

INSTIGATIONS FROM

the whole  
revolution

a third wave feminist response to the sex work "controversy"

A collection by  
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<http://eminism.org/> • Putting the Emi back in Feminism since 1975.

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## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you Leslie Bull for being my best friend, good neighbour, and partner in crime against the “decent” (read: middle-class) society. Thank you Penny Arcade for your encouragement and righteous anger. Here is a piece inspired by both of your work:

### **degrade**

dec. 10, 2002; dec. 15, 2002

degradation  
is not trading sex for money  
but it is exchange  
of social security number for food

degradation  
is not stripping away the minidress  
but it is not having curtain  
covering me in a public shower

degradation  
is not faking orgasms on the phone  
but it is faking compliance  
with the court order

degradation  
is not even being raped on the street  
but it is the doctor asking me  
“why does it bother you if you fuck strangers anyway?”

# Table of Contents

Support Prostitutes' Movement Now! . . . . . 1

A Conversation with an Academic Feminist . . . . . 5

How Sex Workers Defeated Mayor Vera Katz . . . . . 19

*Photo: Emi + Carol Leigh* . . . . . 24

Debunking the Anti-Prostitution Feminism . . . . . 25

*Photo: Emi + Penny Arcade* . . . . . 40

Emi's Sex Work Activism Buttons . . . . . 41

refusing to be safe . . . . . 42

Photo: Emi @ Pole Dancing . . . . . 43



*What happens to Emi when she double-doses on Xanax.  
Photo was taken with a camera held in her own hand.*

Resist Scapegoating of Prostitution and  
Confront Real Problems: Global Capitalism,  
Sexism, Poverty, Exploitation & Violence

# Support Prostitutes' Movement Now!



**“Well, of course you can  
legislate morality!”**

**Portland Police Chief Mark  
Kroeker, circa mid-1990s**

***10 Questions & Answers on  
Why Progressives Should Support  
Prostitutes' Movement***

# What is the Prostitutes' Movement? Why should feminists support it?

Prostitutes' movement is a movement by prostitutes and our allies to **improve and control the condition of our labor as well as our status within the society**. It is an integral part of the greater feminist as well as the labor movement. Even though laws have been passed to protect other women (from sexual assault, domestic violence, etc.) and other workers (from unfair labor practice, unsafe or hostile workplace, etc.), we are still vulnerable in many ways. We demand, just like other women and workers have, that **our rights to safety, dignity, and respect that all people deserve**.

## Do Women Choose to Be Prostitutes? Do they have a choice?

Like many other workers in a capitalist society, our options are limited by many factors, including poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. But to the degree many workers choose their occupation, many prostitutes do choose ours. To the degree many workers are forced into an occupation that they do not want, many prostitutes are forced into prostitution. One of the goals of the prostitutes' rights movement is to **empower everybody who works in the sex industry regardless of how we entered the field, creating many options for ourselves, both inside and outside of the industry**.

## Isn't Prostitution a form of Slavery?

"Prostitution" describes the type of work, like "manufacturing" or "farming." "Slavery" describes the condition under which the work is forced, performed, and exploited regardless of the type of work involved. During the American Slavery, most slaves were forced to perform either farm work or domestic work, but **it was not the type of work per se that was inhumane; rather, it was the condition under which their work was performed (i.e. slavery) that was**.

Even today, severely exploitative working conditions exist in many different fields. Two of the contemporary examples are offshore sweatshops ran by U.S. corporations, and the U.S. farms where undocumented migrant workers work. But nobody is calling for the abolition of garment industry or agriculture altogether; instead, **we are rightfully calling for the better, equitable and just treatment of all workers**. Why should it be any different for the sex industry?

## Isn't Prostitution Always Oppressive?

Not any more so than other lines of work in a global capitalist system. If prostitutes were more vulnerable to exploitation than other workers today, it is because we, like offshore sweatshop workers and migrant farmworkers, lack the **institutional power to defend our rights** as workers. To say that prostitution is “inherently” or always oppressive would **absolve the wrongdoers of their responsibilities**, and therefore is ultimately reactionary.

## Aren't Many Women and Children Being Hurt in Prostitution?

True, but not because we trade sex for money. As pointed out above, it is because **we lack the institutional power to defend ourselves and our rights as workers**. For example, the laws against prostitution can be used by police officers and abusive managers/pimps as a leverage to harass us and violate us. **Our empowerment will make it more and more difficult for them to mistreat any woman or child**. Unsafe working conditions and abusive management are labor issue.

## What about People who have been Forced into Prostitution?

As the prostitutes' movement grows more powerful, it will become harder for pimps to coerce women into prostitution against their will because the use of **coercion and force is against both our values and our economic interests**. It was the labor movement that forced the government to enact child labor laws, occupational safety laws, 8-hour work days, and many other protections for other workers. Prostitutes' movement will achieve these **same goals for ourselves that the rest of the labor movement for others**.

## Weren't Prostitutes Sexually Abused as Children?

Given the epidemic of child sexual abuse in this country, **it is no surprising that many prostitutes have been abused as children, just like many non-prostitutes have also been abused**. On the other hand, there are plenty of prostitutes (as well as non-prostitutes) who were never abused as children. We as the society need to **move beyond stereotypes and take the epidemic of child sexual abuse seriously** rather than using it as a tool to oppress a whole class of workers.

## Isn't Sex Industry Inherently Sexist?

Since we live in a sexist society, every industry is guilty of incorporating sexist elements to a degree. In the medical field for example, doctors are disproportionately male while nurses female as a result of the pervasive institutionalized sexism. Sex industry similarly reflects the society's sexist structures and attitudes. On the other hand, **it is one of the few fields where women make at least as much as men if not more for the same work**, and there is a lot of female companionship and rapport among female sex workers. Scapegoating the sex industry for its sexism trivializes the far-reaching impact of the sexism in other fields.

## But According to Statistics...

Most if not all **statistics used by anti-prostitution groups are skewed due to their flawed methodologies**. Because average or better off prostitutes rarely answer surveys or are mandated by court to attend programs, **existing studies on prostitutes, especially those compiled by anti-prostitution groups, vastly overrepresent those who are indeed in bad situations** due to homelessness, mental illness, drugs, partner abuse, or any combination thereof. Keep in mind that these issues are indeed real for many people, but before you accept these reports as accurate, request a copy of their original research and assess its methodological validity.

## Shouldn't Sexuality be Reserved for Romantic Relationships?

Everybody is entitled to her or his definition of sexuality, and there is nothing wrong with holding the view that sexuality and romance should go hand in hand. However, **when a dominant group forces its version of sexual ideology on the marginalized group, it becomes a sexual oppression**. A common example of this is homophobia. It is no wonder that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people have historically been persecuted in so-called "vice sweeps" along with prostitutes, or that lesbians and female sex workers were lumped together and punished as "sinful women" during the Nazi era, once we realize that the oppression against sex workers is tightly linked to the oppression against other sexual minorities.

**Sex Workers' Rights Are Workers' Rights!  
Anti-prostitution Feminists' Collusion With  
The Law Enforcement Oppresses Women.**

# A Conversation with Dr. A

*A Sex Work Activist takes on an Academic Feminist*

What follows is a series of e-mails that were sent between myself (Emi) and Dr. A., a guest lecturer at Portland State University. I liked her presentation: she spoke about how U.S. academic feminists' "postmodern" interpretation of Filipino women's struggles with the global capitalism was in itself colonialist and decried how the political language of the Left has been weakened by postmodernism. An example: the word "empowerment" once meant a structural change resulting in the liberation of an oppressed class, but in the contemporary late-capitalist society women are told that empowerment is all about individual happiness. True enough.

During this presentation, Dr. A mentioned the phrase "sex work" as an example of ways in which postmodernism is changing our vocabulary and abandoning the true movements for "empowerment." Postmodernists use the term "sex work," she argued, in an attempt to make it seem that prostitution and other forms of sexual labor are simply a matter of individual choice. By doing so, she argued, that the use of the term "sex work" is preventing a more thorough examination of the sex industry in terms of social structures such as sexism and global capitalism. Sounds good?

Well, the problem is that the term "sex work" did not come from academics, but from activists organizing for the collective liberation of sex workers. Far from "preventing" the liberation movements aimed at structural changes, the term was actually coined by the sex work activist Carol Leigh (a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot) and was essential in addressing the issues we as sex workers face as labor issues rather than moral or personal problems. So I wrote Dr. A an e-mail, thanking her for her insights and correcting her on this one minor point.

Oh boy, she did not take it well. She forwarded my e-mail (in which I disclosed my sex worker status, along with my real name, address, etc.) to her students without my permission, and

began dialog with them about how this Emi chick is stupid, ignorant, unfeminist, etc.—and then forwarded me her students' comments! Thoroughly shocked, I attempted to engage in a debate with her and her students.

