The Prostitution of Sexuality

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Published by NYU Press

Barry, Kathleen.
The Prostitution of Sexuality.
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Prostitution of Sexuality

“W hat is a woman? Ans: Support system for a pussy.” That sign, nailed to a post on the street of an outdoor bar, summarized the sex industries, not only there in Angeles in the Philippines, but everywhere. The next sign, “Protect yourself from AIDS, use condoms,” made it appear that under these conditions, aids was the only risk to women. This was only one scene that I thought about in 1993 as I was sitting on a panel in Manila, in a legal forum organized to address the question, “Are women’s rights human rights?” Listening to my colleagues on the panel, I thought of the women trafficked from Bangladesh to Pakistan, of the women trafficked from Latin America to the United States and Europe, of the bar women in Olongapo, Subic, and Angeles I had met and talked to during the previous several days. Most of them still had the naiveté of many of the women who migrate from the distant rural countryside, some previously victimized sexually by incest abuse and rape, others without any knowledge or sexual experience, many not even fully comprehending what is happening to them, many still believing that their American “boyfriends” who left when the United States withdrew its bases from the
Philippines are still coming back for them, some gagging into towels after each blow job, and others, those in the cheapest bars (as if these hell holes made for and usually run by American and Australian men could be distinguished between cheap and cheapest), who are known as “three holers” because no orifice of the human body is protected from sale and customer intrusion.¹

On this typically hot (95⁰), Philippine summer day, as we sat coolly in an air-conditioned room that was unaffected by the Manila “brownouts,” my mind wandered back to the women from the bars I had met, some of whom I had come to know even during my too-short visits. I found my head swimming and my stomach clenched as my colleagues attempted to answer the question, “Are women’s rights human rights?” Given the realities I had just seen and had seen over and over again for the previous 15 years, I knew again how easy it is to become distanced, a distancing that oftentimes leads either to academic pretense of objectivity or to legal liberalism with its pretense of neutrality.²

The intense concern among the human-rights activists and lawyers gathered in this comfortable room was blurred for me by the reality of the days preceding. I was reminded of my walks through the areas of the maisons d’abattage in Paris 15 years earlier. The utter disregard for women’s humanity, as I saw it then and now, in Paris, in the Philippines, in Thailand, in brothels, on streets, and in storefront windows provokes a more direct but unasked question that must be placed before men, governments, their policies, and their institutions: “Are women human beings?”

When society becomes sexually saturated, sex is equated with the female body—where it is gotten, had, taken. In the sexualization of society, woman is sexed body. Sexualization of society constructs femaleness as an “essence” and as acquisition that is sex. As sexed body, woman is made universal, and women, accessible for sex, are made to be indistinguishable from each other. That is sexual essentialism.

By contrast, men may need sex, they may pursue it, they get it,
have it, and frequently misuse it, and sometimes they may even be used for it. But men are not the objects of sexualization; neither as a collectivity nor in their individuality are they sex, sexed body. In fact, *men are not reduced to their bodies* or their biology or their drives. While male sexuality has been treated as driven by an imperative, however imperative their sexual drives are cultivated to be, men’s identities are formed by what they do in the world, not by functions attributed to their bodies.

While sexual identities are *socially ascribed* to women, men *achieve* their identities as acting beings. Sexualization of society genders inequality. Sexual essentialism goes beyond promoting inequality to producing oppression. Patriarchal domination makes women undifferentiated among and from each other and makes them known, in the first instance, as different from men, and therefore lesser.

There are no biological givens about sex that are not social and political constructions. In that sense society precedes biology. Sexual “drives” are built into interactions as needs or necessities. Sex, accessible to men through the female body, is a social product of culture, a political product of gender hierarchy, and these are the conditions of male power. Sexualization is conveyed into society through body images of women in the media, in pornography, and in the “scientific” construction of sex through sexology, which reduces sex to its physicality. Further, the construction of sexuality that reduces sex to a thing and woman to an object is a *public* condition which affects private life but has a public reality of its own. The public construction of sex as a social fact of male power sexualizes women as a public fact. The fullest patriarchal reduction of woman to sexed body is prostitution.

The everyday practice of equating female with sex is typified in the way Melinda entered prostitution. She had been a prostitute in the United States for several years when I met and interviewed her. She told me about her experience as a teenager coming home from the movies with her girlfriend one afternoon. She was waiting for a bus when a man approached her and told her he’d pay
her $50 for a date. Being female and on the street was all that was required for her to be taken as a prostitute. But she was a naive 15-year-old who believed that he really wanted to take her out on a date. She talked with him for a few minutes and accepted his offer. With no idea that he had actually solicited her as a prostitute, she went to his hotel room, where she learned that being a "date" meant that he was buying her for sex. By the time she realized she actually had been picked up as a prostitute, she could not leave. Faced with the expectation that she provide sex, she reasoned, "Why not?" She thought, "It will be over quickly. I'll get out of here." At 15 she was picked up as a sex thing and "turned out" for prostitution. Once begun, she couldn't get away. Afterward, prostitution kept coming back to her.

In many cases like Melinda's, prior sexual abuse, particularly when it has been sustained over time, as in incest assault, has already predisposed women, made them particularly vulnerable to other sexual exploitations and to not fighting back. In exploring Melinda's story with her, I learned that it was not only the trick who picked her up on the street that had taken her for sex, so had her stepfather. What made her a prostitute to each of these males is that she was a female, and therefore could be taken as a body for them to use for sex.

