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THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF ONLINE SEX WORK

How OnlyFans and pornography have influenced perceptions of women and sex: A Marxist-
feminist analysis

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Graduation with Honors

by

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To my dad, thank you for always having an opinion and voicing it. Despite our differing views, I admire your willingness to stand up for your beliefs and your determination to consistently pursue knowledge. You know what you're talking about. You have always cared deeply, and let others know, and I am happy to say I have followed in your footsteps. It is thanks to you that I have strong opinions and I am not afraid to voice them.

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ABSTRACT

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Major: Political Science

The New Landscape of Online Sex Work: a Marxist-Feminist Analysis

Advisor's Name: Ian Zuckerman, PhD.

Co-Advisor/Reader's Name: Russell Arnold, PhD

Debates surrounding sex work are nothing new. Decades have been spent arguing that it's misogynistic, liberating, exploitative, none of your business. There is a distinct shift in the field, though, one that warrants new analysis. The technological advancements of the past decade have resulted in a significant development: OnlyFans. This website combines certain aspects of in person sex work with pornography, and adds in new layers of parasocial connection¹. In order to understand both the issues with this mode of sex work and its implications, I employ a Marxist analysis of labor to understand commodification and wage slavery. Additionally, I refer to the anti-sex work feminism of the second wave as well contemporary feminism's acceptance of body commodification in this manner. I maintain that, even though it is new and changed, OnlyFans is still prone to many of the previous criticisms of sex work as well as newer critiques. The harm that porn and websites like OnlyFans inflicts on the perception of women, their roles in society, and their physical safety cannot be understated.

¹ Parasocial connection refers to the relationship that audience members perceive to have with performers in the media.

The New Landscape of Online Sex Work

INTRODUCTION: Main Factors in the Development of Pornography

Sex sells. In America, sex really sells. Last year, the United States was the country with the highest rate of porn usage.² Most US adults have viewed pornography at some point in their life, but how did porn become so pervasive and normal in contemporary society? Human beings have always had sexual urges, so that natural need and demand cannot be the whole explanation for why it has become the force it now is. A more nuanced and holistic analysis is necessary to understand why porn has essentially become mainstream. Many argue that sex work is a career that has existed throughout the whole of human history, that it is the oldest profession. In the Bible and other ancient texts, there are references to prostitution and the people, often women, who engage in this enterprise. If it is a given that sex work has been a part of human societies since the beginning, then the dramatic differences between the sex work of the old world and the new need to be discussed on a wider scale, along with the ways that the growth of the field has made the ethics of sex work a more morally contentious issue. With the technologies and developments that characterized the Industrial Revolution and the periods thereafter, sex work has developed into a whole new field. Modern feminism has embraced a sex-positive framework that encourages women to take back their sexuality and use it in whatever way feels empowering to them, which includes pornography or other forms of internet sex work. These forms of sex work are becoming more and more prevalent as technology continues to grow and expand, encouraging and funneling more women into the industry. Analyzing porn and OnlyFans through a Marxian perspective, and invoking historical and contemporary feminism, I aim to give a

² Pornhub, "The 2022 Pornhub Year in Review | Pornhub Insights," [www.pornhub.com](https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#top-20-countries), December 8, 2022, <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#top-20-countries>.

holistic view of why these avenues are inherently exploitative and damaging to women.

Empowerment is a key term for defenders of sex work. Despite this argument for empowerment, I argue that even with the further physical protections that online or video sex work offers to women, the actual ethical and labor issues cause sex workers to remain fundamentally disempowered.

The rise and growth of capitalism has incentivized participation in the field and can be linked to an influx of women entering sex work.³ Not only is the economic structure a major key in the development and proliferation of sex work, it can also be attributed to the modern feminist celebration of monetized sexuality, and the ability to “empower” oneself through posting that content online. This is only made easier by the recent rise in new online mediums for sex work that, coupled with easy access to pornography, creates the perfect storm for a culture that is consistently saturated with sexual content.

³ Amaranta Heredia Jaén, “Sex Work Is Work. That’s the Problem... and the Key,” *www.eurozine.com*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.eurozine.com/sex-work-work-thats-problem-key/>.

CHAPTER I: WHAT IS WRONG WITH SEX WORK?

One of the most profound and touching arguments that can be read as a critique of sex work is a famous quote from Margaret Atwood. It comes from her book, *The Robber Bride*, and her message rings deeply true:

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy: that you're strong enough to take what they dish out, or else too weak to do anything about it. Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur.⁴

How are women supposed to know that their behavior is motivated by their desire for empowerment, when the thing they claim empowers them is the same thing that follows the male fantasy? This is known as false consciousness, a term originating from Marxist theory that describes the inability of the working class to see where their interests truly lie, and continuing to work towards their own oppression.⁵ It is the opposite of class consciousness, where workers are able to recognize the systems and peoples who oppress them and work for their own interests instead. In this context, how is self-sexualization on social media, in porn, or on OnlyFans a form

⁴ Margaret Atwood and Doubleday & Company, Inc, *The Robber Bride* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1993).

⁵ Ron Eyerman, "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory," *Acta Sociologica* 24, no. 1-2 (January 1981): 43-56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000169938102400104>.

of liberation when it feeds directly into the structures of oppression, and provides pleasure to the oppressor? It simply isn't. Pornography and OnlyFans are constant cultural reminders that women are submissive to men and the male gaze. Even sexual material that is made by or for the "female gaze"—like OnlyFans—is subject to this criticism. These behaviors are still motivated by the male gaze, the desire for affection and need to feel wanted. This is heavily amplified in porn and OnlyFans. In this line of work, appealing to the male gaze is the whole point. It is not only internalized by the women who are engaging in this labor, as all women have, rather, the gaze leaves the unconscious and enters into the forefront of the woman's mind. It then becomes a physical presence: the camera. The camera acts as a literal voyeur of a typically private event, watching the woman in a moment of deep vulnerability and sexual expression. It reminds the woman of the audience that she must appeal to, the demographic on which her livelihood depends. If women on these platforms want to be profitable, they must know their target audience and their desires, which is men. Simone de Beauvoir's work, *The Second Sex*, and Atwood's discussion of male fantasies echo one another here. de Beauvoir states in this book that women are the second sex because who they are is defined in comparison to men in a male-centric world.⁶ Women are always the other, and their individuality is stripped from them. It is, in this framework, impossible to escape the male gaze. The ability for women to conceptualize themselves as sexual beings apart from men is so limited, since the framework for understanding women as sexual beings is to understand them as sexually pleasing to men. If women cannot escape the male gaze and struggle to identify themselves sexually without the pressures of masculine ideas of what feminine sexuality looks like, publicly posting sexual content online only proliferates in the societal imagination that women's bodies exist for the pleasure of men.

⁶ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Classics, 1949).

CHAPTER II: ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS: MARXISM, COMMODIFICATION, AND ANTI-CAPITALISM

Capitalism has created the perfect environment for pornography and other exploitative industries to flourish. The basis for the unfair nature of this system is the exploitation of the working class, which is inherent to capitalism. Lawrence Crocker, describing Marx's theory of exploitation characterizes it as such: "In an exploitative mode of production, the control of the surplus product by a dominant class necessitates as well that they control the process of production and exercise a general repressive control of the labor force to prevent rebellion."⁷ Essentially, this describes how the surplus value created by workers, the profit, is not allowed to them. The capitalists who own the means of production appropriate that profit for themselves, meaning that the workers who produce the product and the wealth are not afforded the benefits of their own labor. This results in an economic system that creates and relies heavily on inequality between the capitalists and the working class. It also produces wage slavery, which is a term used to describe the way that the working class is forced to engage in labor, even if it seems they are free to choose their own path, otherwise face the prospect of not having their basic needs met. An analysis of Marxian theory states the following, "workers are exploited because the value they create is undemocratically taken by capitalists."⁸ In short, workers are creating surplus value to goods and services with their labor, but not receiving the proper reimbursement in return. Working with this framework, pornography as an industry is already exploitative since, unless they are working independently, the performers are not receiving the

⁷ Lawrence Crocker, "Marx's Theory of Exploitation," *Social Theory and Practice* 2, no. 2 (1972): 201–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23556729>.

