

## Feminists in a Society of Men

Maître assistante, doctorante Oana Magdalena Cenac  
Université „Dunarea de Jos” de Galați, Roumanie

**Résumé:** Notre travail se donne pour but d'analyser le concept de féminisme, tout en mettant l'accent sur la relation femme-homme, dans une société gouvernée par les hommes. Une caractéristique dominante du mouvement féministe est l'affirmation de l'idée d'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes. Même si l'idée est acceptée par toutes les représentantes du mouvement féministe, il y a des différences sensibles au niveau des moyens employés afin d'atteindre ce but. Etant donné ce contexte-ci, nous avons pris en discussion le concept de prostitution, tout en essayant d'analyser la manière par laquelle ce phénomène social a été interprété, accepté ou combattu, à l'intérieur des diverses doctrines : le féminisme existentialiste, le féminisme radical, libéral, marxiste et socialiste.

**Mots-clés:** féminisme, dégradation, prostitution, égalité de chances, relation homme-femme

An important issue with the feminists is their attempt to improve the quality of women's lives by promoting a world in which they can live and work equally with men. Even though they accept it as a major issue, feminists have come to divergent opinions on how to achieve such a goal. In this context, it is difficult to understand why some feminists consider the presence of prostitutes in society as being threatening. What these feminists do not seem to understand or refuse to understand is the fact that what these women want is a better world and society.

In general, prostitution is a result of an action that alters a person's social standing with regard to cultural values. Prostitutes have been singled out and scorned for thousands of years because it seems rather easy to attack the weakest as symbols of the problems of society. Since our society is a fiercely competitive one in which unfairness and exploitation are widely spread, it seems that their only chance to survive is to become prostitutes. Prostitutes are often attacked by feminists who consider them the moral author of the degradation of all women. But having already endured centuries of exploitation, abuse, murder, and slavery for what they do, there is not much prostitutes have to worry about from feminists. The intentions of feminists are essentially harmful. They make a compelling argument that the problem of oppression by men is every woman's problem.

Existentialist feminism derives from the school of thought of Simone de Beauvoir who considers that a woman is not always powerless and does not always need to be dependent in a male-female relationship. Prostitution allows women a chance of escape from dependency on men in a way that does not leave them victims, but it makes them more powerful. Equality of rights and freedom between the sexes is desirable. However, if they are not forthcoming, prostitution can provide the woman with the kind of liberty that is immediate, affirming, and temporally rewarding. In the existentialist view, the power of a competent woman over a man is not an illusion. A man may think he is in charge of a situation by virtue of his power to degrade a woman, but with a woman of competence and spirit this "power" is not incontrovertible. In Carol Pateman's words directed towards the role of a woman as a prostitute, "*The man may think he 'has' her, but his sexual possession is an illusion; it is she who has him...she will not be 'taken,' since she is being paid.*"<sup>1</sup> The spirit of entrepreneurship prevails here instead of the darker concerns of Marxism, which views employment as exploitative and oppressive. To her the prostitute is not the fallen and oppressed victim, rather the "*quintessential liberated woman.*"<sup>2</sup> While believing that women are oppressed by an inequality between the sexes, she also believes there is an escape by economic means.<sup>3</sup> So on the one hand a prostitute is viewed as an oppressed woman, and on the other, a liberated one by way of a successful economic strategy for her own survival.

Radical feminists' views on prostitution are thoughtful but not always delineated well enough to firm up a credible social theory that prostitution is wrong because it degrades women. The argument that prostitution is degrading is a view that is part of a larger ethical

view of human behavior that finds some actions generative and others degenerative. Radical feminists have contributions to make to the discussion of prostitution, but their frequent narrowness of perspective, presented as global truth, leaves much to be desired in examining prostitution as a complex issue.