*When the human being is reduced to a body, objectified to sexually service another, whether or not there is consent, violation of the human being has taken place.* The human being is the bodied self that human rights is meant to protect and human development is intended to support. However, in the American legal context, consent has become the defining factor in determining whether violation has occurred. In this way, the fullness of human experience and the human self is reduced to will, intent or consent, as if that is all that is involved in violation. Human will is the cornerstone of liberal theory and law, which makes the individual central and singular in the Western concept of rights. In this way, liberal legal theory does not consider oppression, the condition of class domination which is so pervasive that it actually
invokes consent, collusion or some form of cooperation from the oppressed. Prostitution is structured to invoke women’s consent, as is marriage, as is socially constructed sexuality.

In this work I am shifting from the nearly singular standard of consent or force in the determination of violation to its full human, interactive bodied experience, to span the range of oppression from individualized coercion to class domination. In the fullness of human experience, when women are reduced to their bodies, and in the case of sexual exploitation to sexed bodies, they are treated as lesser, as other, and thereby subordinated. This is sexual exploitation and it violates women’s human rights to dignity and equality. Therefore, while pornographic media are the means of sexually saturating society, while rape is paradigmatic of sexual exploitation, prostitution, with or without a woman’s consent, is the institutional, economic, and sexual model for women’s oppression.

To the oppressor, sexual differences and racial differences are visible evidence that all women and people of color, being unlike whites and men, are the “other,” the lesser. That is the significance of reducing woman to sexed body in the sexual saturation of society. It is how she is known, no matter what else she does, or who she is. In “otherness” time is made to stand still for the oppressed. By representing the oppressed as biologically or culturally different, by reducing them by means of their difference to “others,” patriarchal power dismembers women from their history. That is how human beings are deprived of their humanity. The making/doing of history is the way in which human social action takes place over time. In violating contrast, oppression is a historical condition in which, for the oppressed, time is shrunk to the moment; for that is what it means to be ahistorical, outside of time, immanent and therefore not transcendent. This is the most ancient and contemporary form of subjugation in the world. These are the ideological justifications that underpin relations of power in racism, apartheid, and colonialism.

Sexual oppression, through its biological determinisms, halts
women’s forward movement and thereby attempts to annihilate the possibilities of their progress, change, growth, and development. Sexually subjugated women cease to be treated as if they exist in time, and to varying degrees they internalize atemporality contained by immanence. These are the conditions by which the subordinated are effectively deprived of the fullness and potential of their humanity. Men make themselves historical at the cost of those whom they have physically differentiated from themselves by race and by gender, those whom they have reduced to “other.” To them, women are not just a different body, but sexed body. It is therefore not coincidental that when women begin to claim their own history—indeed, to enter into history because they are making it—men reinvoke woman as sexed body with a vengeance. That vengeance saturates the society with pornography and enters women’s bodies through sexual exploitation.

Domination by sex, race, and culture is encoded in human beings. The body is our connection as human beings to both our personal inner world and the social outer world, our self and society, and the body is the material location of differentiation, the connection to the world outside of oneself through which one knows oneself as a separate and distinct human being. The body both encases human experience and transcends itself as humanness is achieved and sustained in interaction with others and with and in the world. “Body image extends beyond the borders of the body,” as Morris Berman points out. He quotes Paul Schilder: “In the construction of the body-image there is a continual testing to discover what could be incorporated into the body. . . . The body is a social phenomenon.” Therefore to influence a person in terms of image “is to have an impact on that person somatically.” The body cannot be taken as a discrete object, separate from its interactive moorings, for as Berman and others have pointed out, “I am” also means “I am not.” Interaction in the world and with others is simultaneously the source of one’s differentiation as an individual self and the means by which the world and our interpretations of it are brought into the body. The
self “has no other root than a visceral one.” Yet it has humanity because it is social.

Simultaneously and artificially, racism and sexism etch inferiority or superiority onto, and socially construct human life through, social interaction. Interaction is the most specifically personal means for encoding domination in human beings, onto human life, in the human condition. When domination is encoded through social interaction, it dehumanizes in each instance. Racism invokes the body, with the use of physically differentiated racial characteristics to claim the superiority of one group through the domination of another. In different historical moments those physical differences are attributed to biology or to culture. The effect is the same—the reification of difference to dominate. Likewise, sexism invokes the body in power relations of domination in that physically differentiated sex/gender characteristics are used by men to sustain their subordination of women. Sexual saturation of society is a political accomplishment of male domination. With sexism, domination is brought into the female body through sexual interaction. When sex is objectified and human beings are reduced to vehicles for acquiring it, sexual domination enters into and is anchored in the body. This is the foundation of prostitution and its normalization in the prostitution of sexuality.

Sex, an embodied dimension of the self, is not a preexisting physical or physiological fact, not an already-shaped fact of human experience that merely realizes itself when it is stimulated. “Drives” or impulses that are engaged in initiating sexual desire dictate neither the nature nor the quality of the sexual experience. Rather, sex is socially constructed. In patriarchy, it is a political fact of subordination.

If in human experience, sexual interaction is dehumanized and exploited, then violation of the self occurs. Indeed, we do not know the self as separate from social interaction in which it is being produced. But that is not all. Oppression essentializes human life and determines those it subordinates. Biological and cultural determinisms theorize the essentialisms, such as that
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woman is sexed body, that produce subordination by constructing domination as intellectual truth.

French physician Suzanne Képès has carefully considered the body in relation to human rights and particularly in terms of the violation of prostitution. She identifies “human” as “the condition of existing in the world with a body which is a source of energy and a mind, a psyche, closely linked to that body, depending on and reflecting everything that happens in that body.” Understanding the body as a source of energy, “of different energies serving the motor, affective, intellectual, instinctive and sexual functions,” Dr. Képès points out that health requires that these multiple, human energies be balanced through self-awareness and self-acceptance. For the body/self to negotiate in a world that supports its existence and also threatens it, self-awareness and self-acceptance are necessary to derive introspective knowledge that only comes “from the feeling of being present with oneself.”

