

Rehashing Tired Claims About Prostitution

A Response to Farley and Raphael and Shapiro

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I identified several methodological problems in the three articles I reviewed. In her reply, Farley (2005 [this issue]) argues that her methods are sound, in part because her studies have been replicated by others. However, many of her citations are to her own coauthored articles. And the fact that a study has been replicated says nothing about the quality of the procedures used. It is quite possible to replicate a flawed study, reaching similarly flawed conclusions.

To show that her findings on victimization are not unique, Farley (2005) provides figures from other sources. Some of these are taken from staunch antiprostitution, radical feminist organizations, such as WHISPER in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and its director Evelina Giobbe and the Council on Prostitution Alternatives (CPA) in Portland, Oregon (Farley, 2004; Farley et al., 2003). In her study of CPA, Nanette Davis (2000) concludes with the following critique:

CPA deals primarily with street prostitutes—a group with higher exposure to violent predators than indoor prostitutes in bordellos, massage parlors, or escort services—yet CPA has generalized its claims to cover all forms of prostitution. At its best, radical feminist advocacy serves as a reclamation process for some prostitutes, empowering the disempowered. At its worst, it reinforces stereotypes about prostitutes as unfit and degraded persons. . . . Prostitution historically has been subjected to moral crusades that have scapegoated poor women prostitutes. The link between these

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the two replies to my original article. Janice Raymond declined to reply, which is unfortunate given that she served as the guest editor of the special issue in which two of the original articles appeared.

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earlier events and contemporary gender politics is often lost. (pp. 154-155)

It follows that any figures on prostitution provided by such organizations, and cited by other writers, must be taken with a huge grain of salt.

Raphael and Shapiro (2005 [this issue]) provide more detail on the procedures used than appeared in their original article. In my critique of their methods, I noted that none of the interview questions was provided. In response, they state that I should have requested a copy of the questionnaire from them. It is incumbent on the researchers to provide a full description of their method, including verbatim versions of the key questions.

Raphael and Shapiro (2005) go to great pains in their reply to show that their interviewers were objective and that their sampling strategy was not biased toward one particular type of worker, the most victimized street-level worker. They wonder how I could conclude that their sample might have been skewed by the type of interviewers employed or by the types of questions asked. The following quotation demonstrates obvious bias and shows why I questioned, and still question, their results: 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). Moreover, "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). Yet they now claim in their reply that "this is not a research bias" (p. 969).

Like their interviewers, Raphael and Shapiro embrace this perspective: "This research project was designed within a framework of prostitution as a form of violence against women and not prostitution as a legitimate industry" (Raphael & Shapiro, 2004, p. 132). In their rebuttal response, they try to downplay this: "Stating that we are working within a framework of prostitution as violence against women is simply notifying the reader of that" (p. 969). This perspective has much deeper implications than simple notification; it puts Raphael and Shapiro squarely within the radical feminist camp, though they try to deny this in their reply. Although

they complain that I have wrongly “labeled” them radical feminists, the above quotation is a central radical feminist tenet—the equation of prostitution with violence. To say, further, that “these men must be viewed as batterers rather than customers” (Raphael & Shapiro, 2002, p.137) is additional evidence of their attachment to an essentialist, radical feminist perspective.

INDOOR AND STREET MARKETS

With regard to the issue of street and indoor prostitution, there is no contradiction, as Raphael and Shapiro claim, between the need for more research on the indoor variety and the fact that several existing studies document substantial differences between street and indoor markets in workers’ experiences, control over working conditions, and risk of victimization. I have never claimed that indoor work is free of victimization, but a body of research does show that the risks are much lower indoors. It is by no means premature, as Raphael and Shapiro claim, to draw this conclusion. Their own findings regarding the amount of violence among indoor workers are out of sync with other literature (cited in Weitzer, 2005).

Farley (2005) complains that I focus exclusively on physical violence and ignore “psychological violence,” which she does not define. She claims that “the rates of psychological violence among indoor and outdoor prostitution are comparable” (p. 955) and that indoor prostitution “does nothing to decrease psychological trauma for the prostituted woman” (p. 955). These claims are contradicted by other studies. A comparison of indoor prostitutes in New Zealand and an age-matched sample of nonprostitute women found no differences between the two groups in physical health, self-esteem, or mental health (Romans, Potter, Martin, & Herbison, 2001). An American study documented significant psychological problems among street prostitutes, but call girls, brothel workers, and massage parlor workers were generally “handling themselves well, manifesting good emotional controls, being well aware of conventionality, and doing well in the occupation of their choice” (Exner, Wylie, Leura, & Parrill, 1977, p. 483). Research comparing streetwalkers and call girls in California and legal brothel workers in Nevada found that 97% of the call

girls reported an increase in self-esteem after they began working in prostitution, compared with 50% of the brothel workers but only 8% of the streetwalkers (Prince, 1986, p. 454). Call girls expressed positive views of their work; brothel workers were generally satisfied with their work; but street prostitutes held largely negative views of their work (Prince, 1986, p. 497). Perkins and Lovejoy's (1996) comparison of 124 brothel workers and 95 call girls in Sydney, Australia, found that call girls were emotionally healthier than the brothel workers, though the former felt more social isolation. All of the American escorts studied by Foltz (1979) took "pride in their profession" and viewed themselves as "morally superior" to others:

