

Flawed Theory and Method in Studies of Prostitution

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In no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. Much of this work has been done by writers who regard the sex industry as a despicable institution and who are active in campaigns to abolish it.

In this commentary, I examine several theoretical and methodological flaws in this literature, both generally and with regard to three recent articles in *Violence Against Women*. The articles in question are by Jody Raphael and Deborah Shapiro (2004), Melissa Farley (2004), and Janice Raymond (2004). At least two of the authors (Farley and Raymond) are activists involved in the antiprostitution campaign.¹

IDEOLOGICAL BLINDERS

The three articles are only the most recent examples in a long line of writings on the sex industry by authors who adopt an extreme version of radical feminist theory—extreme in the sense that it is absolutist, doctrinaire, and unscientific. Exemplifying this approach are the works of Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1997), Catherine MacKinnon (1987, 1989), Kathleen Barry (1995), and Sheila Jeffreys (1997). These writers view prostitution as categori-

cally evil, the epitome of male domination and exploitation of women irrespective of historical time period, societal context, or type of prostitution. The authors of the three articles under review share these views.² Prostitution is decried as a human rights violation, “an institution that doles out death and disease” to women (Raymond, 2004, p. 1182) and “a particularly vicious institution of inequality of the sexes” (Farley, 2004, p. 1117). These writers also insist that prostitution is by definition a form of violence against women, whether or not it involves outright physical violence. Violence is endemic and intrinsic to prostitution, categorically and universally. Raymond titles one of her articles “Prostitution as Violence Against Women” (Raymond, 1998) and another “Prostitution is Rape That’s Paid For” (Raymond, 1995). Farley states, “Prostitution must be exposed for what it really is: a particularly lethal form of male violence against women” (Farley & Kelly, 2000, p. 54), and elsewhere she claims that prostitution is sexual harassment, rape, and battering (Farley, 2000). The distinction between “forced” and “voluntary” prostitution is regarded as a myth; some type of coercion and domination is always involved.

The terminology used in these articles, and other writings in this genre, is designed for maximum shock value. Customers are labeled *prostitute users* and *sexual predators* who brutalize women. Farley declares that “the difference between pimps who terrorize women on the street and pimps in business suits who terrorize women in gentlemen’s clubs is a difference in class only, not a difference in woman hating” (Farley, 2004, p. 1101). Raphael and Shapiro (2002, p. 137) proclaim, “These men must be viewed as batterers rather than customers,” and Farley (2004) claims that “johns are regularly murderous toward women” (p. 1102). Everyone knows that some johns do indeed have violent proclivities and others are serial killers who prey on vulnerable women on the streets (Lowman, 2000), but studies of customers caution against blanket characterizations. Martin Monto, who has studied more than 2,300 arrested customers, has found that most of the men did not accept rape myths or other justifications for violence against women. He concludes that “a relatively small proportion of clients may be responsible for most of the violence against prostitutes” (Monto, 2000, p. 76) and that “there is no reason to believe that most customers are violent” (Monto, 2004, p. 176).

Vivid labels are also applied to the workers. Antiprostitution agencies and activists, and the writers featured in this commentary, are adamant that prostitutes be called *prostituted women* or *survivors*. The former clearly indicates that prostitution is something done to women, not something that can be chosen. "Anti-prostitution campaigners use the term *prostituted women* instead of *prostitutes*," writes Jeffrey (1997, p. 330). "This is a deliberate political decision and is meant to symbolize the lack of choice women have over being used in prostitution." It is true that the conventional term *prostitute* is stigmatizing, so I understand why analysts have searched for alternatives. But *survivors* and *prostituted women* are problematic in their own right: The former suggests persons who have escaped something and the latter completely erases women's agency. Women are described as lacking any agency, except when they resist being prostituted or when they decide to leave prostitution. As Farley puts it, "To the extent that any woman is assumed to have freely chosen prostitution, then it follows that enjoyment of domination and rape are in her nature" (Farley & Kelly, 2000, p. 54). Talk about a non sequitur.

