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# Feminist Voices on Sex Work: Implications for Social Work

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Lacey Sloan and Stephanie Wahab

*Sex work and prostitution are the focus of debate among feminists. This article explores the long history of the debate on sex work and presents recommendations for a policy statement for the profession.*

Since the beginning of the profession, social workers have worked with sex workers. A variety of ideological and theoretical orientations have ruled their involvement, from evangelical desires to rescue fallen women from the clutches of male sexual aggression to the insistence that women control their own bodies and sexuality. This article explores the diverse feminist voices on sex work and implications for social workers.

## HISTORY

Much of the early practice of social workers (then called rescue workers, settlement workers, friendly visitors, benevolent workers, reform workers, or religious reformers, depending on their moral-religious orientations) with sex workers was evangelical during the mid-1800s. In the area of sexual morality, evangelicals saw their task as controlling men's sexual aggression and protecting women from it because society did not have a place for women who had lost their "virtue" (D. K. Boyer & James, 1983; P. Boyer, 1978; Rothman, 1978). Reformers rejected

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sexual liberalism, which they believed always meant the sexual exploitation of women. The religious reformers' approach to prostitution excluded the voices and perspectives of prostitutes and thus obscured the possibility that women were not victims and that women might exercise agency in choosing to engage in sex work.

During the late 1800s, the specter of White slavery was used to depict commercial sex as a form of slavery in which women were trafficked against their will by third parties, typically foreigners, such as pimps, madams, and proprietors, who were increasingly organizing the business. It was in the name of protecting women—White women—from exploitation and sexual slavery that the U.S. Congress passed the Mann Act of 1910, which made it a felony to transport women and girls in interstate commerce for such immoral purposes as prostitution and debauchery. Similarly, state legislatures passed laws to protect men from disease-carrying prostitutes. American feminists who had rallied behind Josephine Butler, a British feminist, in her crusade against the British Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, which mandated medical examinations of women who were believed to be prostitutes (Bullough & Bullough, 1987; Cree, 1995; Pheterson, 1989; Roberts, 1992), organized opposition to such laws in the United States. Like Butler, they, in tandem with some purity reformers, argued that mandatory medical examinations of prostitutes perpetuated a sexual double standard that held prostitutes, not their clients, responsible for the transmission of diseases (Hobson, 1987). Many purity reformers argued, as did Butler, that the mandatory medical examinations were a form of sexual assault.

By the 1890s, more than 100 U.S. cities had Charity Organization Societies (COS) that were designed to provide more systematic relief to the poor. Unlike the evangelical workers, who considered women to be victims of male aggression, the COS workers regarded women as incapable of making good decisions and hence of being susceptible to sexual advances (Stadum, 1992). Consequently, the COS workers and friendly visitors would solicit information about unknown men who might visit

women. Like their predecessors, they were greatly disturbed by sexuality—or rumors of women's immorality.

By the early 1900s, despite their apparent openness to the ways of life in their local communities, settlement workers were part of the second antiprostitution crusade (see Bullough & Bullough, 1987, for a detailed discussion of antiprostitution crusades). Influenced by the notion that prostitution was sexual slavery, Addams (1912) called prostitutes "victims of White slavery" who needed to be rescued from immoral people and forces. American feminists agreed with Addams that prostitution was "the social evil" (Vice Commission of Chicago, 1911, cited in Addams, 1912, p. 4) that rendered women powerless to save themselves. Addams, a prominent settlement worker and founder of Hull House, believed that prostitution would eventually go away once society moved to the next level of moral development.

With the onset of World War I, prostitutes were no longer seen as victims of White slavery but as the Number 1 enemy on the home front. War propaganda (quoted in Hobson, 1987) depicted prostitutes as diseased and predatory, women who "could do more harm than any German fleet of airplanes" (p. 165). Women who were engaged in settlement work and other types of community service were called on to help fight the war of disease on the home front: "They initiated volunteer hostess clubs that offered wholesome entertainment near training camps; they acted as chaperones for servicemen and single women at public dances" (Hobson, 1987, p. 166).

During the 1920s, as social workers began to professionalize, they attempted to set themselves apart from those doing Christian and church-based work, namely, the evangelical and charity workers. Despite the tensions between them, moral reform workers and social workers essentially performed the same kind of rehabilitative and rescue work with "fallen women." Social workers tried to rehabilitate fallen women by changing their personalities through casework and therapy, whereas evangelicals used religion. Both groups of reformers thus used interventions that focused on the individual. As long as the causes of prostitution lay with the individual, they thought,

then prostitution could be eliminated if all the fallen women could be redeemed; every time the Magdalen Society rescued an "unhappy female," they believed, prostitution was diminished (P. Boyer, 1978).

