

## **Only an Object**

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Tantalizing, vivacious, and alluring. Weak, struggling, and lost. Two depictions of a woman involved with sex work, villain and victim. One woman steps out of a mansion while the other steps out of a dingy trailer. One of a whore and the other of a struggling single mother who has to face hardships because she just loves her kids. Yet these two depictions are merely just stereotypes who can't blend together. They are merely treated as just sex for the pleasure that men need. Whether by force or consent, they will always just be an object that people get to speak for. They're dirty and forever tainted. However, this is nowhere near the truth that revolves around sex work and the workers involved. Sex work is nuanced and complicated. These are real people who shouldn't just be objectified and mistreated because their job is considered taboo to society.

It is said that sex work and prostitution are the oldest professions to exist. John Phillip Jenkins (2025) wrote about prostitution for *Britannica* where he explains that prostitution is dependent on society and location. Some societies viewed the sex workers as part of a recognized profession. Jenkins also writes how prostitutes had some protection and regulations during Europe's middle age before a change in sexual morality during the 16th century. From then on prostitution eventually became more and more prohibited until it became illegal. However, it is important to note the difference there is between sex work and prostitution. Both contain sex that is used to produce money but in the field of prostitution there is a lack of choice. Sex work allows there to be choice in the worker. Agnese Reginaldo (2021), an art historian, writes "Sex work through the ages" where she states how there were women who were part of the aristocracy where they would sometimes be involved in brothels for pure enjoyment. Such as, the third wife of the Roman emperor Claudius named Valeria Messalina. She once challenged a

famous sex worker to see who could have the most intimate encounters and Messalina won. Though, this doesn't equate to modern sex workers doing this profession because they necessarily enjoy sex but more to show that sex work does involve more of a choice than prostitution.

Some say that sex work is when you "buy" a sex worker. However, that is not what sex work is. The equality Institute (2020) writes that, "Sex work is when you pay for a service offered by a sex worker." They then also include, "Sex workers use their body as a tool to offer and fulfil services." This "buying" of a sex worker pertains more towards prostitution, it's the "owning" of one's body to fulfill a need that puts a difference between sex work and prostitution. Prostitution is sex work, but sex work isn't always prostitution. Kayla Pritchard (2021) writes in "The Oldest Profession": Sex Work through the Lenses of History, Feminism, and Sociology how sex work can relate to a multitude of occupations, from phone calls to exotic dancing. Pritchard also includes how "sex trafficking is separate from prostitution." This matters as it's important to see the distinction between the amount of consent and crime. Sex work, prostitution, and sex trafficking include different amounts of consent from the worker. Culminating to the fact that sex work isn't where you "buy" a sex worker, it's where you pay a sex worker for their services.

Some argue that these services are formed from the need that men have for pleasure and sex. This obviously isn't true as no one in this world needs sex but instead desire and want sex. The National Organization for Women (NOW) (n.d.) states that, "No one 'needs' sex like they need food, water, and air." It's obvious that this "need" for pleasure is purely just from the desire we have. NOW also adds that prostitution is not for the pleasure of the worker, "prostitution is structured by the desire and fantasies of the buyer." Which simply adds on to the point that women aren't doing this for pleasure. In fact, Paul Berthe (2018) writes in "The Stigmatization

Behind Sex Work” that, “Sex workers also experience physical violence, amongst other human rights violations.” They face harder difficulties when getting a job or apartment. None of this portrays an image of prostitution being for the pleasure of the workers. Then again it’s important to bring up that sex work isn’t always prostitution and there are some sex workers who can enjoy the pleasure of their work. However, the root of the sex work industry is not for the pleasure of the workers.

Some will say that women willingly choose to enter prostitution because of the money. However as stated previously, prostitution is not for the pleasure of the worker. NOW writes how “prostitution is an intrinsically abusive institution that preys on those who are mostly poor, mostly women of color, and mostly young.” Most of these women aren’t given much of a choice when it comes to choosing a career that can sustain them and anybody else they support. However, it’s also still worth noting that sex work isn’t always prostitution. As some people will argue that sex work isn’t a real choice. However, this doesn’t allow sex workers to exist with the nuance that is needed. The Equality Institute writes, “[sexual exploitation] does not negate the ability of sex workers to have agency over their decisions.” when referring about the exploitation in the sex work industry. Though there is not much of a difference, socially speaking, there is a clear difference on whether something is consensual or not. There are victims in the sex work industry while also those who chose this. However, prostitution and sex trafficking are an area where the workers are preyed upon.

Some argue that the key to remove prejudice against sex workers is to legalize prostitution. Not only would this not help sex workers, but this would only uplift those controlling prostitution rings. As stated by the NOW, “Once prostitution is legalized, pimps become legitimate businessmen.” This only allows that money can buy someone’s body. Transforming prostitution into an actual business transaction and not the harmful act against

women. Continuing to benefit the payer and the pimp. Sex workers will still face discrimination against them and could even worsen if prostitution was legalized. NOW also writes that a health check is required for the women involved with legal prostitution but not the men. Therefore, enforcing the lack of protection against the workers. Portraying that the issue isn't legalization but the field of prostitution. However, I do notice a major change from past to modern sex work.

That being, the internet. I've seen some say how the internet has helped sex workers while others argue the opposite. Though I do believe that it has helped sex workers, I can't deny the impact it's had on the industry as a whole. Yigit Aydin and Corinna Vetter (n.d.) wrote "The Digital Services Act from the perspectives of sex workers" where they mention how sex workers now have the barrier of the internet to keep them from getting physically harmed while also having more sources of income, an example being Onlyfans. They also mention how harm can still be done online. Though, they do fail to mention how many young girls are groomed and preyed upon to enter the sex work industry. They use tactics that appeal to the insecurity that girls form. Women's bodies have not been treated as our own for centuries and exploitation is then considered as liberation. The amount of girls who get famous while being underage to them having a clock on their birthday for when they turn 18 is weird and predatory. Including the conservative shift in gen z will only lead these girls down a path to choose an option without having the grounds to understand the weight of such a decision.

With all things considered, the sex work industry is complex and nuanced. There is good in sex work and there is bad. However, sex work isn't any less valid than any other job. Sex workers are people who deserve to exist without always being referenced to their job. While writing this I had considered if the bad could be separated from the good and vice versa. I pondered the idea that if something is a crime then is it still what it is, is crime that is in sex work still considered sex work? I came to understand that it isn't, but it also wouldn't be right to not

mention one without the other. Both exist and are real, so to separate it and act as if they have no relation would be a misstep. Crime is crime and sex work is sex work yet they can blend together. Yet, no matter how complicated the sex work industry will be, I will always be pro-sex workers.

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