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ATTITUDES TOWARD PROSTITUTION: IS IT AN IDEOLOGICAL ISSUE?

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Abstract

Prostitution has been the subject of intense debate in all societies and cultures though to varying degrees of public acceptance or rejection. The choice of legal approach to deal with this issue (i.e., legalization or prohibition) may be influenced by ideological factors. The primary aim of this study was to assess, in a sample of 620 individuals drawn from general population, the legal stances towards prostitution, and attitudes and beliefs regarding the underlying motives and behaviour of men who resort to prostitution. Moreover, the effects of sexist attitudes and beliefs and the legal stance towards prostitution on victim-blaming in cases of physical or sexual assault on prostitutes were assessed. The results reveal significant differences in legal stance towards prostitution in relation to attitudes and beliefs concerning the underlying motives and behaviour of men who procure the services of a prostitute. In other words, a high score in prohibition was associated to hostile attitudes and belief regarding the behaviour of men who resort to prostitution whereas a high score in legalization predicted benevolent attitudes and beliefs towards these men. Furthermore, the results show that a high degree of hostile sexism and the legal stance of prohibition predicted victim-blaming in physical or sexual assault to prostitutes.

Keywords: Prostitution, Ideology, Sexism, Prohibition, Legalization, Attitudes.

Resumen

La prostitución constituye uno de los problemas tradicionales presentes en todas las sociedades y culturas con mayor o menor aceptación pública. La medida legal que se adopte ante esta problemática (legalización o prohibición) puede estar determinada por la influencia de factores ideológicos. El objetivo fundamental de la presente investigación, a través de un total de 620 participantes de población general, consistió en indagar la postura legal ante la prostitución y las creencias del comportamiento del hombre que accede a estas prácticas. A su vez, se analizó el efecto de las creencias sexistas y de la postura legal en la culpabilización de la víctima ante un abuso físico o sexual. Los resultados muestran diferencias de la medida legal en el tipo de creencias que se tienen acerca del hombre que consume prostitución. De modo que la puntuación alta en prohibición se relaciona con una creencia hostil acerca del comportamiento del hombre y una puntuación alta en legalización predice una creencia benévola hacia el hombre que acude a una prostituta. A su vez, los resultados muestran que mayores niveles de sexismo hostil y una postura prohibicionista hacia la prostitución predicen la culpabilización de la mujer prostituta si su cliente abusa de ella.

Palabras clave: Prostitución, Ideología, Sexismo, Prohibición, Legalización, Actitudes.

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Introduction

In recent decades Spain has witnessed, as in other European countries, a considerable increase in prostitution, and a parallel increase in the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation (Solana, 2005). Though prostitution is commonly referred to as “the oldest profession in the world”, the scientific literature on this issue is scarce (Della Giusta, Di Tommaso, & Strøm, 2009). Prostitution is defined as “*an activity whereby a person offers sexual relations in exchange of payment of money*” (Real Academia Española, 2001). Since prostitution primarily involves women, the variable gender is a salient factor for analysis. The issue of prostitution can be approached from multiple perspectives, each of which defines how the procurement of sex is understood i.e., as a public health issue, a legal dilemma, a question of personal choice, ethical or moral issues, in terms of gender violence or as a violation of human rights (Montañés & Moyano, 2006).

Several recent studies have focused on public health risks and the use of condoms among prostitutes (Cunha & Chaves, 2008; Rao, Gupta, Lokshin, & Jana, 2003; Willman, 2008); the association between prostitution and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Sullivan, 2007; Zumbek, Teegen, Dahme, & Farley 2003) or the incidence of illegal substance abuse among prostitutes (Burnette, Schneider, Timko, & Ilgen, 2009). Notwithstanding, few studies have sought to examine the attitudes and beliefs of the general public towards prostitution (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Polk & Cowan, 1996).

