

Interviews with high-class hookers, brothel workers, street prostitutes, anti-prostitution feminists and sex-radical porn stars provide the backdrop to this fascinating and persuasive argument for the decriminalization of sex work.

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—R. W. Connell, University of Sydney, author of  
*Masculinities: Rethinking Sex*, and other works

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# Live Sex Acts

women  
performing  
erotic  
labour

**Wendy Chapkis**



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## Chapter 1 The Meaning of Sex

The sexualization of the female body historically has been a concern for women's rights activists. According to feminist historian Sheila Jeffreys, many prominent suffragists at the turn of the century believed that the "sexualization of women led to her being considered fit for no other career than that of sexual object and affected the opportunities of all women for education, work, and general self-development."<sup>1</sup> As a result, they often endorsed purity campaigns which aimed "to free women from the 'degradation of her temple to solely animal uses,' so that she might take a full part in all the areas of life previously arrogated to man."<sup>2</sup> Women's identification with sex was understood, then, to be an important obstacle in the recognition of women as civil subjects rather than simply sexual objects.

Other early women's rights activists challenged this understanding of sex as primarily an expression of women's oppression, arguing instead that sex could and should be an arena of expanded freedom for women. *Freewoman* magazine, for example, founded in 1911 by a former suffragist activist, Dora Marsden, did not shy away from discussions of marriage reform, extramarital and nonmonogamous sex, and (male) homosexuality. From the perspective of the "freewoman," "spinsters" advocating male sexual restraint and purified sexual practices were not only politically misguided but personally repressed. As one correspondent to the *Freewoman* declared:

it will be an unspeakable catastrophe if our richly complex Feminist movement with its possibilities of power and joy, falls under the domination of sexually deficient and disappointed women ...<sup>3</sup>

Similarly acrimonious disputes over the role of sexuality in women's liberation and oppression have dominated debate among women in "second-wave" feminism of the late twentieth century. By the 1980s, these disputes had escalated into feminist "sex wars." One effect of organizing conversations around sex as a "war" of positions



was the need to define neatly dichotomous and hostile camps. Typically positioned on the one side are "Radical Feminists," portrayed as unrelentingly hostile to sex, which is seen as the source of women's oppression. On the other side, are "Sex Radical" feminists, who are portrayed in equally oversimplified terms as unvaryingly positive toward sex, which is understood as no more than a source of pleasure and power in women's lives.

The reality is far more complex. Feminist thinking on the subject of sex defies simple division into two coherent positions. Not only have many feminists argued in favor of a third camp<sup>4</sup> beyond the two polarized ones, but important differences of perspective exist within the two identified camps. Within so-called Radical Feminism, for instance, there exist at least two distinctive visions of sex. One of these perspectives selectively embraces some limited number of sexual practices as long as they are mutual and loving in their expression, while the other opposes all practices of sexuality because they are understood to be, invariably, expressions of male dominance over women. Similarly, within so-called Sex Radical feminism, distinctions can be made between those who understand sex to be inherently benign; those who see sex as potentially oppressive but only for those women who "choose" to embrace an identity as "victim"; those who view sex as neither inherently empowering nor oppressive but a contested terrain in which women must organize and demand their rights; and those who understand sex to be a cultural practice open to subversive performance and resignification. Within these debates over the meaning and function of sex, practices of prostitution serve as a central trope. The prostitute thus comes to function as both the most literal of sexual slaves and as the most subversive of sexual agents within a sexist social order.

### Radical Feminism

Sociologist Steven Seidman argues that within American culture there exist two opposing perspectives on sexuality: "sexual romanticism" and "libertarianism." While libertarians, according to Seidman, believe sex to be benign whether as an expression of love or

of pleasure, romanticists firmly tie sex to affection, intimacy, and love:

Sex, say romanticists, is a way to express intimate feelings; it always implicates the core inner aspects of the self. It should never be approached casually or with an eye to mere erotic pleasure.... It should be gentle, caring, nurturing, respectful and entail reciprocal obligations.<sup>5</sup>

Within Seidman's system of classification, all feminists who oppose prostitution and pornography are relegated to the category of sexual romanticist. But, as Radical Feminist Karen Davis argues, "there are lots of good reasons to dislike objectified sex that do not reduce to a morality of love."<sup>6</sup> While some Radical Feminists do attack prostitution and pornography as corrupting practices undermining a natural foundation of "positive" sex, or eros, based on love, other anti-prostitution feminists see commercial sex as only the most demystified form of sex, which is, by definition, oppressive to women. While the former position might be called a kind of pro-"positive" sex feminism, the latter is outspokenly anti-sex.

### PRO-"POSITIVE" SEX FEMINISM

For those feminists engaged in the recuperative project of attempting to uncover an eros free of the distortions of patriarchy, prostitution and pornography represent a useful foil. They serve as the antithesis of "positive" sexuality. Gloria Steinem, for example, defines the erotic as a "mutually pleasurable sexual expression ... rooted in eros or passionate love, and thus in the idea of positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person." This she distinguishes from the "pornographic" which

begins with a root meaning "prostitution" ... thus letting us know that the subject is not mutual love, or love at all, but domination and violence against women.... It ends with a root meaning "writing about" ... which puts still more distance between subject and object, and replaces a spontaneous yearning for closeness with objectification and a voyeur.<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, then, sex can be divided between its "positive" expression in passionate love and its violent articulation in pornographic objectification.



In the hyperbolic terms of feminist writer Jean Bethke Elshtain, does not anonymous lovemaking, free from constraints, mimic rather than challenge the anonymous killing of war? ... [We must] rethink whether the sexual liberation standard was from its inception the generalization of a norm of adolescent male sexuality writ large onto the wider social fabric.<sup>8</sup>

As Elshtain's comments suggest, for feminist sexual romanticists, certain sexual practices are not only understood to be inherently bad, but also, and not coincidentally, gendered male. Robin Morgan, for instance, argues against a "male sexual style" which emphasizes "genital sexuality, objectification, promiscuity, emotional noninvolvement" in favor of a female-centered sexuality, which would place a "greater trust in love, sensuality, humor, tenderness, commitment."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Dutch feminist Ariane Amsberg argues:

It seems to me that prostitution is something that only men could have invented. Women need more of an emotional connection when they are sexually active.... For most people, or at least for most women, sex is absolutely about intimacy and a safe, loving relationship.<sup>10</sup>

When love, relationship, and mutual pleasure are the only appropriate context for sex, cash and contract cannot substitute as evidence of reciprocity. Kathleen Barry thus argues that positive sex "must be earned through trust and sharing. It follows then that sex cannot be purchased...."<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, the practice of prostitution is not really sex at all, but an abuse of sex. This misrepresentation sold as sex through prostitution and pornography endangers the possibility of real, positive sexual experience. Commercial sexual culture is seen to be as contaminating as a virus. Kathleen Barry states:

Pornography no longer describes only the sexual activities between prostitutes and their customers. Sexual liberation has brought into the home many of the bizarre sexual activities that men have demanded with prostitutes. Pornography depicts not just what one can do with a whore but with one's lover, one's wife, and even one's daughter. Through pornography, time-honored distinctions of society are now blurring and the gap is quickly closing between love and violence, madonnas and whores.<sup>12</sup>

Prostitution, then, is seen to be increasingly the model for private sexuality even when there is no formal exchange of money for sex:

Public sexuality is institutionalized through the massive production and distribution of pornography and through the industrialization of prostitution which has the effect of reducing sex to an object and reducing women to sex [which] objectifies sex into a thing to be gotten, had or taken, disengages sex from its human experience, its dimensionality and places it in a marketing condition *whether in fact it is marketed or not....* Public sexual exploitation increasingly is becoming the model for private sexual behavior.<sup>13</sup>

Commercial sex, therefore, can be held responsible for both literal and symbolic violence against women. In order to protect women and to preserve the possibility of positive sexual experience, prostitution and pornography must not only be abolished, but their contaminating effect on sexual fantasy and practice must be actively challenged.

This has led some pro-"positive" sex feminists to advocate a politics of cultural cleansing. At "The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism Conference,"<sup>14</sup> organized in 1987 by Radical Feminists,



Photo © Annie Sprinkle



participants discussed whether it was possible to reclaim any aspect of sex for use by women:

Ultimately, [British author Sheila]Jeffreys believes that it is possible for lesbians to come up with a vision of egalitarian sexuality, one that doesn't have *all the residue* of heteropatriarchal society. She is doubtful, however, whether heterosexual relations can ever be *cleansed* to the point of equality.<sup>15</sup>

... Jeffreys was asked to elaborate on her earlier admission that she has had disturbing fantasies or has been aroused by pornographic material. In response, she commented on her efforts to *purge herself* of undesirable fantasies. She said she has given up fantasizing altogether; she took some time off from sex in order to try something *completely different*.... She suggested that giving up fantasies was a strategy to *cleanse the movement* of S/M.<sup>16</sup>

... The answer, according to [feminist sex therapist] Stock is to develop our own model.... We should continue to question sexuality in order to *detoxify* ourselves from this culture.<sup>17</sup>

For pro-"positive" sex feminists, then, *sexuality* may be able to be reclaimed from the patriarchy, but not in forms easily recognizable to us as sex. Because prostitution and pornography have already infiltrated our imaginations, women's fantasies and sexual activities must be cleansed of their residue. Pro-"positive" sex feminists advocate the abolition of practices of prostitution both in order to prevent further contamination of the erotic by the pornographic, and to free women from the burdens of sexual objectification by men. The objectification of women through the commodification of sex is understood to reinforce what Carole Pateman calls "male sex-right":

when women's bodies are on sale as commodities in the capitalist market, the terms of the original [sexual] contract cannot be forgotten; the law of male sex-right is publicly affirmed, and men gain public acknowledgment as women's sexual masters—that is what is wrong with prostitution.<sup>18</sup>

Nancy Fraser, in a sympathetic critique of Pateman's argument, notes, however, that it is marriage and not prostitution that "establishes a long-term, hierarchical status relation whose terms are

predetermined and unalterable, and whose roles are assigned according to sex." While a notion of male sex-right may well underlie the patriarchal meaning of sexual difference defining femininity as "subjection," the commodified version of that relationship through prostitution may offer a (limited) challenge to notions of boundless male dominance. The client or employer *does not acquire unlimited command* over the worker (except significantly, in cases of outright slavery). Thus, Fraser suggests, it is misleading to assimilate "commodification to command" because "even as the wage contract establishes workers as subject to the boss's command in the employment sphere, it simultaneously constitutes that sphere as a limited sphere."<sup>19</sup>

### ANTI-SEX FEMINISM

If, from the vantage point of romanticist feminism, a form of positive sexuality can be recovered through purification and selective abolition (of prostitution and pornography), from the perspective of other Radical Feminists, sex itself must be abolished. From the perspective of anti-sex feminists, there is nothing sexual to recover or reclaim because the very meaning of sex is male domination. Prostitution and pornography only reveal this message most clearly. Catharine MacKinnon, for example, argues that

sexuality itself is a 'social construct, gendered to the ground. Male dominance here is not an artificial overlay upon an underlying inalterable substratum of uncorrupted essential sexual being.<sup>20</sup>

For this reason, MacKinnon dismisses romanticist feminism as liberal:

The critical yet formally liberal view of Susan Griffin [*Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*. 1981] conceptualizes eroticism as natural and healthy but corrupted and confused by the "pornographic mind." Pornography distorts Eros, which preexists and persists, despite male culture's pornographic "revenge" upon it. Eros is, unaccountably, still there.<sup>21</sup>

Because sex is understood not to be "contaminated" but rather constituted by male domination, these feminists argue that the practice itself must be abandoned. Karen Davis argues that

being "anti-sex" is not being against sexuality per se, merely against everything that has been organized as sex,



everything one has been able to experience as sex within the constraints of our culture.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most explicit statements of this position has been articulated by the Southern Women's Writing Collective, who organized under the title "Women Against Sex." WAS advocates a strategy of "sex resistance":

All sex acts subordinate women ... all actions that are part of the practice of sexuality partake of the practice's political function or goal.... Thus all sex acts (and their depictions) mean the same thing, though some mean it more than others.<sup>23</sup>

Apparently, while sex always means male dominance, some forms of sexual practice—such as prostitution, s/m, or heterosexual penetration—are more clearly expressive of that dynamic than others (lesbian "vanilla" sex within the bonds of loving relationship, for example). Still, even the most apparently benign kinds of sex are still sex, and hence still an enactment of male supremacy.

