

On the Backs of Working Prostitutes: Feminist Theory and Prostitution Policy

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This article explores answers to three questions: Why is prostitution as controversial today as it was 4,000 years ago? Why are feminists embroiled in the prostitution controversy? And, what are the effects of this controversy on the working prostitute? The author suggests that the answers rest historically in a fundamental contradiction in Western culture that arises from the institutionalization of a sexual double standard in patriarchal societies, wherein prostitution owes its existence to an interplay of social and economic arrangements that involve promiscuity, chastity, and inequality. The article looks beyond theoretical issues and examines social policy and its impact on the women who work as prostitutes.

Why is prostitution as controversial today as it was 4,000 years ago? Why are feminists embroiled in the prostitution controversy? And what is it about prostitution that defies resolution? I argue that the answers to these questions can be found in a fundamental contradiction in Western culture, a contradiction that arises from the institutionalization of a sexual double standard in patriarchal societies, wherein prostitution owes its existence to an interplay of social and economic arrangements that involve promiscuity, chastity, and inequality.

Throughout its long history, prostitution has neither enjoyed uncontested acceptance nor endured total condemnation. In times of acceptance, as in times of condemnation, prostitution was always controversial. That conflict has always involved one or more of the elements in the promiscuity-chastity-inequality model of prostitution. Whatever form this conflict takes, however, it is always the women¹ who work as prostitutes who suffer. This is perhaps easier to understand in times when men, rather than women, dominate the prostitution debate, but even today when the prostitution controversy largely involves a debate *between* women about ending male dominance—about ending inequality, it is still the prostitute who suffers. The schism between women is deep. This divisiveness among women, as we shall see, exists for

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good reason, but it is also the case that today, after more than a century of feminism, the United States is one of the few industrial societies where prostitutes are defined as criminals.

THE PROMISCUITY-CHASTITY- INEQUALITY MODEL OF PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is an activity, which in broad terms can be identified as the exchange of sex for money: women typically provide the sex and men the money (Lerner 1986, p. 131).

The controversial character of prostitution, and the often bitter social conflicts arising from disagreements about it, are the result of a profound cultural contradiction, which originates in the desire of men to ensure promiscuity for themselves and chastity for women. Men want sex with different women and they want women who have sex with only one man, a theoretical impossibility to which men have found a practical, albeit controversial, solution, one that requires "setting aside" a few women to meet the needs of men without substantially reducing the availability of chaste women or threatening the chastity of wives.

Historically, the process of "setting aside" a group of women and keeping them there succeeded because men had the power to overcome the resistance of women to being set aside. Voluntary entrance of women into prostitution seems highly unlikely, given a social order that linked female worth and economic survival to marriage, and marriageability to chastity.

In summary, prostitution in patriarchal society resulted from the following arrangements:

1. Male sexuality was defined to include promiscuity
2. Female sexuality was defined to dictate chastity
3. Men had the power to enforce both.

I refer to these arrangements as the promiscuity-chastity-inequality model of prostitution etiology. The term *inequality* is used to reflect men's social and economic dominance over women. The term *equality* refers to the social and economic equality of women with men.²

As the model suggests, prostitution owes its existence to a sexual double standard, the implementation of which is predicated on the economic and social dominance of men over women. It is not surprising that prostitution, which incorporates male sexual duplicity and inequality between the sexes, has inspired moral crusaders and social reformers to speak out against it. Until

the mid-19th century, those who spoke out against prostitution were almost exclusively men. Only since then have women become involved in the public debate.

HISTORICAL CONTROVERSIES

The following discussion of prostitution controversies makes use of only a few of the examples that have been documented over the course of nearly 4,000 years. History is replete with challenges to prostitution, followed by decades, even centuries, of relatively quiet tolerance. Yet neither support nor challenges have ever succeeded in freeing prostitution from controversy. For example, it rarely enjoyed greater social acceptance than it did among ancient Greeks, where all forms of prostitution flourished, and where upper-class prostitutes frequently attained prominence as highly cultured companions of powerful Greek citizens (for detailed discussions of prostitution in history, see Roberts 1992; Bullough and Bullough 1987; Henriques 1962). But despite public admiration and the association with powerful men, even these prostitutes were refused the status of wife and with it, the ultimate affirmation of legitimacy for women in Greek society, thus ensuring that the bad woman-good woman, today more popularly known as the whore-Madonna, dichotomy remained intact.

