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We need to face up to hatred of prostitutes – among feminists, too

Prostitutes are often the target for cultural anxieties about sex: a kind of kneejerk brutality against them has become acceptable



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Writer and former call girl Brooke Magnanti has been accused of 'being responsible for rape, sexual slavery and prostitution itself'. Photograph: Richard Saker

Sunday was International Sex Worker Rights Day. This year it provided an occasion for sex workers and erstwhile colleagues including Brooke Magnanti (Belle de Jour) to highlight the vicious abuse they have received under the Twitter hashtag #whentisattack.

Writer and former call girl Magnanti is forced to live in secrecy, her number taken to the top of any 999 summons list because of the innumerable threats she has received. One recent example proposed that she should be gang-raped and then executed. She has

been accused of being responsible for rape, sexual slavery, and prostitution itself. Her family's privacy has been invaded to find the "causes" of her choice and her personal appearance derided, not least within what might otherwise be called the sisterhood.

Magnanti reminded us of Julie Burchill's observation in her 1987 essay "Born Again Cows" in the book *Damaged Gods*: "When the sex war is won prostitutes should be shot as collaborators for their terrible betrayal of all women." This would seem crazed were it not for MSP Rhoda Grant, who is sponsoring an "end demand for sex trafficking" bill in the Scottish parliament, declaring violence against sex workers a price worth paying to secure her proposals. As Magnanti tweeted: "Let that sink in. Politician thinks it's OK if people die b/c of her bill. No one bats an eyelid."

Is it not time we came to terms with prostitution? Instead, the prostitute herself (and it is usually her as regards societal venom) becomes the target for culture's anxieties about sex. The collective attitude would appear to be: "They gets their money, they makes their choice"; that choice being to surrender all claim to humanity's most fundamental physical and intellectual rights. The result being that across societies, our own "liberal" state included, whore-bashing – literal and metaphorical – is somehow deemed acceptable.

Notably, said bashing includes a cohort of feminist critics who, in abhorring the activity, choose to hate the perpetrator. This is evident not only in Burchill's string 'em up stance, but the notion that, as "all prostitution is rape", sex workers cannot know their own minds, or be in control of their bodies, and thus consent. The upshot is a curious coalition with streetwalker-hounding religious extremists who are unhappy not merely with the low-hanging fruit of selling sex, but with women having sex at all.

Hatred of prostitutes has implications for all women who desire to determine their sexual existences. These obviously stigmatised targets allow a kind of thin-end-of-the-wedge, sanctioned misogyny. It is a small step from being able to dismiss some women as stupid sluts to dismissing all women as stupid sluts, the former operating as some sort of entry level for the latter. As Magnanti noted: "Ladies wearing shiny things, high heels, and makeup also Very Suspect". That's me guilty as charged, then, and my eight-year-old niece.

Marriage continues to be considered to veil sex with respectability, whatever its financial motivations. Nobody campaigns against the career courtesans who are Belgravia bankers' wives, or the footballers' consorts of Cheshire. The message: sex for

money is fine – just put a ring on it before you put out. Prostitutes, in contrast, are "asking for it", and by "it" we appear to mean everything: rape, aggression, murder. It is as if their work renders them inhuman. They are "fallen women", and what they have fallen from is humanity itself.

As a teenager I witnessed this punitive pack mentality inflicted on a child. One of the brightest girls at my school entered care at 13, and ended up being paid for intercourse – thus also raped – by a man old enough to be her father. Her inadvertent exposure in a documentary a couple of years later provoked an animal savagery among her peers that militated against her even sitting exams. Her transgression was too close to home, provoking a mob rule that dictated she must be shamed and ostracised.

I think of her often, appalled by the loss of potential I hope she has been able to confound. A quarter of a century on, I see no sign of this kneejerk brutality changing – including among too many feminists.

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