The Prostitution of Sexuality

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Strategies to confront sexual exploitation should be as global as the economy is international and as the dimensions of women’s subordination are universal, and as radical as is the rootedness of the prostitution of sexuality. As domination produces despair, struggle for liberation is the act of hope. Hope shatters the conviction that domination is inevitable, especially in the case of sexual exploitation, particularly in regard to prostitution.

The primary reason why I have been able to continue this work (even, at times, against my personal will) is because of those women whose feminist consciousness of domination has enabled them to act on their knowledge, to transform the facts of women’s subordination into political struggle and personal healing—of self and of others—for women. They are and have been the source of my optimism. Sources of hope that transcend the brutal realities of sexual exploitation can be found in women’s projects around the globe. This hope is found in collectives of women and, in some places, in a singular feminist whose solitary voice breaks the barrier
of sound overpowering the voices of despair of those who refuse to speak of sexual exploitation as violation and thus perpetuate it. The voices of hope are diverse; they do not speak in one unison chord. Rather, they come together from their diversity, yet in a universal condition to unravel and expose sexual exploitation in all its global complexity. They are the foundation of a global feminism moving ever closer to the visionary understanding that sexual exploitation, beginning with prostitution, is not inevitable and therefore a world free from sexual exploitation is possible.

In often tentative ways, Western and Third World women are finding the bases of common struggles, transcending patriarchal separations of women into the opposing forces men have constructed to dominate and war against each other. Global feminist action against sexual exploitation is genuine international struggle for Western feminists when we first understand domination and struggle against sexual subordination in our own lives, cultures, and countries. It is therefore the obligation of Western feminists to take extra steps toward making connections, listening and learning, and finding the common base for collective action against sexual exploitation. A global struggle is required to confront the international industrialization of women through Western sexual and economic hegemony over the Third World, which is acted out by military men, tourists and businessmen, diplomats and governments, and which perpetuates the sexual exploitation of women, particularly in prostitution.

International feminism gives voice and presence to that which has been unspoken in the global oppression of women. Where women are actively silenced from speaking the unspeakable, particularly in areas of the world where women may be at great risk in claiming their human right to be free of sexual exploitation, global feminism gives international presence to issues that otherwise would be buried by political repression.
The problem remains for feminism to speak about sex and its socio-political construction into female dehumanization. In one professional meeting after another, in one conference after another, I have introduced the problem of silencing of sex when sex itself is exploitation, is harm, destroys. When I organized a conference, "The Politics of Sexuality" at Penn State in 1991, in order to explore this issue with feminists who have confronted the problem more directly and forcefully than anyone else, I found that even there, sex itself was not discussed. Sex as violence was discussed, but sex itself—the condition of subordination of women that is both bodied in femaleness and enacted in sexual experience—was silenced even in a feminist context most conducive to discussion of it. Adding violence on to sex makes sexual exploitation speakable, but it silences sexual oppression—the sexual relations of power that produce a condition of sexual exploitation. The fact is that in more than 20 years of feminist organizing against "violence against women" and against pornography, we have not yet created the language, the conceptual base from which to speak of sex itself as violation of women, whether or not there is consent, as there is usually presumed to be in prostitution. Andrea Dworkin has broken ground in this area in her book *Intercourse.*

The political silencing of sex as exploitation begins in its privatized condition in marriage and extends to the public normalization of prostitution, especially in the West. Normalizing prostitution socially reaffirms women's not remembering. We know that when the self, the body, and one's experience are sufficiently traumatized, those acts that hurt cannot be contained in memory. The promotion of pornography and the legitimization of prostitution sustain women's forgetting and politically reinforce the sexual relations of power.

Consider the enormous, yet-unknown female population who
have been victims of incest abuse, who were sexualized by adult males—their "protectors"—before they had even developed their own identities as human beings, and who do not remember because the utter violation is so severe that the human soul has not the capacity to endure it in the memory of those women. If no one says to them, “This is wrong; no human being, no girl should ever be treated this way,” there is nothing to trigger memory of it that has been buried in an intensively sexualized society.

We cannot begin to calculate the numbers of women who promote pornography, defend prostitution, or oppose feminist naming of sex as exploitation. We may never know how many among these women do not remember and cannot yet know that they were sexualized as children by uncles, fathers, stepfathers, grandfathers. There are women who actively pursue objectified sex, who promote kinky sex, who promote prostitution (usually of other women, infrequently of themselves), and who defend and promote pornography. Given the patriarchal relations of power, it is not surprising that they are taken as representative of what women want and what women should be doing in their bodies.

I can no longer count the number of times my work has been challenged and censored by academic women who later reveal to me privately, but never say publicly, what they ultimately could not remember or did not even know they dared not speak. Their own experience of sexual abuse as children or in a marriage or with a lover, rendered into silence, prods their censorship of women who dare to break that silence. This fact of women’s sexual exploitation gives new meaning to “divide and conquer,” the well-known strategy of oppressors. In the private, silent, unspoken, sometimes unremembered, often dissociated experience of sexual exploitation, girls and women are saddled with a bonding to male sexual demands that turns women against other women, not their unnamed oppressors, their unidentified violators.

Some women, a few (and they are the tip of an iceberg), are beginning to remember. Even fewer are daring to speak publicly.
They are struggling through the hell of what has been unspeakable, unknowable violation—of knowing the unspeakable, of reliving the unknowable. As they are struggling, with courage that sometimes tests the limits of human imagination and endurance, and as they are coming to grips with their past, we as a feminist movement have been growing enormously because of their remembering, their struggle, their courage—for in their remembering they name the sex that is sexual exploitation. The sexual relations of power are revealed to them and to us for what they really are: oppression that perpetrates the violation of women's human dignity and human rights.

Sexual exploitation is in and on our bodies, and its severity not only fragments the self, reducing human wholeness through objectification, but also often becoming an “out-of-body” experience, something that cannot even be contained in human memory. Not remembering does not give voice and speech to violation. Thus not remembering is more than a traumatic consequence of individual acts of domination. Not naming, or in some cases not remembering, being sexed into subordination and consequently dehumanized leads directly to the displacement of sex from being a part of human experience to being the cornerstone of the sexual politics of oppression. At the crux of this displacement is the production of a separate throw-away class of women—prostitutes, the women who knowingly do the sex of sexual exploitation, who are represented as the validation of sex that is exploited.

In the West, feminism has been pushed to defend its raison d’être by establishing force in relation to any sexual exploitation. But violence is only one aspect of oppression, and opposing violence alone diminishes the possibility of a liberation movement. It contains feminism within a reform of sexual exploitation, and sustains the sense of inevitability of prostitution. Emphasizing force as the condition that makes sexual exploitation a violation silences sexual oppression. Most importantly, it silences the millions of women who are not coerced into prostitution and who are deeply harmed by it. And it silences those victims of sexual
exploitation who have lost their memory of experiences so traumatizing that they cannot be remembered.

*Remembering, Healing, Consciousness*

If we are to speak of women as human beings, they must be enabled to enjoy full human rights. The *intraindividual* effects of sexual commodification and other sexual exploitations that prevent their enjoyment of human rights must be discovered, revealed, confronted, and overcome. With all of the new syndromes and 12-step healing programs, nothing can replace or surpass the effect of feminist consciousness raising in personal healing and collective struggle. It is the basis for women reclaiming themselves from sexual expropriation. Because feminist consciousness is critical, it invokes women’s active engagement in both personal and political struggle and sustains our ongoing resistance to domination, creating an ongoing realization of the possibilities of revolutionary change. Feminist consciousness is the key to knowing the possibility of a life beyond exploitation.

From feminist consciousness of sexual relations of power, personal healing begins with political and social rejection of sexual exploitation, especially prostitution and pornography. Where there has been multilayered abuse as in the experience of refugee women, as in the condition of women subjected to state as well as sexual terrorism over time, consciousness of state power may well delay awareness of sexual power, and seeking safety from political torture may precede the recognition that safety also means protection of one’s sexual/bodily integrity. Similarly, in almost all cases of sexual exploitation of women who are mothers, preoccupation with children’s safety will precede coming to terms with one’s own sexual subjugation. Women are the first to be exploited and the last to be healed.

