

## #METOO MUST INCLUDE PROSTITUTION

Melissa Farley

*Prostitution Research and Education*

### KEYWORDS

#MeToo, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, sexual exploitation, sexism, racism

What matters here is to try to learn what the prostituted woman knows, because it is of immense value. It is true, and it has been hidden. It has been hidden for a political reason: to know it is to come closer to knowing how to undo the system of male dominance that is sitting on top of all of us. (Andrea Dworkin, *Prostitution and Male Supremacy*, 1993)

There is a selfish reason why we non-prostituted women need to understand the experience of women in prostitution: because our worst nightmares are their daily experiences, and because they understand so clearly what misogyny in action feels like and looks like. As Autumn Burris, founder of Survivors for Solutions, put it, "Prostitution is #MeToo on steroids due to the hourly sexual harassment, rape, unwanted advances/penetration and aggressive and violent behavior by white, privileged men sexually commodifying our bodies."

Speaking about sexual abuse, a woman said,

It just was way, way, way, way too much. Each time that I was taking it, again and again, it just felt like more of me diminishing, just getting smaller until it was just like a shell of a person.

When I first read this account, I assumed I was reading a description of prostitution. No. This account was an automobile factory worker in Chicago describing what it was like when her boss abused her. Another woman described her response to sexual abuse at the Ford factory, "No person should have to endure that. You have to force yourself into a place of not feeling anything, of not having any emotion, to exist" (Chira & Einhorn, 2017). These descriptions of what it feels like to be sexually harassed on the job are identical to women's descriptions of what prostitution is like: "It is internally damaging," said a survivor of strip club prostitution, "You become in your own mind what these people do and say with you. You wonder how could you let yourself do this and why do these people want to do this to you?" Another prostituted woman explained: "They stare at you with this starving hunger. It sucks you dry; you become this empty shell. They're not really looking at you; you're not you. You're not even there" (Farley, 2003).

The #MeToo groundswell of women who are challenging everyday sexual predation by men is consciousness-raising and courageous activism that will hopefully benefit all women. Men's money and power coerce women's submission to sexual harassment both in and out of prostitution, in Hollywood, in Silicon Valley, in Ford auto factories, in the California and Massachusetts and U.S. Senates, in domestic service, and everywhere else on the planet. But does this wonderfully expanding big-as-the-sky-sized basket of women's voices include women in prostitution? Is their "me too" welcomed? Is the prostitution of women in pornography included in #MeToo?

Sex trade survivors' voices are essential to a discussion of sexual harassment, rape, and male supremacy because their experiences are that of tolerating sexual harassment and rape and verbal abuse in exchange for money or goods or something else of value. Sometimes the "something of value" that is exchanged for sex acts is food or shelter or medical care. But when the "something of value" is career advancement - it's still prostitution. The supremacist logic of the man who has more power than a woman, whether he is her boss, doctor, lawyer, teacher, president - is the same as the sex buyer: "I pay you so I own you so I can do anything I want to you." Career advancement in exchange for sex acts is a form of prostitution since it is the exchange of something of value for sex acts. Prostitution as an element of career advancement is usually named sexual exploitation but not prostitution.

Sexual harassment is what prostitution is. If you remove the sexual harassment, there is no prostitution. If you remove unwanted sex acts, there is no prostitution. If you eliminate paid rape, there is no prostitution. Evelina Giobbe, founder of WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt), said, "Prostitution sets the parameters for what you can do to a woman. It is the model for women's condition." Wherever there is sexual harassment, a certain group of women is split off from other women. "Prostitution is set apart from everything that people are me-tooing about," said Giobbe. "People would not be appalled if Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby or Woody Allen did what they did to prostituted women." Why is that? A special caste of prostituted women is created to guarantee men unconditional sexual access to women (Giobbe, 1990).

Men in the highest government offices—men like Donald Trump and Clarence Thomas - deny their predatory and chronic sexual harassment as locker room talk,



as boys being boys, as just the way things are. Their behavior can't be distinguished from the behavior of predatory sex buyers, except that sex buyers pay to sexually harass and rape. "Weinstein and Trump are no different from everyday johns," said Vednita Carter, founder of Breaking Free in Minneapolis. "They rape women because they can, telling themselves she wanted it or liked it." The narcissistic delusion that sexual harassment and prostitution are her "free choice," or that "it was consensual" is the ideology that keeps prostitution - and the subordination and silencing of women - running smoothly.