Approaches to prostitution vary from one country to another, ranging from legalization to prohibition (Hubbard, Matthews, & Scoular, 2008; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Weitzer, 2010), and a host of socio-judicial policies have been proposed to deal with prostitution. On the one hand, *prohibition* is based on the premise that sex trafficking is an essential component of prostitution, thus sex cannot be legally bought or sold (Weitzer, 2010). From this perspective prostitution is conceived as modern-day slavery (Mathieu, 2011); thus, prostitution should be decriminalized and the prostitute should be treated as a victim (Ekberg, 2004). Certain penal codes exclusively typify the behaviour of those who seek financial gain from coercing women into prostitution or “clients” who procure the services of prostitutes. This approach has

been adopted by Sweden's 1999 law that penalizes the client with fines and a maximum six-month prison sentences. Swedish law is grounded in the belief that women are always or nearly always forced into prostitution by organized crime or due to adverse social circumstances and/or financial hardship. Thus, policies aimed at eliminating the sex trade should not seek to penalize the weak i.e., the victim (women and young girls), but those who traffic women for sexual exploitation, and those who procure their service as mere sexual objects (Ekberg, 2004). In contrast, *legalization* has been the approach enforced by countries such as Holland, Greece, and Turkey (Outshoorn, 2001, 2005). The underlying premise is that prostitution is simply inevitable and a question of free will, thus it should be admitted by society. Consequently, sex workers should undergo periodic health checkups and controls and enjoy the same rights as any other worker.

From the prohibitionist point of view, prostitution is conceived in terms of gender violence and violation of human rights (Ekberg, 2004; Giobbe, Harrigan, Ryan, & Gamache, 1990; Valor-Segura & Expósito, 2008), and is viewed as the epitome of male dominance and the exploitation of women regardless of the historical period, social context or the type of prostitution (Weitzer, 2005). Mainstream attitudes and beliefs that justify prostitution not only promote and reinforce erroneous depictions of prostitutes, but also of women as a whole (Cotton, Farley, & Baron, 2002). This approach aims to eradicate sex trafficking by removing regulations on prostitution.

Moreover, proponents of legalizing prostitution argue that labelling prostitutes as "victims" only leads to further alienation and gender violence, and hinders their demands for equal rights as sex workers (Holgado, 2001; Raymond, 2004). This ideology postulates that prostitutes are legitimate sex workers and that prostitutes prefer this term themselves (Kurtz, Surratt, Inciardi, & Kiley, 2004). Though it is commonly assumed that under certain circumstances prostitutes are subject to deception and coercion, there remains widespread acceptance of the belief that most prostitutes voluntarily practice their profession in the knowledge that other professions do not reap the same financial rewards (Ferrer, 2001).

Regardless of the disparity in perspectives regarding prostitution i.e., a profession or a violation of human rights, research undertaken in several countries (e.g., USA, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and Zambia) has revealed that a large number of

women who are or have been prostitutes have suffered physical or sexual violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Falcón, 2000; Farley, Baral, Kiremire, & Sezgin, 1998; Farley & Barkan, 1998; Giobbe, 1993; Hunter, 1994; Miller, 1995; Silbert & Pines, 1984; Sullivan, 2007; White & Koss, 1993; Zumbeck et al., 2003).

The impact of prostitution is not circumscribed to prostitutes alone, and conditions social attitudes and beliefs towards all women, and reinforces traditional gender roles (Bernardo, 2001). Gender equality is deeply rooted in a long history of beliefs about the biological differences between men and women, and the innateness of male supremacy, both being fundamental tenets for justifying male domination of women (Expósito & Moya, 2005). Sexism serves to justify and reinforce gender inequality, and has traditionally degraded women by expounding that it is convenient to exercise some dominance over them, and that it is legitimate to force women into submission and restrict their roles and rights. The *Theory of Ambivalent Sexism*, proposed by Glick and Fiske (1996), postulates that sexism is ambivalent because it is formed by two clearly differentiated, yet related, components: benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. Though the former refers to positive but nonetheless sexist attitudes towards women in as much as they are stereotypes, it is associated to affection and prosocial behaviour e.g., help or the search for intimacy (Glick & Fiske, 1996). In contrast, hostile sexism legitimizes violence against women who dare challenge the male supremacy of the men who “sexually exploit” them or those who “stain” male honour. Benevolent sexism, in comparison, legitimizes negative reactions towards women who refuse to conform to traditional gender roles or “step out of line”, and prostitutes do not qualify to be under the umbrella of “protective paternalism”. Both hostile and benevolent sexism influence attitudes and beliefs towards prostitution, and the justification of gender violence towards women. Several studies have examined the relationship between sexism and several aspects of gender violence such as the incidence of rape and victim-blaming (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003), tolerance to sexual assaults (Russell & Trigg, 2004) or the justification of cases of domestic violence (Valor-Segura, Expósito, & Moya, 2008).

