



DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AND ECONOMICS

SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

ISSN 2532-117X
Working papers
DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE
SOCIALI ED ECONOMICHE
[online]

**PhD COURSE IN
APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCES
WORKING PAPERS SERIES**

n. 5/2018

**Prostitution. Studies into public
opinion and feminist debates.**

Do they collide?

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Prostitution. Studies into public opinion and feminist debates. Do they collide?

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The public debate on female prostitution and the number of studies bringing together public attitudes toward the phenomenon have increased in the last years all over Europe. Feminisms debate on the issue proliferated too. In this paper I review researches into public opinion about regulating, liberalizing or banning female prostitution and the eventual paralleling with feminist perspectives. I conclude that public opinion cannot be traced back to feminist theories.

KEYWORDS: prostitution, feminism, public opinion, attitudes, policy models

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the public debate on female prostitution has focused on different aspects. For some people, prostitution is a social problem, leading to the degradation of territory, public disturbance, extramarital sexuality, sexually-transmitted diseases, etc. Others believe it is a positive phenomenon, providing a sexual market for some women who do not have alternatives. Yet others focus on the psychological and physical consequences of prolific sexual intercourse on prostitutes. Then we have prostitutes being described as sex workers, focusing on prostitution as employment. This diversity of approach is both intricate and complex dividing not only society at large, but the women's movement too (Danna, 2004). In the last years, in Europe, the public debate has grown. At the same time, the number of studies bringing together the attitudes of the population toward prostitution have increased.

Feminisms debates and quarrels on prostitution have also proliferated. Schematically a polarization in two opposing ideological approaches came out with some feminist scholars considering female prostitution as an acceptable exchange providing that prostitutes are not obliged by someone else and other feminists claiming the ban of prostitution and the prosecution of male customers (O'C. Davidson, 2002; Danna, 2015).

Of course, prostitution is not a natural, a-historical phenomenon, intrinsically linked to the way men and women are born. Rather it is the political, social and economic imbalance between genders that crystallized roles inside the phenomenon, such that the women provide sexual performance and men buys it just because of many inequalities

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between the genders in the labour market, in the political dimension, inside the structure of family life (Honeyball, 2014).

In this paper I analyse existing literature on the issue and I try to provide a first general consideration of which theoretical positions from feminism is going to be more popular among population. In this attempt, I will consider country-policies variation in coping with female prostitution: different countries implemented different laws and policies in combating, regulating or controlling female prostitution (Danna, 2015) and therefore public opinion may be influenced by the type of policy (liberal or restrictive) on prostitution which is in force in that specific country.

I present studies and surveys on the public opinion about female prostitution and their results. I then briefly highlight the current split within the feminist movement about female prostitution and how different and conflictual positions are combined with attitudes different conceptions of gender theory. Thereafter, I pose some questions challenging the meanings coming from research on the public opinion about prostitution. I finally consider the type and level of adherence between prevailing opinions on prostitution and feminists positions. Since child prostitution is forbidden everywhere in the world – Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – and male prostitution, which is indeed very rare, has been a much less tackled topic of feminist debate (Kissil, Davey, 2010), I am considering only female prostitution. A very crucial and interesting debate has recently emerged around prostitution of LGBTQI¹ people. Nevertheless, if I also treat that questions, I would end up complicating the gender-related discrimination (Geymonat, 2014).

PUBLIC OPINION ON FEMALE PROSTITUTION

In democratic societies public opinion is an expression of the will of the people and needs to be considered by policy makers in shaping decisions about social life. It is frequently cited by political leaders in legitimating their proposals for public policy (Baldassarri, Gelman 2008; Beckett, 1997; Brooks, Manza, 2006; Browning, Cao 1992; Burstein, 1998, 2003; Jones, 1994). In general, the more salient the policy issue, the stronger the impact of public opinion on policy. In addition, the responsiveness of policy makers to public opinion over time has not weakened (Burstein, 2003). While most of the findings reviewed by Burstein (2003) were based on a single nation, the United States, research on other nations has presented results illustrating a synergy between public opinion and policy.

