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The Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent, Prostitution and Pornography: The British Black Women's Movement and Sex Work, 1970s–1980s

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In recent years there have been some noteworthy attempts to remedy scholarly silences on the Black women's movement. The issue of sex work, however, is only mentioned in passing despite the so-called 'sex wars' preoccupying the white feminist scene at this time. Grappling with the methodological issue of silence on multiple interconnected levels, this this article attempts to fill this gap by interrogating how, and indeed whether, activists in the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) approached issues of sex work. It asks why these activists rejected the interpretation of sex work as work taken by their contemporaries in the sex workers' rights movement. It firstly proposes that Black woman activists made a conscious decision to remain silent on issues of commercial sex, dismissing prostitution, alongside other issues of sexuality, as the 'luxury' preserve of white middle-class feminists that were distinct from, rather than integral to, Black women's 'survival'. Piecing together activists' increasing but piecemeal discussions of pornography from the early-mid 1980s, the second section of this article demonstrates how activists analysed pornography and prostitution as part of a historical tradition of the sexual exploitation of Black women. In doing so, it proposes that their approach to commercial sex was fraught with contradiction – they viewed prostitution, an issue with real-life implications, in symbolic terms. Overall, it argues that Black woman activists to turned a blind eye to the tangible implications of prostitution legislation for Black women as they navigated tensions and challenges around post-war British racism, respectability politics and the gendered legacy of colonialism. Together with work on the experiences of lesbian women, it raises questions about which women were welcome in the movement, reminding us of the need to push scholarship on Black women's history beyond the act of recovery.

The Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent, Prostitution and Pornography: The British Black Women's Movement and Sex Work, 1970s–1980s

Lucy Cann

Introduction

In notes taken following the 1979 inaugural conference of the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD), held in activist Stella Dadzie's personal files at the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), activists from the British Black women's movement describe a 'comment of Wages for Housework (WFH) sister on prostitution' as 'a perfect e.g. of total confusion'.[1] Three handwritten exclamation points indicate their hesitation about another attendee's espousal of Black Women for WFH activist Wilmette Brown's argument that 'money for prostitutes is money for black and immigrant women'.[2] While this suggests that the Black women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s was sceptical of the interpretation of sex work as an issue of workers' rights, existing scholarship leaves us curious about how the movement viewed sex work differently. Navigating archival silences, this article attempts to paint a picture of how the Black women's movement analysed issues of commercial sex in race-specific but ultimately contradictory ways.

In recent years there have been some noteworthy attempts to remedy scholarly silences on the Black women's movement more generally. Most comprehensive is Natalie Thomlinson's 2016 book which traces the movement's emergence in response to white feminism's race-ignorance.[3] Jessica White's 2021 article similarly positions the movement as the product of Black women's combined exclusion from both male-dominated anti-racist activism and the whiteness of the feminist movement.[4] The issue of sex work, however, is only mentioned in passing despite the so-called 'sex wars' preoccupying the white feminist scene at this time.[5]

[1] OWAAD, 'Notes on Conference Tapes' (1981), BCA/DADZIE/1/1/37.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Thomlinson, Natalie, Race*, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2016), p.2.

[4] Jessica White, 'Black Women's Groups, Life Narratives and the Construction of the Self in Late Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* (2021), pp.797–9.

[5] For an overview of these debates: Teela Sanders, Maggie O'Neill & Jane Pitcher, *Prostitution: Sex Work, Policy and Politics* (SAGE: London, 2009), p.7.

Seeking to remedy these scholarly silences, this article focuses on the work of activists involved in the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) as an umbrella organisation that encapsulated much of the burgeoning Black British feminist scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite its short five-year lifespan, the organisation has been identified as being at the forefront of raising a wide range of Black women's issues.[6] While we cannot know the details of private conversations between activists, the archival catalogues of other sections of the Black women's movement, such as Black lesbian activists, indicate a lack of documentary evidence of groups like the Black Lesbian Group and Camden Lesbian Centre engaging with the politics of sex work. My archival research suggests that the limited conversations that took place within the Black women's movement about sex work were confined to groups like OWAAD that had a broader remit.

