Sex work through gender

Giulia Garofalo

gaggiulia@yahoo.it

(thank you Camille Barbagallo and Jesper Bryngemark)

whose debate?

Very often in commercial sex a large majority of workers are women and a large majority of clients are men. It may well be for this reason that gender is considered a central issue in commercial sex, and it is by now taken as granted that women should have an important voice in the debate. It is actually one of the few public debates where women are given more space as women at least in Europe. However, the women that are given voice to are not the ones who work in the sex industries. Sex workers are indeed systematically excluded from public debates, also feminist ones, and non-sex worker women often speak on their-our behalf as if they-we were unable to speak for themselves-ourselves. This exclusion is unbearable both from a feminist and from a loosely democratic perspective. And this is nowadays one of the main causes why it is so difficult to develop a public voice as a sex worker unless you are very privileged and educated or unless you are ready to come out as a victim.

There are several reasons for the substitution of sex workers by non-sex workers women in the public debate; one of them is the very way sex work is usually discussed through gender lenses. There are many alternative analyses to understand the numerical fact of gender being central to sex work and to introduce a political critique based (also) on gender. It is the exclusionary ones that must be exposed and changed. Self-awareness and the building of a powerful political position must go hand in hand. In particular in contemporary Europe the challenge is to develop a feminist viewpoint on sex work without hiding the issues of nationality, “race”, and economic privilege, and without erasing the experiences of male and trans (=transgender and transsexual) sex workers, and female and trans clients. Also it is essential to start recognising sex work as central to all discussions on sexuality, gender, and work and to stop treating it as some kind of copy of what “real” sex or “real” work are supposed to be.

what are the problems with gender debates on sex work?

Sex work has become a specific line of division within feminist movements, institutions and academia, so taking a clear position on sex workers’ rights means taking part in a sort of civil war.

A very strong division exists in feminism between what are often called the “abolitionist” and the “sex work” approaches. The first refers to those who see sex workers as victims – of men, of poverty, of sexual violence, etc.- and aim at helping all of us-them to quit sex work. The “sex work” position indicates those who see sex work as one of the forms of sexualised labour, and seek to transform it to the advantage of sex workers by improving the conditions in which it is practised and thought of, without trying to eliminate or to hide it.

>sexualised labour is when what you do and how you do it are seen as (and probably are) connected to your sex and sexuality. examples? housework, personal care, waitressing, etc.
The opposition between these two groups is so strong, and the abolitionist group so powerful that people feel uncomfortable with taking a position in favour of sex workers' rights because they are easily blamed for being "pro-prostitution" and anti-feminists. However the struggles of sex workers' rights must not be reduced to an "anti" or "pro" prostitution discussion. It is important to resist such a naive and in fact regressive level of debate and to respond with an accountable political debate aiming at changing sex work realities. This does not mean excluding critique and feminism, but rather politicising them, i.e. making them tools for change.

In order to build a fresh feminist ground against the "civil war attitude" it may be useful to remember what has been the original contribution of feminists regarding policies of prostitution. Feminists (sex workers and non-sex workers) have distinguished themselves by criticising the traditional attitude that sees prostitution as essentially unmodifiable in its economic form and in its social and psychic meanings. Sex work is traditionally seen as naturally implying the exploitation of the sex workers, their-stigmatisation and their-relegation to a position of non-citizens and non-subjects.

>that's the idea often lying behind the disturbing say that “prostitution is the oldest profession”

In such a perspective, sex work appears as unacceptable to contemporary democracies. Feminism has instead criticised sex work as is has with all naturalised social relations, arguing that they are historically changeable. This has opened the way to policies that seek to change the sex industries without trying to eliminate or hide them. The focus is then not on whether the sex industries will grow, but rather on the quality of working and social life in the sex industries, and the possibilities of resistance and emancipation existing within sex work practices.