For 40 years after World War I, the discourse on prostitution was shaped largely by psychiatrists, who thought that the causes of prostitution could be traced back to the individual "neurotic," "frigid," and/or "masochistic" woman (Hobson, 1987). Unlike the evangelical workers, who believed that women fell into prostitution as victims, psychiatrists such as Greenwald (1970) repeatedly referred to "the personality which makes it possible for a girl to choose the prostitutes' profession" (p. 242). Hence, despite a prostitute's pathology, Greenwald acknowledged a woman's agency to choose the profession, a controversial recognition that is still highly debated in the social work profession.

It was not until the cultural and social protests of the 1960s and 1970s that prostitution again become an issue of sexual politics or social justice, and many of the conflicts in class and gender politics that had inhibited change in the past worked against change in the future (Hobson, 1987). A huge gap exists in the social work literature on prostitution from 1960 to 1980; in a review of more than 20 years of indexes to the *Social Welfare Forum* of the National Conferences on Social Welfare, we found no mention of prostitution. Despite a call for more attention to diverse social issues, women's rights and prostitution included, it may be assumed that because psychotherapeutic models prevailed in the 1960s (Kemp, 1994; Torgerson, 1962), social work practice with sex workers remained focused on individual weaknesses. Some information about the lives of sex workers can be found in both the feminist literature and the prostitutes' rights literature of this period.

Since the 1990s, the debate about sex work has taken place against a backdrop of economic injustice and social inequity for women, who do not have the same opportunities for employment and self-support available to them as do men. Given the inequitable status of women in society, some feminists have characterized women who work in the sex trade as victims of

exploitation and abuse. Other feminists, however, believe that despite the lack of equity between men and women, sex work is a legitimate profession stigmatized by a sexually repressed society.

### SEX WORK AS VIOLENCE AND EXPLOITATION

Addams's (1912) work to end sexual slavery in the early 1900s was picked up by Barry (1979) and others in the late 1970s, who pointed to the economic conditions of women as the primary motivation for women to engage in sex work (Bullough & Bullough, 1987). In addition, many authors believe that patriarchy contributes to the conditions under which prostitution and sex work exist (Barry, 1979; Bullough & Bullough, 1987; Decker, 1979; Grauerholz & Koralewski, 1991; MacKinnon, 1983, 1987; Winick & Kinsie, 1971; Wynter, 1987).

Those who support the abolition of sex work, such as Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER), "reject the lie that women freely choose prostitution from a whole array of economic alternatives that exist under civil equity" (Wynter, 1987, p. 269). Rather, they contend that in the United States, with its high rates of child abuse, wife battering, rape, poor female-headed households, no equal rights amendment, and inequitable wages, women live with civil inequity that does not allow free choices, especially in regard to potentially life-threatening work. Supporters of these beliefs want sanctions against sex workers to be eliminated, but they want those who solicit, procure, or profit from sex work to be criminally liable. The following sections present some of the more prevalent contemporary feminist positions on sex work as violence and exploitation: Marxist feminism, domination theory, and Black feminist thought.

#### Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminists invert the contractarian perspective and argue that the oppression of women is the result of a society in

which social order is based on the ownership of private property (Riger, 1992). The traditional Marxist position on prostitution equates labor and commodified sexuality: "Prostitution is only the specific expression of the universal prostitution of the worker" (Marx, 1975, p. 350). Marx argued that prostitution is the result of the capitalist system in which workers become extensions of their machines and hence alienated, less human, and less free to refuse wage labor. That is, capitalism forces some people to become wage laborers to survive.

Marxist feminists support the notion that both sex workers and workers are exploited because both are turned into commodified objects. For example, Overall (1992) stated, "So the question becomes whether in a context of economic insecurity, sex role socialization, and inadequate education women choose prostitution any less than they choose other forms of traditional women's work" (p. 713). Similarly, Jaggar (1991) noted,

Just as the capacity to labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, so does sexuality, especially the sexuality of women. Thus prostitutes, like wage laborers, have an essential human capacity alienated. Like wage laborers, they become dehumanized and their value as persons is measured by their market price. And like wage laborers, they are compelled to work by economic pressure; prostitution, if not marriage, may well be the best option available to them. (p. 357)

The Marxist analysis of sex work considers the political and economic context in which sex work occurs. With its emphasis on class and labor, however, it excludes important forces, such as sexism, desire, and agency, from the understanding of sex work.

