

Prostitution and Its Impact on Youth: Violence, Domination and Inequality

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Abstract

While the debates on prostitution usually focus on the different legislative approaches or the so-called choices of persons in prostitution, this article wants to give light to an invisible aspect of the system of prostitution: its impact on youth. Through research, data and facts, we want to show that it is urgent to listen to young women's voices as they are detrimentally affected by an industry based on violence, domination and inequality.

Based on a study conducted on young people in the South of France, at the borders with Spanish prostitution clubs, outcomes and analysis clearly demonstrate that prostitution is not only a form of male violence against women, it is also a system and an industry that contribute to gender inequality, to an unequal and negative representation of sexuality for young people, and to reduced choices in sexuality. Its impacts are far more detrimental than we can see, because they are invisible and entrenched in mentalities. Today, young people, and especially young women, are directly targeted by the system of prostitution. Rape culture, economic conditions, migration paths and sexual violence in the childhood are part of the root causes which explain the highest vulnerability of youth to the sex industry. Youth has become a strong commercial value for the sex industry and for the men buying sex; the sex industry does not discriminate on age and uses the existing laws tolerating pimping and prostitution to continue to flourish. The article points out that despite the politically correct trend which supports a neo-liberal approach to prostitution, young people are taking a stance against the sex industry and are strongly supporting the Nordic model approach; this raises an important question—Are we ready to listen to them?

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While the debates on prostitution usually focus on the different legislative approaches or the so-called choices of persons in prostitution, this article wants to give light to an invisible aspect of the system of prostitution: its impact on youth. Through research, data and facts, we want to show that it is urgent to listen to young women's voices as they are detrimentally affected by an industry based on violence, domination and inequality.

Impact of Prostitution on Youth and Sexuality

In 2013, a study was conducted with young French people aged between 17 and 35 years, living in the South of France, at the border with Spain, close to La Jonquera, a city where prostitution clubs have flourished. The central question was the following: Does the normalization of prostitution contribute to a positive representation of sexuality by youth, to respect between women and men, to more choices for youth in sexuality?¹

First, the research found out that prostitution is part of the popular culture of youth. Prostitution is an integral part of the life, knowledge, exchange and mentality of young people, and it therefore impacts them directly. At the age of 12–15 years, young people talk a lot about the prostitution clubs: they know the names of the different clubs, the prices, the practical aspects and the type of practices provided inside. This diffused and widespread knowledge of prostitution fuels into the imagery and fantasies of young people, their representation of sexuality and of the relationships between women and men.

When it comes to young men, prostitution conveys values and norms about male sexuality. It plays a role in the rites of passage into the status of an adult and it is common to hear young men say things like: 'For his 18th birthday, his friends took him to the club; after that he was an adult, a real man.' But most of all, the presence of prostitution brings an obligation for young men to go to the clubs. Some of them explain that the experience was not as exciting as expected: 'I felt dirty; it is not so much the act, but the conditions. It is the context of seeing many persons around you who don't care about you. It is really like a factory.' Going to these prostitution clubs becomes a heteronormative activity, answering to social and family pressure. On a TV interview, a mother says: 'The one who is not going, it is not normal.' Young men have to prove that they are heterosexuals and they have to pass the test of a form of masculinity based on power over women and paying for sex.

When it comes to young women, prostitution also functions as a powerful tool of social control, of their sexuality and appearance, but also of their roles and life. In particular, it conveys two strong opposite injunctions: Don't be a 'whore', but be sexually good. In an environment where prostitution is geographically close and omnipresent in the everyday conversation, the first concern for young women

is to make sure that they do not look like prostituted women. Thus, they take care of the way they dress, avoiding clothes that would resemble the style of prostituted women. At the same time, they have to be good wives and girlfriends and be able to satisfy the 'sexual needs' of their partners. Prostituted women are seen as rivals, and young women feel that they need to equal them both in terms of appearance and sexual performance.

