

# The Rich also Cry<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Philippe Van Parijs (2015) reports a hostile reaction to some remarks he made suggesting that men's stronger sexual drive disadvantages them compared to women, in part because it causes them to visit brothels, thereby incurring financial and reputational losses. This paper describes how satisfying sexual desire can be very cheap, or even free, and explains why the way a man's reputation is affected by a greedier libido is not always significant or negative. More importantly, the paper tries to explain why Van Parijs' remarks were received with so much disapproval by feminists.

**Keywords:** sexual exploitation, prostitution, human trafficking, harassment, feminism

## INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to comment on a text by a philosopher I have never met called Philippe Van Parijs. He tries to describe some possible advantages women have compared to men and comes up with these: women outlive the men they look after; women earn less *but* study more; women have less political representation *but* vote more; women are the victims of crime rather than the perpetrators; and women tend to be those whose body is sold, rather than the client or pimp (Van Parijs 2015). Wow, men must be really envious! He warns that he is speaking "tongue-in-cheek." You don't say! It would be really worrying if this was seriously all one could come up with.

I hope he can appreciate other people's sense of humor, for I work on prostitution and the alleged handicap I have been asked to discuss is men's

1 I thank Paula Casal for her help with the translation, the structure, and countless examples (thirst, seafood, subordination fantasies, Coetzee, sunscreen...). In fact, her contribution was so great, that I thought we should both sign the paper, but she declined. I am also grateful to Jesús Mora for his references and revisions, and to Antonio García Valdecasas for the title and other suggestions. Finally, I am very grateful to three anonymous referees for their criticisms and encouragement and to Laura Sánchez de la Sierra and Hannah Weber for their thorough proofreading.

greedier libido. Van Parijs explains it thus: “Men’s greedier libido turns them into handicapped individuals, sometimes even super-handicapped *à la* Dominique Strauss-Kahn.” It causes them financial losses because they find themselves paying for prostitutes and, if caught, can also cause them reputational damage (86). I was myself really puzzled when I read, and then had to re-read, that he is now telling the world that this is what he actually *prepared* for a feminist, predominantly female audience at a major gender equality event (!).

Predictably, the talk did not go down well. And he could have left it there. Philippa would have gone home wanting the earth to swallow her and quietly researched into where she went so horribly wrong until she understood. But not Philippe. Two and a half years later he remains convinced that the problem lay with the female audience. They misunderstood him. All of them. They must have. There can be no other explanation. So, he is repeating it all again, trying to reach an even larger audience, without changing even a comma. He seems to believe that the problem lay with these women’s poor mastery of English, the insufficient time they gave him, and their unfamiliarity with a philosopher’s job (79-80), for it could not have been what he said. Absolutely not.

Having carefully read his piece, I think I know what happened. He was speaking to well-educated women, united to promote equality in the workplace, concerned with depressing gender facts, and they were outraged by their guest’s speech. They were outraged because they understood him and – what’s more unusual – they dared to say so.

I will try to spell out why, despite the additional complication posed by Van Parijs’ ambivalence about whether the behaviors he describes as hormonal inequality are actually about socialization (16). If I understood correctly – in spite of my being a woman and a feminist with imperfect English – the problem he was drawing attention to is this: men’s libido has the unfortunate effect of causing them to go whoring, which is bad because of the expense and potential damage to their reputation. Women are more fortunate in this respect, as they do not need to visit brothels, and therefore do not waste money or risk reputational losses. He calls the whoring propensity “a handicap,” perhaps offending the disabled and women at once. His paradigmatic super-handicapped male is Strauss-Kahn, a thrice-married millionaire who, swept away by the force of his libido, damaged his public reputation with various affairs – well past the age of sixty, I would add.