Pursuing the duality of the individual and society, Dr. Képès distinguishes between the outer world, “that of everyday tasks, of joys and sorrows,” and the inner world, “a permanent fabric of sensations, emotions, ideas, images, imagined or imaginary actions” that become known as the ego, or personality, or self. Dr. Képès presents a “conventional medical view” of how the body responds to and interacts with its own energy:

The sympathetic and parasympathetic systems are connected in the hypothalamus, the oldest, instinctive part of the brain, and then in the thalamus, where the image of the body is formed. In the thalamus, which is itself connected to the limbic emotional centre and the regulatory matter known as reticulate, are stored actions, all the acts of our unconscious which will be released at a suitable moment. These are no stereotyped actions but actions which respect and reveal the original and specific structure of each individual, in a word: “true” actions. If these actions, which come from the depths of ourselves, are frustrated or corrupted, they block our energy.

Dr. Képès’s medical approach to the body physically reiterates the foundation of human rights, which recognizes each human being
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as a distinct person whose personhood has the inalienable claim to human dignity and rights. Violation occurring on the body, oppression absorbing the self, violates human rights because it segments human beings, separating them from their bodies.

When one loses contact with one's body, one dissociates from "‘the only thing in the world which we can feel both inside and out,' and which is therefore the channel through which we are able to get inside of everything." 11 The human need for “somatic anchoring” is disrupted. “If you are out of your body . . . you need a substitute for the feeling of being grounded.” 12 Sexual exploitation, an objectification, is a disruption to the continuity of human experience, the undermining of sexual development for the subordination of women.

Human beings are incredibly resilient in the security of their bodied location just as they are fragile in the development of a self. In constructing the self, they are constantly negotiating their relationship to that which is not in their body. In the tension between inner and outer, the interaction between self and other, human beings negotiate their world and construct their identities. Violation is bodied—whether it is psychological and emotional, sexual, or physical. Violation occurs in exploiting those tensions between what is the self and what is outside of it. Distorting them destroys human experience. Following R. D. Laing's formulation, “If our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive. If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.” 13

The Social Construction of Sexuality:
Stages of Dehumanization

Under male domination today, when sex is not explicitly treated as a genuine human interaction, it dehumanizes experience and thereby dominates women. The meaning that is the product of interaction can reveal how sex is experienced as an enhancement of human development or how sexual interaction destroys human
experience. This study joins feminism with human rights to explore how meaning is produced in the experience of sex. Feminist theory exposes power and domination, but it goes further. It posits a reality above and beyond the present exploited condition from the conviction and commitment that power can be deconstructed and socially reconstructed into human and egalitarian relations.

Were it not for the groundbreaking feminist research over the last two decades that has revealed the personal harm and human cost of sexual exploitation, especially the work of Evelina Giobbe and WHISPER, of the Council for Prostitution Alternatives, and of Hanna Olsson in Sweden, of Liv Finstad and Cecilia Hoigard in Norway, and the work on incest abuse of Judith Herman, Florence Rush, Louise Armstrong, and Sandra Butler in the United States, were it not for the courage of women who have dared to speak their experiences of sexual exploitation, were it not for the unfailing feminist confrontation against the sex industries, particularly by Asian women’s organizations and feminist activists against pornography worldwide—were it not for all of these women, their efforts and more, my understanding of how sex, a human activity, is turned into harm, a dehumanization, a human-rights violation, would not be possible.

On the other hand, were it not for the exploitation of women in prostitution, were it not for the transformation of the sexuality of prostitution into the prostitution of sexuality, were it not for the normalization of prostitution, accompanied by the silence of women who cannot or will not give voice and visibility to their private sexual exploitation, this study would not be necessary.

From all the above research and activism, from my own 20 years of work on this issue, from the women I interviewed when I wrote Female Sexual Slavery and since then, I have identified four stages in which prostitution socially constructs the sexual exploitation of women: (1) distancing, (2) disengagement, (3) dissociation, and (4) disembodiment. Prostitution is sexual exploitation sustained over time. Commodification is one of the most
severe forms of objectification; in prostitution it separates sex from the human being through marketing. Sexual objectification dissociates women from their bodies and therefore their selves. By examining the social interaction of prostitution sex, we see more closely the harms of prostitution and of prostitution normalized.

1. *Distancing.* Prostitution sex, the act of prostitution, begins for women with distancing strategies in which they separate their sense of themselves—that is, their own, human, personal identity, how they know who they are—from the act of prostitution. Separation in prostitution begins with geographic relocation and extends to psychological dissociation. Once a woman has “turned a trick,” she knows herself as an outcast (or in some few cases, namely, those women who promote prostitution, outcast takes the form of outlaw). Distancing begins with separation of self from family, home, and worlds of social legitimacy. When women are “turned out” for prostitution, they usually take a new name and get forged identity papers, which is frequently necessary in order to falsify one’s age. As extreme and as violating as this appears, it is not unlike the separations women make from their family of origin, their own friends, and their own name when they marry. Even when women are not evidently coerced into prostitution, they begin by changing their name (“Lolita,” etc.), an act that is central to their dissociation from their old or previous identity. These are acts of distancing from one’s real identity and real self; they intensify the dissociation produced in the act of prostitution itself.

At the same time, distancing is a survival strategy for women in prostitution, who are able to stand away from themselves in the world and in the exchange of prostitution. They do not associate who they are in prostitution with who they are apart from being a prostitute. Distancing is an interrelated part of a complex web of other damaging, harmful effects of prostitution on women and girls. It causes women to become estranged from themselves in order to save themselves.