Young men play with the whole spectrum of prostitution to reinforce this double social diktat on their female partners. They clearly make a distinction between their sisters and mothers, and the women in the clubs and streets of La Jonquera: 'Girls are there for prostitution, this is the way they are, so it's possible.' While some young men use prostitution as a blackmail tool to get sexual acts from their girlfriend, others use prostitution as the solution to their 'sexual needs' when they want specific sex acts: 'He told me that he needs sodomy, but that he can't do it with me. He says you will give me children so you are too good for this. He said that he'll go to the prostitutes, they are dirty for this.' In this context, prostitution makes it more difficult for women to express their equality with men when it comes to their expression of sexuality, their affectionate and sexual life.

The presence of prostitution clubs leads to several negative impacts on young people. First, it reinforces the idea that boys and men have so-called 'irrepressible sexual needs' that need to be solved through prostitution. This myth also supports the other myth that prostitution helps to reduce rape rates.

More importantly, prostitution acts as a tool for the social control of young people's sexuality, reducing the freedom and diversity of choices. For example, young women say that they have to be wise about their sexual behaviours: A young woman with several sexual partners is seen as a 'whore', worse than a prostituted person in a club; because she is having sex for pleasure, not against money, she is condemned for her attitude and not respected, both by women and men.

Social pressure obliges young women to behave according to the male values and representations of gender roles. For example, several young women express their distress at not being as beautiful as the women in the clubs; some say that are ashamed of their body, and they would want to change it. We see here the reality of a persistent sexist system where women's value depends on their appearance, while men's appearance is not questioned. It is even taken for granted that it is any man's right to have access to the most beautiful women: 'They can choose; if they can't find a woman on the street or in a dance club, it's easy, they pay and they've got it'; 'They can get women, splendid women.' Prostitution clearly sanctions male domination and the commodification of women's sexuality.

Finally, the normalization of prostitution promotes the values of the consumerist society: Everything can be bought. Young people overwhelmingly use the framing of trade and consumption when talking about prostitution: Women are 'the daydream object', 'it is a factory', 'there is a lot of choice', 'they propose many things', you can negotiate, you can 'own' one or several women, 'it is something more: you have your girlfriend, but you also have those women, so you need to go and see'. The language of trade makes it possible to hide the reality of the violence that prostitution is. Women become products:

When we, French guys, go to make the most of the girls in La Jonquera, we don't think about all this, we are buyers. One goes to buy eggs from chicken which are in life conditions for chicken... We eat them anyway and that's it... It is the consumer society, we consume and even if behind there are wrong things happening, for the prostituted women it is the same. It is the consumer society.

This study clearly demonstrates that prostitution is not only a form of male violence against women, it is also a system and an industry that contributes to gender inequality, to an unequal and negative representation of sexuality for young people, and to reduced choices in sexuality. Its impacts are far more detrimental than we can see, because they are invisible and entrenched in mentalities. This is why a good legislation is urgent because laws set norms and these norms will have a direct impact on the youth.

Prostitution Markets and Youth

Today, young people, and especially young women, are directly targeted by the system of prostitution. First, the rape culture we live in makes it possible to normalize the commodification of women's bodies. Rape culture is defined by Emilie Bushwald, author of 'Transforming a Rape Culture' as

a complex set of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm... In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life, inevitable. (Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth, 2005 [1993])

Today, sexualization of girls and women is everywhere: women are depicted and shown as objects in music videos, video games, movies, advertising. This is the environment in which young people grow up, and which sends them clear messages about unequal roles and possibilities for women and men.

Moreover, young people are more vulnerable to the sex industry because of the economic conditions they live in. The austerity measures have hit them directly, they face poverty, refugee youth is left with no resources, and some young people flee their homes, schools or institutions because of different problems and end up in the streets. Exorbitant university fees push students to register as escorts on specialized websites. We have seen recently several countries where pimping websites were proposing to female students to meet a 'sugar daddy' to pay for their studies (Rodriguez, 2017).

