

4-28-2005

## The Voices of Sex Workers (prostitutes?) and the Dilemma of Feminist Discourse

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The Voices of Sex Workers (prostitutes?) and the Dilemma of Feminist Discourse

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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College of Arts and Sciences  
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Date of Approval:  
April 28, 2005

Keywords: trafficking, migration, Marxist, postmodern, radical

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## The Voices of Sex Workers (Prostitutes?) and the Dilemma of Feminist Discourse

Justine Kessler

### ABSTRACT

The existence of prostitution has been a longtime concern for many societies. It has also been a complicated issue within feminist discourse. Some women choose sex work as a viable economic option while others are forced into prostitution by traffickers and pimps and some are forced into it due to disadvantaged circumstances. The presence of sex work and prostitution is one of the occurrences that accompany a patriarchal capitalist system. Many feminists indeed argue that prostitution is a byproduct of a patriarchal capitalist system. The migration of women for sex work and the trafficking of women into prostitution cannot occur without participation of a dominant more powerful group, and a marginalized less powerful group. Sex work and prostitution are complicated components in an ever increasingly connected world. However, all too often, the belief that a patriarchal capitalist system supports the migration of women for sex work and the trafficking of women into prostitution fails to encompass all the complexities surrounding these occurrences.

The existence of sex work and prostitution involves legal, economic, political, and moral implications that deserve broad theorization. In order to more fully understand the legal, economic, political, and moral implications that contribute to the existence of sex work and prostitution, the voices of women that are involved must be illuminated. While

this interview does not yet exist, I argue that only through interviews of women in sex work and prostitution can we fully understand the issue. Illuminating the voices of these women will help to reveal how issues surrounding sex workers' agency and victimization of trafficked women are present and absent within feminist discourse.

This thesis focuses on the differences between women sex workers with agency and women who are victims of trafficking and pimping. It also discusses the migration of women into the sex industry. The discussion of agency and victimization is applied to modern and postmodern feminist theory. Modern feminist theory is useful to an understanding of how sex work and prostitution are oppressive to the women involved and how conditions of agency and victimization are supported and/or negated.

Postmodern feminist theory transforms the focus of the discussion from the identity of sex workers and prostitutes as agents and victims to a discussion of these women as subjects. First person interviews by sex workers reveal their subjectivity and supports the argument that what they do is indeed work, and it is viewed as such by the women themselves. Inclusion of the voices of sex workers and prostitutes also reveals the issues and concerns that they experience as employees in sex work and prostitution.

## Chapter One:

### An Introduction to Gender, Agency, and Victimization

#### **Methodology**

My belief that prostitutes, like all people, deserve equal rights motivates me to write on this topic. The marginalization of prostitutes, I believe, is undeserved. Prostitution is not a new phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The causes and circumstances of prostitution however, have changed in conjunction with the global economy and our ever-increasingly connected world. My interest in the effects of globalization on women sparked my interest in prostitution in the Third World. While researching prostitution as a global phenomenon, I became interested in the feminist debates about it. The effects of globalization on prostitution among Third World women are the subject of many of the debates. The literature containing information about Third World women and prostitution attempts to explain its existence, however, it offers a narrow vision of the lived experiences of women involved. The absence of a vast amount of literature that recounts the experiences of women of the Third World, leaves much of the stories untold.

Feminist debates surrounding prostitution as a global phenomenon contain the themes of agency and victimization as well as the notion that a patriarchal capitalist

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<sup>1</sup> Because prostitution has existed throughout history, I tend to believe that prostitutes fulfill certain needs in society for example, their participation in religious or spiritual rituals. The participation of prostitutes in religious rituals affirmed sexuality as a valid component of spirituality. This participation in addition to the fulfillment of sexual desires creates a need for prostitution. In modern times, however, prostitutes are more commonly regarded as taboo or immoral and are condemned by Christian morals and beliefs about sex. The taboo nature of prostitution contributes to the marginalization of prostitutes.

system is to blame for its prevalence. The consideration of prostitution as a global issue often places the women that participate in it as pawns in a patriarchal capitalist system. The prevalence of prostitution in the global marketplace, particularly involving women of the Third World, is the subject of much debate and controversy for feminists. Feminists argue for or against the agency of the women involved. Because of the interaction between prostitution globally and the patriarchal capitalist system, the voices of prostitutes are often silenced because of their subordinate status within the patriarchal capitalist system. Within Western feminism, however, the voices and experiences of prostitutes are not silenced. Their voices are heard and are either affirmed or denied.

My thesis is based upon feminist debates about prostitution and my research is qualitative. The information within my thesis focuses on women in the Third World that either migrate for sex work or are trafficked into prostitution. The main sources in this thesis are books and articles that contain theories about gender relations and prostitution. These feminist writings also include arguments for and against prostitution, as well as feminist analyses of gender, sexual practices, and male domination. Particular attention is paid to those arguments within feminism that condemn prostitution while leaving out the actual voices of the sex workers themselves. I utilize the voices of women involved in the sex industry throughout my feminist analysis of prostitution.

## **Introduction**

This first chapter explains how gender relations foster the existence of sex work and prostitution. It also highlights the differences between sex workers and women

trafficked into prostitution. For the purpose of this thesis, I use the term prostitute to refer to women trafficked into the sex industry against their will and the term sex worker to refer to women who enter and/or stay in the sex industry on their own. The explanation of the difference between sex workers and women trafficked into prostitution situates the sex worker as a woman with agency and the trafficked woman or prostitute as a victim with little or no agency.

These two groups of women encompass a wide range within the sex industry, which includes women who are agents and women who are victims. Some women involved in the sex industry adhere to this agent/victim binary; however, there are also grey areas among the experiences of sex workers and prostitutes that remain unaddressed. I describe aspects of an agent/victim binary, which is existent in the feminist arguments that I critique, in order to draw attention to certain aspects and issues of prostitution and sex work that do not fall within it. Both sex workers and prostitutes engage in sexual contact with another person in immediate and direct exchange for money, drugs, food or other forms of subsistence. For the purposes of this thesis, sex work and prostitution refers to the selling of sexual services by a woman to a man.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two, I report on three specific populations of women. These populations consist of Ghanaian and Thai women who migrate to the Ivory Coast and Japan for sex work, and women who are trafficked into prostitution from Thailand to Japan. Within the information I present about these women, the themes of agency and

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<sup>2</sup> Sex work and prostitution can refer to various instances. For example, sex work and prostitution include women who sell sexual services to other women, children who sell sexual services, and men who sell sexual services. I confine my discussion on women who sell sexual services to men. In reference to women who sell sexual services to men, I am referring to adult women.



victimization come to light. These two themes lend to the construction of the agency/victim binary.

The third chapter of this thesis will apply Marxist, radical, and postmodern feminist theories to sex workers and prostitutes. The application of radical and Marxist feminist theories to Ghanaian and Thai sex workers and prostitutes who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan both supports and negates the themes of agency and victimization. Postmodern feminist theory offers a different stance towards Ghanaian and Thai sex workers and prostitutes who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan which are unaddressed by radical and Marxist feminist theories. I use postmodern feminist theory in my analysis to investigate the way in which meanings are constructed about sex workers and prostitutes.

The fourth chapter will employ the voices of Western sex workers. The employment of the voices of Western sex workers will support my argument that the binary created to analyze the experiences of Ghanaian and Thai sex workers and prostitutes who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan is insufficient. Through the employment of the voices of Western sex workers, previously unaddressed themes and issues come to light. These themes and issues often contradict feminist theorizations of sex work, and especially the analysis of Third World women sex workers.

### **The Gendered Organization of Sex Work and Prostitution**

This section explains how socially constructed notions of gender and sexuality contribute to feminist interpretations of sex work and prostitution. To understand the

differences between sex work and prostitution, it is important to understand how socially constructed notions of gender and sexuality shape feminist interpretations.

According to Judith Lorber (1994), the social construction of gender involves distinctions between masculinity and femininity demonstrated through basic institutions in society. The basic institutions of society such as family, school, media, and the workplace reinforce notions about gender. The institutional reinforcement of notions about gender organizes society. The gendered organization of society is hierarchical, in which notions of maleness and masculinity are ranked above notions of femaleness and femininity. Notions about gender situate masculinity as dominant and femininity as submissive. In other words, masculinity is read as the male self, and as the generic human, while femininity is read as the female Other. This self/Other dichotomy reinforces distinctions between masculinity and femininity. Distinctions between masculinity and femininity also include socially constructed notions of sexuality. Therefore, socially constructed notions about sexuality, like socially constructed notions of gender, place male sexuality as self and female sexuality as Other. Within this dynamic, male sexuality dominates female sexuality.

The act of selling sexual services relies upon not only patriarchal<sup>3</sup> socially constructed notions of gender and sexuality, but also heteronormativity.<sup>4</sup> These notions construct and support heterosexuality as the norm. The gendered organization of sex work and prostitution involves heteronormative and patriarchal notions that grant men the expectation of unlimited access to the female body. The heteronormative patriarchally organized social sphere controls women's bodies (Nagle, 1997). Patriarchy along with

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<sup>3</sup> Male dominated

<sup>4</sup> Heteronormativity refers to the notion that heterosexuality is the norm.

heteronormativity, supports the presence of sex work and prostitution. According to Kathleen Barry (1995), “Sex, accessible to men through the female body, is a social product of culture, a political product of gender hierarchy, and there are conditions of male power” (p. 22). Barry (1995) also asserts, “Patriarchal domination makes women undifferentiated among and from each other and makes them known, in the first instance, as different from men, and therefore lesser” (p.22). Men assert dominance over women in a hierarchical fashion, which includes control of women’s bodies and sexuality. Women, within the gendered organization of sex work and prostitution, are situated as passive under the reign of dominant masculinity. A patriarchal notion of men’s unlimited access to female bodies and female sexuality places the sex worker and prostitute in a subordinate position.

Within this position of subordination, prostitutes and sex workers sell their bodies to men. The purchase of women’s bodies by men becomes an exercise of male dominance supported by patriarchal notions of unlimited access to female bodies. The sale of their bodies constitutes a form of employment for sex workers and a form of victimization for prostitutes.

