

INTERCOURSES

\$pread speaks with a Pro-Choice Activist

JOYCE ARTHUR is a prominent pro-choice activist in Vancouver. For almost two decades she has authored a respected Canadian pro-choice quarterly newsletter, *The Pro-Choice Press*, and held numerous leadership positions in local and national pro-choice organizations. As the prostitution debate has taken center-stage in Canadian feminist circles, Joyce has emerged as a thoughtful voice on the side of decriminalization. In this interview, Joyce is speaking as an individual, not for any particular organization.



Eliyanna Kaiser: You are one of the most openly pro-sex worker rights feminist activists in Canada. What got you interested?

Joyce Arthur: When I joined PAR-L [Policy Action Research List], a feminist listserv in Canada, there was a lot of discussion off and on about prostitution, so I started paying attention and thinking about it. When I was younger, I was an exotic dancer for a couple of years. In fact, it was the best job I ever had because it was a lot of fun and I made pretty good money for a young woman in that time. I liked dancing and having the attention of all those men.

I took offense to some of the women saying, "All sex work—everything—exchanging your body for cash is always wrong, wrong, wrong." Who are they to tell me what my experience should have been? It took me awhile to sort through the issues though. I can see both sides. It was interesting to enter the debate without a position, more or less.

You wrote an essay on your blog called, "Why prostitution cannot be abolished ... and should not be abolished." Was one of the things that connected the issue of abortion and prostitution for you the fact that you can't abolish either?

That's how I came at the issue initially and that's why I'm involved in the reproductive rights issue. We are sexual beings. To deny that or try to control that in either ourselves or others is not only futile but counter-productive and dangerous. That was the point I made in the essay: trying to eradicate prostitution is really and hopelessly naïve.

The feminist listerv you mentioned, PAR-L, has these occasional eruptions about sex work. Why do you think it's such a heated topic? The members are all feminists that mostly know each other and generally agree on things.

People take sex personally, and anything involving sex becomes controversial. That's the common denominator. I can understand some of it. Someone who works for a crisis center, for example, they see the women who need the most help, so they translate that to the whole sex industry.

I think we're all really trying to help women, but the abolitionists sometimes don't see that. They go into attack mode and take it personally. There's a mind-set that says a woman's sexuality—and sex itself—is supposed to be sacred and special. Obviously, prostitution sex isn't special so therefore it's "wrong" and "bad for women." This is a very prurient, old-fashioned attitude and it puts [the abolitionists] in the same league as those other people who believe that any time sex is divorced from procreation or love suddenly it's wrong and bad and must be stamped out: the Christian Right, the anti-choice movement, and the anti-gay movement.

Obviously, there is a lot of exploitation and violence in sex work that really needs to be addressed. But sex work is diverse. I think where the abolitionists go astray is labeling prostitution *itself* as bad. It's better to argue that it's the conditions and the illegality that cause the problems. I'm not saying that sex work is a great job. Maybe it's a lousy job, like waitressing. But it's a job.

You've been very vocal on the similarities between "feminist" arguments against abortion and "feminist" arguments against prostitution. Here's an excerpt from a piece you wrote:

"CHOICE" CAN TRIVIALIZE ABORTION,
like the choice between apples at
the grocery store. Some women are
coerced economically into abortion,
and it's the same with prostitution.

What is the difference between these two arguments?

1) Prostitution is always violence against women. It's physically dangerous, it victimizes them, robs them of their sexuality, and inflicts lasting psychological harm. Women never truly choose prostitution; they are forced into it by men, poverty, desperation, etc. We must give women better options by abolishing prostitution and helping them out of it.

2) Abortion is always violence against women. It's physically dangerous, it victimizes them, robs them of their motherhood role, and inflicts lasting psychological harm. Women never truly choose abortion; they are forced into it by men, poverty, desperation, etc. We must give women better options by banning abortion and helping them keep their babies.

