

CODE Forum 2026

Introduction to the Papers and Workshops

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Re-imagining Prostitute Imaginary: Theological Reflections at the Intersection of Slavery, Gender and Sexuality in Images of Sex Workers

This paper explores the negative perceptions, images and stereotypes regarding sex workers, or, like the American journalist and former sex worker Melissa Gira Grant calls it, the 'prostitute imaginary'. For our understanding of imagination and the imaginary we draw on African American theologians Willie Jennings and Kelly Brown Douglas. How can we understand the distorted imaginary regarding sex workers in the context of colonial slavery, gender and sexuality? How can this understanding contribute to opening spaces for life-affirming imaginaries? Is the use of the concept of modern slavery for sex work helpful in reshaping the imaginary about sex workers? To answer these questions, we first describe images and perceptions towards sex workers. We examine and unpack this imaginary using Black, Feminist and Womanist perspectives to understand the connection between slavery, gender and sexuality. To explore spaces for life-affirming images of sex workers, we draw on Queer theological perspectives, especially Marcella Althaus-Reid's indecent theology. Finally, we discuss the critical role of Diakonia and spiritual care in affirming the dignity of sex workers.