

## IV

### **Prostitution and Slavery: A Discussion of Abolitionist Perspective**

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#### **Abstract:**

According to the abolitionist position, prostitution is slavery. It is a moral evil. In this article, I will discuss the abolitionist perspective on prostitution. I will present another standpoint where sex workers are empowered and able to access agency.

**Keywords:** Prostitution, Slavery, Agency, Choice, Abolition

#### **Introduction**

According to the abolitionist position, sex, gender, and sexuality are connected through power relations. Women's sexual subordination is a collective condition. For them, prostitution is not just a social phenomenon; it is an act of violence against women as a social group. Prostitution is the most crystallized and extreme form of sexual exploitation – a foundation of all discrimination and subordination of women. It is important to note that exploitation is not an economic condition but a political one. One of their main arguments against prostitution is that both consensual and forced prostitution are considered a form of slavery. I will discuss this in detail below.

#### **Prostitution and Slavery: An Abolitionist Perspective**

Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) has inspired the thinking of abolition feminists on prostitution. According to Patterson,

the sense of mastery exists both in slavery and prostitution. Though most feminist scholars argue that the contemporary form of prostitution does not have many similarities with slavery, there are still some common factors that exist in both slavery and prostitution. Patterson's work is helpful to establish a connection between slavery and prostitution because he elaborates on the philosophy of slavery, what a slave owner wants to see in an enslaved person, and, most importantly, the effects of the slave trade on enslaved persons. Although Patterson's extreme description of the master-slave relationship does not apply to prostitution: "Slavery is one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave" (p. 1). However, the lives of prostituted women, even free prostituted women, are very similar to the conditions of enslaved life. For Patterson, slavery is a social death where the enslaved person "Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth... ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication" (p. 5). Prostituted women also face social excommunication because of their work, which is probably unusual in other forms of jobs. Kathleen Barry (1979) notes that the most popular practice of trafficking or pimping is trying to separate women from their community, family, connections, and known locations. This way, they are entirely able to control the prostitutes.

Prostitution shares many similarities with slavery. Prostitution is an example of male dominance; transatlantic slavery is also an example of white European racial dominance. Sexism drives the dehumanization and objectification in prostitution, just as racism drives the dehumanization and objectification of enslaved persons. Both prostitution and slavery commodify and objectify human beings. Women have no dignity in prostitution and slavery. Prostituted women and

enslaved persons are degraded and marginalized in cultural rituals that hold basic human rights violations. Over time, this sense of degradation and humiliation can convert into an experience of incapacitating shame in prostituted women and enslaved persons. The viewpoints of sex buyers and slave buyers can be awakening. Sex buyers' attitude matches slave buyers' regarding prostituted women and enslaved persons. A twentieth-century planter mentioned, "We used to own our slaves...now we just rent them" (Hedges and Sacco, 2014, p. 196). At the same time, research interviews reveal that when sex buyers are asked to define prostitution, they said: "You get what you pay for without the 'no'" (Farley, 2015, p. 286) and "It's like renting an organ for ten minutes" (Farley, 2007, p. 145). Prostitution and slavery both involve the commodification of women. Commodification and objectification are parts of the same process where human beings are treated as objects with economic value. A pimp explains the nature of commodification in prostitution: "I took the kind of girl no one would miss so when they were resold, no one would look for them. It is as if I sold a kilo of bread" (Serrill, 1993, as cited in Farley, 2015, p. 286). The same characteristics are applied to enslaved persons by their owners, where their fundamental nonhumanity permits them to abuse and use violence against their slaves. The eroticization of commodification is found both in prostitution and slavery. A sex buyer is excited by the feeling that he buys or hires a whore who willingly permits her sexual degradation and exploitation. Julia O'Connell Davidson explains this mentality of a sex buyer: "By taking money in exchange for sex, she strips herself of her own humanity and so 'legitimately' becomes nothing more than the embodiment of his masturbatory fantasy" (1998, p.144). For a sex buyer, the temporary ownership of a prostitute is the core erotic feeling of prostitution. John Stoltenberg (1993) has explained that possession is the key element of men's sexual behavior. Sexual and economic ownership over women strengthens the sense of masculinity of men who use such services. This

economic-sexual combination also existed in slavery. Edward Baptist (2001) reviews some lettering from 1834 between a slave trader and a slave buyer. He shows how sexual commodification, the rape of enslaved women, and the fetishization of the trade occur. The passion behind the sexual and economic ownership of enslaved persons has been shared equally by both traders and buyers. Baptist describes that the sex buyer from the letters is sexually obsessed with mulatto slave women who are born from the rape of African enslaved women by their owners. He writes: "Sexual fetishes and commodity fetishism intertwined with such intimacy that coerced sex was the secret meaning of commerce in human beings" (p. 1633).