Given such reasons as its tie to social policy, there has been much interest in the predictors of public opinion. Such predictors have

¹ The acronym LGBTQI is to indicate lesbian, gay, trans, bisexual, queer and intersex people.

included symbolic orientations such as political conservatism, authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism, as well as the quantity and quality of mass media exposure, and demographics (Baldassarri, Gelman 2008; Danigelis *et al.*, 2008; Finke, Adamczyk, 2008; Tyler, Weber, 1982).

In a comparative study from Stack and colleagues (2010), more than 45,000 persons in 32 nations were included. Results indicate that 74% of the variation in attitudes about prostitution is at the individual level and 26% of the variation is at the country level. Compared to other outcomes modeled with hierarchical models, 26% is quite high, suggesting that a much higher-than-average share of attitudes about prostitution is shaped by the country context (Stack *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, cross-nationally, religious importance is associated with more conservative attitudes about female prostitution. As expected, people with a higher level of education show more open attitudes and whereas older people and women have more conservative attitudes toward prostitution, people who are more financially satisfied hold more liberal orientations. Nonetheless, more recent surveys in Sweden and Norway attest that older people are less convinced about criminalising male customers while more educated people tend to reverse the judgment (Jakobsson, Kotsadam. 2011a). Therefore, it is clear that attitudes and opinions widely vary cross-nationally.

The main thesis of Stack and colleagues relies on Inglehart² general explanation of main countries systems of values: in countries showing high levels of survivalist orientations, people tend to condemn prostitution, while where self-expressionism values prevail prostitution is more culturally tolerated. National cultural systems have been classified along a continuum from survivalism to self-expressionism (Inglehart, Baker, 2000). Survivalist culture places an emphasis on material security. Until recent centuries, world history has overwhelmingly been a battle for survival. Famines, disease pandemics, wars, droughts and other problems contributed to a widespread sense of insecurity for most people. In response to these material conditions of economic and political insecurity, there is a relatively high probability that the societal cultural system will tend towards the survivalist mode. At the other end of the survivalist vs. self-expressionist cultural continuum rests the culture of individualism or self-expression. Self-expressionism represents post materialism and taps a syndrome of trust, tolerance, subjective well-being and political activism. Self-expressionism thrives on the tolerance of individual differences. The

² Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues have collected data on the cultural dimensions of nations during four waves of their World Values Surveys (Halman, Inglehart *et al.*, 2008; Inglehart, 1990, 2003; Inglehart, Baker, 2000; Inglehart, Norris, 2003). From this body of work, there are several principal findings. First, as nations undergo the industrialization and modernization process, their cultural systems tend to shift in a predictable manner from a concern with physical and economic security to post-materialist values. Second, there is secondary variation in such changes. The secondary variation can be partially explained by location in a set of 8 culture zones of the world including Orthodox, Confucian, Protestant Europe and former Communist Europe.

economic and physical security that underlies self-expressionism is associated with a new set of values such as environmentalism, and active citizen involvement in social and political affairs. Applied to the criminological literature on public opinion, persons high in self-expressionism would be expected to be low in authoritarianism, low in religious fundamentalism, high in political liberalism, high in empathy and so forth.

Nonetheless, where self-expressionism is high, is there a relatively high probability that prostitution will be more tolerated, in at least some form? Looking at Europe, other researches shows that it is not like this. For example, notwithstanding Sweden scores at highest levels of self-expressionism attitudes in the Ingleheart's countries ranking, in a study conducted in this country (Kuosmanen 2011), 76% of respondents believed that to buy sex should be treated as illegal (males 69% and females 83%). Furthermore, in recent years a progression in public opinion in the direction of greater support for prohibition of prostitution, both sale and purchase of sex, took place.

A recent and complete research on population attitudes regarding prostitution includes 8 European countries: United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway and Denmark³. Data was collected in 2014 with an anonymous online survey to which 16,948 people responded. The reference research focused on two different questions in the questionnaire: 'In your opinion is it morally justified or morally wrong to pay for sex?' and 'It should be illegal to buy sex?'. 53% of the population in Norway and 63% in Sweden declared that the purchase of sex should be illegal. In other countries, the percentages vary between 16% and 34%. To be more specific, the Germans and the Dutch show the most approval to the purchase of sex. In countries where the purchase of sex is legal, but brothels are forbidden, the population accepts buying sex less than the countries where brothels are also regulated (Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017).