Although individual therapy programs focused on personal healing may lead some women to political consciousness of sexual
relations of power, I suggest that critical consciousness of sexual subjugation, as in "consciousness raising," is a fundamental condition to personal healing because, among other things, it invokes collective struggle, breaking the isolation imposed through domination. It is virtually impossible to fully recover from the damage of sexual exploitation if one does not "know" the sexual relations of power that produced the harm in the first place. Knowing the sexual power that reduces one to a sexual object only makes sense in the context of a struggle that refuses sexual exploitation, confronts sexual relations of power, and challenges the foundations of male domination. To remember and to know outside of that struggle sends a woman from a victimizer to a protector, meaning that she is never able to return fully to her own self. Feminist consciousness of power relations, then, is at the center of both personal healing and political struggle. But knowing has a deeper meaning than having a correct political analysis. Full knowledge requires facing the damages and confronting the source of suffering so that the legacy of domination no longer holds power over one's person in the form of enduring pain, being ashamed of or at odds with oneself, turning anger on other women in horizontal hostility, or continuing the self-hatred engendered in the original harms.

To illustrate the possibilities of feminist programs and the limitations they confront, I will present 3 programs, the Prostitution Group in Sweden, the Council for Prostitution Alternatives in the United States, and Buklod in the Philippines. (Buklod, which means "bonding," is the name the Filipina bar women gave to the seminars that brought them together.) What is common to these programs is that they rest upon consciousness raising as the basis for women's healing, for their claiming of their selves in order to become active agents of their own lives.

The Prostitution Group in Göteborg, Sweden, a city of approximately 500,000, consists of 4 social workers, 2 women and 2 men who go out on the streets every evening to meet the women there, talk with them, and invite them to coffee and their project. They
see from 350 to 500 prostitutes a year in a city with 15,000 to 25,000 johns or customers. Elisabet Petterson, who has been working in the project since it began in 1982, finds that a crucial element in women leaving prostitution is "to be there for them and to listen." Yet there is more. The single most important factor is care. "They are beautiful women. They are kind, too kind because they can't say no to customers." When a girl or woman comes off the streets into the group, she works with a particular social worker, who is the one in the group who has a particular feeling of care for that woman. The Prostitution Group realizes that care must be expressed by the social worker to make a good match with the woman. In addition to counseling, the social worker involves the woman in training and social health programs.

Girls who are minors (under the age of 20 in Sweden) can be forcibly removed from prostitution with support of the state. The Prostitution Group uses this authority to get girls out of prostitution even when they initially are reluctant to leave. As Elisabet reported, often someone from the Prostitution Group is the first one ever to say "no" to the girls. They frequently come from families that have not established boundaries for them and where no one has ever said, "No, you can't do this." The combination of firm direction, personal caring, and listening seem to be the critical ingredients to keep the girls from going back into prostitution.

At Buklod in Olongapo, seminars are held for women in the bars. The seminars are meant to empower women who typically have lost control over their lives because the bar managers or "papa-sans" dictate the terms of their existence. In meeting with the Buklod women, I was told by bar women and former prostitutes that when women first join the group they have been saying yes to everything their managers tell them to do. But after some time in the seminars,2 they begin to assert themselves, little by little. They begin to make choices, to refuse some things and to decide which other things they are willing to do in the bar. But
their choices are confined within the objective limits of what their poverty will permit. The Buklod seminars begin with remembering, as the coordinator, Emela Cabayong, explained: “We always ask them to make your own ‘river of life.’ And every woman talks about her story.” Coming into the seminar, “you just remember the past when you are working in the bars,” explained Pearline, who came to Buklod from the bars. But as women explore their lives together in the seminars, they begin to “remember the past when you were a little kid.” There is much crying as they think back to the lives they had before the bars. Stories of childhood joys and of the horrors of incest abuse come out. Pearline explained, “You need to recall because you don’t know why you work in the bars.”

Connecting to the past, remembering, telling stories, crying, and joking—it all goes together and healing begins. “Healing is in the process,” Emela explained, because, as Pearline said, “the most important thing in the seminar is that you come to understand your situation.”

Fifty to 75 women, some new ones, others who keep coming back, attend each seminar, of which there have been hundreds. A kind of community building goes on there, and as the women strengthen their relationships to each other, relaxing, joking, and playing games, their interactions in the bars begin to change. Many of the women, even though they are in the healing process, go from the Buklod meetings to the bars. Buklod sponsors training programs to teach women sewing and other crafts, but this work has not yet been developed to a level that sustains them economically.

Something changes after attendance at Buklod seminars. Consciousness stirs something, and women transcend the objectification of their bar lives to become human beings with histories, places in time, lives and relationships beyond prostitution. They come to know themselves as they learn that they are not only that which prostitution does to them. They begin to say no, although sometimes, because of their dire economic situations, they can
only afford to say no to some things. “The papa-san told me to scrub the floor and I said, ‘Why should I?’ He gets mad at me.” In another case, one woman decided not to go to the bar on New Year’s Eve. “It’s a time to relax,” she said. This was a decision, a choice, a self-motivated action that likely would not have occurred before, when she did not even think of herself as someone who should have a “time to relax.”

The bar managers are unused to such truculence in “their” women. “Before, Linda and I always go with American guys,” Pearline explained. After attending the seminars, they stopped. “At least you know how to talk to managers.” The women begin to look for ways to do something else—perhaps tend bar instead of going with the customers. But here the system beats them out because “you don’t earn enough money tending bar to support your child.” These distinctions are finely tuned, reasoned out from within the increasing selfhood that women reclaim.

Unlike the Prostitution Group in Sweden, “We cannot tell the women to stop [prostitution],” Emela explained, because Buklod cannot provide the economic means for them to survive. The gendering of poverty provides the work upon which these women survive while being destroyed, de-constructed, de-selved. For these women, the dilemma of prostitution is complexly multilayered. They come from massive poverty amidst the new material gains in rapid industrialization; they have been sexually abused as children or married in their teens and abandoned with their own children. Under the conditions of underdevelopment, women see marriage as their only possibility, and when they are cast adrift there are few other possibilities outside of the sex industries. This evokes a sense of inevitability about prostitution and marriage. That inevitability is expressed in the brochure for Buklod, which explains that “forcing or helping individual women to leave prostitution is the least effective way of addressing the problem. For every woman who leaves the bar, there will be at least five willing to take her place.” This desperation is precisely what the sex industry counts on and the proprostitution movements legitimize.
Consequently, the main emphasis of this program is on personal empowerment in victimizing situations.

What about welfare or social assistance? “The government doesn’t care about us,” many of the women said to us over and over again. While they see Olongapo being remodeled to develop industries, they see themselves rejected, ignored, invisible in the plans for conversion of the bases and the prostitution towns that served the U.S. military when it was there. If tourist men replace the military men as they have in other prostitution areas, the women will continue to be enlisted for sexual service.

There is no welfare system, no source of support for food, for rent, or for the many children fathered by many of the American military men who took the women out on “bar fines” to live with them during their stay in the Philippines. In the bar-fine system, the GI paid the bar for the time he was away with the woman. The bar established bargain rates by the week, the month, etc. This system made it possible to transfer human life as sexual property. Living together on a bar fine, the men usually treated the women as girlfriends. Frequently the women became pregnant and bore children.

When I visited there in 1993, the American military had left. As the inevitability of prostitution is unchallenged, the women were still clinging to the belief that their “boyfriends” who were the fathers of their children would come back. Inevitability of sexual exploitation in prostitution interconnects with the inevitability of marriage and the perpetuation of female subordination. Ever since the existence of U.S. bases, marrying an American has been seen as a way out of poverty for women. But for the military men, Philippine women were merely there for their sexual use. “I got a passport but he never sent the ticket,” we were told, or “I get a postcard sometimes,” maybe once in 6 months. The “luckier” ones receive small amounts of money, and that helps. But receiving cash in an envelope without a letter, without a way to locate the “boyfriend,” is a reality that cuts deeply and that
women try not to know. The tension of economic dependence on the bar system prevents them from attaining consciousness of independence and perpetuates the dreams of going to the United States as a GI’s wife. Not surprisingly, “love is bullshit” became a common saying among bar women in Olongapo.

