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What's Wrong with Prostitution?

Evaluating Sex Work

Christine Overall

Two problems

THIS ARTICLE originated from the recognition of two problems concerning the nature, meaning, value, and circumstances of prostitution within capitalist patriarchy. The first of these problems is the apparent conflict between some sex trade workers and many feminists in regard to the acceptability of prostitution. Women who work in the sex trade industry often feel condemned and rejected by many feminist women. One sex worker, for instance, writes resentfully of “the apparently immutable feminist party-line that [sex] work was degrading and oppressive to women,” adding that feminists and sex trade workers “are split into good girls and bad girls—just like society’s Good Women and Whores. Only this time the fears of moral inferiority and uncontrollable sexuality are couched in feminist political language.”¹ This notion is echoed in the anthology published by the Toronto Women’s Press, *Good Girls/Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face*, a partial transcript of a 1985 Toronto conference at which Canadian feminists and workers in the sex trade discussed sex work.² Both great good will and anger are palpable among the participants. The workers did not want others to speak authoritatively about their lives; they resented the assumption that their work was necessarily demeaning and never freely chosen. Instead they defended their “right” to be prostitutes and the value, dignity, and liberty of the work, which

I am grateful to Cheryl Misak for her detailed and sensitive comments on this article, to the audience at the Queen’s University Department of Philosophy Colloquium for their questions and comments, and to Jeanne Barker-Nunn and the anonymous reviewers for *Signs*.

¹ Peggy Morgan, “Living on the Edge,” in *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, ed. Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander (Pittsburgh: Cleis, 1987), 23, 25.

² Laurie Bell, ed., *Good Girls/Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1987).

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many of them take to be a "profession."³ Nor did they want to be the targets of pity or rescue work; according to a statement from the Second World Whores' Congress (1986), "Prostitutes reject support that requires them to leave prostitution; they object to being treated as symbols of oppression and demand recognition as workers."⁴ As one sex worker stated, "We want respect for our work."⁵

The vehemence of these pronouncements led me to wonder whether feminists must necessarily be committed to the sort of position on prostitution so roundly condemned by many of the workers themselves. Surprisingly, I found that compared to other topics related to sexuality on which feminist theorists have written copiously (e.g., pornography), sex work has received relatively little attention in recent years, and little of that actually fits the vision of feminist theory presented by sex workers.⁶

The relative paucity of recent discussion of sex work by feminists may well be because the topic is a difficult one for women; it is a topic that divides us. In fact, the division of opinion that ostensibly exists between feminists and sex workers also divides feminists themselves. As Gayle Rubin points out, "Feminism has always been vitally interested in sex. But there have been two strains of feminist thought on the subject. One tendency has criticized the restrictions on women's sexual behavior and denounced the high costs imposed on women for being sexually active. This tradition of feminist sexual thought has called for a sexual liberation that would work for women as well as for men. The second tendency has considered sexual liberalization to be inherently a mere extension of male privilege. This tradition resonates with conservative, anti-sexual discourse. With the advent of the anti-pornography movement, it achieved temporary hegemony over feminist analysis."⁷ While Rubin's description is biased by her sympathy for the liberationist approach to sexuality⁸ and her rejection of the radical feminist approach that is primarily critical of

³ See esp. Margo St. James, "The Reclamation of Whores," in Bell, ed., 81-87; and Valerie Scott, "C-49: A New Wave of Oppression," in Bell, ed., 100-103. Also see, e.g., the debate in "Human Rights: 'Simple Human Respect,'" in *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, ed. Gail Pheterson (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989), 52-102.

⁴ Draft Statements from the Second World Whores' Congress (1986), in Delacoste and Alexander, eds., 307-21, esp. 307.

⁵ Pheterson, 87.

⁶ Compare the debates in "Feminism: Crunch Point," in Pheterson, ed., 144-72, and "The Big Divide": Feminist Reactions to the Second World Whores' Congress," in Pheterson, ed., 173-91.

⁷ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 301.

⁸ This approach also has significant similarities to what Alison Jaggar identifies as the liberal stance on prostitution; Alison M. Jaggar, "Prostitution," in *Philosophy of Sex: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Alan Soble (Totowa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1980), 348-68, esp. 350-51.

male privilege, she nevertheless provides a fairly accurate categorization of a very deep split within feminist theorizing on sexuality. It is a split between an emphasis on sexual freedom and pleasure that views women exclusively as agents, on the one hand, and an emphasis on sexual danger and degradation that sees women exclusively as victims on the other. The debate is over how one should live out one's sexuality and to what ends—for instance, money, pleasure, security, or autonomy.

The subject of prostitution provides a particularly sharp example of this split in feminist thought. While Rubin describes prostitution as “innocuous,” Susan G. Cole describes it as “an institution of male supremacy . . . in the same way as . . . slavery was an institution of white supremacy,” an institution in which “lots of women . . . are getting hurt.”⁹ Andrea Dworkin claims that prostitution is not a simple matter of choice but is, along with rape, one of the “institutions that most impede any experience of intercourse as freedom”; it “negate[s] self-determination and choice for women.”¹⁰ To complicate the controversy, some sex trade workers, especially those who have for one reason or another left the work, would agree with those feminists who are highly critical of prostitution. In addition, sex workers themselves are often feminist in many of their beliefs, if not their self-identification. As a statement from the Second World Whores' Congress (1986) puts it, “Due to feminist hesitation or refusal to accept prostitution as legitimate work and to accept prostitutes as working women, the majority of prostitutes have not identified as feminists; nonetheless, many prostitutes identify with feminist values such as independence, financial autonomy, sexual self-determination, personal strength, and female bonding.”¹¹

To understand this divergence in women's opinions about sex work, it is important first to recognize that it originates from a long history of feminist work around the issue of prostitution and sexuality.¹² This division among women can also be seen as another case of patriarchal divide and conquer; although such a process is not necessarily a deliberate conspiracy, it functions effectively to keep women arguing with each other rather than with those who perpetuate and benefit from the

⁹ Rubin, 283; Susan G. Cole, “Sexual Politics: Contradictions and Explosions,” in Bell, ed., 33–36, esp. 35.

