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The Politics of Prostitution
Women’s Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce

The most effective way to deal with prostitution has always been hotly debated by governments and women’s movements alike. Feminists want it abolished or regulated as sex work; governments have to safeguard public health and order. This book shows how women’s movements in Western Europe, North America and Australia have affected policies on prostitution and trafficking of women since the 1970s, asking what made them successful in some countries but a failure in others. It also assesses whether government institutions to advance the status of women – so-called women’s policy agencies – have played a key role in achieving policy outcomes favourable to movement demands. Written by an international team of experts and based on original sources, all chapters follow the same framework to ensure comparability. The final chapter offers an overall comparison identifying what makes women’s movements successful and women’s agencies effective, presenting the case for ‘state feminism’.

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The Politics of Prostitution

Women’s Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce

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Contents

List of figures vii
List of tables viii
Notes on contributors ix
Preface xiii

1 Introduction: prostitution, women’s movements and democratic politics 1
JOYCE OUTSHOORN

2 The women’s movement and prostitution politics in Australia 21
BARBARA SULLIVAN

3 Taxes, rights and regimentation: discourses on prostitution in Austria 41
BIRGIT SAUER

4 Prostitution policies in Britain, 1982–2002 62
JOHANNA KANTOLA AND JUDITH SQUIRES

5 Prostitution as public nuisance: prostitution policy in Canada 83
LESLIE ANN JEFFREY

6 Towards a new prohibitionism? State feminism, women’s movements and prostitution policies in Finland 103
ANNE MARIA HOLLI

7 Prostitute movements face elite apathy and gender-biased universalism in France 123
AMY G. MAZUR
Contents

8 The politics of prostitution and trafficking of women in Israel 144
DELILA AMIR AND MENACHEM AMIR

9 Italy: the never-ending debate 165
DANIELA DANNA

10 Voluntary and forced prostitution: the ‘realistic approach’ of the Netherlands 185
JOYCE OUTSHOORN

11 State feminism and central state debates on prostitution in post-authoritarian Spain 205
CELIA VALIENTE

12 Criminalising the john – a Swedish gender model? 225
YVONNE SVANSTRÖM

13 The invisible issue: prostitution and trafficking of women and girls in the United States 245
DOROTHY McBRIDE STETSON

14 Comparative prostitution politics and the case for state feminism 265
JOYCE OUTSHOORN

Appendix 1 Independent variable indicators 293
Appendix 2 Worksheets 296
References 299
Index 322
Figures

1.1 RNGS model  
1.2 Typology for women’s movement impact and state response  
1.3 Typology for women’s policy agencies
14.1 Prostitution debates by country
14.2 Gendering and access to policy arena
14.3 Gendered debates and policy outcomes
14.4 Women’s movement and state responses in thirty-six policy debates
14.5 Women’s policy agencies and movement impact
14.6 Characteristics of women’s policy agencies
14.7 Women’s movement characteristics and women’s policy agency activities
14.8 Policy environments and role of women’s policy agency
14.9 Women’s movement characteristics and movement impact
14.10 Policy environment and movement impact
14.11 Women’s movement characteristics and policy environments linked to women’s movement success/dual response
14.12 Effects of women’s movement characteristics and policy environment on women’s movement success, controlling for women's policy agency activities
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This study of the politics of prostitution has emerged from the cooperation of scholars within the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) which set out to answer the perennial questions of feminist politics and social movements: do feminist politics make a difference, and can democratic states, still dominated by men and often denoted as patriarchal, actually be feminist? Do women’s policy offices work? And how do women’s movements actually contribute to the improvement of women’s status? To look into prostitution as a political issue to research these questions seemed both an obvious and an unlikely choice. On the one hand, prostitution is mostly about women selling sexual services to men, a long-time concern for feminism as it mainly occurs within unequal relationships of power. On the other hand, prostitution is usually neglected by the mainstream of political science and policy studies that tend to regard the matter as a social or public health problem. Both aspects made it a challenging topic for analysing the question about the impact of women’s movements in democratic states and the role of women’s policy agencies within government in improving women’s status.

The Research Network on Gender Politics and the State was founded in 1995 at Leiden University, the Netherlands, by a group of political scientists, sociologists and women’s studies experts from both sides of the North Atlantic. Previously many of them had collaborated on the book *Comparative State Feminism*, edited by Dorothy McBride Stetson and Amy Mazur (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995), which had explored the role of women’s policy agencies in equal opportunity policies in a number of advanced industrial democracies. Its outcome called for more extensive, in-depth research into the policies designed since the 1970s in democratic states to meet the challenge and demands of the fast-growing women’s movement. In Leiden the first steps were taken towards developing a common design to analyse the impact of the women’s movement and ‘state feminism’ systematically. An analytical framework was set up, and the decision was taken to study the major research questions in several
issue areas, in order to prevent generalisation on the basis of just one or two issues. Prostitution was one of the issues selected.

From then on the common research design was developed and adjusted in a truly collaborative spirit. Conferences were held at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in San Francisco in 1996 in a two-day Short Course/Workshop session, a two-day meeting at CREDEP, Université de Paris IX in 1998, an APSA panel on Comparative Politics in Boston that same year, a three-day conference at the University of Southampton/Chilworth Centre in 1999, a five-day workshop on The Politics of Prostitution during the annual Joint Sessions of Workshops of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) in Copenhagen in 2000, a Short Course/Workshop on Comparative Politics at APSA in San Francisco in 2001, and a final two-day meeting at Queen’s University, Belfast, in 2001.