From this perspective, it is not enough to reject some of the more apparently abusive sexual practices, it is also necessary to recognize that the language and symbolism of those acts are the building blocks for even that which women perceive to be their most authentic sexual selves. According to WAS, feminist sex resistance must involve resisting "patriarchy's attempt to make its work of subordinating women easier by 'consensually' constructing her desire in its own oppressive image."<sup>24</sup> Female desire must be recreated entirely outside the practices and symbols of contemporary culture. What desire would look like divorced from sex cannot be known:

Any act which did not subordinate women would literally not be a sex act, but would be "something else."... The practice that could make this happen does not exist. In our feminist future, an act outwardly identical to a sex act might be informed by an entirely different practice. It might stand in a different relationship to conceptual and empirical male force. But the feminist future is where we want to go/be after the defeat of male supremacy—and that is to say, after dismantling the practice of sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Sex, therefore, cannot be a tool for dismantling male supremacy because it is created by and for it, and is thus inextricably implicated

in it. Sex, from this perspective, is "in" us but not "of" us. It is not ours to do with as we would, it does us. The only possible strategic response is opposition to sex:

There is no way out on the inside of the practice of sexuality except out.... The function of this practice permits no true metamorphoses.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, Andrea Dworkin insists that sex resists resignification:

Experience is chosen for us, then imposed on us, especially in intercourse, and so is its meaning.... We have no freedom and no extravagance in the questions we can ask or the interpretations we can make.... Our bodies speak their language. Our minds think in it. The men are inside us through and through.<sup>27</sup>

Within the anti-sex framework, woman is constituted as and through sex. Thus, not only is sex synonymous with male supremacy and female objectification, but woman is synonymous with whore. Andrea Dworkin states:

The metaphysics of male sexual domination is that all women are whores. This basic truth transcends all lesser truths in the male system ...<sup>28</sup>

In the anti-sex invocation of "whore" (much like that of the romanticists), the prostitute is divorced from the notion of sex worker who negotiates a literal exchange of sex for money and is reduced to the position of sex object (that is, woman-as-sex, not woman-does-sex). "Whore," like "woman," becomes a passive condition rather than a place of active engagement within the social and cultural order. Thus, Catharine MacKinnon insists "... men say all women are whores. We say men have the power to make this our fundamental condition."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Kathleen Barry warns that "women exist as objects and as such will be taken if they don't give themselves."<sup>30</sup>

Women exist only as passive bodies because men have the power to make it so. Within anti-sex and romanticist feminist rhetoric, the prostitute becomes the symbol of women's abject powerlessness under conditions of male objectification and domination; they are simply objects in a marketplace.

That is what prostitution is about: it is about bodies being exchanged on a market.... So what you have is a



lot of bodies in Manila, a lot of bodies in Thailand, a lot of bodies in Saigon that have been used for prostitution. Now what do you do with them [after the U.S. troops withdraw from the region and no longer support the sex trade]? You don't send them home to mother. Prostitution doesn't work that way.<sup>31</sup>

Kathleen Barry thus explains the development of sex tourism in areas that once served as "rest and recreation" centers for American soldiers as strictly the result of traffickers' ingenuity. Women's need for continued employment plays no part; they are only "bodies that have been used for prostitution," soiled and thus no longer suitable to be sent home to mother.<sup>32</sup> Such language joins forces with the power it seeks to challenge. The dialectics of struggle disappear entirely into an apparently seamless system of male supremacy.<sup>33</sup> Male power is constantly reaffirmed even as it is denounced. In this way, anti-sex and romanticist feminist rhetoric tends to reproduce the very ideology it intends to destabilize.

By constantly reiterating that women are whores, and that whores are no more than objects, such feminists blind themselves to the fact that prostitutes, no less than any other worker, and no less than any other woman, engage in acts of negotiation, resistance, and subversion that belie their designation as passive objects. Anti-sex feminism, like pro-"positive" sex feminism, cannot accommodate this reality. Indeed, reality is understood to be identical to the image of it men would wish to impose. MacKinnon states:

Gender is sexual. Pornography constitutes the meaning of that sexuality. Men treat women as who they see women as being. Pornography constructs who that is. Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be.<sup>34</sup>

Because the positions "inside" culture are defined as fixed, to act defiantly from within the sexual order by making subversive use of that culture is understood to be impossible. The only "radical" feminist act is one of opposition and resistance. The cultural order must be refused.

## Sex Radical Feminism and the Meaning of Sex

Contemporary feminist sexual politics encompass positions beyond those of purification and resistance. Some feminists reject the distinction between "positive" and "perverted" sexuality and simultaneously insist on active engagement within the sexual order rather than the abolition of it. Steven Seidman categorizes these alternative positions as sexual "libertarianism." According to Seidman, while sexual romanticists assume that "certain sexual acts carry an intrinsic moral meaning," libertarians "frame sex as having multiple meanings ... and [see it as] legitimate in multiple social settings."<sup>35</sup> Because libertarians resist the idea that sexual meaning is fixed, individuals (rather than the community) must determine whether an act is right or wrong for him or her. A libertarian notion of "consent" thus replaces a romanticist notion of "responsibility" as the ultimate measure of the ethics of any sexual activity. Seidman insists that this has the effect of individualizing the meaning of sex to the point where social structures such as gender inequality necessarily disappear from the account.<sup>36</sup>

Just as Seidman's category of sexual romanticism is too narrow to account for the divergent perspectives within Radical Feminism, so too is his designation libertarian inadequate to describe the diversity of positions within feminist Sex Radicalism. Among feminists broadly defined as Sex Radicals, a distinction can be drawn between those most closely aligned with the extreme individualism of libertarian ethics and politics, and those who explicitly situate sex (and the individuals enacting it) within structures of power and privilege.

### SEXUAL LIBERTARIANISM

Sexual libertarianism offers a reversal of the image of sex presented in anti-sex feminism. Both insist that sex, as represented in prostitution and pornography, must be read as reality, and both conclude that the encoded message is one of power. Where these groups diverge is on the question of who holds that power. One of the most prominent voices of the libertarian perspective is Camille Paglia, whose



uncompromising pronouncements on sex make her a fair match for such anti-sex feminists as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. According to Paglia,

What you see in pornography and prostitution is the reality of sex. It is not a patriarchal distortion. It is the ultimate physical reality. So a feminist who claims to understand sexuality but cannot deal with pornography or topless clubs is no expert. She is a censor. She is a prude.<sup>37</sup>

While Dworkin and MacKinnon read messages of male power and female subjection in commercial sexual culture, Paglia sees the reverse:

Men are run ragged by female sexuality all their lives. From the beginning of his life to the end, no man ever fully commands any woman. It's an illusion.... That's what the strip clubs are about: not woman as victim, not woman as slave, but woman as goddess.<sup>38</sup>

Paglia insists that women's association with sex should be seen as her source of greatest power, not as the root of her oppression and abuse. Paglia thus intends not only to complicate the notion of women's sexual victimization by men, but to reverse it. It is men who are "run ragged" and feel powerless in the presence of women's sexuality:

The feminist line is, strippers and topless dancers are degraded, subordinated, and enslaved; they are victims, turned into objects by the display of their anatomy. But women are far from being victims—women rule; they are in total control.... The feminist analysis of prostitution says that men are using money as power over women. I'd say, yes, that's all that men have. The money is a confession of weakness. They have to buy women's attention. It's not a sign of power; it's a sign of weakness.<sup>39</sup>

If women rule sexually and enjoy total control in their encounters with men, then those who claim to be victims of male sexual violence have only themselves to blame. In this way, sexual power is removed from any social or political context and instead becomes an attribute available to any individual alert enough to claim it.<sup>40</sup> Author bell hooks criticizes this libertarian feminist position for "embracing outmoded sexist visions of female sexual agency and pleasure." Such a politics, she argues, lacks imagination as it conceives of "sexual

agency only by inverting the patriarchal standpoint and claiming it as their [women's] own."<sup>41</sup>

Hooks is not alone among contemporary feminists in rejecting both the radical individualism of libertarianism as well as the ubiquitous female sexual victimization of Radical Feminism. Many Sex Radical feminists explicitly situate sex within a culture of male domination; sex is understood to be constructed by this culture without being fully determined by it. Carole Vance, for example, suggests that

to focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike libertarians, feminist Sex Radicals do not fully substitute an ethic of consent for one of responsibility. Social and political context beyond the individual continue to figure prominently in their interpretation and assessment of sex. For example, during her tenure as editor of the lesbian sex magazine, *On Our Backs*, Marcy Sheiner objected to photos in another erotic publication, *Future Sex*, on the grounds that they were both racist and sexist. Sheiner challenged these images of sex tourism for glossing over a context of unequal power and privilege:

I'm the first to admit that these images and ideas generate sexual excitement in many people, even those who are ethically opposed to them. But is arousal potential the sole criteria for what goes into a sex magazine? ... [this question] has plagued me since I penned and sold my first pornographic story several years ago. So while I champion freedom of expression, and continue to create sexual materials, I can't kid myself into believing there are black and white answers to the ethical questions raised during the course of my work.<sup>43</sup>

A similar tension was revealed in 1991 when Bobby Lilly, a leader of a mixed gender anti-censorship organization in California, CAL-ACT, reported on the struggles of sex workers and Sex Radical feminists to gain a voice within the largest American feminist organization, the



National Organization for Women. A male reader returned the issue with the words "what irrelevant garbage" scrawled across the top. He also circled the words "Equal Rights Amendment" and "patriarchal" in the article, commenting that "this has nothing to do with the fight against censorship." Lilly, who "didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or spit," replied that as a feminist and a Sex Radical, her anti-censorship politics could never be gender-blind.<sup>44</sup> Sex Radical feminists and libertarians may both embrace a politics of sexual "free speech," but they diverge on the issue of whether an erotic ethic needs to extend beyond the formal question of consent.

