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Sex Wars Revisited: A Rhetorical Economy of Sex Industry Opposition

By Alison Phipps¹

Abstract

This paper attempts to sketch a 'rhetorical economy' of feminist opposition to the sex industry, via the case study of debates around Amnesty International's 2016 policy supporting decriminalisation as the best way to ensure sex workers' human rights and safety. Drawing on Ahmed's concept of 'affective economies' in which emotions circulate as capital, I explore an emotionally loaded discursive field which is also characterised by specific and calculated rhetorical manoeuvres for political gain. My analysis is situated in what Rentschler and Thrift call the 'discursive publics' of contemporary Western feminism, which encompass academic, activist, and public/media discussions. I argue that contemporary feminist opposition to the sex industry is shaped by a 'sex war' paradigm which relies on a binary opposition between radical feminist and 'sex positive' perspectives. In this framework, sex workers become either helpless victims or privileged promoters of the industry, which leaves little room for discussions of their diverse experiences and their labour rights. As Amnesty's policy was debated, this allowed opponents of the sex industry to construct sex workers' rights as 'men's rights', either to purchase sex or to benefit from its sale as third parties or 'pimps'. These opponents mobilised sex industry 'survivors' to dismiss sex worker activists supporting Amnesty's policy as privileged and unrepresentative, which concealed activists' experiences of violence and abuse and obscured the fact that decriminalisation is supported by sex workers across the world.

Keywords: Sex work, feminism, rhetorical economy

Introduction

In the feminist 'sex wars' of the 1980s and 1990s, prostitution was a defining issue. This activist and academic confrontation over what Chancer (78) describes as competing claims of sexist oppression and sexual repression constructed the sex industry as either the linchpin of women's inequality or a site at which radical and dissident sexualities could be enacted and explored. On one side were radical feminists who posited a direct causal link between prostitution

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I am deeply indebted to all the activist sex workers who put their time, energy and labour into advocating for decriminalisation, and whose politics and conversations have shaped (and in some instances completely changed) my thinking around these issues. I have cited their public writings wherever I can, but I am aware that there is much essential discourse which goes uncaptured, yet which has been crucial in the formation of my own analysis. As a small recognition of the unpaid labour of sex workers' rights activists in contributing to my intellectual development, on completion of this paper I made a donation to the Sex Worker Open University.

and sexual violence, situating the sex industry as the pinnacle of gendered objectification and men's entitlement to women's bodies. On the other, 'sex radicals' resisted the equation of sexuality with sexism and saw room for creativity and agency in sexual relations. Together with LGB and BDSM sexualities, sex work was positioned as a challenge to the status quo, opening up spaces for experimentation and constituting an explicit sale of sex for money which highlighted the tacit commodification of sex through the marriage contract (Phipps, "Politics of the Body", 87-88).

The 'sex wars' were heated, emotive, and divisive. Feminists who defended pornography were famously characterised by Catharine MacKinnon as the 'Uncle Toms' of the movement (Chancer 81), while they, in their turn, described their opponents as prudes (Ferguson 106). These emotions reverberate in the present, with a renewed dialectic between radical feminist agendas which feed and are fed by neoconservative and carceral projects, and a reformulated 'sex radical' or 'sex positive' feminism which draws from neoliberal themes around empowerment and personal/consumer choice (Phipps, "Politics of the Body", 98-101). As Grant argues, popular constructions of the politics of prostitution reflect this paradigm, often played out through a binary between oppression and empowerment. However, this binary conceals an important discourse around sex workers' labour rights, rooted in the prostitutes' rights movements of the 1970s (and associated campaigns such as Wages for Housework), which has won key policy gains. Within the persistent 'sex war' paradigm, this discourse is sidelined, misinterpreted and misunderstood.

This paper explores the rhetorical economy of contemporary radical feminist opposition to the sex industry, which is shaped by, and seems unable to move beyond, the 'sex war' dialectic. I draw from Ahmed's (45) concept of 'affective economies', in which emotions are a form of capital, generated by the circulation of objects (such as bodies) and signs (such as the burning cross). I have previously theorised experience as a form of 'investment capital' in these economies, a currency of objects and signs which generates further capital in the form of feeling and which is often 'invested' into debates for political gain (Phipps, "Whose Personal is More Political?", 304).