Once Christianity was firmly established, tolerance for prostitution took on a functionalist character. Religious leaders such as Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas urged tolerance on the grounds that prostitution, an admittedly troublesome social phenomenon, nonetheless served a basic need, which if left unmet would lead to greater harm than prostitution itself. St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, compared the function of prostitution to that of a sewer in a palace: "If the sewer was removed, the palace would be filled with pollution; similarly if prostitution was removed the world would be filled with sodomy and other crimes" (Bullough and Bullough 1987, p. 120). Although Aquinas presented an argument in support of tolerance for prostitution, he clearly viewed it as an evil, albeit the lesser of two evils. This line of reasoning is as old as prostitution itself and, through the years, has taken a variety of forms (Davis 1937; Schreiber 1986; Sieverts and Schneider 1977; Middendorf 1959; Simmel 1971; Kahmann and Lanzerath 1981; Otis 1985; Roberts 1992).

But tolerance, not infrequently, was replaced by movements to abolish prostitution. For instance, when Lutheran thinking came to prevail in 16th-century Europe, all pretense of tolerance disappeared. Martin Luther advocated the abolition of prostitution on moral grounds. He pointed to the moral

reprehensiveness of promiscuity (Otis 1985, p. 41) and depicted prostitutes as emissaries of the devil who were sent to destroy faith (Bullough and Bullough 1978, p. 142). Lutheran sexual morality decreed chastity for all, promiscuity for none.

The history of prostitution provides many more examples of forms of tolerance as well as forms of condemnation. Taken together, historical accounts reveal an interesting pattern. In times of tolerance, prostitution engenders discomfort in society largely because it poses a threat to female chastity and marriage. For example, the Greeks freely tolerated prostitution but went to great lengths to protect the chastity of their wives and daughters. They physically segregated chaste women from other women, and reserved their praise and ascription of legitimacy for mothers and chaste wives. As Roberts (1992) puts it: "The 'respectable' wives and wives-to-be of free Athenian citizens spent almost their entire lives under conditions that can only be described as house-arrest" (p. 14). At other times in history, when the strict segregation of chaste women from prostitutes was not possible, those who urged tolerance pointed out that far from a threat to married life, prostitution actually should be considered a safeguard to marriage. Prostitution, it was reasoned, allowed men to meet their sexual needs in a monetary exchange which, according to Davis (1937) and Simmel (1971, p. 121), poses no threat to marriage: "Money serves most matter-of-factly and completely for venal pleasure which rejects any continuation of the relationship beyond sensual satisfaction: money is completely detached from the person and puts an end to any further ramifications." Sex with prostitutes, unlike that with nonprostitutes, is therefore devoid of emotional entanglements and is consequently much less of a threat to marriage than sex that entails actual or potential emotional attachment. Hence prostitution, given male promiscuity, serves to enhance the stability of marriage.

In times of condemnation, on the other hand, prostitution embodied moral degeneracy, and the moral outrage against promiscuity became the focus in all efforts to get rid of it. Most of these were based on Christian moral objections to sexual promiscuity, as they were for Luther, for example. Other attempts to get rid of prostitution cited links between sexual promiscuity and threats to public health such as the plague and most recently AIDS. But on closer examination, these public health arguments are revealed as religiously informed, moral condemnations of promiscuity.

It is not until the middle of the 19th century that we find concerns about prostitution linked to either inequality—setting women aside, or chastity—as the norm for female sexuality.

