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Sex Work and Trans women in Lebanon

Rouba Zouhairy

Introduction

Sex work is consensually providing a sexual service to a client who gives money in return. Sex work could be a choice or a consequence of several factors. It is said to be the oldest occupation in human history since it existed in almost all cultures and civilizations, no matter the efforts spent to contain it or stop it. It is true that women provide sex work services, however, gender discrimination is projected towards both cisgender and transgender women. For that reason, sex work is a feminist and gender issue. Since sex workers face marginalization and state oppression, their issues should be of national concern since they also deserve protection, rights, and a good life.

This paper will discuss sex work in Lebanon with an emphasis on trans women. Due to the lack of research and data about this topic, this paper will use the general conditions of sex workers globally and in Lebanon, and will attempt to link these findings to the general conditions of trans women in Lebanon.

Methodology

This topic is highly complex with sparse data to support it. This paper heavily relies on the personal observations and analysis of the author after reading several scholarly articles as well as some opinion pieces on the subject matter. The findings are meant to stimulate a conversation on the topic rather than to provide an academic source or argument to rely on. This is not a scientific study. However, this paper does rely on several interviews conducted as a part of a separate project about trans people in the Lebanese labor force. This paper is divided into three main parts: a section concerning sex work, followed by a section about trans people in Lebanon. The final

section will merge findings from both sections in order to explore the realities of trans sex workers in Lebanon.

Gaps and Limitations

There is very little data on trans people and sex workers in Lebanon, and almost no data on trans women sex workers, making this a difficult subject to discuss. As a result, this paper was unable to develop a substantial literature review on the subject of trans women sex workers in Lebanon. However, it uses scholarly information on the subjects of sex work and trans women sex workers globally to support broader claims and analysis. Further, the evidence used in this paper draws from interviews that were done with trans young adults.

Trans People and the Gender Binary

Sex is the social classification of genitalia and chromosomes into categories. The hegemonic understanding of sex includes two categories, male and female. Gender is the social construct that gives each sex its roles and standards. Contrary to dominant beliefs, feminists argue that both sex and gender are social constructs, and are therefore not unchangeable categories (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Different people and cultures often perceive, perform, and understand gender/sex differently. In other words, sex and gender categories are fluid.

Broadly speaking, trans people are persons who do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. They could be born and labelled as men, and then discover that the label of “woman” would fit them better. They could also discover that none of these labels fit them, and therefore decide to identify outside of the gender binary.

Transgenderism and the threat to capitalism

According to Fausto-Sterling (2000), sex and gender are not two fixed categories, but rather a diverse variation of bodies, identities, and expressions. As she explains it, this binary system is an extension of a bigger system that attempts to police our bodies. The existence of transgender people shakes the long-time belief in the “natural”-ness of the heteronormative gender binary. This makes trans people a threat to the system that needs to be eliminated.

The threat that trans people pose to the sex/gender binary is equally a threat to the global capitalist system, which depends on the sex/gender binary. Friedrich Engels (1884) argues that the emergence of private property occurred at a particular historical moment that is inseparable from the advent of modern capitalism. He theorizes that the emergence of private property was the moment of “the world-historic defeat of the female sex” because of the growing importance of private property. Engels explains that private property, a core component of liberal capitalist ideals, meant that “tribes” and other nomadic groups would be forced to settle down onto a specific piece of land. This structure of “land owning,” rather than conquest and roaming, would make these groups dependent on a specific plot of land, which would limit their resources and force them to adapt to living in one place. The result of this shift includes, for example, the development of certain agricultural practices and a need for more workers in order to sustain these practices. Thus, there developed a need for more biological reproduction to supply the market with more workers. Women were thus seen as a necessary component for the reproduction of the capitalist system.

Relatedly, this new system would require that property could be “passed down” between generations via inheritance laws. To ensure that inheritance was done “correctly” meant somehow ensuring that children’s blood-relations, specifically to their fathers, was clear. Patriarchy, as Engels sees it, originated in this moment in history, when the need to control women arose because of their reproductive capabilities. Women were assumed to be “mothers” or future mothers, and therefore became necessary for the maintenance of profits. What Engels means

here is that capitalism thrives on the oppression and exploitation of people, and we see that evident in the gender roles that the binary system gives to people who are assigned women at birth. For thousands of years, capitalism has thrived on the free domestic labor of women while disguising it as their natural role. Capitalism heavily depends on maintaining the sex/gender binary. Therefore, any threat to the binary system is a threat to capitalism, the state, and the overall status quo. For that reason, trans people have been historically marginalized and discriminated against.

What is Sex Work?

