

The Sexism Behind the Anti-Escort Movement

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2014

If you were around in the 1950s, you remember that employment ads in the newspaper were conveniently divided by gender: there were separate listings for “female” jobs and “male” jobs.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act ended that, when the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was formed to eliminate discrimination in the workplace. Today, a want ad reading “female secretary wanted” or “male taxi driver wanted” is almost unthinkable.

So now we’re all free to pursue any job for which we’re qualified, and whose conditions are acceptable to us, right?

Almost.

Escorts and providers of erotic services, unfortunately, face enormous criticism and discrimination over their choice of work. One of the worst kinds of judgment is the assumption that escorts are either coerced into doing their work, or that they’re too stupid to realize how bad it is for them. That’s the basis for the so-called “rescue” operations that activists do.

Let’s face the central question here squarely: are escorts mostly like other women, or are they some strange, alien species? If escorts are like most women, they have similar needs, similar interests, and make choices in similar ways. Many activists and other people don’t want to believe that. The idea of a normal woman rationally choosing to be an escort—rather than being coerced into it, or being incredibly naïve (or drug-addled) when she chooses it—is far too uncomfortable, and raises far too many questions about so-called “normal” women.

That’s another sexist idea—that “normal” women are barely sexual, or are too wholesome to compete with escorts. But it’s foolish to stereotype a group as heterogeneous as “women.” Women who aren’t escorts range from sexually uninterested to sexually average to, shall we say, hot as firecrackers. **Of course.** Female sexuality is not limited to “professionals” or to damaged women—it’s everywhere, regardless of age, social class, or traditionally-defined beauty.

Male-dominated society has been attempting to limit female sexuality for millennia, and the anti-escort movement is part of that historical crusade in two ways: one, by damning escorts as abnormally sexual; and two, by labelling non-escort women as wholesome, whose sexually is limited.

Another common refrain from anti-escort activists is that these women are routinely abused while working. In reality, most escorts report that they are treated well by their clientele. That’s one of the advantages of their job—they don’t have to take every customer who comes along, and can usually ditch anyone with whom they really don’t want to work. The presence of a financial

transaction doesn't prevent an escort from choosing her own customers.

There's some serious sexism in the idea that "escorts can't be trusted to make adult decisions in their lives." So it's especially ironic that many would-be rescuers (including Gloria Steinem herself) call themselves feminists. I guess their motto is "women know what's best for themselves, unless we disagree with their choices." That's exactly what women have been of fighting for eons: being told that their choices are not legitimate, thus proving they're not terribly capable. Imagine having to deal with that challenge just because of your occupational choice.

Of course, the challenges facing escorts are not simply emotional or philosophical. Today's coalition of feminists, conservatives, and even human rights activists are attempting to impoverish escorts' lives as a way of defending "women's rights." Their critiques are translated into criminalization, exclusion from social systems such as child daycare, and the prospect of discrimination in child custody battles or allegations of sexual violence.

These are challenges that everyone should be able to recognize as those of "normal" women. And as such, society should be working to eliminate them. That's a legitimately helpful set of projects for would-be "rescuers" and "activists."

In fact, the escort's quest to control her own life IS feminism defined. Or, if you prefer, it's everyone's quest for adulthood—to own oneself. American society debates this question every day: Should I be allowed to end my life on my own terms, such as with physician-assisted suicide? Should I be allowed to terminate my pregnancy with an abortion? Should I be allowed to smoke marijuana? Should I be allowed to go to a swingers club? Should there be a tax to discourage sugary soft drink consumption? Should the tax code force individuals to support religious institutions?

Each of us deserves the right to make our own choices on matters of personal liberty. In a free society, we're all required to tolerate others' choices, even when they are different from the ones we would make. Regarding the decision to work as an escort, adults should be able to make their own choices—even if that adult is a woman.

This entry was posted on November 26, 2014 at 4:30 pm and is filed under Uncategorized. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. Responses are currently closed, but you can trackback from your own site.

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