Women are treated as nonpersons in both slavery and prostitution. Transaction of money in slavery and prostitution allows the owner and the buyer to abandon the responsibilities to treat the enslaved person or the prostitute as a human being. A prostitute woman said, "Prostitution makes me feel like I am nothing, nothing at all" (Farley, 2015, p. 287). To slave owners and traders, the enslaved woman was "a fragmented commodity whose feelings and choices were rarely considered: her head and her heart were separated from...her womb and vagina" (Omolade, p. 354).

Objectification and dehumanization are intrinsic to prostitution and enslavement, resulting in a psychologically traumatized condition. In prostitution, a woman is defined as a filthy whore, a degraded object, or a cunt. Her individuality, human dignity, and self are constantly destroyed and attacked in prostitution. Under prostitution, a woman is reduced into sexual organs. She behaves in such a way that her clients want her to behave. This same technique is also used by enslaved persons at auctions. They speak only what they thought the slave buyers wanted to hear: "In the slave pens, the ethereal fantasies of the slaveholding regime were daily converted into the material shape of sold slaves"

(Johnson, p. 213). The concept of commodification that finds in the mentality of slave traders, pimps, slave buyers, and sex buyers is attached to the identity of prostitutes and enslaved persons. A woman who works in a strip club said:

You start changing yourself to fit a fantasy role of what they think a woman should be. In the real world, these women don't exist. They stare at you with this starving hunger. It sucks you dry; you become this empty shell. They're not really looking at you. You're not you. You're not even there. (Farley et al., 2003, p. 207)

Humiliation and degradation are the most common experiences that a prostitute and an enslaved person experience in their daily lives. According to a former slave, Harriet Jacobs, non-slaved persons face difficulties in understanding the degree of degradation that presents in slavery. Similarly, author and prostitution survivor Claude Jaget writes about her shattering experiences working in a brothel lineup:

I'd freeze up inside...it was horrible, they'd look you up and down. That moment, when you felt them looking at you, sizing you up, judging you... and those men, those fat pigs who weren't worth half as much as the worst of us, they'd joke, make comments... They made you turn and face in all directions, because of course a front view wasn't enough for them. It used to make me furious, but at the same time I was panic-stricken, I didn't dare speak. I wasn't physically frightened, but it shook my confidence. I felt really [demeaned] ... I was the thing he came and literally brought. He had judged me like he'd judge cattle at a fairground, and that's revolting, it's sickening, it's terrible for the women. you can't imagine it if you've never

been through it yourself. (p. 75)

Major health problems are faced by prostitutes and enslaved persons resulting from battering, sexual assault, and torture. A prostituted woman describes:

I've had three broken arms, nose broken twice, and I'm partially deaf in one ear... I have a small fragment of a bone floating in my head that gives me migraines. I've had a fractured skull. My legs ain't worth shit no more; my toes have been broken. My feet, bottom of my feet, have been burned; they've been whopped with a hot iron and clothes hanger... I have scars. I've been cut with a knife, beat with guns, two by fours. There hasn't been a place on my body that hasn't been bruised somehow, some way, some big, some small. (Giobbe, 1992, p.126)

Women in slavery and prostitution have chronic health problems due to malnutrition, sleeplessness, stress, and overexertion. Inadequate nutrition, unsanitary living situations, and continual hard work increase the risk of diseases. Pimps and slave owners control the diets of prostitutes and enslaved persons. In 1850, in Virginia, the common causes of death of enslaved persons were nervous system disease, respiratory diseases, tuberculosis, diarrhea, cholera, and typhoid. The most common health problems of prostituted women include diabetes, tuberculosis, arthritis, asthma, tachycardia, anemia, uterine infections, ovarian pain, menstrual problems, abortion complications, pregnancy, infertility, hepatitis, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis, cancer, and HIV.

In slavery and prostitution, continuous verbal abuse degrades the person and results in lasting psychological damage. A formerly enslaved person from North Carolina named Harriet Jacobs, wrote, "For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night,

seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. O how I despised him" (Douglass and Jacobs, as cited in Farley 2015, 289). A prostituted woman who uses alcohol and drugs to reduce the pain of relentless verbal assaults from her clients said, "You get extra extra high so you don't have to deal with those words they call you. They hurt so much, if it was a knife, it would cut you" (Farley, 2015, p.289). The emotional damage of prostitution is similar to the emotional damage that occurs through slavery: "It is internally damaging. You become in your own mind what these people do and say with you. You wonder how could you let yourself do this and why do these people want to do this to you?" (Farley, 2005, pp. 3-4).

