

GSF 352S Paper 2

In debating whether prostitution work is fundamentally similar to or different from other forms of female-dominated service sector work, a number of the authors we read drew on particular examples of types of work that could be fruitfully compared to sex work. You are asked to draw on either one or two such comparisons (these could be offered by the authors or by you) and, drawing on a range of the class texts that speak to the nature and experience of prostitution work, develop an argument about what the comparison or comparisons suggest about how this work may be similar to or different from other forms of service sector labor. (In the course of your argument, address the most significant counterarguments as well). Be sure to draw on a comparison or comparisons that you find particularly interesting or compelling and to explore them in relation to a variety of accounts of the experience of sex work in the texts we have read since the first paper under the subheadings in the syllabus titled The Meaning of the work. (Note that this topic is asking you to use this as an opportunity to explore the differences among a selection of texts.)

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In considering whether prostitution work should be legalized, comparisons between sex work and other types of female-dominated service jobs are often drawn to see the similarities and differences. With a focus on specifically comparing prostitution with the example of flight attendants, this essay will address two major controversies around the legitimacy of sex work regarding 1) the exploitation of emotional labor, and 2) the involvement of sexualization of women's bodies. This essay argues that though both occupations heavily involve extensive emotional labor and sexualization, inherent differences exist.

The first debate surrounding sex work concerns its intense engagement with emotional labor, the work involving workers in the service industry to manage emotions to meet customer requirements; in this sense, their emotion is commercialized and sold to the customers (Jeffreys 170). Though sex work does involve expressing strong emotions such as deference, showcasing the state of subordination is the fundamental requirement for almost all women-dominated service sector jobs (Jeffreys 170). This is exemplified in the emotional labor of flight attendants, who are often asked to demonstrate smiles, attentive listening, and admiration (Jeffreys 171) when serving the passengers. Such a dynamic is also normalized in female-dominated occupations, where workers are socialized under the intersection between patriarchy and capitalism to adopt a subordinate posture toward men (Jeffreys 170). Such a view resonates with Berg's critique of sex-work exceptionalism: like any other form of labor under capitalism, sex work is emotionally exploitative precisely because it is labor (694).

Furthermore, although the commodification of emotions is often viewed as the

most harmful aspect of service labor—because, in Hochschild’s view, what are sold along with emotions are workers’ personalities (Jeffreys 170)—some argue that the issue of emotional exploitation in sex work can be managed in the same way it is within flight attendants, reinforcing the idea that sex work is essentially comparable to other legitimate forms of service labor. Specifically, drawing on Karl Marx, Chapkis contends that alienation, the capacity to detach oneself from one’s labor, is a basic technique that needs to be mastered by all productive workers within capitalist systems (71). Specifically, just as flight attendants appear as entirely different individuals when wearing their uniforms compared to when they are not, sex workers, too, should develop the capacity to summon and contain emotions within the commercial exchange, maintaining a clear boundary between their authentic selves and their professional personas (Chapkis 74). In other words, sex workers have multi-positioned selves rather than destroyed ones (Chapkis 76). Hence, such demand for sex worker is similar to that for flight attendants and other service workers.

Nevertheless, such views that perceive sex work aligns with flight attendant jobs, and other emotion-heavy service sector work, suffer from two fallacies. First, historically and empirically, the alienation practices once shared by sex workers and flight attendants have undergone dramatic changes. In the past, sex workers separated work and personal life through strategies like work names or uniforms (Bernstein 49), which is similar to flight attendants. However, this distinction has diminished with modernization and privatization. Today, the emotional demands of the job have intensified, pushing women to offer clients deeper and more intimate erotic engagement

(Bernstein 69). Additionally, the growing participation of middle- and upper-class white women, exemplified by COYOTE sex workers, brings personal meanings and embodied practices to sexual exchanges, further blurring the line between home and work (Bernstein 110). These changes illustrate that, with the modern transformation of sex work, the increasing overlap between a sex worker's job and personal identity makes it harder to maintain a clear boundary between professional and personal emotions, intensifying erotic emotional labor and its estranging effect on the self, and illustrating the difference from flight attendants.

Under this circumstance, for certain groups of sex workers whose boundaries between prostitution career and personal becomes vague, it's important to reexamine the type of emotional experiences and involvement in sex work. Sex workers' authentic emotional involvement is fundamentally different from all other jobs in service sector because prostitutes' emotions are always sexually related. For flight attendants, the core of their emotional work involves mostly showing deference to those higher in the social hierarchy, which grant them the privilege of having their own feelings acknowledged and treated as significant (Jeffreys 174). This is distinct from the emotional labor exploited from sex workers, because they suffer from sexual objectification and dehumanization (Jeffreys 173). To quote Lorde, erotic feeling is special among all emotions because it is "our deepest feelings" (Chapkis 73). Hence, prostitution, which exploits ones' erotic personhood and women's deepest emotions, is far more problematic than the emotional demands placed on flight attendants.