In contemporary Europe gender is often used in order to hide other issues of power related to sex work

In the context of contemporary global migrations issues related to sex work take particular meanings in relation to gendered movements and borders. The total or partial non-recognition of sex work as a legitimate activity is central to denying residence permits to women, trans people and men coming from outside the European Union. Even in the Netherlands, where prostitution is legally recognised as equal to other professions, as a general rule there is no possibility for migrants coming from outside the EU to legally work in the sex industries. Also most of the calls for legalisation of the sex industries, as for instance in Italy or the UK seem to be fundamentally inspired by the wish for a clear-cut separation between European and non-European workers.

>that's also the risk of all unions: becoming protections of a category of workers against the others

The point is that these polices are often justified on the grounds of gender or so called feminist arguments as protection for women who are considered at risk of being "trafficked" due to their poverty or because they are seen as less emancipated. Yet, these are neo-colonialist and anti-migration arguments. They assume an essential difference between women from the South and women from the North by attributing only victimisation to the former and only agency to the latter. They prevent women, trans people and in particular sex workers from legally migrating. This kind of anti-trafficking arguments claim to protect the women from the South, but in fact they should be seen as instruments for
Northern women to protect our-their privileged position in relation to other women.

**Feminist analyses of sex work often look very similar to antifeminist analyses such as those proposed by fundamentalists, neo-conservatives etc**

Despite their obvious differences, feminists often find themselves talking about sex work in ways very close to those of fundamentalists and neo-conservative people. Also, since most of them do not meet sex workers, it is very easy for them not to see what impact their strategies have on sex workers.

By considering sex work as static, this kind of feminists together with anti-feminists invest most of their energies in two directions:
- the idea of an origin of sex work
- the possibility of a distinction between “voluntary” and “forced” sex work.

It is important to be aware that both of them are difficult grounds from a sex workers' rights perspective.

No explanation of a specific **origin** of sex work can be a safe place for sex workers’ rights. Every explanation - for instance “sex work exists because of biology”, “because of inequalities”, “because of individual choices” etc. - can indeed be easily used for purposes of eliminating or reducing the quantity of sex work, be it through genetics, hormones, or as part of various so called equality struggles.

>generally to focus on the origin of practices that are socially condemned may be dangerous for the ones who practice them, as it is clear in the case of non-heterosexualities

The discourse of choice/non choice also shows several problems. The idea of a choice to do sex work may be politically valuable and indeed has been introduced by movements for the rights of prostitutes in the US and in Europe back in the 1970's in order to shift the attention from compassion to rights of subjects. However, because the choice usually refers to the a priori (=before even starting) **individual choice** of practising sex work, the strategy then usually used in contemporary debates is to distinguish between women who have chosen it versus women who are forced into the sex industries.

>who really chooses to work in our societies anyways?

In today's practice the first are called "sex workers", and the others are called "trafficked women" or "slaves". This is on the basis of the racist and classist assumption that a (migrant) woman from the South who works in the sex industries would never choose it, and the ones (if any) that are recognised the possibility of choosing it are usually white middle class EU citizens.

There are also other problems with the distinction between voluntary sex workers and forced sex workers. In particular “the so called forced women are denied autonomy and power to make choices, and this leads to an inadequate representation of their-our complex needs and realities, including those who work under exploitative and abusive conditions”(ICRSE, [www.sexworkeurope.org](http://www.sexworkeurope.org)).

Moreover, “this representation excludes the workers who consciously made the decision to work in the sex industries but who are subject to force or abuse in the course of their-our work or who were promised other working conditions than those in which they-we find themselves- ourselves. The abuses they-we undergo are considered to be the natural consequences of their- our willingness to work as prostitutes, meaning it is their-our own fault. This reinforces the
classic dichotomy between ‘innocent’ and ‘guilty’ women, thus fostering the idea that ‘innocent’ women deserve of protection, whereas ‘guilty’ ones can be abused with impunity. This distinction between innocent and guilty women has been severely attacked in any debate on other forms of violence against women, such as rape, but continues to bias the debate on sex work and the protection of the rights of sex workers” (ICRSE, www.sexworkeurope.org).