As mentioned before, sex work is the consensual exchange of sex and sexual acts for money. This topic is complicated and has produced several feminist discourses. Some radical feminists view sex work, which they call prostitution, as inherently patriarchal since they claim it reinforces the idea of women catering to men. As written in Gerassi (2015), “the central tenet of sexual commerce rests in male domination and the structural inequalities between men and women”. Citing Farelly (2005), Gerassi states that sex work provides men a right to access women’s bodies, which feeds into the patriarchal structure of men’s domination over women. Some anti-sex work feminists see sex work as a product of a cycle of violence, since it is very common among sex workers to have experienced forms of violence previously. Some view it through the lens of “survival sex,” which implies resorting to sex work to combat dire poverty. This creates a certain power dynamic that erases any nuanced discussions about consent and coercion in sex work.

Other feminists, however, view sex work as a type of work. Sex-positive feminists, for example, see this work as a form of economic empowerment for women. They relate the negative stigma that comes with sex work to the repression of women’s sexualities. Within liberal feminism, sex work is viewed as a consensual “choice” that is made by the sex worker. As much as we would love to credit women’s choices to their free will, we cannot deny the effects of different personal events and various environments on their decisions to enter sex work. For example, several studies found an important connection between sex workers’ experiences of social class, race, gender identity, and their personal experiences of violence and their “choices” to pursue sex work.

Anti-Sex Work

In feminist discourse, there are two primary frameworks for thinking about and analyzing sex work: anti-sex work and pro-sex work. The “anti-sex work” feminist view argues that the problem with sex work or prostitution is that prostitution itself is a form of gendered violence against women. It is an extension of patriarchy that feeds into the idea that the existence of women is to cater to men’s sexual needs and desires (Farley, 2005). Anti-sex work radical feminist discourse views the mechanics of prostitution as deeply sexist: men are perceived to have all the power. Further, consent in prostitution is generally absent, since sex workers cannot choose their clients, nor can they choose what they do with their clients. This might include clients who refuse to use protection, which puts the worker at risk of contracting sexually-transmitted infections (STIs). Anti-sex work discourse also claims that the argument that “prostitution has always existed and therefore should be legalized” is invalid, since murder and rape have also existed for a very long time. By that very logic, then, they argue that we should “legalize” rape and murder, but of course we do not.

Another group of anti-sex work feminists come from the Marxist feminist tradition. Although not all Marxist feminists are anti-sex work, a majority of Marxist feminists argue that prostitution is inherently un-feminist and un-Marxist. Gerassi (2015) explains the Marxist feminist stance as follows: as a capitalist exploits the labor of a worker, so too does a man exploit the body and sexuality of a woman. The sexuality of women, therefore, is “appropriated by the men who buy and control the sexual services exchange” (p. 82). Thus, just as a worker is alienated from their own labor by capitalists for profit, a woman also becomes alienated from her body in the service of capitalist profits (Miriam, 2005). In her article, Cruz (2018) uses several original texts from Marx and Engels themselves to debunk pro-sex work ideas. Cruz explains that Marx distinguished between the slave and the worker by emphasizing that the capitalist owned only 15 hours of the worker’s day. Although the worker is “free” for the remaining nine hours of the day, they cannot escape the system of having to work to survive and therefore are “enslaved.” As a result, Marx

concludes that under capitalism, freedom is always “unfreedom” to a certain extent. This might be used to argue that since all work is enslavement, then prostitution could be considered as work under capitalism. However, Cruz disagrees and uses another text where Marx describes prostitution as dehumanizing and the prostitute as part of the “ruined proletariat” forced to sell their bodies to survive.

Pro-sex work

The pro-sex work discourse originated from the liberal feminist notion of women reclaiming their bodies. It is an individualistic look at sex work. Pro-sex work liberal feminists’ first claim refers to the phenomenon as sex work rather than prostitution. Through this terminology, they emphasize that sex work is work and should be treated as such. While they do not necessarily ignore that a lot of the socio-economic factors might lead a woman into sex work, they are able to detach sex work from these conditions and claim that the work is a choice that does not affect a woman’s humanity or her ability to give consent. They argue that sex work will not disappear and therefore should be accepted just as abortion has existed throughout history and therefore should be provided for women safely and legally. After thousands of years of everyone having a say in what a woman does with her body, pro-sex work feminists see this work as a tool for economic liberation. Additionally, they view sex work as having the potential to reclaim a woman’s sexual freedom.

