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### Amsterdam's Red Light District and The Body Autonomy of Sex Workers

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# Amsterdam's Red Light District and The Body Autonomy of Sex Workers

By Kathryn Ariella Pataki

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## **Abstract**

Can one's sale of their own body ever be consensual? Is sex work inherently an act of violence against the body of which one buys? Feminists have puzzled over the politics of selling sex for as long as sex has been sold. While the selling of sex has been a polarizing feminist concern for decades, how are there so many mixed views that all are considered feminist in perspective? In analyzing the autonomy of sex workers, this paper focuses on the city of Amsterdam and its infamous Red Light District. Of importance in this inquiry is the examination of the history, key actors, and feminist perspectives that have shaped the laws and policies regulating the reality of the Red Light District in Amsterdam.

Included in this paper is qualitative-mixed methods data, participant observations and an interview with a public health nurse hired by the city of Amsterdam to aid sex workers, that is used to expand on Amsterdam as a specific location of analysis. Therefore, this paper argues that the legalization of sex work enables sex workers to be more autonomous in their work and in their everyday lives as opposed to the other legal approaches. While this paper makes the claim that legalization is the best approach for regulating sex work and enabling sex workers to be autonomous, this paper also argues for more sex-worker driven legislation that works to lessen the way the bodies of sex workers are hyper-policed. The Netherlands has made some serious strides in terms of legislating for sex worker's rights but the country as a whole needs to work more to protect, work alongside, and destigmatize sex workers as a whole.

**Key Words: Sex Work, Prostitution, Amsterdam, Red Light District, Body Autonomy, Choice, Feminism, Globalization, Transnationalism**

**Executive Summary**

This thesis describes Amsterdam's Red Light District and the body autonomy of the sex workers who work within the brothels that line De Wallen. The approach this research takes is to analyze the body autonomy of sex workers not only in regard to the policies that regulate their work within brothels, but also in regard to the feminist theories which have long shaped and influenced policy. While Amsterdam is known as a city that advocates for sex worker's rights through the legalization of the practice, there is still a push back from radical feminists.

Marianne Craneen is a public health nurse hired by the city of Amsterdam to work at the organization P&G292 to service sex workers in Amsterdam's Red Light District. Through our discussion, she described her very real fear of The Netherlands adopting policy mimicking Sweden's policy on sex work. Sweden's policy regarding sex work was influenced by radical feminist beliefs aimed at the abolition of sex work. Sex work itself is not illegal, as this line of feminist thought still aims at liberating and advocating for the rights of sex workers. Instead, Sweden makes it illegal to buy sex. In this way Sweden is hoping to eliminate the need for sex work. Marianne described Amsterdam adopting Sweden's policy as her fear as she believes that this type of policy makes it impossible and dangerous for sex workers to survive. Marianne expressed her worry in our conversation that radical feminism was infiltrating The Netherlands and that soon the liberal policies that have allowed the Red Light District to survive would be placed into question.

Essentially, radical feminism advocates for sex workers in that the commodification of their bodies and intimacy is a form of female oppression due to the highly gendered and sexed nature of sex work. Radical feminism argues that because of the patriarchal structure that has enabled the commodification of women's bodies, sex work is inherently oppressive and should be eradicated completely. Liberal feminists thought advocate for sex workers by highlighting their right to choose their line of work. Liberal feminism is against the notions that sex workers cannot be autonomous in their decisions and that their existence is one of inherent oppression. These two belief systems of feminist thought have continuously influenced policy and advocacy about the sex industry along with the lived experiences of sex workers. While these two lines of thought seem to inherently contradict each other, they both advocate for the rights of those working within the sex industry. This thesis aims at understanding both of these stances, through the context of the Red Light District. While they contradict each other, they both have essentially the same purpose: to end the oppression of the marginalized community of individuals who work within the sex industry. This paper recognizes the importance of perspectives and aims at finding a neutral ground between the two. In analyzing these perspectives, this thesis asks the question of how these two feminist belief systems can work together to benefit the lived experiences of sex workers.

In conclusion, this thesis discusses the ways in which Amsterdam's Red Light District has been shaped due to feminist politics influencing policy. While there are two lines of feminist thought, this analysis recognizes the ways in which both lines of thought can contribute to creating effective policy that caters to those within the sex industry and their autonomy as individuals and workers. As Marianne Craanen discussed in an earlier part of our conversation, there is still a lot that needs to change within the Red Light District. Although sex work is legal,

Marianne expressed her disdain for the stigmatization that society still places on sex workers and how this societal stigmatization effects sex workers individual selves and their work.

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## **Introduction Part 1**

*Spread my ashes in the Red Light District  
The Dead amongst the living  
So alive  
De Wallen  
Where human life thrives  
Spread my ashes in the Red Light District  
The particles of my body washed in the reflection of Red  
As they float down the canal  
Lights shining on the surface  
Spirits and piss mixing and spilling over the edges  
Spread my ashes in the Red Light District  
So the last of my remains will mix with  
Semen  
Secretion  
And Sweat  
The living mixed with the dead  
In my temple  
My holy grave  
Among the sinners and the saints  
Among Gods disguised as the most broken  
Among the whores and prostitutes  
My Gods  
Those who take the most broken and desperate of us mortals into their bodies  
A place of worship  
Spread my ashes in the Red Light District  
So that my remains may remain  
Holy  
For where else can all of humanity go  
Who else can take us all into their most sacred places  
Take the pain  
Take the longing  
Take the violence  
Take the desire  
Take the abuse  
Take the deepest fantasies  
Confined behind closed doors  
The secrets that no one admits yet are somehow gifted in the form of currency  
And take it all while being condemned  
Human confessionals  
Dying for our sins  
Maybe living  
Are you cleansed now?  
Spread my ashes in the Red Light District  
The sacred ground*



*Spread my ashes*  
*Amen*

~

It might be considered heretical to call a place such as the Red Light District of Amsterdam holy ground. It may seem unlikely to call the women cloaked in Red Lights Gods; to equate bodies being entered to a holy temple. Perhaps, it is even astounding to mention the Red Light District in terms of sacredness at all. *Spread my ashes* repeated in my mind as I walked through the crowded streets illuminated red. *Spread my ashes* repeated as I came face to face with the living, the breathing, the screaming, the dancing, the stumbling, the moaning, the belligerent humans crossing my path and bumping into me. *Spread my ashes* repeated in my mind as the ground I walked on suddenly became holy. *Spread my ashes* was on repeat in my mind but these words had nothing to do with death or dying. These words were not about feeling dead. These words felt a sacredness amidst the chaos. The Red Light District suddenly felt holy.

The women in the windows looked like goddesses. They stood there in their mightiness. While many turned away clients, many others welcomed them into their windows, and what one can assume to be their bodies. People come to them with their fantasies and they deliver. We come to them with our pain and they deliver. People come to them with their bodies and they make us feel loved. People come to them with their cynicism, their critiques, their threats, their violent attacks on their lifestyles, and yet their lifestyle is one that has been asked of them. I repeat *spread my ashes in the Red Light District* to emphasize the humanity and compassion that is often overlooked among the sin symbolized by Red Lights.

## **Introduction Part 2**

The Netherlands is a nation in which prostitution is legalized. Within The Netherlands, the city of Amsterdam stands out for its many visible brothels where one can see the legislation brought to life. Amsterdam is a city well known for its Red Light District. Located amidst the city center and canals, its buildings are lit or illuminated with red and purple lights during the night but whose windows are cloaked in red curtains throughout the day. That is, unless perhaps, you happen to be walking down a side street, and are suddenly faced with the silhouette of a woman baring her body to you, and maybe even tapping on the glass of the window that separates you from her. During the night, you'll see many more women and a lot fewer curtains. It may come as a shock, when her mannequin-like body moves, and you realize she is not a mannequin. That is what I felt when I stumbled into the Red Light District, unknowingly, as a United States citizen walking around Amsterdam casually. After the initial shock, I felt a sense of shame; for the body I thought to be inanimate was actually very animate and alive.

The Red Light District was given its name due to the red lights that illuminate women who are selling themselves in the windows in this area of downtown. For foreigners, the Red Light District may either come as an immoral shock or as a sort of paradise; a location full of sin and sinners or blissful escape into fantasies. Either way, for those coming from countries with various and often harsh laws regarding sex work, The Netherlands might come across as lawless. That is far from the truth however. In fact, the existence of Amsterdam's Red Light District is the product of numerous laws and policies that have been put in place. The legislation did not arise out of thin air. The legislation has a rich history of activists, feminists, and officials who shaped the Red Light District into what it is today.

The feminist debate that speaks the loudest in regard to the body autonomy of sex workers is between radical feminism, which poses that sex work is inherently oppressive, and liberal

feminism, which poses that individual choice is the sole factor that decides if one is oppressed within the sex industry. The fact is that sex has always and will always be politicized. You have heard it a thousand or so times- Sex sells. But, what happens when one sells sex? Activists and academics have been pursuing this question for decades and the answer comes in various forms.

There is one commonality between all the answers and that is the concern for sex workers well-being. The nuance in the debate surrounding the rights and autonomy of workers who sell sex is in critical need of analysis. While it is important to acknowledge that the context of sex work differs from different individual sex workers and from different locations, it is equally important to understand the roles policies and legislation play in protecting the livelihood of the individuals they are meant to serve. With the constant debate surrounding whether sex workers are autonomous beings in their work in opposition to the notion that they are an oppressed group, it is important to understand where both of these perspectives are meaningful but also where they are flawed. While this analysis might not end the debate on different feminist perspectives on sex work, it intends to shorten the gap between the dominant discourses surrounding sex work and the well-being of workers.

