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## PROSTITUTION 2.0: HOW THE SEX INDUSTRY BENEFITS FROM NEW TECHNOLOGIES

*Does technology aid the exploitation of women's bodies? Pornography has invaded the internet, two-thirds of prostitution takes place online, and the sex-dolls and sex-robots industry is in full development. What are the consequences of these advances? Robots reinforce the male behaviors of domination and prostitution is now hidden behind the facade of a simple online transaction. The interconnection of technology and prostitution leads to the normalization of the phenomenon of exploitation.*

“Daddy, I just saw a man carrying a naked lady!” In the opening scene of the movie *The Stepford Wives*, the Eberhart family is moving to New York. The audience is shown what the little Eberhart boy is referring to: not a real naked woman, but an undressed shop-window mannequin. The child doesn't see the difference between a woman and an object simulating a woman. He's not the only one.

Over the years, prostitution and technology have established and consolidated a firm bond, encouraged by the introduction of filmed prostitution (pornography). While technological advances facilitated the expansion of prostitution, prostitution has, in turn, directly contributed to technological innovations that have invaded our homes. E-commerce, highly commonplace nowadays, was allegedly first adopted on pornographic sites, like other now outdated technologies (webcams and VHS) (*Enterprise Features*, June 5, 2011). The giants of prostitution continue to invest in digital technology and robotics. While some websites adapt existing practices, others adapt their

“general” websites to be geared towards prostitution. Another important trend in the field of technological prostitution is the use of sex robots.

### Internet: The digitization of the traditional

The most striking demonstration of the link between prostitution and technology is indisputably the popularization of filmed prostitution. With the addition of a camera to the act of prostitution, pornography has quickly become the internet's *raison d'être*. On the Google search engine, pornography-related terms are systematically the most searched worldwide (Google Analytics).

Not only has digitization affected the practice of prostitution, but also the ways in which it is advertised. Gone are the suggestive ads from newspapers' back pages - nowadays they can be found online. Sites such as *Backpage* and *Craigslist* in the US, and *Vivastreet* in France, have even managed to gain distressing notoriety for aiding human trafficking. While *Craigslist*, anticipating the legal consequences of such adverts, closed its 'adults only' listing pages in 2010, *Backpage* retrieved the advertisers.

The site's annual sales revenue doubled from 26 million US dollars (USD) in 2010 to USD 52 million in 2011, and increased to USD 78 million the following year. The owners of *Backpage* were made aware of the illegal nature of the ads as early as 2008. Instead of reducing them, they simply manipulated these commercials to be legal by 'moderating' their content, particularly the commercials involving children. 70-80% of the site's content has been deliberately modified to civilize public presentation (deleted photos, modified children's ages, codified sexual acts). An internal quota of maximum 16 reports per day to the competent child protective authorities was established to avoid exceeding the 500 reports per month threshold (*US Department of Justice*, April 9, 2019).

One of the pioneers of online commercials in France, *Vivastreet*, based on the tax haven island of Jersey, has too long profited from the trafficking of women and girls. An advertisement in the adult section costs at least EUR 80 (USD 90), and with 7,000 ads a day, the website generated its most source of revenue by facilitating prostitution (*Le Figaro*, June 20, 2018).

In her investigation into such sites, Francine Sporenda speaks of "online brothels incorporated in tax havens," who skillfully exploit globalization with a defiant "catch me if you can" attitude towards authorities (*Révolution Féministe*, November 18, 2018). Nevertheless, in 2018, authorities successfully managed to force *Backpage* and *Vivastreet* to suspend their commercials. In June 2018, *Vivastreet* closed down its 'Dating' section. With the adoption of the SESTA/FOSTA law on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in the US, law which allows the prosecution of websites who are fostering sex trafficking, authorities were able to seize *Backpage* and charge seven of the men heading the platform (*Developpez*, April 12, 2018). In addition, following a complaint made in 2016 by the anti-

prostitution group *Mouvement du Nid*, the Paris Public Prosecutor (le Parquet de Paris) carried out an investigation into aggravated procuring against X, directly targeting *Vivastreet* (*Fondation Scelles*, June 22, 2018). Subsequently, *Craigslist*, another transatlantic classified site, voluntarily shut down its 'Personal' section, which was similarly teeming with adverts for prostitution; *Reddit*, another online forum, was quick to follow suit (*Huffington Post*, March 23, 2018).