Nevertheless, pro-sex work feminists see a difference between the two strategies of decriminalization and legalization, which are both meant to support and protect sex workers. Supporting decriminalization means supporting the abolition of the laws that criminalize sex work and contribute to the marginalization and criminalization of sex workers themselves. From this stance, women can operate without legal challenges while maintaining the independence of sex work. However, people who argue for legalization support a certain amount of government oversight of the sex work industry. This can include licensing, mandatory health checks and STI testing, organization under a union or syndicate, and policies and laws that regulate the work,

among other things. Irrespective of whether they support decriminalization or legalization strategies, pro-sex work feminists all agree that the current laws governing sex work need reform.

Middle Ground?

One could argue that understanding sex work as way to take reclaim a woman's body does not tackle the institutional problem that radical and Marxist feminists highlight in their critiques of sex work. However, it is equally important not to dismiss the reality that "choice" does, to various extents, feature in some sex workers' decisions to enter the field. So, , can there be a middle ground?

For such a middle ground to exist, it is important to start with feminist critiques of work more generally. For example, feminists recognize that even feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other feminist institutions are still built on and operate within a capitalist and patriarchal system. In this environment, work is *necessary* to survive. This means that we all must work, no matter how we feel about capitalism, in order to live. An important online campaign, called "#365waystobeafeminist," produced by Resurj, an international NGO, in collaboration with the Lebanese NGO Mashrou' Alef (The A Project), acknowledges the difficulties of existing as a feminist in a capitalist and patriarchal system that requires us to work in order to survive. To me, such a campaign is important because theoretical discussions about capitalism and patriarchy tend to deviate from reality. They tend to forget about the real women living in these systems that shape their lives and "choices." When we "accept" this reality, it does not mean that we are not angry about it and will not do everything in our power to change it. But, what it does mean is that we will not prioritize theoretical discussions over the wellbeing and the realities of women. Acceptance should not result in apathy, but in more organization and effective action.

In relation to sex work/prostitution, it is also important to recognize the differences between "theory" and "real life." We can have debates in coffee shops and pubs about the origins and the institution of sex work, but at the end of the day, sex workers are being marginalized. Abandoning

them in the name of anti-sex work/prostitution ideologies is not what feminism is about. It is our duty to support marginalized workers. Put differently, we can critique the institution of prostitution while simultaneously advocating for a better life for sex workers every day.

Trans People in Lebanon

Lebanon is a diverse place that hosts different religions, sects, races, ethnicities, and gender and sexual identities. Trans people in Lebanon exist but are oppressed and marginalized. There are many factors that contribute to the marginalization of trans people in Lebanon. This section will discuss the key factors of this discrimination.

Criminalization

When it comes to the legal conditions of trans people in Lebanon, the Lebanese Penal Code has several articles that police trans people. It is worthy to note that the law does not specifically mention trans people, meaning there is no definition of transgender in Lebanese law. Nevertheless, Article 534, which criminalizes “unnatural sex,” Article 521, which criminalizes men dressing up “as a woman” and entering women-only places, and other articles that punish identity theft and sex work are used to criminalize and punish trans people in Lebanon. However, there have been some legal “victories” in the past few years, as some judges refused to prosecute gay men on the basis that homosexuality is not unnatural, consequently challenging Article 534.

Legal Sex Reassignment

The process of legal sex reassignment is not impossible in Lebanon but is a very complicated process that requires a lot of resources and patience. This process also requires certain socioeconomic privileges, as the person pursuing this process must have enough money and support to go through the legal and bureaucratic challenges that might not even result in approval (or any decision at all). Sex reassignment is allowed based on a law which states that any Lebanese

citizen has the right to appeal if there has been a mistake on their identification papers. This policy is utilized in case someone's birthday is wrong or their name is misspelled. In this case, trans people claim they were legally assigned the wrong sex. The person, however, must be fully transitioned as physicians will examine them. In addition to that, they must be socially transitioned because the government sends representatives to ask people in their area about their gender. Gender dysphoria must also be proved through a medical report from a psychiatrist.

This complicated reality often translates to trans folk having a national identification card that might not necessarily match their appearance. This results in several bureaucratic challenges as well as fear of prosecution with something as simple as being stopped for speeding. As a result, a lot of trans people in Lebanon choose not to carry around their ID or carry an ID of someone that looks like them.