In addition to Buklod, there are several centers organized by Sister Soledad Perpinan, leader of the Third World Movement Against the Exploitation of Women. She has organized training programs, drop-in centers, and shelters in Subic and Manila in Angles, which adjoins former Clark Air Force Base. These centers provide shelter, long-term living arrangements, retraining, and self-sustaining-employment training in sewing, typing, and soap making. Visiting a new center recently opened by Sister Sol in Manila, we saw the patio of the house where she plans to open a candle-making factory.

It is a beginning. In these small projects, the women will not make more than they made in prostitution, but they are aware that they will have themselves. When women go from rural poverty to being exploited labor in new factory systems to making more money in prostitution, often they are unaware of what they are losing of themselves and of their rights at each stage. But these projects are making them aware of what they have lost and what they can regain. And out of these programs larger projects may be developed. They are already envisioned. They only lack economic aid. For now, economic aid to prostitute women has been focused on condom distribution, a necessary strategy but one which perpetuates prostitution. Only in a world where prostitution is not considered inevitable, natural, or a woman’s choice can women begin to think of creating real choices by building such things as cooperative industries.

But the fact that prostitution is increasingly treated as merely another form of labor reminds us that slavery too is considered labor, not slavery, by slave masters and systems that support slavery. “Never once did you deserve that abuse” is the first and
most consistent message of the Council for Prostitution Alternatives (CPA) in Portland, Oregon. The first step, according to Susan Hunter, the director, is that “you must reframe prostitution” because “most women come in the door with a threshold and tolerance for abuse so high that they will set themselves up for it.”

The CPA program is based on consciousness raising. It operates from the understanding that in order to reframe prostitution, the women must “look at all aspects of their lives from a new form.” CPA, a project that continually struggles to survive with minimal resources, is wealthy compared to Buklod and impoverished compared to the standard of living in the United States. CPA has 15 to 20 apartments available to provide women with a safe place to leave prostitution. These apartments are used mostly by single women, who do not have access to welfare through Aid to Dependent Children. CPA helps women with children get enrolled in welfare. One of the first problems they confront is that the welfare system tries to treat prostitution as a form of work instead of as violation and abuse. If successful, the system can lower the welfare payments or eliminate the benefits entirely on the basis of income from prostitution.

“Women would leave in droves if more services were available for them,” says Susan Hunter, echoing Pearline and Emela in the Philippines. While Buklod cannot draw upon the resources of a social-services system to help women get a “fresh start,” CPA is able to insist that women who fully enter their program cut themselves off from the prostitution world that is always drawing them back. While they work with women coming in and out of prostitution, for the women who are ready to leave permanently, CPA draws up a contract in which the women agree to

Not having contact with anyone who harms me emotionally, physically, or sexually.

Participate in an alcohol/drug treatment program if I have Alc/Drug problems.
Help make a plan to take care of my needs and work on my personal goals.

Keeping appointments in my plan.\(^4\)

Consciousness raising continues in individual counseling and in group sessions as women begin to reconstruct their health, their work lives, and their social world.

In the last 5 years, programs to support women getting out of prostitution have proliferated around the globe. Maria Lourdes Barreto, president of Women Prostitutes of Belen de Para in northern Brazil, is emphatic: “We don’t want women to become prostitutes but we do want women in prostitution to know that they have autonomy, the right to discuss, to solve their problems, to do whatever they want.”\(^5\) She is fighting for citizenship rights for prostitute women.

In the United States, critical feminist consciousness developing from prostitution women began when Evelina Giobbe founded Women Hurt In Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt. WHISPER is now a Minnesota-based organization that conducts educational forums on prostitution and advocates for women in prostitution.

While projects offering women in prostitution shelter and retraining so they can leave prostitution are new in the United States as of the last decade, they have a much longer history in other parts of the world. In France, Equipe d’Action Contre le Prostitution and Le Nid and Le Cri have not only provided support to individual women but their representatives have also been active in the International Abolitionist Federation, a movement against prostitution on the basis that it violates human rights. In the Third World, EMPOWER in Thailand and El Pozo in Peru are prominent among the hundreds of developing projects that enable women to see a way out of prostitution. In the summer of 1992, Dr. Renu Rejbhandari set up a program to train former prostitute women in bamboo crafts in Kathmandu, Nepal. The
Women’s Rehabilitation Centre that she organized taught women skills that enabled them to earn their own incomes while teaching them about sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. After 45 days of training, “Some of them are working on a salary basis in Shikerbensi, and some are now training others at the training center.”

In the last decade, programs by men for men to prevent violence against women have developed. Although we have yet to see men of conscience actually do work to prevent men from buying women, there are many programs that are laying the foundation for such action. EMERGE is a counseling program in the Boston area that is organized by men and operates from a feminist perspective to stop men from beating women. Common Purpose is a men’s counseling program that works primarily with African American and Latino men in the Boston area. It involves them in developing “Safe Behavior” plans, and Common Purpose works with social institutions to “hold batterers accountable.” Based in San Francisco, the Ending Men’s Violence Task Group of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism is “an activist network for pro-feminist projects and individuals who are working with men to end men’s violence.” They work with men who batter, rape, and consume pornography. Men Against Pornography, based in Brooklyn, have issued statements of accountability “for profeminist men’s activism against pornography and prostitution.” In Japan, according to Yayori Matsui, some men are reacting to the image of Japanese men as sex exploiters, particularly in sex tourism. In 1989, a Men’s Group Against Prostitution in Asia was organized to focus on consciousness raising among men. The group publishes a newsletter, holds symposiums, and has developed a slide show on “Prostitution in Asia and Japanese Men.” In 1991 a Men’s Lib Study Group was formed in Osaka to consider men’s sexuality and prostitution. This network of men has developed and expanded over the last decade, and the number of men involved in it, though small, reflects the few who are willing to consciously forego the power
men gain, individually and collectively, from the sexual exploitation of women.

Therapy: The Individual Approach

Feminism is a persistent movement of women toward liberation that insists on alternatives, ways out, escapes for women from violence and abuse, from exploitation and oppression. For 25 years feminism has pioneered two interdependent projects—projects in the sense that they are personal/political engagements in social action oriented toward change: consciousness raising and safe space. Consciousness raising brings the personal out of its individual isolation and into political awareness and analysis of oppression. Safe space takes the forms of crisis programs, shelters, and group projects where women can escape from abuse or even just find the context in which they can be themselves, explore who they are and what they want, engage in consciousness raising while the pain that patriarchal domination invokes in women’s lives is kept off limits. Furthermore, consciousness raising and safe space build alternatives for women that allow women to stand outside of the most direct experience of oppression and consider personally and collectively other possibilities—for their own lives, for women as a class.

Feminist-movement projects of consciousness raising and of safe space have been individualized into psychological therapies developed specifically to confront the harms to women from sexual exploitation. Feminist research, therapy, and social action with incest victims is a more formalized, clinical, and individualized approach to what consciousness raising and counseling provide for women leaving prostitution. The caveat for women in Western societies, particularly in the United States with its intense emphasis on individualism, is that this dual feminist project can easily be reduced from consciousness raising to individual therapy and social services dissociated from the condition of oppression.
Furthermore, the multiplication of “syndromes” and various 12-step programs, however effective they are in naming conditions that have been invisible, tend to “blame the victim” in that change is focused on the individual victim and not on the perpetrators—the individuals and systems that perpetuate the sexual exploitation of woman. The victim blaming in syndromizing women’s experiences of exploitation ultimately reverts to biologizing exploitation. When consciousness raising and safe space are depoliticized, their goals and effectiveness shift from developing women’s autonomy and connectivity with other women to making women feel better. And frequently, as they begin to feel better, if there is no development of political consciousness of their experiences, they turn their newly discovered anger against other women. That is how apolitical therapy perpetuates the separations of women from each other invoked by sex colonization.