## 1. THE ALLEGED HANDICAP

Let us assume that, because of their hormones, men wake up with a burning desire that prevents them from functioning in life. Let us also grant that such sensation really is like being very thirsty, starving, or extremely cold, so that they truly cannot focus on other matters until they are relieved. 'It must be a handicap!' says Philippe the Philosopher. And he quickly closes his computer satisfied to have found yet another disadvantage he bets feminists have never before considered. However, let us suppose men have a plentiful and permanent supply of water, but love being thirsty. They like it so much that the moment their thirst subsides, they try to increase it with pills, pictures, videos, toys, or whatever works best for each of them. They do this in order to enjoy the thirst, and then the drink which they can always find – even if they could not, the pleasure derived from simple thirst would have made it worthwhile. After all, the market is full of stuff to increase this thirst and delay its satisfaction. It seems to me, then, that if men themselves are delighted with this 'thirst-thing' they possess and can easily relieve, there is no justification for telling women that they are not as far from equality as they would have thought otherwise. And the desire for sex is like this 'thirst-thing' for most men. They love having it, and so long as they are not handicapped in other ways, and so still have hands, relief is simple, instant, and gratis. This is the Cartesian "clear and distinct" idea Carol Pateman explains in *The Sexual Contract* (1988), a widely cited book Van Parijs' audience may well have read and discussed. Men prefer, of course, women pouring the drinks for them, but none dies for having to help himself (and nowadays we know it does not cause blindness either).

You can, by contrast, die working as a prostitute. Even if nobody attacks you, it is a largely nocturnal life of risks, drinking, drugs, driving, disease, and weirdos. This is my field of research: a heart-breaking world of rows of naked or half-naked women freezing in parks at night, or roasting in plastic chairs on the side of busy roads, with just a bottle of water to wash themselves between clients. It is a sinister world of women in glass windows in red light districts and industrial parks: "24 hours, all services," "Asian, very young, submissive," "sluts, totally shaved, do what you want with us." What was Philippe the Philosopher thinking, when he persuaded himself that conjuring these images in the minds of the concerned feminists was going to make them appreciate the disadvantages suffered by...*men*, and in particular one man, Strauss-Kahn? What were the chances of that audience ever thinking of this horrendous, ever-growing meat market as a massive charity operation to assist the poor men with their handicap?

It is strange to describe as a handicap a disposition that is catered to and celebrated both by those who possess it and their broader culture. Consider, for instance, the protagonist of Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000) or Freud's discussion of the greater male libido as a sign of male superiority and the primary cause of greater creativity and inventiveness in men (1923). It is also very strange to say that somebody is to some degree disabled in an injustice-involving sense merely because they have, or are more likely to have, a preference. The same is true if the preference is a passion, for instance, for the sea or the snow, that might kill you in some circumstances. The word 'handicap' suggests something stronger than the frustration of a mere preference, the existence of an unmet need. But what kind of need, preference, or handicap are we really talking about? Does it involve the need for quick relief that can easily be obtained manually? No, it cannot be so simple or the whole sex industry would be redundant. Is it a desire to see a woman down there, on her knees, naked and obeying? Or the wish to humiliate her, to call her a 'slut', and to make her say that she wants you, when you know it is not true? Is it a desire to see women as nymphomaniac school girls, raunchy nurses, or interviewees who would otherwise not get the jobs (three of men's classic favorites)? Or is it the need to show who is boss and prove that 'women are whores' who will do anything you say for money?

Research shows that most men know that many of the girls they use are not self-employed but parts of networks of exploitation and trafficking (Raymond 2003). Many of them, we hear in the news, have been sold by their families, while others are captured by experts in supply and demand and in identifying girls from broken homes, prone to substance abuse or low self-esteem, who are more easily captured.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the majority of them come from the most sexist and unstructured countries, from poor and dysfunctional backgrounds, and cultures where a girl is worth nothing. We all know about this. But when entering a brothel and seeing the "Asian, very young" or "sexy Caribbean, barely 18," do 'the handicapped' step back in shock? Do they make any inquiries? *"Hey, I am handicapped, I hope you are not handicapped too and can help me. Are you here of your own free will? Could you leave anytime? Are you really this desperate for money? Are you really 18? Where is your family?"*

The handicap must be an extreme form of selfishness and indifference, for the handicapped customer asks nothing. In fact, he wants not to know: he is interested only in his handicap and in whether you have the body to relieve it. And so, an audience of women already concerned by the suffering