¹⁰ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 143.

¹¹ Draft Statements from the Second World Whores' Congress (1986), in Delacoste and Alexander (n. 1 above), 307.

¹² See Judith R. Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6, no. 1 (1980): 123–35, and “Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 419–38; and Ellen Carol Dubois and Linda Gordon, “Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought,” in Vance, ed. (n. 7 above), 31–49.

practice. Thus some feminists come to despise the work that some other women do, and some sex workers come to resent the belief systems that some feminists hold. But despite this functional explanation, I wondered whether it is possible to respond more positively to the difference of opinion and, indeed, to find a way to reconcile the views on each side. In the attempt to do so, I shall be quoting extensively from the written words of women sex workers themselves.

The other problem with which this article begins arises from the fact that I had more initial sympathy with the second of Rubin's two feminist factions than with the first. In other words, I had a conviction that there is something deeply wrong with prostitution, that sex work is not defensible. Although as a feminist I could support sex workers' demands for recognition of their human rights, I could not respond to the demand that I "respect" sex work itself; I believed that prostitution is bad for women, both women in "the life" and women outside it. In this assumption I was not alone: most writers on prostitution, whether feminist or not, appear to make the assumption that there is something more morally troubling about prostitution than about other forms of women's work. But precisely *what* is it that is wrong with prostitution? The second aim of this article, then, is to figure out specifically what, if anything, is wrong with prostitution, particularly with respect to the persons, primarily women, who engage in the work.¹³

I want to make it clear that in asking this question, at the beginning in a deliberately naive way, I am not condemning sex workers for doing the work they do. I want to maintain a crucial moral distinction between prostitutes as sex workers and prostitution as a practice and institution. I also wish to distinguish my stance from what I understand as more traditional motivations behind the condemnation of sex work: a hatred of women, who are alleged to live out an evil and sexually rapacious nature at the expense of gullible men, or a hatred and fear of sexual activity itself. Nor is my goal to show that sex trade workers are wrong to defend their work and their right to do it, but rather to discern what truth can be found in their views. I also want to challenge the us-versus-them mentality that suggests that a feminist not in the sex trade may not discuss the work of those who are, a prohibition that buys in too willingly to the good girls/bad girls dichotomy (one that, as I shall argue later, there are several good reasons to reject). At the same time, the issue of prostitution impinges powerfully on my own thinking as a feminist, forc-

¹³ I shall set aside nonfeminist criticisms primarily concerned with prostitution as a public nuisance, which are ably discussed by Rosemarie Tong, *Women, Sex, and the Law* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984), 39-46; and by the Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution, "Pornography and Prostitution: Issues Paper" (Minister of Supply and Services Canada, Ottawa, 1983), 53 ff.

ing me to confront some of my own biases and stereotypes, even my own internalized woman-hatred. Rather than avoiding the controversy over prostitution, it seems important to confront it in order to build feminist theory and practice, particularly in the area of sexuality.

Sex work within capitalism

Although sex work can be defined generally as the exchange of money for sex acts and services of various kinds, and sex workers also include erotic dancers, strippers, models in the pornography industry, and phone sex partners, this article focuses mainly upon prostitutes in contemporary North America and makes no attempt to generalize beyond that context. This prostitution takes many different forms, ranging from the more visible street prostitution and so-called massage parlors to brothels, so-called escort services, and call girl operations. Since child prostitution raises different and additional issues, I shall restrict my discussion to adult prostitution.

Prostitution is a commercial enterprise, and evidence strongly suggests that the women who engage in it do so primarily, and often exclusively, for economic gain.¹⁴ As former sex worker Amber Hollibaugh writes, "The bottom line for any woman in the sex trades is economics. However a woman feels when she finally gets into the life, it always begins as survival—the rent, the kids, the drugs, pregnancy, financing an abortion, running away from home, being undocumented, having a 'bad' reputation, incest—it always starts at trying to get by."¹⁵ And, as Catherine MacKinnon points out, "aside from modelling (with which it has much in common), hooking is the only job for which women as a group are paid more than men."¹⁶

Yet female cooks, secretaries, and university professors also sell their labor power, and for many of them economic gain may be their chief or only motive. Under capitalism, the majority of adult human beings must sell their labor power for some fraction of its value in order to obtain the means of subsistence for themselves and for those who are economically dependent upon them. Why then should prostitution be considered morally any worse than cooking, secretarial service, or professorial work? If

¹⁴ Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, "Prostitution in Canada" (Ottawa, March 1984), 42–43; Debi Brock, "Beyond Images: Hookers and Feminists," *Broadside* 7, no. 6 (April 1986): 8–9; Kate Millett, "Prostitution: A Quartet for Female Voices," in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Signet, 1971), 100, 102.

¹⁵ Amber Hollibaugh, "On the Street Where We Live," *Women's Review of Books* 5 (January 1988): 1.

¹⁶ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 24–25.

one of these is to be condemned for the alienation of the self that is paid labor, then all should be condemned. As Alison Jaggar points out, "If there is indeed a philosophically significant distinction to be made between the woman who sells sexual services and the individual who sells services of any kind, then that distinction must be given a philosophical rationale."¹⁷

In what follows I attempt to find such a rationale by describing a number of possible feminist objections to prostitution and the limitations of each.¹⁸ My aim here is to discover what, if anything, makes prostitution worse than other forms of paid labor in capitalist society. In order to do this, I must engage, as have many feminist critics of sex work, in the somewhat artificial separation of some of the different contexts and conditions of sex work. Assuming that all labor now occurs within the constraints of capitalist exchange, I am asking the deliberately essentialist question of whether there is anything inherent in sex work as practiced today that renders it inevitably morally problematic in a way that other forms of work are not, and whether it is possible to change sex work in such a way as to overcome those moral objections.

