

Standpoint

Sex Work and the Politics of Researching Gender and Culture

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Sex work - a critical subject in advancing knowledge on gender and work - has a troubled position in the African academy. In the year 2000, at the Centre for Basic Research in Uganda, we sat as a scientific committee to select researchable abstracts submitted by 160 prospective researchers in the Eastern and Southern African region on the subject of Gender and Work. There was not one single abstract on sex work. So I asked the committee: "What about sex work?" The silence that followed was not confined to that meeting room; I believe it to be a silence that invariably arises when we systematically and comprehensively engage with the politics of gender and culture.

To reflect on this, I want to raise some salient issues in relation to my research on sex work. [1] Let me start with a position well articulated by Catherine MacKinnon (1990), who pointed out that in this post-Lacan, post-Foucault era, it has become customary to affirm that sexuality is socially constructed. It is seldom specified what the "social" is, from which sexuality is constructed; far less, who does the constructing, or how, when or where. "Constructed" seems to suggest influenced by, directed, channelled, in the same way that a highway constructs traffic patterns. Not: why cars? Who is driving? Where's everybody going? What makes mobility matter? Who can own a car?

Sexuality is an area that has offered critical and difficult engagement in feminist and gender work. In particular, feminism gave us the energy to explore sexuality through the pronouncement that "the personal is political". What this implies is that we cannot deal with sexuality as though it were part of the private sphere only; and that we also acknowledge that the private sphere is marked by different shades of domination. Expanding the focus of our critical work encourages us to confront the political implications of the beliefs, roles or activities often considered to be purely private or personal. For me, this has meant reflecting on my own identity as an African man, and the various conclusions I have reached about the politics of gender and culture in Uganda.

In the course of my study, I became increasingly aware that predictable polemics about sex work are deeply ingrained in a wide spectrum of writing and popular beliefs. The same questions keep recurring: Who gains from prostitution? Is prostitution sex work? How much do men gain? How about the women who sell sex? Is there a political economy of prostitution? Should sexuality ever be liberated?

Often, authors of newspapers or academic publications show a fixation with the question: "Why do women enter the world of sex work?" I do not think that this is the most important question to ask if we are to try to understand sex work. What I intended to do in my study on sex work was to move the debate into a realm that asks questions about the ways in which bodies are disciplined by different social systems, and how identities emerge in this process. This emphasis does not provide definitive "answers", but it does help us to explore the complex relationships that are often ignored in the context of the patriarchal domination that women involved in sex work negotiate on an everyday basis, and the wave of thinking and writing that this context generates.

The moral framework within which I located my study is shaped by questions posed by Laura Shrage (1990). She asks: If a person decides to eat cat and dog meat, is the most important question this raises one of whether eating dog or cat meat is "really" healthy or unhealthy? The issue I raise in this work is that the so-called "objective reality" (whether dog meat is "really" healthy) is not of primary importance. Rather, the eating of dog and cat meat is an index of the "social reality" in which we live. The argument here is not that

unconventional behaviour is "okay", but that we need to ask hard questions about how this "unconventional" behaviour is played out. In exploring this perspective, we can consider the different ways in which patriarchal, capitalist and other systems of domination articulate themselves in the realm of sexuality. In this way, we get to the heart of questions about the different elements of power that structure our identities, and hence our social positions in society.

I have found that even as we question sex and work, unresolved questions about the nature of sexuality itself arise. It is often acknowledged that heterosexuality constructs oppressive relationships and identities because of its prescribing of gender roles, for example, or because of the way it creates hierarchical differences between male (public and remunerated) and female (reproductive, domestic and therefore unremunerated) labour. And yet heterosexuality continues to be seen as central to many ostensibly radical processes of emancipation in the developing world.

My study was therefore anchored within the larger and ongoing debates concerning "wondering about identities" that inevitably impinge on the particular focus of sex work. I found that a great deal of what is assumed, given, and often generally considered emancipatory, needs to be opened up for further reflection. And here I have turned more and more to the Foucauldian notion that identities are not "pre-givens", neutral, unified and fixed. Rather, they are produced by a normalisation strategy in which the individual is regulated and "carefully fabricated" (see Foucault, 1977; 1978). This normalisation has the ultimate goal of eliminating social and psychological irregularities and producing useful and docile bodies and minds. In our understanding of sex work and identities, we therefore need to attend to the different notions of normalisation that occur around everyday and naturalised gender relations and cultural politics. We also need to address the ways in which perceptions and writings about these relations and practices can often work to reinforce the all-embracing "docility" of our regulated and socially prescribed identities and beliefs.

References

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Footnote

[1] See Ssewakiryanga (2001).

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