



English Collective of Prostitutes

King's Cross Women's Centre, 71 Tonbridge Street, London WC1
Mail: PO Box 287, London NW6 5QU
Tel: 01 837 7509

FOR PROSTITUTES AGAINST PROSTITUTION -
CROSSING THE DIVIDES BETWEEN
SEX WORKERS AND OTHER WOMEN

Women - the poorest workers

The 1980 United Nations figure that women do 2/3 of the world's work for 5% of the income and 1% of the assets, spells out the basic truth about prostitution, both in Third World and industrialised countries. Women, who work at least twice as much as men, get much less income; therefore we are the sellers to men who are the buyers. We estimate that 70% of prostitute women in Britain are mothers, mostly single mothers, who go on the game to support themselves and their families. Discussions, recommendations, and policies on prostitution which bypass economics by leaving out women's poverty, hide the single biggest truth about women's lives. They undermine the basic case against the injustice of the prostitution laws, and the basis for prostitute and non-prostitute women working together against the sexism which dooms most of the women of the world to poverty and/or a 24-hour working day.

The United Nations confirms the experience of our international network that women are paying the highest price for the global economic crisis of the past 10 years.

"[Women] adapt their behaviour to the economic changes in an attempt to cushion the impact of those changes on their families by increasing the amount of time they work at home or in the labour market . . . This behaviour may well be the most significant effect of the crisis, implying that women make adjustment socially possible by increasing their own economic activity, by working harder, by self-abnegation."
(1)

In Britain, the government has frozen Child Benefit - the only universal recognition that every mother is a working mother whose work caring for children is a crucial contribution to society. It is often the only money women can call their own. Housing and other benefits have also been cut, and the government has introduced workfare - compulsory training programmes in exchange for benefits - making it harder particularly for young people to claim welfare benefits. These economic policies have resulted in increased homelessness and prostitution. In our survey of 101 prostitute women working in different areas of London, both on the street and in premises, economic need was the fundamental reason given for prostitution by over three-quarters of the women. In addition, another 22 women said they had "drifted into it": which, if you have no serious economic prospects - as is the case for most working class women - is also likely to be economic. (2)

The recently introduced Poll tax, which every adult is supposed to pay regardless of income, and which has been opposed by 73% of people in Britain, is likely to increase prostitution further, as unwaged women and young people are forced to earn the money to pay the tax and any fine resulting from non-payment.

Notes

- (1) *1989 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*, United Nations Office at Vienna, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, New York 1989, p.21.
- (2) *Divided We Fall*, Nina Lopez-Jones, to be published in 1991.
- (3) "Legalized Kidnapping", *Network - News from the English Collective of Prostitutes*, No. 1 July 1983, p.3.
- (4) For a history of the strike read *Prostitutes - Our Life*, Ed. Claude Jaget, with an introduction by the ECP, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1980.
- (5) "For Prostitutes and Against Prostitution", Power of Women Collective, 1975.
- (6) This issue is expanded on in *Anti-porn is the theory, repression is the practice*, Nina Lopez-Jones, November 1989.
- (7) *Out of the Clause into the Workhouse - A lesbian women's view of what Clause 28 intends, pretends and promotes, and what we intend to promote against it*, Wages Due Lesbians, Centrepiece 7, King's Cross Women's Centre, London 1988, p.36.
- (8) Some of the ECP's views, organising and demands are recorded in *Prostitute Women and AIDS: Resisting the Virus of Repression*, English Collective of Prostitutes, with an introduction by the US PROSTITUTES Collective, March 1988.
- (9) *Time*, 27 April 1987.
- (10) Letter to *The Independent*, unpublished, Wilmette Brown and Nina Lopez-Jones, 7 September 1989.
- (11) *Ask Any Woman - A London inquiry into rape and sexual assault*, Ruth E. Hall, Falling Wall Press, Bristol 1985, p.45.
- (12) PC Anderson was found guilty of rape and sentenced to seven years imprisonment on 12 October 1989. The woman he raped has no record for prostitution.
- (13) *Ibid*, p.89.