PROSTITUTION AND 19TH-CENTURY FEMINISM

The 19th-century feminist movement in the United States gave women an opportunity to voice their opinions about prostitution. Then, as now, their voices were not in harmony. Some activist women called for the eradication of prostitution by citing the moral degeneracy of male promiscuity, whereas others urged that society give prostitution legitimacy as an expression of female sexuality outside of marriage. Representatives of the former view included eminent feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. In 1871, they successfully fought government proposals to legalize prostitution. Legitimizing prostitution, they argued along with social purity reformers, was nothing less than capitulating "to the morality of Sodom and Gomorrah" (Pleck 1987, pp. 89-90). Social purity reformers viewed male sexuality in general, and promiscuity in particular, as the source of a variety of social ills, among them prostitution. Prostitutes were cast as being among the "innocents," like many wives and children, victims of licentious men (Pleck 1987; Jenness 1993).

Other feminists regarded Stanton and Anthony's victory as a disaster. They felt that suppressing prostitution was a threat to free love and to a woman's ability to exercise sexual and economic choice. Victoria Woodhull opposed Stanton and Anthony's stance on prostitution, both because she favored free sexual expression for women, and because in her view, marriage was potentially worse for women than prostitution.

The marriage law [which] is the most damnable Social Evil Bill—the most consummate outrage on women—that was ever conceived. Those who are called prostitutes . . . are free women sexually, when compared to the poor wife. They are at liberty, at least to refuse; but she knows no such escape. (Woodhull as cited in Rosen 1982, p. 56)

Free love advocates clearly questioned the traditional view of chastity—the one man-one *pure* woman rule—in the prostitution debate. If the lives of chaste wives are no better, and in some ways conceivably worse than those of promiscuous women, what is the value of chastity? And free love advocates were not alone in questioning marriage as the "naturally" superior social arrangement for women. Engels ([1884] 1942), for example, wrote that bourgeois marriage

turns often enough into crassest prostitution—sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the woman, who 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. (p. 63)

This is one of the first times that the institution of marriage was portrayed as potentially less acceptable than prostitution. And with it, chastity, as it is originally defined in the promiscuity-chastity-inequality model, becomes the focus of the attack on prostitution.

All 19th-century feminists agreed, however, that inequality was bad for women, that the social and economic forces that permitted setting women aside for prostitution (i.e., inequality), were indeed a problem. What divided them were different conceptions about the role of prostitution in women's struggle for equality. Social purity feminists like Stanton and Anthony saw prostitution as the embodiment of female *inequality*, and free love feminists like Woodhull saw prostitution as the embodiment of female *equality*. For Stanton and Anthony, the prostitute represented the victim of male sexuality and dominance; for Woodhull she represented an empowered woman who had cast aside the shackles of chastity and marriage. In its fundamental form, this describes the polar positions in the ideological divide among contemporary feminists as well (Tong 1984). And not even today, more than a century later, according to Barbara Meil-Hobson (1987), "neither those who cast the prostitute as victim nor those who viewed her as empowered could create an ideological consensus" (p. 223).

THE PROSTITUTION CONTROVERSY AMONG CONTEMPORARY FEMINISTS

Prostitution rarely, if ever, becomes a topic of great social concern in and of itself. Prostitution debates tend to emerge in the context of larger social reform movements, occasioned by the need to correct widespread injustices or other social ills. These reform movements, with their own philosophies and language, shape the framework of the prostitution debate. Luther, for example, discussed prostitution as part of religious reform aimed at eradicating the moral and spiritual decay of medieval Catholicism. He discussed it in the context of morally corrupt sexuality and religious degeneracy. The mid-19th-century feminist debates reflected both the broad civil rights agenda and the large-scale social purity reform efforts underway at that time.

The 20th-century prostitution debate has its origins in the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s (Meil-Hobson 1987; Daly and Chesney-Lind 1988). In its fundamental form, the modern framework for discussing prostitution echoes that of the preceding century (Tong 1984; Jenness 1993). Thus contemporary feminist perspectives, philosophies, and language cast prostitution as a civil rights issue involving either the right to free sexual

expression or the right to be protected from male sexual exploitation (the male sexual brute in 19th-century language).