Below is the collection of these e-mails sent between Dr. A, her students, and myself, in which I point out double standards and anti-sex worker biases in their arguments. Please note that neither Dr. A nor her students were consulted regarding whether or not to reproduce their e-mails: since Dr. A did not even bother to protect my privacy when she forwarded my e-mail, I have to assume that Dr. A does not think that e-mail correspondents are private. However, because I do not want to damage the reputation of another Asian woman scholar (even though she did not seem to care that she may be ruining my future job prospects in academia), I chose to remove all names except mine. If Dr. A is reading this, and wishes to be identified by her real name, I will make that change in the next edition.

## **#1: Emi to Dr. A, Feb. 23, 2001**

Dr. A,

Thank you very much for your talk at Portland State University yesterday—I really enjoyed it, and I was glad to see another Asian woman scholar who is making connections between theories and real world as they impact real people, especially Asian women.

As you may have noticed, I felt a bit uncomfortable with the way you discussed issues surrounding sex work. It felt strange to me to feel so uncomfortable because I was mostly in agreement with your arguments and couldn't tell what exactly it was that was making me uncomfortable. Afterwards I thought about it for a while, and I think I now know what it was, and that's why I'm writing to you.

I am a sex worker and a sex work activist - and when I say sex work activism, I mean a whole whore revolution. As sex work activists, we exchange information and resources to keep us healthy and safe, and we organize to improve the condition of our labor. Reformist perhaps, but definitely more than simply demanding more ketchups at McDonald's, because it involves collective empowerment and changing of the structures.

However when you mentioned "sex work," you suggested that this phrase was a postmodernist euphemism and argued that the notion sex work is "empowering" is an individualistic misuse of the term "empowerment" in the context of the lives of many women and children in the sex industry. It was not that I disagreed with your main argument that viewing sex

## (#1 continued)

work as a source of (individualistic) empowerment misses the point—but I disagreed with your assumption that the term “sex work” was an euphemism arising from this position. That is why, I now realize, I felt uncomfortable with your comment while agreeing with it.

I do feel annoyed by people who seem to enter the sex industry or glorify it thinking that it’s such a great line to add to their resume as a sex radical: there is nothing radical about doing this line of work in and of itself. However sex work activism is a real struggle by real people, with a real, global impact: for example, the massive success of the U.S. sex work activism will lead to the reduction of involuntary trafficking of women in the sex industry not necessarily because U.S. sex workers are concerned about women from other countries, but because it is in their economic interest to stop trafficking of additional dispensable workers. In fact, the term “sex work” was coined by Carol Leigh (a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot), a legendary prostitutes’ rights activist, because we needed to recognize ourselves as workers before we can move into collective actions. This, of course, parallels the second wave feminist discovery of “house work” or “second shift” as Arlie Hochschild put it.

In shoft, while I agreed with your criticism of postmodern scholarship on such issues as global trafficking of women and children that fail to address people’s real experiences, I also felt your comment trivialized the real liberation movement that was made possible by adopting the term “sex work,” along with the experiences of those of us who are organizing within the sex industry. Does that make sense?

Thank you for reading, and I hope to see you again.  
Emi Koyama

## #2: Dr. A to Emi, Feb. 26, 2001

Dear Emi,

Thank you for writing. I was pleased to have met you, and am glad you came up to talk to me afterward.

**I hope you don’t mind my sharing your e-mail** with a Fil-Am graduate student who is doing her dissertation on sex tourism in the Philippines; after all, the issues you raise are very important ones that ought to be discussed widely.

The following are her comments.

Best,

Dr. A

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Student B

To: A

Subject: Emi's letter

Dear Dr. A,

Oh, this issue is so frustrating! Emi is very articulate and really does espouse the general position. I like how she distances herself away from sex radicals. However, I think she and the rest of that side don't address the importance of structural gender inequality. Excuse the rest if it seems disorganized. The issue just makes me rant.

I think this talk about unionizing prostitutes is really sidetracking the issue. I think it keeps us from asking more important questions concerning why women are marginalized in the labor force and how they economically get forced into prostitution. The whole consent thing is too fuzzy because most sex workers get into it because of economic hardship. In fact, it's like saying that since drug dealing is the easiest way to survive in the inner city for African-Americans, we should unionize them.

And what about race in this issue? Emi says that American sex workers are against trafficking because of the competition. Do they want to unionize because they want to exclude migrant prostitutes who've come to the US for a better life? We haven't had a huge migrant prostitute problem but is this what will happen with class and national differences between sex workers? Another economic question is when Third World women say they go into prostitution rather than making a pittance at export processing zones—Why don't we question the US, Western, and local gov't involvement in keeping women's wages low? ?

I was just reading Chapkis for my comps and I love how she brackets gender inequality. She says that sex radical feminists agree that there's gender inequality and severe exploitation but that is not the issue. In the Foucauldian sense, she believes that prostitution not only is a site of reinforcement of patriarchy but subversion of it. But it still reinforces it at the same time.

This argument reminds me so much of identity politics where people rally around corrupt categories, like African-Americans rallying around the one drop rule. In my master's thesis on biracial identity, what I found that in most cases, it didn't matter what kind of phenomenological self-concept my respondents had of their racial identity, they could not avoid being racially identified by others. It's just not about redefining something and personally seeing it differently. You

## (#2 continued)

can see yourself as white but if you don't look white, you won't be treated white. You can say that prostitution is not inherently exploitative but that doesn't mean it isn't.

I have to laugh when sex workers say how frightened men will be by women choosing to become prostitutes and how that is feminist resistance, to be a sexual woman. Why wouldn't men love that? Doesn't it serve their purposes—more prostitutes? **The purpose of most prostitutes is not to be sexual autonomous but sexually serve men. It's part of the job description.** Chapkis confuses me in agreeing with the gender inequality side. She has several testimonies from prostitutes who say they control what goes on during the transaction but even in a dominatrix situation the men gives up power in the bedroom he has everywhere else. It doesn't matter if women decide to redefine what being a "whore" is when there is pervasive structural gender inequality.

**I wonder why Emi became a sex worker.** Generally it's because they can more money doing that than working a non-sex job. Not only are women marginalized in the labor force but women of color are even more so.

Many international bodies, ILO and EU are now not seeing prostitution as inherently a human rights violation. It's inherently exploitative because it's inherently discriminatory to women. And this discrimination is integral to it. This will only change if the patriarchal system is changed. Women can't get vested in this system of gender inequality. A part of the subversion is the reinforcement. **Sex workers are vested in the patriarchal system because they rally around a traditional female role** "like wife" and they also don't see that under a patriarchal system, men view women and children as property and feel entitled to do with them as they will, like in paterfamilias.

This marginalization is an issue of gender inequality in labor force. Kathleen Barry looked at the effects of the rapid industrialization of NICs and its disparate effects on men and women. Only men profited from this industrialization and women were harmed by it. Because of their marginalization from the labor force in general, they were further marginalized and closed out by this new success and actually forced more into prostitution because the men had new disposable income and created more of a demand for prostitutes.

Why do sex work activists not talk about the fact that sex work and emotional work is done almost exclusively by women for men? What good does it do for women to uphold such a system? It's like women using traditional roles to get

ahead, like sleeping their way to the top because it gives into the idea that the only power a woman has is her sexual attractiveness not even her sexuality. **I think prostitution has as much to do with female sexual liberation as rape does.** It's about power and not about sex. It's because men can buy women's bodies. As R.W. Connell says, we can only have a democracy of pleasure when we have an equalization of resources.

Sincerely  
Student B

### #3: Emi to Dr. A & Student B, Feb. 26, 2001

Dr. A & Student B,

Thanks for your response. I think I could have explained myself more in the last email, but I was not trying to defend sex work or sex industry \*per se\* in that email—I was only trying to defend sex work activism and the term “sex work,” which was instrumental in the early stage of the whore revolution. Now that the whole issue is on the table, I think I should respond to some of Student B's critique.

I locate sex workers' movement on the intersection of labor and women's movements. It is a labor movement because we are fighting for the same rights that other workers in the U.S. won through labor mobilization. It is a woman's movement because sex workers are overwhelmingly female, and our low status within society coincides with that of any other female-dominated fields.

As a worker, I realize that many of my fellow workers are abused or exploited on the job. We often do not have full range of options because of sexism, racism, poverty, immigration status, etc. But how is it different from the abuse and exploitation of sweatshop workers or migrant farmworkers? Would you argue that clothings or agriculture should be abolished because they are inherently oppressive? Would you accuse sweatshop workers and migrant workers organizing to improve their working conditions of “sidetracking the issue”?

As a feminist, I agree that structural gender inequalities, along with racism, poverty, etc. shape the workforce within the sex industry. The fact that women make up majority of sex workers reflects, as Student B says, structural gender inequalities—but this is no different from how majority of doctors are men and majority of nurses are women. I want us to be targeting gender inequalities that result in these discrepancies in \*all\* fields, rather than scapegoating just one kind of work or workers.