### **Sex Workers as Agents; A Result of Economic Subordination**

In this section, I explain my definition of sex workers and how they have agency. The term sex worker usually refers to anyone who provides sexual services to a consumer. Sex workers include people who are employed as porn stars, strippers, phone sex workers, and prostitutes (Dank, 1999). For the purpose of this thesis, the term sex

worker will exclusively refer to a woman who participates in sexual contact with men as a form of employment. More importantly, a sex worker is a woman who *chooses* to sell sexual services to a man in immediate and direct exchange for money, drugs, food or other forms of subsistence.<sup>5</sup>

An agent is a person who possesses agency, or one who makes choices based on social and economic status, which is influenced by power. I use the term agency to refer to the exercise of choice within a subordinate position. More specifically, women who chose to become sex workers because of their subordinate position, exercise agency. A sex worker then, exercises agency because she chooses her type of employment.

I claim sex workers are agents because they have a choice of employment. Women choose sex work for various reasons based on individual circumstances. Commonly, women choose sex work because their desire for money and independence cannot be fulfilled through other means of employment. The stories told by women who opted to become sex workers reveal their desire for money and independence- a desire that preceded their entrance into sex work (Alexander, 2001).

According to one sex worker named Peggy, “The fact is, there’s a livable wage to be made in the sex business, and *we* decide when, where and with whom we’ll do what” (Delacoste & Alexander, 1998, p. 25). Peggy’s decision of when to enter into sex work as well as to whom she decides to sell sexual services, constitutes evidence of her agency. Under these circumstances, the sale of sexual services by a sex worker to a man involves an exercise of the woman’s agency.

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<sup>5</sup> Within the context of subordination within the gendered organization of sex work, a woman chooses to sell sexual services, as she “chooses” any work, because she has limited economic options. In this thesis, I analyze the choices women make to participate in the existing economic system of sex work. While a critique of the system itself could be made, that is not my project here.

According to Melanie Simmons (1999), “The words ‘consent’ and ‘choice’ are commonly used to describe agency, which is the ability of a person to make choices and take action under the social and economic constraints that impede these choices” (p.125). A sex worker who performs sexual services does so as her chosen form of employment, serving her economic needs and demands. The woman acts autonomously and chooses sex work as a form of employment in which she is the beneficiary of the profits of the sexual contact.

Women choose to become sex workers because sex work is a viable economic option. The process by which a woman chooses sex work involves her individual experience. Some women choose to migrate to a particular geographical location to become sex workers. The story of a woman named Ana reflects the elements of agency within the decision to become a sex worker:

She [Ana] “began to train as a prostitute [sex worker] in Columbia” and knew she was applying for sex work before arriving in Curacao. She could no longer pay for her study (Biochemistry), could find no other employment and consequently had cast around to find a way to support herself and to help provide financially for her aunt and mother. She had heard about work at the brothel via a girlfriend, and at the time of the interview, was there for the first time. She enthusiastically stated that she earned “good money” and during her first month had not encountered any major problems. Her idea was to save enough to buy a house for the family (Kempadoo, 1999, p.125).

This story exemplifies economic motivations for women to become sex workers. In this case, Ana’s choice to become a sex worker is motivated by economic necessity. Her economic responsibilities include support for herself and her family. She chooses sex work because other forms of viable employment are scarce. Ana’s choice to become a sex worker, based on economic constraints, is an example of agency.

Another example of how sex workers use agency is through activism. Sex workers not only assert their agency in their decision to become sex workers but also by demanding equal treatment. Margo St. James, an American sex worker, founded the organization Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) in 1973. The foundation of COYOTE by St. James exemplifies sex workers' agency through their ability to affect political change regarding the attitudes toward sex workers. Sex workers earned public attention through activism initiated by Margo St. James. This activism enabled sex workers to voice their opinions. Through COYOTE, St. James initiated a movement for the rights of sex workers, calling attention to their condemnation and mistreatment and asserting their autonomy and legitimacy as workers. Sex workers, therefore, demonstrate agency. Through their actions, they are not passive participants in their situation. (Pheterson, 1989).

### **Trafficking in Women: Pimping, Coercion, and Victimization**

In this section, I explain how women are victims of trafficking, which forces them into prostitution. I also explain how pimping forces women into prostitution. Trafficking in women encompasses a broad range of exploitation and violence that includes prostitution (Wijers, 1998). Trafficked women do not wish to become prostitutes. Women trafficked into prostitution against their will are victims. Trafficking for the purposes of this thesis refers to the coercion of women into prostitution with force and deception (Murray, 1998). Specifically, the trafficking of women involves migration from their local communities for the purposes of prostitution (Human Rights Watch,

2000). Prostitution, as a result of trafficking, situates women as victims because they lack autonomy as workers and physical, economic, and social control of their situation.

Women trafficked into prostitution are victims of human rights violations<sup>6</sup>, which include the denial of their rights as autonomous agents. Trafficked women are victims because of the denial of rights with regard to working conditions, including type, location and duration of work. They also lack the right to refuse particular customers, sexual acts, and the right to insist on the use of condoms. Above all, women trafficked into prostitution lack the right to leave their situation (Wijers, 1998). I agree with the argument that the trafficking of women into prostitution is a form of sexual slavery, because women who are trafficked become commodities subject to sale, and as a result, are stripped of their agency.

As a result of the sale, the agents, brokers, or employers involved expect repayment from the women in the form of debt bondage. Debt bondage forces the prostitute to relinquish her earnings to her employer (Human Rights Watch, 2000). The trafficking of women into prostitution is a form of sexual slavery because the prostitutes lack control and access to the money that they earn through providing sexual services. According to Kathleen Barry (1995),

Trafficking in women is the oldest, most traditional form of procuring for prostitution. It predates sex industrialization and is extensive in primarily rural, poor, and pre-industrial societies. Traffickers are traders in human beings who either buy women from husbands, buy children from parents, fraudulently promise well-paying jobs or lucrative marriages at the other end, or they abduct them (p.165).

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<sup>6</sup> According to the United Nations, human rights violations include the lack of governmental or institutional adherence to national or international laws that ensure basic freedoms such as freedom, autonomy, equality, and protection from harm.

The trafficking of women is a highly sophisticated operation that benefits participating nations and involves a detailed network of organized crime. According to Barry (1995), the trafficking of women from Bangladesh to Pakistan and India is a prime example. Bangladesh is a highly impoverished nation that capitalizes on the sale of female nationals. To complete the sale of Bangladeshi women, traffickers must first arrange fictitious marriages or employment contracts with them. Securing fictitious contracts begins the trafficking process from Bangladesh to Pakistan or India. Border guards also play a part, ensuring the traffickers' ability to transport the women across the border with little trouble.

Upon arrival at Pakistan or India, brothel owners or managers purchase the women. Police often raid the brothels in which these women work, arrest the prostitutes, and turn a blind eye toward the traffickers. In many instances, the prostitutes are raped by police following the arrests. The highly sophisticated operation of the trafficking of women from Bangladesh to Pakistan and India often results in a two-fold victimization (Barry, 1995). This two-fold victimization includes the coercion into prostitution and lack of legal protection.

The notion of pimping relates to the trafficking of women into prostitution. The definition of pimping is the act of an individual in the solicitation of a prostitute (Random House Webster, 2001). Prostitutes who have a pimp are victims in many of the same ways as women who are trafficked because pimps coerce women into prostitution. Pimps often use mental, physical and verbal abuse to control prostitutes. Pimping, like the trafficking of women into prostitution, involves collecting the earnings of the prostitute. Pimps use their coercive techniques to demand payment from the prostitute (Barry,



1994). Pimps are similar to traffickers because they victimize the prostitute in many of the same ways.

Pimping relates to sexual slavery because the prostitutes have little to no control over their situation. According to Barry (1995) "Female sexual slavery is present in all situations where women and girls cannot change the conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got to those conditions they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation"(p. 199). The story told about a streetwalker named Cherry supports this statement:

Cherry told me once that she met Tredwell when she was sixteen. "He had a yellow Cadillac then. And he had on a yellow suit and matching shoes." She comes from a small town in Ohio and when she looked out the window and saw Tredwell for the first time she said, "Mama, a movie star. There's a movie star downstairs"! Well, her Mama knew about Tredwell, but that didn't stop her baby from running off with him. . .Back on the street Cherry is alone crying by the spot where the fire has been. . ."I'm freezing and Tredwell says I can't go home until I get a hundred dollars more."(Johnston, p. 30-1, 1998).

Women who cannot escape their pimps are victims of sexual slavery. Economic exploitation by the pimp denies the prostitute freedom to earn enough money to liberate herself from sexual slavery. It also encroaches on her ability to refuse certain clients and sexual acts. Besides economic exploitation, prostitutes endure physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by pimps as well as clients (O'Connell Davidson, 1998).

Prostitutes are victims of trafficking or pimping because both of these methods place women into an illegal operation against their will. In addition to forced entry into an illegal operation against their will, prostitutes are also victims because they lack freedom to choose when, where and to whom they will sell their sexual services. Prostitutes do not have access to the money they earn from selling sexual services. They

are also further victimized by law enforcement. Prostitutes are punished for an act in which they are coerced to participate by law enforcement officials. Law enforcement officials take advantage of their power and often rape prostitutes.

Many feminist organizations focus on the eradication of the trafficking in women. For example, The Coalition Against the Trafficking in Women (CATW) actively opposes forced prostitution (Murray, 1998). This stance is important in the global discourse surrounding trafficking because it indirectly advocates for the agency of some prostitutes as sex workers by condemning only forced prostitution. Prostitution should not be a form of slavery, but rather employment, in which a woman chooses as her form of livelihood. The advocacy for the agency of the prostitute as sex worker acknowledges that actual employment in prostitution is not the problem. The problem lies within coercive systems of dominance that victimize the prostitute, such as trafficking and pimping. The abolition of this victimization could occur through the advocacy for prostitute's legal, social and economic rights thereby confirming her as a sex worker.

## Chapter Two

### Migration of Sex Workers and Trafficked Women

This chapter defines migration and explains the economic motivation for the migration of women from Ghana to the Ivory Coast and from Thailand to Japan.