Judith Herman is among the feminist psychologists who have sustained the connection between the personal and the political in her development of therapies based on feminist consciousness raising and safe-space work. Herman’s work is notable in the way its individual therapy is shaped from a consciousness of sexual politics. She has extended the post-traumatic stress disorder to include situations in which women are subjected to “totalitarian control over a prolonged period.” Her identification of a complex post-traumatic stress disorder names a condition that women face in marriage, in families, in prostitution.

Feminist consciousness is evident in the three stages of recovery identified by Herman: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Her work is developed from the late-nineteenth-century identification of stages of recovery in hysteria, from more recent work on combat trauma, and from the identification of complicated post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as from research that recognizes the particular effect of multiple personality disorders—especially as a product of incest abuse.8

The first stage, safety, involves gaining control over one’s body
and one’s environment and moving toward self-care. It means recovering a safe place. In the second stage, remembrance and mourning, “the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor’s life.”9 Telling one’s story, putting it into words in a context that is safe, secure, and supportive, “can actually produce a change in the abnormal processing of the traumatic memory.”10 For many victims of incest abuse, this means actually remembering that which has not been contained in human memory. And Herman is clear that reconstructing memory is not merely a mental activity: “The survivor cannot reconstruct a sense of meaning by the exercise of thought alone. The remedy for injustice also requires action. The survivor must decide what is to be done.”11

In Herman’s third stage, “the survivor reclaim[s] her world.”12 For the incest survivor this means disruption of family relations. She develops new relationships and learns to take power (empowerment) at a personal level. Her desire and her own initiative come into play.13 She is no longer living to please another as she learned to do when subjected to incest abuse or other sexual exploitation.

Feminist research and therapy on incest abuse has effectively revealed the harm that sexual exploitation causes women. It has pioneered approaches that enable women to move beyond the limits that the victimization of sexual exploitation has imposed on their lives and to gain autonomy and learn to construct their own lives through genuine choice and real, personally felt desire.

What we have learned from incest victims’ survival brings into clearer focus both the similarities and the stark contrast for the prostitute woman. And given that prostitution is the patriarchal model for sexual exploitation, women’s survival of it reveals the far-ranging damages of sexual exploitation. For a woman leaving prostitution and beginning to rebuild her life, society either condemns her for her prostitution or normalizes it as work. How
then in either context can she confront the trauma of sexual exploitation as trauma? To be engaged in survival and healing, prostitute women must learn to understand their experiences in a way that the society has refused to acknowledge—they must understand that prostitution itself is abuse. CPA engages women who are leaving prostitution in a "long-term stabilization, a re-orientation where they learn to reframe the experience of prostitution as abuse, and pursue their healing and recovery." 14 For a prostitute woman, this means totally severing herself from all of her experiences and the people she knew in the prostitution world. Unlike the incest victim, who may have to break off relations with a father, a grandfather, and possibly other close family members, the prostitute woman must sever all ties with her social world if she is to be able to find a new life that will not draw her back into prostitution. Moreover, upon leaving prostitution she has no income, she may be facing criminal charges on prostitution itself in countries where it is illegal, and/or she may be facing charges related to prostitution. CPA has found that providing a safe place for women in prostitution may require not only offering housing and a support group but also supporting women in going to court to face their charges and to clear themselves. 15 Before courts and social workers, women leaving prostitution must demand justice neither as a criminal pleading for mercy nor as a "worker" seeking legitimization.

What of the politics of therapy?

The intra-individual psychological approach reflects the individualistic values and orientation of Western society. Feminism has revealed that political action can be the source of profound individual and personal change. The approach of feminist psychologists is treatment from inner to outer, from the individual to the society, from personal change to political action.

From the standpoint of feminist psychology, social action is the culminating phase of the healing process and growth in individual and small-group therapy. "Survivors discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it a basis
for social action,” as Herman points out. “Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capabilities.” This is evident in the numbers of women who, on recovering from sexual exploitation, become counselors or other kinds of workers in projects designed to help other women. Social action—feminist political struggle—engages the individual healing from private therapy in new sustaining bonds that begin “with the discovery that one is not alone” and leads to “a complex mirroring process” in which, “as each participant extends herself to others, she becomes more capable of receiving the gifts that others have to offer.” Sociologically, as the society is constructed through social interaction, that is the means by which we, as humans, socially construct our selves and women in these situations reconstruct their lives. The directionality from outer to inner, from society to self, of sociological analysis is the foundation of the feminist analysis I am presenting. It connects global feminism and women’s personal survival of sexual exploitation, particularly prostitution. When global feminism begins with social action, it then becomes possible for women both to think of confronting their own experience of sexual exploitation and to confront its institutionalization, ultimately in prostitution and pornography. It does not necessarily work the other way around. Beginning with individualized therapy does not lead either to political consciousness or to social action.

Radical Reform

Ironically, the very individualistic ideology that gave rise to personal therapy and has made enormous gains in supporting women through their own recovery from sexual abuse, especially incest assault, is the ideology of individualism that also treats prostitution as a woman’s choice, legitimizing their sexual objectification in economic exchange. The optimism of feminist action is more
than difficult to sustain in the face of global normalization of prostitution and pornography—the international reduction of woman to whore, in the home, in colleges, in brothels, on the streets. In the global normalization of prostitution, the industry impacts most severely on women in the developing world, where states provide little or nothing in the way of social services to enable women to leave prostitution. Given the massive industrialization of women for prostitution in some parts of the globe, to assume that change can occur only through individual therapy-healing and will eventually lead to social action, casts a cloud of doom over the possibility of change. This hopelessness is already manifest in many programs that are trying to make the lives of women in prostitution easier or safer but only with the limited conviction that because the industries are too enormous and prostitution is inevitable, there is nothing more than that to be done about prostitution.

In that context, increasingly many women in prostitution who would leave if they could, as well as many human-rights and women's rights advocates, refer to prostitution as "sex work" or "sexual labor." "Sex work" is new language, introduced to normalize prostitution on the basis of the conviction that prostitute women will never gain any respect unless prostitution itself is accepted as normal, legitimate activity. It is also the language of individualized choice, of pluralistic options either to pursue prostitution as a form of work or to seek individual therapy to recover from it as sexual abuse—as if the same act can have these two different meanings.

When prostitution is referred to as "sex work" by women in prostitution who would leave if they could, the term is an indicator of their hopelessness. "Sex work" language has been adopted out of despair, not because these women promote prostitution but because it seems impossible to conceive of any other way to treat prostitute women with dignity and respect than through normalizing their exploitation. In many Third World countries, that hopelessness and despair is enforced by the economic depen-
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dence of Third World countries on the West. Western hegemony promotes the prostitution in the exploitation of women's poverty. Western aid provides condoms to women on the assumption that prostitution will persist. Western sexual liberalism and its rationalization of prostitution as "sex work" or "sexual labor" ideologically contextualizes Western aid to Third World women in prostitution, which more deeply aggravates sexual exploitation in prostitution by locking women in with funds that could be used to help them get out. By contrast, income-generating projects that would afford women the decent labor that I have so often heard them ask for are not focused on prostitute women. Such projects would enable women to leave prostitution and would require that the state invest in prostitute women's futures. But Western foundation funding has provided little in the way of resources that will assist women in leaving prostitution. Thus, hopelessness that women can respond to their poverty through any other means than prostitution is sustained by these programs.

Feminism reframes women's despair resulting from individual women's experiences of prostitution and from the apparent inevitability of prostitution as it is massively imposed by sex industrialization. This new feminist work is only possible because within the last decade, women in prostitution have begun to confront this condition themselves. They are the new voices of hope, the sources of a new activism. They not only have left prostitution and reshaped their lives but have also begun to speak out against it, revealing their experiences of it, confronting the exploitation of it, and helping other women leave it. In 1980, in Grenoble, France, 4 women in prostitution bravely faced down their pimps in a court trial that broke up a gang of 17 pimps and awarded a judgment in favor of the women. Women's projects in many countries are providing support for women leaving prostitution, support eagerly sought by prostitute women. In the United States Evelina Giobbe launched WHISPER on the conviction that prostitution itself must be (and therefore can be) eliminated. Global feminist action against sex industries is the first step in which
women begin to dissolve the patriarchal dichotomy of women and prostitute, self and other. Further, for Western women genuine international feminist struggle must be responsive to the exploitation of women in the West and the hegemonic imposition of sexual colonisation on women by the West in the Third World. Not only does the West promote exploitation of women through prostitution, but also it robs states of their resources, which leaves little for states to use, even if they were willing to do so, for programs that support women leaving prostitution. The conviction that prostitution is not inevitable, that sexual exploitation does not have to be tolerated and should not be sustained, is the foundation of radical reform.