Beyond the first debate, the involvement of erotic feelings further introduces

another aspect that is similar in both prostitution and airline service industry: the sexualization of women's bodies. For prostitution, Jeffreys indicates that prostitution functions as an outlet for men to release their sexual needs (165), and womanhood in the sex industry is merely perceived as a cunt for male amusement (Jeffreys 173). As a peep dance performer, Salim also suggests that their job is centered around sexuality and physical beauty, aiming to fulfill customers' fantasies and fetishes, and especially of the exotic (60). Similarly, as a common practice of marketing strategy in the airplane industry, branding on sexual expectations of the female staff is a big selling point. Moreover, on the airplane, female airplane attendants frequently experience where married men with kids project sexual fantasies—such as geisha girls—onto them (Jeffreys 171). These suggest that both sex workers and flight attendants experience sexualization in a comparable manner.

Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference between the sexualization in prostitution and that in flight service industry: the former, as a product of patriarchy, also actively reproduces sexualization, whereas the latter represents a purely patriarchal oppression imposed upon female laborers. Zooming in on the prostitution industry, as Jeffreys reckons, the fact that prostitution actively reconstructs of male supremacy mainly differentiates itself from other forms of female-dominated work (Jeffreys 179). Specifically, three problems are incurred when regarding the sexualization in prostitution the same way as it is in other occupations: normalizing body contact in unwanted scenarios, consolidating the culture of sexualized male dominance in sex industry itself, and most importantly, naturalizing sexualization of women in other

service businesses (Jeffreys 193&194). Henceforth, going back to the airplane service industry, based on Jeffreys' contention, flight attendants experience normalized, frequent sexualization because such paradigm persist in prostitution industry persists, as sex workers continuously to enter and build the industry—especially when more women actively choose to do so. Though flight attendants do perform sexual subordination too, which may on surface seemingly to perpetuate patriarchal gender hierarchies, such leverage is not an active choice but forced adherence professional norms; this norm is consolidated in prostitution industry.

Some might dispute this by indicating that simply perceiving all sexualization of females' bodies as actively constructing male supremacy is an oversimplification of the case, because there are also sectors in prostitution that challenges such male supremacy. Illustrated by the example of female dominatrixes in the BDSM sector of the sex industry, they are in fact at the frontline of combating toxic masculinity (West). For instance, West herself, as a female dominatrixes, adopts strategies such as requiring clients to read Black feminist literature as a means of reorienting their fantasies and kinks toward a submission that destabilizes toxic masculinity (West). Henceforth, arguing the sex industry is fundamentally different from the flight service industry because prostitutes are all patriarchal apparatus, while airplane attendants are not, while overlooking the diversity and agency within the sex industry itself makes the argument unconvincing.

To address this point, first, while such an example demonstrates that not all sex work contributes to the reproduction of male supremacy, such cases are comparatively

rare within the broader sex industry. Most sex work, however, still operates through the sexualization of women's bodies to satisfy male desire, actively consolidating male dominance and perpetuating structural inequalities. Furthermore, regardless of how sex workers perform their labor, they are invariably and actively involved in catering for males' sexual desire: sex work is grounded in the internalization and fulfillment of male sexual power as its core transactional mechanism, no matter in what form it's carried out. On the contrast, for flight attendants, they're more the victim of such cultural imposition of gender hierarchy: they may become disconnected from the feminine role expected of them in their work or even diminish their sexual interest (Jeffreys 173).

At the same time, however, it is also worth mentioning that emphasizing the political aspects and higher calling of sex work may overstate its distinctiveness from other female-dominated service sector labor. Heading back to anti-prostitution-exceptionalism, like flight attendants, sex workers' working conditions and experiences are profoundly shaped by capitalism, affecting their working schedules, wages, and sick days policies; their rights are not simply about sexuality and gender, but also regarding their identity as workers. Therefore, an overly heated debate over the nature of the sexualization problem and how to avoid sexualization serves for male benefits in female-dominated sex work will not only reinforce rather than challenge the status quo that labor is gendered, but also leave other aspects of workers' rights neglected (Berg 706). Thus, it's inappropriate to reduce the struggle for sex workers' rights to a question merely about sexual politics, which will discourage workers from demanding improved labor conditions (Berg 707).

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