Police treatment

All these legal challenges create a vulnerable category of people with few laws to protect them. Additionally, trans people also face aggression from police and law enforcement officers and institutions. For example, several raids have been carried out on places that host LGBTQ+ people. In the case of Ghost Nightclub in Dekwene, a place known for its openness toward the LGBTQ+ community, the club was raided after a very invasive public media campaign. The raid resulted in over 30 arrests and the humiliation and sexual assault of those who were arrested (Allouche, 2017). Another similar case is Hammam el-Agha which also involves Syrian Refugees who are, because of their identities, in a more vulnerable position than a Lebanese citizen in Lebanon (Frangieh, 2014). Trans people are stopped and arrested over the mere suspicion that they might be trans and are often stopped with accusations of sex work. With no legal or social protection, a significant number of trans people, especially trans women, have reported being sexually and/or verbally harassed by the police. This harassment includes illegal anal examinations, forcibly removing a person's clothing, intrusive questioning, insults and dead-naming, or using the birth name of a trans person (one they no longer use).

Media and Society

Trans individuals are often used for entertainment on mainstream local and regional media. Trans people who have been invited for interviews on local talk shows or mainstream media programs describe having been misgendered, mocked, and humiliated. Occasionally, religious figures and health “experts” are “surprise guests” on these shows and are invited to shame trans individuals and confirm the normative assumption that they have a “disease that must be cured.” Instead of raising awareness, these shows (re-)produce controversial topics that grab the audience’s attention.

Media not only speaks to the people, but it is also from the people. Media reflects society. Lebanese society is mostly unaccepting of trans people. One can credit this unacceptance to the lack of knowledge and understanding of trans issues. One could also credit it to the overall conservatism, sectarianism, and religious culture that permeates Lebanese society. Although Lebanon is praised for its diversity and progressiveness with respect to other countries in the region, that is not the case for many issues regarding gender and sexuality.

Economic Aspect

When it comes to the Lebanese Labor Law, Article 26 of September 23, 1946, prohibits the employer from discriminating against employees on the grounds of sex regarding the nature of employment, wage amount, employment, promotion, professional training, and dress code. However, the law does not prohibit discrimination in the process of recruitment, or discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity and/or expression. It is also very difficult to prove this discrimination, and therefore most people do not resort to legal action to redress discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity and/or expression. To work legally, trans people have no laws to protect them. If they work legally with their gender unchanged on their ID, they remain prone to blackmail and harassment. If they work illegally they will not benefit from basic employment rights

and can still be prone to blackmail and harassment. Due to those conditions, several trans people have turned to the service industry and the informal sector, whether it is drag performing, make-up artistry, or as servers at queer-friendly restaurants and bars, for example.

In interviews with the LGBTQ+ nongovernmental organization (NGO) Helem, the idea of “queer-friendly neighborhoods” was noted as an important part of trans people’s lives and their survival in Lebanon. The interviewees reported that due to the economic collapse, COVID-19, and the Beirut Blast, many spaces and jobs for queer and trans folks have been negatively affected. They explained that the blast destroyed queer-friendly neighborhoods which hosted houses for a significant number of queer and trans people and safe havens in the forms of coffee shops and pubs for LGBTQ+ customers. These shops were also affected by closures due to COVID-19, which has affected their profits especially in the midst of the broader economic collapse in the country. This has resulted in an increase in calls for aid from LGBTQ+ people, as Helem reported.

In interviews with five trans people living in Lebanon, interviewees spoke about their living conditions and how the Lebanese context has impacted their lives and decisions for the future. They all reported being discriminated against by strangers and especially family. They all reported wanting to emigrate and leave Lebanon due to transphobia as well as the overall economic and political insecurity. They all expressed no desire to transition in Lebanon. When asked if Lebanon is safe for trans people’s gender expression, three of them said no, while two of them said that it depends on the area, since some places are more progressive than others. One of them reported being held back in his education for two years due to discrimination at school and at home. He also reported being in threat of homelessness. According to Helem, as stated in a Human Rights Watch report (2019), discrimination in education is among the main reasons behind the disempowerment of trans people.

Trans Women as Sex Workers in Lebanon

There is an overlap between trans women and sex work. As mentioned before, sex work is not always exactly a choice. Economic and social conditions also play a big role in “convincing,” or as others would argue “coercing,” a woman into sex work.

Arguably the most famous trans woman, Suzy resorted to sex work after being abandoned by her family. She first went viral through videos where she jokes around to get paid. She went on *Hawa el-Horriye*, a television show that tackles social issues, to tell her story and ask for financial help. She was later invited to other shows where she was ridiculed and taken advantage of. At that time, Suzy offered to do handmade embroidery in exchange for money. For years she was able to survive through her own work.