Changing names was common in the slave trade. In prostitution, prostitutes also change their names to create a hypersexualized identity. Sometimes, slave traders inflict marks of servitude on the enslaved person, just as traffickers and pimps tattoo their symbols on prostitute women. A Spanish trafficking ring tattooed a barcode on a prostituted woman for trying to run away. For the woman, the barcode is proof of coercion and a mark of ownership by the trafficking ring.

Family and community rejection are key factors establishing control and domination in prostitution and slavery. Pimps are most likely to target those women who are alienated from and abused by their families and convince them that their family is not worthy of trust. This way, the attachment to the family is destroyed, and the pimp becomes the only source of protection, support, and validation. In slavery, the ending of family bonds is generally brutal. The ability to break their ties with their families is a source of maintaining the economic and social power of the slave traders and slave buyers. A slave's family members, husbands, wives, and children were sold to different owners throughout the existing practice.

Slave owners' and sex buyers' have fantasies about slavery and prostitution that control the lives of enslaved persons and prostitutes. The rented or purchased person is judged against the owner's or the buyer's fantasies. If the rented or purchased person fails to fulfill these fantasies, then it ends in brutal torture by their owners or buyers. Brutality by slave owners was the natural result of slaveholders' inevitable failure to live through the stolen bodies of their slaves. In the face of the frailty or resistance of those whom they had bought – publicly caught between their own fantasies of self-amplification and the reality of their dependence – slaveholders often responded with shocking brutality. (Johnson, 1999, p. 206)

Prostitutes also face similar violence for not meeting the fantasies of sex buyers. A sex buyer expresses:

When there is violence...it is mostly the prostitute's fault. See, I am going to buy something. If I am satisfied with what I am buying, then why should I be violent? I will be violent when I am cheated, when I am offered a substandard service... Sometimes violence is because the prostitute wants the client to use condoms. They force it on the client...He will naturally be disgruntled and there will be altercations. (Anderson and Davidson, 2003, p. 24)

Actual suicide and suicidal thoughts are very common both in enslaved persons and prostitutes. Reasons for suicide by an enslaved person include rape, kidnapping, physical brutality, intolerable physical pain, family separation, starvation, and violation of religious beliefs. Psychological coercion, actual violence, and the threat of violence deter enslaved persons and prostitutes from running away. Even slave owners and pimps have bounty hunters to catch women who try to run away. In prostitution, actual physical violence is not always necessary to control

prostitutes: "They come to perceive their situation not as a deliberate action taken to harm them but as part of the normal, if regrettable, scheme of things" (Bales, 2002, p. 86). Pimps use this violent control scheme to create not only the feeling of terror but also the feeling of dependence and helplessness in the minds of prostitutes. A trafficked prostitute victim in the U.K. expressed, "Sometimes I don't see the point in doing anything. It seems useless. When someone has controlled you and made decisions for you for so long, you can't do that for yourself anymore" (Zimmerman et al., 2006, as cited in Farley, 2015, p. 291). This same pattern of controls is applied in slavery. To establish mental control, sensory deprivation, and social isolation are used by pimps and slave owners over prostitutes and enslaved persons. Social isolation is stressful and traumatize them. Pimps and slave owners also use sleep deprivation, starvation, protein deprivation, and unexpected sexual violence to control them. A pimp's control over prostitutes includes "what she wears, when and where she can sleep, what and how much she can eat, whether she can use a toilet or access menstrual supplies, if and how much emergency medical care she receives, even how much air and light she is allowed to have." (Farley, 2015, p. 292). Slave owners used this similar dynamic to manipulate and control enslaved persons.

Under slavery and prostitution, coercive subjugation is always attached to the threat of unpredictable and overwhelmingly intense violence. Any moves taken by a prostitute to control her body, use her critical thinking, and ensure her autonomy are considered insubordination. The enslaved person or the prostitute is grateful if their buyer or owner is not violent with them. This coerced gratitude is an owner-slave or pimp-prostitute relationship. It is not an intimate relationship but a variation of a domination-subordination relationship. Emotional bonding under coercive subjugation to the abuser is described as "the Stockholm syndrome." Behavioral traits of this syndrome include,

intense gratefulness for small favors when the captor holds life-and-death power over the captive, denial of the extent of violence and harm that the captor has inflicted or is obviously capable of inflicting, hypervigilance with respect to the captor's needs, identification with the captor's perspective on the world... the perception of those trying to assist in escape as enemies and the perception of captors as friends, and extreme difficulty leaving one's captor/pimp even after physical release has occurred (Farley, 2015, p. 292).

Another way through which slavery and prostitution are related is the history of their origin. In *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1987), feminist historian Gerder Lerner argues that prostitution results from slave-holding. It is not something that has always existed. She disagrees with the pro-prostitution scholars that the contemporary practice of prostitution results from the sacred temple sexual practices where women had sex with men; instead, she considers prostitution an entirely different phenomenon.

