

Book Review: Prostitution, Harm and Gender Equality: Theory, Research and Policy

by Blog Admin

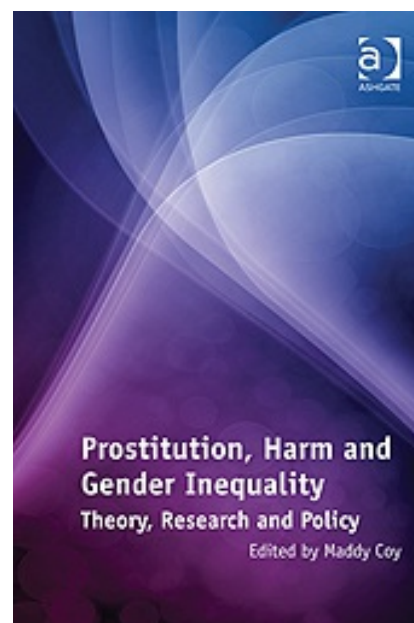
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Prostitution, Harm and Gender Equality: Theory, Research and Policy is a collection of essays bringing together feminist scholars and practitioners to discuss recent developments in the globalized sex industry. Focusing on its theoretical, empirical, and legal aspects, this volume provides an integrated approach to the intrinsically multi-dimensional phenomenon of prostitution. **Ioanna Gouseti** explores its main insights and, focusing on three of the essays, concludes that this collection is a worthwhile read for those interested in a feminist critique on prostitution.



Prostitution, Harm and Gender Equality: Theory, Research and Policy. Maddy Coy (ed.). Ashgate. 2012.

Prostitution, Harm and Gender Equality is a collection of ten essays, edited by **Dr Maddy Coy**, that examine the contemporary characteristics of prostitution, recent developments in the sex trade, and their impact in the lived experiences of girls and women in the industry. Bringing together scholars and practitioners who focus on different dimensions of prostitution, this volume provides an integrative discussion on an inherently multi-faceted phenomenon. Despite the variety of the topics explored, all the contributions share a common conceptualization of prostitution as a 'glocalised gender regime' (p. 4), which is based on the purchase of women's sexual services from men, and (re)produces gender inequality.



Another common feature of the essays is the intention to keep the analytic interest in the 'systemic gendered power inequalities with respect to prostitution' (p. 3), which have been marginalized in recent years due to a 'neoliberal turn' to the notion of agency and decision-making processes. Through these lens, the three main aspects of prostitution discussed in the book concern its theorization in the era of the industrialization of commercial sex, the psycho-social harm experienced by girls and women in the industry according to recent research findings, and the peculiarities and limitations of various (national and international) regulatory frameworks for prostitution.

The industrialization of the sex trade (Marjut Jyrkinen) and the normalization of commercial sex in contemporary popular culture (Maddy Coy, Josephine Wakeling & Maria Garner) highlight the misleading character of the theoretical, social and political discourses on prostitution that are based on the notions of 'agency' and 'choice' (Sheilla Jefreys). On the contrary, these developments require the reframing of the discussion around notions that unravel its psycho-social harms (Meagan Tyler). As research in this field shows, the harms experienced by women in prostitution extend from the disconnection from their bodies and selves (Maddy Coy) to their social stigmatization and marginalization (Jody Raphael), while at the same time paying for sex is experienced by men as an act of consumerism (Maddy Coy, Miranda Horvath & Liz Kelly). In this context, the attempts of international law and human rights to prevent and fight phenomena such as trafficking and prostitution through the criminalization of migration, instead of tackling gender inequality, turns the attention away from the institutions within which these phenomena are developed

(Jackie Turner). At the national level, the impact of legal conceptualizations of prostitution as 'work', and its legalization, apart from shadowing its inherently exploitative and harmful character, is reflected also in the expansion of the sex trade (Mary Lucille Sullivan). And despite the fact that tackling demand seems a promising alternative way forward, several legal contexts make apparent that problem framing is an institutionalized process, conditioned by previous events and various dynamics (Josephina Erickson).

In particular, Jyrkinen's chapter, 'McSexualization of Bodies, Sex and Sexualities: Mainstreaming the Commodification of Gendered Inequalities', provides a theoretical discussion on the contemporary industrialization and globalization of prostitution through the concept of 'McSexualization'. Examining the links between sectors of the sex industry, such as pornography and trafficking, her analysis highlights the impact of the mainstreaming and normalization of prostitution in recent years. On the one hand, these developments have contributed to the expansion of the industry in terms of forms, speed, and profits. On the other hand, the sex trade (re)constructs sexualities, gender relations, and gender inequalities.

Apart from its theorization at a macro-sociological level, the harmfulness of prostitution becomes also apparent as the 'proximity' to the lived experiences of women involved in prostitution increases, through its empirical examination. In her research conducted in Chicago in 2007, Raphael challenges the notions of 'consent' and 'agency' in the context of women's involvement in prostitution, by revealing the coercive nature of their recruitment. Having interviewed 100 women, she concludes, in her chapter 'Meeting Gender Demand: Domestic Sex Trafficking in Chicago', that the majority of them were recruited into the sex trade by boyfriends or family members, in order to escape from abusive family situations or to avoid homelessness. For most of them, the experience of prostitution consists a continuum of violence and exploitation, while the attempts of exiting the industry are blocked by material factors and emotional vulnerability.

At the legislative level, the industrialization of prostitution and its individualized theorization have contributed to the decriminalization/legalization of the phenomenon in some countries. Taking the example of Australia, Sullivan's chapter 'Legitimizing Prostitution: Critical Reflections on Policies in Australia', examines how the legal conceptualization of prostitution as 'work', and its decriminalization, have resulted in the expansion of the sex trade, and especially its illegal sector, rather than in its control and elimination.

One of the limitations of this volume, as mentioned by its editor, is the lack of approaches that explore prostitution through the lens not only of gender inequalities, but also other dimensions of inequality, such as race, class, age (p. 3). Furthermore, the 'other half' of the sex industry, i.e. men who buy sex, remains largely unseen in the current collection, since only one essay focuses exclusively on related issues, presenting research findings on men's motivations for buying sex (Maddy Coy, Miranda Horvath & Liz Kelly).

Taken together, the contributions of the book can be seen as pieces of a puzzle. Each one tells a part of the story of the contemporary commercialization of sex, which has been culturally normalized, by being conceptualized as women's 'choice'. Such popular approaches, the 'puzzle' shows, shadow the lived experiences of violence, exploitation and dehumanization of women in prostitution, while at the same time promoting regulatory policies based on decriminalization with doubtful effectiveness in controlling the industry. On the contrary, such practices prove to be ineffective in tackling gender inequalities and preventing violations of women's rights, and consequently prostitution per se.

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