In this paper, I use the term 'rhetorical economy' to refer to an emotionally loaded (and adversarial) field which is characterised by calculated discursive manoeuvres. Some of these are designed to put specific affects in circulation, while others perform rhetorical sleights of hand, in order to present opposing views or construct political opponents in particular ways. My analysis is situated within what Rentschler and Thrift (239) call the 'discursive publics' of contemporary Western feminism, which encompass academic, activist, and public/media discussions. These 'publics' are framed by a neoliberal context in which experience and emotion have been commodified through a 'tabloidisation' (Glynn, 34) and 'testimonialism' (Ahmed and Stacey, 1) which saturates politics and culture with feeling.

I base my analysis on a case study: the debate around Amnesty International's policy on state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of sex workers. This policy was issued in 2016, following extensive political discussion of the draft policy which was leaked online in 2015. Amnesty's policy argued that criminal laws should be applied to prevent forced labour, human trafficking and abuse and violence in commercial sex, and the involvement of children in commercial sex acts. However, it advised that adult consensual sex work should be fully decriminalised, due to the barriers criminalisation presents for realising sex workers' human rights. This extended to the buying of sex and the organisation of sex work (for instance, the renting of premises). Amnesty's policy stated that sex workers should be able to avail themselves of legal protections pertaining to health, employment and discrimination. It also concluded that states should put in place measures to address the intersectional discrimination, gender stereotypes and denial of economic, social and cultural rights that might cause people to enter sex work, stigmatise

sex workers and prevent exit for those who wish to leave the industry. This policy was extensively informed by sex workers' labour rights discourse: however, within the 'sex war' paradigm which continues to characterise the field, it was misrepresented and misunderstood by its radical feminist opponents.

'Disappearing' sex workers

The Amnesty policy put the voices and concerns of sex workers front and centre. Its evidence base included detailed first hand research conducted in Argentina, Hong Kong, Norway and Papua New Guinea, and consultation with more than 200 sex workers around the world. There was also discussion with sex worker groups, groups representing survivors of prostitution, organisations advocating for criminalisation, feminist and other women's rights representatives, LGBTQI activists, anti-trafficking agencies, HIV/AIDS activists, and others. The policy drew on intelligence by bodies such as UNAIDS, the World Health Organisation and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, and the developing canon of policy and academic literature on sex workers' experiences of different legal frameworks (see for example Levy and Jacobsson, Krusi et al, Shannon et al, Jordan, New Zealand Government). It was also supplemented by Amnesty's previous work which had revealed a variety of human rights abuses against sex workers.

Despite this, immediately after the draft policy was made public in 2015 there was an outpouring of opposition which erased these sex workers under a rhetorical panic around 'pimps' and 'Johns'. Jessica Neuwirth, co-founder of international organisation Equality Now, claimed that Amnesty had been 'hijacked by proponents of the global sex trade' into supporting 'pimps and buyers of sex'. Celebrities Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway, Kate Winslet, Emma Thompson and Lena Dunham, as well as women's groups and religious organisations from all regions of the world, were among almost 12,000 signatories of a petition developed by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International urging Amnesty not to 'legalise pimping' and arguing that the organisation was siding with 'exploiters, not the exploited' (see also Guardian). The furore reached such a fever pitch that Amnesty's Senior Director for Campaigns Thomas Schultz-Jagow was forced to clarify, in a letter to the New York Times that the organisation's motives were to protect sex workers and nobody else. The final version of Amnesty's policy (3) also incorporated a reiteration that Amnesty was not claiming men had a human right to buy sex.