### **The adaption of generalist sites towards prostitution**

Even if classified sites only digitize a non-virtual practice, there are still others that adapt what is digital to the traditional. An example of this is sex buyer opinion forums, where men rate prostituted women, advising potential 'customers' on the quality of the 'product' and services. They resemble crowd-sourced review sites, but adapted for sex buyers of prostitution. The site *UK Punting* has more than 100,000 members. The site owner also created *UK Escorting*, a website openly and explicitly dedicated to prostitution, as well as *Adult Work* and *Punternet*, both of which are comparable to professional classifieds websites (*Vice*, April 21, 2017). There are also similar platforms in France, such as *Escort*, which has more than 70,000 members and allows sex buyers to publish shockingly violent comments with total impunity.

Other websites mimic the layout of dating sites. Such is the case with the German app *Peppr*, whose name is a play on the slang word *peppen* meaning "to fuck." *Peppr* resembles dating apps such as *Tinder* and *Grindr*. The founder of the app claimed to have come up with the idea for the app when she was strolling through Berlin's red-light district. Seeing prostituted women on the streets, she was not

distressed by the fact that they were being taken advantage of by men, but rather that they were freezing in the cold. She relies on personal interviews to assure that the women advertising themselves on her app are doing it ‘by choice’ (*La Repubblica*, April 18, 2014).

*Peppr*’s founder is not the only one thinking she is a philanthropic entrepreneur. In Québec, students studying social sciences developed *GFendr* to facilitate so-called “safe sex”. On the app, there are published commercials for prostitution, accompanied by details about the prostituted person, place, etc. The prostituted persons posting the commercials evaluate their sex buyers based on three criteria: punctuality, safety, and hygiene (*Le Devoir*, March 19, 2018). However, it is not easy to publicly denounce a sex buyer who has your personal details (place of residence, etc.). The website is explicitly reserved for prostituted women. What’s more, despite the website homepage promises of anonymity, the developers obviously have no qualms sharing, on their Twitter account, data from their market research. Because it is indeed a market research – of the women made objects – when one shares information on the women’s chest sizes.

Finally, amongst the digital innovations and its downwards slides of recent years, ‘DeepFake’ allows, with a software, faces replacement in any video. It is then easy to replace faces in some porn movies scenes with those of certain celebrities... (*The Guardian*, January 25, 2018).

### Why the internet?

It goes without saying that there are already a worrying number of ‘digital brothels’ (*Révolution Féministe*, November 18, 2018). Nowadays it is estimated that two-thirds of prostitution activity happens online (*Le Parisien*, May 28, 2015). Beyond

the obvious ease of use the internet provides, there is certain normative aspect to these websites. First is the attitude of defiance, noted by Francine Sporenda, of a global game of cat and mouse meaning “you make the rules; we circumvent them.” The prostitution website project, *Eros*, is emblematic of this attitude, despite being a hoax aimed at defrauding people who took part in the fundraiser for its creation. The stated goal of the site was to circumvent the abolitionist policies by creating a decentralized website with its very own cryptocurrency. The creators of this false website announced a vision that developers of other prostitution websites want to implement: a “sex bazaar” that can “never be censored, banned, or shut down by any government or religious authority figure” (*CNews*, July 24, 2017). However, covering their tracks from governments’ inquiries is not the only goal of these websites, as they also wish to participate in the normalization of prostitution by facilitating and legitimizing the choice of sex buyers. These sites are accessible to all, rather than being on the *darkweb*, where criminals of all kinds meet. The boundary between the purchasing of objects and the purchasing of human beings is blurred, just like the boundary between a sexual relationship and a prostitutional relationship. It isn’t just by chance that prostitution websites mimic the structure of dating websites; by doing so, money is made to appear as a child supplement to a one-night-stand, as opposed to an element that fundamentally reshapes the relationship.

### Electronic robotization

The giants of the prostitution industry compete amongst each other to give consumers the most immersive experience possible. The new toy to facilitate this is the virtual reality (VR) headset: an electronic

mask or helmet that completely covers the eyes of the user, plunging them into a 360-degree artificial world. Two-thirds of the best-selling content for VR headsets is pornographic (*Clubic*, November 25, 2017). Certain websites even suggest to their users pairing their experience with connected sex toys (*Realite-virtuelle.com*, March 23, 2018).