Migration is a process that includes the movement of a population of people from their localities to other places for the purposes of employment. This movement can occur from rural to urban, rural to rural, and urban to urban areas, as well as from one nation to another. Migration can occur seasonally, for an extended period of time, or permanently (Chant, 1992).

Migration of women from Ghana to the Ivory Coast and from Thailand to Japan is a result of dire economic conditions (Kempadoo, 1999). The migration process of women from Ghana to the Ivory Coast and from Thailand to Japan alleviates women from their immediate impoverished economic circumstances. The loss of self-sufficiency in communities of the developing world accelerates the rates of the migration of women. Women often choose to migrate in search of better economic conditions and quality of life, however, much of this migration results in the entrance of women into sex work. Ghanaian and Thai women migrate from their local communities to other localities to participate in sex work. Even though sex work is a highly stigmatized form of employment, women chose it because it offers mobility from their previous narrow

economic opportunities. This chapter also outlines the trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan. The details of the trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan reveal how trafficked women become prostitutes against their will. Women who are trafficked into prostitution move from one economically oppressive position to another. Through the descriptions of the processes of migration and trafficking, the dichotomy between women who choose sex work and women trafficked into prostitution becomes vague because their motivations are the same.

Lack of viable economic opportunity is the force that motivates most women to migrate from their homelands to other localities to become sex workers. The disadvantage of class subordination places women in a position where they must choose to either remain impoverished or to exploit their bodies. The intersection of class subordination with gender inequality, therefore, affects the migration of women for sex work. While they may exchange class subordination for gender inequality, nonetheless women who migrate into the heterosexual sex industry receive economic leverage as a result. The exploitation of their bodies puts women in a position that relieves them of their class subordination but at the same time reinforces gender inequality. If the heterosexual sex industry is exploitative to women, results in gender inequality and at the same time relieves them of their class subordination, then sex workers have some degree of agency because they choose to exploit themselves in order to achieve class mobility. Women who migrate for sex work choose to do so because of their narrow economic opportunities which result in gender and sexual subordination. Their choice to become sex workers arguably subverts their class subordination. The exchange of class

subordination for gender inequality as a choice offers better economic resources. Through this exchange, sex workers gain economic opportunities.

### **The Migration of Sex Workers from Ghana to the Ivory Coast**

This section describes the motivations of Ghanaian women who migrate to the Ivory Coast with the objective of becoming sex workers. Through this description, I argue women who migrate from Ghana to the Ivory Coast are emancipated from narrow economic opportunities and poor quality of life afforded them in their homelands. At the same time, however, these women participate in stigmatized sex work.

The migration of Ghanaian women to the Ivory Coast for sex work began in the middle of the 1970's and extended to the early 1980's. Ghanaian women migrated to the Ivory Coast because of a swift downturn in the Ghanaian economy during the 1970's, as a result of economic restructuring following independence from colonial rule. Export and food production also contributed to the downturn of the economy, which saw the production of Cocoa, a major Ghanaian export, fall by more than 50 percent between 1975 and 1982. A massive drought also exacerbated already low food production (Vickers, 1991).

Traditionally, women in Ghana supported their families through farming, which helped to position them as the main providers for their families. As a result of the drop in food production, Ghanaian women farmers lost this key role, and the ability to support themselves and their families. The impoverishment of Ghanaian women and their

families contributed to the migration of women in search of other economic opportunities (Vickers, 1991).

In addition to the loss in food production, the Ghanaian government laid off a large portion of their previously employed workers when they cut social service funding. The cuts in social service funding had a domino effect on the health care and education sectors. Loss of health care and education workers further damaged the quality of life for women and children in Ghana. The control of infectious disease, and maternal and child health issues were neglected, malnutrition and infectious diseases struck high numbers of children, and the rates of maternal and infant mortality increased all due to cuts in health care. Cuts in education programs also led to massive student dropout rates (Vickers, 1991). High unemployment, health epidemics, and poor educational achievement plagued the independent Ghanaian government over the next twenty years.

The Economic Recovery Program in 1983 led to a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) that forced the agricultural industry to absorb unemployed health and education workers. This SAP, granted to the Ghanaian government by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), most negatively affected the women of Ghana. Because of the SAP's implemented by the IMF and promoted by the Ghanaian government, more than ninety percent of the unemployed workforce consisted of women with little education and few employment skills. These women opted for migration to the Ivory Coast (Anarfi, 1998).

The Ivory Coast served as an attractive destination for Ghanaian women for three main reasons. First, the Ivory Coast is easily accessible by land. The availability of people willing to assist these women in their migration increased the accessibility by land. People assisting these women included drivers, other migrants, and immigration

and law enforcement officials. Second, the Ivory Coast is a haven for male migrants from the Sahel and other West African nations. The high numbers of male migrants to the Ivory Coast creates a demand for sex workers far greater than the supply. Women who choose to migrate to the Ivory Coast in search of sex work view this area as a place for economic opportunity. Third, the Ivory Coast is a haven for European tourists (Anarfi, 1998). International tourism has contributed to the presence of sex workers in the Ivory Coast through an increased demand for sex workers. The explosion of international tourism as affected communities such as the Ivory Coast. The expansion of civilian air travel, the increase in disposable income and the availability of more leisure time all have contributed to the global presence of European tourists (Mullings, 1999).

Women chose to migrate from Ghana to the Ivory Coast for sex work. I, along with Anarfi (1998), argue that Ghanaian women assert their agency because of their motivation to improve their economic position. Sex work is a viable economic option for Ghanaian women, and as stated earlier, the motivations of Ghanaian women to migrate into sex work coincided with the loss of economic independence due to the SAP's granted by the IMF. The fact that Ghanaian women chose to migrate to the Ivory Coast for sex work is evidence of these women asserting their agency.

The gendered organization of culture that motivates women to provide for their families through employment in sex work presents another example for the evidence of women's agency. The culturally proscribed notion of Ghanaian women as providers for their families justifies their entry into sex work. However, this justification is not free from stigmatization. Many locals outwardly condemn and stigmatize Ghanaian women

who migrate to the Ivory Coast for sex work. According to an editorial in a government newspaper:

There is also a problem of stopping those (greedy and avaricious) women who go...to earn money the immoral way. Ghanaians must find a way of keeping these women in the country to learn profitable trades or to engage in farming to earn a decent living instead of allowing them to cross borders to lose their lives in a most shameful manner...It must be noted that even if they do not lose their lives, they come back to infect others in the country (Anarfi, 1998, p.106).

This quote reflects the stigmatization of sex workers. Women who migrate to the Ivory Coast from Ghana because of poor economic, health, and educational conditions are not welcomed by citizens of the Ivory Coast. The condemnation of Ghanaian sex workers by citizens of the Ivory Coast, nonetheless, has little influence on these women. The fact that Ghanaian women are operating as sex workers despite the criticism of communities within the Ivory Coast also suggests that these women have agency based on their economic motivations (Anarfi, 1998).

An analysis of the social organization of sex workers in the city of Abidjan presents another example of Ghanaian women's agency. Ghanaian migrants employed in sex work live and congregate in specific areas of the city. The communities of Ghanaian migrants seek social support from each other. For example, Ghanaian women immigrants occupy dwellings in close proximity to each other, often a complete block of houses. A designated elder woman serves as caretaker, taking on diplomatic duties that serve to ameliorate conflict among residents. She also takes on many roles as a nurse for those who are sick, a host to direct visitors, and a financial manager to collect rent, water, and electricity payments. This social organization of Ghanaian immigrants is intentional and is evidence that these women act with agency. The majority of Ghanaian immigrants



do not view their employment in sex work as a dead end but a phase in their life that will provide them upward mobility (Anafri, 1998).

### **Migration of Sex Workers from Thailand to Japan**

This section explains the motivations for the migration of impoverished rural Thai women to Japan. I argue that women who migrate from Thailand to Japan have agency. The migration of women from Thailand to Japan is due to poor economic circumstances and because women see it as an opportunity to escape their current conditions and earn money for themselves and their families.

Migration accompanied changes in the Thai economy during the 1980's and early 1990's. Economic growth in Thailand served efforts of transnational corporations (TNC's) to promote industrialization in Asian countries. The industrialization of Thailand's economy increased global exportation of manufactured goods. The shift from exports of agriculture to manufactured products favored the urban areas of the country while leaving the rural areas impoverished (Vickers, 1991).

Generally, women in Thailand are responsible for the care of their children and parents. The industrialization of Thailand in the early 1980's disrupted the traditional responsibilities of women (Skrobanek, Boonpkdee & Jantaero, 1997). The impoverishment of rural areas left Thai women with inadequate resources for survival and Thai women opted to migrate in search of better economic opportunities. Thai policies supported this migration with the push for labor-export funding to increase the influx of foreign currency (Vickers, 1991). This desire for competition in the world

market resulted in migration of Thai women to Japan. The restructuring of the Thai economy along with the cooperation of the Thai government promoted the migration of Thai women to Japan for sex work.

Satako Watenabe (1998) reveals the lived experience of Thai women's immigration to Japan. Watenabe conducted her research while working unofficially as a "bar hostess" in Japan and interviewed five Thai women employed in three different Japanese bars located in Yokohama, Tokyo, and Chiba. Interviews conducted by Watenabe document the women's agency in their decision to migrate to Japan. According to Watenabe (1998):

Above all, the experience in the bar has convinced me that entertaining a male client is nothing but work, which is quite tiring and stressful to the woman entertainer. This is in contrast to the prevailing view that "sitting with a man and pouring drinks" is not something deserving of a high wage (p. 115).

This assertion is important because it suggests that women who chose to migrate for sex work should be recognized as legitimate workers free from the stigma placed upon them.

All five women entered Japan with legitimately obtained ninety-day visas. Each of these women sought information about employment in Japan prior to their decision to migrate. One of the women employed the assistance of her friends to finance the trip and obtain a passport. The conscious decision to migrate and seek information about how to go about migration also serves as an example of their agency.