⁸ Ben Burgis, "Karl Marx Was Right: Workers Are Systematically Exploited under Capitalism," *jacobin.com*, June 11, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/karl-marx-labor-theory-of-value-ga-cohen-economics>.

full compensation for the value they are creating by acting in pornography. Even looking at OnlyFans, the website takes a percentage of the profit a performer makes. This all goes to say, sex work *is* work. Those who end up in the industry are workers depending on a paycheck just like most of America. They are exploited in this way, again, like the rest of the working class.

That's not really the problem I'd like to wrestle with, though. The question is, what makes sex work categorically worse and more exploitative than other forms of labor? It naturally follows to ask why we continue to support a field that profits off the exploitation of women, marginalized folks, and the impoverished? More importantly, "Whose interests are served by romanticizing violence against women, by denying the truth of its pain, by the promotion of women's acceptance of violence as our lot in life?"⁹ There is a group of people who have something to gain from this, the same powerful people who have everything to gain by allowing others to suffer: the bourgeoisie, or the capitalists. Those who own the means of production are the minority, and they depend on the majority being economically or socially marginalized in order to succeed.

Capitalism and its development coincides with the subjugation of women, and in many ways, the degradation of women and traditionally feminine labor was integral to the development of such an unjust economic system. Women take on the burden of social reproduction, a necessary function of keeping the capitalist system alive. Social reproduction is considered the labor done in order to sustain and reproduce workers. This includes many homemaking tasks like reproducing and caring for children, as well as cooking, cleaning, and keeping the family system in order. These tasks classically fall to women, and with the development of industrialization and

⁹ James B Nelson, *Sexuality and the Sacred : Sources for Theological Reflection* (London: Mowbray, 1994).

capitalism, men were frequently working outside the home more often while women were banned or disincentivized from performing outside labor.¹⁰ Naturally, women were forced to remain in the home, and the labor they did (and still do) within the home is economically not considered actual work. There is no wage associated with the burden that falls on women, even though capitalism depends on this labor to survive. Women's work is excluded and, simultaneously, exploited. This is yet another reason why sex work is often not considered actual labor. Female bodies have been seen as, "a communal good anyone could appropriate and use at will."¹¹ Women's sexuality being exploited for pleasure is nothing new, and even though sex work does not include bearing children, feminine sexuality is defined in terms of the pleasure and benefits it brings to men, and not what it means to women.

Though I disagree with the stance that sex work is a positive and empowering avenue for women, there is no denying that the labor these women perform is truly work. Considering the devaluation of women's labor, it follows naturally that capitalism and the general history of women's rights in America has created a wage gap between men's and women's earnings. This wage gap is not necessarily referring to women being paid less for the same work as their male counterparts, but also the average income difference between men and women. Because certain fields have been either masculinized or feminized, when women enter traditionally feminine fields, they are often paid less because that job is not considered high value. The wage gap is an important factor to consider when looking at why women turn to sex work. A woman who is single or the single breadwinner of the household is simply making less money than single

¹⁰ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

¹¹ *ibid*

men.¹² Considering how quickly inflation and the cost of living are rising, it's understandable why women would turn to other means in order to meet their basic needs. The pervasive nature of modern sex work then, in a Marxian framework, is a problem of capitalism. If we had an economic system that allowed workers to own the means of production, and did not steal the profit of their labor, we would not be seeing the high levels of inequality that plague our society today. Poverty is the driving force that leads women to sex work, so the problem lies with the system in place, not the women who engage in it out of necessity. While this outlines the problem with pink collar¹³ jobs, what makes sex work worse than these other classically feminine jobs?

To answer this question is to call back to the anti-porn feminists of the second wave. Sex work and porn, in its most common form, not only celebrates the subjugation of women, but encourages those same dynamics to be practiced in our own sexual relationships. Amia Srinivasan's book, *The Right to Sex*, discusses these problems and include an excerpt where Srinivasan is discussing pornography with her students, asking these questions that second wave feminists often considered central to their arguments against sex work. Shockingly to Srinivasan, her students were attracted to these ideas and agreed that sex work is a net negative for women and society as a whole:

Could it be that pornography doesn't merely depict the subordination of women, but actually makes it real, I asked? Yes, they said. Does porn silence women, making it harder for them to protest against unwanted sex, and harder for men to

¹² Natalie Colley, "More Single Women Are Working than Ever, but Their Pay Gap Has Grown, Report Shows," *Forbes*, April 17, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliecolley/2023/04/17/single-women-face-steepest-gender-wealth-penalty-according-to-report/>.

¹³ Pink collar occupations or sectors are those often performed by women, typically involving service or care work.

hear those protests? Yes, they said. Does porn bear responsibility for the objectification of women, for the marginalisation of women, for sexual violence against women? Yes, they said, yes to all of it.¹⁴

Though all workers are exploited according to Marx, the impact of being an overworked teacher or an underpaid housecleaner doesn't reach far beyond the worker themselves and their own experience of exploitation. I argue that porn not only has those effects on the worker, but it reaches far beyond the workers themselves, and leaves its mark on the whole of society. The amount of men who watch pornography is anywhere from 60-98%, but even those who do not watch or engage with porn in any way can feel the effects of it.

Looking at the ways Marxism intersects with gender and sex work specifically, "sex work lifts the mask covering the extraction of surplus value from all laboring bodies, thereby denaturalizing the gendered and sexualized tensions and inconsistencies that remain irresolvable under capitalism."¹⁵ Essentially, sex work is a more transparent way to see the exploitation that occurs under capitalism, but replacing class conflict and the relationship between the worker and their labor with gender or sexuality is where the second wave flattened the argument.¹⁶ Gender is, naturally, an important aspect when discussing sex work, but class is also an integral aspect that cannot be ignored. Acknowledging all aspects of oppression that force folks into labor, especially fields that are uniquely exploitative and demeaning, is necessary to understand how we can best improve the conditions for those workers. It's well-known that many women who get involved in sex work are impoverished, so it follows naturally that the economic issues that

¹⁴ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (S.L.: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021).

¹⁵ Brooke Meredith Beloso, "Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (September 2012): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/665808>.

¹⁶ *ibid*

arose with the COVID-19 pandemic created a rise in women turning to sex work for supplementary income.¹⁷ The lack of social support and the inherent inequality built into capitalism has incentivized women to join these fields that exploit them and do damage to the social perception and situation of female-presenting people.

¹⁷ Maya Oppenheim, "Growing Numbers of Women Turning to Sex Work as Covid Crisis Pushes Them into 'Desperate Poverty,'" The Independent, April 20, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/sex-work-coronavirus-poverty-b1769426.html>.

CHAPTER III: SECOND WAVE FEMINISTS: THE ANTI SEX WORK ERA

The second wave of feminism occurred during the 1960s and 1970s and is often remembered for the fight for equal pay and treatment of women in the workplace. It was also the period where many prominent feminists spoke out against sex work and started discussing issues like social reproduction. Catherine MacKinnon, Julie Bindel, and Andrea Dworkin championed this perspective in that time period. Carole Pateman, whose book “The Sexual Contract” was published a bit later in 1988, echoes these sentiments but focuses more on the interaction between anti-capitalism and sex work than the former three activists. The perspectives of these women provide the inspiration for my argument concerning the rise in sexual media and access to it. Their voices juxtaposed with that of contemporary feminism are quite dissimilar, but I maintain that they are still a useful tool for examining the massive developments we see in the sex work industry today. In general, their perspectives are very far removed from the sex-positive emphasis of contemporary third-wave feminism. Their voices heavily influence the anti-porn argument and discuss why pornography has such an extraordinary social impact. It can be difficult and certainly controversial in the age of sex positivity to align oneself with the anti-porn movement and the aforementioned activists. Their ideas seem outdated and misogynistic at first glance, taken at a simplistic face value. The nuance in their arguments is where one can see everything they offer to women and the feminist movement. I read these works from MacKinnon, Dworkin, and their peers, and I feel so much anguish for the female sex. Their writing conveys the trap that we are locked into as women. In order to appeal to men (generally), we are expected to act the same way that women do in pornography. To be sexy is to be submissive, to relinquish control, and allow violation. If you act otherwise, admonish porn, and stand for female liberation, you can expect the repercussions of losing male attention and being

labelled a radical. It seems that believing in and acting for the best interests of women necessarily goes against what men desire and earn one the label of “other”. In the end, the anti-porn literature of the second wave illustrates this point, central to why porn is so damaging: what men desire is influenced by what is depicted in porn. How could it not be? Even if one man does not watch porn, his friends certainly do.¹⁸ Any discussion of sex between them, then, is informed by pornographic material. Sex positive feminists like Gayle Rubin certainly disagree with this analysis: “In Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously. A person is not considered immoral, is not sent to prison, and is not expelled from his or her family, for enjoying spicy cuisine.”¹⁹ In this passage, Rubin frames pornography and sex as something that is only a matter of sexual preference and consent, with little to no repercussions to anyone except for the people directly involved. It certainly ignores the fact that we are a social people, whose actions affect one another. Specifically in the case of porn, how could such pervasive sexual media not affect the mainstream imagination of what sex is and should be like?