As for the prevalence of prostitution, The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has estimated that one out of every eight men has paid for sex at least once in their lives. According to a survey on health and healthy habits undertaken in Spain, 26% of men aged 18 to 49 years had at some time paid for the services of a prostitute

(Instituto Nacional de Estadística de España, 2003). What are the social circumstances and motives that lead men to seek the services of a prostitute? Much of the evidence obtained from studies designed to tackle this question is weak or inconclusive, and there is considerable disparity in the results reported (Atchison, Fraser, & Lowman, 1998). Paying for sex has been defined in terms of deviant behavior of a psychopathological nature. Recent studies, however, have normalized the image of the client and his motives for paying for sex in relation to the macro and micro social context (Meneses, 2010). Social constructions of men and women's sexuality have contributed to generating the myth of the "natural urge" of men to satisfy their sexual impulses. Consequently, it is commonly assumed that prostitution is a legitimate outlet for lonely or single men with uncontrollable sexual drives (Association for the Rehabilitation of Women Prostitutes, 2005). Several typologies of men who procure the services of a prostitute have been proposed with categories such as: men dissatisfied with existing relationships, lonely men motivated by sexual needs (Manson, 1993); men who desire sexual practices they cannot request from a regular partner or that their regular partners refuse to provide (McKeganey, 1994; Monto, 2001); and men who want to exercise control of sexual relations, or as an expression of male dominance (Atchinson et al., 1998; Monto, 2004; Volnovich, 2006).

Bearing in mind the multiplicity of perspectives, the primary aim of this study was to assess the legal stance towards prostitution, and the attitudes and beliefs regarding the motives underlying the behaviour of men who resort to prostitution. We hypothesised that respondents who favoured prohibition would harbour hostile attitudes and beliefs towards the behaviour of men who procure the services of prostitutes. In comparison, respondents who favoured legalization would have benevolent attitudes and beliefs concerning the behaviour of these men. A further objective was to assess the impact of sexist attitudes and beliefs, and the choice of legal stance on victim-blaming in physical or sexual assaults on prostitutes. Hostile sexism and prohibition were expected to predict greater victim-blaming in physical or sexual assaults on prostitutes.

Method

Participants

Initially, the sample consisted of 659 participants of whom 39 women were excluded for giving several invalid or inconsistent responses and/or their unwillingness to cooperate. Thus, a total of 620 participants, 40% men and 60% women aged 14 to 66 years, mean age 26.69 years ($SD = 10.53$), participated in the study. As for academic status, 9% had completed Primary Education, Compulsory Secondary Education, 10.3% Elementary Baccalaureate, 28.5% Higher Baccalaureate, 7.1% Vocational Studies, and 44.7% were University Graduates. In relation to employment status, 21.3% were full-time workers, 33.2% part-time or seasonal workers and the remaining 45.5% were unemployed.

Procedure and Design

The selection of the stratified random sample for gender and academic status was undertaken in the city of Jaén (southern Spain) by a team of previously trained researchers. All participants freely consented to participating in the study and were informed their responses and data would remain anonymous and confidential.

Variables and measurement instruments

The measurement instrument consisted of a battery of questionnaires that included the following:

Sociodemographic characteristics: sex, age, academic qualifications (Primary Education, Compulsory Secondary Education, Elementary Baccalaureate, Higher Baccalaureate, Vocational studies, and University graduates), and employment status: full-time worker, part-time, seasonal worker or unemployed.