At a simplistic level, proprostitution groups argue that if prosti-
Prostitution were accepted as normal work for women, prostitute women would no longer be marginalized. But the reality of prostitution as a sex commodification is not that simple. Normalizing the sexual exploitation of women will not make it less sexually exploitative, it will only make it more available. In fact, if women are encouraged to incorporate within themselves, into their identities, the knowledge of themselves as socially acceptable sex objects, the damage of prostitution, of any sexual objectification, is intensified. However, distancing is only the first step toward the construction of woman as prostitute. Alone, it is not sufficient to ensure that women will survive prostitution or any other form of sexual exploitation. Distancing sets the stage for disengagement.

2. Disengagement. Disengagement is the up-front strategy of women in prostitution. Women engaged in the sex acts of prostitution report establishing emotional distance by dissociating themselves from the commodity exchange in which their bodies and sexuality are involved. Again, this is not different from what female teenagers, lovers, and wives report in the experience of objectified sex. As with rape victims, repeatedly they report that they are “not there.” They are disengaged.

Disengagement is conscious and intentional action. It is central to the sex act of prostitution. Because sex is interactive, for it to be mechanically reproduced as commodity, sex requires that the women be there and “perform.” For the women’s part, they are “not there” when it is done in, on, with, or through them. Not being there is how they are engaged in the prostitution power relations invoked by customers.

In a recent Norwegian study of prostitution by Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstad, prostitutes report their dissociation from the sexual exchange men buy from them. Pia says, “I have to be a little stoned before I go through with it. I have to shove my emotions completely to the side. I get talkative and don’t give a shit.” Elisabeth reports, “You switch off your feelings, you have to do it.” And Jane reports, “I’ve taught myself to switch off, to shove my feelings away. I don’t give a damn, as long as there’s
money. It doesn’t have anything to do with feelings.” In many accounts from different countries women report becoming icicles. And they view their customers with contempt even as they fawn over and dote upon them as the “prostitution contract,” the implicit agreement with the customer, requires that they do.

Because the sexual relations of power involve women’s bodies and their actions through their bodies with men who assume the right to buy that, disengagement gives a woman the emotional distance to be able to distinguish her real self from that of her self that is being used for sex as a commodity.

Prostitute women construct barriers. Through disengagement, prostitute women establish limits for customers in terms of what of their bodies and their selves can and cannot be used. These are limits that they enforce. Parts of the self cannot be accessed for use, which means that certain acts cannot be employed, certain parts of the body are off limits; often prostitutes refuse kissing or require the use of condoms as barriers demarcating the self. Certain things are kept for one’s real self; as one French prostitute reported, “Never, never will he lie on my bed. He’ll lie on a special sheet, on a blanket, but not on the bed that’s my own bed.” In making these kinds of distinctions, women mark off parts of themselves that are real, personal—parts that they can, if they choose, engage for lovemaking that is not prostitution. Most frequently, however, prostitute women report being turned off to sex in their own intimate lives.

Differentiating parts of the self for sexual commodity is both vital to women’s mere survival of prostitution, and destructive of women’s humanity. It segments the self. But in fact, the self cannot be segmented. There are not separate parts of a self that can be taken as separate from the self. Some body parts, some physical acts cannot be relegated for sale while others are protected. Yet that is what is done and is why and how violation to the self occurs. When the self is segmented, which it cannot be, it is separated and its parts are used as separated fragments.
Segmentation of the self is distortion and produces dehumanization. Sex is an integral dimension of the human being, of the self. When it is treated as a thing to be taken, the human being is rendered into a thing, an objectification that not only violates human rights but also destroys human dignity, which is a fundamental precondition to human rights.

*Can women choose to do prostitution?* As much as they can choose any other context of sexual objectification and dehumanization of the self. Following from distancing, disengagement invokes harm, harm that takes the form of forcing distinctions between what are essentially nonchoices. This is how *women actually do not consent to prostitution* or any other condition of sexual exploitation—in rape, in marriage, in the office, in the factory, and so on.

At the same time, appearing to choose is an element of survival. Agreeing to go with a customer, taking his money, and agreeing to and performing specific acts appear to be choices. The appearance of choice is especially necessary for prostitute women for without it they could, in this stage of prostitution, lose their selves entirely. In this sense, to choose simply means *to act*, a fundamental aspect of being alive. And so women become engaged in establishing the terms of their own commodification. This is the prostitution contract, which “protects” women by involving them, invoking their self-acceptance in what is essentially the terms of their objectification, thus intensifying the harm and abuse of prostitution. In the disengagement that follows from distancing, sex is made available in the prostitution exchange. Doing prostitution involves women in the dissociation of their own selves from their prostitution, over and over and over again. In the market exchange, if a woman stays in prostitution an average of 9 years and takes an average of 5 customers a day, 6 days a week, she will have sold sex in, on, and through her body 9,540 times to different men in anonymous contacts. This is a conservative estimate.
3. Dissociation. From her research and study of Swedish prostitution Hanna Olsson has described the male sexuality in prostitution as “male masturbation in a female body,” wherein the customer may demand, and in some cases may have to negotiate, where that takes place, either in the vagina, the anus, the mouth or all three. As Ulla points out, “They do it to empty themselves. That’s all.” But that is not all; although sex is reduced to this act of male masturbation that has nothing to do with the woman as a human being, customers generally require that prostitutes act as if they are engaged with the customer emotionally, psychically, and affectively by entering into a fantasy or by feigning the role of a lover. Either the prostitute is to act like a whore or she is to act like an affectionate lover. On one hand, themes of perversion abound, particularly acting out “piss and shit” fantasies by which customers associate sex with filth, dirt, excrement. On the other hand, prostitutes are expected to act out submissive, subservient, docile, and fawning sexual behaviors. As numerous studies report, the customers, like the by now well-known profile of the average rapist, are “average men who want average sexual satisfaction.”