## **Feminist Perspectives on Sex Work**

### *Radical*

“Radical feminists characterize prostitution as an abuse of human rights, regardless of whether it is forced or voluntary, and have fought for its abolition. They have had a substantial impact on the development and adoption of antitrafficking legislation and instruments in various countries and at the international level” (Sutherland 2004: 141). It may come across that radical feminists are the moral police of feminists regarding sex work, but it is clear that their position is

a lot more than just a stance against sex. Radical feminist thought has contributed at large to women's rights and to the safety of those within the sex industry. Radical feminism holds an important space within the debate surrounding the legal status of sex work and, therefore, in analyzing policies regarding prostitution.

“It is a cruel lie to suggest that decriminalization or legalization will protect anyone in prostitution. There is much evidence that whatever its legal status, prostitution causes great harm to women” (Farley 2004: 1994). Farley's (1994) perspective on sex work is in alignment with most self-identified radical feminist thinkers. The main standpoint of radical feminist theory on sex work is that it is a form of gender oppression. Regardless of context or situation, the act of selling and purchasing sex is an act of violence on the body of the recipient according to radical feminism. The notion of selling sex as oppressive and violent does not end with the body of the recipient, however, but extends past the free choice of the individual, and onto the bodies of those affected by a male dominated society: women. The position of radical feminist thought disregards sex work as a form of labor entirely and instead only regards sex work in terms of women and their subordinated position to men (Jaggar 1997).

Radical feminist thought lacks the intersection that is so greatly needed when analyzing the effects of patriarchy on sex workers. Not only does it discount that other genders work within the sex industry, but it acknowledges a gender-binary that excludes marginalized individuals who do not conform to being either “male” or “female.” Also, this perspective acknowledges the gender identity of “women” as mere victims rather than as initial and conscious actors in their own existence.

The gendered typology of radical feminism justifies the abolition of sex work through attempts to gender the labor involved and the industry's position in society. To be clear, focusing

on sex work as a women's issue is relevant due to the mass amount of female sex workers that make up the supply and demand side of the industry. The very existence of sex work is founded upon notions of female sexuality as opposed to male sexuality, so the binary constructions of gender cannot be left out when discussing the industry of sex work (Mottier 2008). Also, the sex industry itself feeds into gendered power hierarchies that rely on the subordination of women.

While most notable perspectives on sex work agree that the industry predominately affects women, the solely gender-based argument that sex work constitute a violence against women systematically erases other gender identities from the debate. The erasure of other identities is critical in analyzing the radical feminist perspective. Crenshaw (1991) is famous for her theory on how intersecting identities create even more marginalized communities among groups that are already in precarious and underprivileged systems in society (1991). In terms of sex work, we must then ask ourselves, what identities are at located at the margins of the debate? In terms of gender, those who do not identify as female or those who are not a part of the gender binary are often left out of the radical perspective. Therefore, radical feminist perspectives regarding gendering the sex trade is often critiqued both in terms of the gender-binary notion it perpetuates and how it marginalizes different gender identities that participate in the sex industry.

Also, in terms of gender, radical feminist thought uses a problematic history of the gendered constructions of sexuality. The history behind the politics of female sexuality play a role in the ways in which sex work is analyzed by radical feminists who fight for abolition of the industry. Mottier (2008) discusses the ways in which female sexuality has been monitored and policed by noting how female sexuality is often socially constructed as passive and in opposition to male sexuality. Meanwhile, male sexuality is socially constructed as aggressive and

uncontrollable. Feminists have consistently worked to deconstruct similar notions associated with female sexuality, however, radical feminist thought has greatly perpetuated this construction of passive female sexuality versus aggressive male sexuality within the sex industry. By continuing to place female sexuality in opposition to male sexuality, the argument that sex workers are oppressed heightens the idea that female sexuality is passive and that sex workers need “saving” (Mottier 2008).

Radical feminism also describes how not only all sex workers oppressed, but how they are also actors in their own oppression. A central focus of the argument of women’s oppression under sex work is that under patriarchy, women are forced into subordination. Radical feminism theorizes that the effects of patriarchy are so interwoven into society that women submit to their own subordination (Sutherland 2004: 142). This theorizing is also critiqued on the way it victimizes individuals who are involved in the sex industry by erasing their specific positions within it and their lived-experiences by conceptualizing them as oppressed to begin with. Mohanty (1988) delineates the way in which conceptualizing an “Other” as oppressed is inherently problematic because of the way it victimizes the “Other” without any significant context. By conceptualizing all sex workers as a distinguishable category that faces systematic oppression, radical feminist thought leaves out the specific contexts and experiences that are crucial to sex workers lives. In this sense, while fighting for the autonomy of sex workers under the notion that they lack autonomy due to their occupation, radical feminist thought takes away the autonomy of sex workers and their ability to conceptualize their own experiences.

There are also misconceptions that are used in justifying the abolition of sex work in all contexts. In arguing that sex work cannot be autonomous because of the nature of the work,

Anderson (2001) states that treating sex as a job does not allow workers to be autonomous due to the nature of the jobs. “The principal problem with treating sex as just another use of the body is that it is inconsistent with a number of the restrictions that make autonomy possible in sexual conduct” (Anderson 2001, 763). However, while Anderson makes important critiques about how viewing prostitution as a job is detrimental to bodily autonomy, he fails to state how prostitution as a job is regulated differently within different locations. This argument is based on hypothetical scenarios that are inconsistent with the way prostitution is regulated as a job within legalized systems that are present such as in Amsterdam. For example, the article describes how a condition of the job could be unwanted sex that employers could force upon employees. When looking at the regulation of prostitution in Amsterdam, prostitutes are treated as free agents and there are not allowed to be “employers.” Rather, there are brothel owners who rent out their windows to prostitutes who act as free agents. The view Anderson (2001) presents is consistent with radical feminist thought in relation to sex work and the inherently oppressive use of bodies.

Another critique of radical feminist thought regarding sex work is the way that sex work and sex trafficking are often conflated as one singular phenomena. In fact, a lot of activists against sex trafficking work towards the abolition of sex work in general. For example, Miller (2008) describes the worldwide phenomena of sex trafficking and its effects on individuals within the industry. Miller (2008) describes sex trafficking as slavery, as it is rightly so. In describing what Miller calls “modern slavery,” he says, “Today, the news media and academics unthinkingly use words- "forced laborer," "child soldier," and "sex worker"- that have their own anesthetic effect, and along with others, I have insisted on calling slavery by its right name” (Miller 2008: 54). The conception of “sex work” as a form of slavery or as sex trafficking is then promoted further when Miller (2008) argues,

The 21st-century Dutch are leading exponents of the idea that legalizing and regulating prostitution can reduce sex slavery. But as they have discovered, it is hard to promote a legalized sex trade, with its inevitable links to organized crime, without becoming a magnet for slave traders (55-56).

Not only does this argument lack unmistakable evidence supporting that the legalized sex trade promotes organized crime regarding sex trafficking, but this argument also leaves out the key policies that The Netherlands has in place to prevent sex trafficking in their legalized model. In advocating the approach that legalized sex work opens the door for the illicit sex trade, other authors have also used either a lack of evidence or faulty evidence. For example, Cho, Dreher, and Neumayer (2012) use economic theory to calculate the flow of trafficked individuals within legalized vs. illegalized economies of sex work. While this model is based on existing data, the authors themselves state how the data is unreliable and inconsistent. “One of the biggest challenges of doing research on human trafficking is the scarcity of reliable and comparable data” (69). The authors then go on to discuss their use of data in terms of “reflecting fragmented information only” (Cho et. Al 2012: 69). Therefore, although the authors conclude that a legalized system of sex work increases the flow of sex trafficking, they are unable to provide or use any sufficient data to support this. To add to this argument, Wagenaar and Altink (2012) discuss the way in which policies regarding sex work are often regulated regarding morality. In this way, the authors describe that when looking at numbers such as statistics, morality politics are different from others because the numbers are used for their symbolic value rather than their factual value.

When looking at data that is supposed to be reflective of sex trafficking, one would need to analyze the ways in which sex trafficking exists in certain locations and contexts. The way that sex trafficking is combated, documented, and policed vary worldwide. This is apparent through the different models of legislation that are present across different governments.



Therefore, one is in no way of knowing whether the data each nation provides is even reflective of sex trafficking. To be able to analyze the flow of sex trafficking vs. sex work worldwide, one would also have the task of thoroughly investigating the specific locations and contexts it exists in and the ways it translates across borders.

In analyzing radical feminist thought regarding sex work, it is apparent that there are many flaws in its logic. These apparent flaws are only loopholes situated within a larger feminist consciousness. While it may seem that radical consciousness erases the individual experiences of sex workers, it situates the individual experiences within a larger context. While many sex workers fight for their right to exist, radical consciousness locates their existence within a frame of patriarchal domination. As hooks (2000) has so eloquently described, self-determination and personal choices are not enough to drive the feminist movement forward and to dismantle inherent forces of oppression. The existence of sex work is a product of patriarchal and gender oppression; whether the bodies being consumed are male or non-binary. To categorize an individual's self-determination and choice as feminist in nature forgets the solidarity needed with the feminist movement and can be categorized as "anything goes" feminism. (DiPietro Lecture September 8, 2016).