They consider women who are not 'in the life' to be throwing away woman's major source of power and control [sexual capital], while they as prostitutes are using it to their own advantage as well as for the benefit of society. (p. 128)

Other studies of indoor prostitution report that the workers took some pride in their work, felt the job had at least some positive effect on their lives, or believed that they were providing a valuable service (Lever & Dolnick, 2000; Sanders, 2005; Weitzer, 2000a). Although certain aspects of the work are disliked, indoor workers are more likely than street prostitutes to describe positive aspects of their work.

None of this is meant to romanticize indoor work, but it does caution against the kind of blanket generalizations made by the authors under review. Neither psychological harm nor physical violence is intrinsic to or pervasive in consensual indoor prostitution.

A QUESTION OF IDEOLOGY

My original article (Weitzer, 2005) was very critical of the ways in which one theoretical perspective, radical feminism, has distorted our understanding of contemporary prostitution. These ideological blinders are as apparent in the replies to my article as they were in the original essays by Farley, Raymond, and Raphael and Shapiro.

Farley's radical feminist prism colors her views on virtually every aspect of prostitution. One is the issue of legalization and decriminalization, which she insists would only make a bad situation worse. An interesting finding was that many of the women in prostitution disagree with Farley. In her own study, an average of 54% in six countries (60% in South Africa, 74% in Canada, 85% in Mexico) said legalizing prostitution would make it safer (Farley et al., 2003). But Farley (2005) discounts women's voices when they take positions that challenge her claims. In response to my article, she writes, "Like everyone else, our interviewees minimized the harms of prostitution and they sometimes believed industry claims that legalization or decriminalization will somehow make them safer. Sadly, there is no evidence for their belief" (p. 954). If the working women favor legalization, they did not form this opinion on their own, but must have been duped by advocates. In fact, there is evidence that some systems of legalization provide a relatively safe working environment. Although no system is risk free, women working in legal brothels and window units in the Netherlands experience very little violence. Workers and managers have instituted elaborate procedures to respond to violent customers quickly and effectively. Similarly, in Nevada's legal brothels, the risk of violence is very low (Brents & Hausbeck, 2005).

Both Farley and Raphael and Shapiro believe that no one can approach the study of prostitution objectively; there must be an underlying ideological orientation on one side of the prostitution-versus-antiprostitution divide. Hence, they raise questions about my "ideology." This is a common tactic in debates on sex work. Raphael and Shapiro wonder if my ideology has compromised my ability to evaluate their research. Readers will see that my critique is based entirely on obvious deficiencies in their work, including the strong biases that Raphael and Shapiro (2002, 2004) acknowledged, but now deny.

Farley (2005) says that I "failed to make [my] perspective transparent" (p. 952). This is not true. My perspective is that all conclusions must be based on sound empirical research, not ideological prescriptions. Then she labels me a "supporter of indoor prostitution" (p. 952). Her evidence for this is a short article (Weitzer, 1994) and an op-ed piece in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Weitzer, 2004).

Nowhere in these articles do I express support for any kind of prostitution. Both articles, as well as a longer policy paper on which they are based (Weitzer, 1999), examine the impact of street prostitution on surrounding neighborhoods and other problems, in comparison to indoor prostitution. I do not, as Farley claims, view prostitution “from the perspective of the nonprostitute community” (p. 952), but I do identify a set of grievances commonly voiced by community residents. Farley also charges that I view prostitution “from the perspective of the trick” instead of the “perspective of the prostitute” (p. 952). This assumes that there is a single, monolithic prostitute perspective counterpoised to a single customer perspective. Research shows that customers vary demographically and attitudinally (Monto, 2004), and the same is true for prostitutes (Weitzer, 2000a, 2000b). And even if there were a single perspective shared by customers or by prostitutes, it would be wrong to associate me with either perspective, as Farley tries to do. Unlike Farley and Raymond, I am not an advocate or activist on one side of the “sex wars” debate.

My perspective is based on fidelity to the principles of sound social science, and as such, it is the antithesis of sweeping, essentialist claims about “intrinsic” and “endemic” features of prostitution—whether the claims are made by radical feminists or by writers on the other side who celebrate prostitution as work that empowers and emancipates women (Weitzer, 2000a, 2000b). My hope is that future studies of prostitution avoid the theoretical and methodological pitfalls so evident in the three articles I reviewed and in other ideologically inspired work.

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