I feel that many feminists who criticize sex industry somehow employ this double standard that does not benefit

### (#3 continued)

sex workers, or any other workers or women for that matter. By focusing on “inherent” oppressiveness of sex work, they absolve real perpetrators of their responsibilities in not-so-inherent violence, exploitation and abuse experienced by sex workers. Such rhetoric ultimately harms all female workers, migrant workers, workers of color, etc., and benefits the ruling class. This, to me, is a sidetracking. We need to keep the focus on the structural abuse and exploitation, rather than on specific acts that we perform to make a living, be it stripping, harvesting vegetables, tightening the bolt, or teaching Introduction to Women’s Studies (which I took three times and dropped all three times due to racism, homophobia, etc. in the classroom).

I agree with Student B’s concern that the U.S. sex workers might turn against migrant prostitutes. I have in fact witnessed a lot of xenophobic sentiments among street hookers (which is the word I generally use among ourselves). Again, this is the same horizontal hostility that exists among other working class people who face the direct competition from migrant workers, and it should be addressed as such, rather than scapegoating sex workers.

Student B wrote “I wonder why Emi became a sex worker.” I fear the implication of this question—that sex workers are somehow in need of an extraneous alibi that other workers are exempt from. I get asked this question from time to time, but I hate to answer it because the society seems obsessed with categorizing me either as a helpless victim or a greedy slut, rather than recognizing me for who I am, just an Asian girl trying to survive and to make the world a better place for all.

I am saddened by the way Student B liberally compares prostitution to rape, because I feel it trivializes the seriousness of actual rapes against women, including sex workers. I am also disappointed that another feminist woman would assume that I am not as enlightened as she is about the pervasiveness of the patriarchy simply because of what I do to pay my bills. I am additionally shocked that this attitude came from another feminist woman of color, because the pattern is strikingly similar to how white American feminists objectify, dismiss and silence women of color and Third World women by suggesting that their own voices do not count because they are so oppressed that they don’t have any.

Emi K.

## #4: Dr. A to Emi, Feb. 26, 2001

Emi,

Here's from a former student of mine, also a Fil-Am, who now teaches Women's Studies in \*\*\*\*\* University.

Dr. A

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Student C

To: Dr. A

Subject: "whole whore revolution"

Dear Dr. A,

I'm not convinced by Emi's counterargument. Here's why: **she doesn't have any conception of the gross inequalities between the North and South.** If she did, she might not rely so heavily on the idea that "sex work" is voluntary for all women. Or, that some women enter this industry to add a line to their resume. Maybe that was tongue in cheek, but **I do think she views this as voluntary without understanding the larger picture.** Plus, I found her discussion of "U.S. sex activism" profoundly disturbing. She appears to argue that the work of U.S. sex activists will have an impact on the international trafficking in women (not because of their concern or anything for these women) because that will reduce the competition--and they can have the whole field to themselves! How very U.S. of them. That is silly and a good indicator of how **Emi has provided no context or even thought of the larger structural problems that \*force\* many women into prostitution.** How about SAPs, the IMF, World Bank, imperialism? Aren't those important factors to think about—before launching into the whole whore revolution? What is the whole whore revolution? Reducing international competition? Please, she said it wasn't like demanding more ketchup, but it sure sounded like it to me. **This is one of the most annoying things I have read lately.**

Actually, I am quite angered by her response. She claims that your remarks have trivialized sex work activism and ignored the real "liberation" of sex work! How is it liberating for women forced into this due to a maldeveloped economy? Whose liberation are we talking about? Do you remember Ngo Vinh Long telling us about "hitting the red?" This is where young virgins in Vietnam are recruited and forced into sex work with HIV infected men from other countries—should they begin organizing for a whole whore revolution? Even this term/phrase speaks from an individualistic perspective. What about overseas Filipina domestic workers who become

trapped and tricked into prostitution once in their “host countries”!

I could go on and on, but I’ll stop here. I seem to be getting more and more pissed off.

Love,  
Student C

## #5: Emi to Dr. A & Student C, Feb. 26, 2001

Here’s my response to Student C:

First, never in my initial email to Dr. A, did I suggest that “sex work is voluntary for all women.” I did not even say that it was voluntary for most sex workers. I do not understand why Student C insists that I based my argument “so heavily” on such a faulty notion, when I did not say anything like that at all.

Second, I am speaking as an Asian immigrant woman who have survived racism and xenophobia among white and/or American-born sex workers. While I do not wish to discuss circumstances under which I entered the sex trade because I fear my experiences will be twisted and used against my fellow workers, but it is appalling that Student C is assuming that I entered the sex industry voluntarily and therefore don’t understand experiences of others who did not. For the record, I never specifically said that I chose to enter the sex industry nor that majority of other sex workers do.

Third, as I stressed during the questions and answer period at Dr. A’s presentation, my main argument is that we need to stop focusing on the sexual nature of the work and focus on abuse and exploitation against workers as well as structures that perpetuate them. It is people who argue that sex work is always inherently oppressive who do not understand the real issues, such as sexism, racism, colonialism, and poverty. I find Student C’s unfounded assumption that I am ignorant about North-South world system, IMF, World Bank, etc.—for which she has no basis except her own faulty assumption that I believe sex work is voluntary to all women—particularly offensive. Of course, one of the prevailing stereotypes of a sex worker is that she is stupid, so I am not at all surprised to be treated as if I am. I am however saddened that another Asian feminist woman would feel completely justified in treating me that way.

Lastly, Student C misquotes me as promoting the “liberation of sex work,” and implies that I am saying that sex work itself is liberating under any circumstances. This

is completely unconscionable, considering the fact that I explicitly concurred with Dr. A's argument that postmodernist and/or sex radicals' glorification of sex work as a source of empowerment is problematic. I disagreed with Dr. A's suggestion that the term "sex work" was a postmodern euphemism and stated that such argument trivialized "the real liberation movement that was made possible by adopting the term "sex work," along with the experiences of those of us who are organizing within the sex industry."

The whore revolution is about creating more and better options for everyone, including women who entered the industry involuntarily. The whore revolution begins from the acknowledgement that not all sex work is voluntary or safe, and aspires to create a world in which they are. The whore revolution will fight violence and oppression at every level, including economic violence and the violence by the state or by international organizations, because violence and oppression diminishes our options.

Why did Student C rush to the assumption that I was completely ignorant about how the sex industry—or the global political economy—works as soon as I mentioned a "whore revolution"? Could it be that her contempt or at least prejudice toward whores is keeping her from listening to what I am actually talking about?

Emi K.

## **#6: Dr. A to Emi, Mar. 6, 2001**

I've finally read the discussion thoroughly, and concur with Student B that it brought out just how vexed and emotion-laden an issue sex work/prostitution is, particularly in the industrialized west. Many major points of conflict emerged which I won't go into except for one which, to my mind, serves as the fundamental undergirding for the other arguments.

I think it's very important to examine the conditions and the nature of the work people are engaged in and to look closely at exactly what's involved in the activity. For example, domestic workers operate in a situation that is not at all like assembly-line work, especially when they are migrant workers overseas. Their passports are in the possession of their employers; they are on call at all hours; they are asked to perform all manner of menial and humiliating work; they are virtual captives in the isolation of their bosses' homes. In short, as Bridget Anderson explains it, what they are selling is not only their labor power but their very personhood (*Who's Doing the Dirty Work?* 2001). She describes the way in which employers, whether mean or kindhearted, derive their sense

of superiority via contrast with the “other” (inferior, to begin with, as a result of class, race, and nation) who is made to use different plates and flatware, eat different food, perhaps wear a uniform when company comes the better to buttress the employer’s status, etc. Anderson likens their predicament to that of slaves, and draws from slaves’ accounts to make the comparison.

One recommendation to ameliorate the situation in Europe has been to professionalize domestic work, making workers undergo training. This raises questions, according to Anderson, such as how domestic work can continue to be seen as a “natural ability” of women in general. And is the housewife/employer getting someone who is now better at “her” job? In any case, professionalization will most likely end in the “whitening” of domestic work, leaving migrant workers to continue in the low end of the “profession.”

One can perhaps carry out a similar analysis of what sex workers (or prostituted women, the term Filipina revolutionaries prefer as a way of underscoring the involuntary character of the work and the socioeconomic conditions leading up to it, both national and global) do and what exactly is involved in the activity. Kelly Holsopple (“Pimps, Tricks and Feminists,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 1999) writes about her 13 years of work as a prostitute (she shuns the use of “sex work”) and how none of it had to do with her own desire, pleasure or sexuality, that everything had to do with sexual servitude. This is probably putting it delicately. Using one’s sex organs, after all, is hardly like using one’s hands. But perhaps in the profound alienation pervading late capitalism the severance of desire and sexuality from the act of making love has been made possible?

This is precisely what postmodernists obscure in presenting “sex work” as a form of emotional labor in which sex workers (presumably having “professionalized” their stance) are able to control and manage their emotions, in the words of Wendy Chapkis.

To repeat, there are major, probably irreconcilable conflicts, in the debate. My purpose here is to attempt to locate where the basic tension arises. I think the best that we can do is to recognize this and to avoid, as best we can, imputing unkind motives to one another.