In the early 1990s, a workshop on pornography was organized at the National Organization for Women's annual conference in New York. One presenter, a male academic, reported on the causal relationship he believed to exist between pornography and violence against women. After the presentation, an audience member approached him. "Isn't there some way," she asked, "to educate people about the difference between violence and consensual fantasies, something besides resorting to censorship? Maybe s/m photos could be captioned: 'This is a negotiated fantasy between two consenting adults.'" The man slowly shook his head. "I understand your concern. But while that might be enough for you or me, what about a group of Black teenagers at a newsstand on 42nd Street? They won't read or understand a message like that." Overhearing this exchange, I found myself wondering about the problematic alliances some women have made with "good" (White, professional) men out to protect the sisterhood from the "bad" (Black, poor) ones. But I was soon reminded that my own alliances can be no less embarrassing.

The group I was associated with at the conference, "Union Labia: Sex Workers and Sex Radical Feminists," had a number of male "supporters" attached to it. Some of them were fans of the various high profile porn stars in the delegation. The presence of these men made me acutely uncomfortable, but the pros simply treated them with the cursory courtesy reserved for johns. One man, however, received a more respectful sort of attention. He was a short, chubby, middle-aged fellow in a business suit. This man, I learned, was no average john; he was a journalist on assignment from Playboy

magazine hoping to cover a catfight between sex workers and other NOW feminists.

Playboy had access to our group because the Playboy Foundation had contributed a small sum toward the airfare necessary to bring an international prostitution expert from the World Health Organization in Geneva to the meeting. In return, he was to see if there was a story to be had. I was profoundly ambivalent about his presence. While pornography may no longer be the declared enemy for feminists such as myself, Playboy's fondness for airbrushed "perfection" has never endeared them to me.

Throughout the conference, the Playboy reporter secreted himself away with one or another of the "Union Labia" members attempting, I assumed, to dig up dirt that wasn't being thrown. I managed to avoid him until the final afternoon. He opened our conversation with the offer of a marijuana cookie. Our alliance as outlaws thus cemented, I proceeded to give him my standard feminist critique of both the anti-pornography/anti-prostitution movement and of the male violence that inspires it. This is a familiar role for me in sex worker/sex radical settings where there are already many articulate voices asserting women's right to fuck convention by being sluts and whores.

Because I was talking to a Playboy, it felt especially satisfying to remind him that anti-porn feminists were responding to a very real state of emergency over women's sexual integrity and safety. "Still," I confided, "their insistence that people like me are the enemy is distressing, especially in this political moment when we so desperately need each other. We have to form a united front against the real and declared enemies." "Like who?" he asked. "Well, you know, like the President, the Supreme Court, the whole Reagan/Bush Right Wing." "Now, wait a minute," he interrupted, "what makes you think they're the enemy? I'm a contributor to the National Review myself. William Buckley is a personal friend. They've been very receptive to my articles defending free speech and pornography." I felt the room shift slightly, and it wasn't just the marijuana kicking in. The whole encounter reminded me that anti-pornography feminists have no monopoly on courting or tolerating the support of dubious allies to "advance the cause."



## SEXUAL SUBVERSION

Unlike sexual libertarians, feminist Sex Radicals generally accept romanticist and anti-sex feminists analyses of sex as deeply implicated in structures of inequality. But what distinguishes the Sex Radical perspective is the notion that **sex is a terrain of struggle, not a fixed field of gender and power positions.** Jana Sawicki explains:

Neither wholly a source of domination nor of resistance, sexuality is also neither outside power nor wholly circumscribed by it. Instead, it is itself an arena of struggle. There are no inherently liberatory or repressive sexual practices, for any practice is co-optable and any is capable of becoming a source of resistance.<sup>45</sup>

Sex Radical feminists thus share with romanticist and anti-sex feminists a sense of outrage at the existing sexual order, but reject a politics of purification or abolition **in favor of one of subversion from within sexual practice.** This offers a vision of political struggle not predicated on a cleansing of culture or on a move outside of culture.

From this perspective, **acts of apparent complicity may also be acts of subversive resistance.** Just as a colonized people may make use of the language of the colonizer in transgressive ways,<sup>46</sup> women are understood to be able to subversively resignify sexual language and practices through using them in unintended ways. Pat Califia, for example, argues that lesbians can liberate a sexual vocabulary for their own use by seizing words previously used against them:

Words that have been used in anti-sex, anti-lesbian ways can be coopted. By using these terms with pride, lesbians can liberate them and change their meaning. The word "dyke" has already been transformed this way.<sup>47</sup>

Daphne Marlatt has described this subversive relationship to the symbolic order in terms of being "an inhabitant of language, not master, nor even mistress ... inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety ..."<sup>48</sup> Such attempts to redefine and reinhabit the sexual order are in part a response to the impossibility of moving to a place outside of culture to create entirely anew. Teresa de Lauretis argues that

paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it—to refuse

the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words), even to quote (but against the grain).<sup>49</sup>

In addition to the impossibility of moving to a place outside of culture, some feminists argue that a politics predicated on an abolition of the sexual order rather than engagement with it leaves women further impoverished. Betsy Warland, for example, acknowledges the shortcomings of sexual speech in describing women's experiences and desires, but urges women nonetheless to refuse to abandon it:

the language itself does not reflect women's sensual experience. For most of us, however, it is our native tongue. The only language we have ... so when we abandon words, it isn't a simple matter of leaving them behind but rather a turning over of our power to those who keep them: speechlessness the consequence.<sup>50</sup>

Ntozake Shange wrestles with a similar concern in her decision to make use of sexual speech in her writing:

One part of the exploitation of people of color—especially women—has been to rob us of any inner life, to rob us of our own sexuality and sensuality.... I hesitate to strip



Photo © Annie Sprinkle



us of a concrete and vital language for sexual activities and desires and fantasies, because I don't think we can afford to lose too much more.<sup>51</sup>

But feminists like Shange who regard sexual language as a crucial resource for women are far from reverent in their uses of it:

I'm taking words that men have used to make us dirty.  
I'm taking them to make us able to use them any way we  
choose ... I can get myself in a big bind and never be able  
to write anything that is honest if I can't somehow uproot  
words or images that have been malignant and make  
them constructive for me.<sup>52</sup>

Pat Califia further argues that the meaning of sexual practice no less than sexual language is dependent on the context in which it is employed:

No erotic act has an intrinsic meaning. A particular sexual activity may symbolize one thing in the majority culture, another thing to members of a sexual subculture .... The context within which an erotic act occurs can also alter its meaning.<sup>53</sup>

It is precisely this commitment to locating sex within a cultural and political context that distinguishes feminist Sex Radicals such as Califia from libertarians such as Paglia. While Paglia would generalize the apparent control a performer has over a client in a strip club to assert that all women "are in total control" of sexual interactions with men, Califia would read the interaction and its meaning as context dependent.

Even in sub-cultural enactments of sex, dominant culture always remains important. Anne McClintock notes that within the "control frame of cash and fantasy" of commercial s/m, for example, men can "surrender" power to women while still maintaining control outside of that limited frame:

In the private security of fantasy, men can indulge secretly and guiltily their knowledge of women's power, while enclosing female power in a fantasy land that lies far beyond the cities and towns of genuine feminist change.<sup>54</sup>

McClintock concludes that within the "magic circle" of subcultural sex, "social and personal contradictions can be deployed or negotiated,

but need not be finally resolved, for the sources and ends of these paradoxes lie beyond the individual...."<sup>55</sup> As sociologist Robert Connell concludes, a true "democracy of pleasure" requires an equalization of resources among and between men and women.<sup>56</sup>

While sexual libertarianism can ignore what lies beyond the individual, feminism cannot. Women are still disproportionately poor, overworked, and underpaid; women are still the deliberate targets of male sexual violence; women's bodies are still heavily regulated by state policies criminalizing subcultural sexual practices and restricting access to birth control and abortion; and women are still stigmatized and punished for sexual activity beyond the confines of monogamous heterosexual marriage. These realities co-determine women's experience of sex.

The key difference, then, between Sex Radical feminists and Radical Feminists does not rest on whether attention should be paid to the structures of gender inequality in which sex is constructed, enacted, and represented. Rather, the two perspectives differ in their assessments of whether the meaning and function of sex is fully determined by that sexist social order. While Radical Feminists insist that the sexual (mis)representations of patriarchy create "reality" because of the absolute power of men to make them function as such, feminist Sex Radicals understand sex to be a cultural tactic which can be used both to destabilize male power as well as to reinforce it. In much the same way, Michel de Certeau argues that culture

articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence [and] the tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.<sup>57</sup>

Practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read in more complex ways than simply as a confirmation of male domination. They may also be seen as sites of ingenious resistance and cultural subversion. For this reason, Sex Radical feminists insist that the position of the prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in a male sexual practice, but



instead can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order. Indeed, the Whore is often invoked by feminist Sex Radicals as a symbol of women's sexual autonomy and, as such, as a potential threat to patriarchal control over women's sexuality. Rebecca Kaplan suggests:

Women are usually called whores for being openly or highly sexual. Men who yell at women will often call them a "whore" and a "dyke" in the same breath. How is it that a woman can be simultaneously accused of having too much sex with men (whore) and too little sex with men (dyke)? This should make us realize that both of these terms condemn women's sexual autonomy. Whores and dykes are a threat to heteropatriarchy because both set their own rules for sex—rules which deny men the right to unlimited access to women's sexuality. Of course, prostitution can be critiqued like any other capitalist venture, but in a world in which a woman's body is so devalued, telling a man that he has to pay for access to it can be a radical act of self-determination.<sup>58</sup>

Pat Califia concurs:

The slut is, in Dworkin's parlance, male property—a victim of male violence—a woman who accepts male definition of her sexuality. Instead, I believe that she is someone men hate because she is potentially beyond their control.... A whore does not sell her body. She sells her time. So she has time that is not for sale, that belongs to no one but herself. Domesticated women don't dare put a price on their time.<sup>59</sup>

The slut, the dyke, and the whore are thus embraced by Sex Radicals as a potent symbolic challenge to confining notions of proper womanhood and conventional sexuality. Because Sex Radicals, like libertarians, embrace a vision of sex freed of the constraints of love, commitment, and convention, prostitution and pornography are understood to be useful to enhance sexual exploration and diversity. While Kathleen Barry and other pro-"positive" sex feminists condemn prostitution for introducing "bizarre" pornographic practices into private sexual behavior, Pat Califia celebrates commercial sex for very similar reasons:

If you don't know that there's a whole group of people who engage in a particular sexual behavior, it makes it

much more difficult to imagine yourself ever being able to do it. And porn is one of the commonest ways that people discover there are other folks out there who like to do cunnilingus, anal sex, gay sex, get tied up, have threesomes ...<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Lisa Duggan, Nan Hunter, and Carole Vance argue that

pornography carries many messages other than woman-hating: it advocates sexual adventure, sex outside of marriage, anonymous sex, group sex, voyeuristic sex, illegal sex, public sex.... Women's experience of pornography is not as universally victimizing as the [MacKinnon/Dworkin anti-pornography] ordinance would have it.<sup>61</sup>

Of course, Sex Radicals' invocation of prostitution and pornography as tools of liberation forged by undomesticated outlaw whores is as much of a rhetorical trope as the Radical Feminists depiction of commercial sex as realm of oppression populated by sexual slaves and exploited objects. Ira Levine, who has long worked in the adult film industry, reports, for example, that "outlaw" is not an identity all sex workers embrace:

It's amazing how in so many ways, many people in the porn industry have the same rather conventional values as people in any other industry. Do not assume that this is a bunch of wild bohemian personalities. We have our share of them, but we have an awful lot of people who struggle to lead conventional lives in spite of what they're doing. I think a lot of those people are missing out on the one real advantage of this job: the freedom of being a leper. After you've already done something loathsome to the majority of the population, you have a certain amount of latitude. I think it's a shame that these people feel an obligation to prove to everyone that they're really just perfectly normal people.<sup>62</sup>

Similarly, Carol Queen, a California sex worker and writer, notes that, far from being sexually enlightened, many prostitutes share the sexual prejudices of dominant culture:

Unlike many women working in the sex trades, I actually have a background in sex education. I want to think well of the erotic desires of the people who come to me. I don't think of clients as kinky or perverted. I like it that they can come to me and say "I would like you to put



your hand in my butt" or "I would like you to piss on me." One of the things that I know I am providing is a sexual safe space for people who haven't had that before. And I'm probably more safe for them than most prostitutes because I honor their desire. One piece of the puzzle of how to improve sex work is that sex workers could be trained in human sexuality, and other people could be assisted in developing both their own sex awareness and their communication skills.<sup>63</sup>

The reality of commercial sex (and the experiences of those performing erotic labor) is far more varied than either Radical or Sex Radical feminist rhetoric can express. Prostitution functions as an effective trope in these competing discourses of female sexuality, but the use of the sex worker as a symbol has also served to obscure the real complexity of her life.



