



Photo by Tracy Mostovoy

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**P.I.M.P.**  
(Prostitutes  
in Municipal Politics)

Imagine growing up a girl in late 20th-century America. You may have been a victim of some type of molestation or the target of unwanted sexual advances. Or maybe you were just subjected to the usual propaganda about sex: sex is really for boys. Girls comply to find love or to get attention.

Female sexuality is used to sell everything from autos to window cleaner.

You leave home at an early age, very often (though not always) because of abuse. You become involved in prostitution because of some combination of the following:

- 1) someone talks you into it, sometimes coercively, sometimes not.
- 2) your friends and/or family do or did it.
- 3) there are few jobs through which you can support yourself, and it's hard to survive.
- 4) rebels don't fare well at McDonald's.

Even if you are over 18, if you are living in the U.S. with little education and few job skills, or if discrimination against your race, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. means you probably won't get hired in a straight job or even an indoor prostitution job, or if everyone you know works or hangs out on the streets, or if that's the only kind of prostitution you've ever heard about because that's what you see on the cop shows, talk shows, or TV news, then you might wind up working on the street.

If you are under 16 or 17, the child labor laws can keep you from finding another way to support yourself when you are on your own. Many young women and young men engage in occasional prostitution and more casual forms of survival sex. Attitudes are diverse. I have spoken with a number of prostitutes who worked in their teens and do not think back on this part of their lives with horror. I have met others who do.

Some extricate themselves from a life that they portray as horrific, while others come to embrace this particular sexual culture. Against a backdrop of paradoxes and contradictions, public prostitution combines the defiance of public sex with the drama of social hypocrisy.

### **A Public Woman**

In the late 1970s I began working as a prostitute. Today I continue working, while advocating for prostitutes' rights. Early on in my career I came out as a "public woman," as prostitutes have sometimes been called. As an artist, I was (and continue to be) a participant in public life. Making art is cultural work. As a life artist, I document my life as a prostitute through video, performance, and writing, as well as street theater, civil disobedience, and other types of public participation.

As a prostitute, I have publicly announced my availability in an ordinary manner, mostly through newspaper ads. I committed civil disobedience by standing in front of the New York Stock Exchange and announcing my rates, soliciting to the amusement of stockbrokers, local ACT UP activists, members of PONY (Prostitutes of New York), and the police: "Safe Sex For Sale. Fifty dollars for digital intercourse. That's a hand job..."

### **"Street Prostitution"**

In the 1990s, the policing of streets in the United States has emerged as an urgent municipal concern, interpreted by some as testimony to social dysfunction and class inequities, or as testimony to the unruly characteristics of the poor and young. The sex industry has become a primary target of law enforcement, with street prostitution attracting the brunt of attacks on public, paid sexual expression.

In San Francisco, neighborhood merchant NIMBYs (Not In My Back Yard coalitions) have been fuming with venom and conducting letter

campaigns to San Francisco Supervisors to increase enforcement of laws against prostitutes:

San Francisco's residential neighborhoods have been overwhelmed by street crime in recent years. Chief among these life-endangering criminal activities is street prostitution. It is the nature of the act itself which destroys neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

(Never mind that most of those whose lives are endangered are prostitutes themselves.)

In response to San Francisco's media and NIMBY campaign, one city supervisor decided to tackle the "prostitution problem" head-on. The San Francisco Task Force on Prostitution was organized by an iconoclastic lawyer named Terence Hallinan. Hallinan is the son of Vincent Hallinan, a communist who was a target of McCarthyism in the '50s, and still well known as one of the most radical spirits in San Francisco.

Terence Hallinan was one of the more progressive members of the Board of Supervisors and stood in opposition to the Mayor's punitive "public order" programs. Ex-police chief and Mayor Frank Jordan created "programs" to jail the homeless, and prostitution arrests almost doubled during his final year in office.

Although Hallinan had previously taken the lead in defending the rights of marginalized groups such as immigrants, transgendered people, and the homeless, he was reluctant to propose the decriminalization of prostitution, assuming that the city should control prostitutes through a system of state-approved brothels. In a press release, he announced his intention to study options for legalization, Nevada-style.

Prostitutes' advocates and women's groups quickly mobilized to protest this strategy. Early on in the process I received a call from Jean Paul Samaha, a gay rights advocate and aide to Supervisor Hallinan. I began working with his office along with a group of allies from women's rights and health advocacy organizations. We all agreed that the agenda of this study group should examine law and social service reform rather than "legalization." Decriminalization, or repeal of all laws prohibiting prostitution, was clearly a more fruitful area of study than "legalization," offering more autonomy and less surveillance. Legalization usually refers to licensing or zoning systems, which inspire numerous human rights and labor rights abuses wherever they have been put into effect.