Another critical aspect of the radical feminist movement against sex work is the concern for the physical and mental safety and well-being of sex workers. Rather than simply looking at the laws that are used to regulate legalized sex work, Farley (2004) uses the lived experiences of sex workers working within a legalized system to supply her data. Sex workers are not only more prone to abuse by certain clients, many experience the effects of PTSD associated with the abuses they may face from their work environment and the way in which dissociation is often necessary with the nature of their work. There are clearly health risks that are associated with

this line of work, and these risks should not be discounted solely in the name of personal choice. Farley (2004) also describes how many sex workers feel that their work regulations are a means to capitalize off their bodies, through taxation, rather than a legitimate claim of their work.

It is also important not to discount the fact that sex work and sex trafficking often coincide within the same framework of oppression and can coincide within the same legal systems. Although sex workers and individuals who have been trafficked are completely different populations, their experiences often overlap, and they are often treated in the same ways. Huissman and Kleemans (2014) delineate how legalized systems of prostitution can allow loopholes to exist that may hide victims of sex trafficking. At the same time, however, the authors also describe the ways in which sex traffickers may find it harder to operate within a legalized system. As described in Cho et. al (2012) there is little data that is available or accurate enough to track sex trafficking and the ways it manifests across borders. Therefore, it would be hard to know how often victims of sex trafficking are lost within a legalized system. Also, because sex workers and individuals who were trafficked into the sex industry often share the same narrative in terms of who is interpreting their experiences, it is hard to know whether trafficked individuals are actually hidden within the legalized system and whose experiences are otherwise categorized as “free choice” and autonomous workers.

In conclusion, radical feminist thought perpetuates the narrative that sex workers are victims of their own design, passive in their own oppression, completely gendered, and in no way autonomous in their decisions, their argument is also grounds for a greater analysis. The radical feminist argument explains sex work within the broader need and critical analysis of solidarity within the feminist movement. Radical feminist thought does not discount either the important negative effects that legalization may bring upon sex workers bodies in the name of

free choice. Lastly, while sex worker and sex trafficking are two completely different phenomena, they are often conflated and defined in similar ways and so they must be discussed in similar ways.

### *Liberal*

“Sex radicals have offered compelling opposition, shifting the focus from the abolition of sex-work to the human rights of sex workers. Their legal interventions have been geared toward self-determination for sex workers, including decent working conditions and freedom of movement” (Sutherland 2004: 141). In Sutherland’s article on the opposing views that dominate the discussion on sex work, “sex radicals” are referenced when referring to liberal feminist thought. Liberal feminist thought is often categorized by the main view that sex work is simply just another form of labor.

“Sex work is work!” You will often hear liberal feminists chant or see on passing signs at a women’s march. The concept that sex work is work is one that completely contradicts the radical feminist perspective. Like Marxist thought, radical feminism does not look at sex work as a viable occupation. To be clear however, under Marxist thought, no form of occupation under capitalism is free of corruption or oppression (Tucker 1978). For radical feminists, capitalism is equal to a male-dominated society. Liberal feminist thought instead places sex work on the same platform as any other form of occupation regardless of the gendered dimensions and dangers associated with sex work.

One of the main dangers of liberal feminist thought is the analysis that sex work is a valid occupation claiming it is no different than other occupations. This framework does not recognize the dangers of some forms of labor that exist under capitalism. As Roberts (2012) describes,

there is a dangerous trend towards transnational business feminism. Transnational business feminism is described as a quick fix that feminists turned to to impose more gendered-dynamics within the capitalist global workforce. “While many Marxist and other critical IPE scholars have argued that the crisis revealed deep structural contradictions and tensions in contemporary capitalism, transnational business feminists claim to have discovered an easy fix: a healthy dose of estrogen” (Roberts 2012: 90).

Womanhood and the qualities associated with being a woman and thus constructed in terms of profitability. As argued by Roberts (2012), part of feminist consciousness is to dismantle systems of oppression, such as labor markets, rather than integrate into them. “TBF [Transnational Business Feminism] tends to view labour markets as the key to women’s liberation, from a critical feminist perspective, labour markets are themselves constituted by unequal power relations between capitalists and labour, as well as between men and women” (Roberts 2012: 94). While the legal sex industry is constituted as a labor market where women and other marginalized communities have the ability to profit off of their own bodily labor and on their own terms, it is insufficient for feminist thought to be complacent with the system of capitalism. Capitalism as a system institutionalizes the oppression of marginalized communities and so it is not enough to integrate into the system. Instead, we must work towards dismantling capitalism and the power divides it sanctions.

When viewing the sex industry as an asset of capitalism, one must ask, why is liberation characterized by being able to participate in oppressive systems? When seeking liberation for gender equality, we must ask equal to whom? Therefore, liberal feminist thought lacks the perspective that the inclusion of sex work into the labor market is just another form of oppression under capitalism.

When discussing where liberal feminist thought falls short in terms of sex work regarding capitalism, Farley (2004) establishes how the legalization of sex work under capitalist economies is used to profit off the bodies of sex workers. Farley (2004) goes as far as to say that the legalization of sex work is not about legitimizing the experiences and livelihoods of sex workers, but rather to exploit their profitability in terms of taxes (Farley 2004). As with any legal occupation, the state taxes individuals. A problem that is associated with taxation in terms of sex work however, is if sex workers are not fully able to benefit off the state. In enacting taxation, individuals receive certain benefits and protections under the state. In terms of sex work, sex workers are often not taken care of by the state, further stigmatized, and expected to advocate for themselves.

In fact, there is a lack of discourse surrounding the ways in which societies can further protect and legitimize sex work and sex workers (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Kempadoo et al. (1998) describes the way in which the liberalization of sex work has led to a disconnect between human rights activists and sex workers. While many activists have now agreed that sex work is a personal choice and disconnected from sex trafficking, they often use this discourse to remove themselves from the front lines of advocacy for sex workers and instead place all their efforts into advocacy work for victims of sex trafficking. The narrative is one where the personal choice of sex workers to work within the sex industry is one that means that they are complicit in the sex industry regardless of any injustices they face. This narrative then leaves sex workers as advocates for themselves and as complicit victims in their own oppression (Kempadoo et al. 1998).

While radical feminist thought often categorizes sex work as an oppressive occupation rooted in a deep history of oppression, liberal feminist thought instead focuses on the individual

experiences of the workers working within the sex industry. Their main focal point in discussing any type of sexual relations is regarding consent. Liberal feminist theorizing of consent regards everyone as equal (Sutherlands 2004: 144). This notion that everyone is equal in society contradicts feminist theorizing which holds the standpoint that distinct groups experience different intersections of oppression and so equality-based feminism may be inaccurate. Instead of advocating for equality or feeling satisfied with equal statuses, a core component of feminism is the critical analysis of what equality really means and a strive for equity-based justice instead.

Instead of gendering sex work, liberal feminist thought focuses on the individual and their position within the industry. A core component of the sole focus on the individual in the way it deludes the bigger picture of how sexual economies function off the bodies of often marginalized communities. By only giving voice to one individual, policy may not be effective in tackling the issues associated with sex work and the patriarchal systems of oppression that still make this a dangerous job for an individual to work in.

Although there are some clear problems with the ways that liberal feminism approaches sex work, liberal feminism also provides an income and financial benefits to sex workers working on their own terms. For some individuals, working within the sex industry is just simply a better option for them than other forms of labor. Also, when discussing the ill effects of capitalism on sex workers, it is important not to use morality politics (Wagenaar et. Al 2012).

Another key component that makes liberal feminist thought important in the sex work debate is the way in which it distinguishes sex workers and individuals who have been trafficked into the sex industry as two distinct groups rather than conflating the two. Sex workers and individuals who have been trafficked into the sex industry require different attention. In conflating the legalized sex industry as the same phenomena as the illegal sex trafficking

industry, individuals who do not characterize themselves as victims are often victimized while individuals who have suffered from being trafficked into the sex industry might not be getting the attention that they deserve.

Lastly, liberal feminism is essential in that it gives voices to individuals who have experience working within the sex industry. While it is important to recognize feminist solidarity and the goals of the feminist movement, it is equally important that sex workers and those who have experience within the sex industry are not forgotten in the conversation. Without their individual stories and voices, their needs may be lost within the policy and politics of those who have no experience within the industry, but rather only within feminist politics. It is important that we do not hierarchize feminist knowledge and understand that individual's experiences hold just as much value, if not more, than just a background in academic feminist thought.

In conclusion, liberal feminist thought has done a lot for the sex worker's rights movement. It is not enough step aside and let sex workers self-determination and personal choices reflect the ways in which they are treated in society. Although sex work is legalized in many areas, sex workers still must advocate for their own rights and face stigmatization from society. Therefore, legalization and the liberal ideology that personal choice is enough when discussing sex work is not enough. There is still something missing.

### *Radical and Liberal Feminist Thought: They Can Work Together*

While both feminist perspectives remain critical to the construction of policies regarding sex work, they remain extensively different in theory. At the same time, both perspectives focus on the same general issue. Radical and liberal feminist thought regarding sex work both focuses

on the betterment of sex workers lives and society as a whole. In critically analyzing both feminist theories from a critical feminist lens, it is clear that neither one of them is sufficient on its own to legislate policy for the betterment of sex workers lives.