Nina Hartley, adult film actress  
Berkeley, CA, 1991

I came across explicit adult sexual material for the first time when I was about fourteen. I was immediately fascinated by it, especially by the portrayal of women as sexual free agents. Now I realize that that's just a fantasy of men, but it was a pretty powerful concept for me at that age. It wasn't an entirely new message because my mother had always had feminist books like *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and *Liberating Masturbation* around the house, but the explicitness of porn appealed to me.

It wasn't until I was about twenty-three, though, that I did any sex work myself—first stripping and then adult films. It all happened under very favorable circumstances: the first film I did, *Educating Nina*, was written, directed, and produced by a woman, Juliette Anderson. Since then, I've done almost three hundred more videos and, while the energy is the same, my performances are way more polished.

It's a skill learning how to open up to the camera, how to give head in a photogenic fashion. You know, there's real sex and there's camera sex; my skill is in fusing the reality of camera sex with the intensity of real sex. I have to pull together a lot of different dynamics: who my partner is, what kind of mood we're in, and whether it's the beginning of a shoot so the producers are still a little more generous with time, or at the end of the day and we're running late and have to rush. All those things have to be brought together in a way that appears effortless. And usually it's a challenge I enjoy.

The frustrating part is that, with budget limitations, there's not a lot of time to do much character development, rehearse, do several takes, and really try to hone things down. In the 1970s, adult films were shot with a lot more care, over a period of several days and with real budgets and serious actors. A lot of the best movies still date from that time like *Autobiography of a Flea*, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, and *The Private Afternoons of Pamela Mann*. Those are movies that will stand the test of time. And I think some of my best work will, too. *Debbie Does Dishes* from 1985, for instance, was hugely popular and it still sells well. I received a best actress and best comedy



scene award for it. It also spawned five sequels featuring the Debbie character who is a kind of a utopian Nina Hartley/Judy Holiday combo.

Generally, though, most of the films these days are rushed through production. You come in and have to do five sex scenes. It would really improve the job to have fewer sex scenes per day so you could spend a little more time on each one. But these are relatively minor complaints. I'd still say that my bad days at work don't have that much to do with the fact that I'm making a sex film. Some days I do have a sore back or my feet hurt or I'm just in a bad mood. It's no big deal. I've had experiences from the sublime to the ridiculous, but very few really unpleasant ones. **Work is work: you have good days and bad days, but my worst day at work is still better than the best day selling shoes at Kinney's.**

What I do often long for is more creativity and variety in the work. Pornography as we know it has only been around for twenty or twenty-five years. A lot of the guys making it have been in the business forever; they're real dinosaurs. As they retire or die, new blood is starting to appear. I think in the next ten or fifteen years there could be some exciting developments with younger people, amateurs, and especially more women making movies. Most of the product you see now is made by businessmen for a profit. They're not committed artists; they're just in it for the money.

**I've worked with a number of alternative production companies run by women like Tigress, Blush, and Femme Productions.** The key difference is the boss/worker relationship. To start with, all three of those companies are run by women who used to be adult actresses or strippers. Because they've been sexual entertainers themselves, they understand the process differently. These alternative companies are not only female-oriented but feminist. I love that because it can get a little old sometimes to be the person with the highest consciousness on the set. I take my work very seriously and I see part of my job to be feminist consciousness-raising around issues of health and self-determination.

If another woman on the set is new to the business, especially if she's young, I make a particular point of checking in with her to make

sure she understands her rights and privileges. It's not so much that I'm worried that someone has hit her over the head and dragged her in front of the camera, but I am always concerned that she may not have fully considered the impact the work can have on her life twenty years down the road. The societal reaction to the woman who has not only crossed the line from "good girl" to "bad girl" but has left a photographic record of her sexual activity can be intense. The movies provide undeniable evidence that you have done something society doesn't want women to do. You are a whore, an outcast, a bad woman, and they can punish you unmercifully for it. I try to make sure that actresses understand what it means to have a permanent record of you with a man's penis in your mouth. When this comes up later, will you be prepared to deal with it? It's not good enough to just do it for the money because, while it's not a bad living, you ain't gonna get rich doing it.

I've had a wonderful time making movies for seven years in large part because of how I have done it: I don't do anything I don't like already, and if I like it I'll really go for it. I think a big part of feeling used and abused in this profession is having taken money for something you didn't really like and that won't sit well with you after a while. I really wish there was a pamphlet to hand out to every actress on the set. Something with phone numbers of community counseling centers, substance abuse clinics, rape crisis lines, job training programs, and career planning advisors. Women need to be able to approach things with clarity. You need to save money and pay taxes. It's not just a big party, it's work.

I have to be careful though. When I first got into this business, I had a lot of value judgements about some of the women: they smoked, they drank, they didn't wear their seat belts, they didn't eat their vegetables, and they didn't finish school. These were really street smart women, and I had to admit that I was having a tremendous classist reaction to them. I've done a lot of growing up myself over the past few years. As much as I don't like the fact that some women in this business are only 19 or 20, or don't seem to be together enough to do the work, I also know that a woman has got to do what a woman has got to do. I may not like her path, I may want to



shout "Don't take that road, take a left, take a left, the right is a real bummer ...", but I've finally gotten to the point where I just say, "If you ever need to talk, I'm here. Here's my number."

And who's to say that my limits should be their limits anyway? I've never done any outright prostitution, for example, because, as a middle-class girl, I'm terrified of arrest. If I can't say "This much money will get you exactly this; there's my bodyguard; here's my bedroom; shall we?" then I'm not into it. You know, despite my work, I don't really feel much like a "bad girl." I don't even think I do porn out of a need to rebel. Sure, I'm militantly sexual but only in places where that's expected and appropriate behavior. At heart, I'm a "good girl" who wants to make the world a better place for everybody. I want an end to hunger, no more war, no more rape. I pay my taxes, I help old ladies across the street, I'm kind to animals, I visit my grandma.

The funny thing is, given the objections some feminists have to porn, I really see my work as important for women. I think sex is a very valid area to explore on an artistic level and women need to reclaim that. We need to be less afraid of our sexuality, of becoming frenzied, our eyes glazing over, getting sweaty, and feeling out of control. This is a good state; it's called approaching orgasm. But because we so rarely see it, it can really seem scary. Part of the problem is that in Hollywood films, when a woman is in that state she's either in danger or dangerous. I hate slasher films and movies like *Fatal Attraction* where the sexually aggressive woman is a victim or insane. In 99% of commercially available pornography, a woman is depicted desiring sex, pursuing sex, having sex, having orgasms and at the end of the movie she's still alive, happy, healthy, and well. Women really need to look at that message in light of what Hollywood has to offer and get off the kick that it's pornography that's violent.

▼  
**Ariane Amsberg**, writer and sexologist  
 Amsterdam, 1994

I'm a feminist; I think prostitution is bad for women. I don't want to see women treated as though we were just a hole men can use

whenever and however they want. We'll never be equal, if men think "Ha! For money I can have you!" Men despise women profoundly and the possibility of buying sex only increases that contempt.

Look in the paper, there are two full pages of sex advertisements every day. The phone sex lines advertise things like "young school girls, 18 years old" but the stories they tell are all about being twelve or thirteen and saying "No, no, no, don't do that" to the doorman who almost rapes them. By the end, of course, it always turns into "Oh yes, oh yes, how wonderful." Men listen to this and it stimulates their appetite for younger and younger girls. I'm concerned about rape and battery; such violence is only possible where there is a complete lack of respect for women. Surely that must partly be the responsibility of the sex industry.

One of the sex ads I saw in the paper today read something like "help students: call to negotiate what they will give you in bed in exchange for your financial support." This is terrible for the women's movement; any man, whether he's highly educated or a worker, living in the gutter or even a criminal, any man now thinks that he can get an intelligent woman, a student in need of money, to lie on her back and put his prick in her. Is that what the women's movement is about? To get women educated, to obtain equal rights, just so that any man can still fuck her for a little money? That's very reassuring to men. The message is "Don't worry about women who go to the university, you have nothing to fear from intelligent women. You can still pay to fuck them at Yab Yum [an 'exclusive' sex club in Amsterdam]." I used to write a column in the *Algemene Dagblad* [national Dutch daily paper] until they ran an interview with the guy who runs Yab Yum. He described his business as a respectable one employing very intelligent and highly educated women. After that, I refused to write for the paper anymore. The article was nothing more than a big advertisement for the place.

These men who are involved with prostitution are not nice men. I'll say it just like that: every man who goes to a prostitute is not a nice man. His actions must come from total disrespect. Maybe he has feelings of inferiority so that he has to go to someone who he thinks



is even more inferior to do things that nobody else would do with him or that he would be too ashamed to tell anyone about. I know that some prostitutes think that they have power over the men, and I believe them. It's a kind of professionalism knowing exactly what a man wants the minute he walks in the door. But no matter what kind of power the woman seems to have in that setting, the man will always have more.

In the bedroom, power is almost always in the hands of the man. That's because men have been socialized to feel much more confident about their sexual performance than women. Women are so badly informed and so insecure about their bodies that, in the bedroom, the man just takes over and determines what's going to happen. On top of that, he can also say, "if you don't have enough sex with me, there are thousands of prostitutes who will." That gives him all the power in sex. Imagine how different it would be without that possibility of escape, without him being able to say "if you don't do what I like, then I'm going to a prostitute or I'll take a girlfriend."

Besides, if a woman doesn't want to have sex with her husband, it's probably because he's such a bad lover. And who makes men bad lovers? The prostitutes! I want this to be noted: prostitutes teach men to be bad lovers because, in prostitution, the faster the men come the better. So they learn to ejaculate fast but they never learn to touch a shoulder or caress a face. And, after they've performed so badly, it's the prostitute's job to build up their ego. No matter how ugly and filthy he is, no matter how bad a lover he may be, she always builds him up: "No one has ever made me feel like this ..." It's so fake, I don't know how they can do it. How can they play that little piece of theater for men and their pricks? What happened to those girls? Where's their self-respect?