Prostituted women have the highest rate of rape of any women on the planet. Sex buyers' behaviors are a model for sexual harassment and sexual predation. The pre-rape cues described by psychologists as warning signs for rape are precisely those behaviors exhibited by men who buy sex: an attitude of sexual entitlement, unwanted touching, persistence, and social isolation (Senn, Eliasziw, Barata, Thurston, Newby-Clark, Radtke, and Hobden, 2015).

"Everything the women are describing in #MeToo are common everyday experiences of women in prostitution. Women in prostitution are seen as a legitimate target for men's violence, that we somehow deserve what we get," said Alisa Bernhard, who works at Organization for Prostitution Survivors in Seattle. In prostitution, women are defined as rentable sex organs, as unrapeable, less than human, as having no feelings. "What others see as rape, we see as normal," a woman prostituting in Vancouver explained (Farley, Lynne, and Cotton, 2005).

What men do to women in prostitution is not challenged as illegal. In some places, it's even defined as "work" for those who have no other survival options. I can barely imagine the pain of having the world see sexual abuse as your job. Yet that is the burden that is shoved onto women in prostitution. Bernhard observed that "prostitution is the definition of a hostile work environment." Challenging denial about sexual exploitation, Giobbe asked, "Why would you be surprised that men who can help with your economic advancement would demand sexual favors or rape you? That's what men do with women who they pay for."

Pornography is filmed documentation of prostitution; it's prostitution with a camera in the room. In a creative response to the question, can pornography plots be distinguished from accounts of sexual assault? Dutch filmmakers asked men if stories they read were from pornography plots or #MeToo accounts. The men couldn't tell the difference (Vaglanos, 2017). Pornography has defined what women are, and as a result, the line which was presumed to exist between prostitution and non-prostitution has been removed. #MeToo is an example of that disappeared line.

The #MeToo movement is expanding to include women who are not white middle-class movie stars. There are attempts to include incarcerated women (Law, 2017), women who work in factories (Chira & Einborn, 2017), domestic workers (Bapat, 2017), and women veterans (Stahl, 2018). The racist sexual harassment of Black, Latina, Native, and Asian women—in and out of prostitution—is critically important to #MeToo. Anita Hill, a Black lawyer, publicly exposed one man's pattern of sexual harassment and as a result, a social movement to expose sexual harassment began. In 1991, Hill was surrounded and interrogated by white men who were dedicated to supporting a sexually predatory candidate for the Supreme Court. Putting Hill on trial instead of Clarence Thomas, the politicians refused to permit supporting witnesses to testify publicly on Hill's behalf (Shin and Casey, 2017). In 2006, Tarana Burke, a Black woman, founded #MeToo (Jeffries, 2018).

Jackie Lynne, Co-Founder, Indigenous Women Against the Sex Industry (IWASI), in Vancouver, spoke about #MeToo and prostitution:

The White House and Hollywood—bastions of male power/privilege—are predatory hunting grounds where every woman is 'ripe for the taking'—where no woman is safe. The denial of harms, both of sexual harassment and of prostitution, are big lies mostly told by rich white men. These lies have been told for centuries and are now entrenched as social truths.

How can we listen to the truth about prostitution and male domination? How do we counter the lies that Jackie Lynne speaks of? Kathleen Barry (1979), Margaret Baldwin (1992), and Judith Herman (2003) have written eloquently about the emotional pain of witnessing prostitution. Many people shut down emotionally or turn away from the brutal reality. Can we stand to hear the #MeToo of prostituted women? Or will we avoid using the word prostitution (as is the case with some antitrafficking organizations) thereby disappearing the prostitution as "trafficking" or "sex work"? Will we include prostituted women under the #MeToo umbrella as sisters who are both victims of male violence and survivors of it? Just like the rest of us.

Any vestige of sex hierarchy, any, will mean that some women somewhere are being prostituted. If you look around you and you see male supremacy, you know that somewhere where you cannot see, a woman is being prostituted, because every hierarchy needs a bottom and prostitution is the bottom of male dominance (Andrea Dworkin, *Prostitution and Male Supremacy*, 1993)

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Melissa Farley, PhD. is a research and clinical psychologist who has published extensively on prostitution, pornography, trafficking, and the global sex trade. She is executive director of Prostitution Research and Education (<http://www.prostitutionresearch.com>), a resource for scholars, policymakers, survivors of prostitution, and advocates.