The Scale of the *Legal Stance towards Prostitution* (Valor-Segura & Expósito, 2008; Valor-Segura, Expósito, & Moya, 2011) is a 10-item self-report measure of attitudes and beliefs towards prostitution and different legal approaches. Respondents indicate their level of agreement with various statements, which are placed on a 5-point likert-type scale where 1 expresses total disagreement, and 5 total agreement. An example of the items on the scale is “I think prostitution should be prohibited”; “I think

that legalizing prostitution, like Holland, is the best policy for solving the problem of women trafficking and for the sex industry as a whole”, etc. The poles of the scale were *Legalization* (associated to low scores), and *Prohibition* (linked to higher scores on the scale). The items that evaluated in the opposite direction were redirected. The Cronbach's *alpha* coefficient of the scale was .82, which is similar to the internal consistency obtained in other studies (Valor-Segura et al., 2011).

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Expósito, Moya, & Glick, 1998; Glick & Fiske, 1996) is a 22-item self-report measure of sexism requiring respondents to indicate their level of agreement with various statements, which are placed on a 6-point likert-type scale. The inventory consists of two subscales i.e., hostile sexism with 11 items designed to assess dominant paternalism (e.g., “Women are too easily offended”, “Women seek power by gaining control over men”), and benevolent sexism with 11 items (e.g., “Women should be cherished and protected by men”, “In case of a catastrophe, women should be saved before men”). The total *alpha* coefficient was .91 for the entire scale, .90 for the hostile subscale, and .85 for the benevolent subscale.

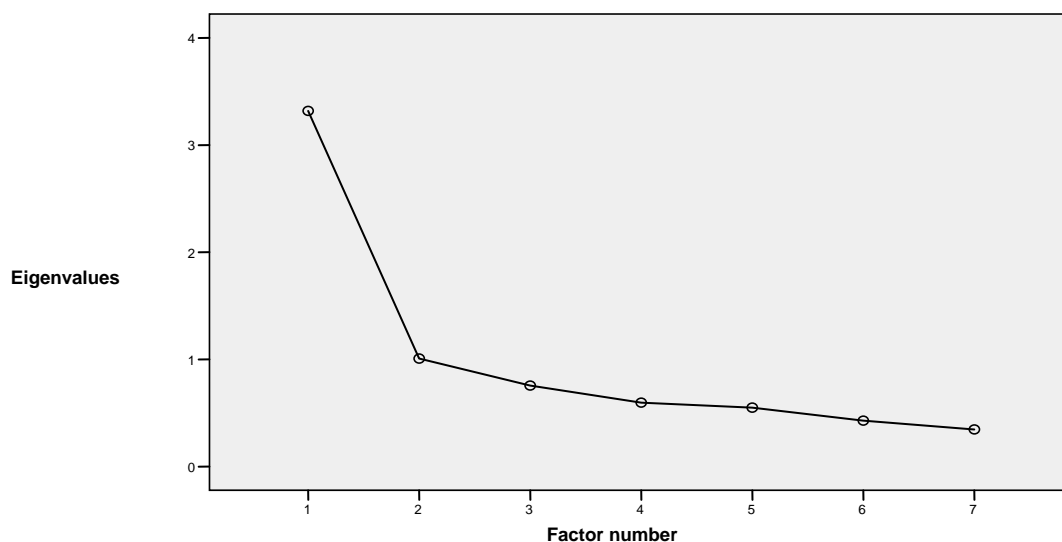
Drawing on the typology of the motives and behaviour of men who resort to prostitution (Atchinson et al, 1998; Mansson, 1993; McKeganey, 1994; Monto, 2004; Volnovich, 2006), a scale to measure *Beliefs concerning the motives and behaviour of men who pay for sex* (Valor-Segura, Expósito, & Moya, 2009) has been designed with six items. Of these, three items measured *hostile beliefs* towards the motives and behaviour of men who pay for sex (e.g., I think men go to prostitutes because “men only want to enjoy themselves”, “men like to dominate women”), and the remaining three items *benevolent beliefs* (e.g., I think men go to prostitutes because “they feel lonely”, “they are in need of love”). Respondents were required to indicate the degree of agreement/disagreement with various statements placed on a 7-point likert-type scale where 1= indicates disagreement, and 7= total agreement).