### **Domination Theory**

Domination theory is closely related to radical feminist theory but considers sexuality to be the basis of women's oppression (Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1987; Sloan, 1997). It holds that the stigma of the prostitute represents the fundamental condition

of women. MacKinnon (1987), a leading proponent of domination theory, argued that female sexuality is constructed entirely as an object of male desire: "Women's sexuality is, socially, a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others. . . . Women never own or possess it" (p. 59).

Unlike liberalism and Marxism, domination theory insists that only women can be prostitutes. Proponents of domination theory reject any possibility that agency and desires are forces for women's involvement in sexual acts. In fact, domination theory assumes the radical feminist position (see Dworkin, 1987; Jaggar, 1991; Zatz, 1997) that sex work is inherently oppressive and violent and serves the purpose of asserting male dominance and power over women. Advocates of domination theory, however, take radical feminism one step further and argue that sex is violence. Dworkin (1987), a radical feminist who has collaborated with MacKinnon on several occasions, stated,

There is never a real privacy of the body that can coexist with intercourse: with being entered. The vagina itself is a muscle and the muscles have to be pushed apart. The thrusting is persistent invasion. She is opened up, split down the center. She is occupied—physically, internally, in her privacy. . . . Violation is a synonym for intercourse. (p. 122)

According to domination theory, sex work institutionalizes women's dependence on men and is therefore inherently exploitative. Advocates often use the term *female sexual slavery*, coined by Barry (1979) and used by Cole (1987), to refer to sex work. Advocates of domination theory argue that women's equality cannot be achieved as long as sex work exists.

According to Zatz (1997), radical feminist positions on sex work, such as MacKinnon's domination theory, mirror the Marxist position that pays attention to how subordination allows women's sexuality to be appropriated. As MacKinnon (1989) stated, "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that is, most one's own, yet most taken away" (p. 3). Like Marxists, who contend that labor is acceptable as long as workers are free, radical feminists argue that sex is acceptable as long



as it is free of economic coercion. Jaggar (1991) noted that the economic coercion of sex work claimed by radical feminists implies that the moral status of the sex worker (i.e., the exploited victim) is identical with that of a rape victim because the notion that women are simply sexual objects is supposedly reinforced by the woman who sells sex.

Domination theory is beset by internal contradictions. First, by grafting Marxism onto feminism, domination theory reproduces a phallic aspect of Marxism: the power of totalization, that is, the belief that Marxism and feminism are universal theories that speak to the political, social, and economic conditions of women (see S. Bell, 1994). Domination theory assumes that oppression is a universal woman's experience and contradicts reports by sex workers who claim to have found sex work empowering and liberating (see, e.g., H. Bell, Sloan, & Strickling, 1998). Second, although MacKinnon (1983) criticized the binary division of women into good girls or bad girls (Madonna vs. whore), she reinscribed it by claiming that all women are whores in a capitalist and patriarchal society. Third, domination theory critiques the notion that women's sexuality is entirely defined by men; it does not leave room for women to create their own multiple sexualities through agency and autonomy.

Although MacKinnon's arguments have been the source of heated debate, especially among advocates of prostitutes' rights, her moralist position has ironically been embraced by conservatives in the United States. Indeed, MacKinnon and Dworkin joined with conservative legislators in the 1980s to pass antipornography legislation in Minneapolis and Indianapolis (see MacKinnon & Dworkin, 1997).

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Given the evidence that female sex workers of color have fewer opportunities for employment off the streets than do White female sex workers and are disproportionately arrested for prostitution (see Alexander, 1987; L. Bell, 1987; McClintock, 1992), any understanding of the experiences of sex workers would be

incomplete without an exploration of how issues of race influence the experiences of women of color in the sex industry. Black feminist thought articulates a social, political, and cultural position that developed out of a need for Black women to create a knowledge-validation process that affirms their history and life experiences (Collins, 1990). Black feminist intellectuals argue that all women of African descent in the United States share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of color (hooks, 1984).

