



How Decriminalisation Reduces Harm Within and Beyond Sex Work: Sex Work Abolitionism as the “Cult of Female Modesty” in Feminist Form

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Abstract

Background Sex work has a long history and takes different forms, but the associated precarity and danger, particularly where poorer women and minorities are concerned, is undeniable. There is growing evidence that decriminalisation reduces harm, and, indeed, it is the policy approach favoured by sex worker groups. Despite this, many feminists instead seek to “end demand” for paid sex, recommending legal penalties for sex buyers, with the aim of abolishing sex work altogether.

Method This paper takes a comparative approach, examining why “end demand” is applied to sex work but not to care work. Abolition is typically justified both in terms of reducing harm to sex workers and to women more generally, with sex work’s very existence being thought to perpetuate the notion that all women are “sex objects.” Women are, however, not only exposed to harm within care work but are also commonly stereotyped as care givers, and in a way that has similarly been argued to contribute to gender inequality.

Results By comparing sex work with care work, this paper reveals the logical inconsistency in the “end demand” approach; unlike with sex work, there is little push to criminalise those who purchase care or other such domestic labour services. By revealing the moral nature of abolitionist arguments, and the disrespectful way in which sex workers are characterised within radical feminist literature, it argues that, rather than reducing harm, the “end demand” approach perpetuates harm, conspiring in the notion that “immodest” women are the cause of social ills.

Conclusions Reducing the harm that sex workers—and women more generally—face requires feminists to challenge “the cult of female modesty”, rather than to be complicit in it.

Keywords Sex work · Radical feminism · End demand · Nordic model · Decriminalisation · Modesty · Stigma

Introduction

When a London statue was recently unveiled to honour the early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, it became a “feminist battleground” (Pierson-Hager, 2020). The reason was that emerging from a shiny abstract sculptural form was a naked woman, albeit a very tiny one. Despite London being in the midst of a global pandemic, some women went so far as to cover the statue’s breasts and its mass of pubic hair. The Telegraph called the statue “embarrassing” (Freeman, 2020). Rhiannon Cosslett, writing for The Guardian, highlighted her

“disappointment” (Cosslett, 2020). Caitlin Moran took to Twitter with her critique, objecting on the basis that “being hot and naked so regularly defines women that to deliberately play into it does nothing but reinforce tired old tropes”. Dr Ailsa Holland announced to the Twitter world that she was “raging” about the statue. As Ellen Pierson-Hager neatly summarised the reaction in the *New Statesman*, “[m]any have asked why a statue of a thinker as pioneering as Wollstonecraft should draw attention to the physicality of the female body rather than to Wollstonecraft’s work and ideas” (Pierson-Hager, 2020; see also Brown, 2020).

The answer should be clear. Wollstonecraft challenged a society that had long believed that being female rendered you intellectually inferior. Suppose we permanently cloaked the statue, would it do a better job of capturing Wollstonecraft’s argument that being born into a female body does not make you less capable of reason? The very

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fact that so many “feminists” seem to think that the figure’s feminine nakedness fails to communicate the intellectual prowess of Wollstonecraft suggests that we are living in a society in which women are categorised as either “brains” or “bodies”—not, as we in fact are, both. That is something I aim to challenge every time I publicly place my own naked body on the line. From my nude portrait, displayed at the Mall Galleries in London (Bateman, 2014), to my naked performance at the Junction Theatre in Cambridge in 2019, along with various naked protests, I hope to show—whatever the theme—that behind every woman (dressed or undressed) is a real thinking being, and that we should think twice before dividing women up in dangerous and simplistic ways, judging them on the basis of their bodily modesty. But, despite it, I too am labelled “anti-feminist” purely on the basis that my body is not sufficiently covered, purely on the basis that I do not subscribe to the particular modesty requirements of our time. As Lynda Rooney tweeted in response to one of my naked protests: “What a total embarrassment ur... You’re a disgrace to all women!”. An anonymous gamer tweeted: “I find it troubling how you, as someone who has had the benefit of a high degree of education and presumably the mental capability to see it through a doctorate, honestly believe gestures like this are those of a sound minded and rational individual?”. Equating immodesty and stupidity clearly seems second nature. “Good God she single-handedly took feminism back to the Stone age!” tweeted Tracy Bryan. Tim Young of the Fox TV channel tweeted: “There’s nothing more anti-feminist than having to strip naked desperate for a man’s attention”. Many more jump in. According to Alyssa, “Being trashy is never classy and you certainly are quite trashy”. When I reply to such messages, politely and calmly, it is not uncommon for the senders to resort to the “block” button. “I’ll start listening to your discourse when you find some clothes. Until then, muted” says Alexandra Marshall, one of many.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, I am told that what I have to say does not deserve to be heard, all because of my lack of bodily modesty. I am deemed “stupid”, a “tramp” and a “prostitute”. Being an academic at the University of Cambridge offers no defence. While judgements cast on social media are not always representative of the general population, when it comes to bodily immodesty they certainly seem to be. Following a naked appearance on BBC Radio 4 in February 2019, the polling organisation YouGov asked the British public whether naked protest is ever justifiable. Forty-three percent of people polled think it is unacceptable in all cases; a quarter of people are unsure; another quarter find it acceptable in some cases, and seven percent find it acceptable in all cases (YouGov, 2019). The national press capture the public sentiment. Telegraph columnist Juliet Samuel argued that nudity “strips my arguments of force”

(Samuel, 2019). Theo Hobson, writing in *The Spectator*, declared it “unfeminist”. Feminism and bodily immodesty are, apparently, contradictory (Hobson, 2019).

In Wollstonecraft’s time, chastity and virtue were commonly equated when it came to women and so this kind of reaction to an “immodest” woman would not have been surprising. Wollstonecraft, however, argued that chastity and virtue were two different things. In her novel “*Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*” (1798), we find two women transgressing the social boundaries of the time but ultimately achieving self-knowledge, thereby encouraging the reader to consider what truly is virtue. But, shortly after her death, and following William Goodwin’s “*Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Women*” (1798), Wollstonecraft was attacked on the basis of what was deemed immoral and immodest behaviour, branded a “whore” and “prostitute” in the press for her love affairs (Eberle, 2002). In their review of Goodwin’s book, the *Anti-Jacobin Review* wrote that “Mary’s theory... is so far from being new, that it is as old as prostitution”, and later published a poem titled “*The Vision of Liberty*” that referred to her work as “*A scripture, archly fram’d, for propagating w_____s*” (Eberle, 2002). Ironically, the feminist critics of her statue seem concerned that it will have the same effect, and, rather than challenging this notion, have decided to subscribe to it. Women must abide by the body versus brain categorisation, and, where they are insufficiently modest, are deemed not worth listening to, and certainly not “feminist”. Little wonder that sex workers’ voices go unheard.

While women with their bodies on show, “strutting their stuff”, are commonly seen as the patriarchal ideal, one which many feminists wish to challenge, there is an equally long and continuing history of the patriarchy policing and regulating women’s dress and sexual behaviour, one which also deserves to be challenged (rather than being co-opted) by feminism. In what is often characterised as an era of “raunch culture” (Barton, 2021), it might seem strange to be discussing what could so easily appear to be a Victorian value: the notion that a woman’s worth, value and respect hangs on her bodily modesty, a belief system which I will term the “cult of female modesty”. The modesty cult is either seen as something from a by-gone age, or as something from “distant” lands. When we are not associating it with Victorians, we instead associate it with countries such as Iran, where women removing their headscarves are “slut-shamed” and declared “anti-feminist” by those who believe that women who reveal their hair are sexualising and objectifying themselves, reducing their worth and reputation, hurting other women and generally being destructive of social order. But, as we have already seen, this modesty cult is closer than we think. And, as we have started to see, rather than the patriarchy enforcing its commandments, shaming and demeaning women on the basis of what they do with their bodies, modern day women—including many

who would consider themselves feminists—are some of the most avid and vehement adherents. Indeed, around a half of “misogynistic” comments on Twitter come from women, with the words “slut” and “whore” dominating the language of abuse (Bartlett et al., 2014; Speed, 2016).

Not only are immodest women like myself instructed to “cover up” and declared “unfeminist”, those considered the most “immodest” of all—sex workers—are to be abolished. Gender inequality is, radical feminism teaches us, the result of men seeing women as “sex objects”, and, if men are to change their way of thinking, sex workers—apparently—must not exist. In 2021, when Sarah Everard was kidnapped and murdered while walking home in London, feminist groups such as “Not Buying It”, turned the spotlight on strippers. According to Sasha Rakoff, the existence of strip clubs “breeds and feeds the very attitudes that leads to harassment, abuse and ultimately violence against all women and girls” (Wall, 2021). This seems to parallel the type of response I have received to my own “immodest” behaviour: “Why do you think women are not taken seriously or listened to and thought as sex objects? Because of silly tarts like you... You’re a disgrace to all women!”, wrote Lynda Rooney on Twitter. While not being accused of causing murder, the mere sight of my naked body has been accused of causing rape. Women themselves—from scantily clad dressers to sex workers—are, either implicitly or explicitly, deemed to be responsible for violence perpetuated by men.