I've always had the idea that they must have been damaged to want to do this. Unless, of course, they're just curious. One woman I know tried prostituting herself one night in Paris just out of curiosity. That's fine if someone wants to do that; I would never look down on anyone for that. But if I try to visualize myself as a prostitute, I immediately see the client. I don't know how he smells, but he probably doesn't smell very good. And then I see myself going around his prick

and caressing it, and pretending to lick it or kiss it, and put it inside me. I would totally lose respect for myself if I did that because it would be something I wouldn't enjoy. Maybe I'd only enjoy the money. Of course, if I worked in a factory all day, I might not enjoy that either. Or if I worked in a hospital; I know that nurses have to touch people's bodies and clean up the urine and shit, which obviously isn't so pleasant either. But prostitution is worse. It cannot be compared to a normal job because it's bad for all women.

One of the things that I regret is that our feminist movement doesn't think enough about the long-term effects of prostitution on society as a whole. They only seem to be concerned about the women who want to prostitute themselves and how they can best be protected. But they don't think about what prostitution means, how it changes society and affects the possibility of equality between men and women. In the Dutch feminist movement, women are really afraid of being critical of prostitution. *Opzij* [the national Dutch feminist magazine] doesn't even take a stand; they're too afraid. Very few women will say what they really think.

But it just goes too far when the Women's Movement is promoting prostitution by saying that it's a job like any other. I've even heard it compared to marriage where a housewife goes to bed with her husband in order to improve the atmosphere at home, or to convince him to buy her a new dress. Of course it's true that men have money, women have what men want, and the rest is negotiation. But to compare prostitution with a good relationship is bullshit. You choose to be in a relationship and you share very nice moments. That's totally different than pure commercial sex. The women have no choice, absolutely no choice. Anyone who comes in, they have to please. Sure the women from the Red Thread will say "I only take this one, or I only take that one." Of course they would say that. What no one will say is that it's outrageous for the Red Thread to get state subsidies to hold their Whores' Congresses. Community tax money is paying for their get-togethers! Well, personally, I don't want to pay for prostitutes to get together and promote their "jobs." Prostitution is extremely bad for all women, including non-prostitutes. Why, then, are we agreeing to support it?



Apparently, though, anybody who uses the label "feminist" is invited into the movement without first finding out who these women really are. Just because you are a woman and say you are a feminist doesn't mean that you are. What could it possibly have to do with feminism that someone likes s/m, for example, or works as a prostitute? They're just using feminism to give themselves some sort of status. They feel safer in the feminist fortress, but they have nothing to contribute to feminism except in a negative sense.

I'm not saying that prostitution and pornography are *bad* in themselves, I'm saying that they are bad for *women*. I know that there are some extremely interesting lesbian porn movies and I've certainly found some of them are very exciting. There's something in the rhythm or the story that's completely different than hetero pornography. As far as I'm concerned, free and consenting adults can do whatever they want to do with each other. It's fine with me if people want to experiment with sex parties, or want to be tied up, or want to be pierced. But once money enters into it, that changes things. It makes it unfree. If you are paid, you have to give the service that you were paid to render no matter how disgusting or painful it is.

Besides, it's not a safe job for women. Prostitutes have to surrender all their money to whoever demands it because they have absolutely no rights. Especially the foreign women. It's terrible to promote prostitution so that all these foreign women come to the Netherlands to prostitute themselves. How can anybody imagine that's a good thing? When they go back to their countries, they'll have to keep their past totally secret or be despised. If it's known what they did, they'll have no chance of marrying or ever being respected. Prostitution works against whatever is good for them. Sure you could argue that it would help them if people stopped despising prostitutes. But isn't it better to say that women shouldn't be used in prostitution in the first place?

## Chapter 2

# Sexual Slavery

White Slavery is not just a figment of the imagination of pornographic writers; it has gained considerable impetus in recent years.... The girls are recruited from all over Europe and their destinations are the ports and capitals of the world, some going to private clients of one race or another before being passed on to brothels.<sup>1</sup>

For over a hundred years, such images have had a tenacious grip on the public psyche for reasons which have not always been conscious or articulate. This depiction of commercial sex as a form of slavery, and prostitutes as women "trafficked" into the trade against their will, has endured in part because it resonates well with long-standing assumptions about women's sexual vulnerability and the proper relationship of women to sex, commerce, and travel.

### "Beautiful White Girls Sold Into Ruin"

Organized movements against what was once known as "White Slavery" formed in the late nineteenth century in both Western Europe and the United States. One of the first widely read exposes of sexual trafficking appeared in 1885 when a British journalist, W. T. Stead, described his purchase of a young London girl from her mother, purportedly for use in Parisian prostitution. Public response was overwhelming, and included a demonstration of more than 200,000 people in London demanding, among other things, legislation to raise the age of sexual consent for girls.<sup>2</sup> Stead's story, and others like it, created the impression that prostitution was little more than the sexual enslavement of young girls. Historical records, however, suggest that most British prostitutes were not children sold into the trade but rather young women who consciously engaged in prostitution for economic reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Still, it was the image of the sexual slave that captured both the headlines and the public imagination, a phenomenon which might partially be explained by the effective mix of moral outrage and sexual



sensationalism in the reporting. One tract, for example, promised readers: "Beautiful White Girls Sold Into Ruin.... Illustrated with a Large Number of Startling Pictures."<sup>4</sup>

Despite meager evidence of a widespread phenomenon of involuntary prostitution, anti-trafficking campaigns quickly spread beyond Britain. In the United States, federal investigators attempting to uncover evidence of white slavery reported with frustration that few of the women they interviewed pointed to slave trafficking as their means of entry into the trade. A more typical explanation, they found, was economic need. One former domestic explained to U.S. investigators: "[I was] tired of drudgery as a servant ... I'd rather do this than be kicked around like a dog in a kitchen by some woman who calls herself a lady."<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, in the U.S. as in Britain, it was easier for both investigators and the public to believe in "a vast underground traffic in women than to accept that working-class women might choose sex either for money or the excitement it brought."<sup>6</sup>

The belief in a pervasive sexual slave trade in the absence of widespread evidence suggests that the notion of white slavery was not dependent on large numbers of documented cases. Instead, it was fueled by more general anxieties about changing gender, sex, class, and race relations at the turn of the century. The idea of a "white slave" unconsciously spoke not only to the experience of the white working class laboring under harsh conditions of early industrial capitalism, but also to the racial fears of an increasingly ethnically diverse population.

In the first sixty years of U.S. history, from Independence through 1840, total immigration was only three-quarters of a million people. But in the next forty, between 1840 and 1880, over eight million Europeans, mostly from northwestern Europe, emigrated to the U.S. And from 1880 to 1930, during the height of the White Slavery campaigns, more than twenty-three million immigrants came to the United States, this time primarily from eastern and southern Europe, including Italians, Poles, Russian Jews, and Slavs. This represented the largest population movement recorded in history.<sup>7</sup> Such massive trafficking across borders produced fears of cultural contamination and moral pollution. Not surprisingly, these foreigners became the

target of nativist rhetoric and provided a focus for early anti-trafficking legislation. A 1901 U.S. Senate report, for example, asserted that "the vilest practices are brought here from continental Europe ... the most bestial refinements of depravity."<sup>8</sup> Investigators especially warned against Jews "engaged in importation ... prey[ing] upon young girls whom they find on the streets, in dance halls and similar places."<sup>9</sup>

Adding to racial anxieties in the U.S. was the recent emancipation of African American slaves, which was perceived as a threat to both sexual and racial purity. As Lynne Segal notes:

the emancipation of Black slaves in the southern states of America had been followed by the immediate violent upsurge of lynchings of Black men, at least one every three days between 1885 and 1890 ... the justification given referred to the protection of white womanhood from bestial Black men.<sup>10</sup>

Even without the effective scapegoating of Blacks, Jews, and immigrants, fears of white slavery resonated with the prevailing gendered belief that travel, commerce, and sex were all properly the province of men. A woman found operating in such foreign territory—especially a White woman—was not only out of place, but highly suspect. Cynthia Enloe notes:

feminist geographers and ethnographers have been amassing evidence revealing that a principal difference between women and men in countless societies has been the license to travel away from a place thought of as "home." A woman who travels ... without the protection of an acceptable male escort is likely to be tarred with the brush of "unrespectability." She risks losing her honor ...<sup>11</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, only a handful of women had assumed the public identity of "lady traveler." Their class status as "ladies" offered some protection from public condemnation as did their willingness to package themselves as handmaids to colonization. Nonetheless, as Enloe reports, they were still "viewed with suspicion because they dared to travel such long distances with so little proper male protection."<sup>12</sup> It was assumed that few women above reproach would willingly travel far from home; it was easier to conclude



that she had been trafficked there against her will and better judgment.

While far more women were "trafficked" out of the home by the forces of industrial capitalism than sexual slave traders, prostitution served as a convenient symbol for anxiety over women's entry into industry.<sup>13</sup> Prostitutes, who traveled not only across physical distance but also through symbolic space, served as an effective trope for traffic across identity: sexual innocent to world-weary woman, sheltered daughter to working girl, madonna to whore. Anti-trafficking campaigns thus gave expression to popular concern for—as well as about—a new generation of working girls laboring and socializing outside the home. Public life was understood to be dangerously seductive. Places of urban commerce and recreation were described as dangerous recruiting grounds for traffickers and, more generally, as "the breeding ground of vice."<sup>14</sup> The danger, then, was not only forced prostitution but also the lure of casual or recreational sex engaged in by so-called "charity girls." Women who engaged in sex outside of marriage—whether for pay, trade, or pleasure—challenged notions of proper womanhood, especially White womanhood.