<sup>2</sup> The Daily Mail, 2014. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3300016/Human-traffickers-preying-refugees-Europe-forcing-slave-labour-child-prostitution-warn-Europol.html>

caused by men's selfish focus on their itch had to listen to the Philosopher blanketing out all else, claiming ignorance and telling them to focus on this matter of such great importance. As if they themselves had not had many occasions to hear men going on about it, demanding pity and relief. Feminists know full well how manipulative, rhetorical, and persistent men can be about the importance of relieving their itch. "Oh, I suffer so much! If you love me, you will make me happy (without thinking about pregnancy or venereal disease)." Even if they had not read it in feminist texts, they would have heard the male 'pity me' countless times directed at them. One wonders if the Philosopher knew this when he told the women they were to pity men.

## 2. THE ALLEGED COSTLINESS

The Philosopher observes that the man must pay (Van Parijs 2015: 16), as an added disadvantage, just in case this escapes us or seems unimportant in view of men's higher average income. It is true, you are supposed to pay. In Madrid or Barcelona you can pay 5€ for a blowjob performed by black girls with really good prices, plus those very special mouths, so perfect for the task.<sup>3</sup> For 10€ more, you can then penetrate one of those skinny Asians in the park, a car, or some back street. For 30€ you can have a half an hour with a breast-enhanced Latina in a room in central Gran Vía. And now there are also 'low-cost' brothels, brothels with "refund if unsatisfied" policies, and even brothels with loyalty cards where you can "enjoy and forget," as they say in the ads.<sup>4</sup> Driving along the Spanish east coast, you can find anything at really good prices: alleged sado-masochists, exotic girls with unusual bending or swallowing abilities, group acts, the lot. I am just reading the current menu to Van Parijs, since he seems unaware of the fact that whoring is rather inexpensive. It is cheaper than seafood, for example, or watching the local fallas, and presumably the Philosopher does not count seafood or firework lovers as handicapped too.

But perhaps he has in mind the exclusive services that arrange for you to have sex with top models, news readers, and top university students struggling with their fees,<sup>5</sup> assuring the 'handicapped' that there is no woman they cannot buy. After all, the paradigmatic super-handicapped is the Economics professor, minister, and IMF Managing Director, Strauss-Kahn, and these high-fliers sometimes spend exorbitant sums on their handicap (or get

3 QUE, 2013: <http://www.que.es/ultimas-noticias/sociedad/201310250800-prostitucion-nigerianas-recien-llegadas-cinco-cont.html>

4 See APRAMP: <http://apramp.org>

5 The Guardian, 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/27/university-students-sex-work-living-costs-tuition-fee-debts>

funding from tax payers). But how could the Philosopher pick this man as the paradigmatic victim of any specific form of injustice? Strauss-Kahn did not lose his reputation in a brothel or a party with prostitutes. He made it to the front pages as somebody accustomed to “getting away with murder” who decided to grab his chambermaid and try to rape her.<sup>6</sup> At the time, he was with his third beautiful wife, heir of a millionaire, but hey, the male itch is so important, how could a maid refuse to cooperate in its relief? He was later accused of further rapes and involvement with a pimp network.<sup>7</sup>

The super-handicapped and self-proclaimed libertine – super-handicapped and proud<sup>8</sup> – soon acquired a new girlfriend, and his business continued to boom until his customers accused him of fraud in October 2015.<sup>9</sup> And yet, as I write, Strauss-Kahn is not in jail, or alone, or abandoned. Surely, while having a girlfriend, he finds time to frolic with the “very young Asian,” “submissive black beauty,” “operated Brazilian,” and “all-waxed Russian” that are routinely trapped in prostitution rings organized to relieve the all-important itch at all prices for men of all classes.

### 3. THE ALLEGED REPUTATIONAL LOSS

The Philosopher, I am reliably informed, is a nice guy who honestly just wants to understand things, and so might reply: “I didn’t realize buying the services of prostitutes is so cheap, and perhaps I was mistaken about Strauss-Kahn too. But what about the others?” Perhaps there are some men who buy sex only from self-employed, mature prostitutes, and take the trouble to ensure they are not prostitutes in part because they have been abused, are mentally ill, addicted, or need to support a sick child. But who are these people who unfairly suffer a reputational loss in such circumstances?