Prostitutes' rights advocates have been developing model programs for peer-based services around the world. Some of this work was initiated in San Francisco. Although peer-based programs for prostitutes are not funded in the U.S. (agencies are not supposed to hire working prostitutes), there is a strong movement which works with service providers in San Francisco.

Several advocates provide expertise in San Francisco regarding legal issues: Priscilla Alexander, formerly of the World Health Organization and co-editor of *Sex Work*;<sup>2</sup> Margo St. James, founder of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics); as well as Rachel West of the US PROStitutes Collective. Both St. James and West are associated with international advocacy networks: Margo with the International Committee on Prostitutes' Rights, which has held international congresses at the European Parliament, and Rachel with the Prostitutes' Collective, connected to the International Wages For Housework Campaign, which has a broad-based analysis of the importance of recognizing and valuing the work women do. San Francisco's role as a mecca for bohemians, politicians, sexual libertines, and artists drew and nourished the COYOTE breed of sex worker activists, including me.

Ultimately the San Francisco Task Force on Prostitution included diverse participation from groups such as NOW, the National Lawyers Guild, Project A.W.A.R.E (Association for Women and AIDS Research and Education), Asian AIDS Project, Center For Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement, Proactive Youth Coalition (Street Survival Project), California Prevention Education Project, Transgender Services Coalition, the public defender, the district attorney, the police department, COYOTE, US PROStitutes Collective, the Commission on the Status of Women, the Health Department, and six neighborhood/merchant groups. There were 30 members in all, of which ten were former or current prostitutes. The solid majority had prostitutes' best interests in mind, with opposition coming only from "the neighbors," the mayor, the vice cops, and the district attorney.

The current issue of street prostitution is largely absent from earlier public discourse about prostitution. According to most histories of prostitution, the movement to prohibit prostitution in the early 20th century was led by a powerful coalition of religious activists and suffragists. These groups managed to close down most of the off-street

prostitution venues, brothels, dance clubs, and call services by criminalizing prostitution. Ironically, their actions produced current patterns of street prostitution, as women were forced to find other venues for selling sex.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, "street prostitution" in its current forms did not become the visible centerpiece of prostitution in the U.S. until legislators criminalized most forms of indoor prostitution.<sup>4</sup> In this way the most public rituals of prostitution have developed in direct response to earlier repressive strategies. Contemporary hostility towards prostitution has escalated as it has become more visible, resulting in increasing violence towards prostitutes.<sup>5</sup>

### "Whorebaiting"

*The Examiner*, a Hearst paper, played a major role in the criminalization of prostitution in San Francisco in the early part of the 20th century. During the early 1990s, the paper, which had been publishing scandalous anti-prostitution ravings for a couple of years, began to play a part in a critique of Hallinan's Task Force by publishing articles and op-ed submissions by anti-prostitution feminists:

Now, instead of taking a serious look at prostitution, Terence Hallinan trivializes the suffering by filling his Task Force with everything from apologists for child sexual abuse to organized crime... Nationwide studies have repeatedly shown that prostitution is nothing like the glamorous, sexy lifestyle portrayed by the spokeswomen at COYOTE. Programs (to help women out of prostitution) must be administered by qualified advocates... and not by the pimp apologists who call themselves experts on prostitution... the city government can strike a blow against the traffic in women by an aggressive policy of arresting and prosecuting pimps and johns, by toughening legislation on pandering (encouraging or promoting prostitution) and by instituting a car seizure law...<sup>6</sup>

For the record, in defense of the unrepentant whores of COYOTE:

1) COYOTE members express a range of attitudes towards prostitution, including some of the attitudes expressed in the above quotation. The sex industry is an entertainment industry. Hollywood "glamorizes" itself, as does Las Vegas. On the other hand, COYOTE was one of the first organizations to discuss rape and police abuse in the context of prostitution.

2) In terms of who is qualified to provide services, persons from a variety of perspectives may be qualified, including those at COYOTE.

Some of the women I work with who want to get out of prostitution reject services that condemn prostitution. Again we need varied approaches, not monolithic analyses and scapegoating libel.

3) Pimp apologists... I won't deny it, like communists who are forced to deny ever having read Marx. Legally, pimping is defined as "living off the earnings of prostitution." So I admit it. All my call-girl friends and I are legally defined as pimps if we do so much as share clients. That stigmatizing epithet ignores the numbers of women's lives invaded and ruined in the name of "protecting" women through anti-pimping laws, and supports the state's "right" to send me to prison for a felony just for sharing a client's phone number with a friend.

