to the author, we must create a safe environment for prostitution that is free of prejudice and stigma. The advancement of gender equality issues, sex roles, and sexual expression, where notions of inferiority and superiority must be rooted out, must play a part in such a shift in general attitudes.

According to Ericsson, we must rethink the concept of commercialized sex in general and prostitution in particular, and free society from its cultural tendencies to condemn commercialized sex on biased grounds (Ericsson 1980).

The general view that prostitution is undesirable, according to Ericsson (1980), should be critically evaluated, and the reasons for this view should be questioned. Reconstructing our moral views on commercialized sex as well as institutionalizing provisions for commercialized sex practices would elevate the status and legitimacy of commercialized sex while also removing morally motivated hostility. Ericsson makes a number of compelling arguments against prostitution's alleged general unacceptability, all of which are based on the idea of decoupling commercialized sex from traditional moral conceptions and reevaluating commercialized sex as a normal societal activity. First, he takes aim at the conventional morality argument, claiming that traditional views on family values and the role of sex are culturally burdened. According to Ericsson (1980), there would be nothing intrinsically morally wrong with consented sexual activity performed within an economic arrangement if there were no such moral grounds for condemning prostitution.

The central theme of Ericsson's arguments in support of commercialized sex and prostitution is to bring commercialized sex and the moral status of commercialized sex workers on par with any other profession in society. We must free society from the moral prejudices that plague commercialized sex and create opportunities for commercialized sex practices to become as morally accepted and valued as any other profession in society.

Liberalist and Conservative Position on Prostitution

There are a few constitutional civil liberties that are highly protected in any modern democracy: the right to vote, the ability to hold political office, equality before the law, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement. Similarly, these fundamental civil rights are all essential to liberalism (Kymlicka 1995). A general open-mindedness toward issues concerning individual freedom, such as the freedom to partake or consume drugs and alcohol, is also considered "liberal" in a more informal sense. Even dangerous drugs can be legal in an "ultra-liberal" society. Obviously, this includes prostitution as well. Individual freedom can easily be defined as the ability to prostitute oneself, as well as the ability to purchase those services where they are legally available. Liberalism is closer to the principles of autonomy than communitarianism in this regard. The liberal agenda, on the other hand, has been chastised for its sometimes naive optimism, believing that cultural oppression can be overcome by simply introducing more freedom (Kymlicka 1995).

Conservatism is somewhat antagonistic, but not necessarily contradictory. Conservatism is primarily concerned with the preservation of tradition or cultural customs. In this way, conservatism and communitarianism are very similar in that they both advocate for the preservation of collective and common community values as a primary goal of political discourse. On many social and moral issues, however, conservatism and liberalism can become

diametrically opposed political ideologies. This conflict is perhaps best exemplified in the case of religious conservatism and the subsequent transition to secularism. Allowing female priests, for example, has been a contentious issue, with many churches opposing this "liberal," gender-neutral policy and instead advocating for the preservation of religious and/or church traditions. Similarly, gay marriage is a relatively recent social change, with the church initially opposing the proposal (and many still do) because of how homosexuality is usually viewed or treated within religious doctrine. However, the principles of equality, as well as personal liberty, demand that homosexuals have access to the same social services as anyone else, and that they not be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation (which can also conflict with intellectual ideas of communitarianism, if equality and/or gender neutrality were a desirable community value). Due to some sex and sexuality conventions, prostitution can also be a highly problematic subject from a religious conservative perspective. Non-marital sex is considered an expression of lust, which is a deadly sin (Berglund 2012).

Consequences and Reactions of Prostitution

Prostitutes are vulnerable and are occasionally targeted by serial killers who may see them as easy targets or use the religious and social stigma associated with prostitutes to justify their murder. Because they are criminals in most jurisdictions, prostitutes are less likely than law-abiding citizens to be tracked down by police if they go missing, making them easy prey for predators. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as HIV is linked to prostitution. Massive transmission among sex workers and clients is one of the main reasons for HIV's rapid spread in Nigeria. In Africa, prostitution is linked to HIV infection, with one study finding that encounters with prostitutes cause 84% of new HIV infections in adults, as well as other sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea, pelvic inflammatory diseases, and syphilis. Multiple sex partners and limited safe sex practice increase the risk of HIV infection. Some customers are willing to pay more for a sexual encounter if they don't have to use a condom. According to research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the rate of HIV infection for prostitutes who smoke crack cocaine is three times higher. Early pregnancy for minors, rape, tuberculosis, post-traumatic stress disorder, assault, and other acts of violence are all linked to prostitution (Alobo & Ndifon 2014).