The working conditions of sex workers in Japan vary. All five women were required to entertain patrons inside the bar, two specialized in having sex in the bar, and the other three provided sexual services outside the confines of the establishment. The number of customers the women serviced during a working shift varied. The variance in the number of customers corresponded to whether or not the women worked under

contract. The women working under contract opted to take more customers to pay off the debt faster.<sup>7</sup> Upon relief of the debt, the women often find the same type of work in another establishment (Watanabe, 1998). Women often choose to remain in sex work because it is lucrative. Sex work also offers Thai women an opportunity to achieve a standard of living that is unavailable in their homeland. Ultimately, the freedom to seek other places of employment also supports the notion of agency.

Watanabe (1998) supports this argument by stating:

The five women, as well as most of the Thai women that I met during the fieldwork, spent a significant part of their earnings on purchasing homes, often western-style, and other goods, notably automobiles, for their families and themselves. This suggests that working-class Thai people's demand for consumption far exceeds the income domestically available to them, particularly in rural areas (p. 122).

This standard of living was not easy to achieve because immigration at the time was illegal, the women covertly sought a way to migrate to Japan. The women had to seek out recruiters and brokers in Thailand to ensure employment upon arrival in Japan and these recruiters and brokers often made contracts with Thai women before they arrived in Japan. The recruiters and brokers who organize the migration of Thai women to Japan assume the role of travel agents, entrepreneurs, business executives, and gangsters and because they engage in an illegal operation, the choice to migrate is a high-risk activity. The choice to migrate illegally despite the potential harm and legal repercussions exemplifies Thai women's agency because these women are willing to participate in an illegal operation despite the consequences. Furthermore, the migration from Thailand to Japan into sex work rather than low-paying sweatshop or agricultural labor reflects the resistance Thai women have toward the poor economic opportunities in Thailand as well as other jobs available to them in Japan.

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<sup>7</sup> Most women who migrate to Japan have debts incurred from their travel expenses.

Thai women contribute to the well-being of their families through their participation in sex work. Migrant sex workers have agency because of their motivation for higher wages, independence, and the ability to provide opportunity for class mobility to themselves and their families despite the stigma and the posed threat to their health and well-being (Watenabe, 1998).

The women who chose to migrate to Japan from Thailand were not free from potentially volatile situations. The illegal nature of their work subjects them to situations in which they are prone to occupational hazards. Sex workers are susceptible to physical and psychological abuse. The perpetrators of abuse include male customers and members of the *yakuza* (Japanese organized-crime members). Migrant sex workers are vulnerable to these potentially volatile situations due to their lack of legal rights as immigrants and/or workers (Watanabe, 1999).

While these experiences are indeed common with the experiences of prostitutes, the fact that these women choose to expose themselves to such dangers suggests agency. Sex workers exercise agency based on their choice to migrate and work illegally, despite the possible repercussions, which are fostered by legal and economic forces beyond their immediate control. Sex workers also exercise agency because migrant sex workers deal with potentially volatile situations as a component of their chosen form of employment. Economic mobility and independence far outweigh the physical and legal repercussions for these women.

Under Japanese law, it is extremely difficult for Thai women to obtain visas. The stringency of Japanese law however, does little to reduce the large numbers of Thai sex workers. According to Human Rights Watch (2000):

As “illegal aliens” and “prostitutes,” undocumented Thai women working in the Japanese sex industry are viewed as criminals by the Japanese authorities. They get little sympathy from police, immigration officials, and labor officials, and their access to health care is impeded by Japanese policies that exclude undocumented migrants from health care benefits available to other residents of Japan. When police or immigration officials raid establishments that employ undocumented migrant women, the women are arrested as illegal aliens, detained in immigration facilities, and deported with a five-year ban on reentering the country (p. 6).

Japanese law places the onus on the sex workers but does little to combat the operations of the *yakuza* or the establishments that employ sex workers.

I argue here that Thai women assert their agency through their decision to migrate despite the potentially volatile and dangerous circumstances. Thai migrant sex workers work under constant fear of deportation because of the work they choose. The work they engage in requires eloquent interpersonal skills that include the ability to provide emotional comfort and engage in intellectual conversation (Watenabe, 1998).

All of the women who chose to migrate to Japan believed that sex work is immoral. They reported they chose sex work because it was the most lucrative compared to other jobs in Japan. It also provided them independence and possible freedom from marriage. These women viewed sex work as an opportunity to earn money to achieve upward mobility. The acknowledgement of sex work as immoral reflects the women’s conscious consideration of long-term material benefits. This consideration reflects their agency (Watenabe, 1998).

Furthermore, the choice to become a sex worker as a means to escape marriage corresponds to Gayle Rubin’s (1975) notion that marriage is a form of trafficking in women. The institution of marriage, which includes the exchange of women, transforms women into commodities. According to Rubin, “The exchange of women is a profound

perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves”(p. 39). Relations within marriage consist of are arranged around notions of social organizations that rely upon gender roles, heteronormativity and passive female sexuality. Thus, a woman within the institution of marriage, is property of a man, and subsequently required to become his sexual partner. Within this arrangement, the woman does not receive compensation for sexual relations. A woman’s choice to become a sex worker, as opposed to a wife, grants her rights to herself in which she receives a wage for sexual relations, an act that would not grant compensation within the institution of marriage.

### **The Trafficking of Women from Thailand to Japan: The Absence of Agency?**

This section defines the trafficking in women. It also explains the exploitation of women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan. In this section, I argue that the trafficking of women into prostitution is a system that sustains the economic subordination of women. In addition to their economic subordination, their forced participation in the heterosexual sex industry (prostitution) situates them as sexual slaves. Women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan for prostitution lack economic and sexual agency, resulting in the loss of basic individual freedoms.

According to the United Nations, the official definition of the trafficking of women and children is:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or the use of force or other form of coercion, of abduction, of fraud or deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving or receiving of payment or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation of the prostitution of others or other form of sexual

exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (Guillemaut, 2003, p.3).

The trafficking of women is a human rights violation, and the trafficking of women for the purposes of prostitution is a blatant violation of human rights and international law. The trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan for prostitution results in debt bondage, which is also a violation of international law. Most trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan is illegal due to the harsh restriction imposed by the Japanese government. The *yakuza* often facilitates the occurrence of illegal migration of women from Thailand to Japan in the form of trafficking (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

The trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan began as early as 1988 and the use of deception and the ease of air travel contributed to the trafficking. According to one Thai woman:

I was told that it was a comfortable job, with good pay. It was in service at a restaurant. There was a lot of work available; you could choose what you wanted to do. There were many positions open for workers at the restaurant, and if you wanted it, the work was there. I was told I'd get the salary, as well as tips from the customers (Skrobanek, Boonpakdi, Janthakeero, 1997, p. 33).

Such deception contributed to the trafficking of more than 80,000 women from Thailand to Japan in the late 1980's. The Thai government is also partially responsible for the prevalence of high numbers of Thai prostitutes in Japan because they encourage labor exports. The export of labor from Thailand contributes to the influx of foreign currency (Skrobanek, Boonpakdi, Janthakeero, 1997).

According to Human Rights Watch (2000), the majority of women trafficked into prostitution from Thailand to Japan choose to migrate. This fact is especially thought provoking because the choice to migrate to Japan in search of work in the industrial

sector suggests that women who are trafficked begin as agents and then become victims of prostitution. It also complicates the distinction between sex workers and prostitutes because their decision to migrate coincides with a desire for emancipation from their immediate economic circumstances. Women who chose to migrate for work, whose unknown destination is prostitution, are classified as victims of trafficking. The type of work they become involved in is quite similar, however, whether or not they choose to do so seems to be the most prevalent distinction. This distinction changes prostitutes' situation to victims whereas the sex worker remains an agent.

Upon arrival in Japan, women realize the purpose of their migration is prostitution. This process begins with a broker who promises legitimate work. The broker assists the women in the migration process, which includes obtaining passports, visas, airplane tickets and transportation to the airport. Brokers typically pay for the process and arrange for another broker to act as an escort for the women upon arrival in Japan. The brokers are responsible for transporting the women to the places in which prostitution occurs (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

Women trafficked into prostitution must repay migration expenses. Most women are unaware of the debt they incurred because of their migration. In order to repay the debt, women must surrender the money given to them in exchange for sexual services. Their employer, who allegedly keeps records of the women's debt, collects this money. In addition to the lack of control they have over the money they receive for sexual services, they endure slavery-like conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2000). Women who work in Japanese "snack bars" involuntarily relinquish their agency.

According to a Thai prostitute named Pot:



In all, I worked for eight months to pay back my debt and I had calculated that I must have paid it back long ago, but the mama kept lying to me and said she did not have the same records as I did. During the eight months, I had to take every client that wanted me and had to work during my menstruation. The mama also made me and the other women work for her during the day and wouldn't allow us to eat much saying we would get too fat. I was like a skeleton during that time. While I was in "tact" [under contract, or in debt], the mama paid for everything except my health care and birth control pills. This was all added to my debt (Human Rights Watch, 2000, p. 35).

Prostitution is a form of sexual slavery because women like Pot have no means to remove themselves from the situation due to economic and social control. Pot's experience supports Kathleen Barry's (1984) assertion that prostitution is a form of female sexual slavery. Debt bondage contributes to sexual slavery because prostitutes lack agency in their decision to sell sexual services. Within the confines of debt bondage, prostitutes are forced to surrender their agency as workers and inevitably, their autonomy is lost because they are sexual slaves.

I argue here that it is sufficient to say that women who are trafficked into prostitution are victims of sexual slavery because they are forced into prostitution. On the other hand, women who are trafficked into prostitution begin as agents in their decision to migrate for work. Thus, women who are trafficked into prostitution are stripped of their agency and autonomy as *workers*, based on the deception they experience in the migration process.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) such as Human Rights (HRW) and CATW suggest women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution are victims. The presentation of the victims status allows for NGO's such as HRW and CATW to advocate for the eradication of the trafficking of women based on their victim status. The advocacy granted to women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into

prostitution are afforded voices based on this victim status. As victims, women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution are only given voices in this particular situation. The advocacy for women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan on behalf of CATW and HRW is premised on their victim status and therefore only speaks to one side of the story. I argue that the victim status of women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan is one small piece of their identities as women. I believe that these women deserve a voice that allows them identities as women, workers, citizens, mothers, daughters, sisters, and migrant workers in addition to victims of a human rights violation.