Black feminist thought articulates a Black woman's standpoint (a social, political, spiritual, or economic position) that is informed by the interconnection of race, gender, and class issues (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Smith, 1987). Rather than isolate issues of race, class, and gender in exploring the lives of those who have experienced oppression, radical women of color, such as Black feminists, argue that it is necessary to examine how these issues intersect to form a matrix of domination. Both hooks (1989) and Collins (1990) contended that racism, classism, and sexism constitute different dimensions of oppression in which domination is both at the core of and the link among these different manifestations. Although racism, classism, and sexism are not necessarily the most fundamental systems of oppression, they represent some of the forces that have profoundly affected the lives of Black women.

Collins (1990) positions prostitution at the intersection of race, class, and gender:

The creation of Jezebel, the image of the sexually denigrated Black woman, has been vital in sustaining a system of interlocking race, gender, and class oppression. Exploring how the image of the African-American woman as prostitute has been used by each system of oppression illustrates how sexuality links the three systems. But Black women's treatment also demonstrates how manipulating sexuality has been essential to the political economy of domination within each system and across all three. (p. 174)

According to Collins, an understanding of racism is essential to an analysis of prostitution and pornography. Collins (1996)

claimed that the rape and abuse of Black women, particularly enslaved Black women, throughout American history is what linked sexuality and violence—"a characteristic of porn." Contending that racism makes certain forms of sexual objectification possible, she conceptualized sex work along the intersecting axes of racism and sexism and argued that sex work represents the exploitation of Black women's sexuality for an economic purpose. Commodified sex can then be appropriated by the powerful. Collins argues that both pornography and prostitution commodify sexuality and imply to the "White boys" that all Black women can be bought.

Collins's position resonates with domination theory to the extent that it regards sex work as a form of violence against women. Although Collins did not theorize that sex work is a form of violence, her writing in this area speaks to the importance of exploring the intersection of race, class, and gender when studying the lives of women of color.

### SEX AS WORK

Prior to 1973, it was rarely acknowledged that sex workers were capable of speaking for themselves (Pheterson, 1989). In 1973, Margo St. James organized a sex workers' rights organization called COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) (Jenness, 1993; Pheterson, 1989). By the mid-1970s, sex workers' rights organizations began to form across the United States and around the world (e.g., in the Netherlands, the Red Thread; in Atlanta, Hooking Is Real Employment [HIRE]; and in England, Prostitution Laws Are Nonsense). Sex workers' rights groups believe that "most women who work as prostitutes have made a conscious decision to do so, having looked at a number of work alternatives" ("COYOTE Howls," 1988, cited in Jenness, 1993, p. 406). The advent of the sex workers' rights movement of the 1970s finally provided a forum for sex workers to speak for themselves.

The sex workers' rights movement was founded on three general tenets, all of which are based on the right to self-

determination. Thus, members of the movement believe that (a) many women freely choose sex work, (b) sex work should be viewed and respected as legitimate work, and (c) it is a violation of a woman's civil rights to be denied the opportunity to work as a sex worker (Jenness, 1993; Pheterson, 1989). These women "demand recognition as workers" and "freedom to financial autonomy . . . occupational choice . . . sexual self-determination . . . [and] worker's rights and protections" (International Committee on Prostitutes' Rights [ICPR], 1986, cited in Pheterson, 1989, pp. 192-197).

Contrary to those who advocate the abolition of sex work, who plan to support sex workers while working to eliminate the institution of sex work, sex workers' rights groups and many sex workers reject "support which requires them to leave the profession" and "object to being treated as symbols of oppression" (ICPR, 1986, cited in Pheterson, 1989, p. 192), an image placed on them by many feminists (Barry, Bunch, & Castley, 1984; Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1979; MacKinnon, 1987). Sex workers' rights groups claim that there is no difference between work in which a woman sells her hands, such as typing, and work in which a woman sells her vagina, as in sex work (Jenness, 1990; Pheterson, 1989).

Sex workers and sex workers' rights groups are concerned about the sexual violence, physical violence, and exploitation that prostitutes suffer at the hands of customers, pimps, and the police. At the World Whores Congresses, many sex workers told of heinous acts of abuse that they and other prostitutes experienced, including kidnapping, torture, rape, and being forced into sex work (Pheterson, 1989). Yet, unlike those who support the abolition of sex work, those in favor of decriminalization want these abuses stopped by the enforcement of existing laws that prohibit kidnapping, assault, rape, and fraud and claim that the illegal status of sex workers leaves them vulnerable to abuse, rape, and exploitation (Pheterson, 1989).

