

Whisper: Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt

Sarah Wynter

There has been a deliberate attempt to validate men's perceived need, and self-proclaimed right, to buy and sell women's bodies for sexual use. This has been accomplished, in part, by euphemizing prostitution as an occupation. Men have promoted the cultural myth that women actively seek out prostitution as a pleasurable economic alternative to low-paying, low-skilled, monotonous labor, conveniently ignoring the conditions that insure women's inequality and the preconditions which make women vulnerable to prostitution. Men have been so successful in reinforcing this myth by controlling the culture that their central role in the commercial sexual exploitation of women has become invisible. The myth is so pervasive that when women come forward and expose the conditions they've endured, the injuries they've sustained through systems of prostitution, they are most often disbelieved or considered to be the exception rather than the rule.

Men's distortion about the realities of women's lives to serve their own self-interest is not new to feminists. Not long ago, we struggled to debunk the lie that women invited, and in fact enjoyed rape. That we "asked for it." Not that long ago, we struggled to expose the lie that battered wives provoked attacks, that they "must like it or they would leave." It was not that long ago that we unmasked the lie that children were complicit in incestuous abuse, that they "must have liked it or they would have told."

When rape victims failed to report their attacks, when battered wives remained in abusive relationships, when incest survivors kept childhood molestations a secret, we, as feminists, didn't interpret their silence as support for the culture's denial of their victimization.

Instead, we joined together to condemn rape, battery, and sexual abuse and to demand legislation that would empower the victims.

These women, the raped, the battered, the incest survivors, along with their poor and disadvantaged sisters, are the selfsame women who are actively recruited and coerced into systems of prostitution. And the male hierarchy is spreading the same lies about the same women again: "They want it. They like it. If they didn't they would leave."

Another way that men attempt to validate prostitution as a career for women is by proposing that because of women's economic subordination (which men have insured), it is unfair to deprive women of the opportunity to earn a living wage by selling a service that they are compelled (by men) to offer for free. As feminists, we are bound to not only criticize and attempt to rectify economic subordination and compulsory sexual submission (which we have defined as rape), but the institution of prostitution which is the commerce of sexual abuse and inequality.

In parts of Europe and South America, drug kingpins hire poor women to transport heroin and cocaine into the United States. These women are called "mules," and they smuggle the drugs past customs by swallowing huge and potentially fatal doses in latex balloons. If there are no delays in the woman's voyage, when she arrives at her destination, the balloons are passed through her stool intact. This is not always the case. Sometimes one of the balloons is eaten away by the acids in the woman's stomach and she dies in transit from a massive overdose.

Some people claim that drug smuggling is a lucrative industry. And it is, for the dealer safe at home in France, or Italy, or Bogata. But for the woman captured by customs officials, or lying on the coroner's table, it was an act of desperation. Shall we then say that because a woman coerced by poverty gambles with her life to secure an income that being a mule is a valid occupational alternative that she freely chooses? Every time a prostitute climbs into a car or walks into a hotel with a strange man, coerced by the circumstances of her existence, sexual abuse, rape, battery or just plain poverty, she risks her freedom and her very life. Can we then say that prostitution is a valid occupational alternative that she freely chooses?

Prostitution is taught in the home, socially validated by a sexual libertarian ideology, and enforced by both the church and the state. That is to say that both the conservative right and the liberal left male hierarchies collude to teach and keep women in prostitution. The right, by demanding that women be sexually and socially subordi-

nate to one man in marriage, and the left, by demanding that women be sexually and socially subordinate to all men through prostitution and pornography. Their common goal is to exercise their prerogative to control and own women in both the private and public spheres.

Prostitution is taught to women in the home when the courts uphold the moral imperatives of the church (that women be unconditionally sexually available to their husbands), by maintaining the marital rape exemption in the penal code of most states. Prostitution is taught to girls in the home through paternal sexual abuse. The fact that social scientists have reported that upwards of seventy-five percent of women in the sex industry were sexually abused as children suggests that the ramifications of incest and sexual assault in childhood are causal factors in prostitution. Prostitution is taught through the social sanctioning of the commercial sexual exploitation of pornographers which maintains women's second class status and yet is touted by the liberal left as women's sexual liberation.

Prostitution isn't like anything else. Rather everything else is like prostitution, because it is the model for women's condition, for gender stratification and its logical extension, sex discrimination. Prostitution is founded on enforced sexual abuse under a system of male supremacy that is itself built along a continuum of coercion — fear, force, racism and poverty. For every real difference between women, prostitution exists to erase our diversity, distinction, and accomplishment while reducing all of us to meat to be bought, sold, traded, used, discarded, degraded; ridiculed, humiliated, maimed, tortured, and all too often, murdered for sex.