The case for decriminalising sex work tends to be made in terms of reducing harm to sex workers themselves (Platt et al., 2018). However, feminist resistance to decriminalisation cannot be tackled unless we also confront the claim that sex work is bad for all women: that sex work causes harm beyond sex workers themselves. In what follows, we will turn initially to history, with a particular focus on the UK, to see the way in which sex work has long been seen as a “problem” not only at the level of sex workers themselves but also at the broader level of society. We will then look in more detail at how radical feminism makes its own claim in regard to the latter: that sex work imposes a cost on all women in society by turning them into “sex objects” in the minds of men. This position will be critiqued by drawing on a comparison with care work. Just as women have commonly been thought of as “sex objects” they have also been characterised as the “care givers” in society, constraining their ability to achieve equality in the public sphere. However, while feminists use the argument that sex work encourages dangerous gendered stereotyping and, as such, it should be abolished, the equivalent argument is not made in the case of care work. By highlighting the moralism that lies behind this logical inconsistency, we will see how the feminist objection to sex work plays into the hands of the “cult of female modesty”, de-valuing sex workers’ contribution, rendering worthless their voices, and dis-respecting their

existence. This parallels the wider demonisation of “immodest” women, as I have myself seen by putting my own body on the line.

Contrary to radical feminism, I will argue that it is society’s division of women into “good girls” and “whores”, where “whores” are deemed as undeserving of respect, which can often be found at the root of society-wide mistreatment of women. The radical feminist ambition—which seeks to abolish sex work—conspires in such thinking, fueling “whore” stigma by suggesting that sex work is wrong, that no woman in her “right mind” would choose to do it (hence all sex workers can be cast as “victims”), and that sex workers are the (albeit unwilling) cause of the sins men inflict on other women. Rather than challenging the “cult of female modesty”, feminists conspire in its teaching.

Rather than reducing harm, sex work abolitionism increases harm, not just for individual sex workers but for all women. Instead of ending demand for sex work, it’s time to end demand for “end demand”. Just as abolishing headscarves is not the correct means to tackle the “cult of female modesty”, abolishing sex workers is not the correct means to tackle the notion that women are all “sex objects”.

Sex Work Abolitionism: Then and Now

In the Christian tradition, women’s bodies have long been represented as the fundamental source of temptation, and a central source of sin, not helped by an infamous story involving a serpent, an apple and the Garden of Eden. As Ruth Mazo Karras explains, “[w]omen were lustful and therefore dangerous to men. All the other criticisms of women ultimately came down to the sexual threat that they presented” (Karras, 1996, p. 107). While chastity was preached as the ideal for everyone, women were not only seen as the ultimate source of temptation, they were also held to a different standard: “Having had sex did not make a man permanently impure, because men in heterosexual intercourse were not penetrated” (Karras, 2017, pp. 45–6).

So as to preserve the virtue of the “mass” of women, the Church not only supported but owned and made money from brothels, albeit regulating where and on what days of the year sex workers could practice their trade. The Bishop of Winchester’s brothel in Southwark was the most notorious in London in the late middle ages: “The authorities judged it better to abandon a small group of women to sin and corruption in order to serve these men than to subject the whole of society to the disorder that would otherwise ensue” (Karras, 1996, p. 76). However, the difficult relationship between religious authorities and sex work resulted in a rather unstable set of regulations and policies.

By the end of the medieval era, sexual desire was seen both as a threat to individual salvation and “destructive of

social order” (Karras, 1996, p. 103). During the Reformation, Christians competed to prove their “purity” (Berkowitz, 2012, p. 191). According to Luther, sex workers were “scabby, scratching stinking” beings who should be “broken on the wheel and flayed” (Berkowitz, 2012, p. 192). Brothels across Europe were closed down (Berkowitz, 2012, p. 193).

This attack on sexual immorality was not confined to sex workers. The “cult of female modesty” affected the life of every woman, with unmarried women particularly on the radar. In sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, as documented by the historian Merry Wiesner-Hanks (2015), the bodies of unmarried women were increasingly under surveillance by the authorities, which included, for example, the breasts of unmarried women being examined for signs of childbirth when abandoned babies were found (Wiesner-Hanks, 2015, p. 68). In 1556, the French parliament ordered that all pregnancies be notified to the authorities and that, if they were not and the resultant baby died, the mother would be subject to the death penalty, on the assumption that it was infanticide (Wiesner-Hanks, 2015, p. 67). One eighteenth century German medic suggested that all unmarried women should be observed monthly in a public bath for signs of pregnancy (Wiesner-Hanks, 2015, p. 68). Any woman who lay on the margins of society was at particular risk throughout this wide-ranging attack on women’s “sinful” bodies. Women’s bodies had long been associated with witchcraft, in possession of powers that men could not control, and now they were being hunted out and murdered in their thousands (Carr-Gomm, 2012, pp. 30–1).

Soon, the very same printing presses that distributed the religious material that stoked the Reformation were finding other purposes, including literary ones. The story of the “harlot’s progress”, from innocence to experience and then an untimely death, would have been familiar to any eighteenth century reader of novels (Eberle, 2002). Fear of being branded a “whore” haunted the life of every woman.

Against this backdrop, the feminists of the nineteenth century could not avoid thinking about sex work. Not only did they think about it, they were divided by it (Jolin, 1994). However, the UK’s 1860s Contagious Diseases Acts, which spread across the world as a consequence of colonisation (Levine, 2003), served to unite many women in opposition to the state’s regulation of sex workers. These Acts allowed authorities to forcibly remove and intimately examine any woman suspected of prostitution, something which caused particular reflection among feminists. A repeal lobby formed, highlighting the sexual double-standards of the law, demanding a re-thinking of “prostitution” law in general. With feminists to a degree united, this meant that the voices campaigning for the further criminalisation of sex work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “were largely *not* feminists” but were instead: “a conservative, male-led, moral reform movement, that believed it was indeed possible

to ‘make men moral by an Act of Parliament’. These moral reform campaigners wished to see prostitution totally criminalized, and all migration for those identified as prostitutes (and pimps) banned” (Laite, 2020). The law increasingly targeted those involved in sex work beyond the sex workers themselves, including brothel-keeping (Laite, 2006). By 1912, UK law was punishing anyone convicted of “controlling or directing the movements of a prostitute”, not just the “prostitutes” themselves (McCarthy et al., 2015).

In 1928, the UK’s Macmillan Report—the Report of the Street Offences Committee—was published. It was a Committee formed in part following the much talked about arguments of the aptly named abolitionist group, The Association for Moral and Social Hygiene. As Samantha Caslin writes, “[c]oncerns about how the prostitute should be defined in relation to other women, the influence of her presence over other women and her supposed impact upon public morals were key features in 1920s debates” and the Chair of the Committee, High Macmillan “tried to rationalise solicitation as both a legal *and* moral issue by suggesting that prostitution represented a threat to the moral and therefore national order; it was tantamount to an offence against social stability” (Caslin in McCarthy et al., 2015). Women’s wider appearance in public life left many increasingly concerned about prostitution:

“By the 1920s, the moral anxiety provoked by prostitutes was closely associated with concerns over women’s symbolic move from the domestic sphere and their greater presence in public places such as shopping malls and entertainment venues. It was no longer easy to say that a woman walking through the streets wearing make-up was likely to be a prostitute. Additionally, fears about greater sexual freedom meant that the law’s definition of a ‘common prostitute’ was becoming problematic. Questions were asked about whether girls who had sex on dates in exchange for non-monetary payments such as gifts were in fact engaging in a form of ‘amateur’ prostitution and, if so, what did this mean for the regulation of the ‘professional prostitute’?” (Caslin in McCarthy et al., 2015).

As in early modern Europe, the demonisation of sex work fed through to raise questions about women more generally. “Whore-phobia” came with a distrust of women’s activities more generally; every woman was at risk of being considered a “whore”.

In 1957, the Wolfenden Report followed. The blurred lines between what was called the “common prostitute” and women more generally were also apparent here and so too was concern about “whether prostitutes encouraged ‘normal’ women to engage in immoral behaviours” (McCarthy et al., 2015). This report aimed to move away from moral discourse, but found it could not. The Report judged that

“prostitution” was “an evil of which any society which claims to be civilised should seek to rid itself”. However, it recommended that only visible “prostitution” be punished by the law, as that involved immorality on display to the general public, with greater social consequences. Given the continued debate on what exactly a “prostitute” was, and whether a young woman engaging in sex with someone who had paid for her dinner constituted one, this distinction between visible solicitation and private behaviour provided an apparent resolution.