For this purpose it is helpful to use the criteria for evaluating sexual behavior proposed by Rubin: "A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide."¹⁹ These criteria constitute a framework for evaluating prostitution as just one among other ways for human beings to relate to each other. First, then, and most obviously, prostitution might be criticized because it is a source of danger, disease, mistreatment, insecurity, indignity, psychological abuse, and emotional pain for women. In the past decade, moreover, sex workers' vulnerability has been enormously increased by the risk of contracting AIDS and from the dangers incurred in requiring their often-recalcitrant customers to use condoms. The 1987 anthology *Sex Work*, a collection of writings by sex trade workers, details many examples of prostitutes who are raped, beaten, injured, robbed, and exploited in the course of their work. Not surprisingly, these women often grow to despise their customers and to hate men in general.

Some of the disagreement in the literature on prostitution between feminists and sex trade workers comes from focusing on different material conditions for the work. One prostitute described the difference in

¹⁷ Jaggar, 354.

¹⁸ These objections cut across the criticisms cited by Alison Jaggar in "Prostitution." In my view, the criticisms that feminists might make of prostitution no longer—if they ever did—line up neatly into the categories of liberalism, Marxism, and radical feminism.

¹⁹ Rubin (n. 7 above), 283.

possible working conditions: "When you're doing a fucking car date, and you're in and out of there and it's dirty, that guy is a gungebag [*sic*]. I know that. But I'm talking about when you take prostitution out of that environment—when you've got a guy that sees you as a human being, when he is able to be responsive and not see you that way, when you've got a setting around you that makes you feel dignified instead of on the run. I've seen what prostitution, as a trade, can be like at its best. And it's not nearly what we have now."²⁰ Of course, what it would take to make prostitution what it can be "at its best" deserves further political analysis. Nonetheless, in *Good Girls/Bad Girls*, some of the prostitutes describe pleasant, clean, even luxurious surroundings for their work, well-mannered "clients," and a reasonable, civilized exchange of sex for money.²¹ Thus danger and injury are not essential elements of the labor, for sex work could still be done, and sometimes is, without them. Furthermore, they are not unique to sex work, for women can be and are subjected to disease, injury, and psychological abuse inflicted by men in offices, factories, and even their own homes. Hence, the presence of these conditions is not by itself a reason for condemning prostitution more than other forms of women's work in capitalist patriarchy.

A second criterion listed by Rubin for evaluating sexual interactions is "the presence or absence of coercion." A serious objection often made to prostitution is that prostitutes do not choose the work; it is a job that women—particularly women doubly and triply disadvantaged by poverty and racism—engage in only under duress or when no other possible option appears to present itself. As former prostitute Toby Summer says, "Prostitution is not freedom, not just another job. It is the abuse of women. It is sexual slavery."²² Similarly, the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women asks, "Can a person of minimal education and financial well-being be said truly to choose a way of life that is stigmatized by much of society, that is physically dangerous at times, that leaves her with little control over her earning power, and that can cause her considerable legal complications?"²³ Thus, such an argument holds, the existence of prostitution as a "profession" constitutes for many women what Thomas A. Mappes calls a "coercive offer." In such cases, the person's situation is subject to "severe prior constraints," such that prostitution presents the single realistic chance of alleviating her needs. The life circumstances of many women entering prostitution often seem to be such that prostitution is the only possible way out from impoverishment

²⁰ Participant, "From the Floor," in Bell, ed. (n. 2 above), 50.

²¹ For example, "Cathy," "From the Floor," in Bell, ed., 119.

²² Toby Summer, "Women, Lesbians and Prostitution: A Workingclass Dyke Speaks Out against Buying Women for Sex," *Lesbian Ethics* 2 (Summer 1987): 33–44, esp. 38.

²³ Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 84.

and lack of opportunity.²⁴ Some critics of prostitution also suggest that some survivors of childhood sexual abuse turn to prostitution because "it is no great leap to learn to make a living selling the only part of them which they have been taught to believe has any value."²⁵

The presence of coercion, however, is a point of disagreement among writers on the topic of prostitution. While some sex workers are willing to grant that many women are not in the work by choice, they also insist that some are. One prostitute, referring to possible changes in the law governing prostitution, claims, "Very few of us are going to stop working. Many of us like to work. It's our choice."²⁶ A more diffident respondent says, "I like to believe I have some kind of free choice. Some choice in my life. That I chose a lesser evil. I wanted to do it. And somehow I want that to be respected. I *wanted* to do that. Somehow their pity deprives me of my freedom of choice. . . . I'd like so much to have the illusion that I had some freedom of choice. Maybe it's just an illusion, but I need to think I had some freedom. Yet then I realize how much was determined in the way I got into prostitution, how determined my life had been, how fucked over I was to have no confidence in myself."²⁷

As the last quotation suggests, the issue of choice in connection with sex work is a particularly difficult one. Several considerations complicate it. The presence of coercion and the absence of consent arguably are features of many of women's activities and roles. Yet the claim that women's participation implies consent is often used in turn to justify that participation, and indeed, in the case of activities like prostitution, to blame women for it. Ex-prostitute Sarah Wynter makes an analogy between those prostitutes who say they like their work and their pimps and those assaulted women who insist that everything in their marriages is just fine.²⁸ Paula Jennings writes, "I am surprised the patriarchy has not yet erected a monument to 'Consent,' inscribed with the words, 'without which none of this would have been possible.' Perhaps no other concept has confused so many people for so long. Women 'consent' to: a lifetime of unpaid domestic and sexual service (she wanted to get married); badly paid monotonous work (she took the job); clothing which restricts movement and damages health (no one marched her to the shop at gunpoint);

²⁴ Thomas A. Mappes, "Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person," in *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, 3d ed., ed. Thomas A. Mappes and Jane S. Zembaty (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 248-62, esp. 260, 261.