Another research on attitudes uses World Value Survey⁴ data from 2005 to 2008. The question used is 'Do you consider prostitution justifiable?'. Responses show how populations justify prostitution in the countries where it is legal and, more importantly, where it is regulated. Therefore, it seems that regulative policies influence individual attitudes towards prostitution with an expressive effect (Immordino, Russo, 2015). To sum up, in Norway and in Sweden, public opinion is more likely to refuse prostitution; in Germany and in the Netherlands public opinion is more likely to tolerate prostitution and in the United Kingdom, Spain, France and Denmark, people accept prostitution less than the Netherlands and Germany (Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017).

³ During data collection, in Spain, the UK, Denmark and France buying sex is legal, but running a brothel is criminalized. Later, Northern Ireland criminalized the purchase of sex in 2015 and France in 2016.

⁴ The WVS is a global research project, the aim of which is to compare people's beliefs and values in different countries and to track their evolution over time.

THE FEMINIST DEBATE ON PROSTITUTION

The ambivalent attitudes towards prostitution have been part of the feminist discussion of prostitutes since attempting to first understand this social phenomenon in the 19th century. In the last three decades, however, there have been more studies investigating the extent, nature, causes, and possible solutions for prostitution due in part to the massive campaign about AIDS, the growing number of countries that are reviewing legislation and reforming laws governing prostitution, and the interest in the topic brought about by feminist oriented scholars who have been encouraging a better understanding of prostitution (Kissil, Davey, 2010; Bullough, Bullough, 1996).

The feminist thought on prostitution is heterogeneous. Moreover, some feminists can identify themselves with one ideology but can refuse some of its precepts or burrow ideas from another form of feminism (Bromberg, 1997). Simmons (1998) describes the debate in the feminist literature as resulting from incommensurate theoretical understanding of the agency of prostitutes.

The debate, which began in the Sixties over pornography, has often been referred to as the «feminist sex wars» (Duggan, Hunter, 1995). The contemporary debate largely revolves around a polarized argument that constructs sex work as either exploitive or liberating (Raphael, 2004). Different writers have given different names to these two opposing groups: Radical Feminists vs. Sex Radicals (Scoular, 2004), Sex Positive Feminists vs. Anti-Sex Work or Abolitionists (Lerum, 1998; Wahab, 2002), Prostitutes Rights vs. Feminists Against Systems of Prostitutions (Simmons, 1998), Social/Marxist vs. Radical feminists (Monroe, 2005), and Sexual Equality First vs. Free Choice First (Jolin, 1994). Aside from the existing complexity, the feminisms debate on prostitution is effectively polarized, into two opposing ideological approaches (O'C. Davidson, 2002; Scoular, 2004; Honeyball, 2014; Danna, 2015). In fact, more than others, radical feminism and liberal feminism reinvent or transform themselves with time (Bromberg, 1997). According to Simmons, as well as other scholars (Jolin, 1994; Lerum, 1998; Scoular, 2004) the main questions dividing these two groups of feminists are: whether prostitutes are coerced victims or entrepreneurs and empowered whores. Translating that into the language of attaining equality, the question is whether emancipation from male sexual oppression (prostitute as a victim) or freedom of choice (prostitute as a worker) is the primary equality issue (Jolin, 1994) and whether the solution should be decriminalization, legalization, or abolition of prostitution.

The crux of the division between these positions lies in the perceived different status attributed to the women involved: one side recognizes them as laborers, the other as victims of the economic/cultural system (Simmons, 1998; Scoular, 2004). Liberal feminist consider prostitution as a service; as a job (Jenness, 1993), as an activity that, under certain circumstances, may even support gender equality by promoting women