Although the two are categorized as two different feminist theories relevant to two different feminist movements, they do not follow a linear line progression. Rather, they both interact with each other and bring up different ways that feminist theorizing can be used to further the rights of sex workers and the betterment of the sex industry. Sandoval (1991) describes different modes of feminist theorizing as typologies that reflect oppositional consciousness proposing that we instead move towards a differential consciousness. Rather than creating a hierarchy of the different typologies, Sandoval (1991) suggests that they are used in a conversation together. In conclusion, in analyzing the sex industry and the radical and liberal feminist perspectives that dominate the discourse, it is not sufficient to choose one over the other. Instead, one must use differential consciousness as proposed by Sandoval (1991).

## **Defining Body Autonomy**

Body autonomy is defined as the ability to govern one's own body. Body autonomy entails having free choice over oneself and their use of their own body. In regarding bodily autonomy of individuals working within the sex industry, it is clear that both radical and liberal feminist perspectives differ in the way they define body autonomy. Liberal feminism works to destigmatize sex work and to integrate sex work into society. Body autonomy is regarded as a choice that individuals within the sex industry can make. While there is an emphasis on the individual's personal decisions, liberal feminism often fail to realize the sociohistorical contexts



that have placed sex workers in their line of work. Also, while advocating for individual choice, liberal feminism is critiqued by their notion that everyone has the same ability to make certain decisions. This notion undermines the differences and inequalities that are present within most societies. Unfortunately, liberal feminism is thus critiqued for using a privileged perspective in analyzing the concept of body autonomy within the lived experiences of sex workers. This perspective is privileged in as much as it accounts mostly for the experiences of autonomy is often geared towards Western, upper class, White bodies (Meyers 2014).

Radical feminism's perspective on bodily autonomy proves to be one in which those in power have the privilege of deciding others' control over their own bodies. Radical feminism is known for its strict perspective that all forms of sex work must be banned because it is inherently oppressive to the workers. This strict control perspective leaves no room for sex workers to decide for themselves if they wish to remain in the sex industry and leaves little room for them to advocate for their own right to make decisions. Instead, sex workers are inherently identified as victims who lack true autonomy for their choices and bodily decisions. As Meyer's (2014: 433) states, "Even under appalling conditions people exercise capacities for choice and action that deserve respect." Therefore, radical feminism is critiqued for the way that their position on body autonomy is paternalistic and elitist in the sense that those in positions of power are capable of making choices for those they deem unable to (Meyers 2014).

Cianciarulo (2008: 67) defines body autonomy in opposition to the way in which radical feminism does, "Choice determines whether a person is a victim or a voluntary actor in a situation involving sex and sexuality." The way the definition of "choice" is utilized here regarding the sex industry makes clear the difference between sex workers and those trafficked into the sex industry. The lack of context and privileged voices that are present within both

radical and liberal feminist frameworks thus calls for a greater analysis of body autonomy outside of these two dominating perspectives.

A crucial perspective to add to the definition of body autonomy within the sex industry is analyzing whose perspective it is in. If the perspective is not rooted in the sociohistorical context of sex work in a specific location and if it is not relative to the individuals who work within that context, will it suffice? Haraway (1988) looks at this specific question by locating the way “vision” works in deciphering knowledge. “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mystically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (581). The vision described here is a form of power that is used to create knowledge without one having to situate themselves within the real life one cannot live or be without. This gaze has roots within militarism, colonialism, orientalism, patriarchy, and capitalism. While this privilege of gaze has historically been utilized by White men, it translates across demographics and can be used by anyone who does not locate themselves within the sociohistorical context of an issue and uses perception to create power differentials between those who see from above and those who are defined to be marked/seen as “Others.”

The concept of situated knowledges is very important when analyzing the body autonomy of sex workers. The lived experiences of sex workers and their control over their bodies should neither be romanticized nor appropriated. Therefore, in analyzing the way in which sex workers are autonomous over their own work, one must understand that by chance you have never been in that position, the knowledge you are producing will never fully encompass the body autonomy

of others. As a individual who has never been situated within the sexual economy, my analysis of the body autonomy of sex workers is limited and is only a glance from “above.”

Alcoff (1991) details the importance of location as well in terms of creating knowledge. Like Haraway (1988), Alcoff (1991) delineates the way in which speaking out on behalf of others and their experiences inherently puts you in a position of power. Regardless of one’s intentions, this produces an infantilization of those on whose behalf one is speaking. While Alcoff (1991) acknowledges the dangers of centering one’s voice within debates that do not concern us, she also emphasizes that those in positions of privilege do not retreat from conversations. Rather, Alcoff (1991), like Haraway (1988) calls for a critical understanding of one’s position within society and how one’s position can be used for the betterment of society without infantilizing and speaking for marginalized communities.

Transnational feminism also adds onto the theorizing of where knowledge comes from and challenges both radical and liberal perspectives on sex work. A transnational feminist perspective would situate the knowledge of sex workers within the discussion and as their own definitions of body autonomy. By centering their experiences, their voices, and their own definitions of what body autonomy looks like and is enacted within their lived-experiences, the hierarchy of knowledge is decentered from those in power (Meyers 2014). Mohanty (1988) makes the transnational feminist perspective clear when discussing gaze in the same way as Haraway (1988). Mohanty (1988) describes the ever-present gaze of the West and its role to homogenizing groups of individuals with separate experiences. When groups are centered around being part of a specific category, important differences and experiences are left out of the discussion. Also, those who are the most marginalized are often understood and made to be inherent victims regardless of the location of their own specific contexts. Victimizing individuals

essentially produces injustice more than it does to uncover injustice. While Mohanty (1988) discusses the gaze as Western vs. “Other,” there is also an othering mechanism in the decider’s gaze that looks at sex workers by removing them from a marginalized sector. In discussing the body autonomy of sex workers, one must always be aware that sex workers themselves should be the ones at the center of the discussion.

At the same time however, this does not mean that those located outside of sex work must “retreat” (Alcoff 1991), but rather that individuals must remain mindful of the sociohistorical context in which they are advocating in and the wants and needs of sex workers whose voices should be centered. The sociohistorical context of Amsterdam regarding sex work is one of male privilege and political agendas. Sex work was initially legal to benefit male citizens and has been legal ever since the late 1900s due to politicians wanting to combat sex trafficking. This history must be analyzed because it affects sex workers lives to this day. In advocating for the choice of sex work within the legalized system, one must understand that “choice” from an outsider’s perspective of the sex industry is different than how choice operates within the sex industry due to a history of male privilege and political agendas.

It is essential in that a transnational perspective on body autonomy is utilized when analyzing specific locations of the sex industry. This utilization would encompass the understanding of the multilayered histories of body autonomy and destitution. The body, or embodiment, in transnational feminist theorizing helps us understand relations of power, the ways society makes sense of bodily differences, their alignment with discipline and rules, and their responses or resistances to what is considered “normal,” while keeping in mind that what is considered “normal” differs across different sociohistorical contexts.

In conclusion, in discussing the body autonomy of sex workers, one cannot determine that the construction of body autonomy is transferable across different contexts and bodies. Also, sex workers are not a homogenous group and therefore their specific locations and bodies must be the site of analysis. Meanwhile, it is those who are located within the context of the sex industry whose voices need to be centered within the conversation and we cannot rely on our own disconnected viewpoints when discussing the enactments of bodily autonomy within the sex industry.

## **Methodology**

The analysis this paper draws upon utilizes both radical and liberal feminist perspectives and feminist perspectives on body autonomy to analyze Amsterdam's Red Light District and the sex workers who work within the sex industry within this specific location. The two dominating feminist perspectives on sex work, radical and liberal, are woven together with other feminist perspectives, particularly intersectional and transnational perspectives, to analyze whether Amsterdam's Red Light District is regulated in a way that enables sex workers to claim body autonomy with cohesive choices about the ways bodies are used, the conditions of their work, and the rights and protections they receive. This paper places the lived experiences of sex workers within the location of the city of Amsterdam and its specific Red Light District, the historical context of sex work within the Red Light District, and the ways in which sex workers bodies are policed through legislation and policies that are meant to regulate sex work.

While the legal frameworks that regulate sex work in Amsterdam's Red Light District are centered through this analysis, there is a specific focus on feminist perspectives and theorizations. Feminism offers framework to analyze sex work in terms of the bodily autonomy

of the individuals who are at the core of the economy of sex work: the sex workers themselves. Also, the Swedish policy is studied in comparison to Amsterdam's model of legalization and strict regulation. For example, Sweden is utilized to juxtapose The Netherlands in terms of legalization. The Swedish model is extremely different in terms of legalization. While sex work is legalized, there is strict control on the bodies of the clients of sex workers. In fact, sex work is legal across Sweden, but buying sex is illegal (Carson and Edwards 2011.) How do these policies operate regarding the body autonomy of sex workers? The use of these separate locations and policies are utilized to answer that question: how do they enable the body autonomy of sex workers?

The research and methods used to formulate this paper's argument are a mixture of feminist theories, secondary literature reviews, and a mixture of qualitative research that included participant observation of Amsterdam's Red Light District and an interview with a public health nurse who was hired by the city of Amsterdam to service sex workers. It is important to note that none of the secondary literature that I used was written from the perspective of a sex worker. My research was limited in the lack of narratives specifically by sex workers. To build upon this research, in the future I will utilize the voices of sex workers within the industry. The observations were limited to a week's worth of nights in which Aalber's (2005) participant observatory research was utilized in terms of constructing the observations. Aalber's (2005) utilized participant observation within Amsterdam's Red Light District in order to gain an understanding about as to how sex workers interact with potential clients and pedestrians.