This article takes an expansive definition of sex work, discussing pornography as well as prostitution. As Mireille Miller-Young notes in her history of race and pornography in the late twentieth-century US, pornography is 'part of a continuum of sex work' that also includes various categories like streetwalking, modelling and erotic dancing, all of which exemplify 'a history of black women working in underground or gray economies'.[7]

Methodologically, this article grapples with the issue of silence on multiple interconnected levels. Firstly, it explores how and why Black women activists were largely silent on the issue of sex work. Additionally, as with any study of Black British history, particularly where it intersects with gender, it is written within the confines of silences in the archive itself. Historian Caroline Bressey, for example, has shown how British archives present whitewashed narratives which erase Black Britons, and others have shown how this is particularly the case for Black women's history.[8] Tanisha Ford, for example, praises the work of recent archival projects for allowing us to 'tell textured histories' about Black women's lives, however she notes how only 'a very small group of Black women activists… have their papers housed in a functional, accessible community archive'.[9] The picture that I have been able to paint of activists' approaches to sex work has been shaped by these limitations. I have relied heavily on Dadzie's personal papers, and the voices of

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[6] See, for example, Natalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement in England, 1968–1993* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2016), p.7.

[7] Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Duke: Durham, 2014), p.12.

[8] Caroline Bressey, 'Invisible Presence: the Whitening of the Black Community in the Historical Imagination of British Archives', *Archivaria*, Vol.61 (2006), pp.46–7. See also, Yula Burin and Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski, 'Sister to Sister: Developing a Black British Feminist Archival Consciousness', *Feminist Review,* Vol. 129 (November 2021), pp.108–119.

[9] Tanisha Ford, 'Finding Olive Morris in the Archive', *The Black Scholar,* Vol. 46 (Summer 2016), p.11.

Dadzie and a few other activists dominate the oral histories I have used.[10] This source material offers only a partial view, and the stance of these activists cannot necessarily be attributed to the wider movement. Indeed, in personal email correspondence, Dadzie recalled some scepticism of the WFH approach but was uncertain as to whether this was shared by all and noted that there was no official position on sex work.

Working within these constraints, this article firstly suggests why the Black women's movement paid so little attention to sex work. Through an analysis of their seemingly curious omission of sex work from campaigns on Black women's economic position and racism in the criminal justice system, it proposes that Black women activists made a conscious decision to remain silent on the issue. It suggests that prostitution, along with other issues of sexuality, was dismissed as the 'luxury' preserve of white middle-class feminists that was distinct from, rather than integral to, Black women's 'survival'. The second section pieces together activists' increasing but piecemeal discussions of pornography from the early-mid 1980s to shed light on their wider attitudes towards commercial sex. It demonstrates how pornography and prostitution were analysed through a historical framework of racialised sexuality, and how this led activists to construct sex work as exploitation. Overall, I argue that Black women activists turned a blind eye to the tangible implications of prostitution legislation for Black women as they navigated tensions and challenges around post-war British racism, respectability politics and the gendered legacy of colonialism.

While archival silences mean that we cannot know how this was experienced by Black women who sold sex, this article proposes that activists' open hostility to prostitution left them isolated from a leading anti-racist movement. In doing so, this piece not only contributes to efforts to shed light on the British Black women's movement, it is also in conversation with scholarship highlighting the movement's exclusionary tendencies. It reminds us that to romanticise the movement is to do a disservice to activists who navigated thorny and contentious issues. Contributing to efforts to move scholarship beyond simply recovering Black women's history, it demonstrates the importance of applying a critical lens to their work, without downplaying its value. As Susan Armitage put it in 1983, 'to move from the single story to the whole picture requires that we be systematic and critical – while remaining caring and appreciative'.[11]

[10] 'Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement: The Heart of the Race' (2009–2010), BCA/ORAL/1.

[11] Susan Armitage, 'The Next Step', *Frontiers*, Vol.7. (1983), p.3.

1. Sexuality as a 'luxury'

Typifying their campaigning on Black women's disproportionate experience of low-paid work in poor conditions, activists at OWAAD's inaugural 1979 conference stressed how 'we have always been forced to take the lowest-paid, least unionised jobs, with long hours (often involving shift-work), appalling sweat-shop conditions and discrimination'.[12] In doing so, they outlined the exact conditions identified by their contemporaries in the sex workers' rights movement as leading Black women in particular to sell sex – low pay, poor conditions, the need for flexible work, and informal work given insecure immigration status. At first glance it thus appears surprising that sex work is almost entirely absent from Black women's campaigns.