This campaign of opposition to Amnesty relied on a rhetorical sleight of hand. The organisation's concern with the human rights of sex workers was turned into a claim that it saw prostitution *itself* as a right, and that therefore it was enshrining men's rights to buy sex. This substitution of the sex worker with the (male) client is a key strategy of anti sex industry campaigning (see for example Rights of Women, Ditum, "Why We Shouldn't Rebrand Prostitution", Norma). In this case it was bolstered by a version of the draft Amnesty policy leaked by Nordic Model Advocates, which contained a phrase (subsequently deleted) focused on clients with disabilities, stating that 'some develop a stronger sense of self in their relationships with sex workers, improving their life enjoyment and dignity'. (Mis)interpreting this statement as if it referred to clients in general allowed opponents of Amnesty's policy to claim that its proposals were aimed at improving clients', rather than sex workers', quality of life.

This was couched in discourse clearly intended to put particular affects in circulation: for instance, on social media radical feminists edited the Amnesty logo to replace the lit candle with an ejaculating penis. A protest staged outside the organisation's UK headquarters in October 2015 featured placards reading: 'Since when did the male orgasm need your protection, Amnesty?'

These manoeuvres seemed designed to create fear, in similar ways to how trans-exclusionary radical feminism deploys the penis as a political tool to link societal transphobia with women's fear of male violence (Phipps, "Whose Personal is More Political?", 311). Representing a prominent human rights organisation with a genital organ was also a boundary-crossing which appeared to be undertaken to provoke unease.

This rhetoric (perhaps deliberately) also disregarded the preponderance of evidence that client criminalisation is a major threat to sex worker safety. For instance, when their clients are criminalised this can force sex workers to displace their activities to outlying areas or secluded times, can pressure them to offer higher risk services due to a lack of bargaining power and need for rapid negotiations, and often discourages clients from providing identifying information which could be used to hold them accountable for their behaviour (see for example Hester and Westmarland, Crago, Kinnell, Krüsi et al, Lyon "Client Criminalisation", Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Police Affairs, Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, Levy and Jacobsson, Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, ScotPEP). Evidence such as this was at the root of Amnesty's decision to oppose the so-called 'Nordic Model' of client criminalisation and support full decriminalisation instead, explained in detail in its policy and accompanying documentation, but ignored by its opponents who chose instead to misinterpret its policy as being concerned with the protection of clients rather than the protection of sex workers.

Amnesty's proposals to decriminalise brothel-keeping and third parties, similarly recommended for sex workers' safety, were also misinterpreted. Indeed, the slogan 'No Amnesty for Pimps' was a key feature of the campaign of opposition, and Esohe Aghatise of Equality Now argued that Amnesty had 'ignore[d] the need to protect the human rights of people in prostitution and [fed] into the hands of organised criminals, pimps and traffickers.' A widespread twitter campaign using the hashtag #noAmnesty4pimps was coordinated with a Global Day of Action in October 2015, which included social media and in-person protests in 50 countries. On the eventual approval of the Amnesty policy, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International issued a press release entitled *It's Official—Amnesty International Creates the Human Right to Pimp and Purchase Sexual Acts*. A joint statement from Women's Aid federations across the UK argued that the Amnesty policy 'legitimise[d] abuse perpetrated by pimps, traffickers and exploiters'.

This rhetoric deserves to be unpicked. First, the figure of the pimp is undeniably racialised (Davis H), and this focus by Amnesty's opponents evoked racist anxieties about 'violent' black masculinities which have been at the root of longstanding and persistent systems of state oppression and violence (see Davis A). Secondly, this emotive rhetoric functioned as a distraction from the very same systems of state violence which target sex workers, and the fact that Amnesty's policy was focused on mitigating the effects of these. Thirdly, it constructed false binaries between pimps and sex workers, privilege and marginality, which obscured the fact that many people facilitating others' sex work are also sex workers themselves (Bruckert and Law, 7).

In reality, the substance of the Amnesty policy was focused on how brothel-keeping laws and third-party criminalisation create risks for sex workers. For instance, the organisation noted that sex workers operating together for safety can be prosecuted under brothel-keeping provisions, which can place them at *greater risk* of exploitation by third parties if they require facilitation but are unable to work co-operatively. It has also been well established that third party criminalisation often targets sex workers' partners and family members or prevents them from renting secure accommodation or hiring security and support staff, leaving them isolated (Levy and Jacobsson 603, Chu and Glass 104). Nevertheless, Amnesty's opponents drew on tried-and-tested rhetoric in claiming that Amnesty was acting in the interests of a so-called 'pimp lobby', which supposedly

funds activism and seeks to protect the industry at all costs (Mullin). This also flew in the face of the fact that sex workers' labour rights activists have consistently resisted the inclusion of managers in their movement (see for example Sex Worker Open University "Our Manifesto").

