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Debating Sex Work

LORI WATSON

JESSICA FLANIGAN

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Introduction

LORI WATSON AND JESSICA FLANIGAN

“PROSTITUTION” IS OFTEN SAID TO be “the oldest profession.” Some feminists have argued that this saying is better rendered as “prostitution is the oldest oppression.”¹ These feminists analyze prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation, as a form of sex-based inequality in which women are subordinated and used for sex on men’s terms. That prostitution was harmful to women was a foundational aspect of feminist organizing for much of the 20th century.

More recently, in the later part of the 20th century and into the 21st century, some feminists, and others, have come to reject this view of prostitution. In fact, they reject the term “prostitution” itself. Rather than analyzing women selling sex as a form of oppression, or a practice of sex-based inequality, these feminists see selling sex as an exercise of agency, a pathway to liberation from sex-based oppression, and reject analyses that place “sex work,” in their terms, as inherently degrading or unequal. Sex work

1. Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Sex Equality*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul, MN: Foundation Press, 2016), 1535.

is work, like many other forms of work, they claim. In their view, denying this claim rests on unjust stigmatization of sex workers, and such stigmatization is a primary harm that sex workers face, according to these feminists and their allies.

This book aims to put these two contrasting views in conversation with one another. Each author aims to defend a particular analysis of prostitution/sex work, and from this analysis argues for a particular form of regulation. Lori Watson argues that prostitution is not like other forms of work and defends criminalizing the buying of sex while decriminalizing the selling of sex. Jessica Flanigan argues that sex work should be treated like other forms of work and argues for full decriminalization.