It all comes down to women's sexual autonomy, and that's what people are really scared of. They see a limited role or how women are supposed to feel about and engage in sex. Women who fall outside that must be "coerced," they must be "victims," or simply not know what they're doing.

From an evolutionary perspective, women get pregnant and therefore have to be a bit more picky about who they have sex with for the survival of the species, so they can have help raising their children. Whereas men, they can just have sex with whomever they want to try to spread their seed and maximize their reproductive potential. Well, that sort of makes people very uncomfortable with women sleeping around. It makes that "Whose the father of your child?" thing an issue. Maybe I'm getting off-topic here—

—No. I think you're talking about control of female sexuality and patriarchy. And I think that it's right that you link the control of female sexuality with the abortion issue and the prostitution debate. There's a link between the stigma and shame that prostitutes and women who have abortions share. This paternity and legitimacy stuff means that you need a clear division between women who have abortions or prostitutes on the "bad women" end of the scale, and wives and daughters on the "good" end.

Exactly. If a woman has an abortion, that's kind of proof that she's been engaging in illicit sex. She's a "fallen woman" the same way that a prostitute is.

There's a big difference between you and I sitting here having a philosophical conversation about how the abortion issue and prostitution are connected, and the reproductive rights movement championing the cause of decriminalizing prostitution. How do you see that happening?

Boy, that's a tough one. You need to keep emphasizing female sexual autonomy. From an activism point of view, this is a long process of public education. Media is especially important, like publishing, film, and news.

Successfully decriminalizing prostitution would have a major impact. I think Canada's abortion ban being struck down in 1988 led to a more liberalized attitude toward abortion. If prostitution is fully decriminalized here, I think you might see a similar thing happen in a couple decades.

The US Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion, *Roe v. Wade*, was based on the "right to privacy," not on women's right to abortion or gender equality. Sex worker rights advocates sometimes appeal to the same idea, arguing that sex work is a "private arrangement" between individuals.

Many people in the reproductive rights movement say that it was to our detriment that *Roe* was decided based on privacy grounds. Do you think it's dangerous for sex worker rights advocates to go this similar path? Appealing to a libertarian perspective is so seductive because people accept it so easily.

I'm actually one of those feminists that think *Roe* was unfortunate in many ways. If you read the decision, it was really about protecting doctors. I think it would have been stronger under the 14th Amendment [the Equal Protection Clause]. I like to think that if America ever passes the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment], it could strike down abortion restrictions on the basis that they discriminate against women. It's similar for prostitution, because

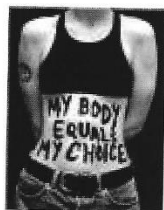
most prostitutes are women. There's a group in Canada that's suing the Crown [the Canadian government] because the current prostitution laws violate various human rights protections—and this harm disproportionately falls to women.

The term "pro-choice" has a consumerist slant; it's about being able to make decisions in the marketplace. Like, I have the right to go to the grocery store and buy granny smith apples or macintosh apples, just like I can "choose" to go to an abortion clinic. I'm wondering if you think the "choice" tactic has been positive or negative overall? There are identical questions about how to cast a sex worker rights movement. Is it about the choice whether to become a prostitute, or is it about sex workers having rights?

I think in the beginning the choice rhetoric was a useful strategy. But over the long run it is less useful and in some ways it's been harmful to our progress. "Choice" tends to trivialize abortion, like the choice between apples at the grocery store. Some women are coerced economically into abortion and the same thing with prostitution. Maybe they don't really want to be prostitutes or to have an abortion. We need to recognize the complexity and gravity of the situation. Casting it in terms of a "right" is much more effective because it's put on a more serious and profound level.

"Rights" also seem to make the message more inclusive. Historically, people have been critical of the pro-choice movement because, for example, while white women were marching for the right to choose, women of color were fending off forced sterilization. I don't want to suggest that the leadership of the sex worker rights movement is the same as 1970s abortion rights activists. It's 2007 and

Pro-choice or sex worker activist?