In the late 1970s, writing *Female Sexual Slavery* before a feminist movement developed to confront prostitution, I proposed decriminalization as the appropriate legal strategy to confront the sexual enslavement of women. Concerned with women’s victimization by police under conditions where prostitution is criminalized, and with pimping that produces slavery of women in prostitution, I saw the urgent need to take the laws off prostitute women, as the abolitionists have argued, without promoting prostitution as the regulationists do. But at that time my proposal to decriminalize prostitution implicitly meant decriminalizing men who buy women’s bodies. The error in proposing blanket decriminalization was that it decriminalizes the customers as well as the prostitute, leaving the customer, the direct perpetrator of sexual exploitation, virtuall y sanctioned.

Taking prostitution as the model of the sexual exploitation of women, I proposed in a meeting called by UNESCO in 1986, that prostitute women should not only be decriminalized; they should also be recognized as victims of sexual exploitation by the customer. When customers are legally identified, sanctioned, fined, and publicly exposed for buying women’s bodies, then the sex they are buying is recognized as an act of aggression, a violation of women, whether or not the women consent. Punishing customers makes all prostitution illegal but does not reduce prostitutes
to criminals. This approach is neither prohibitionist nor abolitionist. It is a feminist human-rights approach that does not separate prostitution from other forms of female sexual exploitation.

Identifying necessary legal changes makes it possible to set new feminist standards, but it is not as easy to change the objective realities and experiences of that exploitation. In actuality, legally enacting the criminalization of customers will immediately reduce or eliminate prostitute women’s income. In the West, where there may be possibilities for women to receive welfare or find some kind of work to sustain them as they begin to transform their lives, cutting off women’s income from prostitution has a different meaning than it does in countries where there are no welfare or social-service systems. In massive poverty, severe and severely gendered, prostitution may be the only source of income for many women. That means that economic development programs and services aimed at prostitute women must begin with economic-alternative strategies and support.

The alternative to desperate conditions is not to validate them. Rather, legal proposals to criminalize customers, based on the recognition that prostitution violates and harms women, must be developed in such a way as to include social-service, health and counseling, and job retraining programs. Where states would be closing down brothels if customers were criminalized, the economic resources poured into the former prostitution areas could be turned toward producing gainful employment for women. Envisioning a liberated future *invokes the intention to claim it*.

Too idealistic? Unrealistic?

Recognizing the “disastrous social consequences and noxious effects of prostitution,” identifying prostitution as one of its top 10 social problems to address, on January 29, 1993, the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam issued Decision 5 on the Prevention and Restriction of Prostitution in Vietnam.* The

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*In January 1993, as part of a faculty seminar I organized with Vietnamese women, I presented the elements of a new U.N. Convention Against Sexual Exploitation, which provided some foundation for Decision 5.
decision begins, “Prostitution under whatever form it might be, should be decidedly eradicated.” The program includes an educational campaign utilizing the press and media to focus on young people (not unlike the media campaigns against drugs in the United States or the successful media campaign addressing prostitution in the Malmo project in Sweden). Not only should funding be provided to support programs that punish pimps and kidnappers and “brothel owners of any sort” but the state is also particularly concerned that “civil servant playboys should be subject to disciplinary measures, their names notified to relevant authorities and published in mass-media.” Everyone else buying prostitutes will be reported to local authorities.

The Vietnamese measures for supporting prostitute women are more far reaching than any that have yet been conceived by state authorities. These strategies have been carved out in the midst of massive poverty, after decades of war and 19 years of the U.S. embargo that was only lifted in 1994. But until the late 1980s it was honored by all but the Soviet bloc countries and thereby severely diminished Vietnam’s economic development. Nevertheless, the government has initiated the following program:

Prostitutes who are willing to lead a normal life will be given a certain sum of money by the Government for a fresh start. Any enterprise (private or state-owned) which offers employment to prostitutes will be allotted funds consistent with every specific case. Credits can be given to reformation centres to create work-places destined for productive labor.

Furthermore, prostitutes infected with venereal disease will be afforded food, accommodations, and medical care until they have completely recovered. And “subsistence allowances can be made for prostitutes coming from poor families lacking the necessities of life [for] a period of 3 months.”

Vietnam recognizes that even in the poorest countries of the world, not all women in prostitution are there because of poverty. Therefore, this new law will provide the kind of programming, or “re-education,” that was made available to women at the end of
the war. Women who remain in prostitution, despite the ban on it and the resources and support offered to leave it, will be “gathered in special centres for reformation for at least a minimum of 6 months.”

The rise of women’s consciousness of gender issues with the socialist approach to prostitution has led directly to the development of this new social policy. This plan for the eradication of prostitution does not treat prostitutes as responsible for their victimization, but makes the socialist state responsible for prostitute women’s future and welfare. By early 1994, with normalization of economic relations between the United States and Vietnam that promises a boost to the Vietnamese economy but may also lead to increased prostitution, the government of Vietnam established a committee to implement Decision 5 and opened new education and training centers for women in prostitution. The vigorous and far-reaching program “to eradicate prostitution” could reverse the trend in the marketing of women under industrialization if resources for supporting women leaving prostitution are coupled with penalization of sex industrialists as well as customers promoting it. This far-reaching protection to women in prostitution, the fact that it has been conceptualized in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation, constitutes a first advance, a step not yet envisioned elsewhere.

The United Nations: The Possibility of Women’s Human Rights?

To confront the sexual exploitation of women globally, I have turned to the Universal Bill of Human Rights, which condemns the “contempt for human rights” that has “resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind,” in order to demand that sexual exploitation be treated as a contempt for human rights, a barbarous act. Human-rights instruments are premised on a utopian vision, the “advent of a world in which
human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want,” and on collective consciousness, “the highest aspirations of the common people.” Human-rights philosophy matches radical feminist moral outrage, recognizing any acts that are destructive to human beings—anything that dehumanizes the human condition—as barbarous.

More than a technical adherence to justice and equality, human-rights philosophy as expressed in the United Nations conventions expresses moral outrage against dehumanization of both human persons and the human condition. It encompasses oppression of peoples as well as violation of individuals. Marxist academics have criticized human rights as an individualistic ideology of capitalism. And it is true that human rights have been interpreted narrowly and applied exclusively within the framework of liberal individualism especially in countries like the United States. But internationally, they have been effectively used by exploited peoples under colonialism, under apartheid, and in totalitarian regimes to confront and expose domination.

“The purpose of recognizing and safeguarding human rights is to ensure the possibility of living fully and completely, in dignity and freedom.” Human rights are the legal expression of human life.” Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” While prohibiting slavery, the Universal Declaration goes further to protect the human being, stating that “no person shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment” (article 5).

Recognizing that human persons are not bodies separable from the social fabric, institutional realities, and class conditions, human rights establish the inseparability of the individual from the collective condition. Therefore human rights are inalienable to both the human person and the human condition; responsibility for them rests both on individuals and on states, as the Charter of the United Nations declares when it affirms “the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and
women, and of nations large and small." Human rights adhere to all human beings and cannot be privileged for one class, group, or state power over another. Moreover, they exist because human beings exist and need no other justification. The fact that women have been left out of human rights and, more than any other group, must establish factual justification for being accorded human rights, returns to the question in patriarchy, "Are women human beings?"

In its applicability to feminism and women's right to dignity, the universality of human rights is a foundation for global feminist struggle based on the common dimensions of women's oppression. Recognizing that human rights are indivisible and inalienable and located in human dignity gives renewed meaning to struggles for legal equality that are subverted as sexual exploitation is treated as something outside of and different than violation of the right to equality.