It is likely that commercial prostitution derived directly from the enslavement of women and the consolidation and formation of classes. Military conquest led, in the third millennium BC, to the enslavement and sexual abuse of captive women. As slavery became an established institution, slave-owners rented out their female slaves as prostitutes, and some masters set up commercial brothels staffed by slaves. The ready availability of captive women for private sexual use and the need of kings and chiefs, frequently themselves usurpers of authority, to establish legitimacy by displaying their wealth in the form of servants and concubines led to the establishment of harems...(p. 133)

If prostitution derives from slavery, then there may be many parallels

between slavery and prostitution both in the past and present.

British feminist sociologist Davidson has discussed the debate on the commonness between slavery and prostitution. She argues that contestations about the issues of consent, power, and control in prostitution have suggested that "prostitution fits neither slavery or wage labour and is a challenge for contemporary social theory" (Davidson 1996, p. 182). Davidson conducted her research by interviewing an independent and successful white British prostitute named Desiree. According to Davidson, Desiree is not a slave because "she exercises more control over her working life than do a majority of workers" (1996, p. 183). She is not powerless with regard to her clients; she has more experience than them when they are uncertain. Davidson argues that the nervous laughter of the client from the tape recordings of Desiree's interactions has suggested that she is in control:

This kind of client relies on Desiree to script the encounter and she can get such men in and out of the house in fifteen minutes... but even when dealing with punters who regularly visit prostitutes, who are confident and who know exactly what they want, D's far greater sexual skill and knowledge allows her to exert some control over how much of her sexual labour she provides for a set fee. She is highly skilled at getting clients to come (and therefore to go) very quickly. (1996, p. 185)

Desiree decides the terms and limits of the sexual encounter. Desiree is, in Davidson's opinion, "far from simply the 'passive, inert, and open' object conjured up by, for example, Dworkin's... feverish rhetoric" (1996, p. 187). In contrast, she is "Both dominatrix and 'straight' prostitute [performing] intensive and highly skilled emotional labour in exchange for the client's money" (1996, p. 187).

However, Davidson also acknowledges the negative effects of prostitution: "Whether he is submissive, flattering or abusive, the client's treatment of the prostitute represents a denial of her subjectivity and humanity, and this process of denial both draws upon and reinforces profoundly misogynistic images of women" (1996, p.189). She argues that when the client is paying the prostitute for the availability of her body parts and sexual pleasure, he is also paying her to be a person as well as not to be a person: "the essence of the transaction is that she is an object, not a subject, within it" (1996, p. 190). Desiree, as a privileged prostitute, though she faces some discriminations that exists in a slave life. A prostitute does not claim any rights and powers over other persons and things. Her work transforms her into a socially dead person, like a slave. Her degraded status in society dissolves her right to respect, honor, and protection like non-prostituted women. According to Davidson, prostitution is a unique form of work because here, a prostituted woman becomes "a person who is not a person, a slave who is not a slave, and a wage worker who is not a wage worker" (1996, p. 192).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The notion of slavery is rejected by many sex workers and scholars who research from the sex workers' perspectives. According to Thanh-Dam Truong, if we apply a labor analysis within sex work, then the concept of workers' agency becomes pertinent. She concludes, "Prostitutes' demands for recognition and emancipation must be seriously considered. Recognition for their work would enable the provision of a certain political space for organization to articulate their needs, their perceptions of themselves and their relationship with society as a whole" (1990, p. 201). These attempts to introduce sex workers as political actors represent an effort to show the transformative perspectives and practices regarding

dominant power relations and structural constraints in the global sex industry. Through this recognition, it is possible to unveil the issues about the exploitative and oppressive structures, regimes, ideologies, and visions involved in women's practices. In the global sphere, women are identified as persons who are capable of making decisions and choices that result in a consciousness transformation to create changes in their daily lives. Related to women's agency, this approach is interweaved with a social theory that involves constructing and reconstructing social knowledge and society. Pierre Bourdieu's *Theory of Practice* and Antony Giddens's *Theory of Structuration* are important for understanding this approach. Both concern the interwovenness of social structure and human agency, focusing on how humans produce and reproduce political, economic, and social life. In *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (1996), Sherry Ortner elaborates, "The challenge is to picture indissoluble formations of structurally embedded agency and intention-filled structures, to recognize the way in which the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs, and in which social and cultural 'systems' are predicated upon human desires and projects" (p. 12). Wendy Chapkis's works on prostitution also elaborate:

Practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read [in] more complex ways than simply as a confirmation of male domination. They may also be seen as sites of ingenious resistance and cultural subversion... the position of the prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in male sexual practice, but instead it can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order. (2013, pp. 29-30)

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