I argue that the contextualization of the voices of Thai women, which reveal their stories of victimization, present these women as victims while ignoring the possibility of agency. The possibility of agency is indicated through the analysis of women who chose to migrate from Thailand to Japan for sex work and the fact that women who live to tell their stories of victimization utilize agency in order to survive their experiences; therefore, to only classify prostitutes as victims in order to advocate for them, degrades the complexity of the issue and women's overall agency.

## Chapter Three:

### The Quandary Between Modern and Postmodern Feminist Theories

This chapter outlines three feminist theoretical arguments about sex work and prostitution, and how they relate to the migration of women into sex work and the trafficking of women into prostitution. The first two, radical and Marxist feminist theories are modern feminist theories. The third is postmodern feminist theory, an alternative discourse to modern feminist theory.

First, I will explain the stance of radical feminist theories toward prostitution and sex work. Second, I will apply Marxist feminist theories to both sex work and prostitution. I argue that the stance of radical and Marxist feminist theories are simultaneously useful and problematic. Third, I will offer a the stance of a postmodern feminist theory to sex work and prostitution, one that attempts to explain the complexities of the issue in a different manner than radical and Marxist feminist theories. More specifically, the first part of this chapter includes an analysis of radical feminist discourse that condemns prostitution and sex work because patriarchy requires it to exist. I will also apply Marxist feminist applications to sex work and prostitution and illustrate how they stand in contrast to radical feminist assertions. As Radical feminists assert that sex workers and prostitutes are victims of patriarchy, Marxists position the sex worker and

prostitute as victims of capitalism. Marxist feminist theory acknowledges prostitutes and sex workers as workers exploited by capitalism.

Radical and Marxist feminist theories can be applied to sex work and prostitution in a useful way. Radical and Marxist feminist theories expose the power structures that support sex work and prostitution, but these theories offer one-sided interpretations of the issue because they only include those voices of sex workers and prostitutes whose claims support the notion of either a patriarchal or capitalist cause. The voices of sex workers and prostitutes illuminate the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of their work, thus contributing to more than patriarchal and capitalist causes and aspects. The postmodern feminist approach to sex work and prostitution examines the intersections of knowledge, power, and action that shapes meaning, which is perceived as reality. The intersection of knowledge, power, and action, in theory, provides a space and an opportunity, to reconceptualize sex workers and prostitutes from agents and victims to subjects.

### **Radical Feminism and Prostitution**

This section explains a radical feminist approach to the topic of prostitution. It explains how radical feminist theory applies to migrant sex workers and women trafficked into prostitution. I argue that it is in some ways useful to apply radical feminist notions of victimization to women trafficked into prostitution. I also argue that a radical feminist analysis fails to find agency in sex work.

Radical feminists are famous for their desire to argue for the eradication of prostitution. Their argument extends to the radical feminist crusade to end pornography. The call for the eradication of pornography and prostitution as forms of oppression against women proliferated from specific feminist notions about the inevitable oppression of women in a patriarchal society. Many feminists claim patriarchy is the main source of women's oppression, positioning male as the dominant self and woman as the submissive Other. The argument against pornography by radical feminists is based on socially constructed notions about heterosexuality that place male sexuality as dominant and female sexuality as submissive. For example, the well-known radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon presented an ideology that based their anti-pornography and subsequent anti-prostitution rhetoric on a premise that asserted all women are victims of a male dominant patriarchal system (Bell, 1994).

Radical feminists claim that women are vulnerable to violence in a patriarchal system. This vulnerability to violence positions women as potential victims and, according to radical feminist claims, pornography is a form of rape, which is considered violence against women. The connection between pornography and prostitution is justified through the belief that both are a source of violence against women. Radical feminists call for the eradication of prostitution because it is oppressive to all women.

The argument by radical feminists that prostitution and pornography (read violence against women) must end is useful because it addresses how pornography and prostitution are components of the patriarchal social organization that asserts male dominance over women. The existence of pornography and prostitution rely on the patriarchal system of dominance. Pornography and prostitution, as supported by the

patriarchal system of dominance, serves as an element of the oppression of women. The support of pornography and prostitution by a patriarchal system of dominance also permits violence against women.

Radical feminists believe that the act of intercourse is material evidence of gender inequality. The act of intercourse (read:gender inequality) is how sex workers make a living (Dworkin, 1987). Within sex work, according to radical feminists, the woman becomes a passive participant available for male domination. Gender inequality also highlights the social and economic disparities between men and women, which most often propel women into sexual commerce in the first place. Furthermore, male hegemony<sup>8</sup> supports the institution of sexual commerce that is oppressive to women (O'Connell Davidson, 1998). The institution of sexual commerce, which exists worldwide, flourishes because of the existence of male hegemony.

The same theories created by radical feminists can be applied to the migration of women for sex work from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan. Women who migrate to become sex workers<sup>9</sup> do so because of their limited economic options. Hegemonic forces such as SAP's and industrialization contribute to the limited economic options of women who migrate for sex work from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan. SAP's and industrialization oppress women who choose to migrate and become sex workers. SAP's and Industrialization are responsible for limited viable economic options.<sup>10</sup> The hegemony of SAP's and industrialization are analogous to

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<sup>8</sup> Hegemony is used to refer to the predominant influence or supremacy of one party such as a state, region, or group over another. It is different from hierarchy because it exists on a larger scale in which the scope of influence is much larger.

<sup>9</sup> I used the term sex workers here because I am referring to women who choose to sell sexual services.

<sup>10</sup> Economic hegemony and male hegemony have a symbiotic relationship. Economic hegemony is fueled by capitalism, which is male dominated. Capitalism cannot exist without male dominance and therefore economic hegemony and male hegemony need each other to survive.

patriarchy because both are responsible for the migration of women for sex work. SAP's and industrialization are push factors that contribute to migration. Patriarchy is responsible for a heterosexual sex industry, which upholds power structures that situate female sexuality as available to men. Women who migrate with the intention of entering into sex work choose to sell sexual services. Sex work is a source of gender inequality in which the purpose of a woman's body is to serve the interests of men in which the sex worker's income relies upon the sexual desire of men.

Radical feminist theory classifies the issue of the trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan as prostitution. The trafficking of women into prostitution is problematic because it does not allow prostitutes to assert their agency because women are coerced into prostitution and, therefore, they become sexual slaves (Barry, 1994).

Prostitutes position as sexual slaves forces them into a passive role in which men such as traffickers, pimps, Johns, and police assume dominance. According to radical feminism, lack of control over one's sexual agency is equivalent to rape because women cannot refuse sex with a man in their position as a sexual slave. The trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan into prostitution constitutes sexual slavery that perpetuates violence against women. Violence, in this case comes in the form of nonconsensual entrance into prostitution.

The argument for the eradication of the trafficking of women present in radical feminist theory is problematic. Primarily, this standpoint negates the possibility for agency of the prostitute. The erasure of agency occurs through the claim that all prostitutes are victims of sexual violence. The imposition of the victim status on all prostitutes is overly simplistic, leaving little room for autonomy and agency.

## **Marxist Feminist Approach to Sex Work and Prostitution**

This section explains the stance of Marxist feminist theory towards sex work. I argue that it affords sex workers and prostitutes more agency than does radical feminist discourse. I also explain how Marxist feminist theory applies to the trafficking of women into prostitution. I argue that, like radical feminist theory, a Marxist approach is also problematic because it only explains one cause, in this case, economic.

Marxist feminist theory can also be applied to sex work. Marxist feminists claim the root of the oppression of women is capitalism (Tong, 1998). In the case of sex work and prostitution, capitalism affects the migration of women into sex work. The notion that capitalism exploits women explains the motivation of women who migrate into sex work. Migration into sex work because of poverty is a class issue. The migration of women from Ghana to the Ivory Coast is a direct result of the impoverished conditions due to economic conditions. Women who migrate from Thailand to Japan do so because of poverty as well.

Marxist feminist theory also supports the notion that the bodies of sex workers are commodities because as sex workers, women's bodies are for sale (Tong, 1998). The commodification of the body of the sex worker is also oppressive because the capitalist system allows women to make money through the sale of their bodies. Within Marxist feminist discourse, capitalist hegemonic dominance is the root oppressor of women and, in this case, the catalyst for sex work and prostitution.

Shannon Bell (1994) offers this critique on the Marxist position of sex work:



The classical Marxist understanding of prostitution [sex work] follows from Marx's statement that "prostitution [sex work] is only the specific expression of the universal position of the worker". The Marxian position is an inversion of the contractarian position: The employment contract, according to the Marxian position, is a contract of prostitution [sex work]. Prostitution [sex work], for Marxists, is exploitative in the same way that selling all labor power is exploitative (p.78).

This critique is important because it explains the connection between capitalism and exploitation. Capitalism exploits laborers generally in the same way it exploits sex workers specifically.

Marxist feminist discourse contends that all wage earners are exploited by capitalism. The exploitative nature of capitalism also applies to migrant sex workers because they sell their bodies. If the exploitation of migrant sex workers is common with other wage earners, then they *are* workers. Marxist feminist discourse argues that sex workers are exploited by capitalism as *workers*. If Marxist feminism situates the sale of sexual services as work, then Marxist feminism affords sex workers agency. They have agency because they choose to sell their bodies because of unequal class opportunities resulting from capitalism. Marxist feminists position a sex worker as a worker but one that is not free from exploitation. The sex worker then is also a laborer whose work relies on capitalism.

This Marxist argument is given even greater relief against the backdrop of Gayle Rubin's (1975) argument that all women are trafficked via the legal and cultural regulation of marriage. The classification of sex worker as opposed to wife affords a woman agency as worker, which does not exist within the institution of marriage. According to Rubin, women play a role in the social relations of capitalism within the institution of marriage "which determines that a 'wife' is among the necessities of a

worker, that women rather than men do housework, and that capitalism is heir to a long tradition in which women do not inherit”(p. 31). To choose sex work, on the other hand, affords a woman financial benefits that would not occur within the confines of marriage. Nevertheless, a sex worker relies on capitalism that provides monetary income which is absent within the institution of marriage.