MacKinnon’s work, “Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws” delves into the legal aspects of prostitution and pornography, as well as her personal views and arguments against the whole concept. Section B of the book provides the simplest reasoning for why MacKinnon is such a passionate voice for anti-sex work feminists, “Pornography sexualizes women’s inequality. It makes the inequality of women sexy. It sexualizes, most broadly speaking, dominance and submission. Every kind of woman is used, each one’s particular inequalities exploited as deemed sexually exciting.”²⁰ She also states, “Adult women are infantilized as children, children are

¹⁸ Rafael Ballester-Arnal et al., “Pornography Consumption in People of Different Age Groups: An Analysis Based on Gender, Contents, and Consequences,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, May 14, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00720-z>.

¹⁹ Gayle Rubin, *Deviations : A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁰ Catharine A MacKinnon, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press Of Harvard University Press, 2007).

adult women, interchangeably fusing vulnerability with the slutty eagerness said to be natural to women of all ages.”²¹ Her argument here focuses on the societal implications that women face due to the pervasive nature of pornography. MacKinnon illustrates that there are consequences to portraying women in porn as always eager, always available, and willing to be subject to violence and domination. It calls to my mind a quote by Marie Fortune, “Pornography is about violence, degradation and abuse in a sexual context...it teaches people violence is sexy and good sex is violent; that women like to be sexually dominated and abused...and that men are expected to be sexually aggressive.” Fortune and MacKinnon are exploring similar sentiments here, with Fortune emphasizing not only the harm that women are exposed to during intercourse, but also the expectation that pornography places on the man to reenact the sexual violence that it depicts. This point that Fortune mentions is often overlooked, that both men and women are saddled with unfair expectations due to the influence of pornography; the man that he must be violent and domineering, and the woman that she must accept it. Porn is and has been teaching people of all ages how to treat women, and thus it is a pervasive and destructive force that constantly depicts women being abused and forced into submission. Momentarily setting aside the harm and trauma done to the women in pornography, it has lasting effects on the way all other women are being treated in society. Think about all the different stereotypes that have been made into sexual fantasies. For instance, librarians, teachers, nuns, mothers, and secretaries have been subjected to overt sexualization in media. Not classically sexy occupations to hold, but there is a plethora of pornography depicting women in these jobs engaging in violent sex. It’s not just classically hot and attractive young women being subjected to the messages porn sends about women. It’s all women. Regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, pornography has helped turn women into

²¹ ibid

sexual objects, having to prove their humanity at every turn. A study conducted in 2012 shows that women's bodies were reduced to their sexual body parts in men's minds, while women processed men's bodies more holistically.²² Men are not subject to objectification in the same way women are. They are not depicted in (the majority of) porn as the ones waiting submissively to be violated.

Andrea Dworkin represents an even more extreme perspective on the spectrum of anti-sex work feminists. She was portrayed by both the media and sex positive feminists during the feminist sex wars as an anti-sex, ugly, man-hating feminist.²³ Many considered Dworkin to be a nightmare for the feminist movement, believing she ruined the image for other less extreme feminists. This can be attributed to just how radical her arguments were, and because her views on pornography and sex work often aligned with the Christian Right. Dworkin was mischaracterized in a lot of ways during her lifetime. Undoubtedly, she had unique views on sex, which can be seen in her book, *Intercourse*. For instance, she states "The normal fuck by a normal man is taken to be an act of invasion and ownership undertaken in a mode of predation: colonializing, forceful (manly) or nearly violent".²⁴ It's intriguing to see how she implies that forceful and manly are synonyms in this context (possibly even in general). In a sexual context, using the words forceful and manly interchangeably indirectly points to the power dynamics of sex that cause Dworkin to find it so demeaning to women. The implication left is that force is something innate to manliness, that their need to dominate women comes from an internal source. Whether that be something they were born with or a product of cultural development,

²² Sarah J. Gervais et al., "Seeing Women as Objects: The Sexual Body Part Recognition Bias," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42, no. 6 (June 29, 2012): 743–53, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1890>.

²³ Lauren Oyler, "The Radical Style of Andrea Dworkin," *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/the-radical-style-of-andrea-dworkin>.

²⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

Dworkin's fusion of the two terms leaves the message that forcefulness is extremely integral to the average man and his sex life. Porn reinforces that.²⁵ The top categories on PornHub in 2022 included "gangbang", "babysitter", and "hardcore".²⁶ This desire to dominate and violate women, that I believe isn't inherent, has been celebrated. The consistent subjugation of women has been essential as long as the patriarchy has been the structure for our societies. In order to keep women submissive in the public sphere, men dominate them in private as well. These two elements sustain one another, creating a loop that makes it nearly impossible for women to achieve true liberation.

As previously mentioned, an intriguing critique of the second-wave feminists is that perspective of viewing sex work through the lens of strictly gender and sexuality flattens the argument and does not address the root issue, which is class.²⁷ Carole Pateman is unlike other second wave feminists in this regard, as she directly compares capitalism with patriarchy, and addresses the economic side of the story by describing how a sex worker's exploitation is different than that of other common workers. In *The Sexual Contract*, she points out,

Even though the prostitution contract is sealed in the capitalist market, it still differs in some significant respects from the employment contract. For example, a worker always enters into an employment contract with a capitalist. If a prostitute were merely another worker the prostitution contract, too, would always involve a capitalist; yet very frequently the man who enters the contract is a worker.²⁸

²⁵ Sarah J. Gervais et al., "Seeing Women as Objects: The Sexual Body Part Recognition Bias," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42, no. 6 (June 29, 2012): 743–53, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1890>.

²⁶ Pornhub, "The 2022 Pornhub Year in Review | Pornhub Insights," [www.pornhub.com](https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#top-20-countries), December 8, 2022, <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#top-20-countries>.

²⁷ Brooke Meredith Beloso, "Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (September 2012): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.1086/665808>.