The only brief mention in the archive of the relationship between economic status and prostitution comes from Women Against Imperialism (WAI), a network which included Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG), a group that was also an influential OWAAD member.[13] WAI identified how because 'women immigrants form the lowest-paid and worst-off strata' they were 'forced by economic insecurity into prostitution'.[14] They noted how, for immigrant women, many of whom at this time were Black, sex work was often tied to immigration status – 'terms of entry of immigrants often specify that they can come to do only one particular job' so 'if this falls through', women are forced into 'work that does not require legal documentation – prostitution and sweat shops are the only alternatives'.[15] While the WAI appear exceptional amongst their colleagues in raising prostitution, the involvement of BBWG in the network suggests that key players in the Black women's movement were not ignorant of these connections. This raises the question of whether activists consciously decided to remain silent on the subject of commercial sex.

A critical examination of the movement's work on racism in the criminal justice system leaves little doubt that their lack of attention to sex work was deliberate. Black women were integral to campaigns against the 'sus' laws and this represents the greatest missed opportunity to show how prostitution was inseparable from wider issues facing Black communities. Formed in 1978 by Black mothers, the SCRAP SUS campaign highlighted the racist application of the offence of being a 'suspected person loitering with intent to commit an arrestable offence' taken from the 1824 Vagrancy Act (VA).[16] As

[12] OWAAD, 'Introductory Talk – 'Black Women in Britain' (1979), BCA/DADZIE/1/1/14.

[13] Women Against Imperialism, 'Draft Discussion Paper' (undated), BCA/DADZIE/1/1/22.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Briefing Paper 2' (1981), BCA/DADZIE/1/1/31; Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985), p.160.

the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) also publicised in the 1980s, the 1959 Street Offences Act's (SOA) laws against soliciting were similarly derived from the VA and were disproportionately deployed against Black women.[17] As they put it in 1982, 'prostitution laws are to young Black women what the "sus" laws are to young Black men'.[18] It would be unfair to hold the Black women's movement to the standards of the ECP whose raison d'etre was the advancement of sex workers' rights. However, given the high-profile nature of their campaigns, particularly their 1982 occupation of Holy Cross Church in King's Cross, it is unlikely that Black women activists were unaware of the issue. Furthermore, this silence on prostitution cannot be attributed to a more general ignorance of the ramifications of the 'sus' laws for groups other than Black men. Their pamphlet 'Freedom for Black Youth and Others from "sus"' outlined how this historic legislation was from its inception a broad 'instrument of social control' and how aside from Black men, 'all sorts of other people loiter in public places' so were vulnerable to the Act including 'unemployed people', 'badly housed people', 'children after school' and 'people waiting for buses'.[19]

Additionally, Black woman activists appear to have deliberately chosen not to include prostitution in their campaigning around the imprisonment of Black women. At a 1981 workshop, activists raised Black women's imprisonment 'for some minor crimes', but stopped short of detailing what these might be.[20] Their plans for OWAAD's 1981 calendar give a sense of the perceived nature of these 'minor crimes', listing the 'possible reasons which land us in jail' as including 'shop-lifting' and the serious crime of 'baby-battering', however they did not mention prostitution, a striking omission given the sheer numbers of women in prison for prostitution offences at this time.[21] The ECP, for instance, revealed how despite the 1983 abolition of prison sentences for soliciting, women continued to be imprisoned over debts and concluded that 'Black women are more likely to be sent to jail than white women'.[22] There is, however, evidence to suggest that OWAAD activists were aware of prostitution offences as being behind Black women's imprisonment. Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe noted in *Heart of the Race,* their seminal 1985 work on Black women's lives in Britain, that in some prisons where 'forty-percent of the

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[17] Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885–1960* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2012), p.117.

[18] Selma James 'Hookers in the House of the Lord' in eds.Selma James, Nina Lopez and Marcus Rediker, *Sex, Race and Class: The Perspective of Winning: A Selection of Writings 1952–2011* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2012), p.121.

[19] Scrap Sus Campaign, 'Freedom for Black Youth and Others from "sus"' (early 1980s), BCA/DADZIE/1/9.

[20] OWAAD, 'Notes on Black women in prisons/mental institutions' (c.1981), BCA/DADZIE/1/1/23.