With these rhetorical manoeuvres around (male) clients and 'pimps', opponents of Amnesty's policy were able to set sex workers' rights and women's rights in opposition, reflecting the time-honoured characterisation of sex workers as dupes or even accomplices of the patriarchy who put 'good women' at risk (Smith "SWOU at Edinburgh Reclaim the Night").² Within rhetoric such as this sex workers become little more than a metaphor, either for male violence itself or for the patriarchal structures which support it, and their personhood and experiences (including of violence and abuse) are erased. The radical feminist definition of sex work as in itself a form of violence against women makes it impossible to distinguish between the rhetorical signification of sex work as violence and what actually takes place within the industry. In other words, sex workers cannot be raped, as they are de facto being raped already.

This framework also assigns sex workers who advocate for decriminalisation with false consciousness, either as promoters of the industry or victims with no agency of their own. Since the only structure that matters is gender, other structural factors (poverty and austerity in particular) preventing sex workers with negative experiences from leaving the industry are concealed. The cruelty of this 'sex war' rhetoric, which positions survivors of violence as complicit with it, is truly troubling. As one sex worker tweeted in response to the social media campaign against Amnesty: 'I'm a survivor of violence in the sex industry and I want full decrim. Stop putting words in my mouth and calling me a pimp.'

Identity and representation

Within feminist politics opposed to the sex industry, the figuration of sex workers often bounces between the poles of victim and accomplice: if they are the latter, much time is devoted to dismissing these sex workers as 'not representative' of the majority. This was prominent in the debate around Amnesty's policy: it was claimed that the sex workers supporting it had unusually positive experiences of the industry, and that their interests differed from the masses they claimed to represent. In the *New York Times*, survivor-activist Rachel Moran wrote:

I know there are some advocates who argue that women in prostitution sell sex as consenting adults. But those who do are a relatively privileged minority—primarily white, middle-class, Western women in escort agencies—not remotely representative of the global majority. Their right to sell doesn't trump my right and others' not to be sold in a trade that preys on women already marginalized by class and race.

This excerpt does a great deal of rhetorical work. Shaped by the 'sex war' paradigm, the first sentence reduces a complex politics around sex workers' labour rights, the lack of alternative employment opportunities, the universality of exploitation under capitalism and the inability of carceral models to deliver social justice (see for example Grant, Sex Worker Open University "SWOU Statement on Poverty, Sex Work and the Swedish Model", Smith "In this Prostitution

² Throughout this paper the term 'sex workers' and 'women' is often used interchangeably: although people of all genders work in the sex industry, a majority are women and anti-sex industry politics is almost exclusively focused on women.

Debate”, Mac) to a banal libertarian discourse about the rights of ‘consenting adults’ to do as they please. The last sentence contains a stronger (misleading) statement about the ‘right to sell’ sex, juxtaposed against Moran’s and others’ right not to ‘be sold’. The emotive and adversarial language here constructs sex workers who fight for labour rights as a threat, and obscures the fact that their politics is focused not on the ‘right to sell’, but the right (for more marginalised people especially) to survive. This is a complex sleight of hand around privilege and marginality.

The figure of the ‘happy hooker’ is a key rhetorical tool for opponents of the sex industry (Smith “SWOU at Edinburgh Reclaim the Night”), who often characterise sex worker activists as having ‘benign’ experiences and claim that these are unusual (see for example Bindel, Ditung “Who Do you Listen to?”). Sex workers themselves have acknowledged that most (but not all) high-profile Western activists hail from more privileged backgrounds (see for example Corvid, Shane). This is also true of those who advocate against the sex industry however, and it does not differentiate sex industry politics (on both sides) from any other form. As Buechler argues, within social movements it is those who have the time and means to organise and the cultural capitals which facilitate public engagement, who are usually able to be heard.

