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# Invited Response to "Think Again: Prostitution"

Donna M. Hughes, Dr., *University of Rhode Island*

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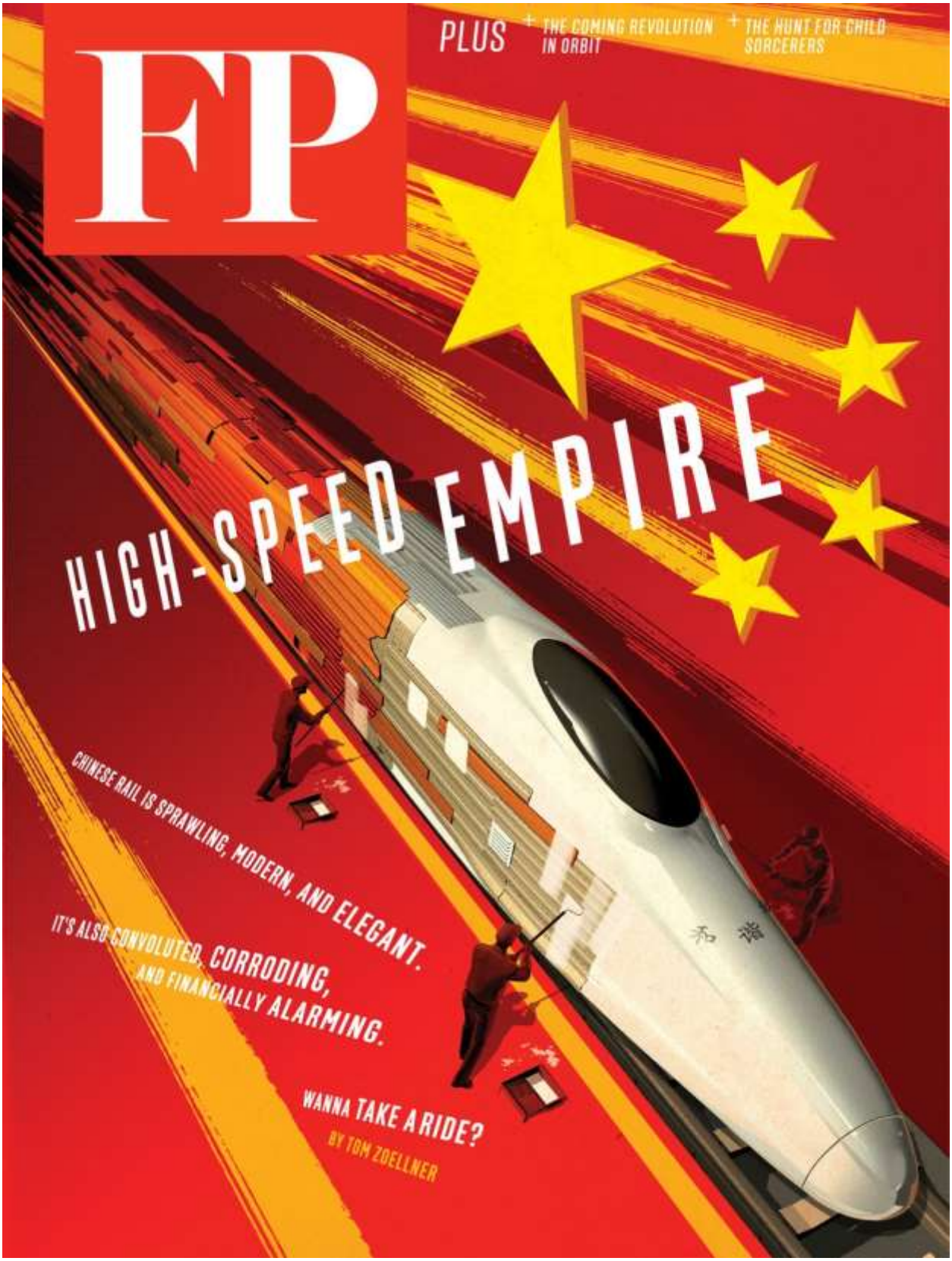


Invited Response to "Think Again: Prostitution" by Aziza Ahmed*, Foreign Policy*, March/April 2014

Aziza Ahmed begins her article "Think Again: Prostitution" with the oldest slur against women: that "prostitution may be the world's oldest profession" (January/February 2014). Anyone who takes a moment to think about the development of civilization knows that's not true, but there is a deeper social meaning to this repeated insult. It implies that prostitution is inevitable, that women have always been prostitutes, and, it follows, that they always will be. This misogynous belief traps us into not being able to see the possibility of freedom and equality for women and girls.

Ahmed supports decriminalization of prostitution. I live in the state of Rhode Island, where we had decriminalized indoor prostitution for almost 30 years. Decriminalization meant that there were no laws for the activity. In Rhode Island, there were no criminal penalties, and there were no regulations either. In this decriminalized environment, prostitution and sex trafficking flourished. With no rule of law, police were handicapped in investigating sex trafficking in the rapidly growing sex industry.

Ahmed is critical of the work of many nongovernmental organizations that are dedicated to ending the sexual exploitation of women and children. One of the NGOs she praises is SANGRAM, a so-called "sex workers' collective" in India. This is a telling choice for her to hold out as an example.

SANGRAM's view is that "prostitution is a way of life like any other." Members of SANGRAM are implicated by their own writings in the sex trafficking of girls. In a document titled "Of Veshyas, Vamps, Whores and Women," SANGRAM describes the process of enslaving girls. "We believe that when involuntary initiation into prostitution occurs, a process of socialization within the institution of prostitution exists, whereby the involuntary nature of the business changes increasingly to one of active acceptance, not necessarily with resignation. This is not a coercive process."

In 2005, SANGRAM's funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development was terminated because the NGO's members reportedly obstructed the rescue of minors from brothels.

In contrast to the claims that Ahmed makes that decriminalization of prostitution creates a better environment for women, a recent empirical analysis of 150 countries found that, on average, in countries where prostitution is legal there are increased reports of human trafficking.

Feminist abolitionists do not oppose prostitution because it is dangerous, although it often is. They oppose prostitution because it is harmful to the health and emotional well-being of women and girls. Many survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking have testified to how degrading and traumatizing it is.

The prostitution debates are not about whether some women consent. They are debates about equality and the rights of women and girls. The feminist abolitionists are fighting for a world where women and girls are free of prostitution in the same way they are now, in most countries, legally entitled to be free of battering and sexual assault. They reject that prostitution is "a way of life like any other." They reject a world where girls eventually become socialized to accept sexual servitude.

Ahmed's article endorsing prostitution as work for women is a statement against their freedom and equality.

**DONNA M. HUGHES**
*Professor and Carlson Endowed Chair*
*Gender and Women's Studies*
*University of Rhode Island*
*Kingston, R.I.*

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