

Radical feminists' objection to sex work is profoundly un-feminist

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne



Criminalising an entire industry because of isolated examples takes away choice from free-will participants based exclusively on the behaviour of abusers. Shutterstock

Although sex workers around the world lobby for decriminalisation, sex work law remains controversial. This article is part of a [series](#) exploring sex work and regulatory reform.

While women's libbers have spent decades fighting to get us dominion over our own bodies, radical feminists have spent almost as long trying to insert caveats.

Apparently there are right and egregiously *wrong* ways to use our bodies – more specifically our *genitals* – particularly when dollars are involved.

For “radfems”, sex work is a metonym for the sins of patriarchy and something that can only ever lead us away from equality.

Sex work – not that radfems would ever [use the phrase](#) – isn't viewed simply as a commercial transaction but rather, as blood money exchanged for abuse that can only ever happen in a world where women are unequal. That selling sex somehow reduces every woman to a commodity, valued exclusively for the extent to which we're found fuckable.

I not only vehemently disagree with the radfem position, but I view it as fundamentally *un-feminist*.

If the sisterhood can support my decision to swallow contraceptive pills or terminate an unwanted pregnancy, then there is a duty for them to support my choice to have as much or as

Radical feminists' objection to sex work is profoundly un-feminist

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

little sex as I like and, if I so choose, put a price tag on that sex.

For me, it's a matter of consent, of bodily autonomy. If feminists aren't fighting for my right to use my body how I choose, then they've dramatically detoured from their mission.

In this article I counter three assertions made by radfems about sex work. While there isn't a simple opposition to such views, nonetheless, liberal, third-wave, intersectional and sex-positive feminisms are united around the importance of choice and agency, and each opposes radfem's frequently conservative, knees-together rhetoric.

The re-victimisation narrative

Radfems love to present testimony of industry ["survivors"](#) who were abused as children, have substance abuse problems, mental health calamities, or have experienced bad industry treatment and are now abolitionists. Heavy reliance on such testimony is severely problematic.

As revolting as it is, *every* industry is full of women who were abused as children. Why? Because the numbers of abused women the world over is *deplorable*.

Scores of women enter *every* industry as victims of abuse, with mental health problems or substance abuse issues. Or any combination thereof. This is a byproduct of gender inequality as well as dozens of other issues that dole out to women complicated – if not sometimes completely *tragic* – back-stories.

But the "broken woman" who's preyed upon by [a dreamcoat-wearing pimp](#) and who is reliving her pain as a sex worker is a narrative indicative of too much [Special Victims Unit](#) and ignores the reality that people enter the sex industry for an abundance of reasons. Just as they do any other profession.

Interviews with women who have exited sex work is a problematic dataset: talk to anyone who

Radical feminists' objection to sex work is profoundly un-feminist

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

has left any job and they'll have war stories.

No, this doesn't make these stories invalid. But it does remind us that the tales of former sex workers don't speak for all sex workers. Every experience is an individual one.

Abhorrent work practices

Be it about sex work in the form of pay-to-play intercourse or participation in pornography, radfems are abolitionists.

Coerced participation, trafficking and lacklustre working conditions are used to pad out the claim that no sex worker has truly [chosen their toil](#) . Not only is such an argument predicated on the false-consciousness argument so intoxicating for radfems, but it pretends that sex work is some kind of special case; that sex work shouldn't exist because there's certain labour that simply shouldn't be sold.

Point to any industry and there will be examples of bad practices, abused workers, and unsafe conditions.

Welcome, my friends, to capitalism. This doesn't make trafficking or coercion unimportant issues, but equally, it doesn't make their presence in the sex industry a special case. There are no shortages of industries that need better oversight. But equally, in no other industry where bad practices exist do we [ever talk of abolition](#) .

Criminalising an entire industry because of isolated bad examples takes away choice from free-will participants and justifies doing so on the behaviour of abusers. Doing so is victim-blaming and paternalistic.

It also provides another hint that the radfem position isn't truly based on worker safety at all, but is about sex. About the radfem *problem* with sex.

The tyranny of the cock

Radical feminists' objection to sex work is profoundly un-feminist

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

In the radfem imagination, for the selling of sex to be understood as so very horrible sex is understood as having special properties; that it can never just be labour like any other, seemingly because no other job necessitates so much cock.

There's more than a little puritanical blood in the water here.

Radfems apparently find it inconceivable that women could actually chose to have contact with a penis they're not in love with. That having random-cock-contact could actually be found fun or lucrative or even a preferable use of one's workday than toil in a factory, a lecture theatre or a coal mine.

Such views aren't grounded in women's lived experiences. They fail to recognise that quite a few of us not only really like the cock, but that having contact with it doesn't necessitate "giving ourselves away". Instead, they rely on a moralistic opposition to any sex that's had in quantities greater than every second Tuesday.

And they use terms like "sell herself" as though, at the end of the transaction, a woman has sold off a body part. Cue Catholic school metaphors about virginity loss.

My worth isn't determined by how much sex I've had. Equally, having sex for money doesn't change me as a person any more than teaching for money or writing for money does: we each sell our time – our labour – to the market.

Sex work isn't an industry you have to love, nor is it an industry you have to find empowering. But love and empowerment aren't things we ever expect of any other industry either. The sex industry doesn't need your admiration, but nor does it deserve your condemnation.

If there is anything feminists should be in agreement on, it's our right to make our own decisions about how we use our bodies.

Radical feminists' objection to sex work is profoundly un-feminist

Written by Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

Read the rest of the articles in this series [here](#).

Lauren Rosewarne does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Authors: Lauren Rosewarne, Senior Lecturer, University of Melbourne

Read more <http://theconversation.com/radical-feminists-objection-to-sex-work-is-profoundly-un-feminist-81333>