With the radical feminist movement of the 1970s, the impact of sex work on wider society remained central. Radical feminists were concerned specifically with the social impact on womankind, and held the sex buyer—as opposed to sex seller—as at fault, echoing nineteenth century feminist depictions of the “prostitute” herself as a victim (Laite, 2006; Scoular, 2004, p. 349). But, the policy approach that has since developed has as much in common with the Victorian moralists as it does with the feminists critics of the Contagious Diseases Acts. “End demand” has been spreading across the Western world. Its aim is to strangle the demand for sex, with the ultimate goal of eliminating sex work. The approach was, in recent times, first introduced in Scandinavia, becoming known as the “Nordic Model”, spreading from Sweden to Norway (2009), Iceland (2009), Canada (2014), France (2016), Ireland (2017) and Israel (2018). Northern Ireland adopted the Nordic Model in 2015, while elsewhere in the UK, it has received the backing of both the Women’s Equality Party and the Fawcett Society, and has the approval of the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution, Sarah Champion MP. Indeed, the All Party Group’s “Shifting the Burden” Report (2014) recommended this particular approach. In December 2020 Labour MP Dame Diana Johnson put forward an associated Private Members’ Bill to the UK parliament. It claims to be “radical in spirit and feminist in practice, and that it will help prevent trafficking, pimping, and abuse” (Laite, 2020). The European Parliament had already passed a motion encouraging member countries to adopt this kind of approach, and so the UK is now riding a popular wave.

Despite the popularity of this new policy approach, Amnesty International, the World Health Organisation and the Royal College of Nursing have all expressed concerns, with growing evidence suggesting that criminalising the purchaser of sex, even when the seller of sex is not themselves criminalised, pushes sex workers into greater danger. After Ireland implemented the Nordic model in 2017, violent attacks on sex workers increased by 50% (Casey, 2018). More generally, a recent overview of the numerous quantitative studies published between 1990 and 2018—covering a range of countries—found that sex workers are twice as likely to have an STD and three times more likely to be victims of violence under criminalisation (Platt et al., 2018). A

synthesis of the qualitative evidence provided by more than ninety publications over the same time period suggests that this is because “in contexts of criminalisation, the threat and enactment of police harassment and arrest of sex workers or their clients displaced sex workers into isolated work locations, disrupting peer support networks and service access, and limiting risk reduction opportunities. It discouraged sex workers from carrying condoms and exacerbated existing inequalities experienced by transgender, migrant, and drug-using sex workers” (Platt et al., 2018, pp. 1–2). To quote one sex worker:

“They couldn’t have designed a law better to make it less safe, even if they sat for years! It’s like you have to hide out, you can’t talk to a guy, and there’s no discussion about what you’re willing to do and for how much. The negotiation has to take place afterwards, which is always so much scarier...it’s designed to set it up to be dangerous. I don’t think it was the original intention, but that’s what it does” (Canadian sex worker, quoted in Platt et al., 2018, p. 39).

While the feminists championing “end demand” claim that it will help those forced into sex work, as Julia Laite (2006) explains, past history is not in their favour:

“Several laws were passed between 1885 and 1922 to curb the exploitation of women and children in prostitution. However, while public concern and sentiment most often worried over the third-party role in prostitution, it always seemed to be the prostitutes themselves who felt the overwhelming brunt of the law’s force. For instance, though 1898 saw a new Amendment to the Vagrancy Act passed, which made ‘living off the earnings of a prostitute’ (or pimping) an offence, in 1900 only 165 ‘pimps’ were sentenced while 7,415 women were convicted under the solicitation laws”

Against this historical context, and armed with their own experiences and evidence, it is therefore not surprising that sex workers and sex work organisations demand a very different type of policy approach to that of “end demand”: for their work to be decriminalised, as was pioneered by New Zealand in 2003. Paralleling the broader human rights movement, the sex worker movement gathered force in the 1970s, bringing individual sex workers together from across the globe to campaign for rights and respect. This culminated in 1985, in the first World Whores’ Congress, when a World Charter for Prostitutes’ Rights was published, making a call to decriminalise sex work and, importantly, “to change social attitudes which stigmatize and discriminate against prostitutes and ex-prostitutes of any race, gender or nationality” (see Weiss, 2018, p. 304). This was followed by the publication of “A Vindication of the Rights of Whores” (Pheterson, 1989), carrying with it an insistence that Mary

Wollstonecraft's teachings are as applicable to sex workers as they are to all women.

Our brief overview of history reveals the way in which sex work has long been seen as a “problem” that is in need of a solution; a “problem” at the level of individual sex workers (who have been cast as everything from immoral beings to victims) and a “problem” at the level of society (destabilising society either by “tempting” men or by rendering women “sex objects”). Policy responses have varied, and still do today. What is, however, increasingly clear is the disparity between feminist demands to abolish sex work and sex workers' own demands for rights and respect. In the UK, feminists organisations such as the Fawcett Society and the Women's Equality Party therefore stand in marked opposition to sex worker organisations and activist groups, which include Decrim Now, SWARM and the English Collective of Prostitutes.

So why—despite the protestations of sex workers—do feminist groups persist with the “end demand” approach? As we will see in the section which follows, the justification that radical feminists and abolitionists provide does not simply revolve around a claim about sex workers, but also a claim about women more generally. *Even if* radical feminists *could* be convinced that decriminalisation does more to reduce the harm faced by sex workers than does “end demand”, that would not be enough to end the feminist resistance to decriminalisation. That is because, for abolitionists, more is at stake than individual sex workers: the fate of all women.

Sex Workers Versus the Sisterhood

Susan Brownmiller's “Against Our Will”, published in 1979, “changed the way we talk about rape” (Cohen, 2015). According to The New York Times' Book Review, it “deserves a place on the shelf next to those rare books about social problems which force us to make connections we have too long evaded, and change the way we feel about what we know” (Gale, 1975). It went on to become one of New York Public Library's “Books of the Century”. At the time it was published, rape was seen as a “deviant” crime, but Brownmiller had become increasingly aware of just how many women's lives it affected. She was part of a feminist consciousness raising group known as the New York Radical Feminists, which involved women meeting together to share and talk about their experiences. The group built a shared recognition of oppression, and created a push to tackle problems at a systematic—as opposed to individual—level. Not only did the numerous experiences of rape become apparent, but also the unhelpful response of legal authorities, which included: “who'd want to rape you?”, “too calm to be credible”, and “you were asking for it” (Cooke, 2018). Brownmiller argued that rape is not so much about lust but

is instead about power: “a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller, 2013 [1979], p. 34). Rather than seeing it as an outcome of biology, she argued it was a practice of male domination. This male domination is what Radical Feminism identifies as being the source of a set of shared problems which women face.

According to the 1969 New York Redstocking Manifesto:

“Women are an oppressed class... We are considered inferior beings whose only purpose is to enhance men's lives... we have been kept from seeing our personal suffering as a political condition... the conflicts between individual men and women are political conflicts that can only be solved collectively... We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest most basic form of domination” (Bryson, 2016, p. 157).

By the 1970s, and in an attempt to prove the point, the group “Women Against Pornography” were conducting tours of New York's “seedy” underbelly in and around Times Square, including its famous strip clubs, “pleasure palaces” and pornographic bookstores. The group charged five dollars per person for their tours, taking more than two and a half thousand people on their excursions, including nuns (Cooke, 2018). Sometimes they watched in silence as women paraded in front of men; at other times, they protested. Either way, they certainly did not accept the view that the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s was liberating women—to them, it was an extension of male oppression. The activities of “Women Against Pornography” live on today in the form of, for example, in the UK, the feminist group “Object!”, armed with their popular phrase “we object to objectification”.

Catherine MacKinnon argues that both pornography and “prostitution” (the two P's) perpetuate the domination of women by men; that not only are they the product of a patriarchal system, but a driving force within that system, reinforcing the idea that women exist to meet the sexual desires of men, that a woman's own sexual satisfaction does not matter, and that a woman's role is to submit to men's sexual demands. She and other radical feminists argue that the two P's cause harm not only to the women involved but to womankind more generally; contributing to men viewing women as sexual play-things, and, in doing so, feeding through to the rape and mistreatment of all women. According to MacKinnon (1993), pornography “deprives women of the right to express verbal refusal of an intercourse”:

“Pornography... is a form of forced sex, a practice of sexual politics, an institution of gender inequality. In this perspective, pornography, with the rape and prostitution in which it participates, institutionalises the

sexuality of male supremacy, which fuses the eroticisation of dominance and submission with the social construction of male and female. Gender is sexual. Pornography constitutes the meaning of that sexuality. Men treat women as whom they see women as being. Pornography constructs who that is. Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 197).

In other words, pornography is used "to train women to sexual submission" (MacKinnon, 1987, p. 188). Sex work itself is seen as "paid rape" (see e.g. Cawston, 2019; Bindel, 2020). According to Andrea Dworkin "[p]rostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body" and exists as a reflection of male supremacy:

"Male dominance means that the society creates a pool of prostitutes by any means necessary so that men have what men need to stay on top, to feel big, literally, metaphorically, in every way...Every man in this society benefits from the fact that women are prostituted whether or not every man uses a woman in prostitution...prostitution comes from male dominance" (Dworkin, 1993, pp. 9–10).

