



Student assignment coversheet and declaration

Title: Contemporary Culture of Female Sexuality: A Feminist Perspective

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Introduction

Attitudes towards female sexuality have differed to male sexuality throughout history and continues to do so in contemporary times. These attitudes vary from culture to culture, however there is a common theme of female sexuality being inherently wrong, and therefore repressed, while male sexuality appears to be accepted and even celebrated. This paper will critically analyse the literature on the topic of female sexuality pertaining to both contemporary culture's as well as contemporary feminist's attitudes towards female sexuality, female sex workers and female BDSM practitioners. This essay will attempt to demonstrate how not only societal, but also feminist theories, attitudes and actions may be causing more harm than any intended good for sexually active females, female sex workers and female BDSM practitioners. This assignment will be using the term 'females' throughout the paper which is referring to cis-gender women as its focus is on cis-gender women's experience of sexuality.

Female Sexuality

The term slut is defined in the dictionary as a woman who has many casual partners, or a woman with low standards of cleanliness.(1) Synonyms for slut are a promiscuous woman, prostitute and whore, among other terms intended to be slanderous and aimed at women.(2) Meanwhile, the term used for men who have multiple sexual partners are far less slanderous, such as stud and ladies man, as it is somewhat expected of young men to seek and engage in sexual activities. These double standards existing in society today are said to have been put in place by men and upheld by men.(3) Theorists believe that women who experience liberation in their sexuality are perceived in this negative light due to a patriarchal structure that considers women to belong sexually to a man, therefore any other act of sexuality outside of this has become to be socially perceived as deviant and slandered in terms such as slut or whore.(4) It is worth noting here that western contemporary culture is greatly influenced by Christianity, which in some interpretations of its philosophy condemns women as temptresses and the original sinners of humanity. (5,6)

Slut shaming refers to the sexual inequality where a female who is or appears to be sexually active is condemned for sexual activities.(7) Slut shaming is found throughout western society including in young teenaged individuals in schools, universities, in the workplace and through online platforms.(3,8) The sheer amount of current literature on slut shaming' demonstrates where contemporary western culture currently stands regarding female sexuality. It indicates that the disapproval and oppression of female sexuality continues to be an issue in contemporary western society. Slut shaming of teenaged girls is especially alarming, as it sends the message early on that female sexuality is something wrong and to be ashamed of reiterating and perpetuating the oppression of female sexuality.

Slut shaming is also allowing a place for sexual inequality to occur and educates young boys and men that female sexuality is inherently wrong and shameful. This can result in serious harassment, one example of which is found within the SVWBS (Sexual Violence Won't Be Tolerated) case study, where a young woman of 23 years old experienced severe online harassment and slut shaming by two young men who were fired and arrested for their misconduct.(9) This cyber violence has been reported as a worsening issue by feminist activists. The phenomena of female participation in slut shaming is said to be a potential reaction to one's own internalized sexual oppression.(3)

While much of society may have considerably conservative perspectives on female sexuality, feminists believe that true freedom of the patriarchal oppression of a woman's sexuality is to experience sexuality according to one's own desire.(4) Some feminists believe that this freedom not only pertains to who and how many men a woman has sex with, but also that a woman can choose to carry out her sex life in whichever way she desires, including in the form of sex work.(4)

Female Sex Workers

Sex work is said to be one of the oldest professions and is defined as an industry where women, men and transgender individuals receive money in exchange for any form of sexual service, such professions include erotic dancers, phone sex workers, nude models for

pornographic use and strippers.(10,11,12) Sex worker's experiences are viewed by theorists to exist within a continuum between oppression and empowerment.(13)

When considering society's conservative perspective on female sexuality, it is no surprise that female sex workers are even more vulnerable to the stigma surrounding female sexuality. Not only do female sex workers not conform to the idea of belonging sexually to only one man, but they also make money from their sexuality. This stigmatization of female sexuality expressed as sex work becomes a cause for marginalization for female sex workers, who are often an already marginalized society. Sex workers are vulnerable to both physical and sexual violence, discrimination, criminalization of their work in much of the world, and have far less rights than sexually active females who do not work in the industry(14,15)

The criminalization of sex work in the modern western world indicates the conservative views of much of society on female sexuality and autonomy. The fact that sex work is illegal in many areas of the world makes sex work a feminist and women's rights issue, as sex workers are predominantly female in population, and sex work is one of the only areas where women have access to as high or higher pay rates than men.(15) The criminalization of an activity between consensual adults brings the questions of- if the field was dominated by males, would it still be criminalized? Is sex work only criminalized because it is a field made up of mainly women having sex with multiple men? Why does the exchange of money for this service make it a crime? These are important questions that a critical perspective on female sexuality and sex work must consider and are especially important when taking in to consideration how a heterosexual society is constructed. In many heterosexual societies female sexuality has value (virginity, chastity and fidelity) and is often exchanged for resources paid for by men who's gender roles in the workplace are valued and paid for, while the gender roles of women are not, such as house-keeping, preparing meals for those who are in the workforce, child rearing etc.(16,17)

