



Sex Work and Prostitution: Female

by Tina Gianoulis

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Throughout recorded history, and across much of the world, sex workers and queer women have shared a shadowy, illicit position on the fringes of society. Prostitution, often called "the oldest profession," has long been the last resort of desperate women and girls, who have usually fallen into sex work because lack of money, opportunity, and status left them few other choices.

In the nineteenth century, however, prostitution--like lesbianism--began to be seen through the lenses of the medical profession, and many sexologists labeled both prostitutes and lesbians as sexual deviants, thus linking the two as pathological identities.

Social and Economic Factors

Lesbians and other queer women, rejected and stigmatized by society, have often found themselves with limited options for supporting themselves. With little to lose, many have chosen or been forced by circumstance to make their living providing sexual services to men. These services vary from stripping and exotic dancing to phone sex and peep shows to manual or oral sexual contact to intercourse.

When discussing sex work, it is important to distinguish between compulsion and choice and to acknowledge that there are many ways in which a woman or girl may be forced into prostitution. Sex trafficking rings operate all over the world, forcing women and children into lives of sexual slavery from which escape is difficult or impossible.

Even where actual slavery does not exist, poverty and hopelessness can force women into prostitution just as inexorably as the most organized trafficker. Women in these situations exercise little choice about their work. They often have little or no protection from mistreatment and frequently earn subsistence wages.

By contrast, in wealthy, liberal societies, sex work often pays very well, and some women choose to work at some form of prostitution, drawn primarily by the high wages, but also, in some cases, by a renegade ideology of sexual liberation. Some of these women identify themselves as sexologists and attempt to provide sexual education as well as stimulation to their clients. Many sex workers point out that heterosexual women regularly trade sex for favors or money in informal ways. For some women, sex work becomes an opportunity to control the marketing of their sexuality.

Prostitutes' Rights Movement

The liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s inspired some prostitutes to band together to demand rights and respect. During the early 1970s, a former prostitute named Margo St. James helped found Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE), a network of sex workers and their supporters.

COYOTE, and other organizations like it that have sprung up around the world, continues to link prostitutes with health care, legal aid, and other resources, while working to change laws and police policies that

target sex workers and victimize them.

The very term "sex work" emerged from this early prostitutes' rights movement. An activist named Carol Leigh, also known as the Scarlet Harlot, coined the term at a 1970s conference about the sex industry. A prostitute herself, Leigh wanted to replace degrading, patronizing, or euphemistic terminology about her profession with a phrase that recognized that prostitution, like many other jobs, was simply labor for hire.

Queer Women as Sex Workers

The intersection of queer women and sex workers, who mostly cater to heterosexual men, though paradoxical on the surface, has had some practical advantages. Lesbians, whose sexuality does not depend upon men, are often better able to separate their private sexual lives from their work in the sex industry, protecting them from some of the psychological damage that straight prostitutes experience.

However, lesbian sex workers do have their own unique challenges. While some are able to band together informally at work for support and safety, many lesbians remain closeted lest their sexual orientation alienate potential customers. Lesbian sex workers who wish to live in a lesbian community have often found themselves judged and criticized by other lesbians for their participation in the sex industry.

Debates within the Lesbian and Feminist Communities

While some feminists view prostitution and the sex industry as unequivocally oppressive to women, others have sought ways to oppose the objectification and victimization of women while supporting sex workers' right to safety, respect, and fair pay. Within the queer women's community, the debate has often been fierce between those who insist that women would not choose to work in the sex industry if reasonable and profitable alternatives were available to them and those who contend that sex work is not only a viable career choice, but an empowering one.

One of the most controversial figures opposed to prostitution was lesbian feminist activist Andrea Dworkin. Until her death in 2005, Dworkin was one of the most vocal critics of the sex industry, claiming that pornography and prostitution were key elements of the subjugation of women.

In a symposium at the University of Michigan Law School, Dworkin declared, "Many of us are saying that prostitution is intrinsically abusive. Let me be clear. I am talking to you about prostitution per se, without more violence, without extra violence, without a woman being hit, without a woman being pushed. Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body. Those of us who say this are accused of being simple-minded. But prostitution is very simple. And if you are not simple-minded, you will never understand it."