Marxist feminist theory differs from radical feminist theory because it situates the sex worker as exploited by capitalism rather than as a victim of male dominance and subsequent violence. Marxist feminist theory categorizes sex workers with other wage earners because all work within a capitalist society is exploitative. The exploitation of sex workers by capitalism is another occurrence of a common theme among wage earners. The sharing of the same source of exploitation affords sex workers agency because it provides them the status of worker. Wage earners, including sex workers, act as autonomous agents within the exploitative realm of capitalism because they choose to sell their bodies. The status of worker, according to Julia O’Connell Davidson (1998) requires “Contractual consent, and the formal and tacit rules which surround and produce it, does separate prostitution [sex work] from rape at the level of subjective experience” (p.121). Although she is referring to social contract theory, I believe that this statement also applies to sex workers. Sex workers sell sex willingly, therefore, they are unworthy of the label victim, and to assume that sex work is rape also negates agency because agency implies a consensual act rather than rape (O’Connell Davidson, 1998).

Marxist feminist theory may also be applied to the trafficking of women from Thailand to Japan into prostitution. According to Carole Pateman (1988), “Prostitution then represents the economic coercion, exploitation, and alienation of wage laborer”

(201). Women trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution experience economic coercion because they lack viable financial options. They also have no choice to not work as prostitutes and indeed must do so to pay off their debt. They experience exploitation and alienation because they are sexual slaves. The exploitation and alienation of prostitutes because of sexual slavery strips them of agency.

Although the theories asserted by both radical and Marxist feminists serve as valid explanations of the presence of prostitution and sex work as a result of male dominant gender inequality and capitalism, I contend that both are incomplete and fail to explain the individual experiences of the women involved. Male dominant gender inequality and capitalism are indeed oppressive to women, however, the identification of one source of the root of oppression is problematic. Radical feminist thought situates the woman as a prostitute with no agency, which supports the notion of sexual slavery. The common status between sex workers and other wage earners recognized by Marxist feminism moves beyond notions of radical feminism which asserts that all sex workers are victims of violence because of male dominant gender inequality.

### **A Postmodern Approach to Sex Work and Prostitution**

This section will explain postmodern feminist approaches to sex work and prostitution. Postmodern feminism has been critical of Modern feminist theories that “Aim to provide *the* explanation of why woman is oppressed” (Tong, 1998, 193). Modern feminist epistemology has a tendency to rely on static gender relations. The reliance on static gender relations has been subject to critique by postmodern feminists

because it overlooks “the relationship between knowledge, power, and action” (Flax, 1992, p. 446). The relationship between knowledge, power, and action upholds postmodern feminist assertions about the nature of gender relations and the oppression of women. The assertion that “Knowledge is a social process, produced by people with specific positions that they generally want to advance or protect” reflects the idea that the intersection of knowledge, power, and action crafts meaning, which is a part of postmodern feminist discourse. (Lerum, 1999, p. 32).

Postmodern feminist theory aims to deconstruct the dichotomous relationships of the self/Other upon which modern feminist theory is based. Through this deconstruction, the meanings about prostitution and sex work are questioned because their meanings are often rooted in the self/Other dichotomy. According to Flax (1992) “Postmodernism is threatening to some feminists because it radically changes the background assumptions and contexts within which debates about such questions are usually conducted” (p. 446). Postmodern feminism moves beyond the binary oppositions of self/Other on which modern feminists tend to rely. The self/Other dichotomy places women as Other to men by denying fluidity in the area of gender identity. The Other, based on static gender identity, is woman, heterosexual, and passive, which leaves little room for fluidity. In order to move beyond binary oppositions, postmodern feminists attempt to deconstruct the meaning of the Other, in order to reveal complexities previously unseen. According to Jane Flax (1997):

Postmodern discourses are all deconstructive in that they seek to distance us from and make us skeptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language that are often taken for granted within and serve as legitimation for contemporary Western culture (p. 41).

Deconstruction, a central tactic of Postmodern feminism, creates an alternative discourse about the making of meanings through the use of language.

Postmodern feminist discourse asserts that modern feminist interpretations rely on constructed meanings of sex work and prostitution. The constructed meanings of sex workers and prostitutes are based on what Laurie Bell (1997) terms a good girl/bad girl binary. This binary implies that a good girl knows her place, in the home in which she engages in unpaid sexual relations with one man, her husband. The bad girl becomes the Other, in which she engages in paid sexual relations with multiple men.

Shannon Bell (1994) refers to the marginalization of sex workers and prostitutes as “the Other of the Other” or in other words, sex workers and prostitutes are situated as the Other or bad girls in the good girl/bad girl binary. Stigmatization of sex workers and prostitutes corresponds to Gayle Rubin’s (1984) notion that any sexuality that deviates from what is maintained by the dominant model of sexuality is taboo. The good girl/bad girl binary consists of the socially constructed notions of female sexuality, which position the good girl as virgin or “wife” and bad girls as “whore” or in this case, sex workers and prostitutes. The good girl/bad girl binary also corresponds to the private/public sphere binary. Sex within the private sphere is reserved for the good “wife” who has sex with her husband. Sex within the public sphere consists of the bad girl “whore” who has sex outside of marriage. Therefore, the identities of prostitutes and sex workers are stigmatized because they opt to occupy the public sphere in which sex outside of marriage occurs. This identity, I argue leaves little room for fluidity, which is a cornerstone of postmodern feminist theory.

The constructed meanings of sex workers and prostitutes are also based on an agent/victim binary. This binary is created and perpetuated through constructed meanings about female sexuality and gender relations, and the constructed meaning of prostitute and sex worker, based on a dichotomous relationship. The agent/victim binary reduces the identity of prostitute and sex worker to a conflated marginal status of bad girl. The marginal status of prostitute and sex worker leaves no room for alternative identities.

Prostitutes and sex workers, I argue, deserve more than the static identities of either agent or victim. The public sphere in which sex workers and prostitutes carry out their actions based on their identities as “whores”, is also the sphere in which their identities can be reclaimed. The reclamation of subjectivity by prostitutes and sex workers within postmodernism is carried out through their activism. Visibility within the public arena grants prostitutes a space in which they are able to call attention to the issues outside of the agent/victim binary providing a different or new ground for meaning making. Issues and meanings outside of the agent/victim binary rearticulate the experiences of sex workers and prostitutes that have been overlooked by modern feminist theory.

Postmodern feminist discourse on sex work and prostitution refutes the modern feminist stigmatization placed on women by women (Kesler, 2002). Based on the modern feminist epistemological notions of the oppression of women, sex workers and prostitutes lose their voices because the language used to classify their experiences are based on exclusive modern feminist epistemological notions. These notions create meanings about the experiences and oppression of prostitutes and sex workers. The use of modern feminist epistemology employs knowledge, power, and action, in such a way

that their theories adhere to static binary oppositions. On the other hand, the integration of the voices and stories of prostitutes and sex workers by postmodern feminist theory challenges modern feminist notions of the experiences and oppression of sex workers and prostitutes.

Marxist and radical feminist theories are both guilty of excluding the prostitute as a subject with a voice. The assertions by Marxist and radical feminists about prostitution exist in a discursive realm, which is based on modern feminist epistemological notions of the oppression of women. Modern feminist epistemological notions of the oppression of women are problematic because, according to Margo St. James, “Any theory dealing with prostitution should be generated from the inside out” (p. 220). Kari Lerum (1999) supports St. James’ concern about theories surrounding sex work and prostitution with her suggestion of the use in creating a new language for old things. This new language and new meaning for old things is available through the voices of sex workers and prostitutes, which produces and contributes to “Prostitutes’ [sex workers] rights discourse”(Bell, 1994, p. 100).

According to interviews with twenty-one incarcerated sex workers conducted by Kari Lerum (1999),

Most of my respondents were not familiar with either feminist terminology or the feminist debate over sex work. However, four of my twenty-one interviewees identified themselves as feminists, and all four of them demonstrated disgust for and alienation from ‘mainstream’ (i.e. anti-sex work) feminism. One woman with years of prostitution experience and a self-described ‘women’s libber’ argued that ‘if a woman got enough sense, has got enough intelligence in her to know what a feminist is all about, she doesn’t have, she could not possibly be in that situation where she could have a choice, O.K.?(p.29)

The voices of sex workers and prostitutes must be present within feminist discourse because they offer a more accurate contribution to the construction of knowledge and meaning surrounding the identities of these women.

Modern feminist discourse helps to explain how a male dominated capitalist system enables and perpetuates sex work and prostitution. The combination of capitalism and male dominance, which oppresses women, presents prostitution and sex work as an economically viable option. The idea that sex work and prostitution is the result of capitalist and male hegemony responsible for the oppression of women is only a small part of the larger picture in this postmodern feminist view. According to Donna Haraway (1988) “Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy” (p. 588). When applied to migrant sex workers and women trafficked into prostitution, postmodern feminists would rather seek to explain these women as subjects whose positions encompass more than just an agent/victim dichotomy.

A postmodern feminist discourse demonstrates that the migration of women into sex work and the trafficking of women into prostitution in developing nations involves much more than just agency and victimization. In order to fully understand the lived experiences of these women, one must question the oversimplification of the modern feminist assertion that prostitution is simply a result of a male dominated capitalist system.

An analysis of women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan for sex work, from the postmodern feminist standpoint, questions the relationship between the power structures that foster this occurrence, the knowledge that is constructed about it, and meanings that it produces. The knowledge that is produced



through the written analyses of the migration of women from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan reveals the experiences of sex workers based on their identity only as sex workers rather than women, mothers, daughters, sisters, citizens, and migrant workers. A postmodern feminist theorization of women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan complicates identities and features the multiplicity of identities possible, as women, mothers, daughters, sisters, citizens, and migrant workers in addition to identities as sex workers. Postmodernism gives credit to the importance of incorporation of the diverse aspects of sex workers and prostitutes.