Despite the use of the generic term "women" in anti-trafficking rhetoric, not all women were seen as equally positioned to fall from grace. The presence of White women in a world of carnality and commerce demanded an explanation which "trafficking" provided. Black women's involvement in the sex trade was considered less remarkable, merely confirming their exclusion from the status of "true womanhood." Patricia Hill Collins notes that "according to the cult of true womanhood, 'true' women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.... African American women encountered a different set of controlling images."<sup>15</sup> According to Collins, the stereotypical image of the Black woman included the sexualized Jezebel: "Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women."<sup>16</sup>

Until the abolition of trade in and possession of African slaves in the British territories in 1833 and in the United States in 1863, the

sexual abuse of enslaved African women was not only commonplace but considered to be a right of ownership. As Sander Gillman points out, both Black women and those prostitutes unable or unwilling to claim the identity of trafficked innocents were believed to possess inherent biological "abnormalities" that set them apart.<sup>17</sup> The idea that Black women were congenitally inclined to whorish behavior was matched by a comparable belief that Black men were highly sexed and dangerously out of control. The stereotypes produced and justified racist violence. As Patricia Hill Collins concludes, "lynching and rape, two race/gender specific forms of sexual violence, merged with their ideological justifications of the rapist and prostitute in order to provide an effective system of social control over African Americans."<sup>18</sup>

The unfortunate term "white slavery" was also a mystifying misnomer for the sexual exploitation of Asian women in the United States during the late nineteenth century. In the 1870s, several hundred women were purchased in China to be resold into either domestic labor or prostitution in California.<sup>19</sup> Popular reports of Chinese "sex slaves" trafficked to California melded sexual titillation and racism. Sucheta Mazumdar argues that the publicity about these "'debauched' Chinese prostitutes fueled fears and hostility among many Americans toward the 'inassimilable Chinese.'"<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that the numbers of women imported from China to California for prostitution were never large, the presence of even limited numbers of Chinese prostitutes was seen as a serious threat to the moral order.<sup>21</sup> In 1876, one observer argued that there were enough Chinese prostitutes "to disgrace the city and greatly facilitate the spreading of ... immorality and vice among the youth of all classes."<sup>22</sup>

The issue of forced prostitution became a justification for racist immigration legislation, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Exclusion Act, the first such law directed against a specific nationality, entirely suspended Chinese immigration into the United States including, rather incidentally, that by Chinese prostitutes. Even the far more compassionate "rescue work" undertaken by White missionary women in San Francisco shared some of the



racism fueling the exclusionary laws. For the missionaries, Chinese prostitutes were victims not only of sexual slave trading but also of a heathen culture. Rehabilitation centrally required both religious conversion and commitment to Christian marriage. "Success" was measured by the adoption of White, middle-class, American standards of feminine behavior. Those Chinese prostitutes unwilling to conform to this model were offered little assistance. Mission Home files suggest that many young prostitutes found the terms of their "liberation" unattractive enough to reject the offer of rescue "with scorn and derision."<sup>23</sup>

### Anti-Trafficking in the Contemporary Period

Echoes of racism and ethnocentrism have remained in the rhetoric of some abolitionist organizations well into the late twentieth century.<sup>24</sup> In general, however, contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns have distanced themselves from the defense of White womanhood by explicitly reframing the problem as one that confronts women of all races. One of the most important texts that helped to transform and update the concept of sexual slavery in the late twentieth century was written by American feminist Kathleen Barry. Barry's 1979 work, *Female Sexual Slavery*, redefined the problem of trafficking in the broadest possible terms:

All kinds of women are vulnerable to slave procurers. The assumption that only women of a particular class, race, or age group are potential victims [is wrong] ... sexual slavery lurks at the corners of every woman's life.<sup>25</sup>

Barry argued not only that sexual slavery was a general threat to all women, but also greatly expanded its meaning beyond forced prostitution. Sexual slavery, according to Barry, is

the business that merchandises women's bodies to brothels and harems around the world ... [as well as that which is] practiced individually without an organizational network, it is supported by pimps ... [and] by husbands and fathers who use battery and sexual abuse as a personal measure of their power over their wives and daughters.<sup>26</sup>

By defining sexual slavery so broadly, Barry generally avoided the racist reduction of sexual violence to that which is enacted on the White female body by the ethnic Other.<sup>27</sup> Barry also challenged the belief that abuses in the commercial sex trade are of an entirely different order than that which might occur within more respectable institutions such as marriage or the family. But Barry's goal was more ambitious than simply to draw complex connections between related phenomena across race and class lines. Barry wished to argue that there was in fact no significant difference between such practices as sex work, sexual slavery, incest, and rape: "Female sexual slavery is present in all situations where women and girls ... are subject to sexual violence and exploitation."<sup>28</sup> Thus, victims of sexual slavery might equally be "a prostitute, battered wife, incestuously assaulted child, veiled woman, purchased bride."<sup>29</sup> This collapse of all forms of sexual violence into a broadly defined category of "sexual slavery" effectively sidestepped debates about how widespread coercion might be within the specific practice of prostitution. Arguing against the need for a careful accounting of the actual numbers of those forced into prostitution, Barry claimed only that sexual slavery was "pervasive throughout patriarchal society."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the author argued that an attempt to be more precise would be both irrelevant and impossible:

Amassing one hundred, one thousand, or many thousands of sex slavery cases will not prove the existence of the practice to those who have a vested interest in keeping it invisible.... There is no way to estimate what proportion of prostitution results from cases like the ones presented [in *Female Sexual Slavery*].<sup>31</sup>

Barry's claim, however, is a reflection of an ideological and not a methodological problem. Scholars and activists less committed to the abolitionist equation of prostitution with slavery have found far fewer difficulties in estimating the prevalence of deception and coercion as "recruiting" devices in the commercial sex trades. In one study of prostitution in South East Asia, for example, author Wendy Lee reports that "about ten percent of prostitutes in Thailand are deceived or forced into the profession. But more commonly families act as agents of recruitment."<sup>32</sup> Lee, who is highly critical of prostitution and presumably has no "vested interest" in discounting the



role of trafficking in the trade, suggests that for the vast majority of Thai prostitutes working in Europe, entry is facilitated not by "traffickers" but by family members, "aunts, sisters, or cousins already in the trade."<sup>33</sup> Licia Brussa, director of the migrant prostitutes' AIDS prevention project in the Netherlands, concurs:

If you look at the way women really get into the trade here, it's mostly in the hands of other women through chain migration. They bring their sisters and cousins over to work, partly out of a desire to help, partly because it provides a feeling of solidarity to have family and friends here. But sometimes it's also simple exploitation: you can earn a lot of money by taking care of the travel arrangements and getting someone else settled into the business. Besides it's safer than bringing over strangers; you aren't as likely to turn in your aunt.<sup>34</sup>

A similar conclusion is reached by the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) who estimate that no more than twenty percent of foreign prostitutes in the Netherlands have entered the trade through coercion or deception.<sup>35</sup>

Kathleen Barry refuses to quantify the problem of sexual slavery. Instead she insists that, for anyone really concerned about violence against women, one case is evidence enough. A file cabinet full of documentation won't make the problem any more compelling to those who just don't care. I bristle at the suggestion that to ask "how many? what percentage? how widespread?" suggests I have a stake in denying that such abuse might actually exist. But I also appreciate her reluctance to play the numbers game. Numbers are not simply neutral "data"; their meaning is always political. As a lesbian, I have watched the "Christian" Right celebrate studies purporting to show that gays comprise less than the proverbial ten percent of the population. No mention is made of how difficult it might be to accurately count the members of a despised minority. No questions are asked about why human rights should be dependent on numerical status. During the 1993 March on Washington for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Civil Rights, about a dozen anti-gay protesters held signs declaring "Only 1%" and "Two Gay Rights: AIDS and Death." It was comforting to me that there were only twelve of them and close to a million of us.

While numbers can never tell the whole story, they are not unimportant. It is useful to know that more than half of the women working behind the windows in Amsterdam's Red Light district are foreigners. It is also useful to know that the great majority of them are not there against their will. I honor the efforts of feminists committed to rescuing those coerced into the trade, and I tolerate the attempts by the Christian Right to rehabilitate homosexuals "recruited" into a life they wish to leave. But in both instances it is disingenuous at best to portray a stigmatized sexual practice as inevitably coercive, and insist that all counterclaims are irrelevant. That's just another twist in the numbers game.

The seriousness of forced prostitution is in no way diminished by evidence that trafficking is not the most common form of "recruitment" into the sex trade. Even using low estimates, the reality remains that many thousands of women and children are involved in commercial sex against their will. Many more have "chosen" prostitution from a desperately limited range of options, and most prostitutes work under exploitative labor conditions. This, however, is a different set of claims than the argument that commercial sex is inevitably a form of slavery.

It is not only those, as Barry suggests, with a stake in denying the existence of abuse who have an interest in knowing the extent of trafficking within the trade. Activists committed to effectively combating sexual violence, too, are well served by the knowledge that deception and coercion do not account for all, or even most, prostitution. If prostitutes have not been simply trafficked into the trade as slaves, rescue work may be a less productive strategy than labor organizing. But many anti-prostitution activists' commitment to abolition causes them to view strategies of reform as not only inappropriate but dangerously counterproductive. Reforms are seen only to "normalize" a practice they insist is invariably abusive. As Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstad suggest, without a commitment to abolition, it becomes easy to

to oppose some types of prostitution without having to take a stand on the fundamental and threatening question of 'voluntary' adult prostitution. 'Fight prostitution



controlled by pushers and pimps, fight prostitution which exploits incest-victims or children. But leave 'voluntary' prostitution alone.'<sup>36</sup>

This is a suggestion they vehemently reject; the practice in all of its forms must be abolished.

Abolitionist ideology actually stands in the way of attempts such as those made by Kathleen Barry to reposition prostitution within a broader range of practices including marriage ("battered wife" or "purchased bride"), family life ("incested child" and mandatory motherhood), and gendered appearance ("veiled woman" and, by extension, other less exotic forms of compulsory female self-presentation). Despite clear evidence that state-sanctioned heterosexual marriage and family life is often violent, coercive, and abusive, there is no comparable argument that these institutions must be prohibited in all of their varied forms including those which participants claim to be consensual.<sup>37</sup> Campaigns against wife abuse and child abuse typically challenge the idea of women and children as property of husbands, propose reforms intended to increase structural equality between participants, promote legal changes to increase protection for victims and facilitate prosecution of those who commit abuses. Rarely is abolition suggested as the most appropriate tactic, nor are claims made that research into the prevalence of sexualized violence within marriage or the family is a methodological impossibility, that those who choose marriage (or defend another's right to do so) are "pseudo-feminists," or that an adequate understanding of these institutions can be attained by studying only those who have "escaped" them. All these are claims freely made about prostitution, however.<sup>38</sup> In short, despite attempts in the 1970s by anti-trafficking activists to expand the meaning of "sexual slavery" beyond the institution of commercial sex, prostitution remains a "special case," uniquely suited to abolition.

The contradictory impulse to consider prostitution as only one among many sites of sexual abuse and to simultaneously position it as a case apart was reinforced in the early 1990s when the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women issued a statement redefining sexual slavery as "sexual exploitation." "Sexual exploitation" was defined as

"sexual harassment, rape, incest abuse, wife abuse, pornography and prostitution."<sup>39</sup> In other words, the *abuse* of a wife or a child, the *harassment* of a worker, and the practice of sexual *assault* (rape), were all to be considered instances of "sexual exploitation," whereas consensual participation in marriage, family life, and heterosexuality were not. "Consent" and "choice" were meaningful in all areas except commercial sex. From the perspective of abolitionists, prostitution and pornography alone required no modifiers to signal abuse because, there, no meaningful distinction could be made between "forced" and "free." Indeed, for abolitionists, prostitution can no more be a "chosen" or consensual activity than rape. Thus, Hoigard and Finstad conclude that "it is not mere rhetoric to counter the absurdity of the demand for legalization of prostitution with 'Legalize rape and incest. Recognize these as normal activities.'"<sup>40</sup>

But defining prostitution as exactly the same, whether consensually enacted or forced, poses a serious problem for sex workers. If prostitution is a form of sexual violence exactly like rape and incest, then the rape of a prostitute becomes predictable, indeed redundant.<sup>41</sup> If a prostitute always already has been violated, rape is unremarkable, no more than a sign of excess. And if a prostitute can never consent, then she can never be said to refuse consent, an assertion challenged by a Melbourne street prostitute raped in 1991: "Sure I'm a working girl, but that doesn't mean I have to put up with such violent behavior. The fact that I sell sex for a living in no way invalidates my right to say no. I don't consent to violent attacks on my body."<sup>42</sup>

One of the justifications for insisting that prostitution, unlike marriage, is necessarily abusive is the belief that no one could ever really choose to participate in such an activity. Coercion, therefore, must be responsible. Hoigard and Finstad insist that "No one 'wants' to rent out her vagina as a garbage can for hordes of anonymous men's ejaculations."<sup>43</sup> Sex worker Carol Queen calls this a "politics of 'ick':"