Men buy not a self but a body that performs as a self, and it is a self that conforms to the most harmful, damaging, racist and sexist concepts of women. Western men, particularly more “liberal” ones, often require from Western women an enactment that is sexually active and responsive as well as emotionally engaged. By contrast, traditional Western and Asian men may require of Asian prostitutes sexual behavior that is enacted with passivity, submissiveness, and slavishness.

In prostitution, customer demand includes specification of color and cultural characteristics, which are advertised and sold. Racism, which like sexual exploitation is an objectification that dehumanizes, is a foundation of the prostitution industry. A woman of color in prostitution is expected to sell not only a sexed body but a “colored” one also—from which she must also dissociate as that, too, is part of herself that she exchanges. Race is that which is bought with sex. And so it goes through different
cultures; whatever the cultural context, prostitution in the sex exchange itself invokes and plays out the most reactionary racist and sexist stereotypes while segmenting women into buyable parts.

4. *Disembodiment and Dissembling.* In prostitution, what men expect from women is the *semblance* of emotional, sexual involvement, the appearance of pleasure and consent, a *semblance that they can treat as if it is real* in the moment of the commodity exchange. In this sense, they want prostitutes to behave like non-prostitutes—wives, lovers, and girlfriends. In other words, in the disembodiment of the self, which the prostitute constructs to protect herself from dissociation, we find the beginnings of the reconstruction of the subordinated, dehumanized self, which must *act* as if it is embodied by acting affectionate, by acting interested in the customer (for whom the women often have contempt), by acting sexual, by acting as if one is feeling sexual and *wants* to feel sexual, by trying to distinguish between acting as if one is feeling sexual and sometimes actually feeling sexual because one has inadvertently sexually responded, and then, by acting as if the racism and sexism in the act are a woman’s self-chosen definition—all in all, by acting as if one is not the icicle that one already has become internally in order to protect one’s self.

Distancing one’s self in order to become disembodied and then acting as if the experience is embodied produces sex in prostitution. In this sense women become interchangeable with the life-size plastic dolls complete with orifices for penetration and ejaculation sold in pornography shops, but those dolls do not affect or dissemble a “response.” Response is the differentiating factor because consistent with legalistic values of liberalism with the compulsive focus on will, response is considered an indicator of choice. That women respond in the sexual acts that dehumanize them is testimony to patriarchal construction of normal sexuality.

In women’s experience, this is what prostitution is, including all of the acting and all of the physical and sexual behaviors in an anonymous commodity exchange. It is the sex of all sexual
exploitations, institutionalized, systematized, and increasingly validated.

What Then Is Rape?

Beating, rape, and even murder are generally considered merely “occupational hazards” of prostitution. The Council for Prostitution Alternatives in Portland, Oregon, reported that of 179 women in their program who left prostitution in 1990–91, “seventy-eight percent of the survivors were the victims of rape, a class A felony. Almost half (48%) were raped by pimps an average of 16 times per year and more than three-quarters (79%) were raped by johns an average of 33 times per year.”

In the prostitution world, the payment of money is the distinguishing factor that differentiates rape sex from prostitution sex. In women’s lives and experiences there is little distinction. In her WHISPER oral history project, Evelina Giobbe found that the prostitute woman “defined rape as a situation in which a customer had sex with her and then refused to pay or took back their money after the act.” Likewise in their study of 200 women and girls in prostitution in San Francisco, of the 73% who reported being raped while being prostitutes, Silbert and Pines found that in 19% of the cases the women tried to stop the rapist by telling him that she was a prostitute. By trying to return sex to economic exchange, the prostitute woman, rather than causing the rapist to withdraw, found that he escalated his attack. “They became furious at hearing the woman say she was a prostitute. Most started demanding she take back what she had said, insisting on taking her by force. In order to reassert their control, assailants then became extremely violent.”

Silbert and Pines pointed out that “when the victim told the assailant she was a prostitute and offered him sexual gratification, she was trying to assert some control over the situation.” In comparison to those who did not tell, these women (12%) were
subjected to more violent abuse. The rapists indicated in their behavior and words that they were directly involved with pornography.

In an effort to reduce accompanying beatings, the prostitute women offered sex that could be treated as if it were consensual, meaning sex to which they would not resist. The women distinguished rape sex from prostitution sex, not by the act, but by the payment of money. In the act of making the offer for prostitution exchange, the women behaved like bodied human beings who would willingly subordinate themselves to exploitation. This is the same condition that rape victims are in when they fight back and are told by their attacker to accept it or they will be hurt more or killed. As Silbert and Pines noted, the prostitute women were trying to assert control. But prostitution is sex bought on men’s terms. Rape is sex taken on men’s terms. The sex men buy in prostitution is the same sex that they take in rape—sex that is disembodied, enacted on the bodies of women who, for the men, do not exist as human beings. Men decide whether it is sex they pay for, or sex they take by force or with consent.

Rape of prostitute women has been a social enigma—not because prostitute women are not raped, for indeed they are, but because the experience of disembodied sex (in both rape and prostitution) has been reduced to issues of consent or of force. The prostitute women who offered consensual sex assumed that because they were sex, the commodity, by virtue of being prostitutes, offering sex would reduce the force. But both prostitution sex and rape sex are constructions of sex power. The prostitution of sexuality is the continuous reconfiguring of sex “on men’s terms” to sustain women’s subordination. In actuality, when a prostitute woman tries to assert sex divorced from rape, she defies one instance of sexual power—rape—to be subordinated in another instance—prostitution. That is why experientially rape and prostitution sex are undifferentiated for the women who are its vehicles. As one woman reported to Evelina Giobbe in her oral history project on women in prostitution,
Prostitution is like rape. It’s like when I was 15 years old and I was raped. I used to experience leaving my body. I mean that’s what I did when that man raped me. I looked up at the ceiling and I went to the ceiling and I numbed myself... because I didn’t want to feel what I was feeling. I was very frightened. And while I was a prostitute I used to do that all the time. I would numb my feelings. I wouldn’t even feel like I was in my body. I would actually leave my body and go somewhere else with my thoughts and with my feelings until he got off as it was over with. I don’t know how else to explain it except that it felt like rape. It was rape to me.