Armed with these ideas, the European Women's Lobby's "Abolitionist Principles" include the statement that "[t]he prostitution of women and girls constitutes a fundamental violation of women's human rights and a serious form of male violence against women" (European Women's Lobby, 2011). Similarly, the Nordic Model Now! group, which campaigns for "end demand" policies, argues that "the system of prostitution perpetuates the archaic practice of female sexual submission for male entertainment" (Nordic Model Now!, 2016, p. 8) that "feeds the punter's sense of entitlement and the sense that she has no rights" (Nordic Model Now!, 2016, p. 11).

Just as Marxism does not believe that exploitation can be resolved without tackling class, radical feminism does not believe that the exploitation of women can be resolved without confronting sex: "Sexuality is considered as the primary dynamic in the ordering of society" and "prostitution" is seen as playing an important role in "maintaining the dynamic" (Scoular, 2004, p. 345). The two P's are thought to instil the idea that men dominate and women acquiesce, and in a way that is glamorised and eroticised. As far as policy is concerned, radical feminism believes that it is hypocritical to, on the one hand, be pursuing an agenda of gender equality while, on the other, pursuing policies that decriminalise rather than clamp down on sex work. The ultimate goal is the complete elimination of sex work.

In sum, the feminist vein of sex work abolitionism focusses not only on what it sees as the exploitation of the individual sex worker, but also on the wider consequences of sex work for the perpetuation of a system—patriarchy—that

it holds responsible for the harms inflicted on womankind more generally (Bateman, 2019). Radical feminism perceives of all sex work as rape and exploitation: society makes a "false distinction between forced and voluntary prostitution" (Jeffries, 1997, p. 10; Nordic Model Now!, 2016, p. 4). But, as Berg (2020) highlights, in the framework of radical feminism, the "problem" with sex work is less about "damage" to sex workers' own well-being "but rather what happens when men impose this same treatment on respectable women outside the home and the brothel...The sex worker is not a person with her own claims for respectful, negotiated working conditions, but rather a metaphor to dramatise the harms" that other women face (Berg, 2020, p. 273). So, can a case be made that sex work is harmful to other women on the basis of which it should be abolished? A comparison with other forms of work can offer us some insight.

What About the Cleaning? And Who Cares?

What is really at the root of gender inequality? This is the question that must necessarily be asked when we seek to identify how we can best tackle it. Without knowing the correct cause, our policy solutions will be mis-targeted, potentially making things worse rather than better. As we have seen, according to radical feminism, the two P's—pornography and "prostitution"—feed men's sexual desires and feelings of superiority, generating lack of respect for—and mistreatment of—women in general. But, in addition to being considered "sex objects", women are also commonly assumed to be the default caregivers within society. Feminist economics identifies gendered assumptions about care as being central to gender inequality. So, if sex work is considered harmful for womankind by—supposedly—nurturing the belief that women are "sex objects", why does radical feminism not argue similarly in regard to society's even bigger army of female carers and cleaners? The parallel between sex work and care work raises a number of questions. Since *unpaid* care is commonly seen as responsible for "branding" women as the carers of society, why do sex work abolitionists focus on *paid-for* sex as being key to women being branded "sex objects"? Do abolitionists and radical feminists think that all care work should be for free, just as they think that all sex should be for free, in order to prevent women from being rendered some form of object for men's caring—as well as sexual—needs? And why is it that when we turn to the extensive feminist literature on the topic of care, we find no demand to "end demand" for care work's paid-for variety, and, instead, a movement to seek proper payment for its *unpaid* variety, along with better pay and conditions for *paid* care workers? Comparing sex work and care work is a useful way of teasing out the logic—or otherwise—of the "end demand" approach to sex work.

In 1975, an international campaign known as "Wages for Housework" served a notice to all governments: "We

clean your homes and factories. We raise the next generation of workers for you. Whatever else we may do, we are the housewives of the world.... We are serving notice to you that we intend to be paid for the work we do” (New York Wages for Housework Committee, 1975; Federici, 1975; Toupin, 2018). Since that time, an expanding literature within feminist economics has identified care as the central source of gender inequality (see e.g. Federici, 2012; Folbre, 2002). More recent empirical work finds that the unequal division of labour within the home contributes in important ways to the gender pay gap (International Labour Organisation, 2018; ONS, 2016). According to the International Labour Organisation (2018), the amount of unpaid care conducted globally is the equivalent of two billion people working full-time for nothing, and three-quarters of this unpaid care is carried out by women. The fact that care is considered a female responsibility affects the educational and work opportunities of women and girls, their ability to progress in the workplace, and their overall degree of financial independence. Not only are highly gendered expectations in terms of who conducts unpaid care central to the gap in earnings between men and women, so too is the way in which even paid care or domestic work is poorly remunerated, in part because of its characterisation as “women’s work”. In the UK, it is estimated that almost a half of care workers earn below “the living wage”, which is more than double the proportion for the economy as a whole (Dromey & Hochlaf, 2018).

Black feminism reveals an even deeper history of engagement with the “problem” of care (Berg, 2020). Here, exploitation has long been identified in the domain of domestic service, which comes in the form of zero or miserable pay, together with physical abuse and sexual exploitation. LaShawn Harris (2016) argues that, in the case of the USA, some domestic workers moved into sex work in preference to working in white homes. In fact, not only is there a history of physical and sexual abuse within domestic work, it is one that continues today (Berg, 2020; Harris, 1990). Moreover, while much of the discussion of international trafficking tends to focus on sex work, domestic slavery is also a significant part of the trafficking world. Global estimates of modern slavery suggest that 40 million people are victims of slavery, 25 million of which are in forced labour and 15 million of which are in forced marriage (International Labour Organisation, 2017). This means that there are more than five victims for every thousand people in the world. Of the 25 million in forced labour, 4.8 million are estimated to be in forced sexual exploitation and 16 million in other forms of private sector labour exploitation, including domestic work, agriculture and construction (International Labour Organisation, 2017).

However, when it comes to care work and domestic service, the solution offered to an extensive range of what

could be termed exploitation (from forced labour to lowly paid labour) is one of rights, recognition and unionisation. Premilla Nadasen (2015) presents the story of household workers of the world uniting. In Brazil, domestic workers formed a union, secured legal reforms and successfully lobbied for an ILO Convention on Domestic Workers (Blofield and Jokela, 2018). The gendered and highly damaging societal expectation that women are care givers is certainly not being tackled by a policy package of abolishing paid care workers (by criminalising those who employ carers or cleaners), or by aiming for a world in which all care and domestic labour is conducted for free. Similarly, the care a parent or guardian offers their child is not commonly thought to have been “diminished” by the availability of childcare, and in order that we can value those who cook a home-cooked meal, we have not sought to abolish take-away.

So, given their underlying similarities, why does radical feminism want to “end demand” for sex work in order to tackle gendered stereotypes, but does not argue for an equivalent approach when it comes to domestic and caring services?

First is the abolitionist claim that *all* sex workers—whether or not they claim to be voluntary—are victims, forced to cater to male sexual desire. In 2005, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women published a Survivors of Prostitution and Trafficking Manifesto. This contests “the idea that prostitution is simply an individual choice, or associated with sexual freedom, or glamorous, or a way out of poverty, or inevitable; on the contrary, it is a form of women’s inequality marked by exploitation and oppression” (Weiss, 2018, p. 439). But, as a member of the English Collective of Prostitutes once remarked: “The sex industry is not the only industry which is male-dominated and degrades women, but it is the industry where the workers are illegal and can least defend publicly our right to our job” (Nina Lopez-Jones, quoted in Zatz, 1997, p. 291). As we have already noted, domestic service is also a sector involving abuse and exploitation, and low (or no) pay is a constant feature of care work. So how do radical feminists differentiate sex work from other forms of potentially exploitative labour in a way that allows them to single it out for separate—abolitionist—treatment? According to Noah D. Zatz, “[n]one do this very well, but those who try tend to fall back on the same kind of normalising discourse...sex should be private and intimate, not commodified and part of public life” (Zatz, 1997, p. 288). In the words of Monica O’Connor, “sexual consent is not a commodity that...should be bought” (O’Connor, 2019, p. 3) and “certain aspects of human life are corrupted and demised if bought and sold in the market” (O’Connor, 2019, p. 108).

Zatz relates this way of thinking to a longer history, and what is in fact a central theme in the broader feminist literature, the division between public and private spheres: “in

hegemonic Euro-American culture, sexuality and money are thought of as things that cannot, do not, and/or should not mix. This separation is related at least in part to the attribution of money, commerce, and contract to the public realm of work and intimacy, desire, and pleasure to the private realm of familial and other affective relationships” (Zatz, 1997, p. 294). Sex work challenges this, and the “criminalization [of sex work] helps patrol the boundary between the sex/affective labor routinely assigned to and expected of women and practices deserving of the financial and status rewards of “work”” (Zatz, 1997, p. 287).