free choices and an independent exploitation of their bodies (Nikita, Schaffauser, 2009). Liberal feminists consider conscious prostitutes as active decision-makers who choose to engage in prostitution as a deliberate choice. Of course, liberal feminism gives to structural conditions producing gender, class, and racial inequality a marginal position (Kissil, Davey, 2010). Many of them admit that prostitution is one of the consequences of women's oppression in society and are also aware of the general constraints imposed by discrimination in labour markets and in accessing to all the type of powerful resources. Nevertheless, they consider free prostitutes to have the power to negotiate service and payment (Simmons, 1998). Some also point out that, due to the pervasiveness of women's oppression, other types of working conditions may not be much better than prostitution itself (Danna, 2001a). They claim in witnesses the growing number of independent or entrepreneurial prostitutes who hold a strong position with this line of thought. Many prostitutes or associated groups of prostitutes declare to hold a feminist perspective when claiming that they do not sell their bodies, but use bodies and sex to enhance their social and economic position. They sell sexual pleasure obtaining power in terms of economic and symbolic autonomy (Nikita, Schaffauser, 2009). Therefore, they call for recognition, empowerment, rights and protection for their working condition just like other workers would do (Sapio, 1999).

At the opposite, radical feminists consider prostitution as a violation of women's rights; an evident symbol of commodification, exploitation, commercialisation and reduction of female being as dehumanized objects. In their perspective, prostitution is a form of sexual slavery reproducing rather than reducing gender inequality (Millet, 1975; Berry, 1995; Kesler, 2002). Radical feminists tend to consider prostitutes as being compelled by social circumstances into prostitution and believe that the involvement of women in prostitution is always a question of mere necessity deriving from their marginal position in a society dominated by male values (Simmons, 1998).

Gender inequality, violence against women and poverty limit women's choices and push weaker women toward entering prostitution. Radical feminists acknowledge that not all women in prostitution undergo the same degree of control and coercion, but firmly defend the idea that the relationship between female prostitute and male customer is always uneven. They also stress out that even prostitutes pretending to separate body and mind are in fail: the separation of body and mind is just the basis for the commodification of female beings (Barry, 1979; Pateman, 1997; O'C Davidson, 2001). A further critique of prostitution expressed by radical feminism concerns what Danna (2001b) called the «second paradox of prostitution»: each woman selling herself, perpetuates the objectivation of all other women by misconstruing both the construction of a female subject free from male sexual objectification and the ideological battle for a world where human being has no price.

When feminist perspectives become supportive of public policies on prostitution one finds three dominant positions: to ban or to hinder prostitution; to regulate prostitution; and to liberalize prostitution. This diversity of positions is not general, but it changes according to specific western countries where one of the feminist positions seems to be dominant among the others which still exist (Kuosmanen, 2011; Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011a; Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2012; Immordino, Russo, 2015; Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017). Anyway, public opinion cannot be traced back to feminist theories, because public attitude is not related to issues, topics and thoughts dividing feminist theories: as a matter of fact, people do not consider prostitutes as victims (as radical feminism do), but a part of a general social problem (Kuosmanen, 2011; Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011a; 2011b); on the way round, some people who are against prostitution at the same time may agree with public regulation of the problem via State controlled brothels (Kuosmanen, 2011). Briefly, public opinion sees a social problem where feminists discuss about gender problem.

The legislation on prostitution is quite varied across western countries (Danna, 2015). The current European situation is polarized into two “new” opposing models of legislative policy: neo-prohibition and neo-regulation⁵ (Crowhurst, *et al.*, 2012; Danna, 2015). Neo-prohibition model was implemented for the first time in Sweden in 1999. In Europe, though varying in its implementation, one can also find this model in Iceland and Norway since 2009, in Northern Ireland since 2015 and in France since 2016. Neo-prohibition as an operationalization of abolitionism⁶ treats prostitution as a form of violence against women (Schwab, 2000). This model relies on the idea that cultural change may follow normative impositions: persecuting male customers and educating male desires women get protected from violence, exploitation and commodification. Condemnation is on men and the criminalization and deviant attitudes is still projected on them. Under the economic metaphor, without demand there would be no supply (Ekberg, 2004).

At the opposite Netherlands in 2000 and Germany in 2002 implemented legislation based on neo-regulation. Not only German and Dutch laws recognize prostitution as sex-work, but they recognize it as

⁵ The definition of traditional models (prohibition, regulation and abolitionism) is agreed on by literature. Nevertheless, new models evolved from previous ones complicating terminology and meanings (Danna, 2015).