²⁵ Megan Ellis, *Broadside* 8, no. 3 (December 1986/January 1987): 4; cf. Donna Marie Niles, "Confessions of a Priestessstute," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds. (n. 1 above), 148-49, esp. 148; but see Brock on the limitations of this explanation for women in prostitution.

²⁶ "Cathy," "Unveiling," in Bell, ed. (n. 2 above), 88-91, esp. 91.

²⁷ Millett (n. 14 above), 124-25, her emphasis.

²⁸ Susan G. Cole, "Whispering Out Loud," *Broadside* 10, no. 4 (February 1989): 3.

etc., etc.”²⁹ So the question becomes whether in a context of economic insecurity, sex role socialization, and inadequate education women choose prostitution any less than they choose other forms of traditional women’s work. Surely women who “choose” sex work do not have the chance to consider and reject alternative careers in fields such as scientific research, music, law, academia, or professional sport. But neither do the women who “choose” to work in the canning factory, the typing pool, the supermarket, or the home cleaning industry. If this is so, then the problem of choice is no more a basis for criticizing prostitution than it is for criticizing other types of paid labor under the limiting and exploitive conditions of capitalism.

Yet it is also important, I now think, not to assume that the very fact that a person engages in a particular sexual activity demonstrates a lack of choice. Rubin calls this the “brainwash theory,” one that “explains erotic diversity by assuming that some sexual acts are so disgusting that no one would willingly perform them. Therefore, the reasoning goes, anyone who does so must have been forced or fooled. Even constructivist sexual theory has been pressed into the service of explaining away why otherwise rational individuals might engage in variant sexual behavior.”³⁰ I assume, rather, that some credence must be given to women when they speak from their own experience, and that women who say they choose to engage in activities that I personally find bizarre or repugnant cannot merely be dismissed as having “false consciousness.” I am not willing to assume a more privileged view of their circumstances and motivation, nor to claim that they are all deluded. Some sex workers (perhaps most) appear to have little or no choice about their work; but some do have some alternatives, are explicitly conscious of them, and deliberately choose prostitution.

Assuming, therefore, that problems about choice are not unique to sex work and that it is not impossible consciously to choose to engage in it, the question about prostitution now becomes, What if women could always and genuinely choose whether to join the sex trade? If coercion is not an essential element in prostitution, insofar as the practice can and does take place without it, then it appears that it too is not a reason for condemning sex work more than other forms of women’s paid labor.

Another criticism of prostitution is that it entails the surrender of personal power and control and loss of independence on the part of the women who engage in it. Prostitutes often give up much of their income and autonomy to the pimps and panderers who engineer the sexual exchanges. They may work very long hours, leaving little time for per-

²⁹ Paula Jennings, “The Hunt Saboteur in Fox Furs,” *Gossip* 6 (n.d.): 80–91, esp. 86–87.

³⁰ Rubin (n. 7 above), 306.

sonal and domestic maintenance, let alone for friendship, leisure, and the development of other interests and abilities. A former prostitute says: "I was in it for the money. I worked five to six days a week, almost every week and I did not have much spare time at all, I worked twelve and fourteen hours a day, some days."³¹ But, again, these conditions are not very different from the work many women do in factories, restaurants, and offices, where they earn little, have little control over themselves and their work, and are too exhausted at the end of a shift for much else. Suppose, instead, that the material and social conditions of the work were changed so that the participants did have control over their working conditions and hours. For example, suppose prostitutes formed unions, or worked in self-governing collectives for limited hours, at rates that were comparable to those charged by other so-called professionals. What then would be wrong with prostitution?

Another of Rubin's criteria for evaluating sexual activities is "the way the partners treat one another [and] the level of mutual consideration." Prostitution in this regard might be criticized as the retailing of intimacy. The prostitute sells her self in the most intimate way; her body, her sexual skills, are appropriated for the pleasure of the customer. She is objectified, treated not as a complete being but as a means to the customer's sexual goals. One prostitute explained, "The worst part about prostitution is that you're obliged not to sell sex only, but your humanity. That's the worst part of it: that what you're selling is your human dignity. Not really so much in bed, but in accepting the agreement—in becoming a bought person. There's a special indignity in prostitution, as if sex were dirty and men can only enjoy it with someone low. It involves a type of contempt, a kind of disdain, and a kind of triumph over another human being. . . . They [the tricks] had a tremendous fear of getting involved because that's giving something."³² Another prostitute even suggested that most women must be drugged to cope with this sort of work.³³ There is a lack of reciprocity, a one-sidedness to such exchange. Intimate, personal acts of this nature, it might be argued, should not be sold in the marketplace but exchanged by equals within a respectful relationship.

Yet if the objection is simply that in prostitution, sex is nonmonogamous and takes place without love, then of course very many sexual acts and relationships could be condemned on comparable grounds. It is not clear that there is a moral weakness in sex without love (although I will not explore this question here), but if there is, then it is a weakness in no way unique to prostitution. Interesting, too, is the fact that, from the

³¹ Shannon Bell, "Ho'ing, Sex and Power: An Interview with COYOTE's Gloria Lockett," *Rites* 6, no. 6 (November 1989): 6-7, esp. 7.