Prostitutes themselves do not necessarily see themselves as people who have been prostituted or as survivors. Many view themselves in more neutral terms. In a study of 294 prostitutes in Miami, for instance, almost all of them "prefer the terms *sex worker* and *working woman* and refer to themselves as such" (Kurtz, Surratt, Inciardi, & Kiley, 2004, p. 359). Regardless of how the women see themselves, authors who take the extreme radical feminist position reject the idea that prostitution is "sex work," because viewing it as work might legitimize prostitution.

The problems described above are the tip of an iceberg floating in a larger theoretical quagmire. The extreme version of radical feminism underpinning these studies is a flawed theory according to any conventional definition. A good scientific theory is one whose propositions can be verified and falsified through empirical testing. Unfortunately, few of radical feminism's claims about prostitution are amenable to verification or falsification. These claims are presented as self-evident, absolute principles. How would one ever test the platitudes that customers are predators, that prostitution is paid rape, or as Dworkin (1997) puts it, that "when men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body" (p. 145)?

I am not the first scholar to raise these questions. In a sweeping critique, Gayle Rubin (1993) noted that the radical feminist literature on prostitution and pornography is filled with “sloppy definitions, unsupported assertions, and outlandish claims” (p. 36). Such writers deliberately select the “worst available examples” and the most disturbing instances of abuse and present them as representative (Rubin, 1984, p. 301). Anecdotes are routinely presented as definitive evidence, and counterevidence is completely ignored. This particular literature “violates most of the criteria for meaningful, serious, systematic, scientific thinking” (Goode, 1997, p. 226). Rubin, Goode, and others are especially troubled by the claims of Dworkin and MacKinnon, but their criticisms apply with equal force to many others who write on the sex industry.

The extreme radical feminist perspective has been criticized for its essentialism and universalism, in particular the contention that victimization and exploitation are inherent, omnipresent, and unalterable—that prostitution has never been and can never be organized in a way that minimizes coercion and inequality and maximizes workers’ interests. Some other feminists disagree. As Christine Overall (1992) points out, “It is imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control” (p. 716). She is not optimistic about this becoming the norm, but does present a contrasting picture to those writers who portray prostitution as a vile institution under any and all circumstances.

METHODOLOGICAL FLAWS

Many studies of prostitution can be faulted on methodological grounds. Some authors fail to describe how and where they contacted research subjects. Others fail to include comparison groups (nonprostitutes matched on demographic characteristics; e.g., age, social class), without which it is impossible to know if the findings reported for a prostitute sample differ significantly from those of nonprostitutes. Those few studies that do include appropriate control groups yield mixed results. Some find significant differences between prostitutes and controls on, for instance, history of childhood victimization, whereas others find no significant differences (Earls & David, 1989; Nadon, Koverola,

& Schludermann, 1998). When it comes to victimization in prostitution, studies are "often methodologically flawed and, moreover, contradictory" (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001, p. 259).

Reliance on unrepresentative samples is widespread. Although random sampling of sex workers and customers is impossible, too often the findings and conclusions drawn from convenience and snowball samples are not properly qualified as nongeneralizable. Victimization studies are a case in point. Street prostitutes appear to experience high rates of violence in the course of their work, but the samples used in most studies consist of people who contacted service agencies, were approached on the street, or were interviewed in jail (James & Meyerding, 1977; McKeganey & Barnard, 1996; Weisberg, 1985). The high victimization rates reported in such studies are thus vulnerable to selection bias: The most desperate segment of the population or those persons who are most frequently or seriously victimized may be especially likely to contact service providers or agree to interviews. Generalizing from prostitutes in custody to the population of prostitutes is also improper, just as with other types of incarcerated offenders. Yet the implications of this sampling bias typically are neglected in the published reports. Moreover, the victimization rates reported are often reproduced in the secondary literature and in newspaper reports without disclosing the sampling technique and its limitations.³

To cite just one example of this tendency: Silbert and Pines (1982, p. 127) studied 200 street prostitutes in San Francisco and reported that 45% had been robbed, 65% had been beaten, and 70% had been raped or had experienced a customer "similarly going beyond the work contract" (a bit vague). The authors hired interviewers who were former prostitutes, had been residents of a treatment facility in the city, and "had been victims of various assaults" when they worked as prostitutes (Silbert & Pines, 1982, p. 123). Despite the problematic orientation of the interviewers (given their past experiences) and the fact that the prostitutes interviewed were all drawn from the streets and from a single city, this study is one of the most frequently cited sources (by Farley and others) of evidence that violence is rampant in prostitution.