[21] OWAAD, '1981 Calendar' (1980), BCA/DADZIE/1/4.

[22] ECP, 'Stop Police Illegality and Racism', Network (July 1983), Bishopsgate Institute (BI)/ECP/1; Nina Lopez-Jones, *Some Mother's Daughter: The Hidden Movement of Prostitute Women Against Violence* (Crossroads: London, 1999), p.44.

women inmates can be Black…most are there for "economic" crimes such as shop-lifting, prostitution, selling ganja or passing stolen cheques'.[23] That the only mention of this is in a book published after OWAAD had disbanded, rather than at public events or in campaign material is telling. It suggests that despite being aware of both the economic basis of sex work and the impact of prostitution legislation on Black women, they made a conscious decision not to emphasise these connections.

Black women activists also chose not to outline how prostitution laws operated in tandem with the 'sus' laws as a mechanism for policing Black men. Just as 'sus' and soliciting laws stemmed from the VAs, so too did pimping legislation that remained in place into the late twentieth-century. As Julia Laite explains, the SOA's provisions against pimping were taken directly from a 1898 amendment to the VA which introduced the offence of 'knowingly living in whole or in part on the earnings of a prostitute' which had a history of racialised application, with pimps 'presented as stereotypically Continental European'.[24] In the late twentieth-century this racialisation was reassigned to Black men, with sex work activists highlighting how Black men in particular were stopped for pimping.[25] This oversight is made all the more frustrating by their broader recognition of how Black men were disproportionately accused of sexual crimes. For example, Black women activists opposed the late-1970s 'reclaim the night' marches against violence against women because they 'tacitly endorsed the racist view that "mugging" and rape are crimes disproportionately committed by blacks'.[26] They observed how white women 'marched through areas where black people live, without considering the racial message they are putting across' in the context of 'much higher levels of police activity (harassment) in black areas'.[27]

When seeking to explain their choice to omit prostitution, sources on the Black women's movement's wider approach to sexuality are invaluable. As becomes apparent in the following discussion of pornography, Black women's groups saw sex work as an issue of sexuality rather than of workers' rights. As scholars have identified, the movement purported to prioritise 'survival' issues, dismissing debates around sexuality as the 'luxury' preserve of white feminists that would distract from, rather than being intimately bound up with, immediate issues like employment and policing.[28] Indeed, as

[23] Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie & Suzanne Scafe, *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (Verso: London, 1985), p.120.

[24] Laite (2012), p.97.

[25] Campaign Against Kerb-Crawling Legislation, 'Information Document' (c.1984), BI/ECP/2.

[26] North London Women Against Racism and Fascism, 'Socialist Feminist Conference' (January 1978), BCA/DADZIE/1/3.

[27] Ibid.

[28] See, for example, Thomlinson (2016), p.59.

contemporary activists Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar stressed in their influential 1984 essay, while 'theoretical debates' around lesbianism, family, rape and pornography 'rage virulently among white feminists, many Black women felt that we do not have the "luxury" of engaging' because systemic racism forced organisation 'around issues relating to our very survival'.[29] Dadzie echoed this in a 2009 interview, recalling activists' feeling that 'we can't just focus on women's issues when the youths are out there getting bludgeoned by the police' because Black women 'don't have that luxury to... focus on sexual politics'.[30] Discussing OWAAD's demise in the early-1980s, BBWG identified the issue as having 'played a major part in exposing our differences' because 'the question was constantly posed as to how we could "waste time" discussing lesbianism, heterosexuality and bisexuality when there were so many more pressing issues'.[31]

This reluctance to discuss sexuality was also tied to anxieties around the movement's 'respectability', particularly in the eyes of their male counterparts. As BBWG put it, 'sexual activity... was too sensitive to be discussed publicly' and was a 'potentially explosive issue'.[32] They articulated concerns that sexuality was 'a weapon the brother could use against us, as supposedly illustrative of our lack of seriousness' because 'the most effective line of attack against black women organising' is 'that we are all "frustrated lesbians"... a charge which was effective in... undermining our legitimacy'.[33] As White briefly identifies, a similar rationale shaped approaches to prostitution, with Camden Black Sisters (CBS), a group formed at OWAAD's 1979 conference, 'divided over the subject of sex work'.[34] Activist Lindiwe Tsele recalled opposition to Camden Council's support of prostitute women due to concerns that 'by supporting sex workers they would be defined as such' – as Tsele put it, '"it came out like we were the prostitutes"'.[35]