The Sexual Secret

Although often represented as sexually liberating, prostitution, fitted to male customer expectations, is a reactionary, regressive, and repressive sexual act. The market is driven by secrecy. Customers require anonymity and secrecy, and therefore prostitutes’ protection from exposing their identities. Secret sex is what they buy. The origins of sexual repression can be found in the secreted buying of women’s bodies. Marginalization of women in prostitution stems from this protection of the customer’s secret sex, his requirement of anonymity and secrecy. He requires that she be the “other,” the outsider, marginalized to sustain his secret. Secrecy is a foundation to sexual power in prostitution as sex industries display women on printed pages, in cages, on billboards, in storefront windows, but men, the customers, carry out their sex purchases in secret. The clandestine character of prostitution is part of the sexual experience and excitement customers buy. When we reach a time, as we surely will if feminism does not vigorously intervene, when prostitution is so normalized that men do not invoke secrecy to sustain their purchase of sex, we will have reached the dystopia of Margaret Atwood’s Handmaid’s Tale where prostituting women is the only sex.

In the first instance and the final analysis, prostitution is not about women at all. The fact is that whether women claim prosti-
tution as a right or condemn it as an exploitation of them is irrelevant to the promotion and continuation of prostitution. Prostitution and traffic in women are not perpetuated based on whether or not women want to do prostitution or are forced into it. Women are in prostitution because men buy them for sex; men buy children for sex, and men buy other men for sex. Sometimes society is concerned about buying of children. Sometimes society is preoccupied with men being bought for prostitution. Rarely does anyone question men buying women for sex, despite the fact that in some countries women in prostitution are no longer counted in the thousands but in the millions.

Prostitution is a male consumer market. The intense public focus on women’s will, her choice or her “right to prostitute,” deflects attention from the primary fact that prostitution exists first because of male customer demand. Sex industries are in place—from trafficking to brothels—to provide female bodies to satisfy that market demand. What matters in terms of the prostitution market and male demand is that there are female bodies provided for sex exchange. How or why they get there is irrelevant to the market.

Beyond Limits

Distancing one’s self in order to become disembodied to do prostitution is an effort to set limits and establish barriers with customers, to mark off oneself from the commodity constructed from oneself. Although setting limits creates a false sense of control, it is at least an effort to sustain some control in order to sustain one’s self. When limits are quantifiably dropped, the self is abandoned. As rape denies women the opportunity to set limits on or establish the terms of exploitation, prostitution without barriers or limits is the merging of rape sex with prostitution sex.

Domenica, an older German prostitute woman and a leader in the movement for prostitute rights in Germany, worries about the
younger generation of women in prostitution. In an interview with Alice Schwarzer, editor of *Emma* magazine, Domenica reflected on the changes she sees in prostitution today, describing it as like a “market fair” where the streets are flooded with women from all classes who do prostitution with no limits: there is no bottom line to what customers are allowed to do, there is no bottom price, there is no separation of women from their lived experience as sexual objects—and they therefore must become them.

There are hierarchies that have structured the world of prostitution, stratifying women from high-class call girls to the lowest class of street walkers. In the last decade this structure has bottomed out and given way to prostitution without limits. In contrast to her generation of women, who learned to set rules and establish limits that enabled their survival of (and in her case survival *in*) prostitution, Domenica points out,

My room is no dumpster. I am not a crap heap. We senior whores have our laws. We only do it with condoms, have always done so. We don’t allow kissing, because this is what you can only do at home, of course. Anally—nothing doing. But the young girls who usually get drugs from a pimp and are then sent on the street; they do everything. They cannot care less. They are so broken in spirit and body, they don’t have the strength to take care of themselves. . . . Today they are rather isolated, they completely surrender to their pimp.

In other words, the construction of prostitution through the stages I have identified above is collapsed; the self is not distinguishable to these prostitute women or girls, because they do not set limits that define their own selves. This younger generation of women and girls in prostitution is not composed of women who stand behind the banners of a proprostitution movement to promote the idea that “all women are whores” and that “sex work” is a viable economic alternative for women. These are the teenage girls and young women who have experienced prior sexual abuse, poverty, and homelessness and have become the prostitutes without limits, selves that are synonymous with prostitution. There-
fore the severity of the effect of prostitution on them personally also has no limits. In other words, the prostitution of sexuality through distancing, disengagement, dissociation, and dissembling, which has allowed women in prostitution to sustain some aspect of their selves and to keep a self apart from that which is sold, has collapsed in street prostitution in the 1990s.

Drugs play a different role in the debasement of women in prostitution than they did a decade or two ago. In the 1970s one could find ample evidence of drug use among prostitutes. Pimps often dealt in drugs as well as women. Women often reported needing something “to get through with it” as they turned one trick after another. But generally both pimps and prostitutes knew that a woman strung out on drugs would not generate much income and eventually would be useless on the streets. On a more casual or occasional level of prostitution, some women with drug habits would turn tricks just as they would steal to support their habits. But many never really entered prostitution because the drugs pulled them off in another destructive direction.