#### **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Farley, Melissa. (2018). #MeToo must include prostitution. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 3, Issue 1, Article 9.  
<https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2018.03.01.09>

#### **REFERENCES**

- Baldwin, Margaret (1992) Split at the Root: Prostitution and Feminist Discourses of Law Reform. *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, 5(1). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlf/vol5/iss1/3>
- Bapat, Sheila (2017) Domestic Workers Face Rampant Harassment on the Job, With Little Protection. *Truthout* November 27, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/42714-domestic-workers-face-rampant-harassment-on-the-job-with-little-protection>
- Barry, Kathleen (1979) *Female Sexual Slavery*. New York, NYU Press.

- Chira, Susan and Catrin Einhorn (2017) How Tough Is It to Change a Culture of Harassment? Ask the Women at Ford. *New York Times*. December 19, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/12/19/us/ford-chicago-sexual-harassment.html>
- Dworkin, Andrea. (1993) Prostitution and Male Supremacy. *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 1, 1-12. Available at <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/Dworkin%20-%20Prostitution%20and%20Male%20Supremacy.pdf>
- Farley, Melissa (2003) Prostitution and the Invisibility of Harm. *Women & Therapy* 26 (3/4), 247-280. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v26n03\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/j015v26n03_06).
- Farley, Melissa, Jacqueline Lynne, & Ann Cotton (2005) Prostitution in Vancouver: Violence and the Colonization of First Nations Women. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 42, 242-271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461505052667>.
- Giobbe, Evelina (1990) Confronting the Liberal Lies about Prostitution. In Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond, *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (editors) New York: Teachers' College Press
- Herman, Judith (2004) Invisible in Plain Sight, Clinical Observations on Prostitution. *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2, 1-13. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03_01)
- Jeffries, Zenobia (2018) Me Too Creator Tarana Burke Reminds Us This Is About Black and Brown Survivors. *Yes! Magazine*. January 4, 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/me-too-creator-tarana-burke-reminds-us-this-is-about-black-and-brown-survivors-20180104>
- Law, Victoria (2017) Does Our Belief in Women's Stories of Sexual Violence Extend to Survivors Behind Bars? *Truthout* December 03, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/42760-does-our-belief-in-women-s-stories-of-sexual-violence-extend-to-survivors-behind-bars>
- Senn, Charlene Y., Eliasziw, Misha, Barata, Pala C., Thurston, Wilfreda E., Newby-Clark, Ian R., Radtke, H. Lorraine, Hobden, Karen L. (2015) Efficacy of a Sexual Assault Resistance Program for University Women. *New England Journal of Medicine* 372: 2326-2335. <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmc1509345>
- Shin, Annys and Casey, Libby (2017) Anita Hill and her 1991 congressional defenders to Joe Biden: You were part of the problem. *Washington Post*, November 22, 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/anita-hill-and-her-1991-congressional-defenders-to-joe-biden-you-were-part-of-the-problem/2017/11/21/2303ba8a-ce69-11e7-a1a3-0d1e45a6de3d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.da55d891bcf4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/anita-hill-and-her-1991-congressional-defenders-to-joe-biden-you-were-part-of-the-problem/2017/11/21/2303ba8a-ce69-11e7-a1a3-0d1e45a6de3d_story.html?utm_term=.da55d891bcf4)
- Stahl, Aviva (2018) Vets demonstrate in #MeTooMilitary protest; DoD expresses support. *Women's Media Center*. January 8, 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/news-features/vets-demonstrate-in-metoomilitary-protest-dod-expresses-support>
- Vaglanos, Alanna (2017) Men Try To Guess if These Situations are Porn or #MeToo Stories. *Huffington Post*. December 20, 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/men-try-to-guess-if-these-situations-are-porn-or-metoo-stories\\_us\\_5a3ac4bee4b06d1621b17351](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/men-try-to-guess-if-these-situations-are-porn-or-metoo-stories_us_5a3ac4bee4b06d1621b17351)