Amsterdam's Red Light District operates within the public sphere. There is a certain area of the City of Amsterdam where the sex industry is the most prominent and visible. There is the main area, De Wallen, which consists of mainly window operated brothels, sex shows, sex

shops, and bars. De Wallen then consists of many side streets that are made up of window brothels as well. In fact, most of the side streets right off of the main canal of De Wallen consist solely of window operated brothels. The fact that sex work operates mainly through window operated brothels in De Wallen means that sex work is located within the public sphere of De Wallen. Window operated brothels serve as a voyeuristic experience for anyone who happens to pass by. Sex workers occupy the windows and the windows serve as a physical division between the sex worker and possible clients, but also as an invitation to approach them to view and negotiate their services. In Amsterdam's Red Light District, all of the pedestrians are possible clients. As a researcher, I consumed sex work through my observations and through my consumption and voyeurism of sex workers and their clients. In collecting data and observing the way in which sex workers occupy their space, I was no different than the average client who goes to the Red Light District and is attentive to the sex workers within the brothel windows. In the windows, sex workers are products of their own making; whether they are sitting still on their smart phones, dancing in the windows, or smiling at passersby, there is the voyeuristic quality of the Red Light District that places all pedestrians in the category of consumers.

As a public sphere, Aalbers (2015) was able to observe some aspects of sex work, particularly, the way in which sex workers negotiated with their clients. Negotiations that in most contexts would take place in privacy and behind closed doors, are located out in the open in Amsterdam's Red Light District. As the windows are directed at any ongoing passerby, it is not hidden when some individual approaches a sex worker in a window to negotiate a sexual exchange. In Amsterdam's Red Light District, the private sphere merges with the public sphere and because of this, it becomes a view into how sex workers negotiate with their clients. While the view is narrow, it offers insight into how bodily negotiations and transactions are made, the

ways in which clients are attracted, and gives a face to who operates behind the brothel doors. These factors led me to mimic Aalbers (2015) research approach and add to his research.

Along with being a participant observer within the Red Light District. I also conducted an in-depth interview with Marianne Craanen, a public health nurse who works in P&G292. P&G292 is an organization that is operated by the city of Amsterdam to provide services specifically to sex workers. P&G292 provides to sex workers with health care, information resources, entering and existing strategies for the sex industry, and support. While Marianne is not a sex worker herself (she was not asked whether she has worked as a sex worker nor did she disclose whether she had or had not), she works directly within the sex industry by strictly servicing sex workers. Her position within the field of sex work made her an amazing resource for the research.

The research is extremely limited due to the very short amount of time I was able to engage in participant observation within the Red Light District. Also, it is limited in that I only interviewed one source. Therefore, both my observations and interview serve as resources rather than a conclusive set of data. It is also of great relevance that I did not interview any sex workers. In specifically analyzing the way in which sex workers embody autonomy, their voices and narratives are the most important. For future research, more observations of the Red Light District would be necessary along with more interviews with both sex workers and others who are directly positioned within the sex industry in The Netherlands. The analysis I am utilizing is a mixture of methods, however, it only adds to research that is already present within the field and to serve as a framework to build off of for future research in this direction.

It is also significant that I, myself as a researcher, is located within my work. As a United States citizen who has never worked within Amsterdam's Red Light District, my view is limited.



As a researcher analyzing the way sex workers are autonomous in their work and under what conditions and narratives, I serve as a framework builder in the way sex workers lives are experienced. I am not the voice of sex work within Amsterdam, nor am I trying to define the narrative of sex workers lives. Rather, I am using my privileged position as an outsider and as a researcher to add to debate on how sex work should be regulated and reconceptualize how society as a whole views sex workers and their position within society.

## **The Netherlands**

The Netherlands is famous for legalization of sex work, however, that was not always the case. In fact, in 1911 there was a strong push for the abolition of brothels and sex work all together (Outshoorn 2012: 234). Before this push, sex work was a normal part of society that many viewed as a necessary inclement of male sexuality (Boutellier 1991: 202). In the year of 1413, the bylaws of Amsterdam stated, “Because whores are necessary in big cities and especially in cities of commerce such as ours - indeed it is far better to have these women than not to have them - and also because the holy church tolerates whores on good grounds, for these reasons the court and sheriff of Amsterdam shall not entirely forbid the keeping of brothels” (Brants 1998: 621). From the beginning, the city of Amsterdam was known for its high tolerance of sex work. While sex workers were not acknowledged in terms of their rights, they were acknowledged because of the fulfillment of man’s sexual needs to which Amsterdam gave immense importance.

In 1911, when sex work was made illegal, it was due to Morality Laws (Outshoorn 2012). This shift to the illegalization of sex work was also a shift between sex workers being seen solely to service men’s sexual needs, to sex workers as being seen more in terms of their value as

people. Before, sex workers were seen as objects of desire, now sex workers were seen as the result of male oppression and individuals who require help in acquiring humanity. There was a societal push made by sex abolitionists and religious reformers to see sex workers as victims and women in need of saving. While this push criminalized brothels, pimping, and making revenue from the earnings of sex workers, sex workers themselves were not criminalized or punished because they were seen as inherent victims (Outshoorn 2012). This type of moralizing rhetors theory, this concept takes away the autonomy of sex workers and gives it to those who have the power to mandate the lives of them. Although the Morality Laws in Amsterdam disappeared less than a century later, Sweden policy today mirrors the Morality Laws regarding their approach to sex work. In Sweden, everyone involved in sex work, but the sex worker is criminalized. This is because sex workers are seen as inherent victims to men led under a strong radical feminist and abolitionist movement (Carson et. All 2011).

Hygienists provided another strong concept behind the enactment of the 1911 Morality Laws along with the abolitionists and religious reformers who made the shift to start thinking about sex workers for their personal qualities by depicting them as individuals in need of saving. Many individuals behind the enactment of the Morality Laws did not see sex workers as individuals but as a public health concern. This push towards criminalization of sex work was due to viewing sex workers as threats to their standards and carriers of venereal diseases (Boutellier 1991: 202). It is also of significance to note that the Morality Laws made abortions, contraceptives, and homosexuality illegal (Outshoorn 2012: 234). They stigmatized female sexuality and the controlling of their reproductive systems, homosexual identities, and sex workers. While we recognize that Amsterdam as a city has a history of sexual freedom and support of sex workers, it is also essential to understand that the beginnings of this history were

rooted in the dehumanization of sex workers by only considering them as tools to function under male sexuality, and that there was a period in which sex workers were highly stigmatized as both victims and carriers of disease.

In the second half of the century, there was another cultural shift in the city of Amsterdam that led city officials to change the Morality Laws. Around 1970, city officials noticed the way in which the sex industry became too pervasive to stop and how sex trafficking was becoming more present in Amsterdam and hard to stop (Outshoorn 2012). By the 1980s, the liberal feminist movement started to shift perspectives around the 1960s to notice sex as work and helped politicians legally change the ban on brothels and sex work. On the other hand, liberal feminists were motivated by the prevalence of sex trafficking because they realized that there was a difference between sex workers who chose to work in the sex industry, and those who were forced through trafficking. Politicians noticed the gravity of sex trafficking to all major cities worldwide and attempted to regulate sex work. Politicians had significant trouble reforming an industry that was illegal and so they were motivated to legalize sex work so that they could further regulate it and combat sex trafficking (Outshoorn 2012). With this new alliance of liberal feminists and politicians, they created a list of three demands: “lifting of the ban on brothels to improve the position of sex workers, residence permits for women who were trafficked so that they could testify against their traffickers and higher penalties for traffickers” (Outshoorn 2004a: 186). The legalization of sex work in Amsterdam was rooted in a fight to end sex trafficking, therefore, it is unfair to completely separate sex work and sex trafficking as two different phenomena and with separate legal frameworks in the setting of Amsterdam as they are inherently intertwined.

Today, the policy in Amsterdam has changed little from when it was initially legalized in the 1980s. Sex work is legal and operated as a sector of the labor force, while sex trafficking is still extremely illegal and combated through policy. The legalization of sex work in Amsterdam has led to many benefits to sex workers. As legally recognized workers and tax payers of Amsterdam, they receive health benefits, training, and resources such as the organization P&G292. Other sources that are provided relate to the lack of stigmatization of sex work within a legalized society. Sex workers legal status as workers within the city of Amsterdam allows them police protection and protection under the law. Brothels are equipped with emergency buttons that immediately notify the local police if a sex worker is endangered and they can testify in court without their status of being a sex worker jeopardizing their stance. Of course, this only occurs if there is no initial bias against sex workers by the acting forces.

They also receive the benefits of being able to operate under their own terms and as their own bosses. The window brothels in Amsterdam are procured by a rent rate that differs in terms of areas, times, and viewability. In this way, sex workers operate on their own time schedules and negotiate directly with brothel owners. In my interview with Marianne, the P&G292 nurse, she stated that, “Another thing is in The Netherlands, if you have a house, you cannot make a brothel of it. We have very strict laws, so everything is controlled.” In fact, as a way to combat sex trafficking in the Red Light District, sex workers have to rent out brothel windows themselves. Brothel owners are not allowed to rent to individuals who are obtaining the window on behalf of someone else. Also, when renting a window, a sex worker would need to provide the brothel owner with a license to operate as a sex worker within the city of Amsterdam. The license is used, again, to help combat the occurrence of sex trafficking within the Red Light

District and to ensure that the sex worker is a legal citizen of the European Union, and therefore, legally allowed to work in The Netherlands.