At these meetings, all members contributed to refining the framework. In a continual dialogue, care was taken to ensure comparability between different nation-states, guarding against conceptual stretching and the denial of important cultural differences between states. Researchers, coming from sixteen different countries and deeply familiar with their native political system and women’s movements, could continually check the appropriateness of the framework for their particular country. At each meeting, Dorothy Stetson and Amy Mazur, co-convenors of the RNGS, kept track of the debates and reworked the research design, which they then distributed to all members. In this way the project has become a truly cross-national study, providing well-grounded theory based on thorough and qualitative research in each country.

After its inception RNGS organised itself into country teams, with a country director recruiting scholars from her country for each issue area. Around each issue a network of researchers developed, studying the issue in a particular country; in due course the work was co-ordinated by an issue area director. Research on the prostitution issue started in 1999 at the Southampton/Chilworth meeting; draft papers were presented and discussed at the 2000 Copenhagen ECPR sessions, the 2001 San Francisco APSA meeting and the conference in Belfast of that same year. I was the network director for the prostitution issue, and took on the responsibility of planning the book, monitoring the progress of the study of each country, making sure the deadlines were met and authors observed the requirements of the framework of the project. I have also written the introduction to the book and the final chapter, in which I make the cross-case analysis and test the hypotheses of the project framework. Without the commitment, enthusiasm and hard work of all the authors, this book would not have materialised, and I want to thank all of our prostitution


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1 Introduction: prostitution, women’s movements and democratic politics

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How have women’s movements challenged states over the past thirty years to deal with women’s status and make them incorporate women as political actors? How have states responded to the challenge posed by the rise of the ‘second wave’ of feminism? Women’s movement activists demanded state measures on a broad and diverse set of issues, ranging from equal representation in political decision-making and anti-discrimination measures on the labour market to the combat of sexual violence and the right to abortion. Governments responded by developing a varied set of ‘women’s policy machineries’ (UN 1993), institutions to deal with such demands, ranging from temporary committees to full-fledged permanent departments within the national bureaucracy. The research described in this book addresses the role of these institutions in advancing the goals of women’s movements in a number of post-industrial democracies. It focuses on one of the issues which re-emerged as a feminist concern, prostitution, and it sets out to answer the question of whether these institutions, here termed ‘women’s policy agencies’, have been effective in dealing with the issue.

In this way the book raises the larger issue of whether governments have actually improved women’s status, promoted women’s rights and reduced gender-hierarchies that are at the basis of the inequalities between women and men. It has always been an issue hotly debated by feminist activists and scholars alike: can the state be ‘feminist’? Does the government have the capacity to act on behalf of a feminist agenda and redress sex inequality? Or is the agenda of women’s movement activists inevitably rendered innocuous or ‘perverted’ when they choose to collaborate with the state (Hernes 1987; Franzway et al. 1989; Eisenstein 1990, 1996; Watson 1990; Sawer 1990; Outshoorn 1994, 1998a; Sawer and Groves 1994)? Social movement scholars similarly debate the question of how far democratic states can be transformed by social movements (e.g. Kriesi et al. 1995; McAdam et al. 1996; Tarrow 1998; Della Porta and Diani 1999). Do women’s movements make democratic states, often criticised for not being inclusive of women’s interests and women’s participation
Joyce Outshoorn

(e.g. Pateman 1988; Phillips 1991, 1995), more democratic? From an earlier study on women’s policy agencies it emerged that these can be important vehicles to movement goals, making the case for state feminism (Stetson and Mazur 1995). This study hopes to contribute to comparative social movement theory, comparative public policy and theories of democratic citizenship by a systematic and cross-national empirical study of prostitution politics in twelve countries.

The research presented here grew out of a collaborative project of the Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS). Using the analytical framework developed by the network, the book explores the politics of prostitution in Australia, Austria, Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United States, all Western political democracies. It does so in a longitudinal way, covering the women’s movements and the issue since the early 1970s. It is also a comparative study of the policy debates on prostitution in these states. In an in-depth analysis of these debates, the researchers determine whether the women’s policy agencies bring the prostitution issue into the policy arena and promote feminist framing(s), as well as enable women’s movement actors to gain access to the policy arenas of the state. With this information, it becomes possible to sort out why some governments and their women’s policy agencies are more responsive to women’s movement demands than others, and when women’s movements are likely to have success or not.

Prostitution as a political issue was selected for study as it touches on one of the key areas of the prevalent gender order, i.e. the norms, principles and policies informing the allocation of tasks, rights and life chances to women and men (Ostner and Lewis 1995: 169, n7). The gender order underpins major social institutions, such as the division of labour in the home and workplace, the organisation of human reproduction and sexuality, and citizenship rights. All of these are crucial aspects of women’s lives and potential areas for gender conflicts. A basic tenet of RNGS is that the activities of the women’s policy agencies and women’s movements should be analysed in each of these issue areas to be able to arrive at reliable statements about the impact of the women’s movement and the effectiveness of women’s policy agencies. Issues were selected with an eye to cross-national comparability and the capability of being both gendered and not gendered. Since women’s policy agency effectiveness is determined in this study by their ability to bring gender ideas into the policy definitions in debates, issues must not be inherently gendered. It must be possible to discuss them without explicit reference to gendered characteristics of people. Following the original distinction made by Harding (1986) and Scott (1986) between gender – social and cultural