The three articles examined here, therefore, are hardly alone in using flawed methods. But it is not methodological flaws alone

that plague these articles; the problem extends to the central conclusions derived from the research. In each case, the procedures used severely compromise the quality of the findings and the larger arguments made by the authors.

Raphael and Shapiro (2004) recruited 12 "survivors of prostitution" to locate and conduct interviews with other prostitutes (p. 129). The authors give little indication of how the respondents were located, except to say that they were "already known to" the survivors, "women with whom they worked while previously in prostitution, and women referred by those interviewed" (Raphael & Shapiro, 2004, p. 132). In other words, no attempt was made to sample the broadest range of workers possible; the sample was heavily skewed by the fact that the interviewers were prostitution "survivors" and by the fact that interviewers and respondents were prior associates who may have been like-minded. The authors point out that the interviewers "did not see their own [prior prostitution] experiences as 'work' or a choice," and "because of the bias of the surveyors, it is likely that this sample is more representative of women who do want to leave prostitution" (Raphael & Shapiro, 2002, pp. 9, 33). Even more serious, this bias appears to have colored the entire study:

This research project was designed within a framework of prostitution as a form of violence against women and not prostitution as a legitimate industry. . . . The survey questions and administration were likely biased to some degree by working within this framework and by employing surveyors who had left prostitution. (Raphael & Shapiro, 2004, p. 132)

It is unclear how either the survey questions or the administration of the survey were biased, because nothing is said about them. Respondents were asked to state how frequently they had experienced 28 types of violence, but the actual survey questions are not presented.

I congratulate Raphael and Shapiro (2004) for acknowledging these methodological problems and biases, something few other writers ever do. But the bottom line is that we can have no confidence in their findings regarding the amount or nature of violence experienced by these women (see below). As Vanwesenbeeck (2001) points out,

When researchers have difficulty understanding rational, not to mention positive, reasons for choosing sex work and find it easier to think of prostitutes as victims, it is understandable that the sex workers [interviewed] will stress their victim status and negative motivations for working. (p. 129)

Biased procedures beget foregone conclusions.

Raymond's (2004) article discusses her two previous studies of sex trafficking—one on trafficking to the United States and the other on trafficking between Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Venezuela, and the United States. Remarkably, nothing is said about the procedures used in either study. All we are told is that interviews were conducted with social service providers, law enforcement officials, and 186 female "victims of sexual exploitation" and trafficking (Raymond, 2004, p. 1167). Raymond provides no information on where she located the women, how she gained access to them, how diverse or representative they are, and whether they saw themselves as victims. Moreover, none of the interview questions is revealed to the reader.

A major objective was to construct a profile of "prostitute users" and gather information on "men's attitudes and treatment of women in prostitution" (Raymond, 2004, p. 1167). Note that she did not interview even one customer. All of the information about "prostitute users" comes from the "prostituted women." And despite the fact that there is a growing body of academic research on customers (e.g., Monto, 2000, 2004), Raymond cites not one academic study published in a scholarly journal. Her findings are instead presented *de novo*, as if no one else has studied johns. It is a canon of academic research that authors situate their findings in the related scholarly literature to highlight similarities and differences in findings and build on prior work—something that Raymond opted not to do.

Farley's (2004) article is a wide-ranging discussion of a variety of harms in prostitution, rather than a single research study. Her title reflects her central argument: "Bad for the Body, Bad for the Heart: Prostitution Harms Women Even if Legalized or Decriminalized." To support this conclusion, she draws very selectively from the literature, citing her own work and that of many anti-prostitution activists (including Barry, Dworkin, Giobbe, Hughes, Jeffreys, and MacKinnon). Moreover, most of the empirical studies

she cites are deeply flawed methodologically. Sampling biases and other procedural problems, in greater or lesser degree, pervade her literature, yet Farley never addresses this problem because that might undermine her sweeping claims.