Who we are

The ECP is an autonomous organisation within the International Wages for Housework Campaign. Together with the US PROStitutes Collective and the Wages for Housework group in Trinidad which works with prostitute women, we form the International Prostitutes Collective, a network of women of different races, nationalities, ages and backgrounds working at different levels of the sex industry.

We are campaigning for the abolition of the prostitution laws which punish women for refusing poverty and/or financial dependence on men, and for human, legal, economic and civil rights for prostitute women. We are also campaigning for money, housing and other resources to be made available to women and children on the game or who want to get off the game; for safe houses for runaway children and young people where they can be anonymous to protect them from being picked up by the police and sent back home, often to more violence; and for higher benefits, grants and wages so that no woman or child is forced into sex with anyone by poverty, financial dependence and/or lack of economic alternatives.

We oppose "legalisation" as a form of police/government control which institutionalises women in prostitution. Evidence from West Germany and Nevada (USA) has shown that legalisation increases the middlemen - legally recognized pimps taking their cut from women's wages; speeds up women's workload; and segregates women from their families and communities. Most women would rather work illegally than be down on a police computer for life and carry health passbooks. Women, not men and not the State, must control our bodies and our money.

The legal divide

Although prostitution per se is not illegal in Britain, it is almost impossible for a woman to work as a prostitute without breaking the law. It is illegal for a "common prostitute" to loiter or solicit in a public place. A woman is labelled as a "common prostitute" by two police cautions before she appears in court - guilty before proven innocent. Women who share working premises with even one other woman can be arrested for brothel keeping. Anyone who associates with a prostitute woman becomes guilty by association: husbands and boyfriends can be charged with pimping, girlfriends with loitering, brothel keeping or controlling a prostitute.

Working girls are often accused of being "unfit mothers" because of their occupation. Many women lose custody of their children to prejudiced social services. A single mother from our network described how her 10-year-old daughter who previously knew nothing of her mother's occupation, was taken away by police:

"They broke the front door in and broke the lock. There were about 10 police in all, three of which were women. My daughter was crying and screaming for me to rescue her. They refused to let me comfort her . . . I was allowed no contact with her for four days. I really did believe that I would never see her again, and I was going out of my mind with worry and grief . . . They couldn't have hurt me more if they

had picked up a knife and twisted it in my heart. Everything that I did was to improve our life-style and escape the 'poverty' trap . . . Something must be done to change laws that make it easy for the police to invade our privacy in our own homes, and to be able to snatch our children away. It is merely 'legalised kidnapping'." (3)

The prostitution laws divide women between those of us who are considered "good and respectable" and those of us who are considered "bad and loose" for refusing poverty by working in the sex industry. Money, in the eyes of the Establishment, makes good - that is, poor - women bad. We recently protested against the way a murdered woman was put on trial by the media which implied that her parents were more distressed to find out their daughter was working as a prostitute than that she had been murdered. Such devaluation of prostitute women's lives is not unusual. In 1981 we picketed the High Court throughout the trial of the Yorkshire Ripper, a serial murderer who killed 13 women and attacked many others. As in the case of the Green River murders in Canada and Seattle, and the Los Angeles South Side murders, the police used the prostitution laws as an excuse to do nothing, labelling the murdered women as prostitutes, who were in any case Black and/or too poor to matter. The Yorkshire police only took the murders seriously after a relatively better off "respectable" woman was killed. Many more women died as a result, prostitute and non-prostitute alike.

In November 1982, with the support of Black Women for Wages for Housework and Women Against Rape, the ECP occupied the Holy Cross Church in the red-light area of King's Cross, London, for 12 days, to protest police illegality and racism against prostitute women. The Church Occupation was the first modern sanctuary in Britain. The police were arresting women who were not working, particularly picking on Black women and women who used our legal service, Legal Action for Women, to defend themselves in court, while refusing to arrest pimps and rapists who were reported to them. The police accused a white non-prostitute woman with disabilities who reported rape, of being a hooker, and arrested her Black boyfriend for pimping. He was later found not guilty but the rapist was never found.