These anxieties were not unfounded. Many women in OWAAD will have remembered male activists' use of accusations of homosexuality to dismiss them from the British Black Power Movement (BBPM) of the 1960s and early-1970s. Speaking in 2009, activist Judith Lockhart recalled her frustration with men who 'accused us all of being lesbians'.[36] As activist Jan McKenley later reflected, this meant that sexuality was 'a difficult conversation to have politically' because, in contrast to the WLM's separatism,

[29] Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism', *Feminist Review,* No. 17 (1984), p.54.

[30] Mia Morris, 'Interview with Stella Dadzie' (March 2009), BCA/ORAL/1/12.

[31] BBWG, 'Editorial on Black Women Organising', *Speak Out,* No.5 (December 1983), pp.5–6. BCA/DADZIE/1/8/3.

[32] BBWG, (December 1983), pp.5–6.

[33] Ibid.

[34] White (2021), p.810.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Remembering Olive Collective (ROC), 'Interview: Judith Lockhart', Lambeth Archives (LA) (2009).

Black women were 'keen not to be alienated from their men'.[37] In this context it is thus reasonable to assume that similar considerations influenced activists' reluctance to discuss prostitution which, given intense societal stigma, could have been similarly deployed to undermine the movement.

2. Pornography as exploitation

If their wider treatment of sexuality hints at how Black women's groups approached issues of commercial sex, then their stance on pornography leaves little doubt about the movement's hostility towards sex work. From the early-1980s, the movement began to discuss sexuality in, as Amos and Parmar put it, 'ways that were relevant to us as Black women'.[38] While these discussions focussed primarily on lesbianism, as this section shows there was also increasing, though still piecemeal, discussion of pornography in this period.

Contrasting with sex work activists who saw sex work as an issue of workers' rights, Black women's groups situated it firmly within the sphere of sexuality. They equated both pornography and prostitution as inherently exploitative and encouraging violence against women. As Dadzie remembered, women at OWAAD's first conference were 'bemused' by WFH attendees' argument that 'prostitution is women's work as well'.[39] Typifying their alternative interpretation that was developed further after OWAAD disbanded, BBWG referenced pornography within a broader piece on 'Sexual Harassment' in *Speak Out* in July 1982. The piece situated pornography as serving to 'perpetuate sexist stereotypes' which meant that 'we are evaluated as sex symbols'.[40] It drew a direct line between pornography, prostitution and violence, arguing that through its reinforcement of stereotypes pornography leads to Black women being 'beaten, psychologically pressured and physically forced into having sex'.[41] In framing pornography as a symbolic issue of representation the piece appears at odds with activists' aforementioned claim to not have time for 'luxury' issues deemed a distraction from 'survival'. The article's vague call to Black women to 'struggle against the system which has allowed men to see and treat us as sex objects', without making concrete suggestions as to tackling the very real issue of violence against women, serves as further evidence of this major irony in their work.[42]

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[37] Morris, 'Interview: Jan McKenley', (2009), BCA/ORAL/1/24.

[38] Amos & Parmar (1984), pp.54–5.

[39] Morris, 'Interview: Dadzie' (2009).

[40] BBWG, 'Editorial: Black Feminism', *Speak Out*, No.4. (July 1982), BCA/DADZIE/1/8/3, p.3.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

Despite initially appearing akin to the contemporary white radical feminist stance, the Black woman's movement's analysis of sex work was race-specific. Myths of Black women's hypersexuality were a foundational issue for OWAAD. In their 1979 introductory talk and again in their pamphlet 'Black Women Speak Out', activists implored women to resist the 'myth that every black woman is a potential prostitute' and reject portrayals of 'us as perverted sex objects' as a key means of fighting their oppression.[43] It was in *Heart of the Race* that activists clearly linked their concerns about these stereotypes to pornography and prostitution. Under the heading 'Entrenching the Stereotypes' they stated in no uncertain terms that 'a casual glance at the porn magazines and sex shows in Soho reveals the extent to which white men have debased our sexual identity for their own self-gratification' and argued in drafts for the book that this reinforced conceptions of 'Black women as exotic prostitutes'.[44] Support for prostitute women was thus positioned at odds with activists' aim of 'countering both racist and sexist stereotypes'.[45]

