

Is Prostitution Forced Oppression or a Chosen Lifestyle?

Katia Dunn

Katia Dunn is a reporter for the Portland, Oregon, Mercury News. In the following article Dunn writes about three organizations that attempt to help prostitutes. She notes that each of these organizations views prostitution in a different manner. One organization, LOTUS, is run by social workers who see prostitutes as an oppressed class—victims of their race and poverty. The prostitutes who use the services of LOTUS often want to leave prostitution. The second organization, Danzine, is run by current and former sex workers who try to provide prostitutes with whatever they need to do their job safely, such as condoms and clean needles. According to Dunn, Danzine employees view prostitution as a chosen lifestyle. The last organization, COYOTE, is a national prostitutes' union that advocates for the legalization of sex work. COYOTE argues that prostitutes should have more rights and should not be labeled as mere criminals.

Melissa Farley, a clinical and research psychologist, is one of the nation's leading researchers on prostitution. According to her 1998 study of 475 prostitutes from five different countries—including women, men, and transgendered individuals—62 percent of prostitutes reported having been raped in prostitution, 73 percent reported having experienced physical assault in prostitution, 72 percent were currently or formerly homeless, and 92 percent stated they wanted to escape prostitution immediately.

Katia Dunn, "Prostitution: Pro or Con?," *Portland Mercury News*, May 9–15, 2002. Reproduced by permission.

Helping Women Escape Prostitution

Nikki Williams is a caseworker at the Portland [Oregon]-based organization LOTUS, which stands for "Liberating Ourselves Through Understanding Sexploitation," a government-funded program aimed at helping women escape prostitution, and she knows the stories of the women those numbers reflect. In Nikki's life, she has met thousands of prostitutes.

"The situation that really bothered me, the woman I'll never forget, was a woman I met when I was doing outreach into a prison," says Nikki. "The woman disclosed it was her 20th birthday. She had two kids currently in SCF [Services to Children and Families] custody, and had been in and out of prison her entire life. She was turned out when she was 10 by her parents, who shot her up with cocaine because she was nervous about turning her first trick."

Nikki's eyes water as she talks about it.

"She was 20, but she looked about 14," she explains. "I saw her a year later—she was in another prison—and she looked about 55," she explained. "She's still in jail today. She was made a drug-addicted, prostituted woman at 10, and has been all her life. Where was her choice in being made a prostituted woman?"

Nikki and another case manager at LOTUS, Swana Thompson, work in the small upstairs of a building off NE 39th and Sandy. Their space is clean and peaceful, designed to be a "safe space" for the women they serve, who are largely minorities. The clients who come to them are always involved in prostitution, often referred by the courts because they have been cycling in and out of the justice system for so long, and sometimes hear about LOTUS by word of mouth.

"We've had women run in here black and blue with bruises—literally running for their lives from their pimps," Nikki explained.

In Portland, the "prostitution-free" zones—which city government argues are in place to prevent illegal sex—seem to

only facilitate the easier arrest of prostitutes. According to Nikki, if a previously convicted prostitute is even *seen* by police in a prostitution-free zone—which includes areas of 82nd, Sandy, and Burnside—they are immediately arrested. LOTUS is located right in the middle of a prostitution-free zone. Consequently, women are often too scared to even come close.

Prostitution as Oppression

The principal belief driving the people at LOTUS is that prostitution and all other forms of sex work are oppression. In fact, Nikki doesn't even like to use the term "sex work," believing it suggests that prostitutes might enjoy being prostitutes. She prefers, instead, to think of all forms of sex work as prostitution.

"Some people are prostituted at places like strip clubs and brothels, places where prostitution is legal, and what they don't seem to realize is that the guy they're giving their money to, that club owner, the bouncer, the bar tender, or manager, is their pimp. He's just a corporate pimp, not a street-level pimp."

At LOTUS, the work isn't easy. The list of afflictions women suffer from after years of prostitution is long: post-traumatic stress disorder, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia. Swana and Nikki want to help, but sometimes the women disclose information that social workers are legally bound to tell the police—like if they're selling their children. One time, Swana says, she admitted a woman, found her housing, and then the next day, the woman died. Even when things go well, the resources at LOTUS are slim.

"One time, I got this woman all set up, found her a house and everything," says Swana. "And she said to me, 'Swana, I'm living in the exact same situation I was living in before. I'm living with a slum lord. People have given me the clothes they don't want.'"

Often, landlords know when tenants are former prostitutes and give them the worst apartment in the building or try to take advantage of them, figuring they won't mind because they're used to it. A large part of the time, the women who come to them are also suffering from drug addiction.