While prostitution has almost exclusively become a feminist concern, it is also a debate that today is primarily argued in terms of inequality. Chastity and promiscuity, as originally defined in the prostitution model, have lost much of their relevance as sources of controversy among feminists. Sexual liberation, the availability of divorce, and increased female labor force participation have weakened the cultural significance of both. Women no longer are openly forced into marriage as the sole conveyor of social and economic well-being and, as a consequence, the question of female chastity has lost part of its importance and relevance. Choosing to be sexually promiscuous is no longer the sole prerogative of men. A woman may opt to be promiscuous, albeit within narrower limits than a man, without jeopardizing her value as a woman or her social and economic standing.³

Contemporary feminists are in full agreement that the social and economic forces that allow men to set aside women, that is, inequality, are bad for all women and must be changed, but how to bring about these changes continues to be a deeply divisive issue for contemporary feminists⁴ (Davis 1993; Meil-Hobson 1987; Tong 1984; Schur 1984; Jenness 1993; Bell 1987; Pheterson 1989; Roberts 1992; Hydra 1988; Alexander 1987). Modern feminists have been unable to resolve questions of this sort: Is it sexual or economic inequality that keeps women from attaining equality? Should protecting women from male sexual subjugation entail restricting women's ability to make choices? Are women victims or entrepreneurs?

The inequality-equality element in the prostitution model has evolved as a highly complex and controversial concept in the prostitution debate among feminists. In fundamental terms, although there are variants of each, feminists divide into two broad groups regarding the role of prostitution in women's fight for equality:

1. Women who stress emancipation from male sexual oppression (prostitute as victim) as the primary equity issue in the prostitution debate—the sexual equality first (SEF) group; and
2. Women who stress freedom of choice (prostitute as worker) as the primary equity issue in the prostitution debate—the free choice first (FCF) group.

Women for whom sexual equality is of primary importance argue that prostitution represents institutionalized sexual inequality and, as such, constitutes *prima facie* evidence of women's social and economic inequality. Therefore, to bring about equality for women, all instances of institutionalized sexual inequality must be sought out and eradicated. This, they contend,

will eliminate the sexual double standard as well as the forced sexual subjugation of women to men.

Those feminists who stress freedom of choice as the primary element in the struggle to overcome women's inequality assert that all steps toward equality must be accompanied by women's freedom to choose even when it involves prostitution. They further maintain that, given the social changes of the last century and a half, choice is eminently relevant to the inequality-equality debate, whether it involves attempts to gain social and economic or sexual equality. Insofar as women today are no longer bound by earlier definitions of promiscuity and marriage no longer represents their only path to social standing and economic security, freedom of choice becomes the central issue in debates about women's equality. Choice in sexual matters is as much an equality issue for women as is choice in the economic, social, or political arenas.

The Sexual Equality First (SEF) Approach

This argument asserts that equality for women depends directly on their ability to eliminate male sexual oppression. Although proponents of this view do not deny the importance of choice in the fight for equality, they contend that until women are equal members of society, free choice is essentially illusory. To attain equality, and with it, genuine freedom to choose, choices that involve male sexual dominance undermine the pursuit of equality and must therefore be restricted.

Two prominent representatives of this approach are radical feminist theorists Catherine MacKinnon (1987) and Andrea Dworkin (1989). They talk about the power-sex nexus in patriarchal societies, where male power is inextricably linked with female sexual subjugation. Women's equality, their argument asserts, sexual and otherwise, cannot be achieved so long as prostitution, which is predicated on the sexual subordination of women to men, continues to exist.

This argument stresses the interplay between male sexual dominance and gender inequality in the etiology of prostitution—the institutionalized expression of a male sexual double standard predicated on female economic and social inequality. Prostitution, in other words, which institutionalizes women's dependence on men, is intrinsically exploitative, as is evident in its most extreme form—in female sexual slavery (Barry 1981; Cole 1987).

Some European feminists have expressed similar ideas in slightly different words. They describe prostitution as the clearest expression of the relationship between dominant sexuality, male power, and control. "Prostitution," they argue, "is little more than rape in installments" (Hoigard and

Finstad 1987, cited in Tübinger Projektgruppe 1989, pp. 100-101). Thus the pursuit of female equality, perhaps even female survival, necessitates getting rid of prostitution.