### **French tech**

As a matter of national pride, we, French writers, cannot forget those tech companies who gave their best help towards spreading prostitution in France. First off, there is Dorcel & Sons, true pioneers of high-tech prostitution. As early as 2002, the Marc Dorcel company predicted the end of the DVD as a means of filmed prostitution distribution and successfully switched to video on demand (VOD). Today, the company produces 360-degree 3D content for VR headsets. In the future, Grégory Dorcel hopes to create pornographic holograms (*20 Minutes*, March 24, 2017). Xavier Niel, another great name of the high tech sphere in France, was one of the developers of Minitel Rose (Minitel was the French Internet ancestor, and Minitel Rose was erotic Minitel). He used the profits made from Minitel Rose to invest in 'peep shows,' which cost him investigations for procuring (*Libération*, September 14, 2006; *Financial Times*, May 3, 2013). One can thus see, once again, how prostitution inspires technology and vice-versa.

### **Masturbatory Robots and Dolls**

In the movie, *The Stepford Wives*, husbands move with their wives to isolated suburbs and replace them with obliging and subservient robot clones. The men do this as a way of revenge on their independent wives against the backdrop of the feminist uprising. This fictional tale is

becoming reality with the advent of masturbatory dolls. Why 'masturbatory' dolls/robots rather than 'sex' dolls/robots? This notion is based on a comment made by Kathleen Richardson, a PhD and Research Fellow at the *Ethics of Robotics Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility* at De Montfort University (Leicester, UK) (*Ressources Prostitution*, February 2, 2018). By viewing sex as an experience with someone else and masturbation as an individual experience, it is appropriate to emphasize individualism in the use of such dolls in order to avoid feeding into the illusion of the woman-objet, object-woman. Since its democratization in the 70s, masturbatory dolls have greatly evolved, to the point that they incorporate robotics and artificial intelligence (*Paris Match*, November 5, 2014).

In 1996, Matt McMullen shared photos online of his hyper-realistic life-size sculptures. A number of Internet users asked him if the sculptures were for sale and if it was possible for them to "sleep" with them. That was when McMullen realized "that there are a lot of people willing to pay a lot of money for a very realistic doll." He then created *RealDolls*, a pioneering company in the field of sex robotics. With that name, McMullen reinforced the misogynistic utopia seen in *The Stepford Wives*: real women -'dolls'- are those invented by men. In this respect, the company's first prototype is called Harmony, as if to oppose it to women who are so unbearable in real life. The robot dolls are hyper realistic (veins, hair, the feel of real skin) while remaining clearly artificial due to the fact that they are deliberately 'pornified:' here is an element intimately linking the production of these dolls to prostitution. The robot doll is able to converse by adapting to the regularly pre-recorded preferences of the user who can, for example, increase the robot's

'obscenity' settings. In addition, touch sensors are incorporated in the robots so that they cry out when appropriate. The average price of one is close to USD 15,000, but it is possible to customize the doll for USD 70,000. The company sells between 20 and 50 dolls per month (*The Guardian*, April 27, 2017).

Douglas Hines developed artificial intelligence to keep his paralyzed father company. For greater profitability, he repurposed the technology to take advantage of the far more lucrative industry of prostitution, and created *True Companion*. The company offers robots with 'real' personalities: take timid, 'frigid' Farrah, which allows the user to simulate rape by reacting negatively to touch (*The Independent*, July 19, 2017). There is also youthful Japanese Yoko, who's "barely 18." The creators ceaselessly update and renew their dolls, which they then present at the *Adult Videos Network* festival in Las Vegas. Thus, masturbatory robots are at the heart of the prostitution industry. Another remarkable dolls company is *Trotlla*, specialized in the creation of dolls looking like little girls. Founder Shin Takagi is proud to report doctors and even school teachers among its customers (*The Atlantic*, January 11, 2016).

While some companies manufacture, others distribute. This is the case for a Chinese app that rents masturbatory robots equipped with preheating functions and sound effects. The name of the application, 'Shared Girlfriends,' reminds of gang-rape (*Le Parisien avec AFP*, September 18, 2017). There are also brothels with masturbatory dolls/robots. A brothel in Barcelona accommodates spaces for real prostituted women and masturbatory dolls, blurring the lines between what is a human being and what is an object (*BBC Three*, April 8, 2018). The first North American doll brothel is in Toronto and offers sex

buyers dolls such as Yuki, "a submissive, innocent, and playful Korean," as well as Jazmine, the "exotic Colombian."