Writing from a liberal perspective, Martha Nussbaum (1999) also notes the way in which sex work crosses this cultural wall. Two centuries ago, so did receiving payment for a whole range of tasks, including acting, singing and poetry. She identifies two contributing factors to this disapproval of the exchange of a service for money: “aristocratic class prejudice and fear of the body and its passions” (Nussbaum, 1999, pp. 278–279). Accepting money “dirtied” and made less “pure” the service, while display of the body and its passions in a monetary sense was considered vulgar. However, while it is now deemed respectable to accept money in return for acting, singing, and poetry, that is still not the case with sex work. To understand why, Nussbaum compares sex work with six other jobs in which women “take money for bodily services”: plucking chickens, domestic service, a nightclub singer who takes requests, a philosopher, a skilled masseuse and a hypothetical “colonoscopy artist”, the last of which would involve using your own colon as a testing ground for the latest medical developments (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 281). Perhaps the closest to sex work in terms of intimate bodily intrusion would be the colonoscopy artist, but few of us would see it as “bad”. Nussbaum concludes that, when it comes to sex work, “the biggest difference consists in the fact that it is, today, more widely stigmatized”, and that this boils down to questions of what is and is not “moral” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 288). Abolitionism does nothing to challenge what Jane Scoular sums up as the “culturally specific processes that separate work from relationships of intimacy” and “the whore stigma, which...reflects deeply felt anxieties about women trespassing the dangerous boundaries between private and public” (Scoular, 2004, p. 346). If anything, it co-opts it.

None of this is to suggest that sex work is *always* the opposite of what radical feminism claims: subversive rather than culturally conformist, and liberating rather than exploitative. There are a wide variety of experiences and meanings for those involved in sex work. We must avoid “viewing prostitution as either inherently oppressive or as an expression of sexual freedom” (Scoular, 2004, p. 349). A sex worker’s financial situation, the legal system they face, and the cultural baggage—the degree of social stigma—that comes with it will affect that experience and meaning (Zatz, 1997). These things, however, are all made worse—not better—by criminalisation.

Indeed, according to Marxist feminists, radical feminists focus too much on sex and not enough on poverty. Zatz turns to Marx, for whom “[p]rostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *labourer*” (Zatz, 1997, pp. 287–288). Sex work certainly can be forced, coerced or involve little choice, but at the root of that is poverty, which is better addressed by the same kind of policy approach being pioneered in regard to domestic labour and care (Berg, 2020; Zatz, 1997). Interestingly, like Marxist feminists, liberal-leaning Martha Nussbaum seems to agree, arguing that “[radical] feminist theory may be insufficiently grounded in the reality of working-class lives and too focused on sexuality as an issue in its own right, as if it could be extricated from the fabric of poor people’s attempts to survive” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 278). Being a liberal thinker, for Nussbaum individual choice is key, and so when sex work becomes concerning is where the economic situation restricts choice: “This seems to me the truly important issue raised by prostitution” she concludes (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 296). Legal intervention to “end-demand” for paid sex does nothing to address the economic inequalities that lead many into sex work. As Nussbaum (1999) therefore argues, “the important thing to realize is that this is not an issue that permits us to focus on prostitution in isolation from the economic situation of women in a society generally. Certainly it will not be ameliorated by the criminalization of prostitution, which reduces poor women’s options still further. We may grant that poor women do not have enough options, and that society has been unjust to them in not extending more options while nonetheless respecting and honoring the choices they actually make in reduced circumstances” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 296). Not only does “end demand” not address underlying economic issues, it makes the situation worse, closing down and making more risky earning income from sex, and by making it more difficult for sex workers to collectivise (Zatz, 1997). Whereas radical feminists turn to the state for a solution, Marxist feminism, liberal feminism and Black feminism is much more sceptical. According to Alison Phipps (2020), the belief that the state can offer a solution—as opposed to making oppression worse—is associated with whiteness and other forms of privilege (Phipps, 2020, pp. 46–49).

So, what else might help explain why radical feminists and other “end demand” supporters are so intent on abolishing sex work but not care work, despite both contributing to the gendered stereotypes that it sees as responsible for gender inequality? It is, of course, notable that the army of sex workers is significantly smaller than the army of care workers and cleaners. It has been estimated that there are around 72,800 sex workers in the UK, the vast majority of whom are female (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2015). By contrast, there are more than 1.6 million people in the UK working in social care alone; 74% of these are directly providing care (Skills for Care, 2011, 2020). As with sex work, the vast majority are female: more than eighty percent of adult social care jobs are held by women (Skills for Care, 2020). If radical feminists were to apply the same “end demand”

approach to care, that would leave many people—on both the buying and selling sides of these exchanges—up in arms. Would you be happy to be rendered a criminal for placing your elderly parent in a care home, or for purchasing at home care or cleaning services? If a government adopted the “end demand” approach, what would happen to the votes of those millions of care workers and care buyers? In contrast to care workers, sex workers are in a clear minority within the workforce and, as such, radical feminists find it much easier to campaign for policies that “end demand” for their services. Furthermore, whilst as a society it is not necessarily deemed shameful to buy cleaning and caring services, many would be ashamed for other people to know that they purchased sex. One study of 110 Scottish men who have bought sex found, when asked, that 86% would be deterred by having their picture on a billboard and 84% having their picture in a local newspaper (Macleod et al., 2008, p. 27). Hence, we cannot expect a “buyer” lobby to emerge that supports sex workers; if it did, and based on what research is available on the clients of sex workers, it could well run into the millions. By contrast, when it comes to care work and domestic service, women themselves are big buyers. Berg has her own answer for why feminists are happy to support “end-demand” in sex work but not in the whole range of what might be termed domestic service tasks “because white women have always been bosses in this realm” (Berg, 2020, p. 269); it would be like turkeys voting for Christmas.

A further difference is that unlike care, sex is considered unnecessary. Abolitionist literature is clear that the idea that people have “sexual needs” that need to be fulfilled is a poor argument for maintaining sex work (Banyard, 2016). Conversely, often we cannot exist unless someone takes on jobs involving caring. Indeed, Susan Himmelweit defines care as “the provision of personal services to meet those basic physical and mental needs that allow a person to function at a socially determined acceptable level of capability, comfort and safety” (Himmelweit, 2007, p. 581). Dependency is a natural state of human existence: at some point we all need help from others. Hence, “ending demand” for carers would create a clear problem, impacting millions.

But the claim that sex work is unnecessary (unlike care) is not enough to justify abolition. After all, even if something is not necessary, it does not mean that it is not valuable; sex creates pleasure, and that’s worth something to the person receiving the stimulation and orgasm. If someone freely chooses to meet the associated demand, what is the problem? This therefore brings us to another difference between sex work and cleaning and caring that could serve to “justify” the abolition of the former but not the latter. The more one believes that sex—and certainly paid sex—is a “problem”, the more one can reconcile ending demand for sex work with not doing the same in regard to cleaning and care work, both of which, like sex work, could be argued to

be nurturing stereotypes that contribute to gender inequality. According to radical feminist Carole Pateman, sex work is “morally undesirable” (Pateman, 1983, p. 56). Shifting the Burden (2014), the UK Report which recommended changing the law to shift the burden of criminality onto sex buyers as opposed to sex sellers (the “end demand” approach), notes that “[l]egislation on prostitution is not value-free” and that it “sends a signal about what is, and what is not, acceptable” (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, 2014, p. 47). Radical feminists along with other supporters of sex work abolition and “end demand” wish to send the signal that the exchange of sex for money is not acceptable.

Unlike sex work, cleaning and caring are not commonly considered “immoral” at the individual level, at either the selling or buying end of the trade. Cleanliness is, of course, “next to godliness”, and care is, well, caring. Neither could therefore be seen as “wrong”. Despite the similarities between female care work and sex work in terms of gendered stereotypes, care work is considered both necessary and morally “good”. It is here, therefore, that we can find a crucial difference in approach in radical feminism towards the two forms of “work” (not that it recognises sex work as work). If sex workers were judged to be conducting valuable and respectable work, as is the case with care work, it is difficult to imagine how radical feminists would be pursuing an approach of “end demand” and abolition. While radical feminism attempts to escape the old-fashioned notion that individual sex workers are themselves immoral, it nevertheless aligns itself with a view that what sex work has to offer is morally undesirable. Indeed, Laite (2020) notes the similarities between “end demand” and the “conservative campaigns for moral reform” of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Comparing sex work with caring and cleaning reveals that implicit to the “end demand” approach is a long-standing set of moral beliefs. If, as a society, we were entirely comfortable with sex—and happy for people to choose to monetise their bodies as well as their brains—it is difficult to imagine why a policy approach which involves criminalising those who pay for sex, strangling the client-base of those who sell sex (of whatever gender), would be appealing. Moreover, if we were simply concerned about people being forced into sex work through poverty, then we would be emphasising worker rights and encouraging workers to collectivise, as well as tackling the inflexibility of the welfare state, lack of access to adult education and employment opportunities, rather than strangling demand for sex. And, if we were concerned with trafficking, which occurs both within and beyond the sex trade, including in the form of domestic slavery, we would be examining our border policies. The fact that the policy approach favoured by radical feminists is to strangle demand is indicative of a view that women should

not be selling sex, and that sex should not be open for purchase. Society would, apparently, be better off without the exchange of sex for money, and gender equality would be better served without—rather than with—sex workers. As the name of the San Francisco sex worker group COYOTE suggested to radical feminists and other sex work abolitionists as far back as the 1970s: it's time to Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics (Weiss, 2018, p. 302).