The Free Choice First (FCF) Approach

For freedom of choice proponents, the freedom to choose must accompany the pursuit of equality in all of its phases. Choice is at all times linked to full and equal personhood. Restricting choice for a woman, for any reason, reduces her status as a full and equal human being.

For feminists of this persuasion, the fight for women's equality depends on the rejection of *all attempts by men or women* to forcibly impose their will on women. Taking away a woman's choice by forcibly imposing one's will on her requires that the person whose will prevails has greater power than the person whose choice was preempted. As long as men has the ability to impose their will by overcoming women's resistance, the power balance between men and women is weighted in favor of men. Making choices for others nearly always implies having control over them. This is particularly true when making choices for others that are deemed "for their own good." Making such choices for others assumes inequality. Thus the freedom to choose is an inalienable precondition for equality. For someone to deny a woman choice reflects the very inequalities that women seek to eliminate. Thus "saving a woman from herself" by restricting her choice denies her equality, and with it, her status as a full human being. Thus, *if freely chosen*, prostitution is an expression of women's status as equal, not a symptom of women's subjugation.

From Theory to Practice: Sexual Equality First vs. Free Choice First Arguments

So long as one remains at the level of theory, choosing between these two approaches is less a matter of succumbing to the inescapable logic of one or the other argument than it is a matter of personal preference. Both are persuasive and both are flawed. Feminists from both sides of the prostitution divide have delivered ample documentation of the flaws in each other's arguments. As an observer, one can either believe that true equality for women will not exist so long as women sell their bodies to men or one can believe that true equality will not exist so long as women are prevented from exercising choice, including the choice to sell their bodies to men. The chances of resolving this issue, either logically or empirically, are no greater than the chances of resolving the nature-nurture argument.

Theoretical considerations notwithstanding, prostitution theories, perhaps more than many other theories, today as in the past, have real consequences for the women who work as prostitutes. Throughout history, prostitutes, not theorists, *lived* the results of the prevailing sexual zeitgeist, no matter how injurious and inhumane these consequences were. That this should have been so is perhaps no surprise if one considers that most theorists were men. Even if they were sympathetic to the prostitute's lot, they were still likely entrenched in the prevailing patriarchal social order. That this should continue to be the case after nearly a century and a half of feminism is not as surprising as it is regrettable.

Prostitution Policy and the Sexual Equality First Perspective

For SEF feminists, the existence of prostitution presents a priori proof of women's inequality. To achieve true equality therefore requires that prostitution must cease to exist. Appropriately translated into 20th-century prostitution policy, this means criminalizing prostitution.⁵ But endorsing criminalization puts SEF feminists in the untenable position of supporting fundamentally contradictory approaches: As feminists in general, they work to liberate women from sexual restrictions, but as feminists in the prostitution debate, they work to impose restrictions on women's sexuality. In other words, SEF feminists advocate women's sexual freedom unless it occurs in exchange for money. This makes it hard to dismiss critics such as Walkowitz (1982) and Coles and Coles (1978), who suggest that these feminists fail to recognize the difference of their middle-class interests from those of the women involved in prostitution, for whom sex is an economic issue first and an equality issue second, if at all. In other words, giving priority to issues of sexuality over issues of economic survival is a luxury in which many women cannot indulge. When the availability of choosing prostitution as an income-producing activity is eliminated, the economic impact will be felt by some women more so than others. It will further curtail economic options for lower-class women because most prostitutes come from that class (Alexander 1987). And as critics suggest, SEF feminists will not be the ones who suffer economic setbacks from the abolition of prostitution. In response to such criticism, proponents of the SEF perspective, except for a very small minority, are tentative in their support of criminalization and have instead aligned themselves most closely, but not without reservation, with, what Tong (1984, p. 58) calls, *laissez-faire* decriminalization. This form of decriminalization involves repealing all laws and regulations that impinge on prostitution (City Club of Portland 1984, p. 54). But SEF feminists are uneasy and, at most, are willing to endorse decriminalization as a short-term strategy (Schur 1984,

p. 172). In the long run, they insist, the continued existence of prostitution is irreconcilable with women's equality. Such ambivalent attitudes "may explain why no campaign around prostitution has materialized within the American feminist movement" (Meil-Hobson 1987, p. 220).