Sex workers and sex workers' rights groups reject the notion that female heterosexuality perpetuates male privilege and men's dominance of women (Jenness, 1990). Many sex workers believe

that all women are empowered when sex workers charge men for what men expect all women to provide for free (Jenness, 1990). This stance conflicts with the view that the sex trade perpetuates men's belief in their right to sexual access to all women (Barry et al., 1984; Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1987). As Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson (1983) stated,

[Blinded] by their own experiences as middle-class women, the social purity feminists were entirely unable to perceive the ways in which other women—their own working-class sisters—could act as sexual agents rather than as victims, using sex to further their own purposes and pleasures. (p. 419)

Sex workers, prostitutes' rights groups, social workers, and others who are working to decriminalize sex work point to the history of the control of prostitution to reveal that most methods adopted to protect and support prostitutes, such as regulation, have failed. They contend that initiatives to prohibit sex work or prostitution have resulted in the isolation, increased vulnerability, abuse, and exploitation of sex workers; that programs to regulate sex work have resulted in the control and further stigmatization of sex workers; and that efforts to abolish sex work have denied sex workers their rights to autonomy and self-determination. Both liberal and radical sexual pluralist feminist voices articulate these positions.

### **Liberal Feminism**

The typical liberal feminist position on sex work is that it should be decriminalized (Jaggar, 1991). According to the American Civil Liberties Union, laws that prohibit prostitution are unconstitutional on the grounds that they interfere with individuals' right to control their bodies and deny women equal protection under the law. Furthermore, in cities in which prostitution statutes do not apply to male customers, the laws discriminate against women. Consequently, liberal feminists

"attempt to minimize government interference in the lives of individuals and they assume that there is a 'private' sphere of human existence" (Jaggar, 1991, p. 351). They argue that prostitution should be treated just like any other business transaction or private contract in which a particular service—in this case a sexual service—is sold.

Liberal feminists agree with the broader liberal perspective that prostitution should be decriminalized (Jaggar, 1991; Zatz, 1997). Some, such as Jolin (1994), contend that women enter the sex industry because they lack other opportunities for employment. Although liberal feminists seem to agree on the central construct of women's oppression, that is, the lack of resources and opportunities (Riger, 1992; Weil, 1995), different liberal feminist positions on sex work have emerged. Some liberal feminists believe that prostitution is degrading to women and thus should not be encouraged, whereas others adopt a contractarian position that regards sex work as a social contract in which the sex worker contracts out a service for a certain amount of time and is a free worker just like any other wage laborer (Jaggar, 1991; Zatz, 1997). According to contractarian feminists, the sex worker is a possessor of property who contracts out a certain form of labor power. She does not sell her body, as radical feminists believe; rather, she sells a service. Furthermore, in the contractarian view, the social contract exists to legitimate civil society and political rights (S. Bell, 1994).

### **Radical Sexual Pluralist Theory**

The fourth theory to consider is the radical sexual pluralist theory articulated by Rubin (1984), who borrowed from the discourses of sexology, gay liberation, and social construction theory to develop her theory of sexuality (S. Bell, 1994). Much like the postmodern feminist theorists (see, e.g., Marchand & Parpart, 1995; Nicholson, 1990), Rubin articulates a perspective that rejects grand theories and binaries. Sex radicals, such as Califia (1994), challenge notions that sexual liberalization,

fetishism, sex for money, sadism and masochism, homosexuality, and pornography are inherently mere extensions of male privilege. In short, they are critical of all restrictions placed on sexual activities (Zatz, 1997).

Central to radical sexual pluralist theory is the notion that no sexual behavior is more moral than any other and that privileging one sexuality over others creates an illusion that there is only one best way to do things—a type of thinking that is seen as dangerous in that it perpetuates a system of sexual judgment that dichotomizes sexual acts into good and bad, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural. Rubin (1984) drew a parallel between the system of sexual hierarchy and certain ideologies of racism in that both systems grant virtues to dominant groups and relegate outsiders to a “less than” status. As she noted, “This kind of sexual morality has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics. It grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged” (p. 283). By not privileging one form of sexual behavior over another, radical sexual pluralist theory opens up a space for those who have been banished to the outer limits of the “charmed circle” to contribute to the creation of knowledge about their experiences. Rather than try to know or give voice to the other, sex radicals like Rubin (1984) and Califia (1994) have argued that those who speak, write about, and research sex work should listen to the voices of those who have been “othered”—a view that is consistent with that of some Black feminist thought (see, e.g., hooks, 1989).