The Red Light District is operated as any other business force would be. This comes with certain negative attributes associated with capitalistic work. Sex work, although legalized, is often still viewed through stigmatization even in Amsterdam's Red Light District where it is so normalized. In Marianne's interview, she stated that the biggest problem that sex workers face in Amsterdam is serious stigmatization. Due to this stigmatization, it is fair to consider whether sex workers receive these benefits equitably. Farley (2004) describes the way that many sex workers feel that they do not receive many worker benefits within legalized sex work systems, but rather are used as just another form of taxation. Also, the licensing of sex workers may stigmatize them more as they are registered and branded as a sex worker. As a group that still faces stigmatization in Amsterdam, and is rooted in a history of stigmatization, the permit brand as a sex worker that the licensing of their profession mandates can prevent them from accessing certain societal benefits.

The city of Amsterdam historically varies in the way sex workers were thought to have agency. Before 1911, the agency of sex workers was not even regarded. The body autonomy of sex workers was individual, but at the same time, the state did not recognize it. Considered necessary tools to sustain men's sexual urges, the state tolerated their existence rather than a protected and legitimate one. For a period after 1911, sex worker gained the existence of victims or the existence of the dehumanization of "disease carriers." Like in prior centuries, many regarded sex workers as just an object. Rather than being deemed a necessary tool, sex workers were now deemed an unnecessary health concern for the male population. There was also the shift to recognizing sex workers as victims of male oppression. In recognizing the ways in which

sex workers were oppressed within society, sex workers gained some agency in the eyes of the law in terms of receiving more protection and humanization against potential threats. From the 1960s onward, the Dutch system defines body autonomy of sex workers in terms of their own personal determination and choice to work within the sex industry. Constructed by liberal feminist thought, it considers sex workers as conscious actors in their own lives.

It is important to question whether the advocacy of liberal feminists suffices in determining the personal choice of others. One must ask, in a society with a history of stigmatization geared towards sex workers, is their own personal choice sufficient in their ability to enact their own body autonomy? Also, are the protections offered to them enough through a system that relies solely on their personal choice rather than potential dangers that are inherent within the sex industry?

## **Why Amsterdam? Data and Observations**

*Rapunzel Rapunzel*

*Let down your hair*

*Hair falling down her chest*

*Cloaked in an eerie glow of Red*

*Momma*

*Look*

*Look at Rapunzel*

*In the window*

*Up above*

*She lets down her hair long brown hair*

*Gliding ever so softly along her bare body*

*Glittering in Red Lights*

*Little Girl*

*Finger pointed*

*Look Momma*

*Look*

*You might want to cover her eyes*

*Young and innocent*

*You might want to get her attention away from the Whore in the window*

*Offering her body*

*For all to see and for some to take  
But Rapunzel Rapunzel  
This isn't how the story goes  
Locked in a window  
Desperate for her love to save her  
Evil, wicked, jealous, stepmother  
Locking her beauty away for none to see  
No, this is how the story goes  
But Little Girl  
When you call out to your Momma  
You are not seeing a damsel in distress  
You are seeing a woman placed there by her own free will  
A woman admired  
A woman of strength  
A woman who lets men come to her in the night  
A woman who helps instead of needs  
A woman whose hair is more than a mechanism for freedom  
Rapunzel Rapunzel  
Let down your hair  
Little Girl  
Do you see?  
Rapunzel Rapunzel  
Her hair does not set her free  
Because she is free  
Herself*

~

### *Stigma and Acceptance*

The date is June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017. It is a Thursday evening and I was on a side street of Oudezijds Achterburgwal. This side street was relatively crowded. There were workers in windows on both sides of this side street once I got further down. Also, the pedestrian traffic really picked up. My head was moving from side to side to take in my surroundings when I noticed a young girl in front of me. She appeared to be around five years old and was holding an older woman's hand. She had slightly curled brown hair that fell to her shoulders and was held in a clip. She was wearing a pink outfit with a matching pink cardigan. She had tanned olive skin and dark brown eyes that were open wide to her surroundings. She was extremely small next to

the woman holding her hand. The woman had the same skin tone, eyes, and hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. She was wearing khaki pants and a short sleeved White blouse. She was probably about 5'5 and in her thirties.

The little girl's head was bobbing back and forth at a rapid pace when I noticed her pointing her little finger up at a second story brothel window and yell "Momma!" in a shocked tone. The window that she pointed to was brightly lit up red and purple and was next to a few others that were the same. I did not make out the worker inside the window although I could tell it was occupied. My attention went directly back to the small child to see if I could observe any more of her saying anything or any other interactions she had with the woman holding her hand and the workers. However, she was soon lost to the crowd and the noises of the Red Light District.

Although the little girl was lost in the crowd that small interaction pointed to a few things. Even though it was late at night and the Red Light District was booming with business, the woman holding the child's hand did not look perplexed guiding her child through the crowd. The child was very curious, and the woman did not do anything to restrict the child's view of her surroundings. Although I did not see or hear how the woman reacted to the child's statement, from what I observed directly afterwards, the woman refrained from making a big deal over the surroundings. While there is still a concern over the stigmatization sex workers face in Amsterdam, it is also clear that window operated brothels are engrained in society.

In fact, a part of the Red Light District that shows its normality is the way in which couples interact while walking down the street. The next day, Friday June 16<sup>th</sup>, while walking along the canal, I noticed two men who were standing up against a bar's stairs and making out. This caught my attention because this was the first display of public affection that I saw



throughout my observations other than holding hands. Both men appeared to be ethnically White with pale skin and brown hair. The one man had short hair while the other's hair was buzzed. The man with the buzz-cut was probably a few inches taller than the other man at around 6'. Both were casually dressed in jeans but were wearing nice button-up shirts. They appeared to be in their late twenties. They were really making out aggressively as I passed, with their lips completely locked and their arms holding one another up against their bodies.

Although this was a very open form of public affection, on numerous other occasions, I saw people holding hands on the streets, engaged with each other, rather than the sex workers in the windows. On the other hand, there was one instance in which a young woman ran ahead of a young man and I saw her look back to the street. As he was walking to catch up to her, a sex worker started to motion towards him. He put his head down and walked faster. When he caught up to the woman, she started laughing and he smiled awkwardly.

While some individuals walk through the Red Light District like it's a normal part of life, there are others you can see who regard it as something completely different, as something that operates alone and that they are not part of, but only as voyeurs who find it intriguing in playful, and yet stigmatizing ways. Another clear example of this was observed was when I noticed a worker pulling the curtains shut across the window, as a figure of a man stood in a lighted hallway at the back of the room and to the left. Outside there were three people standing directly in front of the window that was at eye level and staring in. The worker did not interact at all with the people staring in her window as she shut the curtains. Two women were standing on the right side of the window with their hands on the ledge and their noses practically touching the window as they indiscreetly stared inside. Then there was a man that stood a little farther away from the two of them, to their left, and faced the street while also turning and peering into the window. As

the curtain was being drawn, I heard the younger of the two women gasp and say in English, “She accepted!” She had an American accent as her voice was easy for me to hear and distinguish from the crowd.

These two examples I observed clearly showed the way in which sex workers are still stigmatized. Although sex work is regarded as an official profession within Amsterdam, many pedestrians do not treat it as such. There was another occasion I observed in which a crowd formed around a man entering a brothel window with people from the street running up to get a look in before the worker shut the door very quickly. This type of response would not be considered appropriate nor would it happen if someone was simply purchasing food from a store vendor or buying a pair of shoes at the mall. While sex work is conducted out in the public of the Red Light District, there is a sense of hyper-visibility attached to these transactions.

Marianne stated within our interview that a problem surrounding sex work in Amsterdam is the way that sex workers feel stigmatized.

I think it’s legalized but we have to go one step further, not to only people surrounding sex workers, but also the sex workers themselves. It’s legalized, so we should talk about it and we should normalize it. That’s something else than legalizing, normalizing. Still, people say that, “Oh it’s a profession!” Yeah, but when it’s nearby, then they become different. Sex workers know,” and they are doing it themselves too. They hide themselves. And that’s something that should change.

As professionals, the visibility of sex workers is essential. Visibility normalizes the profession of sex work. While I observed many interactions that would take place typically in night-life and pedestrian store front settings, there were many other behaviors that show that the normalization of sex work, it is not complete. As a tourist area, the observations I observed could have been by individuals from societies where sex work is stigmatized and not treated as a profession. The individuals who looked as if they were just passing through, window shopping,

and showed public displays of affection towards a partner could be from Amsterdam or other places where sex work is normalized. This fact shows that the global context of sex work could be affecting sex workers in Amsterdam and that the stigmatization of sex workers is an international issue that crosses borders.

### *Negotiations with Potential Clients*

As Aalber (2015) described in his Red Light District research, the way in which sex workers negotiate with clients shows an aspect of how personal choice is rooted within their profession. During my observation period in the Red Light District, I gained some insight into how negotiations are made and the way sex workers are able to enact their own personal choice.