Finally, we know that violence in childhood plays a role in facilitating the entry into prostitution. There is still a lot of sexual violence perpetrated in childhood, all over the world, and the prostitution markets just make the most of this vulnerability to attract and exploit young people.

In prostitution, the youth has a very strong commercial value. The best example can be given by the current situation experienced by women trafficked from Nigeria to Italy: In the boats where they are squeezed, the youngest ones are placed in the middle because their commercial value is higher and they should be protected from any sinking (*The Guardian*, 2016). In more recent years, there has been a significant decrease in the age of the girls arriving in Italy: Prior to 2014, the average age was 16–18, this is now closer to an average of 14–16 (European Network of Migrant Women [ENOMW], 2017). In the Netherlands, where prostitution is considered as a ‘choice’ and a ‘job’, 50 per cent of persons in prostitution in the escort sector started when they were younger than 20 years old. Interviews with buyers show that they are looking for younger and younger women and girls in prostitution.

Today, it is forbidden to buy sex from minors in Europe. Still, men buy sex from very young women and girls. However, when they are arrested for prostituting young women, they are rarely prosecuted, because they always pretend that ‘she looked like an adult’. Why? Because she had breasts! It is very interesting to look at our societies’ narrative about the prostitution of minors. Everyone is of course shocked by any case of sexual exploitation of a young woman. But if she looks like an adult woman, the blame goes back to her. Prostitution conveys the idea that your body is the expression of your sexual maturity, even if you are 14 or 15 years old. It takes away from women the possibility to express desire: just because she looks sexy, it means that she is up for it, whatever her age, and that she is even provoking it. As survivor Rachel Moran said: ‘Wherever there was the presence of breasts, there was the absence of childhood’ (Moran, 2012). A study has shown that half of sex buyers continued the transaction even if they saw that the girl was a minor.

When a society accepts that men can buy sex from women, it accepts to put its youth in danger, because the industry will make sure that the law does not discriminate on the basis of age. A perfect illustration is the following: A large majority of women in prostitution entered the industry when they were minors (the average entry age in Europe is 14, it can be lower in other continents). But as soon as they reach 18 years, society does not look at their history anymore: It is their choice, not a consequence of a series of constraints and abuse, often perpetrated in childhood.

Why do we change our look and heart when we are in front of adults in prostitution? Does their age change the context in which these persons got into prostitution, and the lack of opportunities they were facing?

Tolerance for the system of prostitution, even restricted to adults, fosters a culture of violence and of pimping. Despite laws prohibiting the buying of sex from minors, the business exists and grows, because the prostitution of adults is closely linked to the pimping of young girls and boys. Both cannot be separated: if we tolerate a system which is based on profit and on the exploitation of bodies, we will end up tolerating a system which uses our youth as the best products.

A System of Violence, Domination and Inequality

Violence is an inherent part of prostitution, at all stages of a person's life affected by prostitution. Ninety per cent of persons in prostitution were victims of rape and incest in their childhood. Seventy-five per cent of persons in prostitution were raped while in the sex industry. Seventy per cent of women who have quitted the system experience the syndrome of post-traumatic stress disorder (Farley & Butler, 2012). But above all, prostitution is violence in itself: It is a sexual act against money. Men pay, because otherwise they would not have sex with the woman they are paying. Prostitution is not a question of sex, it is a question of power, of imposing one's desire over someone else.

We live in societies where men earn more than women, have all the decision-making roles and powers, and control the economy and the resources. In societies where gender stereotypes persist: it is still seen as positive for men to have a lot of sex (while it is seen as degrading for women, who would be called 'slut' or 'easy women'). Money gives men the permission to treat women like objects, with no desire. If men had to ask women for their consent, if they had to show their personality, they would maybe face a refusal. Prostitution ignores this refusal; money buys this refusal. Twenty-seven per cent of men believe that women in prostitution cannot be raped, because they are paid for sex so their will does not matter. As one buyer said: 'She gave up her rights when she accepted my money.'