Anti-abortion or anti-prostitution advertisement?

we've had the benefit of learning from other movements. But to some extent there are more privileged sex workers out there who act like the only issue is, "What do you care if I choose to become a prostitute?" conveniently ignoring the complexity of how constrained other peoples' choices are.

THE ANTI-CHOICE and the prostitution abolitionists want to treat women like children.

It just shows how diverse the whole thing is. Some women actually do choose, and it might be because they are middle-class or whatever, and others are in a much more dysfunctional situation.

As soon as you start talking about women's rights, it allows you to bring in the more complex, difficult issues, like being coerced into an abortion or sex trafficking. Preventing a woman from working in the sex industry if she wants to, and preventing a woman from being forced into the sex industry if she doesn't want to, become the same issue: Self-determination. You don't want to violate it one way or the other. The same is true with abortion.

Women can make mistakes and they need to be allowed to make them. Controlling women is paternalism, the idea that women need to be protected from themselves. But no, we need to allow women to screw themselves up if that's what they end up doing sometimes. Women need to take responsibility for their own lives and be treated like adult women, just like men. The anti-choice and the prostitution abolitionists want to treat women like children.

The abolitionists also focus a lot on male demand. You posted a creative answer on PAR-L about ending demand for prostitution...

Yep, we need to promote casual sex! But I don't know how far that can go because I think that women have a natural reticence to

Fig. 1 is a pro-choice activist. Fig. 2 is an

START TALKING
about women's
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casual sex with many partners. I think abortion and contraception afford the opportunity for women to engage in casual sex for fun with no real consequences. A lot of women probably do have casual sex, but because of the shame associated with it, they don't talk about it.

Do you see a danger—and I think this is a rhetorical question—in the reproductive rights movement being associated with a pro-decriminalization agenda for prostitution?

There really might be. I'm even worried about that right now, just in terms of this interview. Obviously, there are people in pro-choice groups in Canada that do not think the way I do. I don't think we would ever agree to a position. The issues are going to have to stay separate until feminists have a consensus. I'm optimistic that maybe that will happen down the road because the issues are connected.

In 2000, the Pro-Choice Action Network (PCAN) in British Columbia joined a coalition opposing an anti-sex worker bill called the Secure Care Act, which would have allowed for the extra-judicial detainment of street-involved youth. Few other feminist groups joined, and many actually supported the bill. Do you think feminists principally involved with reproductive rights are more likely to be in favor of sex worker rights?

Pro-choice feminists have more of a tendency to be out there and have a broader perspective. Abortion itself is a controversial issue. The controversy—the root issue—in both movements is sex. People who are strongly pro-choice are probably more likely to see those issues in the prostitution debate.

Joyce Arthur has a number of essays about abortion, humanism, prostitution, and other issues on her blog: <http://choice-joyce.blogspot.com/>

HEROES

HAZERA BAGUM



Orphaned as a child, Hazera Bagum survived working in a brothel in Dhaka, Bangladesh and worked the streets for two decades. At 27 she learned to read and write with the help of CARE International, a private humanitarian organization. Bagum eventually found her calling teaching sex education with Durjoy Nari Sangha, an organization providing services to sex workers and their children. Roughly translated, the group's name means, "Invincible women's organization."

Until recently, Durjoy had twenty drop-in centers (DICs), serving sex workers. But after CARE Bangladesh signed the US anti-prostitution pledge, required under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), Durjoy's funding from CARE was cancelled and sixteen DICs closed.

Durjoy was honored as a Red Ribbon Finalist at the XVI AIDS International Conference in Toronto, and Bagum accepted the award on behalf of her organization. Bagum says that the DIC closures have dispersed the mostly homeless sex workers, cost approximately 500 peer educators their jobs, and decreased condom distribution from 73,000 condoms a month to 30,000.

\$pread honors Hazera Bagum's leadership in fighting the Bush Administration's anti-prostitution pledge and for advocating for the rights of sex workers in Bangladesh.