

Reflection

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In the late 1960s, radical feminism shaped the direction of the Women's Liberation Movement by insisting on 1) going to the root cause of issues of oppression, 2) uncovering the commonality of women's experiences of exploitation across class, race, and nationality, and 3) identifying the agents of oppression in economics, social/cultural practices, political systems and laws, and individuals (the personal is political). In that framework, by 1970, we took on rape, until then an unspoken crime against women, and made it a central issue of Women's Liberation.

In Detroit, our Women's Liberation group published the *Stop Rape Handbook*, breaking the silence with women's groups all over the country. That is when I began to notice short articles in the newspapers every now and then about slave rings that trafficked women into prostitution, astonished at the extent and depth of misogyny.

By 1975 I had a file sufficient, I thought, for an article. In going to the root of women's oppression, we recognized that the most extreme conditions, such as sexual slavery, could reflect on and reveal the expanse of the general problem of rape. For liberation to occur, to free ourselves from fear and the terror of sexual violence, we had to face and confront the worst conditions of oppression.

So there I was in 1975 with my file and an article in progress. I immediately became aware that we had no conceptual framework for understanding sexual slavery that was treated as an exceptional problem, sometimes connected to deviancy and sometimes to trafficking in drugs. As I began to see connections between rape, a systematic practice in sexual slavery, and childhood sexual abuse, better understood as incest assault in predisposing victims' vulnerability, and matched those with prevailing thinking—that women sort of “fell into prostitution”—the sociologist in me turned toward creating a typology that would locate sexual slavery in systems of domination and ideologies of women hating. After another file full of unusable attempts at a typology that would connect childhood sexual abuse with prostitution and trafficking, I gave up, realizing that neither my small file of cases nor an article were sufficient to uncover and disclose sexual slavery. The article turned into a book proposal, and I turned to three years of research.

I was on the streets with vice squads, in courtrooms at trials of pimps, and in one country after another tracking down cases of sexual slavery. I developed my methodology from what we had already learned about wife abuse: that women's descriptions of abuse vary enormously whether they are still in it or have gotten away. I decided to interview women who were out of prostitution and had been controlled by pimps.

As the data flowed in, I periodically returned to my typology file to try again to frame the problem, only to discover that it was a fundamental definition that was needed. In all of my research, one theme predominated over all others, that in order to leave prostitution women had to escape. That was when I understood that any condition a woman is in where she cannot leave voluntarily, and is sexually exploited and physically abused, is female sexual slavery.

Female Sexual Slavery, originally published in 1979 (Prentice Hall) and still in print since 1983 (New York University Press), was a focal point for action at the World Conference of Women in Copenhagen in 1980. Although the organizers were embarrassed by the subject and were grudgingly willing to let me do one workshop, I saw the effects of radical feminism in action once more as the overflow of women at the workshop led to many more sessions and an appeal to the governmental conference to call on nations to address this problem. Senator Barbara Mikulski, a U.S. delegate, introduced a resolution we developed that was ultimately adopted by the conference and led a new 1983 United Nations report on trafficking in women. By the late 1980s, tired of carrying this issue, radical feminists from several countries came together and we launched the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, a United Nations NonGovernmental Organization in human rights consultative status. Soon trafficking in women became an international human rights issue. With the Coalition and support from UNESCO, we developed a new human rights law, the proposed Convention Against Sexual Exploitation.

The reaction that I had not anticipated to my book came from new pro-pornography and lesbian sado-masochism movements. Throughout the 1980s I was attacked in one newspaper after another that had originally hailed my work as a feminist breakthrough, for making women engaged in S & M feel uncomfortable with their choices. Eventually those antifeminist campaigns led to the most severe backlash, the denial of women's victimization in rape. Although I had critiqued feminism myself in *Female Sexual Slavery* for sometimes lapsing into what I called victimism, making a status out of being a victim, I too was accused of reducing women to victims—odd, I thought, considering what female sexual slavery does to women. I often lectured and was interviewed with Linda Marciano, who had been pornography's Linda Lovelace after she published her experience of sexual slavery in *Ordeal* (1979). At the same time, the pro-prostitution lobby that had escalated under Margo St. James and often with funding from pimps, turned to me and my work with rage.

Despite two decades of constant attack, I discovered something about women's condition and sexual exploitation I had missed in writing *Female Sexual Slavery*: the self-prostitution of women. Self-submission to exploitation is a condition that arises in every form of domination—colonialism, imperialism, slavery, racism. Women's liberation was not exempt. And that became the focus of my 1996 book, *Prostitution of Sexuality, the Global Exploitation of Women*.

Even in facing the worst conditions of women's oppression there can be moments of light. I have had the joy of seeing trafficking in women that was thought of as having disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century become the basis of a global activism and an important human rights issue not only to feminists, but for governments. The Convention Against Sexual Exploitation, a draft UN law that calls for arresting those who buy human beings for sexual use in prostitution, in sexual slavery, has been adopted by Sweden, Japan, and Vietnam. And that brought me to the other most important element of radical feminism, making those who exploit women accountable.

REFERENCES

- Barry, K. (1996). *The prostitution of sexuality: The global exploitation of women*. New York: New York University Press.
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