The system of prostitution is a system that normalizes men's entitlement over women's bodies and normalizes the fact that you can buy someone's consent.

It is important to bring back the system of prostitution into our society: It is not a separate world; we are responsible for the sex industry as much as we are creating laws against violence against women. What happens in prostitution has an impact on the whole society!

Moreover, the systems of prostitution are global today and are all connected; it is urgent to look at them from an international perspective. Worldwide, women in prostitution are overwhelmingly the 'last girl': They are from low castes in India, from the indigenous communities in Canada, from minorities or migrant groups or lower social classes in Europe, from the Black community in the USA, etc. When multinationals exploit the lands in Latin America and employ men of the local communities, brothels and prostitution are present to maintain social cohesion and gender inequality.

The sex industry is based on sexism and racism, and perpetuates a neo-colonial vision of women. In research, men buying sex abroad justify their action by saying that it is part of the culture of the country they are visiting; when they buy sex from minors, they feel that they help the families and that these kids have anyway another 'cultural' relationship to sexuality—A lot of justification based on a neo-imperialistic view of the world! To justify that prostitution is a solution for migrant women in Europe or Indigenous women in Canada is a postcolonial posture which strengthens racism and inequalities between communities and between women and men (Smiley, 2016).

Youth Want a World Free from Prostitution

It is urgent to take action. The current legislative systems have an impact on youth! Let us take a simple example: A young boy growing up in Sweden today will be taught that he cannot buy sex, that women are not objects but equal beings who cannot be bought and sold, and that he can be criminalized for doing so. A young boy growing up in the Netherlands will see windows selling women next to shops selling shoes or other products: For him, women will be products who can be sold, as long as he believes (and that the society makes him believe) that they chose to be in the windows. With these two models, you have clearly two different visions of equality between women and men, and two opposite impacts on young boys' attitudes to women and girls.

Despite the politically correct trend which supports a neo-liberal approach to prostitution, young people are taking a stance against the sex industry. They believe that legislative choices made by governments on prostitution have an impact on the values and the society we want, and specifically directly on young people, on their ability to choose not to be in prostitution and to live a decent life.

According to polls conducted in several countries when the public debates were focusing on the legislative approach to prostitution, young people are strongly supporting the Nordic model approach. In Sweden in 2010 (Swedish Government Report SOU 2010:49, 2010) and in Norway in 2014 (*The Local*, 2014) after the adoption of the Model, and in France in 2013 (*L'Express*, 2013) while society was discussing prostitution, young people were more supportive of the Nordic model than the average population. This model is based on the values of equality between women and men, and respect: Prostitution is considered as a form of violence, and therefore persons in prostitution are not criminalized. On the contrary, they are supported if they want to exit the system of prostitution, and exit programmes are proposed. All forms of pimping and trafficking are criminalized, as they benefit from and perpetuate the system of exploitation and violence. Professionals of all sectors should be trained to understand the reality of prostitution, its mechanisms of violence and domination. And finally, sex buyers should be criminalized as they fuel the system with their money, and contribute to the pervasive rape culture.

If we want our children to grow in equality and respect, if we do not want the human body to be a product in a market, like any other product, if we do not want a system which grows on inequalities, neoliberalism and racism, then we need to take action and implement the Nordic model on prostitution. Are we ready to walk the talk?

Note

1. 'A la frontera tot s'hi val'. *Effets-frontières dans l'Espace Catalan Transfrontalier: Vécus, usages sociaux et représentations du phénomène prostitutionnel*, une étude d'Aude Harlé et Lise Jacquez, coordonnée par Sophie Avarguez, dirigée par Martine Camiade, de l'Institut Catalan de Recherche en Sciences Sociales—Université de Perpignan Via Domitia.

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Author's Bio-sketch

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