In addition to the multiplicities of possible identities of these women, perhaps an inclusion of the variations in sexuality would also contribute to the meanings and knowledge constructed about sex workers. According to Gayle Rubin (1984) “The format of a single sexual standard is continually reconstituted within other rhetorical frameworks, including feminism and socialism” (p. 15). Modern feminist discourse surrounding that understandings of the identities, meanings, and experiences of sex workers are shaped by the ideal of a “single sexual standard”. In order to rethink sex work, we must also rethink sex. If we were to do so, perhaps we might come to see chosen sex work of the type that engages fair labor practices and legal credibility as a type of “benign sexual variation” which Rubin calls for.<sup>11</sup>

Modern feminist theory situates women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution as victims of sexual slavery. The stories written about women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution are crafted to support this notion. The knowledge constructed about trafficked women from a postmodern feminist stance challenges the notion that these women are victims who are stripped of their

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<sup>11</sup> I credit this argument to Dr. Sara Crawley who insisted on incorporating Rubin’s ideas into this thesis.

agency. Modern feminist stories about trafficked women and their victimization as sexual slaves confines their experiences to their victim status. Postmodern feminist theory appreciates the limitations of the agent/victim binary, recognizing it as unstable. The instability of the agent/victim binary propels postmodern feminist theory to examine aspects of meanings lost in the impossible effort to maintain the binaries' stability. One of the aspect lost is an engagement with paradoxes of meaning in women's lives, some of which are found by listening to women's voices.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I credit this statement/thought to Dr. Carolyn DiPalma, who wrote it as a comment on my paper. I am still thinking!

## Chapter Four:

### The Voices of Sex Workers and Prostitutes: A Complicated Issue

This chapter will include the voices of sex workers and prostitutes, which create, construct, and reflect knowledge about their own experiences. It will include the voices of sex workers from three books that contain diverse stories about the experiences of sex workers and prostitutes. The three books are *Sex Work*, edited by Federique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (1998), *Live Sex Acts*, edited by Wendy Chapkis (1997), and *Whores and Other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle (1997). These publications reveal the voices of Western prostitutes and sex workers.<sup>13</sup> The revelation of the voices of sex workers and prostitutes in these texts contribute to knowledge about their experiences. The stories in these texts stand in sharp contrast to the works published about women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan for sex work as well as Thai women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution. I argue that there is a contrast between the stories told about Third World sex workers by other people, and the stories told by Western sex workers about themselves. First, the stories told about Third World women involved in sex work and prostitution adhere to a victim/agent binary. The adherence to this binary limits what can be known about their experiences and only

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term Western here to refer to women from developed nations such as the United States, France, Australia, Germany, etc.

attempts to reveal answers to questions asked. The voices of Third World sex workers and prostitutes are only heard when they are present as victims or agents. The stories told by Thai women trafficked into prostitution and Ghanaian women who migrate for sex work are constructed around the binary notion of victim or agent. Second, the stories told by Western sex workers about themselves attempt to deconstruct the victim/agent binary. The confining categorization of work must be deconstructed in order to reveal the complex nature of the sex industry. Appreciating the paradoxical and complex nature of the sex industry permits a stance toward sex workers and prostitutes as subjects rather than victims or agents. Generally, appreciation of this complex nature has yet to be applied to the discourse surrounding Third World sex workers.

### **Toward a New Theorization**

This section will explain how the binaries used to describe the experiences of sex workers are insufficient. Through this explanation, I argue that the experiences of sex workers include themes and issues that are unaddressed in the literature about Third World women sex workers. I also argue that the experiences of sex workers are rooted in social construction as are all experiences, and, therefore, affect the ways in which experiences are articulated.

According to Jo Dozema (1998):

The voluntary/forced dichotomy is the wrong theoretical framework with which to analyze the experiences of sex workers [prostitutes]. The necessity to critically examine the form this theory is taking is all the more pressing now that it is replacing abolitionism as the dominant model of prostitution at the international level (p. 35).

The dichotomy described by Dozema is the wrong framework from which to describe the experiences of sex workers. The books, *Sex Work*, *Live Sex Acts*, and *Whores and Other Feminists* offer a different “theoretical framework with which to analyze the experiences of sex workers”(Dozema, 1998, P. 35). These texts offer a plethora of voices from women in the sex industry. The stories in these texts are different from the stories about women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan and women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution. They are different because offer stories about experiences of women in the sex industry *outside* of the victim/agent binary. The stories revealed in these publications embrace all that is the sex industry.

The book, *Sex Work*, edited by Federique Delacoste & Priscilla Alexander (1998), includes stories about women involved in the sex industry. It includes exotic dancers, pornographic actors, nude models, streetwalkers, phone sex workers, and call girls. These voices encompass more than just the migrant or trafficked women who engage in sexual contact for compensation. The diversity of stories presented within *Sex Work* is important because the stories illuminate the complexities involved in the experiences of women who work in the sex industry. The stories within this text include tales of liberation, stigma, victimization, and worker struggles. These themes reach above and beyond Dozema’s mention of the forced/voluntary binary as well as the agent/victim binary specifically pertaining to Third World women sex workers. Referring to *Sex Work*, According to Delacoste (1998):

This book is about money and workers’ rights, and it’s about women. Women who have voices and a great deal to say about our culture, women whose words cut through the discourse and tell the truth about their lives, and ours (p. 13).

Listening to the stories of sex workers allows us to critically examine what is perceived as reality and what has yet to be addressed among Third World women sex workers. I wonder what could be gathered about the culture and lives of women in the Third World if they were granted such as space.

### **Pleasure and Pain**

The voices of sex workers contradict common conceptions surrounding the theme of oppression. Phyllis Luman Metal (1998) states: “Well...I found it liberating to be a prostitute, and the men must have found it liberating too, for they were much better lovers than my husbands. They seemed to feel free with me and I with them”(p. 119). The notion that sex workers can find pleasure in their work is often absent in theoretical discourse. Many sex workers also contradict the notion of stigma by claiming that the work that they do fulfills a need within society. This need for sexual liberation and pleasure is not encompassed within a worker/victim dichotomy. Sharon Kaiser (1998) illuminates this point:

I was watching a talk show a few weeks ago, and they had a panel of four they were interviewing, and one of the women on the panel was a prostitute. The show’s host was soliciting questions from the audience. The audience questions centered around *why* this woman was a prostitute. Her response was that she liked it, that she saw it as therapeutic, and of value in this society (p. 122).

The common view that prostitution is an undesirable profession and, therefore, stigmatized, is contradicted. The notion that prostitution is a fulfilling and empowering occupation is often ignored by discourses surrounding the issue. Furthermore, pleasure in the form of orgasm is also often overlooked in the discourse surrounding sex work. A former prostitute named Maryann (1997) addresses this issue:

In sex work, there is a real issue around having orgasms on the job. One of the things that I realized was that those orgasms were mine. They did not belong to anybody else. It was up to me to let them be known or not. But they were really mine in that I was the one creating them. It had nothing to do with who I was with; it wasn't about being turned on by this guy instead of that one. It was about me. It really challenged the idea that orgasms are something that a man "gives" you. That's part of the traditional belief that women aren't supposed to be in control of sex (p. 85).

These stories point to the fact that sex work is indeed complex. Like Haraway's "Virtual Speculum"(1994), the recorded voices of sex workers become an "instrument for rendering a part accessible to observation" (p.197). These stories allow us to reveal previously unexamined aspects of the sex industry, which "trace the story within a story" (p.177). Within these stories, truths about culture and society, as well as the amount of power and agency sex workers possess are exposed. Women who derive sexual pleasure from an occupation that revolves around serving the sexual needs of men contribute to the "Virtual Speculum" because they subvert feminist claims that sex work is oppressive to women based on notions of that female sexuality is passive. Control of sex in this case, is a source of empowerment for sex workers. The reclamation of sexual power within a stigmatized profession is also unaddressed in the literature about Third World women sex workers.

One aspect of this "Virtual Speculum" that is not addressed within the issue of Third World sex workers is lesbianism. The book, *Whores and Other Feminists* calls attention to sexual identity outside of the realm of heteronormativity. According to Eva Pendleton<sup>14</sup> (1997):

Lesbians who work in the sex industry have recently received a great deal of attention within the queer community, through both scholarly and popular venues. Since both lesbianism and sex work destabilize heteronormativity, linking the two

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<sup>14</sup> Eva Pendleton is a self-proclaimed sex worker-turned-academic. Her academic background is in American Studies. She attends NYU.

practices is a critical political and theoretical move. Numerous historians and cultural critics have begun to document the rich history of lesbian sex workers; their work often highlights the stigmatized social spaces historically shared by whores and lesbians (p. 74).

Calling attention to the experiences of lesbian sex workers emphasizes “a tension between notions of sexuality as identity and sexuality as performance” ( Pendleton, 1997, p. 76). Lesbians who participate in the sex industry distinguish their sexuality from their identity as workers. This distinction reinforces the identity of sex workers as subjects who possesses empowerment through their dual identities as workers, and lesbians. . The performance of heterosexuality by lesbian sex workers is also subversive because they are able to separate their sexual selves from their working selves. Pleasure is derived from sexual and economic independence. Sexual and economic independence is dually empowering. Furthermore, based on the theoretical meaning of “whore”, lesbian sex workers transcend this identity because work and sexuality exist independently from each other.

While sex workers speak about empowerment and liberation, some express negative aspects of the profession. Negative aspects of prostitution, such as lack of legal protection, are part of the stigma experienced by prostitutes world wide. The story of a prostitute named Karen (1998) reports the lack of protection from violence:

I was walking to my hotel room with a birthday cake when I met a man who wanted to do business with me for fifty dollars. He proceeded to pull an ice pick out and rape me. He kept me for about three hours, and then was walking me to a park, not far away, where he said he was going to kill me. Suddenly, my friend Alice spotted me. She jumped out of the car she was in, approached the man who had raped me, and pulled him away from me. We went back to the hotel room and were sitting on the bed. They were trying to calm me down, when suddenly I saw him walking down the driveway, again. I screamed and pointed to him and my friends took off after him. They cornered him and he pulled out his ice pick, again. Somebody got it away from him, and they held him there for the police.



We went back to our room, where there was a loud banging on the door. Alice asked who it was. It was the police. The said, “Open the goddamn door or we will break it down.” Less than five seconds later, the door came crashing in, hitting Alice. They barged in, and four shotguns and two handguns were staring us in the face. They said we were under arrest for assault on the man who had just raped me repeatedly (p. 145).