²⁸ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

She goes on to state, “The capitalist has no intrinsic interest in the body and the self of the worker, or, at least, not the same kind of interest as the man who enters into the prostitution contract. The employer is primarily interested in the commodities produced by the worker.”²⁹

The distinction Pateman makes in her argument is convincing, and truly illustrates that there is a uniqueness to the contract for a sex worker versus non-sexual laborers. This is in great contrast to the line of thinking from another Marxist feminist, Melissa Gira Grant. Grant herself has engaged in sex work, and describes her frustration with those who argue there is something that separates sex work from other forms of labor. She addresses the issue of selling one’s body as an argument against sex work, “That sex workers are continually negotiating varying levels of intimacy should be proof enough that this is labor rather than selling one’s body.”³⁰ She means to illustrate the idea that women who engage in sex work, by setting boundaries of the nature of sex they are willing to sell, demonstrates that they are engaging in labor in the same ways as other workers. They sell their labor power to the degree they are comfortable with in order to make money. She even goes as far as to say that sex workers’ complaints should not be taken as a reason to advocate for disapproval of the industry, or as a sign that sex workers wish to leave their line of work. Grant states, “Their complaints about sex work shouldn’t be construed, as they often are, as evidence of sex workers’ desire to exit sex work. These complaints are common to all workers and shouldn’t be exceptional when they are made about sex work.”³¹ I believe that Pateman’s argument is a convincing rebuttal to Grant’s. Her analysis, while substantial and effective at illustrating that sex work is certainly a form of labor, falls somewhat short. I maintain that sex work falls into a sort of gray area, because it is work but not in the same way as other

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore : The Work of Sex Work* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

³¹ *ibid*

more mainstream forms of labor are. Pateman posits that the difference between the prostitution contract and the employment contract lies with the relationship between the prostitute and the man who enters the contract with her. It is not a typical capitalist/worker relationship, which proves a difference between the two, and that the man soliciting her services is also interested in her body in a uniquely different way than a typical capitalist boss. The capitalist boss is looking for the worker to increase his profits and make his business more efficient. The prostitution contract differs in that the man soliciting her services is often working class himself, which changes the dynamics, and also because sexuality is a part of selfhood, which these women must separate themselves from for protection.³² It involves the self in a much more real way than non-sexual employment. Pateman's argument considers the dynamics in a different way than Grant, more focused on the actual power dynamics of sex work. Given Grant's argument that sex work should not be considered different from any other form of labor, she maintains that there is not an inherent issue with the dynamics between men and women in sex work, and denies that male desire is the driving force in proliferating the industry. She argues, "The demand for victims, as anti-sex work activists describe it, is driven by men's insatiable desire—not by sex workers' own demands for housing, health care, education, a better life, a richer life, if we dare."³³ Grant, while correct in her analysis that the lack of resources and financial stability is a major issue that fuels the industry, unnecessarily makes it an either/or situation—socioeconomic struggles or male desire—when it is both that perpetuates sex work. I believe that sex work is work, but I believe it contains integral differences that set it apart from other forms of non-sexual labor.

³² Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

³³ Melissa Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore : The Work of Sex Work* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

Early into *The Sexual Contract* Pateman discusses the link of the social contract to the sexual one, stating, “The social contract is a story of freedom; the sexual contract is a story of subjection.”³⁴ The sexual contract concerns the idea that the original social contract left out an important piece of the puzzle: how women fit into it and their sexual subjugation. Pateman states that the social contract instituted “the law of male sex-right.”³⁵ She analyzes this throughout many different lenses throughout her book, including a chapter entitled “What’s Wrong with Prostitution?”. In this chapter, Pateman assures readers that, “To argue that there is something wrong with prostitution does not necessarily imply any adverse judgement on the women who engage in the work. When socialists criticize capitalism and the employment contract they do not do so because they are contemptuous of workers, but because they are the workers’ champions.”³⁶ She then moves on to discuss the problem of prostitution:

Once the story of the sexual contract has been told, prostitution can be seen as a problem about *men*. The problem of prostitution then becomes encapsulated in the question why men demand that women’s bodies are sold as commodities in the capitalist market...prostitution is part of the exercise of the law of male sex-right, one of the ways in which men are ensured access to women’s bodies.³⁷

The anti-sex work feminists of this time truly did not seem to be in the business of slut-shaming and vilifying women for being sexual. Rather, they tried to educate people about the adverse effects of feeding into the oversexualization of the female body. They recognized that the world we live in incentivizes this overt objectification, and that women in general are not at fault for

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*

being subjugated. The unfortunate truth is that our social contract is predicated on the idea of dominance and subordination, and sex work plays right into the classic dynamic of female submission.

My endorsement of anti-porn feminism also includes a recognition of what it lacks. There is some discussion of what factors play into a woman's decision to become involved in sex work, but regardless, the political economic or class analysis of porn and sex work is rarely analyzed as thoroughly as it should be. One can still admonish the industry while recognizing that a woman's decision to engage in that labor is predicated on far more than just whether they believe they would enjoy that work. Additionally, the movement has been criticized for creating more shame around women expressing their sexuality, and some of the more radical women of the second wave left the impression that having sex was actively engaging in patriarchal values and contributing to the devaluation of women. Andrea Dworkin has certainly been characterized as one of these women. Valerie Solanas was one of the most extreme radicals, and another example of a woman who advocated for women to stay away from men, distrust them, and not engage in sexual intercourse with them. Her work, *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, directly states, "the male is a biological accident: the y (male) gene is an incomplete x (female) gene, that is, has an incomplete set of chromosomes. In other words, the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage. To be male is to be deficient, emotionally limited; maleness is a deficiency disease and males are emotional cripples."³⁸ In the title, S.C.U.M. stands for "society for cutting up men". Obviously, Dworkin and especially Solanas do not represent the whole of the second wave movement, but regardless, the hatred for sex work was not difficult for some to translate to a disdain for heterosexual sex. I think it is extremely important to defocus

³⁸ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto : Society for Cutting up Men* (New York: Olympia Press, 1968).

critiques of pornography that concern sexual behavior in general, and get back to the clearest and most coherent part of the message, which is exposing the inherent exploitation and misogyny.

CHAPTER IV: CONTEMPORARY FEMINISM: BODILY AUTONOMY AND THE RIGHT TO SEXUAL FREEDOM

The most recent rendition of feminism has been characterized by values very different compared to what the second wave discussed. The third and fourth waves are concerned with issues of sexual freedom, diversity and inclusion, and movements like Me Too.

“Intersectionality” has been a buzz word commonly associated with these waves of feminism as well. Intersectionality refers to the idea that people face specific or overlapping levels of oppression based on different intersecting identities. For instance, a woman may face marginalization, but a black queer woman has a unique set of circumstances that causes her to face societal oppression in a way that someone who is just female, queer, or black might not be confronted with. Kimberle Crenshaw can be credited with bringing this term to the mainstream consciousness back in the early 90s. It follows logically why contemporary feminism would be attracted to sex positivity given the interest in intersectionality. The celebration and acknowledgement of different identities and cultures existing within one person and how that shapes their experience as a woman connects with sex work in more ways than one. The more obvious is the recognition that the addition of intersecting marginalized identities can make women more prone to exploitation or economic hardship, which can result in sex trafficking or turning to sex work themselves to make ends meet. Also, the identity of sex worker itself is marginalized, so wanting to support women in all their identities could also connect to the celebration of sex work and the general turning away from recognizing its damage.

The increased emphasis on intersectionality has put focus on different ways people can face marginalization, and generally the modern feminism movement has been more inclusive and welcoming of differing identities than past waves. I believe more and more people have begun to

recognize that the experience of being a woman, while it can differ based on race, class, and sexual identity, still has certain characteristics that transcend those differences, and all women can rally around. One of those is reproductive rights. Modern feminism has continued the discussion around abortion and birth control access that was championed during the second wave, which resulted in the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and necessarily brings up the conversation of bodily autonomy. In general, we can see how much this rhetoric surrounding bodily autonomy stretches to other aspects of modern feminist plights, and many issues focus on solutions that tell women to do what is good for them on an individual level, with little to no emphasis placed on the impacts this can have on the wider community. Of course, bodily autonomy is an important aspect of feminism. Women should be afforded that right just like anybody else, especially when we consider issues like reproductive rights. There is a plethora of articles drawing connections between abortion rights and sex work as issues of bodily autonomy, and according to Mackenzie Darling, this critique is one of the most convincing cases for the pro-sex work feminists, “The ever-growing criminalization and policing of reproductive choices in the post-*Roe* world have highlighted the overlap between the criminalization of sex workers and the criminalization of abortion — as both penalize people for sexual conduct that is outside of society’s proscribed boundaries.”³⁹ Surely, as feminists, we do not wish to curtail women’s rights to be in control of their own bodies and what they do with them. Just as many women mourned the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the summer of 2022, there is a true reason to be upset about other cases of women’s bodies being policed. The case of online sex work is different, though. Access to

³⁹ Mackenzie Darling, “My Body, My Choice: Why the Decriminalization of Sex Work Is Essential for Reproductive Justice,” O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health, December 15, 2022, <https://oneill.law.georgetown.edu/my-body-my-choice-why-the-decriminalization-of-sex-work-is-essential-for-reproductive-justice/#:~:text=In%20order%20to%20ensure%20the>.

