

Prostitution: New Forms, Old Oppression*

MFP - Popular Women's Movement (Brazil)

November 25, 2022

During the COVID-19 pandemic and with social isolation, we have seen an exponential growth in the sale of images, videos, and other forms of online sexual content, deliberately encouraged by some celebrities (who reinforce and encourage the image that Brazil is the country of sex), but not only on “adult-oriented” websites. Even social media platforms like Instagram, Youtube, Twitter, Tinder, and TikTok, with large access from children, romanticize, stimulate, and advertise lifestyles that beautify prostitution and lead young women to trivialize the sale of images and videos of their bodies in exchange for money, “followers,” and “likes.” The idea is spread that, because it is through virtual means and supposedly a choice made by the woman to exercise her “sexual freedom,” such behavior is not considered oppression and exploitation, thus strengthening the illusion of “female empowerment.”

According to the revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai, the origins of prostitution are primarily economic. She states that “Woman is on the one hand placed in an economically vulnerable position, and on the other hand has been conditioned by centuries of education to expect material favours from a man in return for sexual favours – whether these are given within or outside the marriage tie.”¹

This secular conditioning, within the capitalist system, is reinforced so that women, increasingly younger, do not see prostitution as a degradation of their human condition, especially those who practice virtual prostitution.

Social media still reinforces these ideas, shaping the social behaviors of young people, because the algorithm system drives the standardization of

*<https://brasilmfp.blogspot.com/2022/11/prostituicao-novas-formas-velha-opressao.html>

¹Kollontai, Alexandra. “Prostitution and Ways of Fighting It.” <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1921/prostitution.htm>.

human behavior, profiling individuals' "consumption" and subtly and invasively presenting them with what they should "consume." In other words, children and adolescents are increasingly bombarded with sexual content at a younger age and encouraged to trivialize their consumption, promoting individualism and liberalism in relationships.

Another situation frequently encouraged among young women is the "glamorization" and romanticization of prostitution. Music, movies, series, and "influencers" constantly advocate that girls and women, called "novinhas," need to engage with older, wealthy men, the "sugar daddies," to secure the lifestyle they are influenced to pursue. Many websites openly advertise that submitting to such conditions is an excellent way for women to achieve their "financial independence."

Imperialism and the agony of class society

It is key to see how the crisis of imperialism, which manifests itself as an economic, political, and moral crisis of the old order, directly affects the increase in cases of prostitution, especially in bureaucratically capitalist countries. If prostitution is a choice, then why does this condition have a direct relationship with the increase of poverty and misery? Why are women who suffer from this condition predominantly black, with low education, excluded from social practice and production in various ways? We must understand that this phenomenon is directly related to the process of deindustrialization and reprimarization of the Latin American economy, and the deproletarianization of the working class. The younger generations find themselves on the margins of the production process and formal employment. As a result, there is a large number of people pushed into semiproletarianization.

There is also the increasing dissemination, even in school curricula, of entrepreneurship as a means of enrichment, which instills in the imagination of these young people the goal of life is to have the guarantee of comfort with little or no work.

Despite all the liberal illusions, it is precisely in moments of deepening political, social, cultural, and especially economic crises that one can see an increase in cases of sexual exploitation of children and women. This is the brutal and degrading condition in which mainly black and poor women, in the case of Brazil, are forced to practice and encouraged to see such practice as a means of survival.

Data on prostitution and human trafficking for sexual exploitation in Brazil and around the world are scarce and underestimated, yet it is estimated that over 42 million people engage in prostitution worldwide, according to data from 2012. Of these, 75% are young women between 13 and 25 years old, and 80% have been raped in this condition. In Brazil, about 90% of people who engage in prostitution would not want to be in this condition. It is estimated that there are more than 1.5 million people subjected to prostitution in Brazil, of which 78% are women. 59% of women who engage in prostitution are heads of households and do so to support their children. 45% have only completed primary education, 24.3% have not completed high school, and 70% of prostitutes do not have a professional qualification.²

According to UN data, human trafficking for sexual exploitation in the pornographic industry and even in prostitution generates more than 9 billion dollars worldwide per year, second only to the arms industry and drug trafficking. In Asia, it is estimated that the total number of trafficked and sexually exploited people represents 56% of all trafficked victims worldwide. According to UNICEF data from 2010, it was estimated that more than 250,000 children were subjected to sexual exploitation in Brazil, and globally, it is estimated to be about 2 million children. Despite the high rates, data on sex tourism cannot account for the actual number of people subjected to this exploitation, especially in mega-events such as the World Cup and the Olympics, and it is known that the poorest Brazilian states also have the highest rates of sexual exploitation, especially in the northern and northeastern regions.