I want to thank you, Emi, for your willingness to initiate the discussion.

Dr. A

## #7: Emi to Dr. A, Mar. 6, 2001

Dr. A,

My original point in the first email I sent you was that your assumption of the term “sex work” as an example of postmodernist academic euphemism was incorrect, because it is a word that came directly from sex workers who are organizing for better and more options. I am frustrated that you continue to focus only on how postmodernists use the term, rather than how sex workers themselves use it.

I do not necessarily disagree with your comparison between “domestic work” and “sex work,” but I can’t help but notice that you acknowledge domestic work as work without any quotation marks while refusing to acknowledge sex work as real work. This is the kind of anti-sex worker double standard I have been criticizing in your students’ responses. Another double standard is that you point to extreme cases of slavery-like exploitation and abuse as evidences that sex work is inherently oppressive, yet you do not condemn agriculture (which is the field in which most slaves were forced to work) as inherently as oppressive as sex work. The political implication of these double standards include further stigmatization of sex workers, absorption of responsibility for those who directly make money off of exploitative or abusive trafficking and pimping, and trivialization of concerns that migrant farm workers and factory workers have.

I disagree that domestic work is by nature exploitative or oppressive any more than assembly-line work. What is making these work oppressive is sexism, racism, classism, nation-state, global capitalism, etc.—but not the acts involved in the work itself. Otherwise, how would you explain the fact that slavery and slavery-like exploitation exists in any field, be it sex industry, agriculture, domestic work, or manufacturing? Migrant workers and Third World workers are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation in any fields of work, because the problem is not specific acts involved in domestic or sex work, but it is greater oppressive structures, such as sexism, racism, classism, nation-state, global capitalism, etc.

Your argument that professionalization of domestic work (as well as sex work) may lead to the “whitening” of these fields is a valid concern. This effect has been observed in areas where prostitution is legalized. In Nevada, for example, prostitutes are required to work out of a licensed brothel (meaning, no undocumented workers can work there) and submit to mandatory STD testing. I have problem with how these governmental regulations are not designed to protect workers, but are designed to protect the employer and the

“public.”

However, this is hardly an issue unique to the sex industry, as migrant farm workers and factory workers experience the same oppressive dynamics. Again, the problem is not what one does to make a living, but sexism, racism, classism, nation-state and global capitalism as well as social and political structures that frame our working conditions. If sex work is oppressive, it is not because it involves sex acts, but because we live under a sexist, racist, classist, global capitalism that will render any labor vulnerable to exploitation.

I think that the real source of the “conflict” is that you hold up sex acts as something more sacred or special than other human behaviors (such as teaching Women’s Studies at a university) that are also bought and sold in the capitalist system. You suggested that “severance of desire and sexuality from the act of making love” is a new phenomena invented by “late capitalism,” but neglect that conflation of desire, sexuality, and sex acts is also an invention of the contemporary industrial/capitalist system.

Of course, you are perfectly entitled to define your own sexuality in any way you see fit. However, when you insist that others must adopt the same definition of sexuality as yourself, you run the risk of practicing bigotry not unlike that of right-wing Christian fundamentalists. In fact, I cannot help but notice how similar your characterization of the “severance of desire and sexuality from the act of making love” as a contemporary social disease is to the right-wing condemnation of homosexuality as the evidence of contemporary decadence in a faithless era.

Emi K.

## #8: Dr. A to Emi, Mar. 6, 2001

Dear Emi,

I am sorry that you had to resort, again, to a personal attack. I cannot possibly define your sexuality for you, and I wouldn’t even think of it.

I thought, mistakenly, that it was possible to present ideas on the table without impugning each other’s personal characters. That is precisely why I said the positions appear irreconcilable, but that we can certainly try to respect those differences. It looks like that is not possible.

Dr. A

## #9: Emi to Dr. A, Mar. 6, 2001

Dear Dr. A,

I'm saddened to hear you describe my responses to your comments as "personal attacks." I sincerely do not understand what you found so personally offensive, because surely one could point out another person's double standard or bigotry as part of reasonable critiques on that person's positions rather than her or his personality.

While I do not feel ashamed of what I do to pay the bills, I felt intimidated and violated when you shared with your students my email in which I stated that I was a sex worker with my real name and email address intact, because it compromises my safety as well as future options outside of the sex industry. Nevertheless, I feel that I presented my views in a completely respectful manner, critiquing your views while not targeting your characters.

I am saddened that you failed to respond to any of the real issues I have raised in my interaction with you and your students, and instead chose to interpret my detailed critiques of your positions as personal attacks. I am saddened that you dismissed my argument by quickly declaring an "irreconcilable" differences rather than trying to respond to any of my critiques.

And I am very saddened because when we met just a couple of weeks ago, I felt that you were an Asian woman scholar that I could look up to as I progress through my education. I feel that your positions on sex work is utterly incompatible with the rest of your philosophy that I highly respect, and I hope that there will be a day when you would at least allow them to be challenged.

Thank you,  
Emi Koyama

# How Sex Workers Defeated Mayor Vera Katz

## Information on Portland City Ordinance 14.44

In September 1999, Portland City Council passed a new ordinance (City Code 14.44) proposed by Mayor Vera Katz and the Portland Police Bureau regarding the personal escort/modeling industry. The ordinance mandated absurd requirements for anyone who worked as a personal escort or model, making her even more vulnerable to abusive customers, police abuse, and discrimination than she already was. It violated sex workers' right to privacy, patronized their ability to make their own decisions, and seriously compromised their safety.

Local sex workers formed **Scarlet Letter**, a collective of workers and their supporters, to combat the city ordinance. "Workers need affordable housing, health care with dignity, and protection from mismanagement and harassing authorities," instead of such a repressive regulation, says its press release. Scarlet Letter later submitted "Sex Workers' Wish List," the counter-proposal to the City describing a better way to regulate escort/modeling industry.

Sex workers and their allies also waged a legal battle, arguing the City Code 14.44 to be unconstitutional. City modified the ordinance twice to increase the odds of withstanding the legal challenge, but the judge eventually sided with sex workers on March 8. Mayor Katz subsequently abandoned the ordinance.

Even though we were able to defeat this particular ordinance, we know that it could come back in a different form any time, plus sex workers across the country are fighting daily against similar legislation. The information about this ordinance is included here in order to preserve the history of sex workers' successful organizing.

### **Absurd Requirements under the Ordinance**

Under the City Code 14.44, anyone who works as an escort or a lingerie model must:

- Pay \$200 to get a personal escort/model permit that has her headshot.
- Give police their finger prints.
- Submit to a criminal background check—permit is denied

if she has been convicted of "prostitution-related crimes" in the past five years.

- Keep a telephone log of each customer who calls.
- Show the escort/model permit to customers.
- Sign a contract with customer before each appointment that describe specific services provided.
- Make the phone log and contracts available to police inspection without search warrant.
- If she works independently, she must obtain a \$500 business license and comply with additional requirements.

## **Penalties**

If a worker is caught in violation of Code,:

- It is a Class B misdemeanor (\$500 fine/ 6 months in jail) to work without a permit.
- Civil penalties of \$100 (for first offense) and \$500 (the second) are assessed for each "minor" violation.
- Permit is revoked for any "major" violation, such as failure to pay civil penalty within ten days and accumulating three offense in a single year.

## **Other Consequences of the Ordinance**

- Those with the history of prostitution-related convictions will be ineligible for the permit, putting them further "underground" and at the greater risk of being abused or exploited.
- Those with fewer opportunities to become self-reliant outside of the sex industry will be trapped in poverty and government assistance.
- When uneligible worker is abused, assaulted or exploited on the job, they will be less likely to seek police assistance.
- The existence of public registry of workers' personal information will make it easier for the customer to harass or stalk her.
- Public record of escort/model permit makes it more difficult for workers to leave sex industry in the future, effectively trapping those who may wish to leave.

## **Sex Workers' Wish List**

The following is excerpted from Scarlet Letter's counter-proposal to the city council as to a better way to regulate escort/modeling industry. Of course the City ignored everything we said in this, but it felt good to have a concrete counter-proposal: we aren't saying that escort/modeling businesses don't need regulation, but that the regulation proposed by the City was harmful to us.

- Change the title of the permit from "Personal Escort/Modeling Permit" to "Worker Permit" so that workers can leave the industry without the scarlet letter.
- Use the OLCC beverage/food server application as a model of what a work permit application should look like, including the fees.
- Have escort/models obtain the permit from the Bureau of Licenses and Multnomah County Health Department, instead of Portland Police Bureau.
- Require escort/modeling business management to have a working relationship with Health Department. Raise the standard of awareness of how to decrease one's risk at the job site. Require job training that addresses disease prevention, safety issues, and current laws that pertain to sex work.
- Hold the management accountable for proper security measures at the job site.
- Remove any unnecessary personal information from the permit application.
- Issue a certificate instead of a photo ID as the permit.
- Remove the automatic rejection of a permit if individual was convicted of a misdemeanor (i.e. prostitution) so that they can engage in sex work legally.
- Police should not be allowed to enter one's residence without a search warrant.
- Change the punishment of working without a permit to a fine, rather than a misdemeanor.
- Remove unreasonable requirements that escort/models keep the customer's phone numbers in a log for Police to inspect, and sign a written contract with the customer before each appointment.