³² Millett, 104, 106, 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 65, 67.

perspective of some sex workers themselves, the business may be no more intimate and personal than cutting hair. What is being bought is merely the illusion of intimacy. One worker says, "Having a customer fondle a breast, for instance, may not be pleasant, especially if he's rough, but it doesn't feel like being violated. It's part of a job, and really no different than if he touched an elbow. It's not sexual; it's *work*."³⁴ Indeed, the retailing of intimacy is a rather common feature of modern North American life; in that respect, the prostitute may simply be a pioneer. Two clear analogies are the "legitimate" licensed masseuse and the psychotherapist. Both persons are offering very personal, intimate services. The masseuse services the client's body, in work that is highly sensual, though not specifically sexual. The therapist services the client's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings in work that is highly intimate and may involve considerable discussion of sex and the sexual.³⁵ Moreover, both roles are nonreciprocal: clients do not provide massages for masseuses, nor do they provide therapy for therapists.

What is striking is that we live in a culture where many of us must pay people both to take care of our bodies and to listen to our feelings. Some prostitutes' customers may well be seeking intimacy, love, and nurturance that they are unable or unwilling to look for in other human contexts. There is much to be criticized in these one-way commercial exchanges and much to be said for mutuality in intimate activities. Nevertheless, I hesitate to claim that nonreciprocity is always problematic, even in a sexual exchange. And, more important, if nonreciprocity and the retailing of intimacy are problematic, then once again the problem is not unique to prostitution. Of course, if there is a real analogy between the prostitute and the masseuse or the psychotherapist, then prostitutes have a right to receive the consideration and respect accorded by clients and by society generally to other professionals. But the absence of consideration and respect are not grounds for condemning the sexual exchange more harshly than other forms of exchange.

Prostitution in patriarchy

At this point the tentative answer to my question, What's wrong with prostitution? might seem to be, Nothing much more than what is wrong with selling ourselves and our services in other capacities within the definitions and limitations of capitalist culture. As Debi Brock and Jennifer Stephen put it, "Is offering 30 minutes of sex for, say \$80 really more awful than working for 8 hours in a sweatshop and earning \$4.50 an hour? Some

³⁴ Morgan (n. 1 above), 25, her emphasis.

³⁵ Compare Millett, 113.

of us don't think so."³⁶ By such an argument, the work of the prostitute is no more (and no less) to be condemned than the work of the cleaning woman, the factory worker, the file clerk, or the farm laborer. The conditions for prostitution in North America may be, in general, more inhumane than those for most other types of labor that women typically do. Rubin argues that this is primarily due to its being illegal.³⁷ Whether one accepts that argument or not, at this point we can certainly conclude that part of what is wrong with prostitution has to do with the avoidable circumstances that collectively make the work dangerous, debilitating, coercive, and largely unfulfilling. These circumstances are neither unique nor essential to the practice of prostitution; that is, the objections to sex work so far considered are not practice-specific. It is imaginable that prostitution could always be practiced, as it occasionally is even now, in circumstances of relative safety, security, freedom, hygiene, and personal control; if these conditions were effected, the criticisms detailed so far would seem to lose their power.

What this preliminary conclusion implies is not that prostitution is therefore beyond moral criticism, but that we have not yet found grounds for believing it to be in any special and unique way more morally objectionable than the many other forms of paid labor that women perform in capitalism. As Brock and Stephen would have it, "Women who work in the sex trade are workers, just like women working at GM or in any of the service industries."³⁸ The point is not that prostitution is "all right" because other forms of paid labor are "all right" but, rather, that prostitution so far seems not much worse than other forms of paid labor and can be criticized only and insofar as women's other forms of paid labor can be criticized.

Yet ultimately Rubin's sexual liberationist criteria for evaluating sexual relationships provide an inadequate assessment of prostitution because they overlook the sexual politics of human interactions. Examining individually the circumstances and characteristics of prostitution is an artificial exercise that fails to take into account either the major structural components of sex work or the reasons for its existence. For sex work differs in a crucial way from other forms of women's labor. While women's work of cooking, child care, or nursing is often commoditized, these forms of labor can and do also exist independently of any form of commercialization or exchange. Prostitution, by contrast, is defined in terms of buying and selling, or more generally, in terms of an asymmetrical relationship of exchange in which the sex worker provides sexual

³⁶ Debi Brock and Jennifer Stephen, "Which We Is Who?" *Broadside* 9, no. 3 (December 1987/January 1988): 4.

³⁷ Rubin, 289.

³⁸ Brock and Stephen, 4.

services and the customer supplies recompense for those services, usually in the form of money, but sometimes also in the form of food, lodging, clothing, or "luxuries." Without this asymmetrical economic exchange the sexual interaction is, by definition, not sex work, but a sexual event or relationship that does not involve service for the sake of material gain. Thus, buying and selling are inherent in sex work in a way that they are not inherent in the work of growing and preparing food, caring for children, or nursing the ill. While cooking, nursing, and child care need not necessarily be commoditized, sex work is by definition the commoditization of sex. What is essential to prostitution is not sexual activity itself but the buying of sexual activity.

Why is this characteristic significant? The inherent asymmetrical exchange in sex work, in which some persons sell sexual services to others, provides the context for other forms of asymmetry, all of them with important implications for its moral assessment. Prostitution is a classist, ageist, racist, and sexist industry, in which the disadvantaged sell services to those who are more privileged. It is classist because for the most part it uses the sex labor of poor and disadvantaged persons largely for the service of those with disposable income to spend on sexual gratification. It is ageist because it recruits and preys upon very young people, often people who are still children, and discards them when they are past the artificially created stage at which they are considered sexually attractive. It is racist because it often victimizes black and Asian women and thrives on race stereotypes of sexually insatiable yet subservient women of color who exist only to serve the sex needs of whites.