The Occupation drew wide support from local residents and many organisations, particularly Black women's and gay groups. It succeeded in putting prostitute women on the political agenda as never before, and inspired prostitute women in other countries, starting with Canada. In July 1984 prostitute women and their supporters occupied Vancouver's Christ Church Cathedral to protest police violence and the interim injunction which declared prostitutes a public nuisance. The ECP has also worked with the Women's Alliance in Support of Prostitutes (WASP), in Halifax.

For prostitutes against prostitution

The women's movement is split on the issue of women working as prostitutes. When we began in 1975 we took our name from the Prostitutes Collective which organised the 1975 national hookers' strike in France, one of the most dramatic events of the women's movement internationally (4). We demanded that the struggle of prostitute women for equal human, legal and economic rights with other women be acknowledged as part of the women's movement for financial independence and control over our own bodies, and as part of the working class movement for more money and less work. To

connect the situation of prostitute women in this way was then completely new. It is still controversial. Most of the Women's Liberation Movement was hostile to prostitute women on the grounds that exchanging sex for money was uniquely degrading. They said it encouraged rape by leading men to believe that all women are available, conveniently forgetting that men already thought that. The sex industry is not the only industry which is male-dominated and which degrades women, but it is an industry based on sex - which tends to pluck many repressive strings in many psyches. Secondly, in this industry the workers are illegal and can least defend publicly the rights both to their jobs and against their employers. We argued that for some women to get paid for what all women are expected to do for free is a source of power for all women to refuse any free sex work they wish to.

In 1975, the Wages for Housework Campaign was the only women's organisation to come out in support of prostitute women.

"All work is prostitution, whether we work for money or room and board. All women are prostitutes. Whether we fuck for money, wait on tables, pack biscuits, type letters, drive lorries, bear children, teach in schools, or work in the coal mines, we are forced to sell our bodies and minds. Our whole lives are stolen from us by work.

. . . all women benefit from prostitutes' successful attempts to receive cash for sexual work, because the cash makes it clear that women are working when we are fucking, dressing up, being nice, putting makeup on, whenever we relate to men . . . The prostitute, lesbian or 'straight', refuses the unlimited emotional and sexual work (and laundry) that normally accompany relations with men, in favour of a cash demand." (5)

Working in the sex industry has also made it possible for many women to get the financial independence they need to afford lesbian lives - having sex with men at work in order to refuse sex with men in their private lives. Discos and clubs have long been hangouts where lesbian prostitutes meet other lesbian women, but prostitute women are rarely acknowledged as part of the lesbian movement. Nor is their experience taken account of in most feminist theory, lesbian or otherwise.

Power to women versus power to the State

While sexual outlaws socialise together, the government uses feminists' ambivalence towards prostitute women to strengthen police powers against everyone. Anti-porn crusades and kerb-crawling legislation are two examples of how feminism fed into the repressive economic and sexual climate of the 1980s.

Anti-porn feminists have concentrated on attacking attitudes, not power relations, blaming violence against women on naked images while ignoring the violent economic reality those images reflect. These feminists tell other women what men have always told us: to ignore our real experience - and submit to their priorities. Not money, not housing, not even non-sexist, non-racist, non-violent policing, but an end to pornography becomes the key to every woman's welfare. This obsession with "dirty pictures" has hidden the full impact of the government's attack on working class women's

purses - less economic independence and therefore more rape and other violence against women and children. (6)

It is no accident that pornography is banned in apartheid South Africa. For unlike legislation to make rape in marriage a crime, which means more power in women's hands, the censorship of pornography means more power in the hands of governments and police to decide how to dress up lies and hide the truth, that is, control what kind of information we have access to, about sex and everything else. (And, in spite of its drawbacks, pornography is often the only sexually explicit material available to women and young people who want to explore their own sexual needs.) Together with Wages Due Lesbians we have worked to show that economic repression and sexual repression are two sides of the same coin, dividing women from each other and from men. Anti-porn and anti-lesbian/gay witch-hunts are integral to the government's economic strategy of cuts in benefits, wages and services.

