

# Simone De Beauvoir's Feminist Ideals Regarding Prostitution

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In a global economy of constant supply and demand of goods and services, sexual pleasure has become merely another commodity. The historical perception of sex as a sacred and private act has not implicated its immunity to commodification. The commodification of sexual intercourse, otherwise known as prostitution, has become an increasingly controversial topic. Some argue that prostitution is a form of female oppression, while others make the paradoxical argument in favour of it as a form of female liberation. Differing opinions of prostitution throughout society are rooted in differing normative gender values. Feminist academics have been discussing prostitution at great length. One of the most important feminists of second-wave feminism is Simone de Beauvoir, and her feminist theory is greatly applicable to the present-day analysis of prostitution. Through Beauvoir's feminist lens, prostitution can be understood to have a more important social context than it is usually credited with. By analyzing the history and facts surrounding prostitution, and applying this analysis to Beauvoir's feminist theory, a conclusion can be drawn that prostitution, with regard to ethics, is acceptable only under certain conditions.

Prostitution, the exchange of sex for money, is simply another kind of 'resource' for which human beings have placed monetary value. William W. Sanger notes the historical importance of prostitution in his work, "The History of Prostitution: Its Extant, Causes and Effects Throughout the World". Of prostitution, Sanger says, "It stains the earliest mythological records. It is constantly assumed as an existing fact in Biblical history. We can trace it from the earliest twilight in which history dawns to the clear daylight of to-day, without a pause or a moment of obscurity" (Sanger 35). Commonly referred to as one of the oldest lines of work, prostitution has long been stigmatized as ethically wrong. Prostitutes now face arrest and fines, but centuries ago, "[t]he guilty women [were] banished, scourged, branded, executed..." (Sanger 19). Those who participate in sex work have done so out of the need for money, shelter, food, and drugs, but no matter the reason, punishment has unevenly fallen upon those selling their bodies, and not those who are subsequently 'buying' or 'renting' them. Today, according to Gus Lubin in Business Insider's "There are 42 Million Prostitutes in the World, and Here's Where They Live", "three quarters of [prostitutes] are between the ages of 13 and 25, and 80% of them are female" (Lubin 1). Thus, if the majority of prostitutes globally are women, and prostitution has historically been punished, is there not then a distinct problem with the way women are treated around the world? The answer to such a question requires an understanding of whether and to what extent prostitutes are criminalized.

Prostitution is not socially or legally the same in the United States as it is in other parts of the world. Global News writes in its December 2013 article, "Prostitution laws around the world" that prostitution is handled very differently from one country's government to the next. The United States has declared buying and selling sexual service illegal, "with the exception of Nevada where brothels are licensed in some parts of the state" (Global News 1). In the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, and most recently Canada, prostitution is legal and regulated by labor laws to ensure that sex workers have quality standard working conditions and workers' rights. While these countries allow and regulate prostitution, they also place restrictions upon it, with "all forms of exploitation in the prostitution industry, including trafficking and forced prostitution" considered criminal and punishable by law (Global News 1). Countries like Mexico and Argentina have prostitution laws and regulations similar to those in Europe. Prostitution is much more restricted in the United States than it is in many other places around the world, and the illegality of prostitution may not be the *reason* it has been labeled ethically unacceptable, but it is certainly a result of the common perception that

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prostitution is always morally wrong. Sex work in the United States, while illegal, is still very much a prevalent industry. Mike Konczal from The Washington Post, in "Sex workers' rights are just workers' rights" argues that "[m]aking sex work illegal doesn't mean the practice goes away. It just means that the police become the de facto regulators. And often that sort of regulation can have harmful consequences" (Konczal 1). Proponents of legalizing prostitution, like the organization 'Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics' known as COYOTE, argue that while sex workers may not operate under the same ethical codes as others, they still deserve the rights that any other type of worker has. For example, in the United States, if one is suspected of participating in prostitution, possession of condoms may be considered justifiable evidence, which may lead to a prostitute's conviction. This kind of law is believed to dissuade sex workers from practicing safe sex, and thus decreases the ability of prostitutes to prevent unwanted pregnancies and the contraction of sexually transmitted infections. The legalization of sex work has proven to regulate prostitution in many countries, all the while making it a safer line of work. One of the most important feminists of all time has an interesting outlook on women, and her theories point to the fact that prostitution has been given the ethical label of being 'bad' primarily because it is a line of work that is mostly occupied by women.