As patriarchal oppression, specifically sexual exploitation, is a universalized condition of domination, ideally there should be a good fit between feminism and human rights. International human rights for women based on the reality of feminism, a global movement of women's liberation, is built from the commonalities of women's condition across state boundaries, class conditions, races, and ethnicities. Yet, recognizing that women are diverse in their individualities, races, and cultures, feminism rejects the reduction of women to one universalized essential, and claiming women's right to control their own bodies, feminism upholds the inalienability of the individual. Universal human rights holds the potential for recognizing that the power individual men gain from sexual exploitation is only possible because of a class condition in which men as a group gain advancement and benefit from the way they use women sexually. As feminists have established, if men did not gain collectively from the individual and collective sexual exploitation of women, then individual sexual exploitation would be harmful and destructive to individual women, but it could not hold down women as a class.
A New Feminist Human Rights

My work has focused on joining the fundamental principles of human rights with the politics of radical feminism in order to confront the massive global proliferation of prostitution, especially the dramatic increase in trafficking in women, and to recognize that these abuses are perpetrated by international sex industries that promote the legitimization of prostitution and pornography.

In 1991, as the director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (a nongovernmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] of the UN), in collaboration with Wassyla Tamzali of UNESCO, I convened a working group at Pennsylvania State University to analyze the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others and to consider the contemporary dimensions of sexual exploitation globally. The working group concluded that worldwide sexual exploitation is the foundation of human-rights violations of women in prostitution, through pornography, and in all forms of sexual abuse and violence. From this meeting an international human-rights instrument was developed, the Convention Against Sexual Exploitation.

Following the meeting, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and UNESCO sponsored a series of meetings to develop a new human-rights instrument and to propose that the Secretary-General of the United Nations promulgate a new Convention against Sexual Exploitation. (See appendix for complete text.) Within the Coalition, working with Dorchen Leidholdt, we have turned to grassroots women’s movements for consultation, input, recommendations, and revisions in order to refine the document so that it will address women’s needs in each world region.

In the “Elements of a New Convention,” formulated at the Penn State meeting, sexual exploitation is recognized as a viola-
tion of human dignity, and therefore it is "a fundamental human right to be free from sexual exploitation in all of its forms." 23 In the Penn State meeting, we defined sexual exploitation as "a practice by which person(s) achieve sexual gratification or financial gain or advancement through the abuse of a person’s sexuality by abrogating that person’s human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being." 24 Formulated by Professor Susan Edwards of the University of Buckingham in England, this definition establishes the basis of sexual power as gain, which can be as specific as sexual gratification or as concretely material as financial profit. This Convention treats sexual exploitation as a class condition and as individual violation, stating that the "sexual exploitation of any woman is the sexual degradation of all women," depriving women of freedom of movement, threatening women’s safety and security, and thus creating the conditions of sexual terrorism. As such, sexual exploitation violates human dignity and equal rights, invoking cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment.

Over many months and in numerous meetings, this Convention was developed and refined in consultation with United Nations nongovernmental organizations and feminist projects as well as women’s groups in Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America. As a product of worldwide grassroots feminism, it is framed to reveal how sexual exploitation aggravates the harm of other existing inequalities, often taking the form of sexual slavery, torture, mutilation, and death. The proposed Convention recognizes that sexual exploitation takes the form of denial of life through female infanticide, murder of women by reason of their gender, including wife/widow murder, woman battering, pornography, prostitution, genital mutilation, female seclusion, dowry and bride price, sexual harassment, rape, incest and sexual abuse, and torture, including sadistic and mutilating practices. Therefore, the Convention calls upon States Parties to punish all perpetrators of sexual exploitation and to redress the wrongs done to their victims through penal, civil, labor, and administrative sanctions.
In defining sexual exploitation, states must consider that it is an aggravating circumstance and not a defense of sexual exploitation that the perpetrator is the husband, father, other relative, or employer of the victim.

The proposed Convention builds upon the legacy of international human-rights law developed in the United Nations 1949 Convention, which found that prostitution is "incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person." According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 30), "Nothing in this declaration may be interpreted as implying for any state, group, or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein." Accordingly, there is no "right to prostitute."

Rejecting distinctions between "free" and "forced" prostitution as legitimizing prostitution, the proposed Convention recognizes that the act of prostitution is the use of a woman's body as a commodity to be bought and sold, to be exchanged, not always for money, including casual or "occasional" prostitution as well as prostitution in brothels, military prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, and mail-order-bride markets. The Convention calls upon states to penalize the customers, recognizing them as perpetrators to be criminalized while rejecting any form of penalization of the prostitute. Therefore States Parties would be required to agree to reject any policy or law that legitimizes prostitution of any person, male or female, adult or child, so-called first or third world; that distinguishes between free and forced prostitution; or that in any way legalizes or regulates prostitution as a profession or occupation. Recognizing that the pornography industry enlarges the demand for, promotes, and is actively engaged in sexual exploitation, States Parties would be required to enact regulations that hold liable the producers and distributors of pornography.

Global industrialization of prostitution is both a consequence of sex-discriminatory economic development policies and the basis of unofficial economic development in some regions. The Convention calls upon States Parties to reject policies and practices of
economic development that channel women into conditions of sexual exploitation, eroding women’s traditional economic base where it has existed. They shall insure that economic-development policies provide for the full economic development of women through their integration into dignified paid labor at a decent standard of living, from which they have been deprived through sexual exploitation, including, especially, prostitution. Therefore they shall prohibit sex tourism and penalize those who organize it as procurers and promoters of prostitution (pimps) in both the countries from which customers travel and the countries to which they go for sex tourism.

Furthermore, persons or enterprises will be prohibited from promoting, profiting from, or engaging in any business involving the matching of women in marriage to foreign nationals on a mail-order basis (mail-order-bride selling). To prevent sexual exploitation in prostitution on and around military bases, military personnel will be prohibited from engaging in the prostitution of women and children in communities where bases are located. Special observers will be designated to prevent the sexual exploitation of women and children in refugee camps, and special provisions will be enacted to protect women from sexual exploitation during wartime, including times of ethnic conflict, civil war, and foreign intervention.

There are certain types of work involved in the immigration process, such as domestic labor and entertainment, that are conducive to sexual exploitation and may lead to prostitution. The proposed Convention would require States Parties to take all appropriate measures to provide victims of sexual exploitation, including prostitution and traffic in women, with refuge and protection and to repatriate those who desire to be repatriated. Employers who sexually exploit women in the migrating process will be held criminally liable.

Women subjected to sexual exploitation are frequently homeless and, often, stateless when they escape. The “vagabonds” of feudalism, they are controlled neither by husband nor by brothels,
and often their human rights as homeless and stateless persons are not recognized by the country into which they have been trafficked. Under the Convention, refugee status shall be granted to all victims of sexual exploitation, whether they have entered the country legally or illegally. States Parties will ensure that valid written contracts of employment are entered into and will provide for monitoring of the provisions of those contracts. According to the proposed Convention, States Parties will protect the right of all women to retain their own passports and travel documents, which will help prevent the sale of women into prostitution or their sexual use by another person.

Recognizing that sexual exploitation is injurious to women’s physical and mental health and well-being and that it constitutes a major health problem for women, under this Convention States Parties will be expected to provide specialized health services, to fund centers for prostitution alternatives that are voluntary and confidential, and to provide treatment and testing for STDs and HIV, substance-abuse rehabilitation, counseling, day care, housing, income support, preferential access to credit loans to begin small-scale businesses, and skills-training programs. Support, such as shelters in which women work with women who have been exploited to provide alternatives, will be provided to create and establish services for victims of sexual exploitation, including prostitution.

When a convention is adopted by the United Nations, States Parties are invited to ratify it. Their ratification carries the assumption that they are or will become in compliance with the convention in their own laws and practices. To implement this Convention, the United Nations will establish a Committee Against Sexual Exploitation, which will be authorized to make confidential inquiries into any reliable accounts of systematic sexual exploitation as defined above and to submit its findings to the State Party concerned with the aim of reaching an equitable solution. The Committee would receive and review individual complaints from victims of sexual exploitation, which it will bring to
the attention of the concerned State Party. The State Party will be required to respond within 6 months.