Three factors that differentiate radical sexual pluralist theory on sex work from the radical and Marxist feminist constructions and domination theory are as follows: (a) Sex workers are constructed as sexual and political figures rather than as MacKinnon’s view of them as “passive holes” (see S. Bell, 1994, p. 86), (b) sex work is recognized as legitimate work, and (c) money in the sexual exchange is treated just like any other variable, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and violence (S. Bell, 1994). Finally, radical sexual pluralist theory shares the liberal feminist perspective that the state should not intrude into private intimate behaviors between consenting adults.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Although few programs in the United States provide social services specifically to sex workers, social workers provide services to some sex workers through correctional, welfare, domestic violence, rape crisis, public health, and HIV/AIDS-related programs. However, because sex workers rarely disclose their occupation to social service providers for fear of stigma and arrest (D. K. Boyer, Chapman, & Marshall, 1993; Weiner, 1996), social workers do not always know when clients are involved in the sex industry; hence, their ability to meet the needs of clients that are specific to sex work is limited. Women who are unable to hide their status as sex workers are frequently the most vulnerable because they are homeless, addicted to drugs, or have severe health conditions (Weiner, 1996). Consequently, many women who reveal their status are turned away from social service programs (like domestic violence shelters or long-term alcohol and drug treatment) out of fear that they will compromise the programs by continuing to trade sex for drugs or money (Weiner, 1996). Some cities such as Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Buffalo, New York have had services that offered support groups, housing assistance, job training, and counseling to sex workers who wanted to leave "the life" (those in Seattle, Portland, and Minneapolis closed as of May 1997), but there are few services to support sex workers who remain in the sex industry even though some of them may be in dire need of social services.

Although there is no evidence that female sex workers have a higher rate of HIV infection than do women who are not sex workers, sex workers have been scapegoated for spreading sexually transmitted diseases (Sacks, 1996). The onset of the AIDS epidemic and the emergence of John's Schools (offered to first-time offenders of prostitution) across the country have created some opportunities for social workers to work with sex workers in the areas of sexual health, ethics, and morality. Several sex worker-focused HIV/AIDS education programs and John's Schools in the 1990s were organized and run by sex workers; some employ social workers (for a discussion of sex



workers' responses to the AIDS epidemic, see Chapkis, 1997). Thus, social workers who work in needle-exchange programs, HIV/AIDS outreach programs, safer sex education, and public health programs for people with HIV come into contact with sex workers. Nevertheless, besides sex worker-run organizations like COYOTE, WHISPER, and HIRE, few programs provide social services directly to sex workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

There continue to be many areas in which social workers can use their skills and education to benefit sex workers. Unfortunately, the feminist debate has impeded united efforts to meet the needs of sex workers. Despite disparate ideological and theoretical perspectives between prostitutes' rights groups and those who want to abolish prostitution, there are two areas of agreement: (a) Sex workers are often victims of exploitation, abuse, murder, and injustice; and (b) sex workers should not be prosecuted for their work. From these two areas of agreement, in conjunction with the social work imperatives to work for social and economic justice, acknowledge the individual's right to self-determination, and alleviate human suffering, we propose that social workers on both sides of the debate work together to ensure that the needs of sex workers are met.

In an effort to move past ideological and theoretical divisions, we present the following recommendations as areas in which social workers, no matter what their orientations, can work for justice: (a) promote the prosecution of persons who exploit, kidnap, or abuse sex workers or force women into sex work; (b) promote economic justice, employment options, and education for all women; (c) destigmatize and depathologize sex workers; and (d) support women who want to leave sex work. The next two points can probably be supported by sex workers' rights groups and abolitionists: (a) support women who continue to work as sex workers, through the provision of needed services, without requiring them to leave the work; and (b) validate the experience of all women in the sex trade. These

statements acknowledge the common ground in this ongoing struggle.

### **Prosecute Violence Against Women, Kidnapping, and Exploitation**

Laws that are designed to address the problems of battering, kidnapping, and sexual assault are frequently not used to protect sex workers from violence by their partners, pimps, customers, or the police. Although the laws do not exclude sex workers from protection, the police and prosecutors have been slow to acknowledge that sex workers can be sexually assaulted and that they deserve protection. In addition, the illegal status of these women may cause many sex workers who are victimized not to file reports with the police. Certain types of federal funding (e.g., the Victims of Crime Act and compensation for crime victims) have been denied to sex workers because they are considered criminals. The police and prosecutors must provide equitable protection to sex workers, support them when they report abuse and violence, and publicize the fact that sex workers will be given protection.