For the radical feminists, a prostitute does not act out of free choice but is a victim of coercion in both its most subtle and direct forms. Because oppression is so entrenched in people's thinking, changes in the structuring of society alone are not sufficient to overcome it. The attitudes of men must be changed and a state of equality made manifest in the power dynamic between men and women. As in the case of the socialist feminist and the Marxist feminist, once equality has been achieved and the structuring of society corrected, prostitution as we know it will play a diminished role in society. Liberal feminism and radical feminism contrast sharply in certain of their fundamental views. Liberal feminist thinking is a more reasoned, intellectual perspective than the radical feminist position, which has both emotional and political centering in its logical expressions. For the radical feminists their tactics and their philosophy are inseparable since their focus is on widespread cultural awakening rather than on scholarly debate. Radical feminists tend to muddle their ideas, producing concepts that do not make finer distinctions of reality. The oppression of women by men is assumed to be of the same intensity among all men, yet obviously as Imelda Whelehan has pointed out when saying that "*Men have different degrees of access to the mechanisms of oppression.*"<sup>4</sup> Radical feminism focuses on men as oppressors, yet says little about the possibility of the woman being an oppressor of other women or of men."<sup>5</sup> Radical feminists do not view prostitution as a harmless private transaction. On the contrary, they believe that it reinforces and perpetuates the subordination and exploitation of women."<sup>6</sup> They see men as universally believing myths regarding their own sexuality. In fact, they discuss about two myths: one which considers that men need more sex than women and a second myth, according to which they are genetically the stronger sex and therefore they should be dominant in relationships with women. Feminist writer Alison M. Jaggar describes the radical feminist view as one in which "*almost every man/woman encounter has sexual overtones and typically is designed to reinforce the sexual dominance of men.*"<sup>7</sup> To the feminist, a man's belief that he has no choice other than to respond to his sexual impulses creates a self-validating tautology of belief predicated on the notion that his aggressive behaviors are linked to his inherited traits. The feminist sees otherwise, viewing the source of men's sexuality as deriving in part from the culture and not exclusively from biology. According to this point of view, prostitution and pornography only increase his self-serving belief in the primacy of his sexuality. His role as the "dominant" sex is reinforced in his mind as something very real, when in fact it is not. D. Kelly Weisberg, in *Application of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives*, describes this process in the following way: "*According to the radical feminist view, men are socialized to have sexual desires and to feel entitled to have those desires met, whereas women are socialized to meet those desires and to internalize accepted definitions of femininity and sexual objectification.*"<sup>8</sup> As men cling to the idea that their sexuality is an absolute expression of their need and dominance, they prevent women from effecting new attitudes, self-realizations, and behaviors.

When radical feminists speak of "degradation," they apply the term in ethical statements to right or wrong behavior. In fact, they refer to degradation in a social sense and not a moral sense, although they allude to their ideas as morally sound. In a social sense they consider degradation as existing at all levels in a society in which everything that men do, from opening doors for women to sexual assault, reinforces their view of men as "dominating." In spite of the fact that radical feminists tend to globalize concepts such as degradation, they appear to compensate for it by making several assertions that have high credibility. One of these assertions is that human sexuality derives essentially from culture and not from biology. This idea is reasonable and consistent with contemporary biological theories which emphasize the role of culture rather than genetics in viewing the evolution of human societies. For

example, zoologist Theodosius Dobzhansky would recognize the radical feminist assertion framed in biological and genetic terms. He views culture as an instrument of human adaptation that is virtually inseparable from biology. Dobzhansky separates *biological and cultural theories* into three categories: *ectogenic*, *autogenic*, and *biological*. One interesting thing he brings up is a biological belief called *eugenics* that was popular in the early part of this century. Eugenics asserts the strategic role of heredity in determining one's class and dominant status in society. He goes on to explain that with the rise of Hitlerism this idea was carried to tragic excess, as expressed by the statement, "*The belief in the influence of heredity overreached itself when it was used—as it still is all too often—to justify the continued domination of some particular caste or group.*" Surprisingly, this sounds somewhat like the ideological beliefs of some men who view their role in society to be one of dominance over women. Dobzhansky, however, does not take one side or the other in the biological dispute between cultural and biological factors as determinants of behavior. In his opinion, the various viewpoints represent credible realities that interact with the environment, creating a cybernetic state in which "...there exists a feedback between biological and cultural processes"<sup>51</sup> to maintain the organic system's equilibrium. Thus, there is a certain degree of support for the radical feminist view that people are not necessarily responding to biological forces that are exclusive of cultural influences. Just like the biological knowledge can expand the ground of support for the arguments of feminists, the study of ethics can do the same. The exploitation and oppression of human beings is considered to be an immoral act. It goes without saying that there are other moral influences that can cause oppression. For example, if a man is forced by career interests to manipulate and pressure clients into making decisions that benefit his company, he soon develops habits in which lying and manipulation become part of the job. When he comes home he brings with him habits that can prove detrimental to his marriage. In this light, one must weigh the corrupting effects of prostitution on the degradation of women's lives against many other powerful influences such as the lying and manipulation just mentioned. A climate of immorality is evident everywhere in society, not just in the lives and actions of prostitutes. In a cultural climate where manipulation, half-truths, lying, and cheating are commonplace, people begin to believe that such practices are acceptable.