In order to measure the incidence of *victim-blaming* in physical or sexual assaults on prostitutes, the participants responded to the following questions: “To what extent is a prostitute responsible for being physically assaulted by a man?”, and “To what extent is a prostitute responsible for being sexually assaulted by a man?” A 7-point Likert type scale was used where 1 indicated “no blame at all” and 7 “all the blame”.

Results

The relationship between the legal stance towards prostitution and attitudes and beliefs concerning the motives and behaviour of men who pay for sex.

In order to explore the uni- and multi-dimensionality of the legal stance towards prostitution, factor analysis using the principal components method was performed that revealed the items were grouped in one factor alone as shown by Cattell's criterion (see Graph 1) and Kaiser-Guttman (eigenvalues greater than one). A total of three items were eliminated for failing to meet the Discrimination Index .20 cut-off. The indices of the remaining items were acceptable (the lowest being .41) given that values above .40 are considered to be good indicators of discrimination (Ebel, 1965).



Graph 1. Sedimentation graph of the scale of the legal stance towards prostitution

The remaining seven items were submitted to further exploratory factorial analysis, using extraction of the principal components method. Both the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sample adequacy (.82), and Bartlett's sphericity test, $\chi^2(21) = 1275.58$; $p < .001$, support the relevance of an exploratory factor analysis. The data of the factorial analysis (see Table 1) reveal that one dimension alone explained 47.4% of the

total variance. Scale reliability, as measured by the α coefficient, was .82, which can be considered satisfactory bearing in mind the small number of items on the scale.

Table 1. Factor analysis of the scale on the legal stance to prostitution.

ITEMS	Factor loadings
1. Creo que la prostitución ha de ser erradicada	.78
2. Considero que la prostitución como un grave problema social	.71
5. En nuestro país se deberían adoptar medidas de abolicionismo como en Suecia, donde la prostitución es considerada como un acto de violencia y el castigo va dirigido al cliente	.67
7. La prostitución es uno de los trabajos más antiguos del mundo y no debería eliminarse (R)	.60
6. La mejor medida para solucionar los problemas que causa la prostitución sería castigar a la prostituta y al cliente que pide los servicios de la prostitución	.59
4. Considero que legalizar la prostitución, como en Holanda, es la mejor política que se puede adoptar para resolver el problema de tráfico de mujeres y el mercado del sexo (R)	.51
3. Las medidas que se deberían adoptar por ley, para solucionar los problemas que causa la prostitución, deberían ir encaminadas a castigar a la persona que se prostituye	.44
% of the explained variance	47.41
Eigenvalues	3.32
Cronbach's Alpha	.82

Note. (R) These items invert their score.

Thus, the resulting one-dimensional scale for evaluating the legal stance towards prostitution consisted of two polar opposites i.e., *Legalization* (correlated to low scores) and *Prohibition* (correlated to high scores).

In order to assess the legal stance towards prostitution, and the attitudes and beliefs regarding the motives underlying the behaviour of men who resort to prostitution, the sample was subdivided into three groups according to the scores obtained on the scale, the criterion for segmentation being the tercile value. Thereafter, low scoring subjects (associated to *Legalization*), and high scoring subjects (associated to *Prohibition*) were selected and the group of intermediate scores was eliminated which reduced the sample for analysis to 425 individuals. The opposing groups were then used as a factor to measure differences in the independent samples, with hostile and benevolent attitudes and beliefs about the behaviour of men as dependent variables. The comparison of the data obtained for both groups reveal the greater association of *prohibition* ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.18$) to *hostile attitudes* and beliefs towards the behaviour of men, $t(423) = -4.354$, $p < .001$, than *legalization* ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.13$). Moreover,

significant statistical differences were found for *benevolent beliefs* of the behaviour men, $t(423) = 2.011, p < .05$, with *legalization* ($M = 4.59, SD = 1.25$) with scores higher than for *prohibition* ($M = 4.34, SD = 1.36$).

The impact of sexist attitudes and beliefs and the legal stance towards prostitution on victim-blaming in physical or sexual assault on prostitutes.