Sex industry debates which remain caught within the ‘sex war’ paradigm reflect the privilege of activists on both sides: the radical feminists who advocate for an end to commercial sex without considering alternative means of survival, and the ‘sex positive’ advocates who focus on identity and self-expression rather than work and rights (Phipps “Politics of the Body”, 87-88). The privilege inherent in ‘sex positive’ politics has been highlighted by many sex worker activists, who argue that it erases their sexual labour and does not help their struggle (see for example Crow, Ray, Berarovich). It is noteworthy that radical feminists have not shown a similar ability to reflect upon their own politics.

It is also noteworthy that these feminists tend to focus on sex worker activists’ privilege, regardless of the substance of their politics. Within the ‘sex war’ paradigm sex worker activism is homogenised under the ‘sex positive’ banner, which is tied to the body of the ‘happy hooker’ as though she is the only activist in the movement and this is her only possible form of discourse (see for example Hunt, Glosswitch, Murphy). In the debate over Amnesty’s policy, Deputy *New Statesman* Editor Helen Lewis went so far as to argue that since those with negative experiences usually leave the industry, ‘only people with an overall positive view of that industry are *permitted* to talk’ (italics added).

There is another sleight of hand here: the sex worker activist is always the ‘happy hooker’ as it is unthinkable that sex workers with negative experiences would continue to sell sex. This constructs arguments for decriminalisation as grounded in uncritical support for the industry. As Jacobs has argued, this is an erasure of the many sex worker activists who are survivors of violence and abuse and who continue within the industry due to the lack of alternative or preferable options. It also ignores and conceals sex workers’ labour rights discourse, within which decriminalisation of sex work is necessary to *keep sex workers safe*. Marginalised sex workers with few to no alternatives, who require decriminalisation to mitigate the harms of their work, are therefore reconstructed as privileged promoters of the industry who put other women in danger.

These rhetorical manoeuvres also assign identity a great deal of value. Through focusing on the (imagined) individual identities of sex workers’ rights activists, radical feminists are able to entangle discussion in issues of ‘representativeness’ instead of exploring the substance of the representations being made. This politics is facile compared to other discussions around representation and universality which have a long history within feminist activism and thought. The concept of intersectionality developed when black feminists challenged their white sisters for

ignoring their experiences and concerns, highlighting the family and the police as two institutions black feminists experienced radically differently due to currents of structural and political racism which put black communities at odds with state agents protecting white ones, and against which the black family has often been a haven, instead of (or as well as) a site of oppression (see for example Carby, Crenshaw). However, these critiques of what is now known as ‘White Feminism’ (see for example Achola, Golden) did not target every feminist with white skin – instead, they focused on the substance of mainstream feminist politics which prioritised the issues and needs of white women. In contrast, the contemporary radical feminist obsession with the identities of sex worker activists often fails to engage with the substance of their politics. Furthermore, it performs a manoeuvre around privilege and marginality which positions sex worker activists as the equivalent of White Feminists, while radical feminists become proxies for ‘the oppressed’.³

It is not at all clear who the ‘representative’ sex worker is. As Lyon (“What is a ‘representative’ sex worker?”) explains, criminalisation and stigma mean that industry demographics remain under-understood. However, Mullin and Venkatesh have pointed out that for most sex industry opponents, the ‘representative’ sex worker is exploited and perhaps trafficked, usually working on the street. This idea is not supported by the evidence we do have: for instance, the majority of sex workers in Western countries now work indoors (see for example Gall 101, Taylor, Bungay et al 17), and there have been relatively few proven cases of trafficking into Western countries (see for example Davies, Mai “Migrant Workers in the UK Sex Industry”, Agustin 36-38).

More importantly however, claims that sex worker activists do not represent sex workers in general are contradicted by the preponderance of evidence that the majority of sex workers worldwide, from a diversity of backgrounds and situations, do not wish to exist under models which criminalise them and remove their sources of income without addressing the economic conditions which lead many people to sell sex in the first place. Sex workers supporting decriminalisation come from the most vulnerable groups in the industry, such as migrants, drug users and street workers, and those in the Global South (see for example Abel et al 16, Win, Lutnick & Cohan 38, NSW, Mai “In Whose Name?”). Although the ‘representative’ sex worker remains elusive, it is clear that the substance of sex workers’ labour rights politics is broadly supported: it is also possible that the focus on the former is a useful way to distract from the latter.