Last, and most important, it is sexist because it is an industry in which, for the most part, women are exploited for the purpose of serving men's desires.³⁹ In the sex industry women are the workers and men are the bosses. Although men do work as prostitutes, and women occasionally hire men or women for sex work, prostitution is, overwhelmingly, a relationship (if one can call it that) of men paying women for sexual services. Moreover, the predominant cultural images of sex workers—held not only by those outside the business but also by customers and sex workers themselves—are of women servicing men. This fact generates significant criticisms of prostitution that are specific to the practice of sex work.

There is, of course, a lot of other exploitive service work in which women similarly serve men, both in the workplace and in the home: office work, sales work, cooking, cleaning, and child care. According to the prevailing division of labor, then, sexual service, like nurturing and domestic work, is gendered: it is part of the work that is primarily allotted to women for the benefit of men. But though nurturing and

³⁹ Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution (n. 13 above), 48.

domestic work is mostly performed by women for men, it is also work that seems to be what I shall call "reversible." That is, there is nothing in the nature of the work itself, insofar as we can separate it from its working conditions, that would prevent it from being performed by men for men, by women for women, or, most significantly, by men for women. Moreover, the labor of office workers, sales clerks, cooks, cleaners, and child care workers has a value independent of the conditions of sexual and economic inequality under which it is done, and much of it would still be socially necessary in a postcapitalist, postpatriarchal world.

But what about prostitution? Is it similarly reversible, and does it have a value independent of the conditions of sexual and economic inequality under which it is performed? Can we imagine men working as prostitutes in the same numbers as women, or women hiring men as sex workers at the same rate as men now hire women? In other words, does the work possess a value⁴⁰—perhaps (as some sex workers have argued) as entertainment, sexual novelty, assertion of personal power or self-determination, sex therapy, social work, or celebration of female sexuality⁴¹—that would lead us to want to preserve the offering of sexual services for pay, while assuring that it be (like the comparable services of giving massages or providing psychotherapy) an equal opportunity service in which women and men are equally welcome, both as workers and as clients?

That is, in fact, the proposal that was made by CORP (Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes) at the 1986 annual general meeting of Canada's National Action Committee on the Status of Women: "[Prostitution] currently represents the provision of a legitimate and necessary service which should be equally available to both men and women (since levels of sexual need and/or opportunity can never be, nor should ever be, standardized),"⁴² Is this vision of prostitution as an equal opportunity service plausible? Science fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin has created a beautiful story in which she depicts the "Festival of Summer" held in an ostensibly free and joyous civilization. As part of the

⁴⁰ A value that, it is claimed, prostitution possessed in ancient times. See Ellen Strong, "The Hooker," in *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Vintage, 1970), 289–97, esp. 290.

⁴¹ Entertainment: St. James, "The Reclamation of Whores" (n. 3 above), 86. Sexual novelty: "Realistic Feminists: An Interview with Valerie Scott, Peggy Miller, and Ryan Hotchkiss," in Bell, ed. (n. 2 above), 204–17, esp. 206. Assertion: Bell (n. 31 above), 6; "Feminism: Crunch Point" (n. 6 above), 160–61. Sex therapy: Phyllis Luman Metal, "One for Ripley's," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds. (n. 1 above), 119–21, esp. 120. Social work: "Aline," "Good Girls Go to Heaven, Bad Girls Go Everywhere," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds., 131–34, esp. 134; Brock (n. 14 above), 8. Celebration: Nina Hartley, "Confessions of a Feminist Porno Star," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds., 142–44, esp. 142.

⁴² Quoted in Ellis (n. 25 above), 4.

festival she imagines "beautiful nudes"—both men and women—who "just wander about, offering themselves like divine souffles to the hunger of the needy and the rapture of the flesh."⁴³ However, the envisioned situation is not prostitution, for sexual services are not being bought and sold. We have instead to try to imagine a situation where both women and men buy sex and sell sex, where there is an equalization of the roles in sex work, and where no one is choosing the work out of economic desperation.

And that is much more difficult to conceive. The fact that it is men and not women who buy prostitutes' services is not, surely, just for women's lack of equal opportunity to do so. Unlike other forms of labor mostly performed by women, prostitution is dependent both for its value and for its very existence upon the cultural construction of gender roles in terms of dominance and submission. While women are taught to render sexual services for recompense and often to regard that rendering as part of what it means to be a woman, men are encouraged to seek and expect sexual services and, indeed, to regard the acquisition of sexual services as part of what it means to be a man.

To demonstrate this point, consider an old and dreary sexist joke. A man says to a woman, "Would you sleep with me for a million dollars?" "I suppose I would," replies the woman. "Would you sleep with me for five dollars?" he asks. "What do you take me for?" says the woman angrily, but the man responds, "We've already established that; now we're just negotiating your price." This joke invites the listener's complicity with the notion that all women are whores at heart; we all have a price. Prostitution is called "the oldest profession," suggesting that women have always done it, will always do it, and will choose to do it, even if a full range of other options is made available. The implication is that there is something inherent in women and independent of sexist cultural conditions that makes us want to sell sexual services to men.

Within capitalist patriarchal ideology only women are expected to prostitute themselves by exchanging their sexual labor. As prostitute Margo St. James, a representative of the sex trade workers' rights organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), points out, "The whore stigma is attached to women and only to women."⁴⁴ Calling a woman a whore or a slut is a way to exert control over her, to remind her of how she is defined and what she can be reduced to within patriarchy. In this culture any woman can be defined as a prostitute, insofar as she is regarded as being potentially available for a fee.

⁴³ Ursula K. LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," in *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*, by Ursula K. LeGuin (Toronto: Bantam, 1975), 252–59, esp. 255.

⁴⁴ St. James, "The Reclamation of Whores," 82.