What about Farley's own research procedures? Much is left opaque. In one study, Farley and Barkan (1998) interviewed street prostitutes in San Francisco. No indication is given of the breadth or diversity of their sample, or the method of approaching people on the street. In another study, Farley, Baral, Kiremire, and Sizgin (1998) interviewed workers in several countries: In Turkey, they interviewed 50 women who were brought to a hospital by the police for the purpose of venereal disease control; in Zambia, they interviewed 117 women at an organization that offers support services to prostitutes; in Thailand, respondents were interviewed on the street, in a beauty parlor, and in an organization offering support services; in South Africa, people were interviewed on the street, in brothels, and at a drop-in center. No information is provided as to how these locations were selected, or whether alternative locations were rejected for some reason. We know that people accessed at agencies providing services are likely to be particularly distressed. Finally, though Farley lists the topics covered in the interviews, none of the actual questions is presented. It is especially important to know the exact wording of questions, especially on this topic, because question wording may skew the answers.

I fully appreciate how difficult it is to conduct research on individuals who are stigmatized and involved in illegal behavior. Gaining access is a chronic challenge, as is any attempt to create samples that are not skewed in a certain direction. But there are numerous studies that are much better designed than the three examined here. Because of the problems sketched above, we can have no confidence in the results of the three studies.

A QUESTION OF VIOLENCE

Because the three authors define prostitution as violence against women, there is really no reason to try to determine how much violence takes place. Violence is intrinsic to the very definition of prostitution, so there can be no prostitution without vio-

lence. As indicated above, these writers simply decree that prostitution is violence, a proclamation that is neither verifiable nor falsifiable. How could one prove or disprove it? But, in one of the most revealing passages, Raymond (2004, p. 1175) uses graphic examples to try to prove the prostitution-as-violence claim:

To understand how violence is intrinsic to prostitution, it is necessary to understand the sex of prostitution. The sexual service provided in prostitution is most often violent, degrading, and abusive sexual acts, including sex between a buyer and several women; slashing the women with razor blades; tying women to bedposts and lashing them till they bleed; biting women's breasts; burning the women with cigarettes; cutting her arms, legs, and genital areas; and urinating or defecating on women.

Note the use of horror stories to arouse the reader's disgust and anger, and recall Rubin's (1984) criticism of those who present the worst examples of abuse as typical.

Given that violence is presumed to be inevitable and omnipresent in prostitution, one wonders why these writers spend so much time trying to document its incidence. Perhaps a finding that violence occurs also establishes that it is intrinsic? I now turn to the question of incidence.

Many studies have attempted to estimate the amount of violence involved in prostitution. Unfortunately, we cannot answer this question definitively until we are able to construct a random sample of workers—something that probably can never be done, given that we have no way of knowing the parameters of the population of prostitutes, not to mention the problem of gaining access to and cooperation from them. Absent a random sample, the best that we can hope for are studies that do an exceptional job of sampling people in different geographical locations in different types of prostitution and doing both the sampling and interviewing in a rigorous and impartial manner.

The amount of violence experienced by prostitutes, as presented in the three articles, is much higher (60% to 90%) than what is reported in several other studies (Kurtz et al., 2004; Perkins, 1991; Perkins & Lovejoy, 1996; Whittaker & Hart, 1996). Raymond's (2004) five-country study reports that "almost 80%" of the respondents had been physically harmed, and "more than 60%" had been sexually assaulted by customers, pimps, and

traffickers (p. 1175). It is important to keep in mind that these figures come from a segment of the industry that has had particularly harsh experiences: trafficking victims. Thus, the results certainly should not be extrapolated to “prostitution,” as Raymond (2004) does: “The reported findings . . . indicate high levels of violation, harm, and trauma, and the fact that prostitution is a form of violence against women” (p. 1177).