### **COP Watch**

In the early 1990s, after many years of coalition-building in San Francisco, I began organizing with a group of San Francisco progressive activists and community-based health service providers. We formed a group devoted to advocacy for the rights and needs of prostitutes, particularly street workers. Our network included feminists, sex workers from various venues, attorneys, health service providers, and employees of alternative criminal justice programs. We distributed condoms and legal information, and networked with prostitutes on the street. Police abuse became one of our primary concerns. We called ourselves COP—the Coalition on Prostitution.

For the last few years COP has been doing outreach on one of the prostitution strolls. I have been going out regularly, basically getting to know people on the streets while passing out condoms and info. I regularly survey women, asking about needs for services, opinions about the laws, and information on arrest patterns.

It isn't fair, some complain. There will be one woman in a miniskirt on the corner, standing next to a group of five drug dealers. Passersby will be tooting their horns, calling out, even throwing things from car windows, and the police will arrest only the prostitute.

Quite a few women working on the street tell me that they understand their rights. They know that they have the right to simply stand or walk on the street. They know that they have a right to dress however they want. Some insist that they do not step out in traffic or make noise. They just stand there. Standing on the street corner just can't be a crime, some tell me.

According to my understanding of the law as of 1996 in California, standing there can be a crime, depending on what you are thinking at the time. For instance, if you're thinking, "There's no food at home and the kids are hungry. I better pick up a date tonight," then "standing there" is a crime.

### **The WIPS (Women in Public Spaces) Project**

As a prostitute I had always envisioned tough female activists standing on street corners in short skirts as an act of civil disobedience. I mentioned this to some fellow activists who seemed to have an interest. In conjunction with her Ph.D. research project, Esther Rosenthal, a feminist sociologist, took me up on it. My goals dovetailed with her project, which was to get a closer understanding of street prostitution. Another friend, Carol Draizen, was a social worker and former "officer of the court" (a diversion counselor for prostitutes who had been arrested). Through her work within the legal system, Carol had witnessed the adverse effects of criminalization on prostitutes over the years. It became clear that through this project we could at least make an effort to monitor the conduct of the cops.

"This is all about how women occupy and are prohibited from occupying public space," said Rosenthal.

I called this project WIPS. Women in Public Space. We planned that three of us would go out to the stroll, with two of us sitting in a car with a video camera and wireless mike attached to the third woman, who would stand on the street.

Prior to engaging in the project, I had been doing outreach on this stroll for over a year. We conferred with a number of the women I knew working on the streets, proceeding on the basis that the project would be welcome. We were surprised to find that there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the project. When we said the phrase, "looking for police violations of prostitutes' rights," a number of women replied, "You want to know about our rights being violated? My rights are violated every day."

We stationed ourselves at the most public and patrolled sector of "High-track," San Francisco's hotel district, where prostitutes share the streets with tourists, landmark theaters, and pricey fast-food joints. Before starting the project, we prepared with a number of attorneys, including the Sex Workers' Rights Committee of the National Lawyers Guild.

Through this ongoing project we are able to obtain documentation of abuses of citizens who are usually considered beyond the scope of human rights advocacy.

Esther stood for hours among the other women, turning away the tricks, being videotaped by passing cars of teenagers, waiting to see how the police would treat her. She wore high heels and a hemline that exposed her thighs. I parked a few feet away with my video camera and monitored her.

Police cars circled the block regularly and instructed Esther to move. She would insist that she was not doing anything illegal. They threatened her, "If you are still here when we return, we will take you down to the station."

"For what?" Esther asked.

"For solicitation."

"But I'm not soliciting. I'm just waiting for someone."

"You heard what I said. You'd better not be here when I come back."

### **Laws Against Prostitution = Violence Against Prostitutes**

Gina is a Native American transgendered woman, warm, funny, and very intelligent. She had just gotten out of prison when she had a run-in with the police. She told one of the outreach workers on the street, who called me at COP.

When I met her she said over and over that she hadn't done anything wrong. She felt that, because she never agreed verbally to accept money for sex, she should not have been subject to arrest. She did take money from the officer, whereupon:

In a few seconds he flashed a brown wallet and tells me I'm under arrest for prostitution.

"No, I'm not. I didn't do nothing. I did not agree to anything verbally."

"Get up against the wall, You're under arrest."

"Why should I? For what reason. I did not do nothing wrong."