Dworkin wrote many books and dozens of essays and articles about the damaging effects of the sex industry on women. With lawyer Catherine A. MacKinnon, whom she met while both were teaching at the University of Minnesota in 1983, Dworkin drafted ordinances defining pornography as "the sexually explicit subordination of women" and making its sale illegal as a violation of women's civil rights. Such measures were passed by the city councils of Indianapolis and Minneapolis. The mayor of Minneapolis vetoed the bill, however, and a federal court in Indiana struck down the law there. The United States Supreme Court upheld that ruling in 1986.

Though many feminists respected Dworkin and her work, others criticized her severely, accusing her of inflexibility and censorship, and even resorting to personal attacks on her.

But if Dworkin and other lesbian feminists attacked prostitution and pornography and other manifestations

of sex work as demeaning to women, other lesbians took a different position.

Male-dominated society has often dictated that women's sexuality be submissive and hidden, defined only in relationship to men. From the beginning of the gay liberation movement, lesbians and other queer women have taken the lead in asserting the importance of female sexuality and demanding acceptance of counter-cultural forms of sexual expression.

Out of this sex-positive movement has come a new view of sex work as a kinky and empowering way of reclaiming sexuality. Radical lesbian historian Joan Nestle and sexologists Susie Bright and Annie Sprinkle have all written and spoken extensively about the need for a new feminist perspective on sex work.

Lesbian Clients

Some queer women sex workers serve female clients as well as male. Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been an increased visibility of sexual commerce directed at lesbians, ranging from pornography and sex parties to strip shows and escort services.

During the 1980s, "butch gigolette" Les von Zoticus set up a prostitution business aimed at femme lesbians. She hoped not only to perform sexual services, but also to educate clients and help them explore their own sexual needs. However, perhaps because women tend to have less money than men, or perhaps because their sexuality does not lend itself to purchasing sexual service, female prostitution clients are far outnumbered by males. Les von Zoticus' gigolette service survived only six months.

Dangers of the Profession

Sex work, especially prostitution, remains an extremely dangerous profession. Though accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, many social scientists agree that a high percentage of sex workers experience violence at the hands of clients or pimps.

Because prostitution is so widely treated as a crime, prostitutes who are abused, beaten, or raped can expect little help from the legal system and are frequently victimized by the police themselves.

Hookers who work the streets and highways are especially vulnerable to attacks by aggressive clients. The life and death of Aileen Wuornos provides a stark example of the devastating effects of violence against prostitutes.

Example of Aileen Wuornos

Wuornos, a queer woman who worked as a prostitute in and around Florida truck stops, was executed by the state on October 9, 2002 after being convicted of murder. Widely billed as the first female serial killer, Wuornos admitted killing seven of her clients, claiming each had raped or attempted to rape her.

Many dismissed these claims of self-defense as ridiculously unlikely, but most sex workers would have little trouble believing that a streetwalker working the Florida highways could experience numerous incidents of extreme violence.

As Wuornos sat on death row, a November 1992 episode of *Dateline NBC* pointed out many lapses in Wuornos' defense. In addition to editing out Wuornos' many claims of self-defense from the confession tape that was played for the jury, the prosecution also did not fully investigate one of her victims, Richard Mallory. *Dateline's* revelation that Mallory had previously served ten years in prison for violent rape validated Wuornos's testimony but was not enough to gain her a new trial.

Aileen Wuornos became the subject of several films including two documentaries, Nick Broomfield's *Aileen Wuornos: The Selling of a Serial Killer* (1992) and *Aileen: Life and Death of a Serial Killer* (directed by Broomfield and Joan Churchill, 2003), and Patty Jenkins' docudrama *Monster* (2003), which starred Charlize Theron as Wuornos.

Other Films

A number of other films have explored or exploited the life of the lesbian prostitute, beginning as early as 1912, when Aleksandr Arkatov made a film version of the 1906 Sholom Asch play, *God of Vengeance*, about a Jewish brothel owner whose daughter falls in love with one of the prostitutes who works for him.

Edward Dmytryk's 1962 film *Walk on the Wild Side* features Barbara Stanwyck as the madame of a New Orleans bordello in love with one of her prostitutes, played by Capucine.

In 1986, lesbian filmmaker Lizzie Borden used information she gathered from interviewing sex workers to create her film *Working Girls*, the story of a lesbian photographer who works in a New York house of prostitution. Unlike more sensational portrayals of sex workers' lives, Borden's film presents prostitution as a singularly un-erotic routine, where boredom and violence are all part of the working day. Hima's 1994 documentary *Straight for the Money: Interviews with Queer Sex Workers* offers a positive look at sex work through interviews with lesbians and bisexual women in the life.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.