The greater understanding for the specifically male handicap that the Philosopher tries to promote gives the Berlusconi of this world a great sense of impunity. Their endearing “weakness for the girls” is said to make them “more human” (Walston 2010). They know they will not lose their reputation for doing what they want. It is after all a “handicap,” and a sort of need-based claim.

Bill Clinton did not think that being the most powerful man on earth as President of the United States came with the responsibility to behave himself

6 *The Guardian*, 2012: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/10/dominique-strauss-kahn-case-settled>

7 Sott, 2015: <https://www.sott.net/article/292198-Dominique-Strauss-Kahns-pimping-trial-starts>

8 France 24, 2015: <http://www.france24.com/en/20150210-libertine-strauss-kahn-admits-orgies-denies-prostitutes>

9 BBC, 2015: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34549950>

at least until the end of his term in office. No, with so many centuries of the ideological compassion for the male weakness, he felt untouchable or at least less liable to indignation and sanction. Maybe he even felt entitled, and claimed that sex with the young intern was “consensual.” I am just a teacher, and a woman, but would not think that sex in my office with one of my students could count as consensual. Monica Lewinski’s reputation (and much of her life) was ruined, of course.<sup>10</sup> But what happened to Bill? He remained married and President, and the world remembers him as one of the best contemporary Presidents, and a rather nice guy.

#### 4. THE ALLEGED LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

Perhaps the Philosopher would judge Franco’s Spain superior to Zapatero’s in one respect. There was such understanding for the male handicap that it was normal for the *Señor* of the house to have access to the maid’s young body with neither the maid, nor the wife, having any say about it. “Men have to throw a grey hair in the wind” was the catch phrase (meaning: “copulate with somebody besides the wife”). Until 1963, a womanizing man could even kill his wife for adultery and be acquitted. Why? Because men have a weakness women lack.<sup>11</sup>

Given the Philosopher’s insistence on the need to abstract from all else, he may also want to focus on the unique way in which society accommodates for the male itch at war: at home, the soldiers’ prerogative is to leave a trail of pregnant girls behind, and while away, occupying armies are more readily permitted to ‘whore around’ than to read in the local library. Occupying armies are so understanding of the male need that soldiers can rape with impunity just about anyone.<sup>12</sup> The poor soldier forced into so much discipline has to let off steam somehow, right? Van Parijs condemns such actions, of course, but he seems to believe he is the first one to suggest the men are to be pitied for their weakness when in fact there is no novelty in this: this is the rancid ideology that has been oppressing humanity for centuries. He may say he does not mean his words to excuse such behaviors, but the fact is that his message has been used in this way for far too long. He cannot reasonably be surprised that feminists did not appreciate that his contribution to their empowering meeting was a disempowering message: “the handicap we ought to pity” is just too similar to the discourse fed to us ad nauseam which has done so much damage and we have to fight.

10 TED, 2015: [http://www.ted.com/talks/monica\\_lewinsky\\_the\\_price\\_of\\_shame](http://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame)

11 ABC, 2010: <http://www.abc.es/20100915/internacional/adulteras-espana-201009151646.html>

12 Independent, 2014: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/no-justice-in-sight-for-iraqi-victims-of-alleged-murder-rape-and-torture-9849305.html>

For what made Strauss-Kahn assault the maid is not a handicap or a need, but a product of overindulgence in the male itch. The ideology of calling it “a handicap” misdirects attention and empathy away from the maid, and towards Strauss-Kahn’s desires. By reproducing it, the Philosopher is maintaining a discourse according to which, although men are already richer and more powerful, women must have some understanding and pity for the distinctively male “weakness.” Although they would have applauded loudly, Strauss-Kahn, Berlusconi, and Franco do not need this message, so Van Parijs instead delivers it to a feminist audience. But these are people devoted to ending precisely that ideology, people who encourage poor women to stand firm and tell their husbands to stop talking about *his* needs when they cannot even feed their existing children. Feminists tell women to stand up and show no mercy in denouncing men who rape or harass them.<sup>13</sup> Feminists tell women not to listen to his veiled threats of leaving her for somebody more accommodating to his whims. Feminists tell women not to risk HIV because a man tells them that he suffers. Feminists are people like Pateman, who tell women not to be afraid to say “why do I have to use my mouth when you have two able hands” (Pateman 1988: 172)?

