

The struggle against the anti-porn movement

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**I don't separate women into two camps: "us" and "them". Instead, I criticise a society in which prostituted people are being stigmatised, says author Petra Östergren.**

The focal point of my book "Porn, Whores and Feminists" is an attempt to understand the Swedish anti-porn and anti-prostitution movement. Against the backdrop of modern international research, as well as my own conducted studies of pornography and many years of conversation with women who sell sex, I explore how the arguments of this movement don't hold water. Instead, I argue that Sweden's three-decades-long resistance against porn and prostitution is dictated by cultural ideas about sex. Moreover, the movement conveys different messages and functions than it would appear to at first glance which are normative (a particular sexuality is better than another), symbolic (creating a sense of safety and identity) and derailing (it's easier to focus on porn and prostitution than more urgent and complex problems).

The crux of the book is therefore not, which Kajsa Ekis Ekman claims in DN 10/11/2006, to explore why sex workers' voices are not heard. Neither do I think that prostitution is "sex that is about money", nor do I ignore the debates around the implications of money. Furthermore, I don't see myself as a cultural relativist in Ekman's terms.

Neither do I separate women into two camps: "us" and "them". Instead, I criticise a society which is doing just that – a society which has succeeded in stigmatising a group of women to the extent that no protests are heard when individuals from this group are deprived of the right to decide over their bodies and sexualities, are excluded from democratic political processes, are finding themselves without social security networks or legal protection for workers' rights, and whose situation is continuously deteriorating as a result of the same policy which originally intended (and is still perceived to) help them.

However, Ekman is right about one thing: in the book, I amplify the voices of sex workers and give them credence. This is also the point at which we part ways. She compares women who sell sex to slaves who defend their situation and their masters, implying that this makes it impossible to give any authority to their voices. I contend that it is, amongst other things, through listening to sex workers' analyses and experiences that one can understand the mechanisms of prostitution and the resistance against it. I also think that it is, as in any analysis of power structures, of utmost importance to question whose voices are heard and whose voices are silenced. Last time a sex worker was given a platform for expression in DN's culture section was in 1977 – what does that tell us? And what does the outcry of indignation that followed in this instance tell us?

Yet, there is an interesting paradox in Ekman's line of reasoning. At the same time as she discredits the voices of sex workers, she also questions whether I have the right to write about prostitution (as well as questioning the credibility of my argument). In doing this she is assuming that I have never sold sex or thought about doing so.

There is no other researcher or writer who has had to fill this requirement before. Besides this, to sell sex as part of a study would pose a range of ethical and methodological problems. Additionally, there is no evidence that this approach would lead to a more “truthful” result.

I suspect that if those women whose voices are amplified in my book would confirm the views propagated by the anti-prostitution movement, objections and concerns like these would never occur. With this perspective in mind, I do understand the suspiciousness of and misinterpretations of my work.

In Sweden, there is only enough space for one singular view, and in order to secure its hegemonic position, all attempts to form or voice opposition are silenced. This is a game in which much is at stake; not only social relations and people’s high positions in society, but also symbolic struggles for universal safety for all women (wherein prostitution is inaccurately defined as men’s violence against women), and this results in a climate where any means used to win is justifiable.

Prostitution is a complex phenomenon which carries multiple meanings both for people involved in it and for those who critically observe it from a distance. In prostitution and other economic-sexual relations there are, just as Ekman writes: “Conversation, copulation, therapy, fist-fighting, play as romantic couples, to play whore or just to pay to take up someone’s time.” In other words, there can be coercion and violence *and* there can be free will. There are those who feel hurt in the process, those who feel that sex work benefits them and, there are those who feel that they are impacted in both positive and negative ways.

When we talk about prostitution and attempt to find solutions to the issues involved, this complexity must be considered. As we are fully capable of doing this when discussing other types of commercial activities or multifaceted phenomena such as marriage, we must ask ourselves why we seem incapable of addressing these nuances when it comes to commercial sex. What is it, in our culture, that contributes to the fact that sex - and particularly less conventional sex - is not analysed, evaluated and dealt with in the same way as other types of societal phenomena?

We also have to ask ourselves why anti-porn and anti-prostitution sentiments are so solid and unified in Sweden today. What is it that makes Swedish feminists so incapable of or unwilling to listen to different views and perspectives? Or to cooperate and stand in solidarity with all sex workers – irrespective of their approach to their work?

We should also discuss the possibility of understanding prostitution and pornographic imagery as something that has the potential of being both empowering and offensive to women.

However, it is imperative that this discussion be driven by intellectual decency and respect.

**Petra Östergren**