Radicals believe that when equality is achieved between the sexes there will be no prostitution. This is probably true in the sense that if harmony prevailed among all couples, seeking outside sex might not be considered. But many moralists have noticed there is not a lot of love in a world that is preoccupied with pleasure and material things.

From the beginning, radical feminists have shown a weak understanding of the nature of prostitution and of the personal lives of prostitutes themselves. A prostitute is not necessarily a home-wrecker in the way non-prostitute women in extramarital affairs might be considered. The intimate nature of the prostitute-client relationship is much more complex than it may appear at first sight. Whether women are call girls or street girls with few resources, clients sometimes find prostitutes' company comforting. At times, the only thing a client is looking for is simple warmth and human contact, even though he might initially define that need as sex. Time spent with a person who listens can be comforting and emotionally beneficial to one person in the same way that seeking out a professional psychologist might be reassuring to another.

In liberal feminism, prostitution is considered as a private business transaction. Radical feminists, on the other hand, view a prostitute as a human being who has been reduced to a piece of merchandise. The radical feminist usually sees prostitution as an exploitative relationship in which the customer is interested only in the prostitute's services and not her personally. The Marxist feminist response to the liberal position is that prostitution represents a corruption of wage labor, and is therefore degrading and oppressive. But Carol Pateman in *The Sexual Contract* goes to some length to show that the prostitute is not really a wage laborer but rather an independent contractor who has it within her means to start or stop a

transaction. Her contract is with a male customer and not an employer.<sup>9</sup> The liberal feminist wants to free women from oppressive gender roles. This focus bears a similarity to the existentialist position which seeks equality of rights and freedoms between women and men.

There are people who object strongly to the ideals of the liberals. Their ideas tend to value the radical feminist position, not the liberal feminist one. To women in *WHISPER* (Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution), harsh experiences in prostitution separate them from liberals. Members of *WHISPER* are commonly in contact with women who have been terrorized, traumatized, and beaten in prostitution. This experience leads women to conclude that the liberal position is wrong since it accepts a social system in which women can be exploited and harmed. *WHISPER* and *COYOTE SF* (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), are two prostitute organizations that hold widely divergent views on the issue of harm and degradation attributable to their profession. *WHISPER* is generally more involved with the experiences of women of color, and very poor white women, many of whom have had fewer educational advantages than *COYOTE* women. In addition, many of *WHISPER*'s members may have additional hurdles to overcome that are rarely encountered in *COYOTE*. *WHISPER* describes prostitution in such terms as "*disgusting, abusive, and like rape*,"<sup>10</sup> sentiments that seem quite the opposite of those expressed in *COYOTE*. *WHISPER* probably represents a much broader view of prostitution, finding its analog among prostitutes in underdeveloped countries where educational levels are lowest. But *COYOTE* is a necessary ally for all prostitutes. While members may not have experienced the same brutality in prostitution that members of *WHISPER* have, it is within the power of their more politically influential members to gradually influence change in the world towards improving the quality of life of all prostitutes. At the same time, the liberal approach has the capacity to encompass the arguments of *WHISPER*.