He grabbed me. Since I did not get a clear look at any type of badge, I got scared and I thought I was going to be raped and robbed. [Gina also told me that an incident had happened a month or so prior in which a rapist showed her a phony badge, said that she was under arrest, then tried to rape and rob her.]

I tried to get away, but he grabbed me by my hair and slammed me against a brick building wall. I started struggling with him for fear I would get hurt. He grabbed me by my hair and forcibly dragged me for about three meters. He then called for assistance.

My head was stepped on aggressively while my right arm was being twisted. I asked them to stop, that I was hurting. They both informed me that I shouldn't have resisted, that if I would have cooperated, none of this would have happened.

"We're going to let you know to cooperate the next time an officer says you're under arrest."

I told them once again that I did nothing to be treated like this.

"When I say you're under arrest, I mean for you to shut up and put your hands behind your back. Let this be a lesson to you and the other individuals not to resist."

I was then handcuffed and physically beat with their fists in my chest and ribs. I started to cry and asked if they would please stop. One of the two insisted I turn my back towards them. When I did this I was told, "Bitch, this is for you," and I was repeatedly kicked within my upper right side chest.

One officer said he would call for transportation, and the other officer kept telling me that he would like to take me north somewhere and he would beat the shit out of me and leave me for dead. He then told the other officer that the next person who resists should be shot, and I told him to shoot me and just get it over with.<sup>7</sup>

She was yanked up, then forced to the ground again, when the transport arrived. She asked to go to the hospital, and they told her to shut up. They took her on a frightening ride over the steepest hills (apparently this is a frequent tactic) and did not give her a seat belt. The following day she went to the hospital on her own and was told that her ribs were crushed. She suffered additional injuries, some of which were sustained by the bumpy ride.

Institutionalized violence against prostitutes is familiar to me as well. In 1979 I was raped while working at a massage parlor. The effect of criminalization on prostitutes' safety became apparent to me as I realized that there was no way I could call the police. The fact was, the police would bust our massage parlor, and my co-workers would be out on the streets. These same rapists had been to several parlors in town, and there was little I could do to stop them. I vowed to devote my energies to changing the laws and working with prostitutes to organize to protect ourselves.

I am appalled that the state assumes jurisdiction over my sexuality. To me, cops seem like rapists with badges. I read the newspapers: "Ex-Cop Linked to Hooker Slayings" and "Rapist Lures Prostitutes with Phony Police ID." The serial killers are the police—or at least there's no way to tell the difference.

In 1992, Maggie's, Toronto's Prostitutes' Community Project, performed a study of violence against prostitutes. Of 100 cases of reported rape and battery, five percent of the rapists identified themselves as police in order to 'disarm' the prostitutes. (This does not include those who actually were police.)<sup>8</sup>

Prostitution busts are a form of rape. When an emissary of the government (a cop) coerces me to engage in fondling and petting through fraud (pretending to be a client), then arrests me for my sexual behavior, I call that institutionalized rape. My mantras:

LAWS THAT PUNISH PROSTITUTES ARE CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN.

THE ARREST AND INSTITUTIONALIZED HARASSMENT OF PROSTITUTES ARE ATROCITIES.

### **Punitive Legislation Increasing**

During the late '80s, Democrat Willie Brown, then California's Speaker of the House and later the mayor of San Francisco, sponsored a law requiring mandatory HIV testing for prostitutes and a felony prison sentence for agreeing to do a hand job if you are HIV+. Since treatment for HIV-related illness is almost nonexistent in prison, a felony conviction can be tantamount to a death sentence. Twenty-eight states have similar legislation.

"Civil remedies" have become a recent trend in enforcement and litigation. This tactic has been promoted by lawyers-cum-legislators, cities, police, and anti-prostitution feminists as the "new tool for public order." Civil suits can be used punitively (by the government and individuals), and require less of a burden of proof than criminal law. Seizure of property is the newest legal remedy for such offenses, and provides a way for the state to extract their share of the profits by confiscating all earnings based on so-called crimes. This includes drug offenses as well as prostitution. Police have more at stake with these economic incentives, and they are highly motivated to hunt down "recalcitrants." These incentives also tend to trigger greed and over-

enthusiasm. Officers who are ordinarily restrained by constitutional prohibitions on illegal search and seizure under criminal law wield much greater power under these new statutes.

Contemporary prostitution-prohibitionist feminists working within the criminal justice system in San Francisco are breeding a new set of "retraining centers" for johns. Here, the police blackmail the clients, by, upon arrest, presenting the D.A.'s offer not to press charges if the john takes a \$500 seminar. "John school" is very educational, including testimonies by ex-prostitutes about how much they hated prostitution. (Personally, I have a few choice words I'd like to share, but they shouldn't arrest the clients.)

