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Reviews

Playing the whore: the work of sex work

- Reviews section -

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Written by a journalist and former sex worker, this book turns on its head the commonplace approach to sex work. Rather than discrediting the workers and their clients, or calling on police to arrest clients leaving sex workers without any means of survival, this argues for the legalisation of sex work and its clients. She argues that sex work is work and sex workers are at work.

The writer bases her arguments on the rights of sex workers, the rights of clients and turns on its head the usual attack against men who use sex workers. She shows how policing of sex work makes it more dangerous for the women (and the men), does nothing for their safety. She shows how those who want to 'help' prostitutes and sex workers do the very opposite. Helping sex workers by criminalising the men who use them is a contradiction in terms for if the sex worker has to work in hidden places, she is more at risk than if it can be carried out in safe spaces.

Those who want to outlaw such work do so by attacking the 'glamourisation' of sex workers, but ignore the pervasiveness of such 'glamour', in advertising for example. They ignore the continuous line of sexualised imagery – from TV commercials, photographs of film stars, models on the cat walk to prostitutes – positing one set as OK while the other is unacceptable. The division between 'legitimate' sex work, for example stripping or posing for pornographic images, and sex work that involves actual sex, is false for there is a continuum, a line of similar images of women that may start with a prostitute, but goes on to include models, adverts, right up to informal photos taken by a friend. That is not to say that we cannot analyse such images, we should make a critique of them, but the line of divide is false.

There is not one form of sex work. There are many facets to it, whether street hustling, hostessing, stripping, performing sex for web cams, all can be described as prostitution, but some do not see their clients while others perform sex with them. The stereotype of a sex worker in short skirt and heels bending over a car to speak to its driver has become the symbol of the prostitute to stand in for all sex work, yet it is a lazy stereotype, not only because it hides that woman's other activities – shopping for food, looking after children, watching TV – but it also because it stands in for all sorts of other sex work.

For many women, prostitution is an easier way to earn a living than many 'legitimate' jobs. Working on a zero-hours contract, at the mercy of the company, reduces it workers totally to the needs of the employer. Selling sex can be organised to suit the prostitute, when, where, with whom and how she works is up to her.

The sex worker is silent in the arguments anti-prostitution campaigners use, they are 'spoken for' rather than allowed to speak for themselves. The author quotes Jill Nagle in *Whores and Other Feminists*, 'one could argue that the production of feminist discourse around prostitution by non-prostitutes alienates the labourer herself from the process of her own representation.' They give voice to the voiceless but ignore the actual content of prostitutes speaking for themselves.

The book puts an interesting argument. Refusing to accept everyday stereotypes of the prostitute, the one image that stands in for all sex work, she argues for decriminalisation and giving sex workers a voice. A voice to put forward their demands, to fight for their rights and to overcome the stigma of selling sex.

The one criticism I have is that in arguing for the right of women to sell sex, there is no discussion of the men who often control prostitutes, for example bringing women from poverty abroad, on false promises of good jobs, and forcing them against their wishes to sell sex. The book ignores the role of such men confining her arguments to the

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rights of women who have chosen to work as sex workers. However the author does not claim to speak on all aspects of prostitution, she is putting a rarely heard case against the all-pervasive argument put by anti-prostitution campaigners.

Nonetheless it is a refreshing and well-argued book, turning old stereotypes on their head and posing sex work in a new relationship to the rest of paid work. Rejecting much previous work on the subject, where the sex worker is spoken for rather than able to speak for herself, Grant speaks as someone who has been a sex worker, has discussed the ideas in the book with others who still sell sex, dismantles pervasive ideas about their lives and opens up a new way to think about the subject.