## **Timeline of Our Struggles**

September 22, 1999

City Code 14.44 is introduced by Mayor Katz and the Portland Police Bureau. No sex workers are informed of the proposal.

September 29, 1999

City code 14.44 passes the City Council with no objections.

November 1, 1999

First meeting of Scarlet Letter. Open only to workers.

November 8, 1999

Second meeting of Scarlet Letter. Open to all supporters.

November 14, 1999

Sex Workers' Masquerade, a fundraiser for Danzine and Scarlet Letter campaign.

November 15, 1999

Third meeting of Scarlet Letter, to which a *Willamette Week* reporter showed up to write an article.

November 17, 1999

Scarlet Letter speaks out at the City Council.

November 23, 1999

Emi hosts a panel discussion on sex work at Portland State University, which turned into a pep rally for Scarlet Letter.

December 15, 1999

Lawsuit is filed to block enforcement of the ordinance.

January 26, 2000

Scarlet Letter presents the "Sex Workers' Wish List" to the City Council. Emi was almost arrested for holding up a sign in the Chamber. City Council makes a minor modification to the ordinance, but ignores us for the most part. *Willamette Week* runs a story that is somewhat favorable to sex workers.

February 4, 2000

First hearing of the lawsuit against the ordinance.

February 22, 2000

Judge declares the ordinance invalid under Oregon constitution.

March 8, 2000

Mayor Katz abandons the ordinance. WE WON!!!!

## Emi's Final Comments

1. It is frustrating that the only thing that stopped the ordinance from being enforced was the constitution. I mean, we worked with the media, tried to educate the City Council, went to City Hall many times, called up people, and even worked with the Multnomah County Health Department to come up with an effective alternative to the ordinance so that the escort/modeling industry is regulated just like all other industries—and the only thing that actually worked was a judge's order. I guess that's how the system works in this lawsuit-obsessed country, but I'm really sad that City Council absolutely refused to think, even for a second, that perhaps the Vice Unit of the Portland Police Bureau may not be the expert when it comes to the sex industry.

2. I'm annoyed by the "sex radicals" who celebrate sex workers as strong independent women (or men, or whatever) while neglecting the real suffering of people who are being exploited or abused within the sex industry. And I'm also annoyed by the radical feminist I spoke with who told me how much money sex industry is costing tax payers and how many abortions are taking place as a result of the sex industry as a way to demonize it.

My goal is to empower everyone working in the sex industry, whether they are engaged in commercial or survival sex so that people who wish to leave can have other realistic options and people who wish to stay can have safer, better working environment. So all sex radicals and radical feminists—stop arguing and do something already.

3. Initially, I thought that this ordinance is about inhibited sex moralists versus us freakish folks. In fact, that's how all the media reported it. But it was not. The reality is that this is *not* about morality, but is about business owners versus workers. I realized this as I was talking with the City officials.

In fact, it is not true that the City did not consider the legitimate needs of the industry while drafting this ordinance: they talked with people who *run* the businesses although not the people who *work for* them, which makes me think that the interests of the owners and managers—but not those of workers—are reflected in the ordinance.

The ordinance would have made it much more difficult for women to work independently without a pimp—which is exactly what the owners and managers want, because it would wipe out the competition for their businesses. The ordinance was never intended to hurt these businesses; the City was trying to enact

a system in which workers are under the control of pimps and pimps are under the control of the Police Bureau.

4. Escorts and models still do not have the protection they deserve within the industry. Now that the ordinance is struck down, City of Portland should join Multnomah County in working with us to develop a real regulation that would protect safety and rights of workers. If they don't—well, everyone who has ever consumed adult entertainment (which is pretty large number of people) should refuse to vote for the current City Council members when they come up for re-election!



*Emi & Carol Leigh singing the gender-bending anti-war song, "Cruel War" by Peter, Paul & Mary*

# Debunking the Anti-Prostitution Feminism

## Articulating the *Working-Class Sex Worker Feminisms*

Below is a series of postings I made in April 2002 to WMST-L, the scholarly Women's Studies mailing list managed by Joan Korenman of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. In these posts, I thoroughly debunked the radical feminist analysis of prostitution, arguing for the *working-class* sex worker feminisms (as opposed to the largely middle-class sex libertarianism position). You may see this as an update to "A Conversation with Dr. A," which is also included in this 'zine.

While it is my understanding that comments posted to an open electronic mailing list (i.e. a list that lets anyone to join) are considered *public* in the sense it can be quoted and critiqued in other media just like any other publications, it is also my understanding that such use of others' postings for the purpose of criticism must follow the traditional "fair use" standard. For this reason, I chose *not* to include others' comments in this 'zine except those small portions that I quoted and responded to in the actual e-mail conversations. In case you want to read the entire dialogues, you can read the WMST-L archive maintained by Dr. Korenman at:

<http://www-unix.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/sexwork1.html>

## Part One: April 10, 2002

On 04/09/02 06:04 pm, "Ruthe M. Thompson" wrote:

> Today she came to class and said she had begun  
> an interview with one of the prostitutes, a  
> cross-dressed man.

Does this person really identify as a "cross-dressed man"?

> The question of economics got her thinking. I  
> then asked her to query the neighbors on where  
> the real problem may lie (or perhaps what bothers  
> them most): the prostitutes or the johns they  
> attract to the neighborhood?

Are those the only choices? And when you say "neighbors"—are you automatically excluding sex workers as neighbors?

- > I think the key must be to ask students to put
- > aside their prejudices (growing from general
- > fears of sexuality, perhaps)

Or working-class people. Or immigrants. Or single mothers. Or transsexuals.

- > and think about sex workers as people like them,
- > perhaps without their economic or educational
- > privilege (not that my students in downtown Chicago
- > have a great deal of privilege in either realm!)..

This assumes (1) students are not sex workers and that sex workers never take a Women's Studies course, and (2) being a sex worker is universally horrible and extremely deplorable, rather than the conditions under which they work often are. Neither is true.

- > I know there are publications about this topic and
- > would like to see a bibliography if anyone has one,
- > as I suggested to my student that she read a few
- > sources on the realities of sex work before writing
- > her piece.

I created this pamphlet for an action (the hookers' demonstration at an anti-prostitution seminar in Portland) last year (note: open the pamphlet with Adobe Acrobat Reader 4.0 or higher; print page 1 and 2 back to back and fold in the middle):

<http://transfeminism.org/conspire/pdf/2001-04-01-flier.pdf>

I also have a 'zine which includes this pamphlet, titled "Instigations from the Whore Revolution: A Third Wave Feminist Response to the Sex Work 'Controversy'":

<http://eminism.org/zines.html>

Other online resources I recommend are Meretrix Online (by Magdalen Meretrix, the author of "Turning Pro")

<http://www.realm-of-shade.com/meretrix/>

and

BAYSWAN (by Carol Leigh, who coined the term "sex work")

<http://www.bayswan.org/>

As for an academic analysis of prostitution, I like Julia O'Connell Davidson's "Prostitution, Power and Freedom" even though I disagree with some of her assumptions.

By the way, I was going to give a lecture about the whore revolution at a liberal arts college in New York, but they canceled at the last minute (they called me today, only three days before my planned flight) because the president of the college felt it

## Part One, continued

was inappropriate and uneducational and pulled the funding—I thought about going there anyway to spite them, but I concluded that it was not worth my time.

Emi K. <emi@eminism.org>

## Part Two: April 10, 2002

On 04/09/02 11:50 pm, "Sheila Jeffreys" wrote:

- > Street prostitution is still illegal, and it is
- > extremely hard for women to work for themselves
- > without being forced into brothels to make profits
- > for the industry.

Are you therefore calling for an immediate legalization of all forms of prostitution, including street walking (under which sex businesses are regulated by the same labor and commerce laws that regulate other industries)? If not, why?

- > My position, and I am involved with Coalition
- > Against Trafficking in Women Australia, is that
- > men's abuse of women in prostitution is a form
- > of violence against women and a violation of
- > women's human rights.

[snip]

- > I then put forward arguments against prostitution
- > being seen as work, as sex, or as choice and argue
- > that it should be seen as violence and a human
- > rights violation

There is a huge \*slip\* here—in the first, you are arguing that the \*abuse\* of women in prostitution is a form of violence (indeed!). In the second, you suggest that prostitution itself—regardless of the presence or absence of abuse, exploitation, or unconsensual acts - as violence. This slippery slide shows that anti-prostitution feminists share one thing in common with rapists: that they do not understand “yes means yes, no means no.” While rapists argue in court that prostitutes can’t get raped, anti-prostitution feminists argue that prostitutes can’t avoid being raped - both arguments exonerate those directly responsible for the act of raping.