Arresting clients is usually more of a propaganda campaign for the police than a real priority. Client arrests have gone up 25 percent according to the local police department, but many of the prostitutes tell me that women are still being detained, without the paperwork. In the '70s there was a similar rash of news stories about an increase in the arrest of clients. However, this had no long-term effect on the arrest ratio—prostitutes are still arrested much more often than clients. If the police department were comprised of a majority of women the figures might change, but some prostitutes say that women cops can be worse. While some male officers are friendly and actually supportive, women report that female officers may be less friendly and less likely to let a known prostitute continue working. And there is an underlying problem regarding re-educating johns in order to take away a hooker's business: it causes many prostitutes to work longer hours and take extra risks to make the money they need.

Recently, in Minnesota, a group of prohibitionists wrote and managed to pass legislation (HR2519) prescribing civil remedies against anyone who "entices" someone into prostitution. This civil remedy bypasses the proof required in the criminal justice system and stretches the meaning of coercion to include a wider range of circumstances than usually exists in the legal definition of coercion. Offering unionization was listed as one of the "sins."

Organized prostitution is a prime target of the law. Living off the earnings of a prostitute (a.k.a. pimping) is a felony in most states. Although police should enforce laws against persons who abuse, coerce, force, kidnap, or commit violence against prostitutes, criminal-

izing "living off the earnings" makes it impossible to spend one's money on family, friends, or lovers. This strategy increases the marginalization of prostitutes by criminalizing their relationships.

These laws apply to me, and I take them personally. As a call girl, it is almost impossible not to share a client's phone number with a friend. Prostitutes work together, giving referrals and sharing apartments as a way to organize to protect ourselves. In fact, prostitutes' rights groups try to make the sex business safer by encouraging communication between sex workers. Laws against pimping threaten all our communications and supports.

Prostitutes, especially the most visible prostitutes working on the streets, are again emerging as primary symbols of suffering and need, of the mythic malevolence of women, of "criminals and deviants." Society, the laws, and the police attack the public display of women's sexuality and sexually assertive presence. Erotic performers and prostitutes, as well as any public erotic image, are cast as a prime enemy of an idealized social order that is based on middle-class concepts of "decorum" and conformity. This century—this millennium—is coming to an end in an atmosphere of fear, with society seeking unfair revenge on the poor, the sick, and the strange.

#### NOTES

1. San Francisco Task Force Interim Report 1994, Statement by Neighborhood Group Activist.
2. Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander, eds., *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1987).
3. Ruth Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), xii.
4. Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
5. Priscilla Alexander, "Prostitution: A Difficult Issue for Feminists," in *Sex Work*, 201.
6. *San Francisco Examiner*, February 18, 1994, A-23.
7. From a statement written by Gina, personal communication, which she intended to submit to the Office of Citizen Complaints. This report is indicative of occasional occurrences within a context of repeated verbal harassment and arrests of young women, women of color, and transgendered women.
8. "Police Response To Reports of Violence Against Prostitutes," Maggie's, The Toronto Prostitutes' Community Service Project, submitted September 25, 1992, to the Police Services Board, Toronto.

Timothy J. Gilfoyle

## FROM SOUBRETTE ROW TO SHOW WORLD

**The Contested Sexualities  
of Times Square, 1880–1995**

In 1995, New York City outlawed sexually oriented adult businesses in certain neighborhoods. Previously, New York's zoning laws had treated adult stores and similar entertainment venues—bookshops, video outlets, theaters, topless bars—like any other commercial enterprise. Such businesses were permissible in any area zoned for commercial or manufacturing use. The history of New York is replete with reform crusades to obliterate the most public forms of commercial sex from its streets.<sup>1</sup> Passage of the 1995 law, however, ushered in a new era in Gotham's long history of commercial sex. The city statute marked the most aggressive effort in New York City history to utilize municipal or state power to restrict land and property use in regards to sexual behavior.

Nowhere did these efforts take on more real and symbolic meaning than Times Square. Real estate interests involved in "redeveloping" the Times Square area from 1980 to 1995 read like a who's who in New York real estate history. Bruce Eichner, William Zeckendorf, Jr., Jack Rudin, George Klein, Harry Macklowe, and others worked in conjunction with city officials and the Urban Development Corporation to make the "Great White Way" great again. "We want to bring fantasy back to Times Square," said City Planning Commission Chair Herbert Sturz in 1986, "and replace much of the grim reality that currently exists." In 1995, fantasy indeed replaced reality—Michael Eisner and the Disney