Indeed, activists focused much of their campaigning on the tangible effects of these longstanding myths on Black women in Britain.[46] Explicitly linking the disproportionate use of the harmful contraceptive injection Depo-Provera on Black women to stereotypes of hypersexuality, activists argued that 'our abuse at the hands of the Family Planning Service is intensified even further by the many popular myths and stereotypes which abound about Black women's sexuality'- Black women are 'considered a "high promiscuity risk"' so are 'encouraged to accept contraceptives involving less "risk" [of pregnancy]'.[47] Activists similarly connected these myths to the scandal of Black girls being removed from their families via Supervision Orders, outlining how 'stereotypes of black women as "immoral" or "promiscuous"' render 'social workers hyper-sensitive to the possibility of moral danger, particularly among young black women who show signs of being sexually active'.[48]

Historicising this analysis, activists placed pornography and prostitution within a longer tradition of gendered and racialised exploitation of Black women under enslavement and colonialism. Taking an intentionally 'historical perspective', *Heart of*

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[43] OWAAD, 'Introductory Talk – 'Black Women in Britain' (1979); OWAAD, 'Introduction: Black Women in Britain', *Black Women in Britain Speak Out* (undated), p.4.

[44] Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985), p.193; Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe, 'Draft: Entrenching the Stereotypes' (early-1980s), BCA/DADZIE/3/1/2.

[45] Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe, 'Draft' (early-1980s), BCA/DADZIE/3/1/2.

[46] See, for example, Thomlinson (2016) pp.72–3; Caitlin Lambert 'The objectionable injectable': recovering the lost history of the WLM through the Campaign Against Depo-Provera', *Women's History Review,* Vol. 29 (December 2020), pp. 520–539.

[47] Bryan, Dadzie & Scafe (1985), p.102–3.

[48] Ibid., p112.

the Race interpreted the images displayed in Soho as evidence of how 'negative images and insulting stereotypes, which had been developed as a justification for slavery' were 'carried forward, unchallenged into the twentieth-century'.[49] Highlighting how 'under slavery, Black women were routinely abused by white men', activists explained how 'the myth of our "animal-like promiscuity"' functioned to 'justify these acts', concluding that 'by labelling Black women as sexually promiscuous, in this way, white men were thus exonerated for their sexual excesses under slavery'.[50] The context of late twentieth-century Britain was obviously very different to enslavement under colonial rule. However, just as Patricia Hill Collins argues in the US context that descriptions of the rape of enslaved women 'encapsulate several elements of contemporary pornography', the British Black women's movement similarly saw prostitution and pornography as a contemporary incarnation of this racialised and gendered oppression.[51]

In the context of the complex entanglement of postwar racism, respectability politics and the gendered legacy of colonialism, it is possible to discern a certain logic in activists' stance on pornography and prostitution – they were keen to avoid being seen to support women whose trade was deemed to perpetuate the harmful stereotypes they were fighting against. Indeed, White sees CBS's reluctance to support prostitute women as unsurprising 'given the context of the intense scrutiny of black women's sexual practices' in the 1980s.[52]

However, a closer analysis of this approach reveals its contradictions. By choosing not to challenge prostitution legislation, Black women's groups overlooked another mechanism through which racialised sexual stereotypes were deployed against Black women. The first part of this article revealed how Black women activists had at least a basic awareness of the impact of prostitution legislation on Black women, and there is evidence to suggest that this translated for some into a scepticism of the suitability of policing-based responses to prostitution for Black women. At a May 1984 meeting of Camden Council's Police Subcommittee on prostitution, Black woman activists opposed proposals for a 'specialist unit' to 'assist women who wished to leave prostitution' because it was deemed 'uncomfortably close to the notion of multi-agency policing'.[53] Their hesitancy about this initiatives on the grounds of its approximation of policing

[49] Ibid., p.192.

[50] Ibid, p.212, p.193.

[51] Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: NewYork, 2000), p.134.

[52] White (2021), p.810.

