

Commodification of Sexual Labor: The Contribution of Internet Communities to Prostitution Reform

Jeffrey R. Young

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Most feminists agree that successful prostitution reform requires that prostitutes be respected by their clients, peers, and the community. Although respect is not the only criterion necessary for acceptable reform, many feminists believe that the absence of stigma would be a sufficiently fundamental improvement to merit the reconsideration of policies that severely restrict prostitution. The aim of this study is to show that certain online prostitution venues contribute to acceptable prostitution reform by fostering trust and respect between the participants. My hypothesis is that when commercial sex is conducted in an open atmosphere of respect and mutual understanding, within certain economic parameters, beliefs and practices that stigmatize prostitutes and prostitution are potentially neutralized. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide evidence that prostitution can be facilitated online with trust and respect, identify the social and economic variables that contribute to these attitudes, and explain this phenomenon with a useful social science model. This study identifies a non-legal enforcement mechanism to facilitate cooperative exchanges based on establishing trust between participants. At the center of the cooperation system is a reputation mechanism that fosters trust between potential partners by encouraging participants to post honest reviews of their encounters with each other. Understanding the social order as a cooperation game where participants publicly signal each other in an attempt to find the most desirable partners explains the mutual trust and respect that participants have for each other. Because stigma and disrespect are founded on mistrust, this cooperation mechanism is effective in minimizing undesirable attitudes, beliefs, and practices that stigmatize and oppress prostitutes. This study suggests that prostitution reform acceptable to many feminists is possible. But in order for meaningful reform to work in practice, it must be accompanied by regulations carefully designed to protect the sexual autonomy of women without stigmatizing prostitutes.



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