My first night of observations, Monday June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017, I noticed a few guards. The guards were all male and were dressed in the same all-black outfits and were stationed outside of sex show venues and bars. There were quite a few sex show venues and bars, but they did not compare to the amount of window operated brothels in the area and there was no presence of guards stationed outside. This observation suggests that sex workers were not closely monitored by pimps as is usually characteristic of what is assumed of sex workers lived experiences. An argument used against sex work is that sex workers every action are closely monitored by pimps who decide their actions for them.

The array of behaviors that I was able to monitor of the window workers also suggested that they were under their own control. While many workers tapped on glass, smiled at passers, or gyrated their bodies on display to viewers, there were just as many, if not more, window workers who casually sat in their windows and paid little to no attention to passers. On one

occasion, I saw a window that stood out to me. Inside were two workers, however, they did not stand in the window. The curtain was completely pulled back and the inside of the window was in full view. However, upon first glance it appeared that the window was empty. At the very back of the room, in which a worker would stand, was another room that was in shadows. Perhaps it could have also just been a hallway. In the shadows, two workers were reclined and talking. They were barely visible from street view.

Other workers simply ignored potential clients. An example of this was when I noticed a man go straight up to a worker's window and stand there staring. She avoided eye contact with him and simply just kept on staring out into the street. He did not budge. She then looked straight at him and I saw her mouth the word "no" before looking away again. He stayed at her window for a few more seconds before he finally left. Not only did she pay no attention to him, but she completely denied him when he seemed persistent.

This was not the only interaction where I saw a worker blatantly refuse a client without any negotiation. There were a few other times where I noticed a client go up to a window while the worker either did not acknowledge his presence or simply just kept looking at her phone. While many instances of client's denial included no negotiations, they were also a lot where workers turned clients away after a negotiation. While pressed up against a brothel Friday night, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a boy that was directly behind me started knocking on the window next to me. The window opened-up about an inch. He said something that I could not hear and then the window closed about 15 seconds later and he started pushing his way into the crowd once more.

Another time, the same evening, I started walking up the street when I noticed two men in front of me walk up the stairs to a door beside a brothel window and go directly in together. They are greeted by a worker in a black body suit whose window is to the left of the stairs they

ascended. They only talk for around a minute and the men walk straight back out, down the stairs, and continue walking up the street.

Other negotiations appeared to be successful. I noticed quite a bit of opened windows, exchanges, and then an entrance into the window. On the other hand, there were other occasions where there were no negotiations that took place with no interaction. On Thursday night, I noticed two men standing and peering into a window. The worker inside was smiling and motioning at them but they stood there just watching. Another man appeared suddenly and walked straight past them and into the worker's window. She opened the door, closed the door, and closed the curtain all in a matter of seconds. The other two men stood there for a few seconds before walking the opposite way down the street from me. Also, on Monday, I noticed a very similar interaction.

Right before ending my observations, I noticed a worker ignoring a group of men in front of her window. She stood there and just looked out into the street making no indication of interacting with them. They all were staring at her in their big group and talking. There was no indication of any negotiations or interactions with them and the worker. Her window stood shut while she proceeded to look past them. They stood in this spot for a very long time. The worker in a window next to this one suddenly opened up her door and started yelling at the men and pointing up the street very aggressively. The look on her face was very stern. The men were just looking at her and at one another for a few seconds before they started walking away. They did not seem to respond to her and just moved.

As soon as they left, a man who seemed to be standing really close by but that I had just noticed at this very moment went straight up to the middle worker's window. He did not pause in front of her window but rather went straight in as she opened the door. They paused at the back

of the room away from the window. They appeared to be talking. It also appeared that he took out his wallet. Then I saw her lead him back and to the left of the brothel and up a set of stairs. This instance expressed a lot of the ways I noticed negotiations happen within The Red Light District. Not only did a man walk straight into a worker's door without any confrontation, or hesitation from the worker within, but she also completely ignored the group of men that were standing there before him. Perhaps she was waiting for a known customer or maybe she simply did not want to interact with the other men. This interaction showed the exerted agency over the worker's decision of which clients to service. The other worker also showed agency by claiming the space that was being taken over by bodies that were not benefitting her.

On Tuesday, another worker exerted agency over her space in the same manner. Two women walked up the street, in the direction of sex show venue Moulin Rouge, and suddenly stopped in front of a window. They faced the canal and were extremely close to the worker's window and they just stood there talking and looking out to the canal. Suddenly, the worker in the window started tapping her window aggressively, and they turned to her quickly before leaving. Negotiations over services were a way in which I observed the body autonomy of sex workers, but I also noticed their negotiations regarding space and their exertion of dominance.

Not only did the workers choose their clients by the negotiations explained above, there were also very gendered dynamics of how these negotiations took place. For example, it was rare that any of the workers in the windows would interact with females at all. On Tuesday, I walked by a window where a worker was motioning at the men in front of me, however, when I walked past she looked right past me. On another instance I was walking down a side street and looking into windows. In one window, I made eye contact with a worker and she rolled her eyes.

The most blatant example of the gendered aspect of negotiations that I witnessed though was when a group of females I saw walking through the Red Light District actively tried to engage with the workers in the windows. As they walked along the canal, with me close behind them, I noticed that the one who appeared to be the leader was interacting with the workers in their windows. This really caught my attention and so I tried to remain attentive to what she was doing. We passed one window with a worker inside and she smiled and waved at her. The worker saw her and smiled and waved back. Then we came to a window on a corner where the woman smiled and waved at her as well. The worker noticed and winked at her.

Unfortunately, the crowds started to make it more difficult for me to follow this group and observe at all. People were closing in around me, cutting in front of me, and obscuring my vision. As I got temporarily separated from the group, I was still able to see them as they made their way down the street and through the crowd. I saw the same woman smile and wave at workers in their windows two more times above the sea of people.

At a bridge, the group of women made their way out of the crowds of the main street and onto a corner of a side street. I slowly caught up to them at the side street. I continued to observe them. While the side street was still extremely crowded, the traffic was not as congested as it was on the main street. At the very corner of the side street and the main street was a window with a worker inside and the group of women stood in front of it. They all stood extremely close to the window and were staring inside. Inside stood a worker and although there were four women standing directly in front of her window and staring at her, the worker looked right past them. The worker was standing with her hands on her hips very upright. Although she was looking straight past the group of women at her window, she was smiling into the distance. The women continued standing and staring at her and I noticed that they were even smiling and waving at

her. The blonde woman, who I described as the leader of the group, then said: “She’s so beautiful!” She spoke in English and had an Irish or English accent. The worker finally acknowledged them by smiling and waving back at them for one single moment before her attention went straight back to the street past them.

The interactions I noticed between women and the sex workers were not particular to solely women passers. As I described, there were a lot of instances where male passers and potential clients were ignored. The point here is that my experiencing simply gazing within windows initiated no response from workers other than that one eye-roll. Also, that there was only one group of women that I saw who tried to engage with the sex workers and when they did, they were either ignored or granted a friendly smile, wink, or wave. These small interactions could be regarded as friendly greetings as they resembled a greeting you would give to a friend and were extremely brief before the sex worker disregarded them again.

In regard to the visible negotiations that I observed within my observational period of the Red Light District, it appeared that the sex workers were initial actors regarding how they chose to interact with potential clients and passers on the street. There were an array of behaviors that were displayed by sex workers during interactions. Sex workers were also seen to exert dominance over their space along with their interactions. Lastly, it is important to note that from the street view I was able to observe, there was no presence of anyone else involved in negotiations besides the sex workers and their clients. This is not to suggest that the sex workers I observed could not have possibly been influenced by an outside force, but the lack of a presence and the array of behaviors I observed suggested otherwise.

### *Male Presence*



Lastly, there was another observation that stood out very blatantly ever single night that I was in the Red Light District and that was the unavoidable male presence that engrossed the district. In any patriarchal society there is a strong male presence but in Amsterdam's Red Light District it was extremely tangible. Locating myself within my research as a female, the exertion of male dominance over the district felt very real to me. I was in a man's land.

Some of the exertion of dominance over the space was very subtle and could be expected to happen anywhere. One man bumped into me quite aggressively while walking but paid me no notice. Another man who was walking right behind me was hacking up mucus and spitting it on the side walk inches away from me. Other stronger examples of territorial male presence was seen in interactions that appeared to be more specific to Amsterdam's Red Light District in particular.

One way that male dominance was observed was by acts of aggression and disregard to the sex workers working in their windows. On Thursday night I watched as three men stumbled past a window, talking with each other. The one man stumbled behind the other two for a moment as he paused at a window. From the distance I was at, I could see that there was a worker seated in the window. However, my attention was drawn to him as I saw him nonchalantly but aggressively raise his middle finger to the window. The two men now in front of him turned around as he started once more to stumble towards them, but then he paused again and raised his middle finger in the same manner towards the window. The two men both grabbed a shoulder of his, and guided him away from the window, all three still stumbling. As this happened, an older man walking up the street stopped and patted the one man on the back with a huge smile on his face.

Then on Friday I noticed a worker in a window as she stood sideways and was shaking her butt while peering over her shoulder into the street. As she was doing this, a man walked by and smacked the window where her butt was with a big thud. The worker started to laugh and shake her butt more. The man paused for a little but continued walking down the street. Both of these examples I observed were of men who did not purchase the services of the sex workers they approached and debased.

