

Prostitution is Not Compatible with Anarchism

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The concept of women's 'choice' to sell sex is constructed in line with neo-liberal and free-market thinking; the same school of thinking that purports that workers have real 'choices' and control over their work. It suggests that women chose to sell sex and we should therefore focus on issues to do with "sex workers's " safety, ability to earn money, and persecution by the state. Whilst women's safety and women's rights are paramount, the argument for state regulated brothels and unionisation is reformist at best, naive and regressive at worst. Even the proposal for "collective brothels' ignores the gendered nature of prostitution, and its function in supporting male domination.

An anarchist response should demand the eradication of all exploitative practices and not suggest they can be made safer or better.

Anarchist Perspectives

Anarchism comes from a Greek word meaning "freedom from domination". It is premised on "the essential decency of human beings"; a desire for individual freedom and intolerance of domination (Woodcock). It calls for radical and revolutionary social change, not reformism. Underpinning beliefs include:

- Opposed to domination and all hierarchies, including gender hierarchy (Goldman)
- No state apparatus is needed. (Kropotkin)
- Social justice is part of our human nature. (Godwin)
- Social change will occur through collective action. (Bakunin)
- Those with power will surrender it for the common good. (Godwin)
- Mutual aid and reciprocity results in an exchange between equals. (Proudhon)
- Humans can be sovereign individuals who participate in voluntary association (ie not for payment). (Kropotkin)
- Women's emancipation must come from themselves "First be asserting herself as a personality, and not as a sex commodity. Second by refusing the right to anyone over her body". (Goldman)

Questions from an Anarchist Perspective

1. The question: Why do men believe they have a right to buy sex?

Analysis: Gender is a power-based hierarchy and prostitution is one manifestation of that power inequality. The overwhelming purchasers of sex (from women or from men) are men. The entitlement for men to purchase sex is dependent on their privileged hierarchical position and the subordinate position of women. Women from poorer socio-economic backgrounds are overrepresented in the sex industry.

Solutions: Men should be encouraged to relinquish their hierarchical power, not supported in maintaining it.

2. The question: Why do men pay for sex?

Analysis: Prostitution is “a financial transaction for sex”. Sex is freely available, even in the current capitalist system! Consensual sex can be negotiated between any adults with no financial exchange necessary. Therefore the act of paying for sex serves another purpose: it allows the man to assert power and control over that which he has purchased. The assertion of power and control by the man, and the domination of the woman are part of the transaction. It is not about sex.

Solutions: Men who buy sex should be challenged on their abuse of power and control over women.

3. Question: Are unions or collectives of “sex workers” the answer?

Analysis: The majority of women sell sex primarily because of lack of alternatives. 90% of women involved in prostitution want to exit, but have limited choices (Farley, 1998). When people are exploited, we support them, not the exploiters. Workers unions are necessary for essential production: sex is not a commodity - it is freely available to everyone. Unions or even collectives of people selling sex to men ignore the issue that the act of purchasing sex is problematic within an Anarchist analysis. Normalising power imbalances and inequalities does not make them reduce or disappear; they are only reinforced.

Solutions: People should have equitable choices in how they live their lives. The majority of women in prostitution do not have a range of equitable choices. Men who purchase sex do have choices. Anarchists should challenge the status quo of gendered power hierarchies by questioning men’s right to purchase sex, rather than supporting ways that makes [sic] it easier for men to exert power and control over women, and thereby alienating themselves from human nature.

Other radical ideas

- If women have limited choices, men aren’t doing them a favour by paying them for sex: just give them the money.
- People who think that prostitution is a service for socially isolated men should offer to have free sex with these men.
- People who think prostitution is the same as any other manual work, but better paid, should try to earn a living wage from it on the Romford Road. (The majority of women are not working as “highly paid escorts”).
- Those who fetishise [sic] the exchange of sex for money are not Anarchists... or radical in any way, but promote human beings [sic] alienation from each other.

An afterthought on feminism

Feminism brought the notion of “the personal is political” into consciousness. The requirement from a feminist analysis to examine interpersonal interactions as either supporting or challenging gender hierarchy results in the same conclusions: the act of men purchasing sex makes them complicit in the subordination of women as a group.