Farley found that 78% of her sample of street prostitutes in San Francisco had been threatened with a weapon, 82% had been assaulted, and 68% had been raped (Farley & Barkan, 1998). Similarly high figures are reported for four other societies—Thailand, Turkey, South Africa, Zambia—though less so for Thailand (Farley et al., 1998). In two of the societies (South Africa and Turkey), respondents included women in brothels as well as on the street. Although no comparative figures are presented from these two domains, “We found significantly more physical violence in street, as opposed to brothel, prostitution” (Farley et al., 1998, p. 419). This seems to challenge Farley’s claim that violence is omnipresent in prostitution. Another interesting finding is that 44% of the prostitutes interviewed in San Francisco, 38% in South Africa, and 28% in Thailand said that prostitution should be legalized. Farley dismisses these workers’ preferences, insisting that legalization would only make their lives worse (Farley et al., 1998, p. 420).

Raphael and Shapiro (2002, 2004) report similarly high figures for Chicago. For example, 86% of street workers had been slapped, 70% had been punched, 79% had been threatened with a weapon, and 64% had experienced forced sex.

Raphael and Shapiro (2002, 2004) include in their total figures violence committed by the women’s intimate partners, which is not prostitution related. (The article is about violence in prostitution, not that occurring outside it.) Including domestic violence in the figures artificially inflates the total amount of violence experienced. Indeed, intimate partners were responsible for much of the total violence against prostitutes: After customers, these partners were the actors most frequently involved in meting out violence. For workers who work out of their own residence, for instance, their partners were responsible for “25%-100% of the violence,” depending on the type of violence; for women who work the streets, their intimate partners committed about one fourth of the violence they experienced (Raphael & Shapiro, 2004, p. 135).

These intimate partners were not pimps; the authors present separate figures for pimps.

A related question is whether street and off-street prostitution differ. Street prostitution accounts for approximately one fifth of all prostitution in America; indoor prostitution is much more common, though less visible. A number of writers argue that there are indeed significant differences between these two domains and that studies that lump all workers together into an undifferentiated prostitution category are simplistic (Chapkis, 2000; Weitzer, 2000a).⁴ Vanwesenbeeck (2001) is critical of the widespread "failure to adequately differentiate between sex workers. . . . Sex workers are not 'the category' they are often taken to be" (p. 279). Chancer (1993) notes that "prostitutes' experiences, situations, and circumstances differ greatly over the gamut of this highly class-stratified occupation" (p. 163). And Monto (2004) points out that "empirical analyses demonstrate a remarkable diversity of activities that fall under the term *prostitution* and a remarkable diversity of experiences among participants" (p. 164). Comparative studies tend to find significant, and sometimes huge, differences between street prostitutes and call girls, brothel workers, and escorts in terms of job satisfaction, self-esteem, physical and psychological health, and occupational practices (Exner, Wylie, Leura, & Parrill, 1977; Lever & Dolnick, 2000; Perkins, 1991; Perkins & Lovejoy, 1996; Perkins & Bennett, 1985; Prince, 1986).

Regarding victimization, a number of studies indicate that street prostitutes are substantially more vulnerable to victimization than indoor workers. A British study, for instance, of 115 women who worked on the streets and 125 who worked in saunas or as call girls found that the street prostitutes were more likely than the indoor workers to report that they had ever been robbed (37% vs. 10%); beaten (27% vs. 1%); slapped, punched, or kicked (47% vs. 14%); raped (22% vs. 2%); threatened with a weapon (24% vs. 6%); strangled (20% vs. 6%); stabbed (8% vs. 0%); or kidnapped (20% vs. 2%; Church, Henderson, Bernard, & Hart, 2001). A comparison of street workers and escorts in Canada (Lowman & Fraser, 1995) found similar disparities: for robbery (37% vs. 9%), kidnapping (32% vs. 5%), sexual assault (37% vs. 9%), strangling (31% vs. 5%), being beaten (39% vs. 14%), and attempted murder (10% vs. 0%). Similar differences are found in other studies in

Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States (Perkins, 1991; Perkins & Bennett, 1985; Perkins & Lovejoy, 1996; Prince, 1986; Whittaker & Hart, 1996). None of these studies uses random samples, so there are limits to the conclusions we can draw from them. However, these studies are better designed than the three under review here.