In 1913, Teresa Billington-Greig argued that penalties imposed even at the buyer as opposed to seller end were enacted for reasons of a warm moral glow, rather than in view of the evidence:

“those responsible for it may have obtained ease of mind, the selfish satisfaction of having accomplished something. But that is merely the measure of their folly... The Fathers of the old church made a mess of the world by teaching the Adam story and classing women as unclean; the Mothers of the new Church are threatening the future by the whitewashing of women and the doctrine of the uncleanness of men” (Billington-Greig, 1913, p. 446).

Radical feminists today may—like the Victorian moralists—feel a warm moral glow by throwing their weight behind the “abolition” of sex work, but warm moral glows do not compensate for the harm imposed on real people. As we will see in what follows, not only does feminist resistance to decriminalisation increase as opposed to reduce the harm that sex workers face, it also contributes to the harm which the “cult of female modesty” inflicts on women beyond sex work.

Sex Work Abolitionism: the “Cult of Female Modesty” in Disguise

For centuries, women's bodies have been seen as sinful, and a woman's respect, worth and value rested delicately on her bodily modesty: on where a woman found herself on the continuum between “good girl” and “whore”. Bodily modesty was deemed necessary both for individual women to protect themselves from harm—by keeping their “temptations” under wraps—and for wider social order. Immodest women were thought to provoke sin, leading to a breakdown of society. As such, they were singled out, punished and stigmatised. Patriarchy benefited: it was able to take what the “whores” had to offer while at the same time limiting their power, and it gave men a useful bargaining chip that could be used against all women, as we see in “Susanna and the Elders”. As Karras (1996, p. 108) notes, for a long time, “[t]he arena of sexuality was the only one in which women could compete with men in importance... and it was the one in which men most feared they would not be able to control

them”. Associating women's bodies with sin and immorality was one way to take back control, while characterising women as temptresses allowed men to behave in whatever way they liked, guilt-free. Men could abuse and mistreat women while taking the “moral high ground”, spinning the punishment as deserved and in the best interest of wider society. Women's bodies were fair game.

When it comes to women themselves, it is difficult to see how they could ever “win” from this “cult of female modesty”. As MacKinnon (1989, p. 110) herself notes, “Virtuous girls, virginal, are “attractive,” up on those pedestals from which they must be brought down; unvirtuous girls, whores, are “provocative”, so deserve whatever they get”. The only way for women to earn popular respect was to abide by the modesty norms, which meant marking themselves out from other women; engaging in slut-shaming. This type of world is not one that has ever proved to be commensurate with gender equality. Indeed, where such modesty norms are most clearly practiced in the world today, one finds unequal opportunities and unequal rights for women. But, the “cult of female modesty” lives on in the Western World today, albeit holding women to a different “modesty” standard. Wendy Shalit's best-selling American book calls for “A Return to Modesty” (2014) and “Purity Culture” is popular within the growing Evangelical movement, something which has been linked to rape culture and abuse within these communities (Allison, 2021; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Moon & Reger, 2014). Gabby Aosse writes that “[h]ip Feminist campaigns like Free the Nipple only encourage a gullible behavior of disrespect for our own bodies, leading to everyone else around us disrespecting our bodies as well... Muslim woman get respect and are looked at beyond aesthetics; they are actually taken seriously in their communities” (Aosse, 2017). But this renewed emphasis on female modesty is not only a feature of religious groups, it also manifests itself in feminist circles: in the lack of respect radical feminism offers to “immodest women”, and most notably sex workers. As we will further see in what follows, this is visible, firstly, in the language employed within the abolitionist lobby, and, secondly, in the dismissal of sex workers' voices.

According to the artist Claire Bentley-Smith, described as “working closely” with the Leeds-based UK organisation “Save Our Eyes”, an organisation which successfully challenged the street sex work managed zone, sex workers are “broken dolls” (Hyde, 2018). Bentley-Smith has therefore built sculptures made from rubbish, consisting of broken doll heads, monopoly money, drug refuse, or dirty bits of discarded underwear (Hyde, 2018). As Lister and Campbell (2018) responded: “They are not broken doll heads, monopoly money, drug refuse, or dirty bits of discarded underwear – the women working on the street in Leeds are human beings”. As Gemma Ahearne has tweeted: “When I was a dancer aged 18–23, people spoke to me like rubbish. They spoke about

dancers as...polluting. I vowed I would never let another dancer feel like that. The abolitionists are pushing ‘purity culture’”. Just as Claire Bentley-Smith compares sex workers with “broken dolls” and rubbish, Natasha Walter refers to women more generally who could be thought of as immodest as “living dolls” (Walter, 2011). Carole Pateman claims that “[p]rostitution remains morally undesirable” (Pateman, 1983, p. 56); even though she characterises sex workers as victims as opposed to immoral beings, the fact that she cannot find any value in or respect for the work sex workers perform (in fact, radical feminism will not even recognise sex work as work), speaks volumes. Without realising it, one victim of sexual abuse in the workplace sums up the general disrespect which sex workers are afforded by society: “I felt like a prostitute, an utter disappointment to myself, my parents, my friends” (Berg, 2020, p. 272). As Zatz suggests, perhaps it is “not sex work per se” that is the problem but instead “the particular cultural and legal production of a marginalised, degraded prostitution that ensures its oppressive characteristics while acting to limit the subversive potential that might attend a decriminalised, culturally legitimised form of sex work” (Zatz, 1997, p. 291). Hence the call made by sex workers in the World Charter for Prostitutes’ Rights “to change social attitudes which stigmatize and discriminate against prostitutes and ex-prostitutes of any race, gender or nationality” (see Weiss, 2018, p. 304).

Throughout radical feminist and abolitionist discussion of sex work one finds use of the phrase “buying women”. For example, the 2008 report published by the Women’s Support Project was titled “A Research Report Based on Interviews with 110 Men Who *Bought* Women in Prostitution” (Macleod et al., 2008; emphasis added). Julie Bindel (2020) writes of “punters, many of whom travel from outside of the city, are able to buy a woman with the same ease with which they might pick up a burger”. Carole Pateman writes that “when a prostitute contracts out the use of her body she is...selling herself in a very real way” (Pateman, 1988, p. 207). Alison Jaggar writes that “since, unlike a man, she [a woman] is defined largely in sexual terms, when she sells her sexuality she sells herself” (Jaggar, 1991, p. 274).

But, as Zatz responds, when a female sex worker sells sex to a male client: “Possibly she is selling his image of her sexuality—but this image is not herself... There is no more reason to think that sex workers cannot separate their work from their sex life than there is to think that therapists cannot separate their work from their emotional life” (Zatz, 1997, p. 298). And, as *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* makes clear, “feminists have to realise that all work involves selling some part of your body. You might sell your brain, you might sell your back, you might sell your fingers for typewriting. Whatever it is that you do you are selling one part of your body. I choose to sell my body the way I want to and I choose to sell my vagina” (Pheterson, 1989, p. 146). While radical feminists suggest that men see

women as “sex objects”, their own use of language suggests something similar when it comes to sex workers. The notion that buying *sex* is equivalent to buying a *woman*, seems to suggest that radical feminists themselves—somewhat ironically—see the women involved as just sex objects. Of course, by reducing a sex worker’s identity down to one single identifying feature—sex—radical feminism is, conveniently, able to escape the uncomfortable comparison with care work altogether (Scoular, 2004, p. 345).

In addition to its use of language, a further way in which radical feminisms’ disrespect for sex workers manifests itself is in its dismissal of sex workers’ own voices. Let us first of all take a look at a couple of these voices.

In the words of the sex work activist Laura Lee (2014):

“I don’t ask you to like what I do ... what I do ask for is to be allowed to do my job in safety and to be treated with dignity and respect...there is no greater feeling than meeting a disabled person who has never been with a woman and affording them their first orgasm. To bring such happiness and fulfilment into someone’s life is something I treasure. Sex work is work, just like any other. And those of us in the industry deserve support and respect—not to be reviled and stigmatized”

And, as Kirio Birks (2018), a defender of Grid Girls, notes:

“[S]urely a woman has a right to be the object of somebody else’s desire if she wants and surely it doesn’t matter if she is being paid for it?...Rather than sending Grid Girls off into the wilds of unemployment, or providing one less place for would-be models, a far better solution would have been to make sure that they’re unionised, properly paid, and protected. If they are, then they have empowered other women to take up work they might otherwise have avoided, in a safer way.”