Criminologists Lisa Maher and R. Curtis have studied women into crack cocaine and street prostitution in New York City. They have found that “the widespread use of crack in many poor urban minority neighborhoods has increased the number of women participating in street-level sex markets.” Thei

26 Their study supports Domenica’s observation in Germany that there is increased isolation of women in prostitution, particularly in the heightened hostility prostitutes have for each other. A Detroit director of a clinic for addicts, Dwight Vaughter, explained crack cocaine in terms that are increasingly synonymous with street prostitution today: “It overwhelms every other human instinct. Crack comes first; something to eat and a safe place to stay means nothing in comparison. The instinct to protect your body, the instinct for life itself, is overwhelmed.”

27 Maher and Curtis have shown that “crack-induced increases in the number of women sex workers” has caused a shift in the nature of prostitution “from vaginal intercourse to blow jobs,
indoor to outdoor,” which has “deflated the going rates for sexual exchanges.” The fall in prices, combined with the virtual “anything goes” access customers have to women, reflects the latest changes in prostitution, the bottoming out of it. This is what Domenica meant by “they do everything,” and doing it for next to nothing ($3 for a blow job, $5 for a fuck) has made street life in prostitution a rougher place to be. It has increased customer violence—beatings and torture have become a taken-for-granted part of the prostitution exchange—along with the violation that is the prostitution of sexuality.

Norwegian sociologists Liv Finstad and Cecilie Hoigard have found that while prices in prostitution vary over time, there has been a minimum to which women have held. “The system of minimum prices is an exact parallel to the internal solidarity employees exhibit when it comes to the question of pay. Personal interests coincide with common interest. If someone sells herself cheap, it affects all the others. Prices fall.” And that sets women more intensely against each other.

Hoigard and Finstad found that in Sweden prostitution prices are set by the price of smack. “The women who see themselves as hooked have their daily routines, shifting between shots and tricks.” This direct relationship between drug costs on the street and the price of a trick was also found in Oslo, Stockholm, Hamburg, London, and New York. The price of a trick is not only related to the daily expenditure on drugs but is also directly related to the marginalization of women in the labor force and the homelessness forced on women through domestic violence and poverty.

Maher and Curtis’s research exposes the life of homeless, addicted, often pimp-controlled women on the streets, for whom prostitution becomes one of the very few “opportunities for revenue generation that are available in the informal economy.” This study found that women did prostitution while men in the same neighborhoods stripped cars. “Men still very much control the informal economy in these neighborhoods and the street drug
scene in which social and occupational relations are increasingly embedded.”  

Maher and Curtis’s findings reveal a pattern different from what we saw in the 1970s in relation to drug abuse. Crack-cocaine prostitution evokes a deeper desperation and reveals an abandoned self. Drugs become a reason for doing prostitution when there seems to be little reason to exist. Trespassing certain boundaries in which a self can be kept intact means giving up on survival. In homelessness, desperation reaches new extremes. By contrast the effort to survive, to keep oneself together even within prostitution by finding ways to try to protect oneself, reveals human beings who are somehow still engaged with themselves, still fighting for survival. Even if they are despairing of the present moment, they are surviving for a future moment when things might be different.

But, for many immigrant women, for women coming from prior sexual slavery and drugs, all of this—their efforts to survive—seems to have bottomed out. They have given way to deeper levels of deprivation wherein prostitution becomes the means by which they give up having a self. The possibility of being a whole person is thrown away in the despair of it all. Even that fact of desperation is trivialized in the superficial assumption that in bottoming out of prostitution, one does prostitution for the money for drugs. Bottoming out means that human agency is not there. Giving up on one’s survival becomes possible when there are no social conditions to support and promote survival. When the world of prostitution hits a new bottom, women become socially confused within a reality in which their survival is of no significance.

In both the Maher and Curtis research and that of Hoigard and Finstad, early childhood sexual abuse figured largely in the backgrounds of the women crack and smack addicts on the street. They had experienced the prostitution of their sexuality in incest assault, from which they, like every child subjected to it, learned to dissociate. They now do a prostitution from which they are
disembodied, taking drugs through which they further dissociate from themselves. The desperation of homelessness and poverty added to the destruction from early childhood sexual abuse leaves young women and girls approaching prostitution without limits—there is nothing of the self left to save for survival. Trespassing those limits, where harm is contained, reduces the self to the sexually exploited thing that one is doing. The price is cheap because fast money is needed for another fix. But the price is also cheap because there is almost nothing of value left. Women are existing in their most severe conditions of dehumanization ever, for unlike the slave master who sold the body of another for a cheap price, these women sell themselves. There is not much of life left for them. Unlike women who distance themselves from prostitution, these women have little or no social space in which to be other than prostituted.

**Murder**

Systematic sexual exploitation reduces the value of female life to that of “throwaway women” who are like no-deposit, no-return bottles or cartons disposed and unaccounted for. When I first began my research in the late 1970s, I was shown some photos of prostitution homicides taken by the police. One file puzzled and horrified me. It contained a photo of a huge trash barrel in the basement of an old building. I peered at this photo for a few moments before I realized that a dead girl’s body had been stuffed into the barrel. Only her arm, circled above her head, was showing. In New York City alone in 1975, official police statistics documented 71 prostitution homicides. At least 54 of them were committed by pimps or tricks. This figure is undoubtedly conservative.

Maher and Curtis found that in 2 neighborhoods in New York City, at least 4 women in prostitution were killed during the time
they were doing research: “One woman was hurled into a parking meter from a van being chased by the police; another was murdered and her decapitated body, minus her breasts, was found over by the railway tracks. Another woman ... was beaten to death by a date.”

