

**Ouch! Feminists' 'wounded attachment' to the third world sex worker
by Jo Doezema
Queering Development Seminar Series 10.2.00**

Summary/Paraphrasing of discussion

(P=participant speaking)

P: There are two links between this talk and other seminars in this series: Firstly, Development's imposition of/construction of subjectivities of third world 'beneficiaries'. Oliver Phillipps discussed the imposition of western identities/binaries of gay and straight. Gilles Kleitz discussed development's framing of sexuality as always related to family or reproduction. Secondly, this seminar links to sex and gender.

P: You argue that parallel to Victorian feminists' view of Indian prostitutes, Barry's 'camp' portrays Southern sex workers as similar to a colonial subject, as helpless victims who can only be 'rescued' by outside support from their western sisters. Are there no Southern women who also subscribe to the view of sex workers as victims in need of help?

Jo: Yes, some southern women do construct sex workers in this way. One argument is that it is imperialism which has caused trafficking of women and prostitution.

P: Freedom is not always the only way. If it is part of a broader political project, 're-education' of sex workers may be valid to catapult a society forward, for example it has been used positively (although also sometimes very repressively) in Cuba.

Jo: Wendy Brown conceives of freedom differently from that of the 'American way' of the free individual, the liberal version of the individual who seeks redress by appealing to an imagined state of good. In practice, as in the example given in Vietnam, re-education usually means imprisonment/torture, rather than training in useful vocational skills.

P: Identities shift, and people's feelings about whether or not they are exploited as sex workers must change over time. The philosophy of Participation understands people's consciousness as constructed and participatory methods aim to offer an opportunity for people to reconstruct their consciousness. How does this affect Barry's positions of taking the voice of the 'injured' prostitute as authentic and truth, and dismissing the voice of the prostitute who claims not to be injured as 'denial' or 'false consciousness'?

Jo: Yes, people change, but if you see sex work as labour, this is compatible with accepting that some people will feel exploited. Sex labour, like other labour, should be free, and should be optional, so those who don't like it should be able to get out.

P: Isn't Barry just mobilising one discourse, the voice of the 'injured prostitute', isn't that a standard political strategy?

Jo: No, because Barry's organisation does not simply mobilise one discourse, but excludes other discourses by its very position. Prostitution is equated with injury, so experiences outside of this equation cannot be heard.

P: Because of the power imbalance between discourses, other discourses are excluded.

P: How powerful is Barry's camp?

Jo: There is a new agreement on trafficking under discussion in the UN, and Barry is lobbying in the US, in a coalition of right wing christians and feminists. They accused the Clinton administration of being soft on prostitution, and the Clinton administration responded by clarifying their position as firmly against prostitution. This is an indication of how seriously she is being taken.

P: Putting the trafficking of both women and children together infantilises women. What efforts have been made to separate the two?

Jo: Lobby efforts have been made, taking the line not only that combining the two infantilises women, but that different policies are needed to address the two groups. However, for Barry, there is no possibility of consent, so the distinction between adult and child is irrelevant.

P: So what line do you take, how can you argue it?

Jo: The simple approach is to say that children should not labour, and set the age limit at 18, although this does fudge a lot of issues.

P: Choice is the issue, but choices are limited, and there is an inequality of choices. I have a friend who wants to get out of Cuba by marrying a western woman, who wants to 'traffic' his self. This is a practical choice, it's not victimhood or false consciousness. How does Barry deal with male sex workers?

Jo: Male sex workers are often ignored. Barry accomodates them by arguing that male sex workers are 'feminised', because like women, they are injured by sex. The discourse of choice is no answer to this position, because if prostitution is inherently injurious, then choice not an answer, people can't choose it, it's like people choosing to stay in abusive relationships. You have to attack this position on the level of identity, take apart women's sexual identity of victim/injury.

P: It fits in with development not being able to conceive of sex outside of family/reproduction unless it is harmful, eg. Injurious prostitution.

Jo: Unless there is a functionality, if a function can be found, eg. Sex workers can be safe sex educators.

P: What other coalitions are addressing the sex work issue?

Jo: There is another view in feminism, and active coalition. It is now becoming clear to government that there is an alternative to Barry's camp, one saying that prostitution should be decriminalised, recognised as labour, one that attacks trafficking when coerced, whether or not for sex work or of women or men. They identify the problem as forced labour, not prostitution. However, not surprising Barry's camp is gaining ground, because it sees sex as bad for women, and prostitution as bad, which appeals to establishment views. The radical feminist angle, which is also part of Barry's analysis gets ignored.

P: Why focus always on the woman seller, not the male buyer. What about clients?

Jo: In fact lots of men sell sex, including to women, eg. Examples in Caribbean, but this is not read as prostitution. The problem with that question the way it is usually asked is that it assumes 'nasty men buying sex'. However, if you condemn buying sex, then you are also condemning selling sex. This is inconsistent with saying sex work can be dignified labour.

P: Everything is commodified, so it's not so strange that sex is too. It might be more interesting to look at the transaction instead of the buyer or seller. You might find variegated results similar to purchase of other affective relations like childcare.

Jo: Angie Hart sort of did that in Buying and Selling Power