"To succeed, this strategy must be accompanied by an attack on our rights to self-determination and to [sex and other] information/education about ourselves and each other - in other words, an attack on our power to organise with all kinds of people against exploitation and repression. Monetarism - government by market forces, needs moralism - government by police forces, in the bedroom, the classroom, and on the street." (7)

Legislation against kerb-crawling (men soliciting women for sexual purposes) was introduced by the Thatcher government in 1985 in the name of bringing equality to prostitute women by arresting their clients, and safety to other women by making it illegal for men to accost them. It has equalised women down by taking away some of the rights men had which women were fighting to get: instead of prostitute women not being arrested for approaching men, men are being arrested for approaching them. Kerb-crawling legislation is similar to Canada's Amendment C-49 (1985) which criminalises anything the police decide is "communicating for the sake of prostitution". It is part of the government's drive to "clean up" inner city areas of one of the more visible effects of its economic policies - increased prostitution; to clamp down on street activity generally; and to defend property values at the expense of civil rights.

Kerb-crawling legislation has fueled prejudice and hostility against prostitute women, and has extended to men some of the bias the prostitution laws inflict on women. In the same way as police evidence alone is enough to convict prostitute women of loitering and soliciting, it is enough to convict men accused of kerb-crawling. A police force whose illegality, racism, sexism and corruption have become everyday news, has been given additional powers to arrest any man they choose. Experience tells us that the police are more likely to use their new powers against Black and other working class men they may want to charge for quite unconnected purposes. The red-light residents in the name of whose property loitering, soliciting and kerb-crawling legislation was introduced, have never had to substantiate their allegations.

In 1984, we initiated the Campaign Against Kerb Crawling Legislation (CAKCL) - a coalition of anti-rape, Black and civil rights organisations,

AIDS and drug prevention groups, lawyers, probation officers and Labour Party activists. Our opposition has shown that kerb-crawling legislation adds to prostitute and other women's vulnerability to violence by forcing working women further underground and committing more time and resources to catching prostitute women and kerb-crawlers rather than rapists and other violent men. While the police have formed special squads and arrested thousands of women and hundreds of clients (women are always the first to get arrested!) in a combined effort to "clean up" red-light areas, they have failed to act in concert against women's murderers and rapists.

The government is now counting on feminist ambivalence about sex industry workers to introduce electronic tagging, in the hope that tagging will not be opposed if "only" prostitute women and kerb-crawlers are the targets. Once introduced, it can be used against anyone, expanding rather than reducing, the prison population into our very homes.

The virus of repression

The "spread of AIDS" has also been used by politicians and the media to encourage witch-hunts and deepen the divide between women who are portrayed as married, monogamous, faithful, clean and mainly white, versus women portrayed as unmarried, promiscuous, contaminated/contagious and mainly Black and/or Third World. The presumption that prostitute women are spreading the HIV virus is based not on evidence but on assumptions that women who have sexual intercourse with (potentially) many sexual partners inevitably contract and transmit disease; that women who have "chosen" this way of life are uniquely degraded and immoral; and that "degradation of the mind" inevitably brings "degradation of the body". Prostitute women's illegal status has made it harder for working girls to speak out publicly in their own defence and easier to be dismissed than more "respectable" people.

Research in Western countries contradicts claims that prostitute women are "high risk". But isolated and often unconfirmed reports of working girls who test HIV positive, have been sensationalised to whip up prejudice and hostility. Propaganda about the so-called African origin of AIDS and statistics about high rates of HIV/AIDS in Africa - figures whose accuracy and reliability is in question - are used to whip up racism against Black, immigrant and prostitute people everywhere.

Wherever condoms and clinics are affordable and accessible, prostitute women have traditionally made use of them, and so may well be less at risk than other women. And although it is clients who are usually not keen on wearing condoms, most proposals for compulsory testing have targeted working women, not clients. This double standard extends to the ludicrous situation of women being arrested and convicted for prostitution for carrying condoms in their handbags.

Our sister organisation in San Francisco, the US PROStitutes Collective, spearheaded opposition to legislation proposing mandatory AIDS testing for convicted prostitutes and clients; a felony prison sentence of up to three years for anyone convicted of prostitution after s/he tested HIV positive; and enrolment in a drug diversion and/or workfare programme. The 1988 Bronzan Bill and similar legislation would hit women hardest, particularly

Black women. At least 70% of people arrested for prostitution are women, and although most prostitute women in the US are white, racist policing and sentencing ensure that most women sent to prison for prostitution are Black. (8)

As compulsory testing becomes more widespread, the ECP, Black Women for Wages for Housework and WinVisible: Women with Visible and Invisible Disabilities, our points of reference on anti-racism and anti-disability racism, have focussed on exposing AIDS policies of divide-and-rule, a crucial step towards understanding and defeating AIDS.