Only when theories are attached to real people’s stories, such as Suzy’s, do we start to understand the difference between theoretical discussions of sex work and the realities of sex work on the ground. Rather than just theoretical discussions, these theories are now real conversations about real people. Suzy, like other trans women, had a tragic story that led her to sex work. The list of reasons that might lead trans women to sex work is long: poor socio-economic conditions, being abandoned by their families for being trans, discrimination in education, ID complications (especially for non-Lebanese women), lack of stable employment, absence of legal protections, and police harassment. Just like women sex workers, trans women sex workers are prone to violence and extreme exploitation, making it even more difficult for trans women sex workers to survive in Lebanon. This is an important area for future feminist inquiry.

Solutions

Trans women in Lebanon live in poor conditions. Some of them resort to sex work. They are deeply marginalized. What can be done to solve their issues?

Policy Reform?

There have been no policy efforts when it comes to sex work and trans people in Lebanon. It is worth mentioning that licensed sex work in brothels in Lebanon is legal, but the last license issued was in the 1970s. There are also “Super Nightclubs,” which are places where men go to pick up sex workers (Abdullah, 2010). This is regulated by managers who employ women from different countries under the artist visa category. It has been reported that these clubs are protected by some people in power and therefore are still allowed to operate.

In general, though, the issues of sex work and trans rights are ignored in Lebanon. A notable exception is the work of KAFA, a women’s rights NGO in Lebanon, which released a pro-abolitionist campaign about sex work. However, women’s rights NGOs in Lebanon primarily focus on securing rights for cis-women, further marginalizing trans women. This is due to the overall political system. Personal affairs are heavily related to sectarian courts and regulated by religious figures. Further, most successful policy campaigns are related to the political gain of certain politicians rather than the good of potential beneficiaries. Also, today, the majority of voters are not concerned with the politics of sex work. With the quality of life deteriorating and the cost of living increasing, voters are more concerned with policies that will help them survive. This is a feature of the failure of capitalism resulting in the alienation of workers from society and from the consciousness of their own oppression on different levels and identities. On another note, according to Salamey (2017), Lebanon is a sectarian communitocracy, meaning that sectarian communities vote and determine their representatives not as individuals, but as groups. Therefore, a patriarchal sect that acts within a patriarchal political system is not concerned with the issues of feminism and intersecting identities.

Reform

As trans people

For trans people under Lebanese law, first and foremost, the repealing of discriminatory articles in the Lebanese penal code must be achieved. Laws and policies that position the LGBTQ+ community as a protected group of people must be passed. Specifically, laws should prohibit illegal anal examinations, and other forms of harassment, which are commonly used by law enforcement agencies against suspected trans and gay people. Additionally, workshops should be carried out in both the private and public sectors to raise awareness about the discrimination facing the LGBTQ+ community in Lebanon. Relatedly, a progressive sex education curriculum should be mandatory in all schools, both public and private, in Lebanon. This can help dispel stereotypes about the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, an immediate remedy to increase inclusion for trans people is to create Gender Neutral Bathrooms in both the public and private sectors.

As sex workers

While trans women sex workers will benefit from reforms that support trans people, they also require targeted interventions to support and protect them. Adopting social welfare programs can support poor and low-income trans people. By supporting trans people financially, they will not be forced to participate in illegal and often dangerous forms of work in order to survive. Alongside this economic support, shelters should be created to support homeless sex workers and trans people. Again, the availability of these options can ensure that trans people and sex workers are not forced into dangerous and illegal activities to support themselves. Other suggestions that give trans women sex workers more options would be community-based hiring practices, where queer business owners employ queer and trans people.

Radical

As Workers

One could argue that these reforms do not provide real change in trans women sex workers' lives. Rather, the reforms suggested only seem to "tweak" their current situations, instead of tackling the deeply-rooted systemic issues that perpetuate discrimination against trans women and sex workers, namely, the capitalist patriarchal system. We cannot reform this system: we need an alternative. If we continue to allow this system to exist, new forms of oppression and exploitation will emerge, creating new groups of marginalized people. Thus, while we need reforms to fix the immediate situation of trans women and sex workers, we must also continue to work for an alternative system that can prevent oppression and exploitation in the future.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to shift the conversation about sex work and trans sex workers away from ideological discussions to a discussion about the real, everyday situations of sex workers and trans women sex workers. In other words, the paper has tried to shift the discussion surrounding sex work away from discussing the origins and ethics of the institution of prostitution to shed light on the real people that are suffering. The paper aims to provide an intersectional look at the category of sex workers, in particular trans women sex workers. No matter your personal stance on these issues, one thing we can all agree on as feminists is that the most vulnerable groups always face the most difficult life circumstances and, therefore, we must support them. This is why, in relation to sex work, we must move away from ideological discussions about the "profession" toward discussions about the realities that sex workers face in their everyday lives. Only then can we start to truly support them.

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