Prostitution Policy and the Free Choice First Perspective

For FCF proponents, choice is inalienably linked to full and equal personhood. Restricting a woman's choice or right to engage in prostitution denies her equality and with it, her status as a full and equal human being. Prostitution, as an act of sexual self-determination, becomes an expression of women's status as an equal, not a symptom of women's subjugation. This view is most vigorously supported by feminist sex workers and feminist prostitutes' rights groups, which include Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) in San Francisco, Hooking is Real Employment (HIRE) in Atlanta, the Canadian Organization for the Rights of Prostitutes (CORP), Projekt Hydra in Germany, and the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR), which was organized during the Second World Whores' Congress in 1986 in Brussels.

For many of the FCF or prostitute rights proponents, prostitution is seen first and foremost as an economic issue. This perspective was colorfully expressed by Margo St. James (1989): "A blow job is better than no job" (p. 21). For these feminists, women's inequality rests as much, if not more, in economic and social inequality as it does in sexual inequality. Mariana Valverde (1987) a feminist freedom of choice proponent, accuses MacKinnon and Dworkin of doing a "disservice to the women's movement by claiming sexuality as the site of women's oppression" (p. 30). Valverde sees this as a dangerous reduction of the many complex social and economic factors involved in women's inequality. What is needed instead, according to Gail Pheterson (1989) is "the recognition of prostitutes' rights as an emancipation and labor issue rather than as an issue of criminality, immorality or disease" (p. 26).

But critics of this perspective point out that so long as female inequality exists, choice may be a dangerous illusion. Members of the prostitute collective, Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER), put it this way:

We will no longer whisper furtively about the ways that we have been used and hurt by men, while they brag about, celebrate and profit from our abuse. We also reject the self appointed "experts" or spokespersons who pimp prostitution as a pleasurable, lucrative, economic alternative that women freely choose, while they decline this "choice" for themselves. (cited by Hobson 1987, p. 221)

Despite their profound disagreements, both groups of feminists proclaim decriminalization as their prostitution policy of choice. While SEF proponents, as we noted above, are ambivalent in their endorsement of decriminalization, FCF advocates give it their unqualified, enthusiastic support. Yet neither ambivalence nor unqualified support have had much of an impact on prostitution policy in the United States. Prostitution, to this day, remains a criminal act in all but a few jurisdictions.

Although prostitution policies are not limited to criminalization and decriminalization, the feminist debate has virtually ignored the other primary approach to prostitution policy: legalization. Neither SEF nor FCF feminists appear to regard legalization as a policy worth considering. This stance seems to be largely based on a general distrust, by both groups, that a male-dominated state system could develop "women centered systems of state licensing" (Tong 1984, p. 58). Instead, most feminists foresee that legalization strategies would lead to the expansion of state control in women's lives. For example, mandatory medical examinations for prostitutes would mean "increased male control of women's bodies," and as such would do little more than further "highlight the gender and class bias in prostitution policy" (Meil-Hobson 1987, p. 217). Insofar as most legalization policies enable the state to determine where, when, and how prostitution can be pursued, legalization allows the state—a predominantly male institution—to regulate female sexual conduct, and, as such, represents yet another form of male sexual domination for women. Legalization, therefore, presents an obstacle to both sexual equality and free choice.