When it comes to the economic health issue of prostitution, it is argued that street prostitution is not victimless because it can harm a neighborhood's reputation and quality of life, as well as depreciate property value. According to Maxwell (2000) and other researchers, there is a strong link between prostitution, drug use, drug selling, and involvement in non-drug crime, particularly property crime. Because prostitution is illegal in many jurisdictions, its substantial revenue does not contribute to state tax revenues, and its workers are not routinely screened for sexually transmitted diseases, which can be dangerous in cultures that value unprotected sex and result in significant

health-care costs. Prostitution also reduces the value of property and lowers women's status.

Prostitution is often divisive in the society in which it occurs. Its presence may cause moral outrage among religious people, who see it as a threat to the moral codes enshrined in their scriptures. Others, on the other hand, are simply curious or see it as a necessary evil. Many feminist and women's organizations oppose prostitution because they see it as a form of female exploitation and male dominance over women, as well as a practice that is a result of the patriarchal social order that currently exists (Alobo & Ndifon 2014).

CONCLUSION

Views that condemn prostitution as immoral tend to invoke various notions of impropriety and unnaturalness to demonstrate why it is immoral. The radical feminist view that any heterosexual form of sex is immoral because the power differential between men and women in society makes it impossible for women to properly consent to sex because they are always in a state of subjugation has a number of flaws, not the least of which is the universalization of women's positions that ignores individual experiences. Women as a group are suppressed by men as a group is a common feminist claim that is widely accepted. According to the contractarian viewpoint, it is necessary to rid society of the moral prejudice that surrounds prostitution and to investigate ways to help prostitution become as morally accepted and valued as any other profession in society.

To conclude, prostitution is neither coercive nor immoral if valid consent is obtained. Any sex act that takes place between two freely consenting adults is morally acceptable. Prostitution combines consenting sex with a contractual exchange. This dual aspect of the act serves as the foundation for any governing set of rules or morals that govern prostitution.

REFERENCES

- Alobo, E.E & Ndifon, R. 2014. Addressing prostitution concerns in Nigeria: Issue, problems and prospects. *European Scientific Journal*, 10(14): 36-47.
- Amnesty International. 2015. "Global Movement Votes to Adopt Policy to Protect Human Rights of Sex Workers." Press Release. <http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/press-releases/global-movement-votes-to-adopt-policy-to-protect-human-rights-of-sex-workers>.
- Berglund, T. 2012. *Understanding prostitution: A political discourse analysis on prostitution in Sweden*. Master Thesis. Media and Communication, Halmstad University (Högskolan i Halmstad)

- Bromberg, S. 1997. Feminist issues in prostitution. Paper presented at the *International Conference on Prostitution at Cal State University, Northridge*, 1997.
- Ericsson, L.O. 1980. Charges against prostitution: An attempt at a philosophical assessment. *Ethics*, 90(3): 335-366.
- Farmer, A. & Andrew W. H. 2013. Prostitutes, pimps, and brothels: Intermediaries, information, and market structure in prostitution markets. *Southern Economic Journal* 79(3): 513-528.
- Garner, Bryan A. *Black's Law Dictionary*. 7th edition. (Eagan: West Publishing Corporation, 1999).
- Green, K. 1989. Prostitution, exploitation and taboo. *Philosophy*, 64(250): 525-534.
- Hobson, B.M. 1987. *Uneasy virtue: The politics of prostitution and the American reform tradition*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kymlicka, W. 1995. *Modern politisk filosofi - En introduktion*. Nya Doxa; Falun.
- Lancet. 2015. "Keeping sex workers safe." *The Lancet* 386(9993):504.
- Maxwell, S.R. & Maxwell, C.D. 2000. Examining the "criminal careers" of prostitutes within the nexus of drug use, drug selling, and other illicit activities. *Criminology*, 38: 787-809.
- Nussbaum, M. 1998. Whether from reason or prejudice: Taking money for bodily services. *The Journal of Legal Studies*, 27(S2): 693-723.
- Satz, D. 1995. Markets in women's sexual labor. *Ethics*, 106(1): 63-85.
- Weitzer, R. 2000. Commercialized sex: paradigms and policies. In R. Weitzer (ed.) *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry* (1-43), London: Routledge