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Critical Reviews of Flawed Research on Prostitution

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EDITORIAL

CRITICAL REVIEWS OF FLAWED RESEARCH ON PROSTITUTION

Donna M Hughes

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There are two articles published in this issue of *Dignity* that go to the heart of the mission of this journal to publish sound research on sexual exploitation and violence. Each article critically examines a popular, widely distributed and cited study that individually and together are being used to support far-reaching changes in law and policy on prostitution and sex trafficking.

Dignity was founded to publish scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. Our reviewers and editors maintain high standards for the accuracy and validity of the articles we publish. We ensure that research questions are premised on a solid base of previously published literature, the research methods are valid, and ethical research standards were employed with research participants. We ensure that findings and conclusions flow logically from a solid analysis of the data collected. If recommendations are made, we ensure they are consistent with the research findings.

Dignity understands the importance of rigorous research methods, conclusions, and recommendations, particularly when the findings are used to advocate for law and policy changes. Misguided laws and policies are usually ineffective and can even harm the people, families, and communities they impact.

The first article “Does the decriminalization of prostitution reduce rape and sexually transmitted disease? A review of Cunningham & Shah findings” (Lachapelle, Schneider, Shapiro, & Hughes, <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol4/iss3/6/>) critically reviews a paper that was released by authors Cunningham and Shah in 2013 entitled “Decriminalized indoor prostitution: Surprising implications for sexual violence and public health.” In their paper, Cunningham and Shah report finding a “dramatic decrease” in rape and a “dramatic decrease” in sexually transmitted diseases in the state of Rhode Island during the years that prostitution was decriminalized (1980 to 2009). These findings were accepted, without question or scrutiny, by the media and spread widely. No one critically examined the research assumptions, methods, analysis, or conclusions. Today, those who campaign for the full decriminalization of the sex trade routinely cite

this article as proof that their recommended changes in law will be beneficial to all people involved in the sex trade.

The authors of the article published in this issue of *Dignity* examined all aspects of the Cunningham and Shah article and found methodological flaws in the researchers' assumptions and methods. A critical flaw in the analysis is the use of an incorrect date for when prostitution was decriminalized in Rhode Island. (Cunningham and Shah said it was 2003; in fact, it was 1980.) The use of an incorrect date enabled Cunningham and Shah to establish an incorrect time period for their analysis of the incidence of rape. In addition, Cunningham and Shah used a data outlier in the incidence of rape in Rhode Island to begin a period of analysis of decriminalized prostitution, thereby biasing the outcome. Revealing these flaws in this study show that the claims that decriminalized prostitution reduces rape and sexually transmitted disease are incorrect.

The second article "Do prostitution advertisements reduce violence against women? A methodological examination of Cunningham, DeAngelo, and Tripp findings" (Feifer, Raphael, Yagci-Sokat, <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol4/iss3/7/>) critically reviews a 2017 paper released by Cunningham, DeAngelo, and Tripp entitled " Craigslist reduced violence against women." The authors report that their study found that prostitution advertisements reduced the rate of homicide for women in the U.S.—the whole population of women in the U.S. Following the release of this paper, the media and advocates for the full decriminalization of the sex trade claimed that this study's findings were proof that advertising prostitution online increased the safety of prostituted women. The paper never measured or analyzed the homicide rate of women in prostitution.

The authors of the critique published in *Dignity* examined the assumptions and methodology employed by Cunningham et al. They found the methods used by Cunningham et al. were flawed. The study failed to demonstrate a link between the decline in the female homicide rate and the online prostitution advertisements. Problems in the analysis include: The study did not measure the homicide rate of women in prostitution, and the study defines "safety" for women only as not being murdered.

Cunningham et al. extrapolated their findings to speculate on the impact that pending federal legislation that would have. The flawed research findings of this paper were used to argue against the passage of federal anti-trafficking legislation entitled "Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA), and now are being used to push for repeal of the new law.

The rapid incorporation of the Cunningham et al. findings into public debates about prostitution and sex trafficking show how easily flawed research can skew important law and policy with harmful outcomes for victims.

Dignity is proud to publish careful examinations of these two papers whose findings and conclusions have so quickly, but without critical evaluation, entered into the public policy and law debate about prostitution and sex trafficking. The findings of the two papers emphasize the critical importance of a scholarly journal like *Dignity*.

We hope that these critiques of the flawed papers will be widely read and used to counter false claims about the most effective laws and policies to protect victims from sexual exploitation and violence.

Readers are encouraged to share these articles with others who want evidence-based, sound information about sexual exploitation and violence on which to base law, policy, and future research. We hope these critiques will be employed to counter the flawed information.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Donna M. Hughes, Ph.D., is the founder and editor-in-chief of *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. She is a professor in Gender and Women's Studies and hold the Eleanor M. and Oscar M. Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island, USA.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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