The assumption is that because I find something icky no one else could ever consent to doing it. The question I always ask is whether "oh ick!" is really the basis for a politics. For a lot of years, heterosexual people said "oh, I could never have sex with people of the same sex, so



therefore it must be sick, it must be immoral, it must be criminalized." Well, some of us really can do this.<sup>44</sup>

To argue that there is an important difference to be made between consensual and forced prostitution, is not, however, the same as arguing that all consensual prostitution is necessarily "free." As Hoigard and Finstad point out:

voluntary choice assumes that there exists good, realistic alternatives to choose among.... Both material and cultural processes leave some women feeling pushed into a corner where prostitution emerges as the best alternative.<sup>45</sup>

Prostitutes' rights activist Jo Doezeema agrees that the concept of "free choice" is less than useful in discussing prostitution:

There is no way to combat the anti-prostitution position that all prostitution is forced by using their language and insisting that what I do is "freely chosen." If I say "I choose to do it because I need the money," well, that's economic coercion. For every "free choice" you can think up, they just point out how it wasn't entirely free. The idea that there are two distinct poles of "forced" and "free" is a false dichotomy. I mean who really freely chooses to work at any kind of job? I want to get the whole choice argument off the prostitutes' political agenda. We'll never win it and it's useless as a political strategy. And ultimately it's not important if you're fighting for things like workers' rights, or fighting to challenge the stigma around being a prostitute. It doesn't matter if you were forced to be a prostitute or so-called chose to be one; you're dealing with the same stigma and you'd be benefitted by better working conditions.<sup>46</sup>

Very few women's lives are models of "free choice." Most women's "choices" are severely limited by their disadvantaged position within hierarchical structures of sex, race, and class. Gender inequality, coupled with extreme differences of wealth within and among nations, creates tremendous pressure on women to engage in any available form of employment, including sex work. Indeed, there is good evidence that participation in prostitution increases in times of economic crisis and diminished options. At the Second European Meeting on

Migratory Prostitution held in 1994, for instance, a huge increase in the number of East European women working illegally in Istanbul's sex trade was reported. Women, primarily from Rumania, were fleeing "extreme economic hardship. The majority had had either no personal income or had earned less than \$13 a month" prior to emigration.<sup>47</sup> In this study of about three hundred women, only six percent reported having been trafficked to Turkey against their will. Yet it clearly would be a misrepresentation to suggest that the other ninety-four percent had "freely chosen" migratory prostitution from among a range of occupational opportunities. In a similar study of two hundred prostitutes in contemporary Bulgaria, investigators found that economic hardship motivated most to enter the trade. Women were "often unemployed before becoming a prostitute ... [Once working in the sex trade] their income per day was often higher than that of their parents' monthly salary." The study further notes that "many had plans to go abroad as migratory prostitutes."<sup>48</sup> These women are neither classic "victims of trafficking" nor are they fully empowered free agents. The complexity of their situation has led to a deep rift within the contemporary anti-trafficking movement dividing those who insist on abolitionist strategies from those who defend migrant prostitutes' right to "self-determination."

### A Movement Divided: Abolitionism and Self-Determination

While the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women has been strikingly successful over the past two decades in promoting the prostitution-as-slavery perspective within influential international bodies such as the United Nations, anti-trafficking activism is no longer synonymous with abolitionism. Increasingly, voices supporting reform over prohibition are surfacing from within the anti-trafficking movement itself. The Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (STV) is one of those organizations challenging the abolitionist imperative. Almost since its inception in 1985, the STV has explicitly targeted coercion and abuse, rather than the practice of prostitution as such. This perspective may be a reflection of the largely



decriminalized status of the sex trade in that country. Unlike in the United States, where policies of prohibition have produced clandestine prostitution and created problems of access for those attempting to assist women trafficked into the trade, decriminalization in the Netherlands has created a highly visible, partially organized, and relatively accessible population of sex workers.

Prostitutes in the Netherlands have long resisted easy definition as victims of sexual commerce, and instead have demanded rights and respect as workers. This has produced an unusually collaborative effort between the Dutch prostitutes' rights movement and anti-trafficking activists, with both advocating the importance of increased worker control and "self-determination." Lisa Hofman, director of the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women explains that her organization quickly concluded that

the best place to start is to improve the circumstances under which [prostitution] takes place.... Of course we are here to help those trying to leave, but we also recognize the importance of working with those who decide to stay to improve conditions in the trade.<sup>49</sup>

This pragmatic perspective is increasingly characteristic of anti-trafficking activity in Western Europe. In 1991, European anti-trafficking groups held an international conference attended by ninety participants from women's, migrant's, and prostitute's rights organizations from fourteen different countries. The meeting produced a series of recommendations submitted to the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, part of the UN Commission on Human Rights, to "initiate steps to formulate a new international convention for the suppression of the traffic in persons."<sup>50</sup> The existing UN Convention dates from 1949 and is explicitly abolitionist in objective. Under its current wording, signatories commit to "punish any person who, to gratify the passions of another ... exploits the prostitution of another person, *even with the consent of that person*."<sup>51</sup> The European conference proposed a revision of this agreement "based on the principle of the right of self-determination of women which would differentiate between prostitution as work and forced prostitution."<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, the group advised that an updated

convention on trafficking "avoid the moral rejection of prostitution."<sup>53</sup>

Two years after the first European anti-trafficking meetings, a second international gathering was held to further discuss proposed revisions to the UN Convention. The resulting recommendations were submitted to the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna by the Dutch National Council of Churches, the STV, the Asian Women's Human Rights Council of the Philippines, and the Thai Foundation for Women. These recommendations were endorsed by fifty-three organizations from Europe, Africa, and Asia, including the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Physicians for Human Rights, and Sisters in Islam. The proposed revisions strongly emphasize the role of violence and coercion in determining instances of trafficking, and encourage an expanded definition of trafficking to include "modern manifestations like malafide marriage bureaus or employment agencies."<sup>54</sup> The groups argued that the existing convention does not "cover contemporary practices ... in which people are traded and end up in slavery or slavery-like conditions."<sup>55</sup>

These efforts to revise anti-trafficking agreements on the basis of a distinction between consensual labor and slavery (whether sexual or otherwise) were almost immediately denounced by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. Positioning itself in direct opposition to such efforts, the Coalition declared: "Trade in sex is a moral transgression ... Prostitution exploits women. The erroneous distinction between 'free' and 'forced' ignores that reality."<sup>56</sup> While the Coalition agrees that the existing convention requires revision, the direction of their proposed changes is diametrically opposed to proposals made by those emphasizing prostitutes' rights to self-determination. From the Coalition's perspective, the existing agreement is not severe enough in its rejection of the significance of consent. The Convention as written, the Coalition notes, is "directed specifically at prohibiting pimping, procuring, and brothels because they constitute coercion. Therefore, the 1949 Convention implies a distinction between coerced and 'voluntary' prostitution."<sup>57</sup> Because the Convention admits the possibility of consent even while dismissing



its relevance in determining instances of trafficking, neo-abolitionists believe the agreement to have "only limited value in protecting women's human rights because ... it reduces the victimization of women to only the most extreme examples of torture and slavery, thus obscuring how prostitution violates human rights..."<sup>58</sup>

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women thus reiterates the abolitionist view that *all* instances of prostitution are abusive, not only those that are most obviously nonconsensual. Indeed, it is not the issue of coercion that interests the Coalition, but rather the problem of *sex*. Thus, while the European Working Group proposes expanding the definition of "trafficking" to emphasize the common features of "deception, coercion, violence and financial exploitation," the Coalition argues instead that the pertinent commonality is "the abuse of a person's sexuality." It is *sexual commerce*, not *sexual coercion*, that is identified as a threat to human rights. For this reason, the Coalition proposes rewriting the agreement to replace the notion of "trafficking" with that of "sexual exploitation" including:

casual, brothel, military, pornographic prostitution, and sex tourism, mail order bride markets, and trafficking in women ... [which] violates the rights of anyone, female or male, adult or child, Western or Third World.... Therefore this definition rejects the use of any of these distinctions to determine exploitation as artificial and serving to legitimize prostitution.<sup>59</sup>

The Coalition's proposals have met with serious criticism from European anti-trafficking activists. One member of the Dutch National Council of Churches has argued that the Coalition's proposal to revise existing UN conventions on trafficking "denies the right of self-determination of adult women.... The whole draft convention breathes a patronizing air...."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in a document signed by "women's, children's and development groups in Thailand" (including EMPOWER, Friends of Women Migrant Workers in Asia, Terre des Hommes, and the YMCA), the Coalition's proposed changes are criticized for

not allowing the differences between forced prostitution and prostitution chosen by women in both industrialized

and developing nations ... [in the Coalition's document] prostitution is prohibited without exception, absolutely. This is not in accordance with the present reality, and more regressive than the basic principle stated in the 1949 Convention.<sup>61</sup>

For activists who resist the abolitionist imperative—including those involved in anti-trafficking work—the context and conditions of sexual labor become a paramount concern. Those who are enslaved must be made free either to leave the trade or to join those who are "merely" exploited in demanding better wages, safer working conditions, and greater control over the labor process. Such a perspective allows prostitution to be examined critically as a form of service work, with attention focused on factors enhancing or limiting a worker's power relative to clients, employers, and colleagues. When erotic labor is viewed as work, it is transformed from a simple act of affirmation of man's command over woman, and instead is revealed to be an arena of struggle, where the meaning and terms of the sexual exchange are vulnerable to cultural and political contestation.





**Grazyna**, *victim of forced prostitution and trafficking*  
Amsterdam, 1993

My name is Grazyna, I'm thirty years old, and I come from Poland. I used to work in the shipbuilding industry, but since the so-called "revolution" there is no more work for me. I'm divorced and have two children to support. The economic crisis turned my life upside down. In September of 1991, I was working in a restaurant in Yugoslavia and had just come to the end of my contract. Through some acquaintances, I met a man who asked me whether I was interested in going to work in a restaurant in Germany where I would earn three times as much for the same kind of work. I was interested because the situation in Yugoslavia was becoming more and more unstable. It was agreed that I would work as kitchen help and would be paid a salary between DM 1,500 and DM 1,800 a month. A few days later, Robert came with two other men to fetch me. There was also another woman with them who was going to work in Germany, too.

At the German border I had to give him my passport because he somehow convinced me that it was better if he was the one to hand it to the immigration officers. He never gave it back to me. We stopped at a hotel somewhere in Germany and Robert and one of the other men stayed with me while the other man went somewhere with the other woman. I never did see her again. That's when I was told that I was going to work as a prostitute. I protested, but it didn't help. When I kept refusing, one of the men raped me while Robert took photographs which he threatened to send to my mother if I continued to resist. I was taken to the Netherlands, where I was forced to work as a prostitute behind a window in a street full of "prostitution windows." They said they would be watching me all the time so I shouldn't even think about escaping. They also said it was no use going to the police because they were paying off the police, too. I was supposed to earn at least 600 guilders a day, and if I didn't I was beaten and kicked. It was terrifying.