"Prostitution and drug addiction go hand in hand," Nikki explains. "Unfortunately, people seem to believe the myth that prostituted women prostitute for the sake of the drugs. However, in the beginning, the drugs are taken to numb the effects of prostitution and in the end, the drugs take over. Sometimes, even after they get clean and go off the drugs, they will relapse into prostitution because they need money. Once they relapse into prostitution, they relapse into drug abuse. This is an endless cycle."

Overwhelmingly, the women LOTUS works with want to get out of prostitution. Often, they've been in it since before the age of 15 and have been conditioned not to know any other way of working or making money.

"People don't understand," says Nikki, "that the pimp is usually the 'boyfriend,' the 'husband,' or the 'baby daddy.' He's sitting at home while she's out being prostituted."

"Prostitution is not work. It's more than just a sexual act," Nikki explains. "It's a degradation of your spirit, a sacrifice of the soul, and abuse of the body and spirit. It is slavery."

The Race Issue

Occasionally, Nikki is invited to speak at colleges to women's studies classes about issues of prostitution.

"The women that I do community education to are usually surprised," Nikki explains, "because the mostly white, educated, upper-class audience doesn't seem to understand the racism involved in prostitution. They don't seem to understand that even under these circumstances, there is the privilege of having white skin."

"If you're white and educated, you might see stripping as an option, but if you're poor, a woman of color, drug-addicted, or were turned out into the trade when you were 12, it's not an option. Your choice has been taken."

Statistics do indicate that, overwhelmingly, the majority of prostitutes come from abused families and are abused on the job. In 1991, the local Council for Prostitution Alternatives stated that 85 percent of prostitutes reported history of sexual abuse in childhood and 70 percent reported incest. The same report indicated that "78 percent of women who sought help from the Council for Prostitution Alternatives in 1991 reported being raped an average of 16 times a year by pimps, and were raped 33 times a year by John[s]." Another study, conducted in 1994 by the Council for Prostitution Alternatives in Portland, reported that 85 percent of prostitutes are raped by pimps.

Melissa Farley, who, aside from being a leading researcher on the topic, is also working to compile one of the more comprehensive websites on prostitution research (prostitutionresearch.com), believes that not only are oppressed minorities most often the victims of prostitution, but they are also in the largest demand.

"You cannot understand prostitution unless you understand how sex, class, and race all come together and hurt a person at the same time," she explains. "People are chosen in prostitution because of the extreme imbalance of power."

"The poorest, the most vulnerable women are basically made available for constant sexual access," she explains. According to Farley, people who hire prostitutes seek out the most helpless victims in order to exploit the imbalance of power.

Danzine

Across town from LOTUS . . . is the headquarters of Danzine, located in the back of their non-profit thrift store, Miss Mona's

Rack. The shelves in the back of the store are stocked with boxes of needles, condoms, and files organized by categories of sexually transmitted diseases. There is a sign on the wall that reads, "F**k safe, shoot clean," as well as slick pictures of exotic dancers wearing lingerie. Danzine's mission statement reads, "It is our goal to share the resources and information we need to make informed decisions, personally and professionally."

Unlike the people at LOTUS, the people involved in Danzine almost always use the term "sex work" over prostitution and, also unlike LOTUS, do not advocate that prostitution is necessarily a system of oppression. Aside from running the store and the non-profit organization, Danzine has ventured into looking at sex work as an art form by organizing a publication and a biannual film festival—both put together by sex workers.

"I wouldn't say sex work is good or bad," says Teresa Dulce, director and founder of Danzine. "It's more like sex work just is, like the way the ocean swims and the night falls. The moment you have some kind of civilization, you're going to have currency and trade."

Therefore, Danzine tries to give sex workers whatever they need, in the moment they need it, rather than attempting to pull them out of prostitution in the long-term. Whether that means facilitating sex work or not is irrelevant. It is respected as the woman's choice and her ability to be self-reliant.

Another major difference between Danzine and LOTUS is that, while LOTUS is run by social workers, Danzine is run "by and for sex workers." According to their flyer, "dancers, models, escorts, working girls, phone operators, fetish specialists, adult entertainers, people under 18, survivors, internet players, and more are invited to contribute their words, action, and art work in *danzine*, the publication, and agency programs."

"We are the people we serve," explains Teresa. "We don't use the word 'client.'"

There is the distinct feeling, inside Danzine, that the conditions of prostitution and sex work can be made better by making informed, educated decisions and by taking control of the situation. It's a foregone conclusion that the choice to do sex work is in the hands of the sex worker.

COYOTE

Carol Leigh is the media representative for a national alliance of sex workers, called COYOTE, and has been working in the sex industry since 1977. She started in a massage parlor, worked in networks of call girls, and is currently teaching film in San Francisco. She also works at St. James Infirmary, a clinic that serves the sex industry, and has just returned from the "Sex Work and Health in a Changing Europe" conference in London, which was attended by 400 people.