Feminists, then, are not people reluctant to voice, or hear, challenging views. But they are people who would not have invited a speaker, philosopher or not, to repeat an old myth that women have worked long and hard to combat.

## 5. THE ALLEGED CLASS AND GENDER SIMILARITY

Philippa would have thought that having accepted such an invitation, she ought to engage in some research. But not Philippe. With the confidence society imbues so many men, Philippe thought he could quickly improvise something, thinking of four possible advantages for women and perhaps some comparisons between class and gender should suffice. And off he goes. And like so many men before him, but perhaps never to such a large audience of gender-aware listeners, repeatedly displays the androcentric understanding of class that feminists have so often criticized. For he writes, “people who grew up in poor families (...) are disproportionately in prison (Van Parijs 2015: 87).” No, Philippe, it is “prisons and brothels,” for not everybody responds to poverty in the same way. Depending on sex, race, and age, people face different risks: for some the risk is gang warfare or crime, for others it is, or also includes, teenage pregnancy, single motherhood, the sex industry, STIs, and encounters with Strauss-Kahn. The main cause of death for women aged 18 to 40 is gender violence (UN Women 2015). And

<sup>13</sup> Even Barak Obama had to speak against the view of rape as an inevitable part of life on US campuses (White House, 2014).



even if a poor, black man's chance of imprisonment was higher, anybody prefers a higher chance of committing a crime and a lower chance of being the victim, because the victim does not have a choice. Only for the rapist, not for the raped, is it enough to say "no."

The Philosopher then makes us search into our conscience with the phrase: "especially if we happen to enjoy a more privileged background" (Van Parijs 2015: 87), assuming, once again, before so many gender-conscious women an androcentric view. Perhaps his female listeners were middle-class, but that would not have saved them from a violent or oversexed father, an important portion would have been raped,<sup>14</sup> and tending to be pioneers in the workplace, most would have been harassed or threatened at some point (Fine 2010: 87). Knowing this, is it appropriate for a man to go to this female-empowerment meeting to attempt a sympathetic look at the men who can pick a poor, naked, maybe terrified girl, and use her for their pleasure? And why stop there and not include testosterone-filled tyrants, sadistic torturers, hangmen, and Nazi officials, who were all also overwhelmingly male?

## LOS RICOS TAMBIÉN LLORAN

Nobody, and certainly not Philippa, would go to a meeting in a South-African shantytown and attempt to move people with stories about privileged white lives, perhaps expressing frustration about servants' unreliability and showing how the rich can also cry. One could imagine the reaction on hearing about the puzzle arising from their need for more expensive sunscreen to avoid skin cancer. And why not go to a disability conference to talk about the four downsides of being able-bodied? Maybe Van Parijs would think that doing so is fine, because philosophers are licensed to focus on whatever they find interesting, blanketing out all else. But such things do not normally happen. It is usually women that have to put up with good philosophers coming to talk to them about gender and telling them the first thing that comes to mind. Philippa would have not dared to do such a thing. But Philippe may tell himself that the cold reception for his speech was not due to its being inappropriate or ill-researched, but due to some uncomfortable truth he alone unearthed. It is more likely, however, that there was little in it the feminists did not already know, and much the speaker should have known.

At the meeting, the women were concerned with discrimination, exploitation, and power and sex abuse in the workplace. In this context, Van Parijs' idea of comparing the scores of men and women must have

<sup>14</sup> In the UK, for instance, one in five women report having been victims of sexual offences since the age of sixteen (Ministry of Justice 2013: 6).

seemed rather juvenile to them. They were there to incite men to help create a cooperative and female-friendly work environment. In such a context, creating some petty competition (Men: 4, Women: 0) is unlikely to be of any help. Simone de Beauvoir (1966: 28) lamented the way men attempted to turn the female struggle for justice into a trivial diatribe, and perhaps this is just how these feminists felt.

And, no, men do not have to be eliminated, but the world would be a better place without patriarchal men.

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