⁶ Abolitionism, though varying in its implementation, decriminalizes prostitution itself by shifting attention to the activities associated with it (Danna, 2001a; Geymonat, 2014). The goal is social reform that would promote women's political influence and improve their social conditions, so they would no longer be forced to resort to prostitution to live. This is why abolitionism does not penalize either women or men, but refuses to acknowledge the existence of a simple actor who, for profit, facilitates and regulates prostitution (Barry, 1995; Danna, 2001a). For a subtle analysis of abolitionism, it is necessary to specify the existence of two different currents within it. One wants to prevent the practice of prostitution for the sake of the prostitutes themselves. It believes no woman would ever choose prostitution if she had alternatives, just as no one would ever choose slavery (as neo-prohibition). The other recognizes the possibility for women to exercise this activity autonomously (Danna, 2001a).

an economic and social entity. Prostitution is free and not relegated to state-controlled tolerance homes (Brussa, 1998). Norms and policies aim at protecting prostitutes from eventual pimps' exploitation or violence, venereal, deviant or criminal behaviour, sexual diseases, trafficking implicitly recognize that prostitution is not a problem of gender relationship. Toleration goes together with regulation and control in order to prevent or suppress negative collateral effects such as violence, harassment, economic exploitation, sexual diseases and so on. By protecting prostitutes from both social stigmatization and various types of exploitation, neo-regulationism considers the sexual intercourse and the economic transaction between prostitutes and customers something out from gender inequality (Danna, 2001a, 2015; Geymonat, 2014).

PUBLIC OPINION AND FEMINIST THOUGHT: A COLLISION?

In comparing public opinions and feminism thought two key factors must be considered: 1) current laws concerning prostitution in a given country influence public opinion attitudes over the issue (and the way round may be also true); 2) it is hard to establish a direct connection from feminism thought to the implementation of a given policy, since even where the former drives the design of the latter, political consensus and other extra-gender issues steal the limelight. Those two factors alone may explain why feminist thought, whatever the position on prostitution, tend to collide with public opinion.

We know from several studies that laws on prostitution affects people attitudes: most of public judgments tend to be in line with the type of law in force. Even if the knowledge in this area is still sparse (Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011c), it is evident that laws may affect attitudes (Della Giusta, di Tommaso, Strøm, 2008; 2009). There might be a spurious relationship between prostitution laws and inflow, so that there in fact is a third variable causing both policy and inflow independently, resulting in correlation without causality (Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017). Nonetheless feminist positions about the right policy to be implemented on prostitution, both when radical – such as the total criminalisation of male customers – and when liberal – such as the toleration and regulation of controlled prostitution – have to face complex controversies deriving from public opinion.

Firstly, and not surprisingly, there are noticeable differences between men and women in public opinion about prostitution: men are most critical toward the imposition of criminal sanctions, while women tend to be closer to radical feminism. Does that mean that liberal feminism ends up legitimising male opinion about the legitimacy of female prostitution when this latter is not a social problem? When asked about the sentence 'State-run brothels ought to be introduced in Sweden', a third of the men (32%) either wholly or in part agree, while only a fifth of women (17%) share a similar opinion. When these answers are compared with those in

relation on the retention of the prohibition on the purchase of sex, it is found a paradox: the 16% of the men who wish to retain the legislation, agree, at the same time, with the statement that state-run brothels should be introduced (Kuosmanen, 2011). Public opinion seems to view prostitution in gender-neutral terms: who sell sex is not perceived as a victim. She just need to be equally treated as those who buy sex. On the way round, female public opinion is more likely to identify prostitutes as exploited by men, and to show more empathy (Cotton *et al.*, 2002; Kuosmanen, 2011; Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011a, Immordino, Russo, 2015, Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017).

Secondly, it is plausible to say that the standpoint of the law is important about public opinion on prostitution. For example, in Sweden, the law banning prostitution was introduced for reasons of gender equality, in Norway for reasons of economic inequality. Where buying sex is legal, people report buying more sex and they are also more likely to report knowing someone who has bought sex. Probably there is less willingness to report doing an activity if it is illegal than if it is not. Investigating the effects of the change on attitudes towards buying sex, one finds indications that criminalizing prostitution decrease the recurrence of people legitimising the purchase of sex. (Kotsadam, Jakobsson, 2014).