What is also taken for granted in the joke about the woman's price is the supposed innocence of the man, whose own moral standing, though he is negotiating to buy sex, is never in question. While the sale of sex helps to define woman, it also condemns her; the purchase of sex also helps to define man, but it does not condemn him. At this point, then, it is tempting to turn the discussion from prostitution as a social practice to men as the customers. It is tempting to ask why men, some men, anyway, buy sex, and what is the nature of the "sexual need" referred to by CORP. Such questions are open to several different interpretations and responses. Asking why men hire prostitutes could be interpreted as a question about whether there is something innate in men, or in men's sexuality, that makes them want to do so. It could make prostitution sound both natural and inevitable, a "normal response to female sexual seductiveness and male sexual 'drive,'" and indeed a necessary outlet for otherwise pent-up male lust.⁴⁵ A vivid example of these assumptions can be found in a recent discussion of sex work by philosopher Lars O. Ericsson, who states that prostitution is "conditionally desirable because of certain ubiquitous and permanent imperfections of actual human societies"; it satisfies "important human needs" relating to "the sex drive." Hence, he says, we must "liberate ourselves from those mental fossils which prevent us from looking upon sex and sexuality with the same naturalness as upon our cravings for food and drink."⁴⁶

A comparable short answer given by some feminists to the question, Why do men do it? is simply, Men benefit from it. In Toby Summer's words, "Men as a class devised male supremacy because men—but not only men—find it exciting to use force and coercion."⁴⁷ But this approach assumes that men's sexual behavior is biologically determined and implies that promoting different male sexual practices is futile.⁴⁸ It begs the question of the origins of men's sexual "needs" and questions of why the practice of prostitution is perceived as a benefit and what sort of benefit it is.

For it cannot just be assumed that buying sexual services is a benefit in and of itself, that it is self-evidently something human beings (or at least male human beings) would want. That men benefit from prostitution, and that the buying of sexual services is perceived as an advantage for men, are cultural artifacts of gender socialization, which defines men's sexual desires in such a way that prostitution is seen as a legitimate

⁴⁵ Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 263.

⁴⁶ Lars O. Ericsson, "Charges against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment," *Ethics* 90 (April 1980): 337, 342, 347, 355.

⁴⁷ Summer (n. 22 above), 38–39.

⁴⁸ Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1985), 196.

response to them. Hence, to make prostitution reversible would require changing women's sexual socialization so as to construct women to regard the purchasing of sexual services as attractive and desirable in the way that many men do. Indeed, some writers have thought that if buying sex is a benefit for men, it must also be a potential benefit for women, one that they should be encouraged to seek out. Ericsson, for example, argues that under the present unequal circumstances of sex work, "some benefit is withheld from or denied women that is not withheld from or denied men." "The best way to deal with this inequality," he suggests, "would not be an attempt to stamp out the institution but an attempt to modify it, by making the benefit in question available to both sexes."⁴⁹ Similarly, St. James says, "I've always thought that whores were the only emancipated women. We are the only ones who have the absolute right to fuck as many men as men fuck women. In fact we are expected to have many partners a week, the same as any good stud."⁵⁰

By contrast, feminists critical of the expression of men's power through sexuality deny that women's acting sexually just like men is a worthy goal or that women's purchasing sexual services is a potential benefit. In a culture where women's sexuality is used to sell, and women learn that sex is our primary asset, sex work is not and cannot be just a private business transaction, an exchange of benefits between equals, or an egalitarian trade. Like rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and incest, prostitution is inherently gendered, a component and manifestation of the patriarchal institution of heterosexuality.⁵¹ Prostitution is structured in terms of a power imbalance in which women, the less powerful, sell to men, the more powerful. That power imbalance ensures both that women's sexuality is constructed very differently from that of men, and yet also, paradoxically, that male sexuality, socially constructed, defines the standards for evaluating human sexual activity.

While women may have the "freedom to choose that form of bondage (prostitution, marriage) that most suits them," we do not have the freedom to choose the institutions that shape our decisions and severely limit the options we have.⁵² Some sex workers proudly concur with Friedrich Engels's observation that a married woman "only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery."⁵³ Yet insofar as the comparison to marriage holds, it does not raise the standing of prosti-

⁴⁹ Ericsson, 350.

⁵⁰ St. James, "The Reclamation of Whores," 84.

⁵¹ See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Bantam, 1975) for a discussion of the connections among these phenomena.

⁵² Tong (n. 13 above), 55.

⁵³ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 134.

tution, but lowers that of marriage. Within capitalist patriarchy, both practices have traditionally existed to serve men. Prostitution is North American culture's archetypal sexual interaction, within which sex, money, and power are interwoven: the willing, economically dependent, always available, sexually seductive and irresistible woman serves the needs of the virile, strong, aggressive male with an irrepressible sex drive who can buy the means for satisfying his desires. Prostitutes cannot "really" be raped because their *raison d'être* is sexual performance for men. For many of those women, sex is their only currency, their only way to obtain some degree of security, subsistence, and independence. Under these conditions, dominance and submission, oppression and victimization are necessarily built into the practice. As one prostitute says, "What they're buying, in a way, is power. You're supposed to please them. They can tell you what to do, and you're supposed to please them, follow orders."⁵⁴ Carole Pateman points out that for sex to be a commodity in the capitalist market, bodies and selves are also necessarily commodities; "the prostitute cannot sell sexual services alone; what she sells is her body."⁵⁵ Thus, "prostitution is the public recognition of men as sexual masters; it puts submission on sale as a commodity in the market."⁵⁶ Prostitution is an inherently gendered practice in which women are constructed as the sexual servants of men, and the buying of sexual service is defined as a benefit for men.