abortion actually creates more opportunities for women and makes it easier for them to move through society. For instance, it gives women more options in their career, their romantic and sexual partners, and their lifestyle. It has been championed for years by most women and the general majority of America⁴⁰ because it is a necessary part of reproductive health and the freedom to control what happens to one's body. In contrast, porn and online sex work have a completely different motivation. The creation of these has been purely for pleasure, and even if the full abolishment of sex work was possible, it wouldn't prevent women or anyone from engaging with their own sexuality. Advocating for an anti-porn agenda does not directly translate to demonizing women for being sexual, but rather asks for women to be able to have sex without the influence of porn seeping into their sex lives. The mainstream reach of porn and online sex work, while it may seem like a positive sign of women being able to use their sexuality however they see fit, really is not that. The most common forms of sexual media bombard viewers with scenes of exploitation, violence and female submission,⁴¹ which is the opposite of what reproductive rights offers to women. I desperately want women to feel free to express their sexuality, but I truthfully cannot see a way towards liberation when people insist on using the means of the oppressor to free themselves. It is not real freedom, rather constraints that we can no longer see. It is doomed to fail. This difference is clear when looking at these two issues of bodily autonomy on both individual and community-wide levels. When something is doing far more damage than it is good, we have a duty to examine what the problem is and how we can fix it.

⁴⁰ Gallup, "Broader Support for Abortion Rights Continues Post-Dobbs," Gallup.com, June 14, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/506759/broader-support-abortion-rights-continues-post-dobbs.aspx>.

⁴¹ Pornhub, "The 2022 Pornhub Year in Review | Pornhub Insights," www.pornhub.com, December 8, 2022, <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2022-year-in-review#top-20-countries>.

Sexual liberation has turned from what earlier proponents, like Ellen Willis, saw it as (the ability to have consensual sex outside of marriage and access to reproductive freedom) into a whole different beast. Concerning the sexual liberation aspect of third wave feminism, it's understandable to some extent why this is so important to women. Centuries have gone by where women were expected to completely suppress their sexual urges and never voice them. There has long been a double standard where men are allowed and even encouraged to express their sexuality (often aggressively), while women were viewed as vessels for male pleasure. Reclaiming sexual power and feelings as something that is normal for women is important. But has the pendulum swung too far, to the point where women are encouraged to be overly sexual? Ellen Willis, in her chapter, "Towards a Feminist Sexual Revolution", discusses the feminist debates surrounding sexual liberation and women's fears of "sexual anarchy."⁴² She argues against focusing on violence and pornography as things that oppress women, and instead focus on sexual freedom for both men and women, such as abortion access and defending everyone's right to engage in consensual sexual activity.⁴³ The question I am still faced with after Willis' argument is how we can achieve sexual liberation, or freedom of any kind, without fighting against oppression against women? If we no longer focus on sexual violence and its glamorization in pornography, how can we change the perception of women from submissive sexual beings to sexually autonomous and empowered? Additionally, by ignoring or deemphasizing the role violence plays in women's lives, we fail to receive a holistic picture of the power dynamics between men and women.

⁴² Willis, Ellen. "Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution." *Social Text*, no. 6 (1982): 3–21.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/466614>.

⁴³ *ibid*

In the face of the question of sexual freedom, one needs to ask another: is it bad to be so sexual? *Revolting Prostitutes*, a book by Juno Mac and Molly Smith, can help make sense of this dilemma. The book focuses on the fight for sex workers' rights, and the authors hold a nuanced position, believing that the sex work industry currently is not a safe or positive field for people to enter, and they discuss both the arguments for and against becoming a sex worker. Early on in the book, Smith and Mac present one of the many arguments that sex is a good thing, and therefore sex work is a good thing, "Advocates push back against narratives that associate bodily or moral degradation with 'the wrong kinds of sex', instead asserting that sexual pleasure is a personal and social good."⁴⁴ Following this argument, if it is the case that sex is good, then sex work should also be considered good. Especially because in this framework sex is considered a *social* good, then folks should be able to access that resource. Smith and Mac's own views include a healthy critique of the view that sex work as simply being sex where you get paid, one that I agree with wholeheartedly. They state, "The worker's interests are not identical to those of the client. Ultimately, the worker is there because they are interested in getting paid, and this economic imperative is materially different from the client's interest in recreational sex. Losing sight of that leads to a politics that is inadequate in its approach to workers' material needs in the workplace."⁴⁵ While I can agree that sex and expression of sexuality is a good thing, the monetization and lack of shared interests between the client and the sex worker demonstrate that there is more to the dynamic than just sex and pleasure. Smith and Mac do an excellent job illustrating what makes sex work and body commodification so separate from the way people

⁴⁴ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁴⁵ *ibid*

engage with sex outside of the capitalist market. Another issue Smith and Mac raise with this brand of sex positivity is how it erases the experience of the majority of sex workers:

Sex positive sex work politics are useful for the Erotic Professionals who advocate them and for carceral feminists who push for criminalisation. These groups share an interest in glossing over the material conditions of sex workers' workplaces. For Erotic Professionals, to raise such topics either spoils the advertising illusion or is detrimental to the self protective identity they've created. For carceral feminists, arguing about the 'meaning' of sex usefully conceals practical, granular questions about sex workers' access to power and resources at work – questions which, if examined, inevitably reveal that criminalisation cannot improve sex workers' lives.⁴⁶

Sexuality is an objectively natural and positive element of human existence, which has unfortunately been unfairly demonized in different ways throughout history. But that does not mean that placing one's sexuality for sale on the capitalist marketplace should be the way we remedy the conceptualization of female sexuality. In turn, marketing women's sexuality as something that exists for men's pleasure instead of as an integral part of a consensual and reciprocal sexual experience perpetuates the idea that women's bodies are a vessel for men to enjoy. Again, I must invoke Carole Pateman, "why do men demand that satisfaction of a natural appetite must take the form of public access to women's bodies in the capitalist market in exchange for money?"⁴⁷ This is not to blame women for their participation in the sexual economy. In many ways, the urge to profit off one's own oppression is an appealing choice. The

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

liberation and equality of women has been a strong political cause for centuries, yet our liberation has not been achieved. In the meantime, why not make lemonade out of lemons? The unfortunate truth is that we cannot break free from the patriarchy within the bounds of those who oppress us.

The demonization of feminine sexuality pervades our culture to this day. Frequently, the disgust for women's sexual behaviors and prostitution can be traced back to early Christianity and their standards for sexual purity. The church often viewed female sexuality as dangerous, a way for women to lead men astray into sin. Sexual freedom is often seen as a response to these issues associated with religious purity culture. Purity culture's impacts don't stay within religious communities, and don't exist within a vacuum. Preaching these values to the wider community leaves even secular folks forced to reckon with shame surrounding their sexuality. Jessica Valenti, in her book *The Purity Myth*, converses about how the beauty standard places an expectation on women to remain looking as young as possible, that a woman becomes less valuable when she looks less young and virginal. Even worse of course, is to not be a virgin.⁴⁸ This resource in general provides concrete examples of how putting pressure on young women to stay a virgin until marriage damages their perceptions of selfhood and sex not just before marriage, but after. The remnants of shaming women for being sexual remain steadfast in cultural beliefs, and many women make an effort to rebel against that by tapping into the innately sexual aspects of their being. This can be seen in many ways, including engaging in hookup culture, openness about one's sex life, and posting suggestive material on social media. A frequently overlooked influence on disgust for women's sexuality is that of sexually transmitted

⁴⁸ Jessica Valenti, *The Purity Myth : How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*. (Read How You Want, 2009).

diseases, and the weight they held back when treatment wasn't as effective as it is now. The Victorian era is highly associated with a high rate of STDs,⁴⁹ specifically syphilis. The association with sex and filth hasn't been broken yet, even if the explicit link is less obvious. It's still strongest for women, as they were often the ones blamed for the spread of STDs. Many women believe that breaking these negative associations with sex and being dirty is one of the reasons why sexual liberation is so important. We so frequently see negative stereotypes and beliefs about sex being projected onto the woman, largely due to this persisting belief that women are the gatekeepers to sex. This idea places the responsibility of the act on the woman. If she is the one deciding whether or not sexual activity can occur, then she is held liable if her partners contract an STD, if she gets pregnant, in addition to the pressure of pleasing her partner.