The Position of Revisionists and Opportunists

Some bourgeois or petty-bourgeois feminists advocate for the regulation of prostitution as if such a measure would guarantee better conditions for prostitutes. They propose this because there is nothing in their reformist programs that could put an end to sexual exploitation. In doing so, they confuse working-class women and fulfill their vile role as auxiliaries of imperialism and reaction.

In reality, regulation aims to stabilize a serious social phenomenon that arises when women are in a vulnerable condition. These feminists believe that female sexual exploitation becomes acceptable as long as it complies

²Data from the BAND media monopoly, on the program “A Liga” in 2010

with established regulations. It is crucial to expose any idealization of this! Let's look at the situation in European and first-world countries where the legalization of prostitution is directly linked to the trafficking of women from oppressed countries. This is because while there is a decrease in native women working as prostitutes, there is an increase in immigrants who are trafficked, deceived with false job offers, and subjected to sexual exploitation.

On the other hand, there is the more radical segment of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois feminism that advocates for the so-called "Nordic model," which prohibits prostitution and feeds into a punitive logic for "clients," as if such a measure would solve the problem of women in such a situation.

Combat Against Exploiters and the Causes of Prostitution!

It is not uncommon to hear that prostitution is the "oldest profession in the world." However, what this statement conceals is that as old as prostitution is the oppression of women, as both arise at a particular moment in human history, which is the emergence of patriarchy, private property, and class society, in which the condition of women in society has been increasingly degraded.

Prostitution cannot be considered a profession because it does not involve the sale of labor power, but of the human body itself. It does not produce anything socially, and the profit obtained through exploitation is given through the sale of women's bodies.

The worker, deprived of the means of production, sells their labor power **to the employer, not themselves**. This is one of the conditions that allows to differentiate the proletariat from the slaves. By prostituting herself, a woman **sells her own body, resembling the condition of the slaves, as her body becomes the property of someone else** and she falls into a condition that turns her into a thing, dehumanizing her.

There is still the weight of hypocritical bourgeois morality, which worsens the situation of women. The bourgeoisie repudiates prostitution only in words and in the sense of criminalizing the prostituted woman, but not the system of exploitation and oppression that allows her to be in this condition. Engels, analyzing the formation of monogamous family composition, realizes how, on the one hand, monogamy was instituted for women, and on the other

hand, conditions of sexual freedom for men were perpetuated. Let's see:

For hetaerism is as much a social institution as any other; it continues the old sexual freedom – to the advantage of the men. Actually not merely tolerated, but gaily practiced, by the ruling classes particularly, it is condemned in words. But in reality this condemnation never falls on the men concerned, but only on the women; they are despised and outcast, in order that the unconditional supremacy of men over the female sex may be once more proclaimed as a fundamental law of society.³

For the women of the people, it is not enough to understand and denounce the social and economic problem that generates prostitution and its consequences. It is necessary to take an active part in the struggle for women's emancipation as an intrinsic part of the struggle for class emancipation. We must combat bourgeois morality and revisionism because sexual exploitation will not be eradicated through mere punitive measures or liberal reforms such as the regulation of prostitution. Sexual exploitation will be eradicated as the struggle against the system of exploitation and oppression of capital advances, in an organized way and with the elevation of class consciousness in the midst of the struggle for women's emancipation. We must incite, especially among the youth, a relentless fight against the naturalization of prostitution, encourage a new culture, proletarian morality, and active participation in the class struggle.

³Engels, Friedrich. "The Family: The Monogamous Family." *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.