The masturbatory doll/robot industry is an extension of prostitution. Without the prostitution of women and girls, it is not possible to imagine this use of robots. Once again, the male demand enables the industry to evolve. Thus, the argument that blames women for prostitution, that "women choose to take up prostitution," is misleading. The role of men in the development and preservation of the industry is paramount. A study in 2016 showed that out of a sample of more than 200 men, 40% admitted that they would consider buying a masturbatory doll within the next five years (*The Guardian*, April 27, 2017). The market is dominated by men, both in production and consumption, and the product is overwhelmingly female. Only 10% of current dolls are male, and there is nothing to suggest that female customers are interested, as female requests for dolls are based on the "companion" aspect rather than the "sexual" one (*The Sunday Times*, December 2, 2018).

Another commonality between buyers of dolls/robots and sex buyers of prostitution is the particular way in which they are treated by society: as victims. In China, because of the one child policy, there is a significant imbalance between the number of men and the number of women. Therefore, 'unfortunate' Chinese men are 'desperately' searching for female companionship, which is supposed to justify buying women in neighboring countries or exchanging dolls (*France 24*, June 9, 2017). All around the world, sex buyers supposedly suffer from 'psychological or physical issues' or have been 'traumatized by an unfortunate experience' with women (*L'Obs*, August 5, 2018). Films such as *Lars and the Real Girl*, in which an awkward Ryan Gosling falls in love with a *RealDoll*,

help reinforce the stereotype of the man being incapable of controlling himself and borderline pathological. An interview in *The Atlantic* with Shin Takagi of *Trotlla* treated pedophiles with disturbing empathy: it is society that is guilty of forcing them to wear masks that repress their desires (*The Atlantic*, January 11, 2016). These clichés are baseless, as are those that concern traditional prostitution. According to relevant forums and some public appearances made by robot aficionados, many (potential) sex buyers are in a relationship with a woman they hold in contempt, in comparison with the artificial version (*The Guardian*, April 27, 2017).

### **“No one has died”**

Many believe that these robots act as a measure against acts of male violence. Since the dolls are inanimate objects, the violence they may endure from their users doesn't seem to pose a problem, as they cannot suffer. In the plot of *Lars and the Real Girl*, the whole village plays into Lars's delusion that his girlfriend (the doll) is alive. Why participate in this delusion? Is it not disturbing enough that there are men who, like children, claim their toys are alive and, what's more, masturbate to these toys? This idea should be more than enough to disturb us, but instead we attempt to accommodate these men. How are we comfortable with the knowledge child abusers and other potential aggressors now have a tool that, de facto, might allow them training in violent acts or becoming violent? This concept of a shield against male violence has already been applied to prostituted women, without ever appreciating the violence they undergo and without any evidence to corroborate such an approach. How do robots fundamentally change this? The real transformation would be making violent men understand they are fully responsible for their intolerable acts, and not making the job easier for them by

providing toys or women to prostitute. Robots were created in a context of pre-existing male violence and the lucrative nature being what it is, manufacturers have no interest downplaying this violence. The more validation society gives to crimes of violent men, by providing outlets to their so-called needs, the more those needs will be normalized and perpetuated.

### ***The Male Creator (of women)***

Journalists have been quick to observe the resemblance between contemporary robots and ancient myths, such as that of Pygmalion who, disgusted by women, created his own woman and fell in love with her (*L'Obs*, August 5, 2018). The developers of robots assume the role of divine creators: without man, there is no woman. This idea of impossible independency can also be found in female sex toys, which were wrongly compared to robots for men. As noted by Kathleen Richardson, leader of a campaign against masturbatory robots, there is a difference between tools reproducing a body part and technological reproductions of a person. The former are supplementary and act as instruments, while the latter are an end in and of themselves, with their functions being secondary. Regarding sexual robots, possessing women as objects is attractive, otherwise consumers could've contented themselves with artificial vaginas. Next, the normative message behind sex-toys is in opposition to the one behind dolls/robots. Sex toys imply women's lack of autonomy in their sexuality, women being unable to satisfy alone. We haven't moved past the idea that women in negative need men in positive in order to be finally complete (ie “sexually satisfied”). Richardson explains how the development of dildos and other female sex toys came from doctor's ‘treatments’ for women's “hysteria” (*Feminist Current*, June 2, 2017). With robots and/or dolls, it's the opposite

as the woman is replaced entirely. While this may seem extreme, it is useful to use this extreme example as a starting point to be able to reveal the common underlying message. “If my *RealDoll* could cook, clean, and fuck whenever I wanted, I’d never date again,” said one user (*The Guardian*, April 27, 2017). To think that more than half of the world’s population could be replaced shows the extremely reductive vision some have of women. To think that these robots and/or dolls aren’t doing anyone any harm disregards the fact that these dolls could not exist without the pre-existing context of women’s suffering.