- > I use the work of organisations like SAGE in
- > San Francisco which make arguments from women
- > who have been prostituted that prostitution is
- > commercial sexual violence.

SAGE cooperates with the law enforcement, which means that it gains its “clients” by threatening prostitutes (I’ve never met a prostitute who likes to be referred to as “prostituted women”; this phrase only makes sense when you are talking about the actual sex slavery) that unless they go through its program they will go to jail. Under this threat, it then demands women to accept and internalize its anti-prostitution message—that prostitution is inherently horrible thing, and that they were duped into prostitution in the first place. Talk about women being kidnapped, brainwashed, and trapped in an abusive system through enormous power differential! If anti-prostitution feminists were to seriously assist women wishing to leave the sex industry, they need to end their collusion with the law enforcement.

Here is a small portion of an interview I recently did with a prostitute who survived SAGE’s program: “At one point a case manager referred me to a group called SAGE. I was told that SAGE offered a supportive place for sex workers and survivors. What I found however was a ‘support group’ that focused on shaming and blaming prostitutes out of the industry lead by a charismatic and manipulative ex-prostitute and recovering drug addict who worked with the law enforcement to further criminalize prostitution and who use the media to further scapegoat sex workers. I left the group early, thanks to my growing awareness of the patterns that tipify abusive group power dynamics.” (to be presented as part of my paper at NWSA 2002)

- > In Victoria, in a recent case, 40 Thai women in
- > debt slavery (they had to be penetrated by 500
- > men for free) were kept in a hotel behind
- > bars. But apparently they ‘consented’ because
- > they signed contracts in Thailand. These are
- > the women who would be seen as ‘migrating to
- > labour’ under the understanding that prostitution
- > is just work.

In Victoria, is this kind of business arrangement (that workers are kept in a hotel behind bars until they perform certain amount of task—any kind of task, that is) legal? Under the understanding that prostitution is just work, I would think that what you describe is an oppressive and probably illegal treatment of workers by the management.

- > The ‘choice’ argument can be seen as victim
- > blaming. Like battered women who ‘stay’
- > prostituted women ‘choose’ to stay in prostitution.

## Part Two, continued

How is it “victim blaming” to acknowledge that battered women have the agency and that when they decide to stay within an abusive relationship rather than leave immediately there may be good reasons for them to do so? Are you suggesting that if someone actually “chose” to stay in an abusive relationship, blame should follow next time she is beaten? Do you think that if someone actually “chose” to turn some tricks, she should be blamed for being raped?

- > It can also be seen as classist since most
- > students want good jobs in which sexual
- > harassment policies protect them from men’s
- > unwanted hands and penises on and in their
- > bodies. However in prostitution sexual
- > harassment, precisely those unwanted, often
- > hated, hands and penises in and on their bodies
- > is what prostituted women are paid for.
- > So prostituted women are abandoned, by the
- > choice argument, to receive precisely what
- > professional women are pretty desperate to
- > remove from their workplaces.

Of course prostitutes deserve to be protected by sexual harassment policies—unconsensual touches are violation of their rights, and not part of their jobs. It is not “the choice argument” that abandons prostitutes without these rights enjoyed by other workers—it is the legal system that treats prostitutes as less than workers, refusing to enforce laws and regulations that other industries must comply.

I would also think that it is classist to suggest that work done by working-class women are really not work because their rights as workers are not protected as well as that of their middle-class counterparts.

- > I very deliberately do not use the language of
- > ‘sex work’. This language makes it impossible
- > to see the violence of prostitution,

This language was coined by sex workers because they needed to view their work as work in order to (1) call for respectful treatment of sex workers in the society, (2) confront exploitative environments surrounding the sex industry as workers. You began discussing violence within prostitution economy (which does happen, as it does in any other industry), and jumped to equating prostitution to violence. Not mention that “sex work” involves much more than simply prostitution...

- > Such language does not allow us to see what is
- > different about commercial sexual violence in
- > which unwanted sex and sexual harassment are bought.

Again, your rhetoric shows me that you share the same mentality as men who think it's okay to sexually harass women because women's right to consent does not matter.

I do not buy "choice" argument either, because it is not particularly useful to reduce the issue to "choice." But "sex work is work" position is not the same as the "choice" position, as it has the potential to address abuse within the prostitution economy as the exploitation of workers' rights and challenge conditions that make workers vulnerable to such abuse, such as poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-immigrant policies, neoliberalism, etc.

Emi Koyama <emi@eminism.org>

## **Part Three: April 11, 2002**

- On 4/11/02 1:04 AM, "Heather Merle Benbow" wrote:
- > Attempts in Melbourne, Australia, to unionise
  - > 'sex workers' failed because the women did not
  - > want to see themselves as in the industry long-term.

Of course, with the kind of prejudice that exists in the society, often intense working conditions, and lack of long-term security, it is not surprising that many women do not want to stay within the sex industry long-term.

And unionization may not be the best strategy—for example here in Portland, Oregon (city with more adult entertainment businesses per capita than anywhere else), most clubs are small family-owned ones, and hire very few workers—which would mean they are more readily replaceable. Even with the union bashing, women working at Lusty Lady were lucky because they had the status as employees to begin with—most clubs treat workers as independent contractors, which makes unionization impossible. And, yes, self-identified feminists pulling their legs does not help either.

There could be other ways to empower sex workers, simplest of which is enforcing the labor and civil rights laws on sex businesses just the same way other businesses are regulated. Californian legislature passed a law that require clubs to grant employee status to nude dancers, although it currently lacks enforcement (someone has to sue the club, and the government is not doing it). We need to also support decriminalization of

## Part Three, continued

prostitution so that workers can openly organize (currently, simply sharing safety and health information among prostitutes may be construed as abetting prostitution, which is a crime), and challenge societal attitudes toward sex workers in general.

Throwing up hands because unionization in sex industry (just like in many other industries where workers are treated as independent contractors) is difficult is not feminist. Women working in these industries (i.e. not just sex industry, but other places where unionizing is difficult) have organized and resisted exploitation, and they need the support of middle-class women, including academic feminists.

- > I find the above response to the exploitation of
- > working class women pretty unfortunate. I don't
- > think just telling women that prostitution is
- > empowering does anything to help women harmed by it.

I never stated that prostitution is empowering; in fact, I had a big argument with Carol Queen (author of “Real Live Nude Girls”) about this at the last Sex Workers’ Conference in Olympia. My criticism was that by telling sex workers that sex work is inherently empowering, she was making invisible the exploitation and abuse of workers by the management, and making it easier for them to further the exploitation. By labeling someone “anti-sex” for having legitimate grievances against their working conditions, whether the work involves sexual act or not, Queen’s pro-sex feminism renders sex work as primarily sex as opposed to work—and thus her argument is counteractive and anti-worker.

What I do not understand is why anti-prostitution feminists would conflate the working-class sex worker feminism I am advocating for with simplistic “pro-sex” statements like “prostitution is empowering.” That is not something I said, nor even hinted in my last post; you invented it out of nowhere. What is truly unfortunate is that anti-prostitution feminists refuse to listen to the actual working-class sex worker feminists, and instead only argue with middle-class “pro-sex” feminists like Carol Queen and think they’ve done enough. I have even been told by a staffer at an anti-prostitution group (Council for Prostitution Alternative, now LOTUS) that all “prostituted women” (again, the term despised by most prostitutes that I know) are so severely beaten that their brains are damaged and therefore what they say is not important.

- > It is not 'classist' to identify harm and act
- > to end the circumstances (gender and class
- > oppression) which create it!

Yes! That is exactly what I was arguing for—rather than scapegoating prostitution, feminists need to confront poverty, violence, sexism, racism, neoliberalism, prison industrial complex, “war on drugs,” etc. as they (and not the sexual acts themselves) are what make sex workers vulnerable to exploitation.

- > Since when was it progressive and feminist to
- > argue for a status quo backed by big business
- > (the 'sex' industry)?

Again, I was calling for the whole whole revolution (see my web site, <http://eminism.org/readings/supporthookers.html> ) rather than a status quo; anti-prostitution feminists who single out prostitution displace the problem onto sexual acts when in reality we need to be confronting economic and political systems that make workers vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. That is not to mention how anti-prostitution groups such as SAGE (in San Francisco) and Lola Greene Baldwin Foundation (in Portland) collude with the law enforcement to regulate and dictate women's lives (Lola Green Baldwin is a name of a police officer - how typical).

- > I don't understand where this glorifying of sex
- > work comes from.

I don't understand where you got this either, because nobody on WMST-L has so far “glorified” sex work. You are making a classical “straw person” argument, and have not even began to dispute \*anything\* I said in my last post. And I doubt that you can dispute this one either.