'What is a woman?' is the question that Simone De Beauvoir grapples with and carefully deconstructs in her famous 1949 work, *The Second Sex*. In this text, De Beauvoir sets out to understand what it means to be a woman, with the notion that in society "there is an absolute human type, the masculine" (De Beauvoir 7). She declares that women are merely considered an exception to the rule—man is human and thus, human is man—and not part of the rule itself. They have no position of direct reciprocity to their male counterparts, because masculinity has no counterpart. Rather, masculinity is normatively upheld as the maximized capacity of human potential, and, she quotes Aristotle, "The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities... we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness" (De Beauvoir 7). De Beauvoir, regarded as a feminist pioneer, rejects this kind of indoctrinated logic, and subsequently rejects the idea that women are, by nature, incapable of being fully human. Her feminist philosophy greatly contrasts some of her feminist contemporaries because her analysis of feminism reaches beyond the idea of eliminating gendered social norms. She does not deny that there exist concrete differences between men and women, contending that ignoring these differences is to ignore what makes one a woman. This passive ignorance, in De Beauvoir's perspective, is just as oppressive to women as is their societal subordination. De Beauvoir's work in *The Second Sex* has shaped modern feminist theory and philosophy, paving the way for further critical analysis of feminism. This feminist thought opens the gateway for understanding how prostitution is simply a result of female oppression, and perhaps a side effect of a world in which being a woman is to be economically and socially subservient to a male dominated society.

When women are forced to turn to prostitution, they are oppressed. But when they have laws making it safer for them to participate in sex work, they are given legal protection, and are thus liberated from some of the oppression and abuse they would otherwise face. De Beauvoir might have been in favor of prostitution laws modeled after those of some European countries, making sex work seemingly like any other kind of work: standard safety requirements, government regulation, legal protection, and sufficient compensation. De Beauvoir contends that in order for women to be liberated from their social confines, they must have both legal and financial freedom. Thus, allowing for a basic structural equality between prostitution and other kinds of labor is a step in the right direction because it reduces legal and financial oppression. Sally Scholz comments on De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and argues that De Beauvoir's opinion of the prostitute is that she "is the absolute Other... She is a prostitute for both money and the recognition of her Otherness she receives from men" (Scholz 2). By Otherness, De Beauvoir refers to the foundational concept that woman is perceived to be less than man and defective. Prostitution has become a mere consequence of woman's Otherness. De Beauvoir would say that it is no coincidence that prostitution is a line of work that has often been unregulated and shunned by society. The fact that women make up the majority of sex workers is indeed the reason prostitution has had severe structural inequalities to other kinds of labor. Thus, De Beauvoir's logic would follow that prostitution is not bad because selling sex for money is bad, but that it is bad because women make up the majority of this line of work, and the only reason women supply this work is because men are the overwhelming majority who demand it. De Beauvoir, while in favor of sex workers rights, also upholds the value that women deserve to not only do work that is appropriately compensated, regulated, and legally protected, but they deserve to "pursue and participate in intellectual activity" (Scholz 2).

De Beauvoir's feminist approach to prostitution reveals that prostitution is an ethically acceptable line of work so long

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as those involved in this kind of work do it willingly and are given the same kind of rights that other workers are given. It is understandable, from De Beauvoir's point of view, that prostitution has historically been given a bad reputation because it is looked down upon as being a lowly woman's job. To oppress women financially and legally, it only makes sense that prostitution would carry such heavy consequences and sever social stigma. The fact that the majority of the female sex workers are in their teens and early twenties is a symptom of the fact that girls and women of this age range are among the most financially dependent demographic. If women elect to sell their bodies for sex, they must have the ability to seek legal protection if they fear they are in some kind of danger, they must have sanitary and safe conditions along with appropriate forms of contraception and sexual protection, and lastly they must have regulated or documented monetary compensation to allow them to leave the sex workers' industry if and when they desire to. Making these kinds of changes on a political and societal level will allow for women to escape the oppression and dependency that they currently face. If every single woman is given the option and ability to become financially independent without having to become involved in sex work, the chain of supply and demand of sex can be broken, and thus female liberation from social norms can be possible. But until then, sex work must be detached from the stereotype of unethical practice, because with the appropriate working conditions, it can function just like any other line of work.

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