Sexual Deviance: Prostitution throughout the World

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Prostitution is defined as the exchange of sexual acts for money. Due to the fact that prostitution is associated with both sexual and economic relations, two things that are viewed very differently, societies have a very difficult time coming to a consensus about it (Davidson, 2007). In some societies like the U.S. there is a greater negative stigma towards prostitution, and it is illegal. Others, such as Amsterdam, believe it is not harmful and should be legal. However, not everyone in the societies agree with the majority view. An example of this is Margo St. James, who founded Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) in the United States in 1973 to speak for the rights of the women in the sex industry (O’Neil, Pitcher, & Sanders, 2009, p. 95). In this paper, a cross-cultural comparison will be made concerning prostitution in Amsterdam, prostitution in Asia, and prostitution in the United States.

In Amsterdam, prostitution is legal but regulated. Most of the prostitutes are women. Initially, there were not as many regulations when it was first decriminalized, but evaluations made in the 2000s showed that bad working conditions and human trafficking still occured. The goal of legalizing prostitution was to erradicate or at least significantly decrease the chance of anyone being in these poor conditions, so it seems on a surface level like the goal failed. It’s important to realize, however, that law abiding prostitutes in good situations occurred as well, so the negative working conditions and such did not apply for everybody. As a result of the negative situations persisting, a bill was proposed that required sex workers to register with authorities, set a legal age for prostitution, and more (Outshoorn, 2012). Furthermore, a study from 1989 to 1995 showed a large decline in risky sexual acts with heterosexual, non-monogamous partners among drug users in Amsterdam. This could be due to STD clinics and free condoms provided for prostitutes (Van Ameijden, Van Hoek, & Coutinho, 1996, p. 772-781). These journals show both a negative and a positive side to prostitution in Amsterdam. On one hand, the legalization of prostitution did not initally seem to improve the working conditions for as many prostitutes as was intended. However, by making prostitution legal, if prostitutes were obeying other laws they were no longer getting arrested, and they could now go to the police for help whereas they could not previously. The bill being passed only caused the positive conditions to increase and the negative ones to decrease. Additionally, the decline in risky sex acts among heterosexual drug users with multiple partners shows that the legalization of prostitution has a correlation with safe sex, whereas most would assume it would cause the opposite. This is another positive effect as it means people may be less likely to contract STDs.

In Asia, primarily Southeast Asia, prostitution is illegal but abundant. Sex tourism is popular, which causes sex trafficking. Usually, the victim is a woman. Some people believe that all prostitution is forced, so sex trafficking is a “pelonasm,” or uneccessary emphasis. Others believed that prostitution is used by women to survive and should be respected. In this perspective, how women engage in prostitution is the problem rather than prostitution as a whole, and trafficking is one of the problems. There are prostitutes in Asia who chose to be prostitutes for primarily economic reasons, but they are typically ignored in favor of discussing sex trafficking (Outshoorn, 2005, p. 141-155). The differences in the perspectives show how society is not truly in agreement about the morality of prostitution. In order to try and prevent sex trafficking, the European Union and the United Nations work together. However, it is a very large, global problem and is difficult to eradicate. Sex trafficking rings have often been able to remain hidden due to protection from other criminal organizations or corrupt individuals. Militarization also has aided this industry, as it increases the demand for sex (Kligman & Limoncelli, 2005, p. 118-140). It is evident based off of this that many people in Southeastern Asia disagree with the illegality of prostitution. As a result of this, the laws are not enforced and people openly break them. Due to the fact that the laws are not enforced, sex tourism is possible, which only adds to the amount of sex trafficking.

At the level of the federal government, prostitution is illegal in the United States. However, it is legal in some parts of Nevada in the form of brothels. Due to the fact that prostitution is illegal, and therefore there are no protections, prostitutes face a higher risk of rape and murder. The danger is worse for streetwalkers, who are also more likely to be drug addicts (Clemmitt, 2008, p. 433-456). Amnesty International is a human rights organization that wants to solve these problems. They released a draft proposal suggesting for sex work to be decriminalized worldwide. This caused controversy and backlash. Amnesty International argued that decriminalizing prostitution would make women safer from violence. They believe that as long as it is between two sexual adults, police should not interfere. The other side of the debate says that it is “‘paid rape’ of vulnerable women (Glazer, 2016, p. 337-360).” These arguments are very similar to the perspectives on prostitution mentioned regarding Asia, which shows how, although there is not a consensus on the ethics of prostitution, the same general perspectives appear in different cultures. The perspectives from these cultures seem to be focused on the health and safety of people, which shows that is perhaps viewed as more important than simply reducing crime rates. The fact that the federal law making prostitution illegal and prostitution still being legal in certain counties in Nevada relates again to Asia, where prostitution is illegal but it still happens openly and abundantly. In all of the societies mentioned, the majority of prostitutes are women. Due to this and the fact that prostitues are sometimes mistreated or forced to be a prostitute, prostitution is involved in women’s rights issues.

Throughout the world, there are very different policies on handling prostitution. Some countries, like Amsterdam, legalize it but have strict regulations. Countries in Southeastern Asia such as China or Japan make it illegal, but do not enforce the laws and allow it to be abundant. Finally, countries such as the U.S. make it illegal and enforce the laws. Although these cultures’ policies on prostitution all seem very different, they have much in common. Firstly, the health and safety of the public seems to be at the forefront of issue. In some way, every view on prostitution concerns health or safety in some manner. In addition, the perspectives on prostitution throughout different cultures are largely the same. Third, a majority of the prostitutes in all the societies are women, so the issue is linked with women’s rights. Finally, people disagree with the majority opinion or the laws regarding prostitution in every culture, and people will break these laws. Prostitution is an issue that is surrounded by much controversy, and it likely always will be.

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