So much of the discussion around sex and pornography centers around the idea of autonomy and personal choice, yet very little thought is given to the way our sexual behaviors impact people beyond oneself and their partner. I would argue that, especially considering the argument that sex is a social good, we obviously should do so. The influence of American liberalism in our culture and everyday relations, though, cannot be understated. I do not use liberal in the same way that we refer to the U.S.'s Democratic party, rather looking at the kind of liberalism that was discussed by John Locke. Classical liberalism centers around this idea of privacy, individual rights, and generally individualistic behaviors. The communal experience and consideration of the wider good are sent to the background. The culture this has created is one that deemphasizes the importance of community and the impacts we can have on the people around us. Considering how this individualism has blossomed in the U.S., we can see extremely negative ramifications on society. For example, consider the widespread apathy towards

⁴⁹ *ibid*

unhoused persons. Most do not consider unhoused people a part of their community, even if they reside close by. They are seen as a blight, an ugly fixture of city life that prove how dirty and unsafe our cities are. Instead of being offered social support like rehabilitation facilities, housing, or mental health care, the message “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” is thrown around. People just want them gone, out of their eyesight. It is not the norm to show care for our community and have a communal mindset. When discussing sex work and pornography through the lens of individualism, and mentioning the impact it has on the psyche of those who consume it, a central question emerges: can we really justify engaging with porn and online sex work because a minority of performers find it empowering? To accept it for this reason, despite the fact that pornography in its current existence necessarily harms women⁵⁰ and upholds patriarchal structures of female behavior is to prioritize the voices and experiences of women who are likely in the field for their own enjoyment and not for economic reasons. The focus on what Smith and Mac have deemed the “Erotic Professional” cannot continue,

This discourse of sex positivity helped produce the figure we term the ‘Erotic Professional’. Easily identifiable as one of the more vocal, visible figures of the sex worker movement, the Erotic Professional positions herself as answering a vocational ‘calling’ that seems to have barely anything to do with being paid. In downplaying economic coercion and instead emphasising her pleasure and desire, the Erotic Professional attempts to make commercial sex more closely resemble

⁵⁰ Whitney L. Rostad et al., “The Association between Exposure to Violent Pornography and Teen Dating Violence in Grade 10 High School Students,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 48, no. 7 (July 15, 2019): 2137–47, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-1435-4>.

the sex life that society is more ready to endorse – that for which women receive no payment.⁵¹

This systematically ignores the economically exploited and marginalized, and erases the pain of working class women who enter sex work because they have no other real alternatives. Working class women have been consistently ignored by modern feminism, which subscribes to neoliberal ideas of what we owe one another as a political community—which is, essentially, nothing. Every woman can become a “Girl Boss” and have everything if she simply works hard enough to break through the glass ceiling. Never mind that for many women, working hard isn’t actually enough. College is more expensive than ever,⁵² a massive barrier to getting the degree necessary for jobs that pay well. The cost of living is up,⁵³ and women who want to have children are at an even larger disadvantage, having to take up a career and homemaking at the same time (also known as the double shift). This brand of feminism regularly focuses only on the ways women as individuals can make their lives better, and ignores the material struggles that make it nearly impossible for economic mobility to occur. Unfortunately, it seems to still be the most pervasive.

Contemporary feminism is so compatible with capitalism, and it plays into the hands of the oppressor much like sex work does. This is my great gripe with contemporary mainstream feminism. It encourages women to try and work within capitalism, to “hustle”, ignoring that patriarchal capitalism is the very structure that has kept women in a place of economic and social submission for centuries. Just because a few wealthy women are the ones choosing to oppress the poor and marginalized instead of men does not mean that we have succeeded in increasing

⁵¹ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁵² National Center for Education Statistics, “Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities,” NCE.ed.gov (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>.

⁵³ Mike Winters and Gabriel Cortes, “These 5 Charts Show How Much 2 Years of Inflation Have Really Cost You,” CNBC, April 14, 2023, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/04/14/charts-how-much-inflation-increased-since-2021.html>.

opportunities and equality for women. It means that society has something to offer for the rich. At its core, feminism must acknowledge that intersecting identities, while real and certainly the basis for both structural and interpersonal discrimination, were emphasized and designed to put a veil over the identity that truly defines our existence in society. That is class identity. Contemporary mainstream feminism will continue to offer nothing to the socio-economically disadvantaged until it realizes that the core of the problem is capitalism. It does not care that the sexual freedom or liberation that is hailed as so beneficial to women is harmful, because the women who are exposed to the most danger because of this are either poor, queer, or women of color. Instead of recognizing the whitewashed, classist nature of their cause, it desires success stories of women like Hilary Clinton who were able to achieve a position of power, ignoring the fact that they had to step on the backs of the working class to get there, and continued to do so once they had reached the top. This is what brings together the very nature of “girl boss” feminism, and why I am very hesitant to acknowledge it as feminism at all.

A new and massive development we’re seeing in sexual liberation, however, is the rise of platforms like OnlyFans. The COVID-19 pandemic, due to the economic difficulties and the decreased avenues for social connections that it caused, forced people to find new ways to connect with one another online, encouraging those who were lonely to seek solace on the internet.

CHAPTER V: THE ONLINE SPACE: A NEW FRONTIER

In the past, pornography has carried a much heavier stigma. Individuals were only able to consume porn that came in a physical copy, whether that was a magazine like *Playboy*, *Barely Legal*, or videos that had to be rented from the local movie store. Pornography now is accessible to us at any time in any place. The advent of porn websites like PornHub caused a wide surge in the amount of porn people were consuming,⁵⁴ and mobile phones only contributed further to that problem. Folks can watch porn in class, at work, essentially anywhere, without being detected because it's on a small handheld device. Even websites like Twitter have a plethora of porn if one just knows the correct terms to type in the search box. Now, anyone can watch porn without having to be seen buying a porno magazine or renting a film. It's more private, and more pervasive.

Of course, there are also new ways of engaging with sexual material now that we have the internet. In 2016, a website called OnlyFans launched. OnlyFans allows individuals who are 18 and up to post pre-recorded or live footage of themselves engaging in sexual behavior. These videos are for viewers to see if they subscribe and pay a monthly fee, with different tiers of subscription that allow access to more or less content depending on the amount the subscriber is willing to pay. While it launched in 2016, it didn't have significant societal reach until the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020.⁵⁵ OnlyFans became popular during the pandemic not only because it is an easy way to make money, but because the platform encourages connection

⁵⁴ Samantha Smith and Jamie LeSueur, "Pornography Use among Young Adults in the United States," Ballard Brief, 2023, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/pornography-use-among-young-adults-in-the-united-states#:~:text=Of%20the%20men%20who%20were>.

⁵⁵ Matilda Boseley, "'Everyone and Their Mum Is on It': OnlyFans Booms in Popularity during the Pandemic," the Guardian, December 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/dec/23/everyone-and-their-mum-is-on-it-onlyfans-boomed-in-popularity-during-the-pandemic>.

between the influencer and their “fans”. During the lockdown portion of the pandemic, people were starved for intimacy and affection, and while traditional pornography is sexual stimulation, OnlyFans offers that as well as emotional connection. To cultivate a loyal following of fans who are willing to offer money, women interact with them frequently online: sending messages back and forth, offering them exclusive explicit content for extra fees, and making their fans feel like they are wanted and desired. This extra labor aside from the production of sexual content is often exhausting, so more frequently we have seen the rise of what some may call “e-pimps”.⁵⁶ These are companies that offer to do marketing for performers on OnlyFans, as well as take over the job of messaging and staying in contact with their fans. These managers keep a store of the influencer’s sexual pictures and videos available to send to fans. With this material as a bartering tool, they expertly formulate a completely fake relationship with the fans under the name of the performer. This practice not only perpetuates the implicit belief that men have a right to access women’s bodies whenever they wish, but also that women exist as an emotional sounding board for men’s problems and desires.⁵⁷ It is rooted in the stereotype that women should be nurturing and supportive creatures, the perfect companion to absorb all the worries and thoughts of a man. Federici again becomes relevant, “women’s labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink.”⁵⁸ This statement does not exclude emotional labor.

