

Bristol Feminist Network (BFN) Position Paper

The sex industry/prostitution

Since the second wave, this has probably been the thorniest issue for feminists. However we believe it is important that a feminist organisation takes a view on the sex industry/prostitution.

BFN does not condemn legal, informed and consensual decisions made by individuals working in sex industry/prostitution. However we do ask how far decisions taken within the sex industry/prostitution can be consensual in the context of a patriarchal and capitalist society, where violence against women and girls is a major issue, where women's 'worth' is not equal to men's, and where women's success is still judged on their ability to perform a narrow definition of sexuality to the male gaze. In this debate we hear a lot about choice and the rhetoric of choice. We are concerned that, given the atmosphere and pressure on women in the sex industry and prostitution, women are not always able to make truly free choices.

Whatever one's view on the sex industry and prostitution, there is no getting away from the fact that violence runs through it. Here are some stats:

- Women who work in the sex industry are 60-100 times more likely to be murdered than women who don't¹ and the risk is higher if you are transgender.
- 2/3 of women who work in prostitution suffer client violence².
- 1.2 million people are trafficked as sex slaves and that 500,000 – 600,000 people every year are trafficked into the sex industry over national borders³.
- 68% of women who have exited prostitution experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)⁴.

Often in the media, violence against women in prostitution and the sex industry is 'othered'. This means that rather than seeing women who have been prostituted as women, they are portrayed as only 'prostitutes' or other more offensive terms. This was the case in some of the reporting around the Ipswich murders, as an example, and more recently with the Bradford murders. We condemn this media stance.

Fundamentally, commercial sexual exploitation runs through prostitution and the sex industry. One proposed change to the law is to legalise the selling of sex and criminalising the buying of sex. This puts the emphasis on the client and reduces

¹ Salfati, James, Ferguson http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1127&context=honors&sei-redir=1&referer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.co.uk%2Furl%3Fsa%3Dt%26source%3Dweb%26cd%3D4%26ved%3D0CDQQFjAD%26url%3Dhttp%253A%252F%252Fdigitalcommons.liberty.edu%252Fcgi%252Fviewcontent.cgi%253Farticle%253D1127%2526context%253Dhonors%26rct%3Dj%26q%3Dsalfati%2520james%2520ferguson%2520violence%2520against%2520women%2520in%2520prostitution%26ei%3D66maTtOICZCq8QPOn9S6BQ%26usg%3DAFQjCNE9BeQFqpS6S8YHeFYEMd2_1o9o0A%26sig2%3DOV5Sw0iLcxIZ1R_kIo1gXA#search=%22salfati%20james%20ferguson%20violence%20against%20women%20prostitution%22

² Church, Henderson, Barnard and Settings, http://www.eaves4women.co.uk/Documents/Recent_Reports/Men%20Who%20Buy%20Sex.pdf

³ International Office of Migration

⁴ Farley, Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart

demand. This is commonly known as the Nordic Model as it has been adopted in Sweden. Objections to this include that it pushes prostitution underground and that there is corruption in the system. However it has shown a decrease in demand⁵ and, with the right support systems in place, it has allowed many women to safely exit the sex industry. A further proposed change is decriminalising prostitution entirely. Objections to this include that by legalising prostitution, you are fundamentally saying that it is okay to buy another person's body to have sex with. Some BFN members who identify as radical feminists believe that fundamentally buying sex with someone is rape, that you are raping someone for money, because consent is meaningless when it is informed by a need for money, rather than having sex because you want to, because of desire, love, pleasure etc.

BFN supports the law change that criminalises paying for sex with a woman who has been trafficked, even if the punter did not know. We support Object's awareness-raising campaign on this issue⁶.

In conclusion:

- We question what meaningful consent means in prostitution and the sex industry in a capitalist and patriarchal society
- We question what 'choice' and 'free choice' means in a patriarchal and capitalist society when it comes to prostitution and the sex industry.
- We recognise and campaign against violence against women and girls in prostitution and the sex industry and its 'othering' in the media.
- We support campaigns and organisations who support women who work in or need support exiting prostitution and the sex industry, such as One25.
- We believe that we need to give a voice to and listen to the women who are in, and who have exited, prostitution and the sex industry.
- We believe that tackling demand, and challenging the belief that sees women's bodies and sexuality as something that can be bought is a way to move forward with ending VAWG within (and outside) the sex industry.

Sub-section: The normalisation of the sex industry

BFN is concerned that the normalisation of the sex industry, from the proliferation of pornography to the rise in lad's mags and the opening of strip clubs and restaurants like Hooters on our high streets, are contributing to the normalisation of the view that women are sex objects to be consumed.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that the continued view of women as only and always sex objects, as opposed to full citizens of the world, contributes to a raised tolerance of sexism, and is a contributing cause to violence against women, particularly within teen relationships (American Psychological Association⁷). Seeing women as objects for consumption contributes to dehumanisation. It is easier to commit violence against someone who is dehumanised.

⁵http://action.web.ca/home/catw/readingroom.shtml?x=130078&AA_EX_Session=7c4f455047e37cf63442a3dd50ee4d0c

⁶ <http://www.object.org.uk/resources/archive/98-press-release-criminal-records-for-punters-from-april-1st>

⁷ <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report.aspx>

BFN campaigns against the normalising of women as only and always sex objects. This is another issue where we hear a lot of rhetoric of individual choice. However, individuals are growing up with no 'choice' but to see women as anything other than objects because an alternative view of women and women's bodies is simply not there. This is highlighted beautifully in Natasha Walter's book, 'Living Dolls'.

BFN does not believe that liberation lies in being portrayed only and always as sex objects. Liberation is not found in being told what to wear, when to smile, how to laugh, how to talk, how to walk, how to perform sexuality.

The normalisation of the sex industry has a huge impact on women's mental health and self-esteem. It contributes to low self esteem and anhedonia – the inability to feel pleasure⁸. It is linked to the rise in cosmetic surgery and practices such as labiaplasty, which reshapes a woman's genitals to conform to an 'ideal' whilst often leaving her with decreased sexual sensation⁹. The desire to be seen as conforming to what is 'sexy' is literally castrating women.

BFN does not condemn the women who work in strip clubs, Playboy Clubs, lad's mags, page three, Hooters et al. Instead we want to change the terms of the debate and question and condemn a society and a system that places women's worth and self esteem and value on their ability to conform to a narrow definition of 'sexiness' rather than their value as full agents in the world.

⁸ Sweeting and West 2003

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2011/feb/27/labiaplasty-surgery-labia-vagina-pornography>