### **Prostitution**

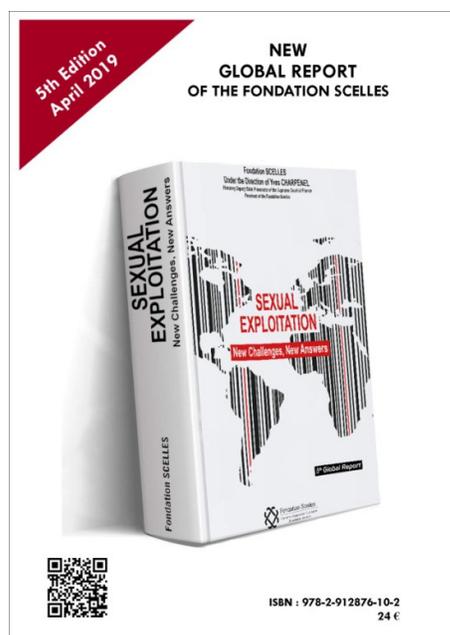
Prostitution is a system in which suffering is industrialized, and the issue of sex robots is deeply entwined in this system. Prostitution, especially when it is filmed, transforms women into objects, and vice-versa. For example, Gail Dines observed how *Playboy* has not only objectified women, but has also sexualized and feminized real objects (*Dines*, 1998). When speaking about a pimp in a film by the Coen brothers, the *Big Lebowski* exclaims, “Mr Treehorn treats objects like women, man!” Despite this exclamation primarily seeming like *Lebowski* is confused, it is rather the opposite. *Lebowski* has understood the concept completely; women are objects, therefore objects are women. If prostitution were to cease to exist tomorrow, these dolls would no longer have meaning as objects would no longer be stimulating. In the meantime, use of sexual robots is not opposed to the prostitution industry. It is a ramification of a market sector ready for exploitation: in 2017 alone, searches for sexual robots for pornography doubled (*The Sunday Times*, December 2, 2018).

The market for prostituted women and girls, as with any other, reorganizes and reshapes itself to capitalize off of the latest trends amongst the demands of its “sex buyers”. Procurers have not simply followed the course of new technologies; they have and still are the true architects of these developments. What would Google be without filmed prostitution? Behind the great success of computer technology and electronics lies the influence of a visionary member of the prostitution industry. The internet has long been a playground for traffickers of all kinds, but new regulations and prominent seizures could signal a change. Even so, the symbiotic association of technology and prostitution remains pernicious thus dangerous. By mimicking generalist classified sites, prostitution effectively hides its intentions behind the innocent façade of simple online transactions. Inventions such as masturbatory robots provide additional problems for lawmakers and regulators. As always, vigilance is essential and research to analyze, for example, if there is juxtaposition between robots users and traditional sex buyer, must continue.

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The **Fondation Jean et Jeanne Scelles**, recognized as a public utility since 1994 and as a consultative status with ECOSOC, is an independent, non-profit organization based in Paris (France) dedicated to fight the system of prostitution and the exploitation of prostituted persons, through information, analysis, advocacy, trainings, awareness initiatives and legal actions. The **Fondation Jean et Jeanne Scelles** is a co-founding member of the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution (CAP International) which was launched in 2013 and today brings together 28 abolitionist NGOs from 22 countries.

The **International Observatory on Sexual Exploitation** is a worldwide hub which allows for information exchange on the system of prostitution. The hub is regularly consulted by French and foreign experts including NGOs, institutions, journalists, lawyers, researchers and those involved in the defense of human rights. The goals of the **International Observatory on Sexual Exploitation** are:

- to analyze all the aspects of the phenomenon: prostitution, sex tourism, procurement, child pornography, sex buyers, human trafficking for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation...
- to encourage reflection and to take a stand
- to inform the public who are interested in these issues

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