**self-awareness: the “whore stigma” as a general threat for women**

Across different languages the word corresponding to “whore” does never exclusively indicate the precise position of a person exchanging sexualised services in a particular way. Rather it more generally applies to women who develop forms of autonomy and/or transgression in relation to certain spheres, such as sexuality, labour, movement, and reproductive work. 

>read Gail Pheterson *The prostitution prism* (1996) and Paola Tabet *La grande beffa* (2004) ... if you find them!

Women who challenge society in different ways - migration, singleness, lesbianism, economic independence, etc. - are threatened by the name of “whores”, and at the same time we-they may use sex work as a way of living our-their lives. For this reason feminists are directly threatened by the “whore” stigma as autonomous women.

This means that also positions on sex work elaborated by feminists must be double checked: indeed they could be mainly ways of distancing themselves-ourselves from (other) “whores”.

>within the sex industries itself there is a hierarchy based on migrant status, origin, gender, sexuality, drug use, work sector and the services provided: “she is the whore! you are the whore! - not me!”

**thinking radical**

A critique on the existent gender analyses of sex work is not enough. That is the basis to build a positive position on the specificity of sex work through a gender perspective to a more general perspective for social change.

One of the issues we need to address in order to change sex work realities is indeed why sex work is so problematic for societies and why sex workers are so stigmatised. Society's condemnation of sex work has to be seen as political, as opposed to moral. It has to do with gender power relations, but not exclusively; it has to do with how power relations work in general, and how these power relations are supposed to be reinforced through sexual practices in particular.

To demand money for sex in a transparent and potentially contractual way is certainly a break in the way women are supposed to give “female” services, such as sexual, caring, and reproductive activities. As women we-they are expected to give these services for no remuneration or as part of an exchange involving informal gifts or advantages. These informal exchanges can and often are
actually profitable also for women individually, but only as long as we-they do not transgress certain socially ruled behaviours. What sex work exposes and challenges with its potential transparency and contractuality is how these informal exchanges of personal services and material advantages, actually control women's lives (and also men's and trans people lives, although differently) in unnecessary and exploitative ways. What it exposes is the exploitative division in society between what is "private" (unpaid) and what is "public" "work" "valuable" (paid).

> what other exploitations does then sex work make clearer?

This may be one reason why sex workers is so problematic and stigmatised generally, and also by feminists. It is indeed difficult to have a non superficial look at sex work realities without a complete questioning of one's own society and most intimate arrangements.

However, if that is true for women mainly, more generally we can say that to people of every gender working with sex potentially offers a radical self-employment of their-our own relational resources mainly in connection to gender, sexuality, "race", nationality and class hierarchical positions. From such a perspective what is going on in sex work is actually the asking for remuneration for the use of relational resources that one has because of her-his position in the hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality, nationality, class etc.

> for instance a white female sex worker from an Italian middle-class background, a black transgender sex worker from a French upper-class background, a white gay male sex worker from a working-class Spanish background, all sell not only their-our genders but also their-our "races", nationalities and classes - "selling" not in moral but in a technical sense

In our societies one - especially if s/he belongs to certain groups - is supposed not to use these resources for one's advantage in a too explicit way, which is what happens through commercial sex practices. Indeed, one is also not supposed to openly pay for these relational resources as a direct and clear object of pleasure - as they happen to be in (all) sex. That is why also clients, although differently, are stigmatised.

This may at least partly explain why non stigmatised sex work and empowered sex workers are politically disturbing, why we-they may be tolerated only in a victimised position and not if we-they want to have direct control over our-their work and lives.

What we need is not a struggle against sex work - if it is not an ideal struggle against work in general. Here and now what we need is a struggle against the ways sex work in prevented from becoming a direct form of employing one's own relational resources in connection to hierarchical positions, and a direct exposition of power dynamics in society.

This is yet another reason why the struggles of workers' rights in the sex industries are fundamentally important for social change, also a feminist change.