Whether or not you yourself can imagine wanting to be a sex worker, these voices should be allowed to speak for themselves. Once, I could not imagine how any woman would want to pose or protest naked; now I do it myself. How can I, therefore, assume to know the mind of every other woman? How can I assume to know what is better for another woman than she herself does? How can I discount the voices of individual sex workers who demand rights and recognition, not “end demand”?

Here, however, radical feminists think they do have just cause to override sex workers’ voices. Their first defence is that of “socialisation”, or what a Marxist would call “false consciousness”. From Simone de Beauvoir (1949) to Natasha Walter (2011), feminist theorists have long argued that women are socially conditioned to behave in a way that benefits the patriarchy. For some abolitionists, this carries the implication

that sex workers who speak out against the “end demand” approach can be conveniently ignored; they are presumed to be speaking on behalf of “pimps and punters” rather than for themselves. Hence, while prominent Labour Members of the UK Parliament, such as Sarah Champion and Jess Philipps, more normally emphasise the importance of listening to workers, they do not do so when it comes to sex workers, who are assumed to be victims rather than “workers”.

But, isn't it intellectually elitist for radical feminists to assume that they know better than sex workers themselves? As Zatz notes, “attributions of false consciousness carry tremendous drawbacks. For starters, they are radically undemocratic, setting up a privileged group (usually intellectuals) to interpret the experience of others for them” (Zatz, 1997, p. 296). Isn't the whole point of feminism to listen to the voices of women, particularly those seen as at the margins of society? As one active member of #Labour4Decrim (a group tied to the UK Labour Party, supporting sex workers and allies), tweeted in December 2020, “I'm sick of women labour members and trade unionists slapping themselves on the back and saying that women need to be heard and then ignoring and talking over sex workers who are trying to do that”. Ensuring that all women have voices and choices should be the feminist goal, and that goal can be achieved while welcoming sex workers, recognising their voice and ensuring they have the same rights as any other worker. The policy package which sex workers themselves favour—a three-pronged approach of decriminalisation, poverty-reduction and tackling borders—is one that can both reduce the number of non-consensual sex workers and also avoid hurting consensual sex workers. Once one entertains the possibility that sex work involves a whole range of experiences, and that these experiences are shaped by the law, by poverty and by stigma, it is a policy approach that, on a theoretical as well as practical level, trumps the blunter “end demand” approach.

Not only does radical feminism reduce sex workers' voices and demands down to the “pimp lobby”, it, albeit subtly, prioritises male experiences ahead of female ones. Bindel (2017a, b) argues that many of the organisations supporting or campaigning for decriminalisation are backed by the “pimp lobby”, and so we can effectively ignore them. Despite the evidence Amnesty International received from numerous sex workers, the fact that a man who owns an escort business spoke in favour of decriminalisation at one of their annual general meetings is, according to Bindel, reason to ignore Amnesty's extensive work showing that decriminalisation is better for sex workers. She also noted that: “[a] legal challenge to the law in Northern Ireland is being led by Laura Lee, a “sex workers' rights” campaigner – whose backers include the pimp Peter McCormick. I hope Lee loses” (Bindel, 2017a, b). Lee was a sex worker and sex work activist who wanted to reverse Northern Ireland's

implementation of “end demand” because it made her feel less safe. But, because McCormick would benefit, this is thought to be enough to override Lee's own safety.

In regard to the impact of decriminalisation in New Zealand, Bindel (2017a, b) writes that: “Views differ as to whether decriminalisation has made the situation better or worse. One report, published five years after decriminalisation, claimed it had little impact on the number of people working in the sex trade but had offered some safeguards to children and others. But the personal testimony of women who have been prostituted provides evidence that brothel owners and punters have benefited more than the women have”. She nevertheless does not support New Zealand's decriminalisation. Despite the fact that it has resulted in greater “safeguards”, because brothel owners and punters have benefitted, it would have been better, apparently, if it hadn't happened.

So, should we more generally enact policy in a way that ensures that what are seen as male “aggressors” don't benefit, even if it comes at a cost to women? Male rapists might benefit from the fact that we live in a country where women are free to leave their homes unaccompanied, unlike in communities which practice *purdah*. Does that mean that women's freedom to roam should come second? That's what Bindel's approach to sex work would seem to suggest, though her well known objection to police advice for women to “stay indoors” when the Yorkshire Ripper was on the loose reveals a degree of inconsistency. Surely, the interests of men—even criminal men or men we might consider “immoral”—should not override the voices and interests of women? If sex workers prefer decriminalisation, that should speak for itself.

In numerous ways, and across the world, the daily life of women is dictated by the way heterosexual men are assumed to “see”; by the “male gaze”. It is the male way of viewing and experiencing the world that overrides what a woman herself would like to do and how she herself witnesses the world. If she wants to cool down, whether by removing her headscarf or her bikini top, that comes second to concerns about how a man might view her uncovered body. If she wants to show off her personality, rejecting conformity, that is, once again, overridden by how a man might interpret her state of dress. If she wants to protest naked, that must come second to how men might “benefit” from the sight of her body. As Emily Channell writes, “[m]ainstream women's organizations and many academic feminists see Femen's topless actions as simply giving men more of what they want—easily accessible women's bodies” (Channell, 2014, p. 613). On that basis, the tactics of not only Femen but also Pussy Riot, #freethenipple and my own activism are deemed “unfeminist” (Channell, 2014; Rivers, 2017; Matich et al., 2019). Hence why Tim Young of the Fox TV channel can tweet in response to my protests that “[t]here's nothing more

anti-feminist than having to strip naked desperate for a man's attention". The priority given to the male gaze means that a woman is judged on something other than her own terms, and is expected to dress and behave in a way that is dictated by how men might think and feel; if men might benefit from a particular action, then a woman should not do it—even if she wants to do it. Limiting men's "benefit" is more important than a woman acting in her own self interest.

Living our lives in a way that is *limited* by the male gaze as a means to *escape* the male gaze would seem to be a pyrrhic victory. The solution to women being viewed as "sex objects" is to be found in changing the way we as a society judge women, rather than in changing (and restricting) women's behaviour. When I employ someone to move my heavy academic books, it is typically a man who arrives at my door, but that does not mean that I objectify men as existing to fulfil my muscle-based needs, seeing them a "cart horses". Where men choose to see women as sexual objects, it is they—and not women themselves—who are to blame. Just because some women do not cover their bodies is no excuse for people to think that women are "just bodies", and just because some women sell sex is no excuse for men thinking that women are simply "sexual objects" available for the taking. After all, I'm perfectly able to respect a man whatever he is or isn't wearing; it would, to my mind, be superficial to judge another person based on their state of dress. And I, for one, am also perfectly capable of respecting people who sell sex. Similarly, just because a woman makes you a coffee in a cafe, or makes your hotel bed, does not mean that you should assume that all women exist to serve your basic needs. If men feel sexually entitled to women's bodies, and if women's respect and worth hangs on something as flimsy as a piece of cloth, we really do have a problem, but that problem is not uncovered women or sex workers: should women *really* have to cover up—or only have sex for free—in order to earn respect? The problem is in the collective beliefs of a society that judges women based on their bodily modesty, with those deemed "whores" expected to shoulder the blame for what happens in the heads of (some) men. As Priscilla Alexander has elsewhere pointed out, abolitionist feminists internalise the notion that the "whore" is "the cause of women's pain", and women will never be free until they are no longer afraid of this very word (Alexander, 1997, p. 83). What we find in radical feminism is the goal of completely abolishing sex work, the ultimate form of "whore-phobia".

Perhaps, however, this argument is best made by turning to sex workers' own voices. Let's begin with a letter which a sex worker sent to the American group Women Against Pornography, now housed in the Schlesinger Library archive at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University:

"I recently heard one of your members say that porn films caused rape. I work in sex films. I don't think

that women who appear sexy, either in film or in person are to blame for rape. The blame lies with the rapist—so let's not make excuses for his crime... To say that looking at a sexy picture makes a normal, healthy man go out and rape is crazy. Most of the men I meet would not force themselves on me, and the ones who would, would do so even if they never saw an X rated film" (Exhibited at Museum of City of New York in 2018, courtesy of Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University).

The same sex worker notes that she and her colleagues face violence of a sort ignored by the feminist group: violence from the authorities, which takes the form of "police violence every night". She adds that "you work hand in hand" with these authorities under the same banner of "cleaning up" the streets. The Yorkshire Ripper, who murdered numerous sex workers in the north of England in the 1970s and early 1980s, also claimed to be "cleaning up the streets" (Summers, 2008). As Roberts (1992) and Lowman (2000) have shown, "whore stigma" and the "discourse of disposal" fuels the violent treatment and murder of sex workers. Kinnell (2008) documents the way in which sex workers are portrayed as "social pollutants" and equated with rubbish. As Cunningham and Sanders (2017) conclude: "Only with a combination of anti-stigma work alongside meaningful legal and policy change that prioritizes sex worker safety can there be any hope of addressing the tragedy of sex worker homicide". As Laverte (2017) writes:

"There is a lack of understanding that first and foremost, it is social prejudices about prostitution that render it difficult for us to protect ourselves. That is because they lower the threshold to use violence against us – among clients, among the police, among everyone"

This same stigma affects the ability of law enforcement to catch those who are engaging in exploitation within the sex sector. The fear of being "outed" is a common fear, as a result of which many cases of abuse and exploitation go unreported (Payne, 2014). As Belinda Brooks-Gordon (2016) writes:

"[E]xploiters can only be held to account with an increased chance of being caught. Currently, the likelihood of being caught is low because sex workers are so stigmatized they are reluctant to report offences. Decriminalization is an effective way to ensure that exploiters are more likely to be held to account (Barnet, 2004), as is making violence against sex workers a hate crime."