Are Women People?

Conventions are international treaties. The proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation would not be the first United Nations convention to explicitly address women’s rights. The Convention on the Political Rights of Women was adopted as early as 1952 and was preceded by the convention on prostitution (1949) discussed earlier. These were followed by several conventions and official U.N. declarations to protect women’s rights in marriage (1957) and to protect women and children in armed conflict (declaration of 1974).

Furthermore the international treaties of the mid-1960s, promulgated in response to Third World struggles against and liberation from European colonization, advance the right of peoples to self-determination in Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and Civil and Political Rights (1966). Both covenants recognize women’s rights insofar as they explicitly are in force “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

And as women know very well, adding women to codified rights is not the same as actually protecting and promoting those rights for women. That is why, with this long and elaborate history of women’s rights codified but largely ignored by the United Nations, many of us held high hopes for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 and ratified by nation states beginning in 1980.

But as often happens when legislation turns to women, something is lost. The loss is first evident in the absence of moral outrage against violation of women. One of the effects of the
long-term sexual colonization of women’s bodies, of the advocacy of this colonization by sexual liberals, and of its institutionalization by sex industries, is that many women can barely grasp our right to moral outrage against sexual dehumanization. When the United Nations turns to women, emphasis on human rights is narrowed and its commitments seem to fizzle. In terms of human rights commitment, CEDAW is no match for the powerful International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which recognizes that “the existence of racial barriers is repugnant to the ideal of any human society” and, consequently, that “any doctrine of superiority based on racial differentiation is scientifically false, morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous, and that there is no justification for racial discrimination, in theory or in practice, anywhere.” By contrast, sexism is only “discrimination against women” which “shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex” (article 1). Absent is the passionate denunciation of injustice found in other struggles against oppression, precisely because sexism is taken as a condition of inequality but not of oppression. The fuller, subtler, and more profound meaning of human rights is diminished to legal discriminations, technical inequalities that require rebalancing. Removed from the context of collective discrimination against a separate people, the moral outrage against women’s condition and the exploitation of women is toned down, reduced to a matter of individual violation. This reverts the exploitation of women to a matter of technical equality regarding “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex.” Although broad in scope, and a significant gain for women who otherwise had almost disappeared from the generic “human” of human rights, this Convention stops short of actually encompassing the full meaning of human rights. Not surprisingly, in the United Nations “women’s rights” have been treated as a different venue, with a separate division and in a different location from “human rights.”

The losses women suffered in CEDAW, adopted in the midst of
a global women’s movement which raised sexual violence and exploitation to issues of primary importance, are that in relation to sexual exploitation it did not cover or include violence against women and it simply reaffirmed the 1949 Convention on prostitution, a law that would have been useful had it been promulgated in 1890 but by the 1980s no longer addressed global sex industrialization and the normalization of prostitution.

This led to new and potentially important work in the 1990s on the development of a U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, which is meant to expand the limited scope of CEDAW. The Declaration is broad in its definition of violence against women, including “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women” (article 1). However, violence against women takes place in a context of patriarchal oppression, and sexual violence is one dimension in a broad scope of sexual exploitation. In writings and reports about this new Declaration, there are radical proclamations about male power and subordination of women but they do not find their way into the official U.N. Declaration. Most importantly, the broad scope of sexual exploitation as it includes pornography and prostitution is omitted. Not thousands but millions of women, daily, hourly, through lifetimes subjected to sexual exploitation are excluded from the violence against women declaration that so many other women rightly are thankful to have won. Intensive lobbying of the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women, which approved the draft Declaration, and particularly from the representatives of the government of the Netherlands, prevented inclusion of prostitution and pornography as forms of sexual exploitation even when it was proposed by nongovernmental organizations later.

The omission was not an oversight. The Declaration was drafted after the elements of the new Convention Against Sexual Exploitation were formulated, presented to the U.N. Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations, forwarded to the U.N.
Centre for Human Rights in Geneva to be considered for the World Conference on Human Rights scheduled for Vienna, June 1993, and then was published in conjunction with UNESCO in 1991. Months later, after the elements of the Convention Against Sexual Exploitation from the Penn State experts group meeting were made public, a meeting was convened in Vienna that led to the drafting of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Held by the U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women, neither UNESCO representatives nor nongovernmental organizations involved in initiating the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation were included. Allowing for the unlikely possibility of oversight, shortly after the Vienna meeting I met with directors of several human rights and women’s rights organizations involved in the Vienna meeting regarding the draft Declaration to discuss its omissions and the proposed Convention. One stated that prostitution was irrelevant to human rights while another acknowledged that it was at the base of women’s equality but said “we can’t touch it.”

It was not only within the Division on the Advancement of Women that prostitution and the normalization of sexual exploitation was discarded as a human rights violation in the United Nations. The World Health Organization had already committed its policies to the proprostitution lobby by placing a representative of that lobby in charge of the WHO policy on prostitution and AIDS, which, not surprisingly, led WHO to issue policy that in effect promotes prostitution by only addressing AIDS in prostitution through condom distribution. And for the new European community, the Council of Europe held a seminar in 1991 with a preplanned agenda that favored the proprostitution policy of the Netherlands.

Yet, this history of the United Nations and its concern for women’s human rights is incomplete without recounting its relationship to the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights. In its early stages of planning, the Centre for Human Rights did not even plan to have a nongovernmental component
to its world conference in 1993. When it finally conceded to open the world conference to nongovernmental organizations and human rights advocates, it did so by closing down their access to the official conference of government representatives, ensuring that nongovernmental activists would have no direct involvement in determining the outcomes of the World Conference on Human Rights. As women, indigenous peoples, and other oppressed groups gained easy access to the nongovernmental meeting, most were so grateful to have some public international forum to speak what had been silenced in their experiences of human rights violations, that the extent to which the formal government meeting excluded most of their issues went by unnoticed. Having participated in other U.N. world conferences, I was keenly aware of a shift or change in U.N. policy toward nongovernmental organizations whose consultative status in the past meant that they had some access to and involvement in the meetings of government representatives. Instead, in preplanned programs of regional meetings, a draft for the final report of the World Conference was developed before the Conference took place.

Although it had been presented to U.N. meetings many times, and it had been recommended from nongovernmental consultations to be considered in the World Conference on Human Rights, the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation was excluded. In fact, while women used the nongovernmental format to educate participants to the abuses women suffer globally, nothing in the form of new or additional protections was asked of the United Nations. The United Nations received extensive media coverage for allowing women to expose our human rights violations. But the United Nations has not been asked to take action on them. While the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation would involve the United Nations in a treaty with nation states that required not only monitoring of human rights violations but action against them and programmatic support for women, it appears that educational campaigns toward delegitimizing violence against women is as far as the U.N. Division on the
Advancement of Women wants to go. A 1993 background paper of the U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women outlines the position on delegitimizing violence against women. Distinguishing between violence in the family and in the community, the paper concludes that controlling violence in the family by law is problematic. “There are legitimate questions of how far the States should or even can intrude into family life. . . . There is no consensus about whether jailing violators provides an effective deterrent.” So as the position turns away from criminalizing wife-beaters and incest abusers for the sake of protecting privatized power relations, it is the same position that is articulated when violence and harassment is public. Criminalization of crimes against women in the community is rejected in favor of educational campaigns to delegitimize violence because testimony about sexual assault and sexual harassment involves “different perceptions by the parties involved [that] tend to cloud the issue. The problem of ‘he said, she said’, where the extent of which what was perceived as harassment by one party, was perceived as innocent badinage by the other, makes adjudication difficult.” And the conclusion is the same for the community as it is in private: “eradication of practices may require sensitization and education rather than legal remedies.” Likewise, civil as well as criminal law is disfavored in this approach.