The topic of female sex workers brings a broad spectrum of opinions within the field of feminism, expanding beyond it being a female dominated field. Some feminists' perspective is that women can both work in the sex industry and be empowered at

the same time- and perhaps even more so due to their autonomous sexual and professional choices. However, there are other feminists who disagree and perceive the sex work industry as a threat women's empowerment, autonomy and liberation.(4,18) These feminists state that all sex work should be abolished so that women will discontinue to be perceived as objects for men rather than autonomous subjects, and that women participating in porn is particularly damaging to female empowerment.(4,19) It is worth noting here that sex work may be the only industry in the world where the workers are expected to be empowered in their employment.

This lack of support for sex workers by some feminists not only further marginalises an already marginalised population but imposes external ideals while attempting to diminish female sex worker's authority and autonomy over their lives, choices and bodies, just as the patriarchal society that feminists are attempting to dismantle has done. Therefore, not only are female sex workers faced with stigma surrounding their informed consensual choices with how they make money and with whom by a largely sex phobic society, but they are also vulnerable to ridicule and stigmatization by feminists themselves. This lack of support for sex workers by these feminists and continued stigmatization, only further supports the already existing structure that has marginalized sex workers and leaves the women in these professions feeling both rejected and condemned by supposed allies as women.(12)

Female BDSM Practitioners

The influence of society, culture and even some feminist's beliefs and values on women's sexuality does not stop with female sexuality and the sex industry alone. When taking the practice of BDSM (bondage-discipline, domination-submission, sadism-masochism) into consideration, the way in which women experience pleasure has also been interfered with by outside opinion. While BDSM practitioners as a whole have been stigmatized through the pathologizing of the practice, female practitioners have faced even more stigma and shame regarding their practice, by those who believe that have BDSM practitioner's best interests at heart- contemporary pagan feminists. These feminists are of the belief that the "values of

sexual practice endorsed by the Goddess” are “the liberation of women and sexuality free of violence”, indicating BDSM to not be acceptable in contemporary Pagan feminism.(19) This, in itself, could be considered as violence towards female BDSM practitioners in its stigmatizing, alienating and unaccepting attitude. Kinky contemporary Pagan feminists (contemporary pagan feminists who participate in BDSM practices) have themselves defined what pleases the Goddess to be “the liberation of women (including erotic and sexual liberation) and sexual freedom to pursue all of one’s desires (with full consent of all parties) which may include power play.(19)

Additionally, it appears that feminist critics of BDSM and female BDSM practitioners have formed their opinion on a largely misunderstood concept- that being that women are generally submissive in BDSM practice. Muella’s paper demonstrates this with her informant’s concern of women’s internalized misogyny and hatred of women.(19) This theory cannot be legitimized when taking into account the large number of male subs in the BDSM community, as well as the studies showing that both men and women can prefer the submissive role. Additionally, many of the theories on the motivations behind submissive fantasies focus largely on women, resulting in skewed results and lacking data on male submissive roles and their motivations in these roles.(21)

While BDSM is becoming more recognised and normalised in pop culture, it is still suffering the stigmatization that the pathologizing of the practice has done, even though it has been removed from the DSM5(19,21). Pleasure felt through pain and power play has been in the past considered a pathology, while tattoos and combat sports are in the most part accepted by society. The pathologizing of a consensual practice between adults in BDSM is not dissimilar to the criminalization of sex work, which has clearly demonstrated a lack in sex positivity in much of contemporary western culture. It appears however, that females bear the brunt of stigmatization, due to a belief system surrounding female sexuality as being inherently wrong.

Conclusion

Throughout history until current contemporary times what is considered acceptable

for women to do with their bodies regarding sexuality has been largely interfered with by the external opinion of a sex-negative society. It also appears that the expression of female sexuality is in some areas oppressed by female activists themselves. There is an inequality experienced between female and male sexuality, where it appears male sexuality is celebrated and far less oppressed and interfered with than female sexuality. This can be found within society via language- with the term slut referring solely to women, with no equal term used for men. It can be found with the phenomena of slut shaming, which focuses on sexually active women. It can be found with the criminalization and marginalization of a profession dominated by female workers, who choose to exchange sexual intimacy for money. And lastly it can be found with how females experience their sexuality, with female BDSM practitioners frowned upon by women themselves. Therefore, it can be said that contemporary times in western culture do not yet support female sexuality in many of its forms.

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