The fate of prostituted immigrant women rarely surfaces. Maricris Sioson was one of the many of the 80,000 Filipino women who immigrated to Japan for jobs and in the hands of the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia, were turned into bar women. When Sioson’s body was returned to the Philippines for burial, the Japanese medical determination of organ failure as the cause of death did not stand up to the evidence on her body of extreme brutality. The unexplained brutality, evidenced in severe head wounds and slashes on her legs and other parts of her body, would have been left unexplained had Sioson’s parents not taken the medical photographs to the press. However, after President Aquino dispatched an investigator to Japan for a fact-finding mission, reports began to equivocate on the charges of wrongdoing.

Whether foreign immigrants or local runaways, it is difficult to determine the incidence of murders and suicides of prostitute women. No one counts. Prostitute women’s disengagement from former friends, family, and “straight” society makes them anonymous, then invisible. No one knows. Within the prostitution world, no one cares.

But when a prostitute kills a trick, the john, it is as if the world might come to an end. In 1992, Aileen Carol Wuornos was convicted and sentenced to death in the killing of a trick who may very well have been a serial murderer of prostitutes, as her story, reported by Phyllis Chesler, who has championed her case, suggests:

I said I would not [have sex with him]. He said, yes, you are, bitch. You’re going to do everything I tell you. If you don’t I’m going to kill you and [have sex with you] after you’re dead, just like the other sluts. It doesn’t matter, your body will still be warm. He tied my wrists to the
steering wheel, and screwed me in the ass. . . . Eventually he untied me, put a stereo wire around my neck and tried to rape me again. . . . Then I thought, well, this dirty bastard deserves to die because of what he was tryin' to do to me. We struggled. I reached for my gun. I shot him. 36

In all, Wuornos killed 6 violent tricks. A woman serial killer. Chesler points out that “serial killers are mainly white male drifters, obsessed with pornography and woman-hatred, who sexually use their victims, either before or after killing them, and who were themselves paternally abused children.” 37 They do not claim self-defense, nor are they threatened with beating, rape, and murder, as was Aileen Carol Wuornos. 38 After being convicted in the first trial, she was convinced by her attorneys to plead guilty or no contest to the other charges.

As a woman serial killer of men, the Wuornos case has generated dramatic media attention and her acts have incited the full wrath of Florida justice. She has been sentenced to death 5 times, and given the state’s fury over the death of male tricks, it would seem, as Chesler points out, that “if the state of Florida could, it would electrocute Wuornos once for each man she’s accused of killing.” 39 The murder of women is one of the occupational hazards of prostitution, clearly demonstrated in the court trial and treatment of her case, which was dissociated from the context in which she was prostituted and reduced to sex to be used at the will of her customers, which includes his will to kill, apparently.

In Rochester, New York, Arthur Shawcross was on parole from a manslaughter conviction when he killed 11 women between 1988 and 1989. Most of the women were prostitutes. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. During a “cleanup” or sweep of prostitutes that involved arresting more than 12,000 women in 1992, 10 more prostitute murders occurred. 40 None of these murders has evoked the wrath that Wuornos’s killing in self-defense provoked.

Serial murders of prostitute women are periodically reported. From late 1977 to early 1978 a Los Angeles strangler brutally raped and murdered several women; most of his victims were
prostitutes. During the same period many street walkers in northern England were victims of a "ripper's" mutilation murders. Serial murders of prostitutes have continued, and in 1992, 9 prostitute women in Detroit, all crack cocaine users, were strangled and left in empty buildings. Their bodies were nude, and they were bound and gagged. Some bodies when found were badly decomposed, having been in the abandoned buildings at least 6 months.\(^{41}\)

Meg Baldwin summarized prostitution murders, giving a sense of their scope:

Forty-eight women, mainly prostitutes, were killed by the Green River Killer; up to thirty-one women murdered in Miami over a three-year period, most of them prostitutes; fourteen in Denver; twenty-nine in Los Angeles; seven in Oakland. Forty-three in San Diego; fourteen in Rochester; eight in Arlington, Virginia; nine in New Bedford, Massachusetts, seventeen in Alaska, ten in Tampa. . . . Three prostitutes were reported dead in Spokane, Washington, in 1990, leading some to speculate that the "Green River" murderer of forty-eight women and girls had once again become "active."\(^{42}\)

As Jane Caputi points out, "serial sexual murder is not some inexplicable explosion/epidemic of an extrinsic evil or the domain of the mysterious psychopath. On the contrary such murder is an eminently logical step in the procession of patriarchal roles, values, needs, and rule of force."\(^{43}\)

Murder, bottoming out, rape, and prostitution itself are consequences of dehumanized sexuality, a condition of oppression. When liberal legal constructions of human will are invoked to determine if, when, and where violation occurs, the dehumanized sexuality of patriarchal oppression is dissociated from the individual violations. Cause and consequence are dissociated. Domination prevails.

As I found in *Female Sexual Slavery*, the agents of that power are men who may function individually or in concert with each other,
considering the numbers of men who are pimps, procurers, members of syndicate and free-lance slavery gangs, operators of brothels and massage parlors, connected with sexual exploitation entertainment, pornography purveyors, wife beaters, child molesters, incest perpetrators, johns (tricks) and rapists, one cannot help but be momentarily stunned by the enormous male population participating in female sexual slavery. The huge number of men engaged in these practices should be cause for declaration of a national and international emergency, a crisis in sexual violence.

To this list should be added the sexual liberals who promote pornography as free speech and prostitution as consenting sex.

The emergency I identified in *Female Sexual Slavery* has not yet been recognized. By the end of the twentieth century masculinist society has found the answer in the normalization of prostitution in the prostitution of sexuality. Women's human rights violations are becoming conditions of normal sex, confirmed in women's consent and answering the question posed by the Marquis de Sade in the eighteenth century, "But where is one to find free slaves?"