This anti-criminalization strategy has been used repeatedly in the United States against the women’s movement, first when we called for new laws and harsher penalties for rape in the early 1970s and since then with each campaign against sexual exploitation. It usually comes with the admonition that using law to criminalize perpetrators of prostitution, pornography, rape or wife abuse will “put power in the hands of the state.” No oppressed group ever puts power in the hands of the state. But oppressed groups often put enormous pressure on the state to use its power to protect them, and in many cases, states have been brought down because they would not ultimately meet the demands of the oppressed group for justice. In a long struggle, that
is how power has been redefined, as it is being done now in South Africa, for example. Neither the U.N. nor international human rights groups have asked victims of apartheid, or colonialization, or racism not to seek justice in and protection from courts, not to force the hand of law to work in their behalf. But that is what the United Nations appears to expect women to do now. This anti-criminalization approach to crimes against women can be contrasted to a combined action of Voices of Thai Women and the Foundation for Women that has led them to a demand that the government abolish the Prostitution Suppression Act, which solely blames women for prostitution. "Prostitutes could not do business if there were no male clients," and therefore they are also calling for criminal action against "brothelgoers, as supporters of the flesh trade." And that, among other protections, is what the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation would accomplish globally.

Behind the new U.N. declaration on violence against women is a callous disregard for actions of women in their struggles against domination and for the well-being of women globally covered by militant sounding rhetoric about "male power, privilege, and control." In the final analysis, when the rhetoric is stripped away what is left are unfunded educational campaigns that presumably in one century or another will stop men from beating, raping, and sexually exploiting women because they have been educated to stop doing that which brings them power, privilege, and gain.

What is evident in the power wielding to determine whose definition of violence and exploitation will prevail is a well-oiled collusion between Western, primarily U.S.-based, women's and human rights groups and the United Nations, especially the Division for the Advancement of Women. It is the newest international hegemony over women, particularly women in the Third World. This hegemony is brokered by the U.S. manipulation of global human rights for the purposes of its own dominance in the global economy. Using international human rights to control and manipulate other countries began in the United States under Presi-
dent Carter but became an intensified strategy of Ronald Reagan. While he was manipulating human rights globally he was responsible for the escalation of human misery, especially for women, in the United States, retracting welfare rights and food stamps and regressing affirmative action and civil rights.

As the United States has increasingly entered into the international human rights scene governmentally, it has lobbied to narrow the platform of human rights away from collective rights of peoples, particularly the protected Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which require such rights as the “right to work,” and toward individual rights. That is why the U.S. government has joined U.S.-based human rights groups in supporting the CEDAW approach to violence against women that does not ask governments to penalize perpetrators and narrows women’s claims from that of a class seeking their self-determination, women as a people, to educational campaigns in a rhetoric of individual rights that are not even protected.

Meanwhile, the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation represents women collectively and individually, requiring protections, sanctions, and support programs for victims. And it is the least we should expect.

**Intolerance**

A world without prostitution. . . .

To imagine it is like imagining a world without slavery in the United States in the 1820s. At the height of U.S. slavery, it was inconceivable to all except a few that slavery could be eradicated. Those few fiery and determined abolitionists, many of whom were feminists, refused to concede to the prevailing ideology that slavery was inevitable. They refused to be morally compromised or defeated by arguments that traced slavery back to the beginning of recorded history. At times abolitionism was considered a
vanguard movement, and at other times it was considered a retrograde movement consisting of a collection of oddities who could not fit in elsewhere in the society and who protested the near-sacred U.S. Constitution, which rationalized slavery. The core group of determined abolitionists persisted despite the unpopularity of their message.

This has been the pattern globally. By 1927 the international Slavery Convention entered into force declaring what had been unthinkable a century before: “the firm intention of putting an end to the traffic in African slaves” and hence “to bring about, progressively and as soon as possible, the complete abolition of slavery in all of its forms” (article 2b).

To imagine a world without prostitution is to conceive of eliminating the sexual exploitation of all women. Unless we can go that way, rape-crisis work and protection for abused women will lead only to what I call the “Evian solution,” that is, will reduce our work to a drop in a bucket, to something akin to sending a case of Evian water to a drought-stricken country.

New laws, national and international, cannot replace responsive action. But they are an important part of the strategy, because they establish the base and standards for the liberation of women. As legal change will always fall short of feminist demands, we must pursue it while also knowing that it will never be sufficient. Activism must be shaped from feminist consciousness of domination as it must reveal women’s refusal to co-exist on this planet with sexual exploitation.

Prostitution makes all women vulnerable, exposed to danger, open to attack. To be vulnerable is, by definition, to be “able to be hurt or wounded or injured.” Such vulnerability is publicly institutionalized sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation is privately institutionalized in marriage.

The point is that women’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation is an institutionalized social system. From distancing to disengagement, women lose the boundaries that identify them to them-
selves as separate, distinct, and autonomous. Instead, to survive they must segment themselves, must set up demarcations within themselves that break down the human self—a process that, in the worst cases, results in multiple personality disorders. That which is the human, personally identified self, when made vulnerable, meshes with the world outside the self. I am not speaking here of what makes women "relational," a popular theme in the psychology of women. Rather, I am referring to the way the self that is not bounded is made vulnerable; exposed and unprotected, it is robbed of the experience of direct action on its own accord and, as a result, choice is reduced to managing survival in dehumanized conditions.

Nor is women's vulnerability only individual. Pornography and the sexualization of women in society is a collective, social-class representation of women's vulnerability in which women are socially presented as vulnerable—open to sexual attack, able to be sexually hurt or wounded.

Vulnerability has been exploited into a condition of oppression—a condition taken to an extreme in the breakdown of the female self promoted by the sexual exploitation of women. Oppressors are protected from being vulnerable precisely because they, as a bonded (however diverse) class, are the ones responsible for creating vulnerability.

It is worse than ironic that "vulnerable" has been made into a positive term in the daily experience of sexual relations. The "sexual revolution" and 1960s guides like The Power of Sexual Surrender have made "being vulnerable" an expectation in sexual relations. "Being vulnerable" has stripped the idea of harm from the meaning of the word "vulnerable." "Being vulnerable" has come to mean being open, with no recognition that openness requires protection of human fragility.

The feminist challenge is not to promote the institutionalization of women's vulnerability and openness to sexual exploitation, which then becomes treated as sex and as sexy. Sex in this way is
dehumanized and its use violates human rights. By contrast, the feminist challenge is to demand the neutralization of visible, media-promoted images of sexual exploitation and to restore the social image of woman to that of human being, an image not synonymous with whore. The feminist challenge is to confront all institutionalized sexual exploitation—made public in prostitution and privatized in homes, among couples, in marriage.

What is sexual equality if it does not begin with equality in sexual relations? That is the first and foremost condition for a sexual intimacy in which openness leads to a human experience of sex, in which interaction is passionate with integrity.

In this, the most profound level at which the personal is political, women will set the standards by which we will experience ourselves, by which we can and will be open, by which we know ourselves as open, desirous sexual beings.

In this sense, I do not envision a political struggle that culminates in a final revolution, a revolution that promises complete and final change while we live in the misery of the present condition until then. Neither is revolution, as I think of it here, reduced to “process,” a series of psychological changes we go through stage by stage as individuals, falsely assuming that individual change repeated in many will lead to collective action.

For me, envisioning a reality beyond the seemingly intransigent, immutable conditions of patriarchal domination means being grounded in this world while positing another possible reality. It requires being located in women’s (collective) experiences while knowing the material, concrete, unexploited, human possibility, a possibility that is within reach, a possibility already begun. This possibility is the meaning of feminist struggle against domination and for liberation—a possibility that has already been put in motion in the many projects and actions of feminists worldwide, yet a possibility that holds more potential for change than most women in these projects fully realize. To provide for any woman or girl the possible reality that there is another world, another
kind of life than the sexual exploitation in prostitution, in incest, in rape, in marriage, and then to provide for the material realities of housing and health care, money, jobs, counseling, group awareness, and, indeed, love already is the manifestation of that other new reality.
The 1994 draft of the Convention Against Sexual Exploitation is presented here to convey the minimum conditions for a new international law and does not represent the fullest formulation of all the possibilities which continue to be discussed and formulated in each world region as this book goes to press. However because legal change for women is frequently undermined either by being sabotaged before it can be adopted or ruthlessly revised to less than minimal needs, this text provides a baseline for evaluating future actions on this Convention.