Emi Koyama <emi@eminism.org>

Founder, Student Hookers Association, Portland State University

## Part Four: April 11, 2002

On 4/11/02 8:15 AM, "Rebecca Whisnant" wrote:  
> that is that if any perspective is being almost  
> entirely silenced and drowned out in the  
> contemporary WMST "debate" (such as it is) on  
> this issue, it is the radical feminist critique  
> of prostitution and pornography.

Silenced and drowned? Being defeated and obsoleted by others due to its faulty logic or unpersuasive rhetoric is not "silenced"; I've had to hear plenty of this position that you call "radical feminist" analysis of prostitution, and concluded that, like its anti-pornography, anti-S/M, anti-transsexual, anti-butch/femme, universalizing, oppression-ranking, and sexual hierarchy politics, it is a convenient tool for mostly white middle-class feminists to pretend that they are working for all women, including working-class women and women of color, while remaining oblivious to their own complicity in the oppression against these women, and without working toward the actual processes (e.g. decriminalization, immigration reform, drug policy reform, trans civil rights) necessary to bring about the changes working-class sex worker feminists demand.

Speaking of silencing, Sarah Lawrence College has just canceled my speaking engagement. I was going to speak there on April 13 about the sex worker feminism and the idea of the whore revolution from the third wave feminist perspective, but the president of the college singlehandedly withdrew funding, labeling it "inappropriate and uneducational." This happened on April 9, only three days before my planned travel. If I had more energy and I wasn't in the process of moving right now, I would have gone anyway to call attention to this specific act of "silencing." As a radical feminist concerned about the silencing of women's voices, what do you think about this?

> The following cannot be said too many times: the  
> radical feminist critique of prost/porn is not  
> a moral criticism, or indeed any kind of criticism,  
> of the women.

I've been told "false consciousness" many, many times. If that is not a criticism of where I am and my views, what is it?

> Perhaps the most fundamental theme of this critique  
> is that prostitution, including pornography, exists  
> because men, as a class, demand that there be a  
> sub-class of women (and children, and men, and  
> transgender people--but mostly women) who are

> available for their unconditional sexual service.

Prostitutes do not provide unconditional sexual services any more than other workers provide eight hours of “unconditional” work. They only provide conditional sexual services.

This once again proves my argument that radical feminist critics of prostitution have rapist mentality: that prostitutes are and must be always available to any man unconditionally.

> It exists because they desire and demand sex \*of  
> a certain kind\*--the kind they don't have to ask  
> for or negotiate about, the kind they can have  
> with a class of person defined as degraded and  
> inferior, the kind where “the customer is always  
> right” and always get what he pays for.

Clients must ask for and negotiate about services they receive. Only people who think that they don't have to are anti-prostitution feminists and rapists. Anti-prostitution feminists participate in the definition of prostitutes as degraded and inferior. In addition, one of the barriers to having better negotiation about services is the illegality of prostitution (neither the worker nor the client can explicitly negotiate the exact acts traded without breaking the law, risking arrests). What are you doing to help change this situation?

“I've never felt as dirty and used as when I was told how dirty and used I had been/ like I'm a pawn in someone else's theory about me” - from “difference,” a piece performed at “Intercourse: A Sex and Gender Spoken Word Recipe for Revolution 2001.”

Emi Koyama <emi@eminism.org>

## **Part Five: April 12, 2002**

Here is my last post on the topic (for now, at least) also...

On 4/11/02 10:26 AM, “Rebecca Whisnant” wrote:  
>> Prostitutes do not provide unconditional sexual  
>> services any more than other workers provide eight  
>> hours of “unconditional” work. They only provide  
>> conditional sexual services.  
>  
> Yeah, and they get more money (except they usually  
> don't, most of it goes to the pimp) the more they  
> “consent” to let men abuse them -- to not use a  
> condom, to treat them violently, burn them with  
> cigarettes, all that good stuff.

## Part Five, continued

You made the statement that prostitutes exist due to men's need for women available to provide unconditional sexual service—which suggests that prostitutes provide unconditional sexual services. Are you now withdrawing that statement, which was supposedly the fundamental theme of your critique to begin with? And what constitutes abuse—is it the dynamic of power and control in the specific context (as I believe it is), or is any act that involves sex in exchange for money abusive? (This, again, connects to radical feminists' self-righteous criticism of S/M and other sexual practices and identities.)

>> This once again proves my argument that radical  
>> feminist critics of prostitution have rapist  
>> mentality: that prostitutes are and must be  
>> always available to any man unconditionally.  
>  
> Emi, that's absurd. That's exactly the view  
> that we're \*criticizing.\*

No. Anti-prostitution feminists argue that once a woman becomes a prostitute she is available for unconditional sexual services, that it is the norm within women in prostitution to be treated that way because of the nature of prostitution itself—rather than addressing specific social, political and economic factors, direct (physical confinement, slavery) as well as indirect (poverty, neoliberalism, sexism) that make women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in prostitution, as well as in other areas of underground economy.

>> In addition, one of the barriers to having better  
>> negotiation about services is the illegality of  
>> prostitution (neither the worker nor the client  
>> can explicitly negotiate the exact acts traded  
>> without breaking the law, risking arrests). What  
>> are you doing to help change this situation?  
>  
> My view is that we should do as Sweden has done,  
> and decriminalize the selling of sex while  
> criminalizing pimps and johns.

In other words, you support leaving prostitution industry underground and unregulated, so that workers can continue to be abused or exploited with little recourse. Rebecca, it is not the exchange of sex for money that is the problem; it is the exploitation, coercion, lack of choice, lack of protective regulation, etc.—which arise from oppressive social structures (sexism, racism, transphobia, poverty, etc.), not from the fact one

is trading sex for money. Not to mention the fact your response does not address the problem I pointed out above—as long as it is illegal to negotiate the exact acts being traded, that will close down communication channels and put workers at a greater risk.

> Thanks for this quote. It summarizes what I think  
> is one of the most fundamental issues in this  
> dispute: whether the \*primary\* harms of prostitution  
> are a result of having people think bad thoughts  
> about you, or rather a matter of being violated  
> and treated as a piece of meat day in and day out  
> in ways that are NOT merely accidental and  
> occasional “extra” abuses within this industry,  
> but are rather PRECISELY what the industry exists  
> in order to promote, protect, and give men as a  
> class LICENSE to do to a certain class of women.

You are mischaracterizing my argument by suggesting that I argue that “primary harms of prostitution are a result of having people think bad thoughts about you.” The actual fundamental issue in this dispute is: whether the primary harms of prostitution are an inherent result of trading sex for money, or a result of many social factors such as poverty, sexism, racism, neoliberalism, violence, etc.—which would make working-class people vulnerable whether or not they work within the sex industry. Your argument is circular in that you define prostitution as inherently violent and the only evidence for that position (i.e. \*inherent\* oppressiveness of sex-for-money transaction) is the notion that prostitution is violence itself.

I view anti-prostitution feminism as extremely harmful to women, not only because they collude with the law enforcement to dictate women’s lives, as many of my friends had to endure, but also because it makes it difficult for workers to talk about their grievances around working conditions, violence, or exploitation - because if they said anything negative about their experiences, instead of actually addressing the specific injustice of violence or exploitation, anti-prostitution feminists would twist it and use it as a poster child to attack prostitution as a whole (and soon after, local police department will do a major sweep and everybody will be in jail). Thus rapists, abusive managers, and anti-prostitution feminists are jointly responsible for the silencing of sex workers.

One last anecdote: I was attending a conference about violence against women, and a speaker, who was from Council for Prostitution Alternative, a rad-fem anti-prostitution group, gave a story about the “successful” case in which a woman who had initially “refused” to admit that she was being victimized or forced into prostitution “finally, after three years in our program”

## Part Five, continued

came to see how abused and without a choice she had been. And this, for them, is a “success story”; it sounds to me that she was reluctantly attending the program only to escape imprisonment, and resisted for three years against the anti-prostitution feminists’ demand to give up all of her power and agency—until it came to the point where she gave in and told them what they wanted to hear—either because she felt she had to lie in order to keep her sanity and “graduate” from the program, or actually came to accept the fabricated history and experiences that were fed to her in order to resolve the cognitive dissonance.

Those who successfully adopts to the ideology and history that match rad-fem analysis of prostitution are recruited as a poster child and used to “educate” the public. SAGE in San Francisco brings these women into the program for johns, where they are encouraged to yell and scream at the men. This shout therapy would have been rather innocent, if there was any way to guarantee that these women would never see the men in the program in the future; otherwise, it is one huge risk that SAGE is pushing women to take.