As Julia Laite notes of the "end demand" approach, it is "an ideal way to appear to crack down on prostitution

without appearing to crack down on the women involved”. In reality, “[t]he legal stigma of selling sex might be removed by a law that criminalizes clients and only clients, but the social stigma of engaging in the sex industry—even if it is claimed to be a choice made by an adult woman—still remains” and, as such, “end demand” still “maintains the age-old position that prostitution is inherently morally wrong” (Laite in McCarthy et al., 2015).

The “cult of female modesty” does not serve women well, whether sex workers or not. Not only does violence towards sex workers go unreported because of stigma and associated reputational fears, so too does abuse of nonsex workers in communities where the modesty cult is particularly strong. Zakaria et al. (2020) note that “[s]exual violence often goes unreported in Pakistan, as victims risk being cast out by their parents, are forced to marry their rapists or are killed over the perceived injury to their families’ honor”. In recent years, stories of rape and murder of women in India and Pakistan have proliferated. On 1 December 2019 a female student in Pakistan was forcibly taken from her car by a group of five men. Here were just some of the responses (Chaturvedi & Niaz, 2019):

“Jab mithayi ko khula chorro ge to makhyan zaroor ayen gi” (If you leave the sweet box open, it will inevitably attract flies).

“Ye to hona hi tha, kapre to dekho” (This was inevitable, look at what she is wearing).

“Well done kidnappers... Jo log apni bachio ko be lagaam chor dete hain. They deserve this” (Those who leave their daughters unconstrained deserve this).

This suggests that the problem is not “immodest” women but those who deem women to be unworthy based on what they judge to be “immodest” behaviour; those who, as a result, see women as ripe for attack and punishment. Closer to home, and as Allison (2021) shows in her book *#Church-Too*, the “purity culture” that exists within Evangelical Christianity “upholds abuse” within American communities.

So, in sum, are sex workers, pornography and scantily clad women (including myself) really what causes harm to womankind? Is abolishing pornography and “prostitution” really the best approach for tackling gender inequality? If “immodest” women and sexualised images of women were central to gender inequality, why are countries like Iran and Pakistan not at the top of the gender equality rankings? Perhaps it is because what causes most damage to womankind is not women who wander around scantily clad or who sell sex, but, instead, what happens in people’s minds: the social belief that a woman’s value rests on her physical modesty. It is *this* belief that not only causes harm to sex workers—causing clients to mistreat them and limiting their options to speak out for fear of their reputation—but that leads to men’s guilt-free mistreatment of women who

they more generally judge to be “trashy”. In response to one of my naked protests, Deborah Kurbjuweit, who graduated from Berkeley, tweeted that I was fat and needed to lose weight, and then followed up with: “The body is sacred until you decide to give it over to gawking, opinionated onlookers. Then you get what you deserve”. This attitude—one in which immodest women are fair game who “get what they deserve” is the ultimate problem, and it is a problem rooted in minds, not in immodesty. It is this same modesty cult that results in so many of the policies and practices that hurt women across the world. Those policies include controlling women’s travel, where they work, and their clothing, all to supposedly “protect” them from mistreatment. It also includes social practices that involve cutting off women’s genitals, compulsory virginity testing and “honour killings”. Radical feminism should be challenging the modesty cult, not contributing to it with its insistence that sex workers are not welcome in the feminist utopia.

On one level, feminism of course rejects the idea that a woman’s worth hangs on her body. But, at the same time, it nevertheless judges women based on what they do with that body, seeing gender inequality as the result of using that body in “immodest” ways. Of course, so as not to appear as if one is blaming women themselves for the resultant gender inequality, immodest women have to be cast as unwilling victims. It is simply inconceivable that any woman would choose to be a sex worker if you believe that a woman’s value rests on her bodily modesty; but, once we escape from the “cult of female modesty”, sex workers voices start to make sense, and the idea of “abolishing” them is revealed for what it is. That is, a morally-driven and intellectually elitist project in which a group of “clever” women are ganging up to deny women on the margins of society the rights and freedoms that they themselves benefit from. It is a battle in which women who monetise their brains are denying others the freedom to monetise their bodies.

For centuries, men have regulated and restricted what women can do with their bodies and with their brains. Over the last century, women have taken great strides in terms of their ability to use their brains as they wish. However, the same cannot be said of their bodies. Show too much of that body, and you’ll be accused—as I so often am accused—of objectifying and sexualising yourself, of “setting feminism back a hundred years” and of “embarrassing” womankind. And, whilst freely making money from your brain is to be celebrated, making money from your body is, apparently, not. Ultimately, isn’t it inconsistent to allow women to both uncover and make money from their brains but not to uncover or make money from their bodies? A good chunk of modern day—radical—feminism looks increasingly hypocritical, intellectually elitist and unfair. It has far too many overlaps with historic moralistic-driven campaigns to abolish sex work, and with those who persist in the modern day with blaming society’s problems on the immodest behaviour of women.

Conclusion

Since the story of Eve tempting Adam, women's bodies have been associated with sin: the nude was rude and—through its ability to engender lust—the female form was seen as particularly problematic, even as the root of evil. A woman who revealed more of her body than was customary was seen as devaluing her worth and so lost her community's respect. So too did a woman, unlike a man, who engaged in “too much” sexual activity. In Britain, this arguably reached its peak in the Victorian era. Even suffragettes adopted the supposed virtue of “purity” as part of their weaponry, embedding it in the white stripe that formed part of their tricolour branding. Jumping forward a century or more, many feminists seem to be returning to the same ideals, taking the view that women who reveal too much of their body or present themselves in a sexual way are “objectifying themselves” to the benefit of men. We tell our daughters that they must abide by certain modesty norms if they are to be respected in the same way as a man: as a brain and a person and not as “a body”. We instruct them not to behave “like whores”.

Rather than fighting the menace that is the “cult of female modesty”, there is an illiberal element within modern day feminism that has effectively co-opted it and employs its flawed reasoning to not only justify denying sex workers their bodily autonomy but to implicitly blame sex workers for the gender inequality which all women face. While women's bodies have always been a “battleground”, what is ironic is that feminists themselves can be increasingly found on the front lines of attack. While the mantra “my body my choice” is applied to some things, its application is far from consistent. While feminists can regularly be found defending women's ability to control their fertility, they can also be found attacking women's freedom to dress as they wish, along with the rights of those who not only reveal but monetise their bodies. Implicit is a view that while it is perfectly acceptable—even to be encouraged—for a woman to “show off” and monetise her brain, it is not acceptable to do the same with her body. If a woman does, it can only be—we are told—because she is either desperate or is not in her right mind, and she must be forced out of this mindset so as to prevent indignity and harm to other women. If only women covered up and if only they were selling their brains not their bodies, gender inequalities could, apparently, be tackled.

If women's respect and worth does hang on something as flimsy as a piece of cloth, and whether they accept money in return for sex, then we really do have a problem. That problem, however, is not with uncovered women or sex workers. Acting as if it is—enacting policies that control the bodily freedoms of these women—not only fails to help, it will make the problem worse, giving credence to the modesty cult. If any women do deserve blame for gender inequality it is not sex

workers or scantily clad women but, instead, those who propagate the view that a woman's worth, respect and value hangs on her body; those who believe that women who uncover are “trashy” and that sex workers are “whores”. Ironically, these same women will tell you that they are fighting against the view that a woman's worth hangs on her body, while at the same time pouring shame and scorn in a way that causes the guilt-free mistreatment of sex workers and numerous others.

Only if feminism faces up to—and challenges—its modesty-loving tendencies can we build a world in which all women, sex workers and others, are treated with greater respect. The radical feminist utopia is one in which sex workers have been banished. My utopia is instead one in which women are free to monetise their brain or their body (or both), with those who monetise their body being treated no differently to those who monetise their brain, with equal respect and equal rights. The harm which sex workers face results not only from bad sex laws that leave them operating in the shadows, but from a deep-rooted social belief that immodest women are “trashy” and so undeserving of respect. Sadly, it is this very attitude that radical feminists seem to be complicit in, an attitude which is itself at the root not only of violence towards sex workers but towards women more generally. Confronting the “cult of female modesty” can have a transformative effect in reducing the harm experienced by women in and beyond sex work.

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