Many third-wave feminists believe that OnlyFans is a wonderful medium for women to reclaim their sexuality, as well as make money by taking it from the men who have historically

⁵⁶ Ezra Marcus, “The ‘E-Pimps’ of OnlyFans,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/16/magazine/e-pimps-onlyfans.html>.

⁵⁷ Fahs, Breanne, and Eric Swank. “The other third shift? Women’s emotion work in their sexual relationships.” *Feminist Formations* 28, no. 3 (2016): 46-69.

⁵⁸ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004).

oppressed them. A main factor that contributes to the belief that it's so much better than in person sex work, or even porn, is that the performer often engages in it alone, and does not have to face any physical danger from others to do it. It appears to be done completely on the terms of the individual creating the content, not on anyone else's. There is evidence to the contrary, though. OnlyFans has been compared to a pimp⁵⁹ due to their policy of taking a 20% cut of the performer's profits, making money off women being increasingly more shocking and sexual on the internet. Not only does OnlyFans take a substantial cut of the money people produce on the website, they have little to no protections in place for users. Clearly, physical protections are not a high priority due to the nature of online interactions, but they have had numerous leaks that revealed performers' information and content. Leaks are not the only issue that OnlyFans has had, though. There are multiple accounts of underage girls being able to get onto the website using someone else's credentials and posting nude/sexual content on the platform.⁶⁰ Because this is happening online and behind a paywall, it's extremely difficult for it to be regulated and for the proper authorities to be notified. OnlyFans also markets itself to young girls as a self-proclaimed "influencer" platform.⁶¹ These girls and women are often freshly 18 or even younger, and in need of some extra money. It's manipulative and cashes in on the idea that women are most valuable and sexually appealing when they are young and naïve.

⁵⁹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Opinion | OnlyFans Is Not a Safe Platform for 'Sex Work.' It's a Pimp.," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/06/opinion/onlyfans-sex-work-safety.html>.

⁶⁰ National Center on Sexual Exploitation, "OnlyFans Chooses to Continue Exploitation," NCOSE, August 25, 2021, <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/onlyfans-chooses-to-continue-exploitation/>; Lucile Marie-Claude, "Stop Encouraging My 15-Year-Old Sister to Be a Sex Worker," *The Virago*, September 19, 2021, <https://medium.com/the-virago/stop-encouraging-my-15-year-old-sister-to-be-a-sex-worker-183b16c5cc44>.

⁶¹ National Center on Sexual Exploitation, "A Look into OnlyFans: Child Sexual Abuse Material and Trafficking," NCOSE, June 10, 2021, <https://endsexualexploitation.org/articles/a-look-into-onlyfans/>.

The young girls being roped into posting content on OnlyFans are also not being taught about the stain this will leave on their digital footprint. Digital footprint can be defined as, “your paper trail of online activity. Your digital footprint gets tracked every time you post or visit a website.”⁶² Anything you do online can be used against you, even things posted behind a paywall. Many of the girls working on OnlyFans don’t want to be sex workers forever, not realizing that doing OnlyFans could impact their careers in the future even if they don’t explicitly state that they posted on the platform.

OnlyFans, Pornhub, and websites like those are not the only issues women face online. Their reaches can be felt far outside those specific platforms, and seep into regular, everyday social media usage. Platforms like Instagram have become increasingly more risqué, which one could argue is a product of porn and online sex work. To analyze further, I want to discuss the idea of sexual capital. Sexual or erotic capital, according to Catherine Hakim, is a fourth form of capital just as important as economic, cultural, and social capital.⁶³ It involves the ways one is able to command and attract sexual desire from others, and how much power they can wield from that. She believes that women are more capable of accessing and utilizing erotic capital, and that this can be seen more frequently in online spaces.⁶⁴ Women post sexual or explicit photos on Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat for the purpose of validation, because if they cannot be seen as fully human, at least they can be wanted. Some argue that this is truly empowering for them, like porn and sex work, because it allows them to reclaim power over their sexuality and the classic perceptions of how a woman should behave. It’s true, women have historically been deemed dirty, inappropriate, or vulgar for engaging with sex in the

⁶² Clare Stouffer, “What Is a Digital Footprint and How Can You Protect It - Norton,” [us.norton.com](https://us.norton.com/blog/privacy/digital-footprint), July 25, 2023, <https://us.norton.com/blog/privacy/digital-footprint>.

⁶³ Catherine Hakim, “Erotic Capital,” *European Sociological Review* 26, no. 5 (March 19, 2010): 499–518, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq014>. Catherine Hakim, “Erotic Capital,” *European Sociological Review* 26, no. 5 (March 19, 2010): 499–518, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcq014>.

⁶⁴ *ibid*

same ways that men do. The double standard is inarguably unfair, and it's fully possible that in some way, engaging with sex in this manner might be empowering, at least in the moment. But the reality behind this overt display of sexuality, and the reason why it feels so good in the moment is exactly because it is a male fantasy. It offers instant gratification, assurance that you are attractive and have worth, even if that is found within male attention.

CHAPTER VI: BANDAIDS: SHORT-TERM IMPROVEMENTS

Considering that porn and online sex work are a net negative for women both in and out of the industry, I will explore solutions to fix the problem. I don't expect that sex work in every form will be abolished. It has been present in some form for thousands of years, but the most recent developments due to the internet have exacerbated the problem greatly. There are ways to improve this issue for the time being, and work on large scale change to improve the conditions that push people to engage in sex work.

Most of the realistic, material solutions that can be implemented soon focus on improving conditions for the workers themselves, so they are not subjected to further exploitation. Unfortunately, the short-term solutions for the way sex work affects women outside of the industry are very few and far between. The main issue these women face is reinforcement of female submission and sexual violence, rooted in the way men interact with and value women. The process of fixing the way society views and engages with the female body and sexuality is a long and strenuous process, unlikely to occur while capitalism is still our economic system. In the meantime, harm reduction is the main solution I propose, to at least protect these workers who face severe exploitation. One way to allow workers more autonomy in their job is unionization. Even considering the traumas that are involved with sex work, performers are still workers, and crave the job security that all workers want. Smith and Mac state, "These people would prefer enhanced power within their relationships with bosses rather than that relationship being criminalised. The reason is that workers generally want to keep their jobs, with improved conditions. That is a standard trade union demand".⁶⁵ This echoes Marxist ideas of how workers

⁶⁵ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

behave under capitalism. Marx's discussion of labor under capitalism as forced labor illustrates why workers are so wary of leaving their jobs, "His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it."⁶⁶ When workers are forced to remain in an occupation to ensure they can meet their needs, the risk of leaving their job, no matter how exploitative, is likely to keep them there. This is why unionization is so important for workers in the meantime, so they can negotiate better terms for themselves and their fellow laborers, and improve their material conditions. OnlyFans workers specifically face challenges because their industry is so underregulated, and being on the internet, it spans far and wide. During the summer of 2021, the platform announced they were planning to ban sexually explicit content on their website and turn away from being known as a sex work platform. When this news came out, workers talked of unionizing, but they did not end up following through. This is likely due to the massive hit their profits would have taken, given that the platform has become synonymous with pornographic material. Regardless, the initial threat sparked backlash from thousands of users, both content creators and consumers.