I will be presenting about the interviews I’ve been doing with working-class sex worker feminists at this year’s NWSA conference, but for now here are some online stuff you can read for clarification of my positions:

My NWSA Abstract:

<http://eminism.org/academic/2002-nwsa-prostitution.html>

Support Prostitutes’ Rights Now! (pamphlet)

<http://eminism.org/readings/supporthookers.html>

Instigations from the Whore Revolution: A Third Wave Feminist Response to the Sex Work ‘Controversy’ (zine)

<http://eminism.org/store/zine.html>

Emi Koyama <emi@eminism.org>

## Part Six: April 13, 2002

I know I said what I wrote before was the last post in this topic, but there are some distortion of my comments so I’ll try to only correct them. It is interesting that the only negative responses to my posts so far have been: (1) distortion of my views (conflating my working- class sex worker feminism with middle-class “pro-

sex” feminism or the “choice” argument, despite the fact I have criticized these positions as well), and (2) tokenism (i.e. “some women of color, working-class women, or former prostitutes agree with me!”). If these are the only possible “refutation” of my views, that once again proves that radical feminist analysis of prostitution is obsolete and intellectually bankrupt.

On 4/12/02 12:43 PM, “Kathleen (Kate) Waits” wrote:  
> 2) Despite the strong differences of opinion  
> expressed, it appears that everyone who’s spoken  
> agrees that “happy hooker” or “prostitution  
> as choice” model is a far cry from reality.

I did not say that it is or is not “far cry from reality.” Here’s what I said:

>> I do not buy “choice” argument either, because  
>> it is not particularly useful to reduce the  
>> issue to “choice.” But “sex work is work” position  
>> is not the same as the “choice” position, as it  
>> has the potential to address abuse within the  
>> prostitution economy as the exploitation of  
>> workers’ rights and challenge conditions that  
>> make workers vulnerable to such abuse, such as  
>> poverty, sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia,  
>> anti-immigrant policies, neoliberalism, etc.

As Karen Kapusta-Pofahl pointed out, statements such as yours erase “the complexity of the group of practices under the umbrella ‘Sex Industry’” that I am trying to articulate here.

> What I mean by this is that Rebecca and Emi, for  
> all their disagreement, agree that IN THE WORLD  
> AS IT EXISTS TODAY, prostitution is often evil,  
> demeaning, dangerous, etc.

I’ve never stated that prostitution as a whole is or is not evil. I am saying that sexism, racism, poverty, transphobia, neoliberalism, anti-immigrant policies, “war on drugs,” prison industrial complex, rapists, abusive management, etc.—those are what’s evil. And anti-prostitution feminist groups such as SAGE and LGBF are also evil for using the threat of imprisonment as a weapon to abuse and control women, and getting paid by the law enforcement to help them dictate women’s lives.

> The organization, headquartered in Minneapolis,  
> describes itself as is “an educational organization  
> against prostitution, pornography, and all other  
> forms of sexual exploitation.” I think it’s fair  
> to say that the organization’s analysis is much  
> closer to Rebecca’s than Emi’s.

## Part Six, continued

Blatant tokenism.

On 4/13/02 9:58 AM, "Angie Manzano" wrote:

- > Which is why I think it's odd that you accuse
- > \*all\* radical feminists who believe the system
- > of buying & selling women is inherently
- > misogynistic of being elitist, racist, white,
- > middle class.

Again, I did not say that "all radical feminists [are] elitist, racist, white, middle class." I argued that radical feminist analysis of prostitution (that prostitution is inherently misogynistic) has implications that are racist and classist, among other things; I also argued that actions taken by anti-prostitution groups such as SAGE and LGBF are anti-women. See my previous posts for reasons.

If you disagree with my positions, you need to show why they are wrong - rather than distorting my positions or relying on tokenism.

- > Is it just me, or does it seem like it's mostly
- > white, 100% college educated, 100% Western women
- > (and men, of course) saying that prostitution can
- > be a great career for women, and that women freely
- > choose it as a profession?

As I have already stated, I am equally critical of "pro-sex" feminism which posits prostitution (or any other form of work under the capitalist system) as freely chosen and "anti-prostitution" feminism which displace the blame by arguing that prostitution is "inherently" oppressive, rather than focusing on social, political and economic issues that perpetuate abuse and exploitation within the sex industry (as well as in other industries).

- > (Yeah, and Mexicans "freely choose" and thoroughly
- > enjoy cleaning up white people's houses, doing
- > your laundry, and cutting your grass.

Excellent point. In other words, it is not the specific acts (e.g. sexual service) involved that make those work oppressive; rather, it is racism, classism, colonialism, neoliberalism, anti-immigrant policies, etc. that do. Forcing women to stop turning tricks is not productive if other options are not any more attractive. On the other hand, if we as the society could provide more attractive options for these women, there will be no need to force them out of prostitution - if they are truly better options, women will know

and switch to that.

Programs currently run by anti-prostitution feminist groups are regressive because they take away relatively lucrative form of work from poor women, immigrant women, trans people, etc. and force them to work in other dead-end job for minimum wage or less (prostitutes from middle-class background seldom get sent to these programs, because they are less likely to be arrested and more likely to have good lawyers). These programs are abusive, degrading, patronizing, and out of touch with the actual needs of prostitutes.

These programs may claim to support decriminalization under the logic that women do not deserve to be punished, but they rarely take any concrete action to make such a legislation reality, despite their close ties with the authorities. I suspect that they are afraid that once it is decriminalized they won't be able to use the threat of imprisonment to force women to stick with their agenda, and thus lose their power and their government funding.

> Please. Get out of school and into the real world.

It's interesting that many anti-prostitution feminists continue to argue with the "choice" or "glorification" position that nobody here is making, and never respond to my criticism of anti-prostitution feminism and its anti-women actions.

Emi Koyama <emi@eminism.org>



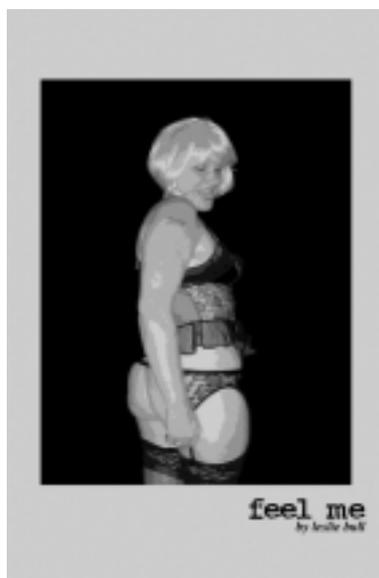
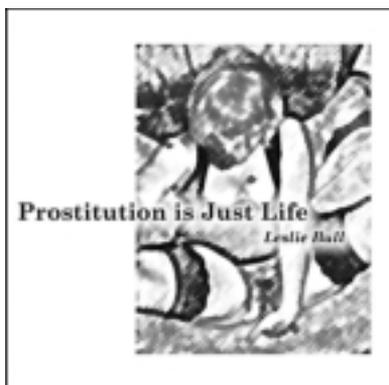
*Emi listening attentively to Penny Arcade as she bitches about the yuppies invading her 'hood in the Lower Eastside*

# Emi's Sex Work Activism Buttons

Armed with her own fancy **button machine**, Emi makes her own original buttons. Here are some of her sex work activism buttons. You can order these and many other buttons and 'zines online at <http://eminism.org/store/>



Also available from [Eminism.org](http://Eminism.org) online store: Leslie Bull's sex work themed 'zine *Feel Me* and CD *Prostitution is Just Life*. Leslie is Emi's best friend and a next-door neighbour.



# refusing to be safe

i've been thinknig about safety lately  
i've been wanting to be safe  
wanting to feel safe, all my life  
do you understand?  
do you understand?

cutting wrists at nine  
turning tricks at thirteen  
playing with dope at fourteen  
ran away from three foster families  
i don't claim to have always made the best choices but  
i did the best i could do  
to be safe  
to feel safe  
to be away from home  
shelter, mental hospital or jail  
they are all the same thing

everyone seems afraid for safety these days  
media keep reminding us that we are not safe  
when the airplanes smashed into the buildings  
and mails arrived poisoned  
they said it transformed america forever  
as if america wasn't already waging many wars  
as if there weren't already battlegrounds in this nation

as women and queer people, we knew all along  
that our safety came with a price tag  
we were taught to silence our voices  
hide our bodies, sexualities, ourselves  
to be safe, to feel safe, in this hostile world  
we were all taught  
that to be a slut, to look and act like a slut  
translates to danger  
so i learned  
that being slut is a radical act of resistance  
and subversion  
see, us sluts  
we violate rules, take risks  
demand more than just safety  
refuse to shrink away  
from who we are  
what we want  
how we want it

to be a slut in the post-9/11 world  
in which thousands of people are jailed, deported  
or bombed in the supposed  
pursuit of security  
means that we must refuse to be safe  
at someone else's expense

to be a slut in this u.s. of fucking a.  
that thinks that marriage is the solution to poverty  
that punishes homeless people for sitting on benches  
and excludes trans people to protect "women"  
means that we must refuse to allow the rhetoric  
of safety to pervert and circumvent  
our commitment to justice

so, let us be sluts, political or otherwise  
let us form the posse of sluts everywhere  
because everyone is safe when sluts are safe  
because everyone is safe when sluts are safe

nov. 12, 2002; nov. 15, 2002; dec. 15, 2002



*Emi practicing pole-dancing at  
a strip club in Las Vegas*

Also available from **Confluere Publications:**

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