Marxist feminism arises out of the doctrines of Karl Marx, whose theory is centered less on the material aspects of life than on the more broadly defined social ones. Simone Weil in *Oppression and Liberty* describes Marxism as being a theory quite incomplete yet very relevant in describing the mechanisms of economic growth. Central to Marxism is the idea of the divisions of labor, which are evident in the capitalist system. Marxist feminists base their arguments of moral right and wrong in reference to the corruption of wage labor that is in itself an expression of class distinctions. "*Wage earning is a form of oppression, that the workers are inevitably enslaved under a system of production where, deprived of knowledge and skill, they are reduced practically to nothing*."<sup>11</sup> Following this doctrine, Marxists are opposed to any social or political action that perpetuates oppression of members of the work force. Prostitution is a form of labor and therefore has been specifically noted as falling under the designation of a corruption of wage labor. Marx himself asserted that "*prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer*."<sup>12</sup> Prostitution, therefore, can be seen as standing as a symbol of all that is wrong with world policies in society. However, Pateman in *The Sexual Contract* sees prostitutes otherwise, pointing out that they are not wage laborers, but rather independent contractors. In her thinking, "*The objection that the prostitute is harmed or degraded by her trade misunderstands the nature of what is traded. The body and the self of the prostitute are not offered in the market; she can contract out use of her services without detriment to herself*."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, philosopher Robert Nozick believes that a person has the right to sell himself or herself into slavery if that is his or her decision.<sup>14</sup>

Socialist feminism appears to adopt some of the same concepts of Marxism, but instead of focusing on economic determinism as the primary source of oppression, the socialist feminist sees the oppression as having psychological and social roots.<sup>15</sup> They share a sincere concern for women, their focus being on people, not profits. To the socialist feminist, the prostitute is a victim of the corruption of a society which accompanies class distinctions and considers people as being merely parts of a mechanism that can be replaced by other parts of the same description. The socialist feminist and Marxist feminist perspectives prostitution is discouraged, but neither school of thought seeks a legal remedy for its elimination because

they believe that the cause of prostitution is in the structuring of society, and that is where the solution will reside.

In conclusion, we may argue that, no matter the point of view (liberal, Marxist, existentialist, socialist etc), we have to be aware of the fact that we live in a society which functions according to the scheme: power, success, affirmation in the public life is men's privilege, and women are "forced" to express themselves preponderantly in the home area. Those mental clichés create, by tradition, prejudices and discriminations against women and they are inevitably reflecting in the public mentality.

Nevertheless the promotion of the gender equality principle is a complex and longtime process which can not be considered as satisfactory. The stereotypes persist at every level, and their changing is possible depending on how much we know and are aware of them. And this is possible only by putting together the efforts of all those involved and, at the same time interested, in the serious and competent promotion of the gender equality principle.

## Notes

- [1] Alison M. Jaggar in *Applications of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives*, p. 191.
- [2] Ibid., p.191.
- [3] Simone de Beauvoir "believed that one of the keys to a woman's liberation is economic, a point she emphasized in her discussion of the independent woman." Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989), p. 211.
- [4] "Radical feminist writings are consciously deemed inseparable from group tactics, rather than as a discrete contribution to an abstract philosophical position." Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought* (Washington Square, New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 73.
- [5] Women are also exploiters of other women. Human passions and greeds are not endemic to one sex or the other. If a woman of questionable morality wants something badly enough she is likely to exploit any easy source that can satisfy her desire, whether it is a man or a woman.
- [6] "Prostitution is not a harmless "private" transaction but a powerful means of creating, reinforcing, and perpetuating the objectification of women through sexuality." *Applications of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives*, p. 242.
- [7] Alison M. Jaggar in *The Philosophy of Sex*, p. 270.
- [8] *Applications of Feminist Legal Theory to Women's Lives*, p. 194.
- [9] Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 202.
- [10] Evelina Giobbe in *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*.
- [11] Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1955), p.161.
- [12] *The Sexual Contract*, p. 201.
- [13] Ibid., p. 191.
- [14] Robert Nozick, in an article by Alison M. Jaggar, in *The Philosophy of Sex*, p. 264.
- [15] Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview Press, 1989), p. 211.

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