There was also a very strong sense of comradery among men that I noticed throughout my observations. Men were often seen in groups and engaging with each other very socially. The experience of window shopping for the services of a sex worker was seen quite a bit in packs of men just as much as it was seen by single men alone. I did observe men on numerous times leaving brothels alone and walking of purposefully, but the presence of territorial dominance and the groups of men was a lot stronger and seen more frequently. In fact, one of the times I saw a man leave a brothel alone, he fixed his crotch very openly and then put his fist up in the air as if claiming a victory.

A group experience that I observed consisted of a group of four young men. As I walked past an underground passage that consisted of brothel windows, I noticed a young man hurry out of it. He was then excitedly greeted by three other young men who were on Oudezijds Achterburgwal. They were jumping up and down and yelling and patting him on his back. It was as if they pounced at him and were smiling and laughing as he awkwardly smiled. They were also talking but I did not recognize their language. Their mannerisms made me believe that they were young along with their round baby faces and energetic attitudes.

In front of one worker's window, one of the other young men stopped and stared at the worker and said, "Marry me. Marry me." Although he spoke English, I was unable to recognize

his accent. The window was illuminated bright red and inside stood a worker with her hands on her hips. She simply just smiled at him. I also heard a man say to his male companion, “She’s very nice!” while looking into a window. On Monday night, I overheard a conversation between two young men and someone who was on one of their phones. At this point in passing, I could make out exactly what one of the two said, but I only was able to hear this one line from the conversation. He said something along the lines of, “My dude already came. So, listen, this is what happened. It’s fifty euros for a blow job and sex. He went in and came before his pants were even off.”

Not only did I observe comradery in behaviors and speech between males, but there was also a sense of comradery in choosing the same exact sex worker. On Tuesday, I counted nine men standing in the group along the canal. I was sitting across the canal on the ledge and noticed that there was absolutely no action coming from this group for around five minutes. Suddenly, the group moved a bit, and I was able to see another male quickly join them as he came out of the middle window in the brothel they were in front of. They moved up the street towards the sex show venue Moulin Rouge with him in tow as another one from the group went straight up to the window the other one was just in and walked right in. Another instance where I saw men choose the same sex worker was Friday night during a negotiation outside of a brothel window. A worker had a group of four men standing in front of her opened window and she was talking to them. Two were standing along the brothel wall while the other two stood in front of the door. The worker had her door open to the men and appeared to be talking to the two men standing in front of the door. I heard her say, “With you and him in the room... No, not for that price.”

In conclusion, the actions I observed in the Red Light District conveyed a strong male presence that exuded territorial dominance over the area as a whole, individuals occupying the

space, and in terms of their public displays of male sexuality and sexual negotiations. While I did notice the group of four women Friday night who were clearly engaging with the sexual location of the Red Light District by engaging with sex workers, it was also clear that they crossed into male territory. While they were standing at a window trying to engage with the sex worker inside, an older man approached them. I did not see where he came from, but he ran over quite aggressively from behind them and engaged them in conversation. He asked, “Where you girls from?” The blonde woman who was the one previously speaking answered, “Ireland.” He then asked, “What do you think of the situation here?” To which the woman responded with, “Situation?” He then exclaimed rather excitedly, “Prostitution!” The engagement of the group of women with a sex worker was put into question by a man who was exerting himself into their group and questioning their location within the Red Light District. Unfortunately, I did not hear any of the rest of the conversation, however, not once during my week of observations did I notice a man approach a group of men in the same way.

### **Moving Forward: Legalize but Prioritize!**

The way Amsterdam is legislated in terms of sex work allows sex workers to operate on their own terms. By recognizing sex work as work, sex workers within Amsterdam are agents of their own sexual labor. When questioning body autonomy however, it is not enough to suggest that one’s own free will and self determination is enough. Body autonomy is interlocked with systems oppression that may limit an individual’s personal choice. It is crucial that in legislating sex work, one must take into consideration the historical context sex work is operating in, the bodies of those effected, and the ways in which personal choice is limited.

In Amsterdam's Red Light District, the historical context of sex work is deeply rooted within the fight to end sex trafficking. While the two industries interact on an intimate level, the individuals within both industries require different types of support and therefore different types of legislation. In my interview with Marianne, she made it extremely clear that her work with P&G292 only services sex workers. She stated how she is trained to notice the signs of human trafficking and how if she were to notice a sign of it, she would contact other organizations who specialize in servicing individuals within the sex trafficking industry. While she talked about having connections to organizations that service individuals within the sex trafficking industry, she made it clear that P&G292 was not one of them. If the organizations within Amsterdam aid sex workers and individuals within the sex trafficking industry differently, then it is clear that legislation needs to as well. It is not enough to talk about the two together; there must also be separate conversations that make the distinction between the two industries clear. This conflation of the two industries could further the stigmatization that sex workers face within Amsterdam.

As Marianne described, there still needs to be more work done to normalize sex work. My interactions within the Red Light District would suggest so as well. While it is considered an occupation in The Netherlands, there are indications that it leads to a hyper-voyeuristic sphere of public life that leads sex workers to be scrutinized. It also leads to a hyper-masculine sphere where men seek entitlement to the space and those within in. In legislating sex work, we can also see this stigmatization. Within the policy, sex workers within Amsterdam must be licensed as sex workers and carry that label with them wherever they go. Although this is used to monitor sex trafficking, it targets the bodies of sex workers.

This leaves the question of whose bodies do we police and how. There are no background checks done for men who purchase services from sex workers. This leaves them clear of the

stigma that comes from purchasing sex. It also leaves them less accountable of their actions. As Farley (2014) described, sex workers face mental health issues that come with the ways they are treated by clients. Although I did not observe any intimate interactions, I did notice the aggressive and disrespectful ways that men interacted with sex workers from the street such as the man who was harassing the sex worker by aggressively pointing his middle finger at the sex worker numerous times and the other man who slapped a sex worker's window where her butt was. Although I did not hear what sparked this interaction, I observed a man approach a sex workers window which she then opened, and then a few minutes later yelled, "You prick!" before slamming the door in his face. While only being able to observe the public sphere of harassment, it was clear that it existed.

If the clients of sex workers were monitored in the same way that sex workers were, by licensing, health checks, and then added backgrounds checks to see if they have an abusive history, this could not only create less of a stigmatization of sex work but could also work to ensure the health and safety of sex workers. While the bodies of sex workers are highly policed through licensing and health checks, the bodies of clients are hidden from view. This would create a forum in which sex workers could report clients that were abusive or caused trouble and could also ensure sex workers that their clients are sexually healthy. While this communication does take place through unmonitored settings, it could really benefit sex workers if there was a system that was set up to monitor their clients. While the Swedish model is highly critiqued because it makes soliciting sex work a crime, its perspective on policing the bodies of clients of sex workers for their protection is a position that The Netherlands can learn from.

What I am suggesting is a system set up by the city of Amsterdam that collects information on sex clients. It would include a physical registration process, sexual health exam,

and extensive background check. It would result in a scannable license that would hold their information. Sex workers would then need a scanner within their brothel where they could scan the license to see if their client has an abusive past or any STDS. Once scanned, the local police department would be notified and have the client's name and location if the sex worker were to use their emergency button. The license could then track if the police have ever been called on the client from a sex worker and/or if the client has ever been charged. It is fair to suggest that many clients would not like this suggestion and could affect the business of the legal sex industry. With that in mind, I propose this system as one in which individuals, both sex workers and clients can choose to engage in. Some sex workers might not find it necessary to check licenses or may only find it necessary with certain clients. On the other hand, this gives the sex workers more control over who they decide to service. As the Red Light District in Amsterdam is a very touristic spot with people visiting from all over the world, it would also allow clients who are there shortly and for a one time experience to engage within the sex industry.

This system would help dismantle the history of oppression and male domination that exists within Amsterdam's Red Light District. It allows for a direct surveillance of bodies that have always been privileged in their lack of accountability. Meanwhile, it also allows sex workers to have agency over whether they choose to utilize this system. Most legislation regarding sex work in Amsterdam exists to mandate what sex workers must or must not do. By implementing a system that can be used at their disposal for their benefit, sex workers would become more autonomous not only in their decisions, but within the sociohistorical context that shapes their decisions.

Another proposal for legislation is that we engage with the sex industry just as much as we do with the illicit market of sex trafficking. Kempado and Doezema (1998) critique the way

that individuals retreat from conversations surrounding the betterment of sex workers lives to focus on trafficked individuals. Although sex workers choose to work within the sex industry, that does not mean that society should leave them to face the ill effects that come along with their profession. Instead, there should be a clear and separate focus on the sex industry and ways in which society can make the industry safer and better from those working with. It is important and crucial that sex workers themselves are included in these conversations however, they should not have to advocate for themselves completely alone.

In conclusion, neither radical or liberal feminism do enough to aid the agency of sex workers within Amsterdam's Red Light District. The radical perspective makes important claims in analyzing the systematic oppression of women within the sex industry. It provides the crucial perspective that individual self-determination is important, however it is not enough to dismantle systematic oppression. While the liberal perspective on sex work claims that everyone has the choice to do what they want with their bodies the conversation should not end here. What happens after the initial choice? How can policies provide a safer society in which individuals can make this choice and not face certain consequences? The legalization of sex work within the Netherlands is important in allowing sex workers to have agency, but we must not forget that we should not only legalize, but also prioritize.

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