THE WORKING PROSTITUTE AS CRIMINAL

Criminalizing prostitution has been dismissed by feminists of both perspectives on the grounds that it intensifies female inequality and furthers discrimination against women. In addition to all other inequities, this policy means that prostitutes bear the additional physical, psychological, and economic burdens of being identified as criminals (Tong 1984; Schur 1984; City Club of Portland 1984; Millett 1970; Jenness 1993). An attempt, during the mid-1970s, to reduce the gender inequities in criminal prostitution policies led to the widespread enactment of gender neutral prostitution laws in the United States, but 20 years later arrest patterns still show the vast overrepresentation of women among arrestees. In Portland, Oregon in 1984, 79% of the prostitution arrests involved women (City Club Report, p. 43). St. James (1987, p. 82) reports similar findings, noting that only one third of the men arrested for prostitution were clients, the rest were male prostitutes,

which has not brought about much lightening of the burden for women prostitutes.

Prostitution theories, it has become clear, do not address the actual problems experienced by prostitutes, and neither do the strategies that flow from these theories. The fact that, despite feminists' advocacy of decriminalization, prostitution in 1993 continues to be a crime underscores this point. And, for the street prostitute, criminalization translates into a very real, very long, and very painful list of daily victimizations and indignities, to which she can add the further burden of becoming the victim of feminist prostitution ideology. This is a cruel irony, when one considers that much of the motivation, especially among SEF feminists, stems from the wish to protect women from victimization.

The fact that criminalization has prevailed as prostitution policy in the United States could mean that SEF feminists did little more than pay lip service in their endorsement of decriminalization, which undermined the efforts of FCF feminists and, as a consequence, preserved the status quo. It could also mean that longstanding cultural values that are not central to the contemporary feminist debate, such as concerns about the moral reprehensibility of promiscuity, present greater obstacles to change than feminists anticipated.

However, as the central argument in this discussion of prostitution and prostitution-associated controversies maintains, the cultural origins of prostitution have exposed in the past, and will continue to expose, prostitution to a variety of legitimate challenges. Until such time as a woman's sexual conduct is of her choice (equality), and neither detracts from (promiscuity) nor enhances (chastity) her worth, prostitution will continue to exist and it will continue to be fraught with controversy.

But because in the meantime real women live real lives as prostitutes, and some prostitution policies are less harmful to women than others, it is incumbent upon feminists to create a synthesis in the dialectic of the rights to choose and the rights to protections. Both depictions, of the prostitute as a woman empowered and of the prostitute as a woman enslaved, capture but a fraction of the women who work as prostitutes. After 150 years of feminism—of women working with women—we as feminists must work with all women.

NOTES

1. For purposes of this article, prostitution will be defined as an activity wherein women provide the sex and men provide the money—commonly known as female prostitution. The

scope of this article is purposely limited to the discussion of female prostitution. Male prostitution, which has its own long-standing history (Roberts 1992) and shares many of the economic, social class, and stigmatization issues with female prostitution, is therefore not reflected in any of the subsequent discussion.

2. Lerner (1986, p. 236) notes that a distinction must be made between equality and emancipation. The former refers to obtaining equality with men and the latter refers to gaining freedom from restrictions. Equality as it is used here leads to emancipation, and inequality to lack thereof. In patriarchal societies, social and economic inequality or dominance is associated with sexual emancipation, whereas the lack of social and economic dominance is associated with sexual restrictions (chastity) or forced sexual activities (prostitution). Thus, in the context of the present discussion, the terms equality and inequality are causally related to emancipation.

3. These changes notwithstanding, comments in discussions about AIDS among the population at large suggest that fears about the sinfulness of promiscuity are far from forgotten.

4. According to Daly and Chesney-Lind (1988, p. 502), some of the divisiveness is related to difficulties with the definition of feminism itself. Feminists confront a variety of difficulties when they try to define feminism. Delmar (1986), for example, offers what she thinks might be a baseline definition, with which she hopes most women might be able to agree. Feminism, she suggests, accepts that women experience discrimination because of their sex, and that due to this discrimination, they have needs that are negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs requires a radical change. Beyond that, Delmar says, "things immediately become more complicated" (p. 8). And indeed, the contemporary prostitution debate takes place in Delmar's "beyond."

5. There are private nonprofit groups, such as the Portland, Oregon-based Council for Prostitution Alternatives, that provide broad-based support for women who wish to leave prostitution. Despite these efforts, the dominant social response to prostitution remains treating prostitutes as criminals.

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