Prostitution is the foundation upon which pornography is built. Pornography is the vehicle by which men sexualize women's chattel status. Pornography cannot exist without prostitution. They are interdependent and create a sexual ghetto that insures women's inequality. It is impossible to separate pornography from prostitution. The acts are identical except that in pornography there is a permanent record of the woman's abuse.

The emerging profile of women used in prostitution clearly does not reflect the lies promoted in pornography and the mainstream media. As these social science ethnologies document, these are women with few resources; most are poor and have been subjected to sexual assault, rape, and battery. The average age for women entering prostitution is sixteen, although the number of nine-, ten-, and eleven-year-old girls in the industry is on the rise. Over half of adult prostitutes were adolescent runaways; approximately seventy-five percent of these teenagers were victims of sexual abuse. Between half

and seventy-five percent of prostitutes have pimps, and almost all of them have had pimps at one time in the past. Many are women of color. Many are substance abusers or drug addicts. Many have dependent children. Many were battered wives who have escaped from, or were abandoned by, abusive husbands and forced into prostitution in order to support themselves and their children.

We, the women of WHISPER, reject the lie that women freely choose prostitution from a whole array of economic alternatives that exist under civil equity. In the United States women have been unable to pass the Equal Rights Amendment. Eighty percent of the people in poverty in this country are women with dependent children. Women earn approximately sixty-seven cents for every dollar men earn. It is estimated that one out of every four girls will be sexually abused before the age of sixteen, that a woman is battered every eighteen seconds, raped every four minutes, that two thousand to four thousand women are beaten to death by their husbands annually, and most states still carry a marital exemption in their penal code. Clearly this does not reflect civil equality.

We reject the lie that turning tricks is sexual pleasure or agency for women. We reject the lie that women can and do become wealthy in systems of prostitution. We reject the lie that women control and are empowered in systems of prostitution. We reject the false divisions imposed by society which differentiate between pornography, peep shows, live sex shows, and prostitution as it is commonly defined. Each is a type of commercial sexual exploitation and abuse which reduces women to commodities for the pleasure and profit of men. Each is premised on inequality due to a condition of birth: gender. Because the only prerequisite necessary to be targeted for this abuse is to be born female, the commercial trafficking in women is by definition a form of sex discrimination.

We reject the false hierarchy imposed on women by men which claims that "call girls" are inherently better off than "street walkers," when the only real difference between the two is the private abuse of women juxtaposed to the public abuse of women. The equivalent of this would be stranger rape juxtaposed to marital rape.

We oppose current and proposed legislation (including *current* versions of criminalization, legalization, and decriminalization *with* zoning or regulatory provisions) which treat the institution of prostitution as an "urban blight" or an "eyesore" that needs to be hidden from view yet kept available to men. These "solutions" insure men's unconditional sexual access to women without consideration for the physical and psychological consequences to individual women and

the overall damage to the civil and social status of all women (by defining us as genitals that can be bought, sold, or traded). We want the state to stop defining prostitution as a "victimless" crime or as a crime committed by women, and acknowledge it for what it is — a crime committed against women by men. We want the state to stop arresting prostitutes and to start enforcing laws against men who traffic in women's bodies for their own pleasure and profit.

WHISPER has been founded by women who have escaped systems of prostitution to create a forum for us to speak out about the realities of our lives and to explore ideas for change. We have chosen the acronym WHISPER because women in systems of prostitution do whisper among ourselves about the coercion, degradation, sexual abuse and battery in our lives, while the myths about prostitution are shouted out in pornography, in mainstream media, and by self-appointed "experts" who have admittedly never experienced prostitution. We expect WHISPER to be a tool for change in our lives, and in our lifetime. Our purpose is to make the sexual enslavement of women history.

Workers: Introducing the English Collective of Prostitutes

Nina Lopez-Jones

In 1975 the English Collective of Prostitutes came together as an autonomous organization within the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Since prostitute women are illegal workers who, most of the time, can't afford to come out publicly (and often not even to family and friends), its founding members called on a non-prostitute woman, Selma James, housewife, mother and founder of the Campaign, to be our first public spokeswoman. Not only was she willing to be trained by prostitute women, she also trained us: her experience as a long-standing organizer in the black and women's movements helped shape the Collective's connections and developed our skills and confidence. This built our autonomy and protected us from separatism: we needed our own independent power base so that we could work together with other women and men whose support we needed to win.

As more of us were able to speak for ourselves, we developed a policy of not revealing who was and who wasn't on the game. We wanted our members, illegal working women, to be able to speak out without having to come out. Also, we knew how the media manipulates the movement by creating "stars" who do not represent the constituency they are supposed to speak for. We were determined to choose our spokeswomen on the basis of their ability to represent the struggle of prostitute women, and keep them accountable to the women's movement for legal, civil, and economic rights.

The media is always looking for the "real" prostitute: the perfect victim — the street walker controlled by a pimp and preferably on drugs, who hates men and may be painfully inarticulate; or the professional whore — the high class call girl who is ready to defend