Conclusion

Seeing prostitution in this way suggests a partial resolution of the problem of the apparent conflict among some feminists and sex workers about the value of the work and the right to do it. For prostitute women living, like all women, within capitalist patriarchy, any port in a storm will do: as the analysis in the first section of this article shows, participating in one patriarchal practice is not in itself very different from participating in another, although the conditions of work may vary. There is a continuum of labor performed by women, varying in degrees of oppression. Some forms of sex work are at the far end of that continuum, but others are not: doing housework for a battering husband might be worse. Moreover, the division between prostitution and other sexual behaviors is not always an obvious and exact one. In patriarchy, feminists often point out, many women are just one man away from welfare. But it is also true that many women are one man away from prostitution. Sex work takes many different forms, as even *Ms. Magazine*

⁵⁴ Millett (n. 14 above), 94, 96.

⁵⁵ Carole Pateman, "Defending Prostitution: Charges against Ericsson," *Ethics* 93 (April 1983): 561-65, esp. 562.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 564.

reminds us in the November 1988 issue on money. Their questionnaire asks, "Have you ever consciously had sex in exchange for the following reasons? (Circle all that apply.) 1. Money. 2. Gifts. 3. Expensive night out. 4. Trip. 5. Professional benefits. 6. Academic benefits. 7. Other favors."⁵⁷

Hence both feminists and sex workers need to challenge the apparent differences that divide them by rethinking the "good girl/bad girl" dichotomy. As has already been remarked, from the patriarchal perspective all women are at heart "bad girls." Indeed, Ellen Strong argues that "from the time a girl is old enough to go to school, she begins her education in the basic principles of hustling."⁵⁸ Moreover, in the eyes of capitalist patriarchy, feminists in particular are bad girls, who simultaneously challenge male supremacy while championing women's sexual freedom.⁵⁹ Feminists are "nightwalkers,"⁶⁰ to use an old legal term for prostitute, who want to repossess sufficient independence and safety to permit us to go where we please, with whomever we please. Paradoxically, however, prostitutes may actually be "good girls" in the eyes of capitalist patriarchy: despite the individual strengths some may derive from their work, prostitutes serve certain patriarchal purposes very well: "Rather than subvert patriarchal ideology, the prostitute's actions, and the industry as a whole, serve to perpetuate" women's social subordination. Indeed, the existence of prostitution implies that women can "profit economically from patriarchy."⁶¹ Thus if, as some sex workers claim, some prostitutes genuinely choose the work they do, then they carry a responsibility for that work: at the very least, to recognize and evaluate its meaning, its implications, and its effects on other women and on themselves.

It therefore makes sense to defend prostitutes' entitlement to do their work but not to defend prostitution itself as a practice under patriarchy. But it is essential to be cautious about what sort of right this is. One feminist, Priscilla Alexander, makes the sweeping claim that "women have the right to determine, for themselves, how they will use their bodies, whether the issue is prostitution, abortion/reproductive rights, lesbian rights, or the right to be celibate and/or asexual."⁶² But not all of these rights are precisely comparable. Although there is not space here to discuss the significant differences, it should at least be said that the claim

⁵⁷ "Come Clean!" Ms. 17 (November 1988): 63-64, esp. 63.

⁵⁸ Strong (n. 40 above), 290.

⁵⁹ Brock (n. 14 above), 9.

⁶⁰ Dubois and Gordon (n. 12 above), 42.

⁶¹ Laurie Schrage, "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?" *Ethics* 99 (January 1989): 357.

⁶² Priscilla Alexander, "Why This Book?" in Delacoste and Alexander, eds. (n. 1 above), 14-18, esp. 17; cf. Carol Leigh, "The Continuing Saga of Scarlet Harlot III," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds., 59-61, esp. 61.

of a right to be a prostitute can be turned against women by those who merely want to preserve men's entitlement to buy women's bodies. As Megan Ellis points out, "We cannot examine the labour performed by prostitutes as something separate from the industry of prostitution. And while it is important to work to increase protection against dangers faced by women who do that labour, that is not the same thing as working to protect their jobs."⁶³

Some sex workers have spoken of the power inherent in their work,⁶⁴ but even where it exists it is limited, and it can be deceptive. As Gail Pheterson argues, "It's invisible power again for women and temporary power, depending very much on a temporary contract or manipulation."⁶⁵ Sex workers are not just successful entrepreneurs; nor are they necessarily any more sexually liberated than other women. One former sex worker suggests that the feeling of power some have from the work is a form of internalized oppression that keeps the women divided, politically and personally, from each other, and focused only ineffectively upon the real locus of power, men. Engaging in sex work is "buying into the patriarchal version of independence."⁶⁶

Nevertheless, prostitution is not a matter of individual pathology or immorality, either of women or of men (although men must take individual responsibility for hiring prostitutes). Sex work is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy. Prostitution epitomizes men's dominance: it is a practice that is constructed by and reinforces male supremacy, which both creates and legitimizes the "needs" that prostitution appears to satisfy as well as it perpetuates the systems and practices that permit sex work to flourish under capitalism. What is bad about prostitution, then, does not just reside in the sexual exchanges themselves, or in the circumstances in which they take place, but in capitalist patriarchy itself. What is wrong with prostitution is not just that it is the servicing of sexual needs but, rather, that it is women's servicing of men's sexual needs under capitalist and patriarchal conditions. Those conditions create both the male needs themselves and the ways in which women fill them, construct the buying of sexual services as a benefit for men, and make the reversibility of sex services implausible and sexual equality in the trade unattainable.

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⁶³ Ellis (n. 25 above), 4.

⁶⁴ St. James, "The Reclamation of Whores" (n. 3 above), 82; Margo St. James, "From the Floor," in Bell, ed. (n. 2 above), 128; S. Bell (n. 31 above), 6-7.

⁶⁵ "The Big Divide" (n. 6 above), 179.

⁶⁶ Judy Helfand, "Silence Again," in Delacoste and Alexander, eds., 99-103, esp. 101.