"I'm not really in prostitution full-time anymore," she explains. "I mean, I have a few regulars who call me once in a while. . . ."

While Carol certainly agrees that racism is widespread in the sex industry, she believes that one solution to ending racism—both in the sex industry and in the world—is to help prostitutes become less marginalized through labor laws and legalization of prostitution.

"I don't want to be simplistic," she explains, "it's not like we can just say, 'okay let's make a union,' but in my perspective, sex workers of color need more support for voicing their terms and their issues."

Carol objects to Farley's research because she believes it limits the ways in which people understand prostitution. "Melissa researches those who are in marginalized situations," Carol explains. "She basically tries to define prostitution through statistics and descriptions of prostitutes in the most

marginalized circumstances, which of course represents prostitution from the perspective of her position."

Though Carol doesn't have any numbers to counter those of Farley's, she also points out there has been very little research on prostitution and that a sampling of prostitutes across the economic scale would better represent their feelings on the matter. Carol also feels that pointing out a simple disdain for work can skew the weight of results.

"You can't obtain accurate data about the qualities of 'prostitutes in general' because prostitution is underground," she argues. "Most statistics are obtained from those who are easily accessible to researchers, in the criminal justice system, those who use services at various agencies. The samples are necessarily skewed, but many misrepresent the results to represent prostitution in general."

"Melissa's work tries to prove that prostitutes want to quit, and I think that's sort of an inflammatory way to view prostitution," she explains. "Of course they want to quit; most people want to change jobs to a job that's more secure, that has benefits. I agree with her there, but I just wouldn't necessarily frame it as oppression."

In Carol's opinion, the solution lies not in stricter sentences for johns, but legalization of prostitution and more rights for the sex worker.

"The way [prostitution] is practiced in our society is often oppressive," she says, "and criminalization makes it more oppressive."

In fact, says Carol, it is work like Farley's which enforces the polarization of views on prostitution, by enforcing the stereotype that there are two kinds of prostitutes: the "happy hooker," as Farley says, and the quintessential victim—the oppressed, miserable, drug-addicted prostitute.

"Matters of choice and sex are a continuum," she explains. "Not just polar opposites."

However, Carol concedes that Farley's research accurately represents *some* prostitutes—what percentage of the world's prostitutes that is, she doesn't know.

"I understand that Melissa's research does not necessarily represent the 'happy hooker,'" she explains. "I just think the fundamentalist feminist agenda creates only a narrow framework for 'appropriate sex.' People have sex for a lot of different reasons."

Access to Escape

While COYOTE and Danzine argue that unionizing will unite prostitutes under labor laws, Nikki, Swana, and Farley object to organizations like Danzine and COYOTE, because they believe that, legal or not, prostitution will always reflect the racial and class status.

"The thing I would say is most typical of groups which advocate prostitution is that they are composed largely of white European Americans," explains Farley. "These women are not poor or working class. In other words, these are women who have access to escapes from prostitution, who decide they want \$4000 to pay tuition for a semester."

LOTUS sees Danzine as a threat, because it gives people an excuse to look at prostitution as a viable form of income. People don't have to feel guilty about going to strip clubs, watching porn, etc.

"It's not a pretty sight to see an older prostituted woman," says Nikki. "That's why I think pro-prostitution groups get so much more attention. No one wants to see the reality of a 40-year-old prostituted woman who looks 90. It's more pleasing to look at a perky 18-year-old who seems healthy."

The by-product of this ignorance, argues Nikki, is a systematic ignorance and system of oppression within prostitution. The consequences for a woman caught in prostitution are significantly higher than those for a john; in 1993, 42 percent of women arrested in Seattle on prostitution-related

charges were convicted. In the same year, eight percent of men arrested in Seattle on prostitution-related charges were convicted.

Moreover, in Oregon, when a woman is convicted of prostitution, she's convicted of a sex crime—the same category in which child molesters fall. Because of the severity of that category, children are more easily taken away from these women, and they can never qualify for federal housing or have a job working with kids. In Portland, Nikki watches johns who have been arrested regularly walk away with \$25 fines, while the prostitutes they were working with are charged with sex crimes.

While COYOTE and Danzine agree that oppression within prostitution exists, by legalizing prostitution, argues Carol, the government will legally owe women certain guarantees of safety and privilege, regardless of class status. Moreover, the power would lie in the hands of prostitutes and sex workers themselves—rather than pimps and social workers.

Nevertheless, the heart of the disagreement between the two groups comes down to one issue: whether prostitution is a choice or a form of oppression.

For Nikki, the answer is clear. "After doing outreach in jail, the women say to me, 'Nikki, I never looked at prostitution like that. I thought it was my choice.'"