This story presents a “double bind” experienced by sex workers. Karen’s story relates to the vulnerability of punishment by law enforcement official experienced by Third World women sex workers. Vulnerability and lack of legal protection from harm corresponds to the argument that sex workers are victims, however, this is not exclusive to the profession but to all women. Lack of legal protection from rape is an example of the stigmatization experienced by sex workers. Sex workers are also victimized by police in other ways.

According to Gloria Lockett (1998):

In Hollywood, the police arrested me for “obstructing justice” when I warned another prostitute of his presence. Both of my arms were almost broken when he picked me up by the handcuffs and threw me in the back of a pickup truck, which was the vehicle he and his partner used when trying to arrest prostitutes. The first time Deborah got arrested, she was handcuffed behind. The officer was drunk and tried to kiss her and fondled her breast and body in the elevator of the hotel. In San Jose, the police drive you around and leave you off in dark areas. In Las Vegas, the police almost broke Deborah’s arm when they arrested her. In Berkeley, when the police used to drive us around in their cars for hours, one officer pulled into a dark alley and demanded a blow job (p. 39).

The potential danger that is involved in sex work exposes the truth that it is a stigmatized profession, however, the ability of sex workers to speak about it in their own terms is a form of empowerment. Nevertheless, these stories support the claim that sex workers indeed are “new political subject[s] on the boundary between sex and work” and, as such, they transform “the identity of the prostitute [sex worker] inherited from modernity” (Bell, 1994, p. 99).

The publication of the book *Sex Work* situates sex workers as political subjects by allowing them a forum to voice their experiences. According to Frederique Delacoste (1998):

*Sex Work* sought to create a space where “prostitution” was not automatically understood as a metaphor for self-exploitation; in fact, after publication of *Sex Work*, “sex work” became the preferred term among progressive feminists, academics, and the workers themselves. The book appeared at a time when the feminist movement was embroiled in a profound split, dividing those women who wanted to explore the complexities of sexual desire and those who condemned such exploration as a treasonous and antifeminist assimilation of men’s objectification of women (p. 11).

This book was revolutionary in the sense that it affected change from the term prostitute to the term sex worker. This change was important because it reflected the shift in attitudes about prostitution. Many of the stories included in *Sex Work* present new ideas about the construction of knowledge about the experiences of prostitutes. Stories told about prostitution by prostitutes include themes that attempt to combat stigma and victimization with pride and purpose. According to Carol Leigh (1998):

Well, here I am again. The Whore. I admit it. Oh, no. This can’t be, you think. Not an actual, real-live prostitute spilling the beans? Isn’t that dangerous? Won’t she be arrested? What if her mother finds out? And dangerous it is. Yet I forsake my well-being in an effort to satisfy your overwhelming curiosity about what prostitution looks like from the inside out. Besides, I’m proud. Sex work is nurturing, healing work. It could be considered a high calling. Prostitutes are great women, veritable priestesses. Maybe that’s an exaggeration. “Prostitutes always glorify their work,” says X. “They have to glorify it or they couldn’t stand to do it.” X is an ex-prostitute. Ex-prostitutes are out of touch with the true glories of the trade. Plus, they were never very good at it. That’s why they’re ex-prostitutes. But I suppose everyone has their prejudices. And so I strive to sift these complexities, to seek and present The Truth (p.123).

Reclamation of the term “whore” suggests that sex work is empowering. Construction of the truth, whatever that may be, must come from the inside out. The voices of sex workers reveal their experiences. I argue that these truths, also known as experiences,

attempt to explain the complexities presented in sex work. These experiences, as reiterated by sex workers as the truth, simultaneously creates new knowledge. These experiences, like all knowledge, are socially constructed. According to Joan Scott (1991):

Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather what we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. To think about experience in this way is to historicize it as well as to historicize the identities that it produces (p. 26).

In order to deconstruct the knowledge that is already constructed, which shapes the identities and experiences of sex workers, we must be aware of the authority that is granted to the people who can tell these stories. It is imperative to include voices of women who tell stories from first-hand experience.

According to Wendy Chapkis (1997):

Self-advocacy efforts by sex workers have been complicated by challenges to all forms of organizing rooted in identity politics. Most significantly, attempts at self-representation have exposed conflicts over who has the authority to speak for and about the prostitute (p. 182).

Speaking about sex workers only compels the answers to the questions the authors want answered. Speaking from first-hand experience reshapes the knowledge about sex work. The first-hand experiences of sex workers reveals experiences and questions that need to be theorized.

In this chapter, I explained how the experiences of Third World women sex workers must be theorized beyond the voluntary/forced agent/victim dichotomy by illuminating the themes and issues expressed through the words of Western sex workers. I also highlighted the complexities of the experiences of sex workers. Through the

illumination of the complexities of the experiences of sex workers, I argued that experiences affects the construction of knowledge.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

This thesis begins with an explanation of the gendered organization of sex work and prostitution, which draws from social construction theories. My analysis of social construction theory is important because it illuminates how sex work and prostitution function and thrive within society as well as why feminists deem sex work and prostitution as a source of oppression of women. I purposely create a binary to define the difference between sex workers and prostitutes. This binary helps to clarify the distinction between women who are forced into prostitution and women who choose sex work. This distinction is necessary because it differentiates between women who choose sex work as a form of employment and women who are forced into sexual slavery. This theorization lays the groundwork to discuss feminist debates surrounding the issue of the migration of women for sex work and the trafficking of women into prostitution. Through my analysis of feminist theory, the agent/victim binary used to theorize the experiences of Third World women sex workers is proven to be insufficient.

The research and literature about women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan for sex work presents evidence of agency. This agency is identified as a conscious choice to migrate for sex work based on the desire for better economic options. Through my research and analysis of the migration processes of Third World women, agency is identified and highlighted. However, I believe that the authors

who highlight the agency of Third World women sex workers do so in order to disprove that all these women are victims. Authors Anarfi, Vickers, and Watenabe provide compelling arguments for agency. These writers provide an argument that supports the agency of women who migrate from Ghana and Thailand to the Ivory Coast and Japan by documenting evidence of economic hardships in their homelands. Through my analysis of migrant sex workers, I argued that these women indeed exercise agency, however, descriptions of their lived experience fails to extend outside of the classification of sex workers with agency.

Women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution begin as agents who seek to migrate in search of work. I am not thoroughly convinced that these women completely lack agency. What I am convinced of is that NGO's such as HRW and CATW advocate for trafficked women solely based on their victim status. I question their motivations because they seem to focus only on advocating for the eradication of the trafficking of women. The stories that are presented by HRW and CATW focus on the human rights violations experienced by women who are trafficked into prostitution. The lived experiences of women who are trafficked into prostitution remains undocumented outside of their encounters as trafficked women. The lack of documentation by HRW and CATW of their lived experience beyond their status of sexual slaves limits what can be known about the lives and identities of women who are trafficked. Much that has been written about women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution adheres to the agent/victim binary and supports the notion of sexual slavery, which is similar to the manner in which the agency of women who chose to migrate for sex work

is presented. Without the victim status of women who are trafficked from Thailand to Japan into prostitution, advocacy on behalf of these women would cease to exist.

Feminist theory can be used to complicate the discourse about the root of oppression and the cause of prostitution and sex work. The many debates within feminism about prostitution and sex work both support and negate the argument that women who migrate for sex work and women who are trafficked into prostitution fit into an agent/victim dichotomy. Besides the debate about this binary, feminists disagree that there is a single root of oppression of women. Modern feminist theory relies on binary oppositions to identify the root of the oppression of women. Radical feminist theory supports the sexual slavery claim by contesting the possibility of agency within prostitution. Patriarchal notions rooted in the gendered organization of society erase the possibility of agency within prostitution. The evidence of agency on behalf of women who chose to migrate for sex work as well as the stories told by women in chapter four, the voices of sex workers, prove that there is agency as well as empowerment in sex work. Marxist feminist theory can be used to support the notion that women who sell their bodies do so as a form of work, with capitalism, as opposed to the radical feminist argument deems patriarchy, as the source of oppression. I argue that both patriarchy and capitalism are to blame for the oppression of women and the existence of prostitution. Postmodern feminist theory calls for the inclusion of the voices of prostitutes and sex workers. The voices of prostitutes and sex workers contribute to the exploration of how meaning is made, how women and work are defined, and how sex workers and prostitutes see and define themselves. The deconstruction of the agent/victim binary by postmodern feminist theory allows for the exposure of the grey areas previously ignored by modern

feminist theory. The deconstruction of the agency/victim binary transforms the identities of sex workers and prostitutes from agents into subjects. This change allows for the identities of sex workers and prostitutes to become fluid, rather than static, thus offering a more accurate depiction of how their meaning is constructed.

I believe that through my personal analysis on this topic, the documentation of the experiences of sex workers is limited by the authors' motivations to prove his/her theory. The documentation of the experiences of sex workers is also limited by the questions that the researcher asks and attempts to answer. I acknowledge a possibility that language and cultural barriers inhibit certain stories to be illuminated about the experiences of Third World women sex workers. Overcoming language and cultural barriers in conjunction with the impossibility of recounting the experiences of every sex worker on the planet makes it difficult to create an accurate depiction of Third World women sex workers. Many factors such as language and culture influence the stories that are already published. In addition to the influence of language and culture in the construction of knowledge, the diversity of stories and standpoints complicate how any truth can be written. I believe that a book containing the voices of Third World women sex workers, however partial it may be, would be beneficial in order to move beyond the agent/victim binary that has shaped what has been written about them. Rather, the absence of the voices of sex workers only compels the questions that many feminists want answered.

Through my research on this topic, many of my questions remain unanswered. I feel that this topic is too complicated to be able to theorize all the experiences of all women involved in the sex trade. Because of this complexity, it is imperative for feminist research to continue building on the theories that have been written. The



inclusion of the voices of sex workers compel some of the questions that need to be answered. Some of these questions are included within feminist debates repeated in my discussion. For instance, who can tell what kind of story? Perhaps a new story would affirm that all knowledge is incomplete. Within these stories, new questions arise. Pursuing these questions, understandings, and meaning making is a feminist project I hope to continue to engage.

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