

“Sex Work” Zéromacho Exposes a Sham!

To call what people in prostitution are subjected to “work” is to legitimize a system of domination, violence and oppression.

“Sex workers”: the term used to designate those women who were called “prostitutes” in the twentieth century is becoming more widespread. By using the term “sex workers”, many people think they are showing respect for the women involved, failing to see that others are keen to normalise for their own financial benefit an archaic situation that entraps women.

The words used to designate prostitutes have been multifarious throughout history, taking the form of either euphemisms (“woman of easy virtue”, “fallen woman”, “streetwalker”) or insults (“whore”, “slut”, “harlot”). Nowadays, the word “prostitute” exists alongside “sex-worker”, or the acronym “SW”; such an acronym dehumanises these women and makes prostitution appear normal and acceptable, pre-empting any questioning.

Some prostitutes refer to themselves defiantly as “sluts” or “whores”. Social workers use the expression “person subjected to prostitution,” instead, so as to avoid giving prostitutes a blanket identity and in order to emphasise the temporariness of the situation. The expression “sex work” was coined in the seventies in the United States in order to normalise a particularly lucrative business in an ultra-free market economy. The terms “sex work” and “sex worker” were originally linked to prostitutes’ demands for the recognition of their dignity as people and were applied to them exclusively; a gynaecologist is not a “sex worker”.

Zéromacho contests the classification of prostitution as work.

To call it “work” is to hide the double domination, both capitalist and patriarchal, it involves. The procurers and traffickers who run this market derive huge returns from it: the prostitutes (complacently called “clients”, which validates a purely economic analysis of the “transaction”) are thus given the right to impose a sexual act on a person who has been recruited from among the most vulnerable, women who are often fleeing extreme poverty and are torn from their country and their family, after years of being subjected to patriarchal oppression and violence conditioning them to endure their lot.

Whose cause is the expression “sex worker” promoting? Although it is understandable that prostitutes should wish to obtain recognition of their dignity, caution is required in the face of the manoeuvrings of an international lobby that has never been stronger. To group together “work” and “prostitution” – two realities that each have their own associated histories and imagery, is to want to obscure the very roots of the prostitution system: the all-pervading violence that is “wiped away” with the magic of money.

To use the expression “sex work” is to normalise and trivialise the sexual exploitation of the most vulnerable women, which is what the legalisation of brothels in Germany and the Netherlands has led to. The vast majority of women in prostitution are under the influence of procurers and under the control of international criminal rings trafficking in human beings. **To call what they are subjected to “work” is to legitimize a system of domination, violence and oppression.**

To be subjected to multiple penetrations, to endure insults, humiliations, attacks (all research shows that prostitute-clients are the first to commit violence against prostitutes), to live in permanent distrust and fear – is that work? What profession is this, that is built on discrimination (according to age, skin colour, measurements), as well as words and acts that are a permanent form of sexual attack? Yet such is the logic that underpins the process initiated by those of the European countries who, by legalizing prostitution, have in effect legalized procuring, in other words trading in the female sex, and have given brothel owners, promoted to “sex managers”, unprecedented power. In Germany, employment agencies have even offered such “work” to women on the dole.

In France, it’s the opposite. The 2016 Act, inspired by its Swedish model that came into force in 1999, represents huge progress: it considers that prostitutes are victims who need to be helped and it prosecutes those

men who are prepared to pay them for sexual acts. In the last four years, 5,000 prostituer-clients have had to pay a fine or take part in an awareness-raising course, in the same way as domestic violence offenders do.

To draw a parallel between the profession of masseuse and prostitution is to confuse care, which is indispensable to all human beings, and sexual arousal for the privilege of certain men: a difference not of degree (more or less tiresome) but of nature. Besides, not all activities requiring payment are professions: take drug dealing, for instance. Far from abstract reality, the reality of prostitution is that of mouths, vaginas and anuses being repeatedly penetrated, violated, brutalised. The act of penetrating is in itself violent if it is imposed by the need for money. It means having to endure the violation of the ultimate refuge that is one's intimacy; and only a state of psychological dissociation can make that possible. The traumatic consequences of such violation are now well-known and documented.

Money does not erase violence. There is no existing right to sexuality that would be implemental irrespective of the desire of the other person concerned. In the same way, a couple's desire for a child does not create a right to have a child through the renting of a poor, destitute woman's uterus.

Prostitution is neither sex nor work: it is violence. In buying the silence of the person he inflicts himself on, the prostituer-client prohibits her from stating this. All over the world, trade unions (in France, the main one, the CGT) are contesting the confusion, promoted by the lobby of procurers, between work and prostitution, which is actually exploitation. In a world of justice and equal rights, sexuality will be the meeting and interaction between two adults' desires.

Sexuality, which is recognised as an important part of a prostituer-client's identity, is just as important for the women who are forced into prostitution. These people will only be able to defend their rights by refusing to be expropriated from their own sexuality, their own desire, their own pleasure, and by being able to assert themselves and their skills in other areas of society. None of this is possible while they remain trapped in the prostituting system, and while society keeps them there by allowing the violence they are subjected to, to be called "work".

Translation: Joanna Marshall