The transplantation of feminist debate into public opinion is complicated by the effect of the rhetoric of protection. Where prostitution is a recognized as a legal profession, women have more chances of asking for help. But it seems that regulation of prostitution is irrelevant, if not harmful in some cases, to the protection policy. Legalized prostitution leads to negative prediction on preventive performance and in fact prevention policies have a positive impact on the anti-trafficking regime (Cho, 2015). As Cho (2015) underlined, «the presumed positive link between legalized prostitution and victim protection is not empirically supported» (2015:19). Therefore, regulating prostitution under the pattern of legitimising prostitutes does not foster their status while bringing more people to agree with the logic of ‘a liberal transaction between two conscious adults’ (Immordino, Russo, 2015; Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017).

Then what are the consequences for all those women who are currently involved in prostitution? Three pieces of research have observed that in Sweden, where prostitution is banned, and customers are criminalised, most of population is more likely to agree with feminist radicalism. A paradoxically drift is at work in this case: while being considered a victim, in practice prostituted women tend to be considered an ‘accomplice’ to the creation of the problem, a sort of structural obstacle for the real achievement of gender equality (Kuosmanen, 2011; Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011a; 2011b).

This latter aspect has suggested that pro-prohibition policies may risk further stigmatizing and weakening of women into prostitution by subjugating them to secondary undergrounded and risky black market

where male criminality holds more power of exploiting female bodies. Therefore, it is important to wonder how public opinion reacts when pro-prohibition politics are at play. It seems that public opinion tends to overlook that the majority of people in prostitution belong to the most vulnerable categories (NU, 1949; Honeyball, 2014), that regulation of prostitution is correlated to the increase in trafficking (Marinova, James, 2012; Cho *et al.*, 2013) while neo-prohibition policies have reduced human trafficking (Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011b). The Mayor of Amsterdam (The Netherlands) in 2003 stated that «it seemed impossible to create a safe and controllable zone that was not open for abuse by organized crime» (Honeyball, 2014:16-17). Later, United Nations named the Netherlands as the main destination of human trafficking victims (Honeyball, 2014).

CONCLUSION

In democratic societies social policies are expected to match public opinions. However, many nations do not have democratic political institutions. Future work is needed to determine if democratic institutions provide better conduits between public opinion and the status of prostitution. In the meantime, there are signs that the EU is heading in the direction of the criminalisation of customers (Danna, 2015), even if there are countries which legitimised, regulated, controlled and integrated prostitution as a legal even if particular economic sector (Germany, The Netherlands, Austria). Even if European Parliament, with the Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality, considers prostitution as a violation of human dignity; contrary to the principles of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, including the goal and the principle of gender equality, female prostitutions underwent a political treatment allowing public opinion to judge it only as a social and not a gender issue.

We don't know if and how much, feminist thoughts influenced legislative policies. Instead, one thing is clear: feminism is about promoting a world in which women enjoy an equal share of the rights and power (Bromberg, 1997). So, in a feminist prospective, studies researches on prostitution seems to be still far away from investigating concrete effects on female-male relationships involved in prostitution. Although neo-regulatory policies succeeded in associating the idea of gender equality with prostitution (Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017), they are not able to guarantee specific protection for women (Cho, 2015). Nor they changed the power unbalance the engender social relations in the sex industry. They further risk increasing sexual trafficking (Marinova, James, 2012; Cho *et al.*, 2013; Honeyball, 2014). Neo-prohibitionist policies, on the other hand, require further insights and improvements. They succeeded in associating the idea of gender inequality with prostitution (Jakobsson, Kotsadam, 2011a, Immordino, Russo, 2015;

Jonsson, Jakobsson, 2017), but it is not yet evident if succeeded in triggering the cultural change they declare to. One should not underrate the conscious association between prostitution and violence against woman in general (Cotton *et al.*, 2002; Della Giusta *et al.*, 2008; 2009; Honeyball, 2014; Immordino, Russo, 2015). If this is true, radical feminists are right to consider prostitution incompatible with a real policy promoting gender equality.

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