### **Economic Justice, Employment, and Educational Opportunity**

Women must be afforded economic justice and equal employment and educational opportunities. In the United States, women continue to earn less than men—76.3% of the wages earned by men as of 1998 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1998)—and the majority of poor people and welfare recipients have always been women (DiNitto, 1995). Worldwide, illiteracy rates are the highest for girls and women, and women own the smallest proportion of assets (UNESCO, 1999). Furthermore, women continue to be victims of gender inequality in the classroom and sexual harassment in schools and on the job.

Economic and educational opportunities must be ensured for all women, for only in this way will women ever have an

array of viable options. Strong laws must be passed and enforced to ensure equal educational opportunities for girls, and affirmative action and sexual harassment policies must continue to be enforced in the workplace. Poverty and illiteracy need to be eliminated through strong community-based programs.

### **Destigmatizing and Depathologizing Sex Workers**

Throughout history, sex workers have rarely enjoyed equal status with other women in any society. Whether women choose to work as sex workers or not, the stigma creates additional burdens on those who are in the sex trade. Many sex workers become alienated from their families, lose custody of their children, and are ostracized from society. A woman who is identified as a sex worker or former sex worker may be unable to obtain suitable employment once she decides or is able to leave sex work. Labeling sex workers as victims may add to the stigma rather than empower women in sex work.

Sex workers have frequently been pathologized by those who purport to help them. They have been categorized as drug addicts and carriers of AIDS, with little regard for the vulnerability they face because they are marginalized and criminalized. Although the World Health Organization (1993) noted that problems such as drug addiction and AIDS were no higher for sex workers than for other populations, more recent data have suggested that the rate of infection with AIDS of prostitutes in developing countries is many times that of other women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). In addition, studies have focused on the psychological differences between sex workers and non-sex workers instead of identifying societal and economic barriers for women.

Many persons who have worked with and researched sex workers have identified stigma as the primary difficulty for sex workers (Foundation for Women, 1995; Sloan, 1997). Sex workers are just like other women who are trying to survive in an inequitable world order. They want to be treated as human

beings worthy of dignity and respect, feel worthwhile, and have adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Degradation of their work does not help them meet their needs.

#### **Assist Those Who Want to Leave and Those Who Do Not**

Around the world, programs have been established to assist women who want to leave the sex trade. Like earlier efforts by Addams (1912), these programs usually provide shelter and job training or educational opportunities. In addition, many programs have outreach programs that provide street prostitutes with information, condoms, and referrals (some even offer a traveling break room with chairs and coffee). Programs are also needed to protect women who have been forcibly trafficked from other countries; these women are not illegal immigrants and should not be treated as such (Foundation for Women, 1995).

Many programs do not accommodate sex workers who want to or must remain in sex work but have social service needs. For example, most battered women's shelters do not allow women to continue to work as prostitutes while they are living in the shelters, even though there is no contact between customers and the shelter.

#### **Validation of All Voices**

It is imperative to hear and validate the voices of women who work or have worked as sex workers. The reality of all women can be validated by acknowledging that there is a continuum of experiences within the sex trade. Some women have other job skills and education but freely choose to work as sex workers for a variety of reasons, others are physically forced into sex work through kidnapping and trafficking, and still others are sex workers because they would otherwise have no options but poverty and starvation. In addition, the differences between the experience of First World and Third World sex workers must be examined and recognized.

## CONCLUSION

The 1993 Delegate Assembly of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) passed a resolution (written from the abolitionist perspective) directing the association to develop and adopt a policy statement on sex work at the next Delegate Assembly. Despite the 1993 resolution, no such policy statement was developed or adopted at the 1996 or 1999 Delegate Assembly. We believe that the profession should adopt a policy statement that considers all the voices in the debate and reflects a carefully considered plan. Despite the divergent theoretical frameworks and ideologies of the players in this debate, there is some common ground on which to develop a policy statement. NASW must acknowledge the continuum of experience within the sex trade and develop a policy that both eliminates victimization and exploitation and supports the individual's right to autonomy and self-determination.

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