‘Listen to Survivors’

In place of the sex worker, sex industry opponents usually insert the ‘survivor’. In the debate over Amnesty’s policy, it was claimed that the organisation had failed to hear or prioritise the concerns of ex-sex workers who had experienced trauma and exploitation, and that these survivors had been ‘strategically sidelined’ by a movement for decriminalisation headed by clients and ‘pimps’ (see for example Lewis “Listen to the Sex Workers”, Sanchez). A petition entitled ‘Listen to Survivors: Reject the Proposal to Decriminalize All Aspects of Prostitution’ was signed by 4,700 people and supported by organisations SPACE International (Survivors of Prostitution-Abuse Calling for Enlightenment) and Sex Trafficking Survivors United. SPACE International, which describes itself as ‘a group of sex-trade Survivors from the US, UK, Germany, Denmark, Canada, Ireland and France’, issued a 3-page statement which argued that Amnesty’s policy had

³ Ironically, this fixation on identity, as well as a persistent refusal to acknowledge their own privilege, may be why some feminists are resistant to (and offended by) intersectional critiques of White Feminism because they mistake these for a politics of skin colour (see for example Lewis “The Uses and Abuses of Intersectionality”).

ignored survivors and survivor-led groups and erased the realities of their lives and the damage they bear witness to. ‘What we find in the lives of young women today’, the statement read, ‘are the very same things we found yesterday in our own: poverty, desperation, addiction and an absolute absence of viable choice.’

This sex industry ‘survivor’ is an abiding and central figure in anti- sex industry politics. Famous second-wave radical feminists Andrea Dworkin (herself an ex-sex worker) and Catharine MacKinnon made the voices of women exploited in pornography central to their legislative lobbying. Since then, such ‘survivor stories’ have acquired corporate gloss and wider exposure, as a key rhetorical tool for what Agustin terms the ‘feminist rescue industry’⁴ constituted by policymakers, NGOs, women’s groups and international organisations who seek an end to commercial sex. For instance, in 2013 Equality Now launched a campaign entitled ‘Listen to Survivors’, in response to two UN reports which advised that commercial sex should be decriminalised in order to help reduce HIV and AIDS and promote the human rights of sex workers. The campaign used ‘survivor stories’ to urge the UN to instead promote measures criminalising clients.

All the Equality Now ‘survivor stories’ concerned trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation, even though both UN reports had opposed these practices and distinguished them from the consensual sale of sex. The phrase ‘trafficking and prostitution’ was common: an example of the metonymy Ahmed (76) identifies in which words (such as ‘Islam’ and ‘terrorist’) are stuck together to evoke particular responses. Many of the stories also recounted childhood sexual abuse and domestic violence, and some contained references to HIV and AIDS (although the UN reports had linked sex industry decriminalisation with a reduction in these conditions). The narratives also contained graphic descriptions of rape and physical violence: all these experiences became ‘investment capital’ in the political campaign against decriminalisation (Phipps “Whose Personal is More Political?”, 304)

Massey points out that campaigns focused on sex industry survivors often concern trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation: this persists even though organisations and groups advocating for decriminalisation (including Amnesty International) are clear that these practices are unacceptable and distinct from the consensual sale of sex. Harrowing accounts of victimisation and suffering are also common, deployed in support of a particular legislative agenda, usually that of ‘ending demand’ for commercial sex through criminalising clients and third parties. This is normally done without reference to the evidence that client criminalisation creates additional risks for sex workers and does not necessarily reduce prostitution (see for example Jessen 210, Levy 107). In addition, such manoeuvres rarely incorporate analyses which tie specific experiences to particular parts of law or working practices: instead, the fact of suffering is used to bolster a sweeping moral case against the sex industry as a whole.