Our three authors attempt to refute the argument that the amount of violence differs significantly between street prostitution and indoor prostitution. Farley (2004) says that violence is "the norm for women in all types of prostitution" (p. 1094). Raphael and Shapiro (2004) conclude that in Chicago, "violence was prevalent across both outdoor and indoor prostitution venues" (p. 133), and they issue a "mandate that we not strive to make strict distinctions or demarcations among different prostitution activities in terms of violence" (p. 31). However, we have already established that Raphael and Shapiro admit to having a strong bias that views prostitution as violence against women, and their exprostitute interviewees shared this perspective and thus were hardly objective in selecting interviewees, persons who are likely to have had bad experiences. It is ludicrous to conduct a study measuring the extent of violence suffered by prostitutes when one's orienting framework equates prostitution with violence, and it is not surprising to find high levels of violence, in any prostitution sector, if one's sampling and interviewing strategy is so transparently slanted.

The other, better designed studies cited above do indeed find significant differences in the amount of violence in various indoor versus street settings. No one is arguing that indoor prostitution is free of violence, but based on the available research literature, violence is nowhere near as prevalent as the image presented by Raphael and Shapiro (2004). Even Farley found "significantly" more violence in street prostitution than in brothel prostitution (Farley et al., 1998, p. 419). Street prostitutes are more vulnerable to victimization than escorts, call girls, and those involved in consensual brothel and massage parlor work.⁵

CONCLUSION

Violence in prostitution is a serious problem. Workers, particularly those on the streets, are vulnerable to assault, robbery, rape,

and murder. The best studies provide us with rough estimates of how frequently this violence occurs. Unfortunately, the three articles reviewed here make little contribution to our understanding of this problem.

Although my critique has been restricted to writings on the extreme radical feminist side, elsewhere I have been equally critical of works that celebrate and romanticize prostitution, pornography, and other forms of sex work (Weitzer 1991, 2000a, 2000b). Such studies marshal the “best available examples”—typically upscale call girls and escort agency workers—to argue that prostitution is or can be empowering and lucrative. For some workers, this is indeed the case, but these “best examples” are no closer to the norm in prostitution than the “worst examples.” Again, prostitution varies significantly by type, and it is disingenuous to generalize from one type to prostitution as a whole.

Finally, though these writers continually refer to “prostitution,” it is not clear if their arguments encompass male and transgender, as well as female, workers. Does the radical feminist definition of prostitution as violence, oppression, and human rights abuse apply, generically, to all types of prostitution? If these claims apply only to female prostitution, then these harms are not intrinsic to prostitution. Studies indicate that male workers experience much less violence and exploitation and exercise greater control over working conditions than female and transgender workers (Aggleton, 1999; Valera, Sawyer, & Schiraldi, 2001; Weinberg, Shaver, & Williams, 1999; West 1993). Further investigation of male and transgender prostitution, as well as better designed and ideologically neutral studies of female prostitution, will contribute to a more sophisticated, nuanced, variegated, and comprehensive understanding of contemporary prostitution.

NOTES

1. Raymond is coexecutive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. Farley is director of the staunch antiprostitution organization, Prostitution Research and Education. Raphael and Shapiro are affiliated with Chicago’s Center for Impact Research.

2. The views expressed in this paragraph are less prominent in the article by Raphael and Shapiro (2004), but these views are no doubt shared by them because they operate within the radical feminist “framework of prostitution as a form of violence against women and not prostitution as a legitimate industry” (Raphael & Shapiro, 2002, p. 132).

3. For example, Farley and Barkan's (1998) San Francisco study was reported in *Life* magazine rather boldly: "75% of prostitutes suffer from substance abuse, a majority were abused as children, and 68% have been victims of violent crime" (Fogolino, 1998, p. 96).

4. Of course, the line between street and indoor work is not written in stone. Some workers transition from one type of work to another, but most remain at one echelon for their entire career (Benson & Matthews, 1995; Heyl, 1979). Moreover, it is rare for workers to experience radical upward or downward mobility, such as moving from street work to escort work or vice versa. If a move takes place at all, it is likely to be lateral, such as from the street to a crack house.

5. The studies cited that compare indoor and street prostitution do not include in the indoor category persons recruited by force or fraud and those trafficked to work in brothels or massage parlors, who clearly suffer multiple victimizations.

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