As antithetical as it may seem to my argument, I am vehemently against the criminalization of pornographic material or punishment of sex workers. I believe that decriminalization is essential to ensuring the well-being of sex workers in the meantime. As long as our culture has desires and has access to the kind of negative material one can see in porn and online sex work, the industry is going to exist. We cannot ignore the plight of the worker because the industry they are in is exploitative. If anything, it provides us with more of a reason to center their experiences and figure out how to ensure their safety. Criminalization and carceralism are

⁶⁶ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977).

incompatible with true feminism and the idea of helping sex workers, as Mac and Smith argue, “cops are not feminist. The mainstream feminist movement is correct in identifying prostitution as a patriarchal institution; they conveniently miss that policing is, too.”⁶⁷ By criminalizing sex work, there can be no regulations placed on an industry that will continue to exist regardless of whether it is illegal or not. It also sets the standard for legal forms of sex work like pornography and OnlyFans and informs the way we treat all women in the industry regardless of whether their sector has been legalized. Additionally, decriminalization provides access to numerous social benefits like healthcare and protection, which workers in the industry are currently denied.⁶⁸ Women in sex work, whether that be online or in person, are not taken seriously when they go to law enforcement and report sexual violence. They are afforded no protection from the communities where they reside and make their lives. In the case of in person sex work, they are disincentivized from reporting crimes because their work is illicit. It’s one of the ways we consistently erase violence against women, particularly sexual violence. Not taking sex workers seriously in regards to sexual violence is arguably maximized compared to what other women experience, but regardless it reflects our social attitudes towards women, especially women who resist male desires in any way.

⁶⁷ Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers’ Rights* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch, “Why Sex Work Should Be Decriminalized,” Human Rights Watch, August 7, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/07/why-sex-work-should-be-decriminalized>.

CHAPTER VII: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: LONG TERM METHODS FOR IMPROVEMENT

The solutions outlined above provide support for the near future, but without structural change, there is little to no hope of extinguishing the exploitation that porn and online sex work creates. Long-term, we would ideally be able to institute more widespread social democratic policies. This includes establishing better social safety nets like universal healthcare, childcare, maternity/paternity leave, a livable minimum wage, and affordable housing. By having systems like these in place, we can ensure that people have their basic needs met and are able to survive without taking on multiple jobs or engaging in careers that encourage further exploitation. One full-time job should pay well enough for people to support themselves and live without economic insecurity.

All of these policies sound wonderful in theory. Unfortunately, we have not been able to institute any of them in the U.S., much unlike our peers. Why is that? As one of the wealthiest nations, shouldn't we be able to find a way to ensure our citizens have access to the resources they need to be happy and healthy? People argue for logistical issues being the reason why we cannot have these policies in place. For instance, the localized aspects of our government structure make it difficult for people to form a coalition in favor of the legislation they would like to see, and there is a massive lack of cohesion and solidarity amongst the working class.⁶⁹ Considering how much sway money has in our political landscape,⁷⁰ coupled with the disconnected working class, it makes sense that we rarely see politics work in the favor of the

⁶⁹ Bruce Vladeck, "Universal Health Insurance in the United States: Reflections on the Past, the Present, and the Future," *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 1 (January 1, 2003): 16–19, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1447684/>.

⁷⁰ *ibid*

people. Commonly when discussing these social democratic policies, one will also hear the retort, “who’s going to pay for all this?”. It’s a natural question to ask, as providing resources for people is not a cheap task. That does not mean it is not worth it, though.

I therefore propose a wealth tax. The difference between a wealth tax and regular taxes is that it only applies to a small percentage of the country’s most wealthy, and it is not only a tax on their income, but their assets as well. This would provide substantial revenue towards widening social safety nets. Even if it was necessary to slightly raise taxes on regular citizens as well, the amount of benefits they would be receiving would likely save them money. No more having to pay for expensive healthcare through your employer, or have ridiculous amounts of medical debt that you are unable to pay off. Childcare costs have reached unbelievable levels, so to establish universal care would be a massive relief for working parents. Obviously, imposing all of these policy changes at the same time and quickly would be an extremely tall order. I am hoping to see the conversation around these policies open up again within the house of representatives and the senate. Bernie Sanders, throughout his career, was a consistent proponent of all these policies, and for a time in 2020, it seemed like he might have had a shot at grasping towards the power necessary to enact change. With his loss to Joe Biden in the democratic primary, much of the drive for change has dwindled. Social and economic conservatism are the highest they have been in a decade,⁷¹ and as that grows, the likelihood of getting support for these policies falls drastically. Regardless, I maintain that social welfare policies would be an excellent way of alleviating poverty, at least to some extent, which should help with the number of women forced into sex work.

⁷¹ Gallup, “Social Conservatism in U.S. Highest in about a Decade,” Gallup.com, June 8, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/506765/social-conservatism-highest-decade.aspx>.

The most effective way to treat the problem of porn and online sex work is, unfortunately, also the most difficult to achieve and the most abstract solution. It involves shifting the cultural mindset around women, their bodies, and what sex should be. These ideas are molded by the economic framework we live under, as well as the male dominance that has persisted for centuries. As long as we continue to perpetuate systems of patriarchy and capitalism, men will continue to benefit from the subjugation of women and wish to control and dominate them.

CONCLUSION

Second-wave feminist views on sex work have, in recent years, appeared less and less in feminist rhetoric. Modern feminism has consistently held the view that all sex is good sex as long as it is consensual, and ignored criticisms of how sex work is different than interpersonal sexual relationships. This perspective has become increasingly popular and the number of Americans agreeing that porn is morally acceptable has been rising.⁷² With the rise in positive attitudes towards sexual liberation, platforms like OnlyFans have sprung up. That is, services that offers women a new avenue to engage in sex work from the comfort and safety of their own home, able to create sexual content without the physical contact often necessary in pornography and in person sex work. I maintain that a Marxist analysis of labor is essential to remember in this context, as Marx's ideas of false consciousness and exploitation contribute insightful critiques to the conversation, coupled with second-wave feminist critiques of sex work. These two perspectives have a worthy place in the conversation around newer forms of sex work and the increased access we are seeing with the development of new technologies.

Nowadays, almost everyone has a smart phone and is able to view sexual content whenever they wish. Social media is also saturated with sexual content, and it is almost impossible to escape these explicit images and videos. Young women specifically are being encouraged to become producers of this content, and OnlyFans is making that easier than ever. It offers women more autonomy in when and how they choose to make sexual content, but it does not erase the misogynistic values that online sex work proliferates in the same way as previous iterations of sex work do. This is why I believe OnlyFans and platforms like it deserve an

⁷² Andrew Dugan, "More Americans Say Pornography Is Morally Acceptable," Gallup.com, June 5, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/235280/americans-say-pornography-morally-acceptable.aspx>.

analysis of their own and should not be lumped into the same category as all forms of sex work. Of course, much of the second-wave feminist critiques are still applicable, but the actual method of sex work these women are engaging in is categorically different than older forms of sex work like prostitution or pornographic material.

Finally, I believe that sex work is so harmful to women not only because of the exploitation women within the industry face, but because there are negative ramifications that spread to how women are conceptualized and treated within our culture. I focus much of my analysis on the ways that second-wave feminists were correct, in my opinion, on how viewing and engaging with porn and other forms of sex work proliferates the dynamic of dominance and submission between men and women, and the violent nature of porn is reflected back in our personal sexual dynamics, leading to sexual violence against women. It continues these systems of oppression against women and cements women as sexual objects and dehumanizes them in the cultural imagination. Additionally, the use of a Marxist framework describes how the exploitation is inherent to all labor under capitalism, but especially how the sex work industry functions as a form of pink collar labor, where the primarily female pool of workers in the field have their labor consistently ignored, devalued, and marginalized.

Sex work is not the same as it was throughout most of history. Technology is developing faster than ever, and the demands for access to women's bodies has only increased. Who knows what kind of technological developments will be used in the sex work industry in the future? There is talk of using artificial intelligence (AI) in sexual spaces, and some people have already begun doing so.⁷³ There have been suggestions and even early renditions of using AI in porn, or

⁷³ Konner McIntire and Janae Bowen, "Fact Check Team: AI Infiltrates Sex Industry, Tech Startups Generate Explicit Content amid Legal and Ethical Concerns," WPDE, September 6, 2023, <https://wpde.com/news/nation-world/fact->

even creating AI sex robots. While these options, like OnlyFans, remove some of the physical risk for women, in the end it does not interrupt the narrative that women are created for male pleasure; in fact, it could exacerbate that. People have always found new ways to exploit women under the guise of autonomy and sexual liberation which, in reality, only lend themselves to pleasuring the oppressor.

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