This rhetorical use of the sex industry ‘survivor’ draws on the long tradition of white feminist empathy which, according to Hemmings, is a way of cannibalising the Other (see also Ahmed, Pedwell). Furthermore, there is a double-oppression at work here: as the sex industry survivor is cannibalised by the radical feminist agenda, she is also used as political capital to deflect opposition coming from another Other (the sex worker advocating for labour rights), whose politics are defined as proceeding from atypical and inauthentic experiences of the industry (Phipps

⁴ I am not necessarily comfortable with the term ‘industry’, since this does not seem particularly apt to the impoverished women’s sector, and also suggests a homogeneity of motive (in the form of a self-serving orientation), which seems a little harsh and overly simplistic.

“Whose Personal is More Political?”, 310) A sex worker, then, is only representative if she is making the right representations.

Alternatively perhaps, as activist Molly Smith has argued, a sex worker is unrepresentative if she is making any representations at all. In sex industry debates ‘survivors’ are used as a proxy for current marginalised sex workers who are ‘voiceless’, but the implication is that if they were not, they too would support an end to commercial sex. This enables sex workers advocating decriminalisation to be rejected as ‘unrepresentative’ on spec. Again, this sleight of hand is cruel: for current sex workers, the condition for dismissal is being able to speak at all. In Smith’s words, as soon as they enter the debate, sex worker activists are dismissed as ‘not representative’ because they are *not voiceless enough*.⁵

This manoeuvre (as well as the obvious futility of attempting to find the quintessential subject of any category, in identitarian terms) means that the ‘representative’ sex worker is an apparition who can only manifest through radical feminist discourse. Moreover, she cannot manifest herself: she can only *be manifested* as an absence within constructions of sex workers’ struggle for rights. She must be spoken for, by the feminist critic or the ‘survivor’: as soon as she speaks for herself, her representations are dismissed. This full stop is repeatedly drawn on the body of any sex worker activist who raises their voice. It is also used, as Congdon argues, to create a space between different sex workers as if they have competing demands in relation to legal regulation of the industry, when the evidence strongly suggests that they do not.

Conclusion

Using the case study of feminist debates around Amnesty International’s 2016 policy on decriminalisation, I have attempted to sketch a ‘rhetorical economy’ of sex industry opposition. This politics is situated within a ‘sex war’ paradigm characterised by a binary opposition between radical feminist and ‘sex positive’ perspectives, within which there is often no room for discussions of sex workers’ labour rights. Prostitution is positioned as sex rather than work, and sex workers become either helpless victims or privileged promoters of the industry. This allows opponents of the sex industry to construct sex workers’ rights as ‘men’s rights’, either to purchase sex or to benefit from its sale as third parties or ‘pimps’. There is very little opportunity for sex workers to advocate for decriminalisation as a necessary measure to keep them safe. Indeed, the sex industry ‘survivor’ is used to dismiss sex workers’ claims for labour rights as an uncritical endorsement of the industry, and to erase the experiences of sex worker activists who are themselves survivors of violence and abuse. These activists are defined as ‘unrepresentative’ on spec, despite the fact that sex workers across the world, including from the most marginalised groups, do not want to be criminalised or have their sources of income removed with no alternatives.

In a rhetorical economy such as this, sex workers themselves have very little value and almost no space in which to discuss and heal from difficult experiences. Indeed, these experiences are often hidden lest they become ‘investment capital’ in the feminist politics against the industry (Phipps “Whose Personal is More Political?”, 304) In the words of the organisation Survivors for Decrim, ‘our stories are used to advocate further criminalisation, despite the reality that criminalisation itself fuels and facilitates violence against us.’ Survivors for Decrim actively challenges the ‘sex war’ paradigm of sex workers versus survivors, by showing that it is possible to be both. Within the rhetorical economy I have sketched in this paper, the odds are stacked against groups like this: nevertheless, they perform an important intervention in the struggle to

⁵ This statement is from an unpublished talk given at Goldsmiths College in March 2015 (my italics).

create a more nuanced debate around the sex industry. Judging from the reaction to Amnesty International's policy on decriminalisation, a more nuanced debate is urgently needed if we are to make more progress on keeping sex workers safe.

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