

The Oldest Profession: Prostitution recorded in Genesis is found in the biblical narrative of Tamar, a young, childless widow. Because she was a woman, Tamar could not inherit her husband's property, but remained tied to his family and was expected to have sexual relations with his brother, Onan, that she might produce a male heir.

Refusing to split his inheritance with a male born to Tamar, Onan spilled his seed on the ground rather than impregnate her. Like his brother, Onan died young. Tamar remained a childless widow, economically impoverished.

In a society that valued women for their childbearing abilities, Tamar had no value, was considered worthless and discarded by her father-in-law, Judah. Realizing she has been abandoned and is destined for economic despair, she sets in motion a plan to secure her financial future.

In the only wage-earning work available to biblical women who needed to provide for themselves, that of prostitution, Tamar disguises herself and sits in the roadway in pursuit of a patron seeking to buy sexual intercourse. She is propositioned by none other than Judah. He offers her a sheep as payment for his purchase of sexual intercourse. She accepts, and wisely asks for his seal, cord, and staff. He complies.

When Tamar (still bound to Judah's family though not integrated in it) is known to be pregnant, it openly announces her sexual intercourse act as one of promiscuity and trespass against Judah's dignity. Judah's initial reaction is to have her burned. However, when his seal, cord, and staff, evidence his sexual intercourse with her and her pregnancy as his, he immediately reconsiders, affirms Tamar's worth and welcomes her back into his household. Thus, he claims her unclaimed inheritance, her labor, and her. She has economic stability due to a man who engaged in prostitution with her thinking she was a whore, who also had the power to exonerate her from scorn to honor once he knew he impregnated his daughter-in-law, not a whore.

Prostitution, constructed and imbued with moral gender interpretations, has plagued and provoked societies since Genesis. Globally, in the United States, Canada, Thailand, England, France and Queensland in Australia, everything necessary to work as a prostitute is illegal although it is not illegal to be a prostitute. Rather than place prostitution under business codes, most governments place it under police-controlled state regulations.

Charles Winick, professor of Sociology at the City University of New York, and Paul M. Kinsie, a renown expert on the study of prostitution, write, "Our social structure is threatened by people who engage in sexual activity for pay." Simultaneously our social structure legally protects sales of sexual and sensual literature, art, films, pornography, lyrics, gender jokes or jesting, etc., by virtue of the First Amendment right to free speech, and the Fifth Amendment due process clause of the U.S. Constitution.

In the business of government-protected sex sales, the seller who profits often is successful, gains status, independence, and is described as a publisher, director, manager, executive, etc., words positively associated with entrepreneurs, mostly men. While in the business of government-regulated sex sales, the seller who profits often is arrested, loses status, sometimes independence, and is described as a whore and/or its derivatives, slut, hooker, harlot, etc., words negatively associated with prostitutes, mostly women.

Prostitutes explain the law as an institutionalized attempt to isolate and silence women. Susan G. Cole describes prostitution as “an institution of male supremacy.” In Pompeii prostitution was a respected, recognized, and taxed women’s business venture.

Be it legal or illegal, moral or immoral, prostitution is a supply and demand business. Business as usual has long been a man’s world with no women allowed, except perhaps as prostitutes doing business outside the law in the oldest profession.

Sources: *The Lively Commerce*, Charles Winick & Paul M. Kinsie; *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, Gail Pheterson; *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, Sarah B. Pomeroy; “What’s Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work,” *Signs*, University of Chicago Press, Summer 1992, p708.