Sometimes I was allowed to keep some money, which I sent to my mother and children in Poland, but I didn't dare tell them about my real situation. After I had been working a few weeks under close

guard, I saw a chance to escape. A client seemed to like me so I asked him for help. After some hesitation, he took me to his apartment. Two weeks later, a man appeared at the door; the client was afraid and let me go. From then on I was guarded even more closely and not allowed to go anywhere unaccompanied. I pretended to submit. I worked, I laughed, and I hoped that my captors would relax their guard. I was still determined to escape.

It finally worked. In an unguarded moment, I fled, not knowing where to go. On the street I spoke to a woman passerby who couldn't understand me. But at least she figured out that I was Polish. It turned out that she had a Polish neighbor and this neighbor understood my story. The woman let me sleep in her house that night, and the next day she brought me to a center for asylum-seekers. But the Ministry of Justice eventually decided I didn't fulfill the criteria for recognition as a political refugee and rejected my request for asylum. Luckily my lawyer understood that I was a victim of trafficking and contacted the Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, the STV. They explained about the laws against trafficking in the Netherlands and told me what my rights were. Since I had nothing more to lose, I decided to press criminal charges.

The STV contacted the Vice Police, but they didn't believe me. They thought I made up the charge of trafficking after my asylum request had been denied so that I could stay in the Netherlands. They wanted to know why I hadn't filed the trafficking charges in the first place. Fortunately, the woman I had been brought to Germany with had ended up in another city in the Netherlands and had also filed charges against Josef and Robert. The police in that town had contacted the STV for assistance for her. So finally my case was taken seriously. That meant I would be allowed to stay in the Netherlands until all legal procedures were completed. But my relief was short-lived. Josef was arrested but, through a procedural mistake, he was released. Robert was never found.

After some time, my case was dismissed for lack of evidence and I knew I would have to leave the country. Meanwhile my mother informed me that "some strange people" had visited her and were



asking where I was. I can't imagine going back. The STV and my lawyer are trying to get me a residence permit for the Netherlands on humanitarian grounds, but it will take months, maybe years for a decision. In the meantime, I miss my children and my family.

[This testimony was presented by a staff worker at the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women at the U.N. World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, June 15, 1993.]

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**Luisa**, *indentured brothel worker*  
Amsterdam, 1993

I'm 23 years old and I was born in a small village in Colombia where I lived most of my life. My parents earned very little money so, to help support my family, I began working as a prostitute in a bar in Panama, and later in Aruba. There I met a man who told me he had two sex clubs in the Netherlands and asked if I was interested in coming to Holland to work. The promise of more money was something I just couldn't pass up. I told him I could buy my own plane ticket, but he said he would arrange everything and I could pay him back later. He said that if I tried to arrange things myself, the police might make trouble and send me back to Colombia after taking all my money. He arranged for me to fly into Germany. A man named Ronny and his friend picked me up at the airport and drove me to the Netherlands. At first they were very friendly and we chatted about the weather and my flight. Then Ronny and the other man began to talk in Papaminto; I understood enough to know that they wanted me to pay them a lot of money and I started to get really frightened.

I was tired and wanted something to eat, but Ronny took me to one of his clubs and had me work until 4:00 a.m. Then he took me back to his house which became my prison when I wasn't working. I asked Ronny when I would get paid but he said that I had to first pay him 15,000 guilders. I'd have to work in his clubs and I wouldn't get any money until I had earned everything I "owed" him. He wanted my passport and became furious when I tried to keep it from him. I felt like I had no choice but to give it to him.

When I started working, I had no idea how much I was earning because the clients paid the two men behind the bar. Finally I heard that the clients paid 150 guilders a session and that I was going to earn about 55 or 60 of that. But I never saw any of it. Ronny kept it all because he said I had to pay him back the money I owed him first. From the time I arrived in the Netherlands, I worked six days a week, and saw eight or nine clients each night. My earnings were recorded by the bar keepers but, even if they forgot to do it, I kept my own records. After about eight weeks, I went to Ronny and told him that I thought I had paid off my debt and I wanted my passport back. I figured that I had seen at least 250 clients by then and showed him the records I had been keeping. He got really angry and told me I owed him another 15,000 guilders for rent and all sorts of expenses. Then he tore up my records, grabbed my head and tried to stuff my mouth with them. He picked up a chair and started beating me with it.

I decided I had to run away; I wasn't going to earn another 15,000 guilders for him. So I took a chance, called an acquaintance and asked for help. I had really thought that in the Netherlands I would be able to find legitimate work as a prostitute. If I had known beforehand that I would be so abused and have no control over my life, then I never would have come here.

[This material is from a 1993 interview conducted by the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women.]

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**Lisa Hofman**,

*Director of Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women*  
Utrecht, Netherlands, 1994

At the Dutch Foundation Against Trafficking in Women we're terribly pragmatic. We start from the basic reality that prostitution exists; it probably always has and probably always will. There are millions of women in the world who see prostitution as the best means of survival for themselves and their families. It seems to us, then, that the best place to start is to improve the circumstances under which it takes place, thereby strengthening the ability these women have to



negotiate better conditions for themselves. We've adopted this approach because we've seen what a dangerous illusion it is to look to the state to abolish prostitution. Just like with drugs, when you criminalize prostitution you only drive it underground and make it more dangerous.

I think that this kind of pragmatism is very common among anti-trafficking organizations with real contacts in the field. When you start working with these women and really develop respect for them, it becomes clear how important it is to change the very practical circumstances of their life. The point is, given existing conditions, some women do make a rational choice to do this work. We would never call it a "free choice," but "free choice" in the contemporary labor market is something that very few people really have. I think it's a good long-term goal, but it's not a very practical guide to immediate action. What is urgent is to help these women increase their options and gain more control over their lives. So for those of us in anti-trafficking groups in places like Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands, we've all concluded that decriminalization has to be the priority. Prostitution itself should never be an offense. What has to be punished is coercion, violence, and deception. That is a crucial distinction; without it, you can't work effectively with the women in the field.

We were shocked when we went to an anti-trafficking conference in New York in 1988 and discovered how out of touch with working women the U.S. Coalition [Coalition Against Trafficking in Women] seemed to be. I think it's very significant that that particular group only works with women who have already left prostitution. The whole thing felt kind of religious: "I am a survivor who was saved from this evil. I escaped and can now distance myself from my terrible past thanks to these good people who helped rescue me." That's a really different approach. Here we're primarily working with women who are still involved in prostitution. Of course we are here to help those who are trying to leave, but we also recognize the importance of working with those who decide to stay to improve conditions in the trade.

The problem is that these two approaches aren't able to comfortably coexist; the U.S. Coalition was one of the very first organizations concerned with trafficking and that means that they set the tone. They have a high profile and excellent contacts with the UN. The Coalition tends to present itself as if they are *the* international representative of all anti-trafficking groups. If you've ever had anything to do with them, shared information with them, whatever, then suddenly you are part of their network. But in my opinion, it's not a network. A network means real cooperation and an acknowledgment of our differences.

Two years ago we held a European-wide conference with representatives from eighteen countries from around the continent. A really different perspective came out of that meeting but it's been hard to get our voices heard. It seems that the Americans have convinced everyone that they speak for all of us. I suppose we need to be more diligent in attending international conferences, but we really aren't big-time professional conference goers. Our work is in the field. Other people seem to specialize in attending conferences. It's almost a career, going from meeting to meeting like that. The result is that you develop lots of contacts, but you also start to operate in a kind of closed circuit and run the risk that you lose contact with your base. I keep thinking it shouldn't be a choice between the two, but practically speaking, we experience a certain amount of tension knowing that we can't do it all. In general, it seems to me that the movement here is different in style from the Americans. We always try to work together despite our differences whereas it seems like nobody there will talk to you if you don't already agree with them. Well, I'm sorry, but we really aren't used to that style of working. It's all so unproductive when we share such important goals like strengthening women's right to self-determination. More and better choices has been such an important goal for feminists whether you're talking about abortion, reproduction, or prostitution.

If you depend only on the state, you end up with repressive strategies which often interfere with the rights of women to make decisions about their own lives. For instance, the Dutch state recently



imposed new regulations designed to fight "paper marriages," partly using the argument that it would help curtail trafficking in women. Actually, among our clients the use of paper marriages is pretty unusual. But because the government is so intent on denying residency to foreigners, this paper marriage law was very popular and passed without any problem. The result is that foreign residents now have fewer rights. A Dutch person can decide to marry for any reason at all: for financial gain, tax purposes, convenience, whatever. But migrants who marry are strictly controlled; now all migrant women interested in getting married have an additional hurdle to jump. That doesn't increase their independence or their ability to determine what's going to happen in their lives.

The problem with repressive strategies is maybe the clearest if you look at the new visa requirements for women from some Third World countries. By requiring visas for these women to travel to the Netherlands, they just become more dependent on "go-betweens" who can get them into the country. Again, the new requirements are part of a much broader campaign against foreigners, and absolutely not effective in addressing the problem of trafficking. Visas are just a tried and true method of discouraging immigration; so the authorities don't get much more creative than that. The Justice Department doesn't think: "Okay, how can we best get rid of the pimps, the go-betweens and the traffickers?" They just immediately think "visas." We keep trying to point out to them that that kind of strategy only strengthens the hand of the traffickers and weakens the position of the women themselves. But they have a "Fort Europa" mentality and are trying to close the gates. If you really want to stem the flow of foreign prostitutes into Europe, the only real solution is to do something about the inequality between the rich and poor parts of the world. But that again is a very long-term strategy. For the moment, the state seems to have decided that the most politically popular thing to do is simply to try and close the borders. There are very few people willing to say that we have to come to terms with the fact that Europe is an immigration magnet. Instead foreigners are targeted as the source of all of our problems and excluding them becomes some kind of solution.

This year the Dutch government came close to abolishing the prohibition on brothels, but in exchange they almost instituted a ban against women from outside the European Community working in prostitution. The STV immediately responded that this would be a violation of migrants' rights. If you are going to regulate prostitution for foreigners it should never be done through the criminal code but through regular immigration law and labor law—just like for all other professions. The assumption that foreign women shouldn't have the right to decide whether they will work in prostitution is patronizing. Under the proposed regulations they would have been put in the same category as children who, by definition, cannot choose prostitution. That's a complete denial of their right to self-determination. We were also opposed to the prohibition on foreign prostitutes because we knew that it would put them at greater risk. They are still going to come, of course; you aren't going to stop them. But under the proposed changes they would have ended up in the illegal circuit, where they would be much less visible and much less accessible to those of us doing outreach work.

It was difficult for us to decide to publicly oppose the proposed revisions. Our position wasn't always appreciated by the other groups involved [The Red Thread and the prostitution policy group, the de Graaf Foundation]. We certainly agree that brothels should be removed from the criminal code; that's something we've supported for a long time. But then replace it with legislation advantageous to more than just the brothel owners. The new law should be an improvement for the women in the trade.

Some people initially thought it was better to accept what they saw as partial success, than to leave the old law on the books. So it was especially crucial that we were there defending the interests of migrant women. It isn't clear to me that the other organizations take those concerns seriously enough even though a very significant proportion of prostitutes in this country are foreigners. There are probably thirteen to fifteen thousand migrant women working in the Netherlands in prostitution; that means 40 to 60 percent of the prostitutes in the big cities are foreign. Among those women, there are



several hundred cases each year of trafficking. And no matter how they got here, all of those women would have been made more vulnerable under the new law. That's just bad policy.



## SECTION II

# WORKING IT