[53] Maria Duggan, 'Report of Research Regarding the Establishment of a Specialist Unit to Co-Ordinate Services to Prostitute Women', 30 May 1984 (Camden Archives Ephemera/Folder 02/No.06).

suggests an awareness of the unsuitability of such responses to prostitution for Black women in particular, but that such views were only voiced in closed settings rather than in campaigning material. This therefore reveals a clear contradiction in activists' approach to prostitution. Though claiming to be focused on 'real world' issues, they turned a blind eye to the very real implications of prostitution legislation for Black women who sold sex, or who were accused of doing so by a racist criminal justice system.

Black women activists' decision to not publicly condemn prostitution legislation can be attributed to a misunderstanding of the nuances of prostitution and the meaning of campaigns against these laws. Resembling misunderstandings about sex work that persist today, activists shoe-horned prostitution into narratives of sexual violence. They failed to appreciate that opposing prostitution legislation on the grounds of the harm it caused was not the same as advocating for the existence of the sex industry itself. As the ECP made clear in their slogan 'For Prostitutes, Against Prostitution', it was possible to campaign *for* decriminalisation and workers' rights, while also being *against* the sex industry and its exploitative elements.[54] Had they embraced a more nuanced understanding of what it meant to sell sex, campaigns against prostitution legislation could have sat comfortably alongside their work on Depo-Provera and been integrated into their influential campaigns on police brutality.

In revealing their approach to prostitution and pornography, this article is in conversation with other scholarship highlighting the movement's exclusionary tendencies. As Black feminist Julia Chinyere Oparah noted in 1998, notions of 'authentic black womanhood' were integral to late twentieth-century Black women's organising. She argues that the 'pure and narrow' figure of the 'ital black woman' was defined by 'a whole array of behaviours' that were 'characterised as black and non-black', specifying sexual behaviour as 'a primary arena of that contestation'.[55] While she identifies 'hostility towards lesbian women' as the most obvious expression of this, this article has proposed that the movement's exclusionary 'policing of sexual behaviour' also applied to women who sold sex.[56] While the voices of these women are sadly absent from the archive and we cannot speak for them, it is important to hold space to consider what this hostility and lack of compassion would have meant for them as multiply marginalised people.

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[54] ECP, 'For Prostitutes, Against Prostitution' (1976) BI/WFH/15.

[55] Julia Sudbury, *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation* (Routledge: London, 1998), pp.102–3. 'Ital' is a Rastafarian word which translates roughly as 'pure' (see Sudbury (1998), p.92).

[56] Ibid.

Conclusion

Grappling with archival silences, this article has teased out the ways in which Black women activists engaged with debates around sex work in the late twentieth-century. It has demonstrated that issues of commercial sex were not a priority for the movement. There was no official stance on the issue and activists decided to remain silent on how sex work intersected with their wider campaigns around Black women's economic position and racism in the criminal justice system. Reinforcing existing scholarship on the movement's broader approach to sexuality, this article has proposed that, in the 1970s at least, prostitution was thus dismissed as a 'luxury' issue that was distinct from Black women's 'survival'.

But the Black women's movement was not totally silent on issues of commercial sex. Using their fragmented discussions of pornography from the early-mid 1980s, this article has revealed how activists constructed prostitution as an issue of sexual exploitation rather than one of workers' rights. Analysing pornography and prostitution as part of a historical tradition of the sexual exploitation of Black women, they viewed it as a contemporary incarnation of sexual abuse under slavery. Support for prostitute women was thus positioned at odds with their work to challenge the continued deployment of harmful racialised sexual stereotypes against Black women in late twentieth-century Britain. However, in doing so activists ultimately fell into the trap of doing exactly what they criticised white feminists for doing – they viewed prostitution, an issue with real-life implications, in symbolic terms. As they navigated tensions around postwar British racism, respectability politics and the gendered legacy of colonialism, Black women activists decided to turn a blind-eye to how prostitution legislation impacted Black women. Had they taken a more nuanced approach, campaigns against prostitution legislation and support for sex workers' rights could have sat comfortably alongside their wider work.

While we cannot know how this was experienced by Black women who sold sex, there is little doubt that the movement's initial silence followed by its open hostility to prostitution would have sent a message that they were not the 'ideal' Black women who were welcome in the movement. By revealing another instance of the movement's hostility towards Black women with other intersecting identities, it is in conversation with other scholarship on the exclusionary tendencies of the Black women's movement. Together with work on the experiences of lesbian women, it raises questions about which women were welcome in the movement and reminds us of the need to push scholarship on Black women's history beyond the act of recovery.

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