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It's Different for Boys

by J. Marlowe

Female prostitution takes on new meanings when analyzed alongside male prostitution. Within the gay male world, prostitution is, for the most part, regarded with indifference. This is probably because many gay men have learned not only to accept but also to take pride in sexual deviance.

The arguments against female prostitution are familiar: prostitutes are victims, have no self-esteem, degrade all women, and need to be forcefully removed from their circumstances. However, when one applies these arguments to male prostitutes, and if one treats men and women as intellectual equals, then the arguments contradict the very essence of feminism; instead, they propagate patriarchal and antifeminist values.

My first argument centers on the notion of victimhood. The stereotypical Hollywood female hooker is regarded as helpless and pathetic, waiting to be rescued by a man (Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, for example), whereas a stereotypical male hooker is regarded as tough and invulnerable, turning tricks just to be deviant (Keanu Reeves in *My Own Private Idaho*). The sugar daddy of a former acquaintance of mine once admitted that he used to get a rush from picking up hustlers on his lunch break due to the sheer element of danger: the person he picked could conceivably beat him to a pulp.

Whenever concern is expressed in the media for male prostitution, it's inevitably in the context of a child prostitution ring. The use of the word "child" is intended to portray innocence, when in fact male prostitutes are usually adolescents above the age of consent. In contrast, women of any age are treated as childlike victims, even if they entered prostitution well into adulthood. It would appear that age confers maturity and autonomy upon male, but not female prostitutes, who are rarely represented as anything but exploited.

"Exploitation" evokes a zero-sum game: one person gains at the expense of the other. However, prostitution -- and especially male prostitution -- is almost always a commercial transaction in which both parties agree on a price beforehand. The exploitation argument seems to rest on the spurious claim that women find sex inherently unpleasant, and that any woman who engages in it for reasons other than love is having something taken from her, no matter what fee she commands. In comparison, consider the same transaction between two men. Who is exploiting whom? Is it the client, who has the financial ability to buy sex from a younger man with (presumably) less financial freedom, or is it the conventionally attractive hustler, who cashes in on the fact that he's younger and more desirable than his client? Whose erect penis represents the "weaker sex"?

Looking at a commercial sex transaction between two men thus highlights the ambiguity of traditional feminist notions of exploiter and exploited. While there is exploitation in the sex industry -- pimps who take a hooker's entire earnings, clients who refuse to pay, men who secretly videotape encounters and then sell them -- there is nothing inherently exploitive about two adults engaging in consensual paid sex. It is only when the prostitute is female and the client is male -- or when the prostitute is a minor and the client isn't -- that the issue of exploitation arises at all. Perhaps it's time we ask ourselves why women and children are regarded as a homogenous group in this regard, while men are subject to an entirely different set of rules.

My second argument has to do with the presumption that prostitutes have low self-esteem. Adolescents learn that "good girls" abstain from sex while "bad girls" don't, and that good boys and bad boys alike strive to have sex as often as possible. Because of this conditioning, we believe that young women who engage in casual sex must necessarily be bad girls and, moreover, that they themselves must agree with society's assessment of their bad girl status. Only a handful of feminists have bothered to suggest that good girls can enjoy sex for its own sake. In contrast, boys who engage in casual sex are considered to have a normal and healthy sex drive.

For better or for worse, gay men have mastered the art of the one-night stand. As such, prostitution is merely a variation on a well-established theme within gay circles, namely the anonymous, no-strings-attached fling. Many of my own clients have confided that they seek the services of a professional simply as a matter of convenience -- they'd rather not waste their time playing mind games in the bars, they know exactly how much it's going to cost them at the end of the evening, they know exactly how far they're going to get, and they don't have to worry about any romantic expectations on the part of their partners.

Concern for the mental health of female sex workers rests on a normative view of female sexuality as connected to love and relationship, reflected in the stereotype that female prostitutes must not value themselves as anything more than receptive sex organs. Yet, among gay men, hustlers are not stigmatized in this way -- more likely, they are envied. Why would a man have low self-esteem if he's being sought out and given money for his body? In gay male culture, knowing that one is attractive enough to command payment raises, rather than lowers, one's self-esteem. It is only if one believes that the ability to have sex without love is damaging that this aspect of prostitution appears to be "unhealthy" or a reflection of low self-esteem. In fact, the required linkage of sex with love (or the injunction to be "good girls") has historically functioned to keep women under the control of one loved man -- their husband, who may or may not demonstrate equal monogamy and devotion.

Unlike the link between female prostitution and roles and perception of women in general, male prostitution is quite separate from the roles and perception of men in general, both within the gay world and without: few would argue that the presence of street hustlers in any way influences how society perceives men in general. This dichotomy arises from the different ways in which we perceive and treat women and men in society, rather than anything inherent in the sex trade. If prostitution were patently destructive, then presumably male whores would find themselves as stigmatized as their female counterparts.

Measures to abolish street prostitution are typically geared toward women. In many cities, "schools" for johns are popping up, in which men arrested for soliciting an undercover female officer can circumvent a police record by paying a \$500 fee and sitting through a lecture telling them how they have degraded all women through their actions. The ex-prostitutes who inform these men of their evil ways claim to be speaking on behalf of all prostitutes, which is yet another example of women having their opinions decided and voiced for them on their behalf: just because in this instance they are being eclipsed by other women doesn't make it any less condescending. Further, these programs rarely if ever target the clients of male sex workers, perhaps because proponents realize that a man standing at the front of a room trying to convince johns that their actions degraded all men would be regarded as comical at best. While these programs are purported to "help" victimized women, their effect is to erode the client base for all female prostitutes -- essentially to abolish one of the only professions in which women typically earn more than men.

In debates about prostitution, it is often women -- the same women who correctly argue that women and intelligent and independent beings -- who selectively invoke antiquated notions of helpless victimhood when trying to abolish the profession. If one truly believes that men and women are equal (or at least should be regarded as equal), then it should be clear that prostitutes require neither pity nor salvation on the basis of their profession alone. All of the arguments against prostitution break down when sex roles are held constant. Men can engage in commercial sex without being regarded as victims of exploitive men or as propagators of demeaning attitudes. Any prostitute (or anyone else) may be victim of circumstances beyond his or her control, and measures should be in place to help those who wish to get out of oppressive circumstances. However, to suggest that prostitutes who do not see themselves as victims just don't know any better is patronizing and contradicts the very essence of feminism -- the freedom to make one's own choices.

The juxtaposition of male-female and male-male prostitution helps to highlight a fundamental flaw in the arguments of antiprostitution feminists: the objection relates not to the actual transaction (which is fairly mundane when all is said and done) but rather to preconstructed sex roles that attempt to stigmatize women for being anything other than the traditional passive partner. Rather than advocating a manifestly patriarchal view of female sexuality, perhaps feminist energy would be better spent trying to eradicate the whole good girl/bad girl paradigm altogether.