Sex Work and Sexual Rights

Week 9

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Sexual Politics of Representation

- **Stereotypes** legitimate inequality, and provide rationales for exploitation (jezebel/mammy, puta/maid, lotus blossom/dragon lady).

- **Hypersexuality**: a discourse that exploits and stigmatizes WOC as over-sexual responsible for their abuse. As a result of this discourse many women of color experience sexual repression, surveillance, and discipline through their families and communities.

- WOC care about the **sexual politics of representation** because it shapes their everyday experiences, and their identities and relationships.
Sexual Identity, Sexual Autonomy and Media Representations

WOC negotiate, and construct their identities against, media representations everyday.

Sexual rights for WOC include the right not to be objectified and misrepresented through sexual stereotypes in the media.

If most images of WOC are negative, sexualized myths or misrepresentations, how can women and girls gain sexual autonomy (control)?
Intersectional analysis of sexual labor as racialized, gendered, and classed, and informed by other dimensions of power like citizenship status.

WOC sex workers are devalued and vulnerable to abuse due to their lack of “Erotic Capital”

WOC must negotiate demands to both assimilate to the beauty ideal (white) and to perform the exotic Other (racialized fantasy).

WOC sex workers critique their exploitation as limiting their rights to work, survive, take care of their needs and family, and express sexual autonomy.

Criminalization and social stigma of sex work increases the marginalization and potential dangers of abuse and exploitation.
Power & Choice

✓ WOCs choices to work in the sex industry reflect structural inequality and marginalization from socio-economic & political power in society.

✓ WOC have limited labor choices & limited power in the sex industry due to structural inequality & discrimination.

✓ Yet, WOC choose sex work out of need to survive, make a living, support families, aspire to fame, mobility, &/or a sense of sexual autonomy.

✓ WOC see sex work as a strategic choice, among a limited range of choices.
Street sex workers, usually poor women, are most vulnerable to violence, stigma, & criminalization (through vice laws).

WOC more likely to be arrested & experience violence & abuse, including from police, while “Johns” are least likely to be arrested.

Many feminists want prostitution to be either decriminalized or legalized.

Decriminalization: end policing and laws against sex work.

Legalization: sex workers legally allowed to work but subject to rules like taxes and monitoring or surveillance by the State.
Resistance Through Activism! Sex Worker Rights Movement

- COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics)
- SWOP-USA (Sex Workers Outreach Project)
- YWEP (Young Women’s Empowerment Project)
- CAL-PEP (California Prevention Education Project)
- St. James Infirmary (Healthcare for sex workers)
- HIPS (Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive)
- $pread Magazine
- Desiree Alliance
The 3rd of March is International Sex Worker Rights Day. The day originated in 2001 when over 25,000 sex workers gathered in India for a sex worker festival. The organizers, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a Calcutta based group whose membership consists of somewhere upwards of 50,000 sex workers and members of their communities. Sex worker groups across the world have subsequently celebrated 3 March as International Sex Workers' Rights Day.

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (2002): “We felt strongly that we should have a day what need to be observed by the sex workers community globally. Keeping in view the large mobilization of all types of global sex workers [Female, Male, Transgender], we proposed to observe 3rd March as THE SEX WORKERS RIGHTS DAY.”
The Sex Wars: Pornography and Sex Work

- Feminists debate since 1970s
- **Radical Feminists**: porn and prostitution as extreme violence against women. Emphasize harm of male gaze, coercion, and rape.
- **Liberal/Sex-Positive Feminists**: porn and prostitution as both exploitative and potentially empowering. Emphasize agency (autonomy) of women to choose sex work, and labor rights for prostitutes/performers/sex workers.
WOC and the Sex Wars

✓ WOC feminists are on both sides of this debate, though they are marginalized.
✓ Some WOC feminists (“radical”) see porn & sex work as extra exploitative for WOC due to racism, and emphasize victimization.
✓ Other WOC feminists (“liberal”) see porn & sex work as both exploitative as well as (usually) women’s chosen work, and emphasize an analysis of the role of race in sexual labor (exploitation and inequality), the need to expand sexual rights within the sex industries, & of women’s agency, autonomy, and desires.