A further aim of this study was to assess the impact of sexist attitudes and beliefs and the legal stance towards prostitution on victim-blaming in physical or sexual assaults to prostitutes.

To determine the best predictor variables of *victim-blaming* in physical and sexual assault to prostitutes, two multiple regression analysis were performed. The predictor variables used were the total scores on the scale of the legal stance towards prostitution, the total hostile sexism score, and the benevolent sexism score. Variables were added to the regression equation in a stepwise manner. The dependent variables were the victim-blaming scores for physical or sexual assault to prostitutes.

In the case of victim-blaming in sexual assault, the explanatory variables were the total score for legal stance towards prostitution and the hostile sexism score. These variables also appear in the predictive model for victim-blaming in physical assault (see Table 2 for details on the load of the predictor variables in both models).

Table 2. Linear regression analysis of the predictor variables of victim-blaming in physical or sexual assaults to prostitutes

	Variables	B	β	t	p	R ²	F	gl ₁ /gl ₂	p
Sexual assault	Constant	-.703		-2.951	.003				
	Legal stance to prostitution	.090	.337	8.539	.000	.198	76.514	2/608	.000
	Hostile Sexism	.384	.273	6.793	.000				
Physical assault	Constant	-.435		1.949	.050				
	Legal stance to prostitution	.077	.316	8.539	.000	.171	64.103	2/608	.000
	Hostile Sexism	.326	.251	6.793	.000				

Table 2 shows that hostile sexism and the legal stance to prostitution were the best variables to predict the tendency to victim-blame in physical or sexual assault to prostitutes. As expected, the tendency was to victim-blame the prostitute in instances of

physical or sexual assault when men have a hostile ideology towards women and support the prohibition of prostitution.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that men who wish to outlaw prostitution have hostile beliefs concerning the motives and behaviour men who pay for sex (a man who likes to dominate women or has an insatiable sexual appetite). In comparison, men who favour the legalization of prostitution assert it is an escape valve for single men or for those who have voracious sexual appetites (Association for the Rehabilitation of Women Prostitutes, 2005), and hold benevolent beliefs about the motives and behaviour of men who pay for sex.

The key objective of this study was to assess the impact of sexist ideology and legal stances towards prostitution on the appraisal of violence towards prostitutes. The results reveal that the tendency to victim-blame prostitutes is greater among people who harbour a hostile ideology towards women (hostile sexism), and favour the prohibition of prostitution. In contrast, people who favour legalization tend to conceive of prostitutes as sex workers, and do not tend to victim-blame the prostitute for physical or sexual assaults by men.

The literature on prostitution in relation to public health risks, illegal substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Burnette et al., 2009; Cunha & Chaves, 2008; Rao et al., 2003; Sullivan, 2007; Willman, 2008) is extensive. Notwithstanding, few studies have sought to examine the attitudes and beliefs of the general population towards prostitution (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Polk & Cowan, 1996). Basow and Campanile (1990) found a correlation between feminist ideology and attitudes against prostitution. Polk and Cowan (1996) found their sample of students widely accepted the belief that prostitutes enjoyed and were proud of their job, liked sex, and had high self-esteem.

Prostitution is a complex and controversial issue that is immersed in the wider gender inequality pervasive in society, thus one should be cautious in drawing conclusions. Nevertheless, we may conclude that sexist ideology, attitudes and beliefs towards prostitution influence how prostitutes are depicted and the justification of

physical or sexual assaults on prostitutes. Thus, violent behaviour towards women was associated to culturally reinforced attitudes and beliefs that men have the right to sexually access women, feel superior to them, and that sexual abuse can be justified (Cotton et al., 2002). Regardless of the debate on whether prostitution is a job or a violation of human rights (Farley, 2000, 2001, 2004; Farley & Kelly, 2000), there is sufficient data to conclude that prostitution is not an expression of a woman's sexual freedom, but rather the plight of prostitutes is associated to physical and sexual assault, alienation, economic hardship, and the degradation of a sexist and patriarchal culture that has dominated women since time immemorial.

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