"The most up-to-date information from the USA shows that AIDS, like cancer, is a disease of poverty, and that Black and other working class people are dying of both illnesses in disproportionate numbers. [70% of AIDS cases in women occurred among blacks and Hispanics . . . and 90% of infants born with AIDS are black or Hispanic. (9)] But instead of stopping military and industrial practices which attack our immune systems - malnutrition, homelessness, overmedication, pesticides, radiation and other pollution, and overwork (otherwise known as stress) - governments all over the world are introducing compulsory HIV testing, tighter immigration controls, detention, deportation, and other repressive measures; and fattening the pockets of the drugs industry with expensive research grants on "miracle" drugs and vaccines whose side effects may be at least as dangerous as the disease they are supposed to cure." (10)

The hooker and the wife

Yet, in spite of divisions within the women's movement, more women are realising that their lives and safety are tied up with the lives and safety of their illegal sisters. In December 1989, the ECP and Women Against Rape (WAR) supported a woman whose ex-husband, Victor Powell, was being sentenced for the rape of a prostitute woman. We held a vigil outside the court to highlight the vulnerability that prostitute women and wives share at the hands of the law, the police and the courts. The rapist had previous convictions for raping another two prostitute women. In this case the woman was held prisoner, raped and assaulted in his home. Drinking heavily, he eventually fell asleep and she managed to call the police. They took 45 minutes to arrive!

WAR's 1985 Women's Safety Survey, *Ask Any Woman* (11), found that more than a quarter of women who had worked as prostitutes had been raped or sexually assaulted. The prostitution laws, which criminalise women, are a signal to men that violence against prostitute women will be dealt with more leniently than violence against others, and it is often dismissed by police and courts as "part of the job". These laws are used against other women also. A policeman who was recently convicted of raping a young Black single mother while on duty, had threatened her with arrest for soliciting if she dared report the rape. (12)

Similarly, rape in marriage, now treated as a crime in Scotland and some other countries, is regarded in the rest of the UK as a husband's right. *Ask Any Woman* found that women have most to fear from "the rapist who pays the rent" - one in seven wives had been raped by their husbands. (13) Most

women gave financial reasons for not leaving. That rape in marriage is not a crime affects whether the police treat all domestic violence and rape seriously.

Powell repeatedly broke injunctions against his attacking his wife. She and her children were put at risk by court delays and by police refusing to act before receiving official notification - usually two days after the court order. Contradicting stereotypes that wives and prostitutes are inevitably sworn enemies, Powell's ex-wife, who suffered years of violence at his hands, and the prostitute woman he raped, met at the trial and became friends. Each sees the guilty verdict and the life sentence passed for the rape as a protection. It is a victory for all women when the rape of prostitute women is recognised as rape.

Counting women's work and the abolition of the prostitution laws

It is also a victory for all women when the work of prostitute women is recognised as work. For this reason, the ECP has helped organise **TIME OFF FOR WOMEN** - international actions by grassroots women to press for implementation of the 1985 UN decision (Paragraph 120 of *Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women Until the Year 2000*) that all women's work, waged and unwaged, in the home, on the land and in the community, should be counted in every country's gross national product. **TIME OFF** takes place every year during the week of 24 October - the anniversary of the Iceland women's general strike. It is co-ordinated by the International Wages for Housework Campaign. As a prostitutes' organisation, we want to ensure that the work of prostitute women, which has been essential to the survival of millions of families, entire communities and even countries, is made visible and acknowledged as the economic contribution to society it really is. Prostitute women provide some of the welfare the State doesn't provide.

But the established spokeswomen of feminism have been more concerned with their own equality with men at or at least near the top than with breaking down divisions among women. Their focus on their access to top jobs rather than on most women's lack of access to wealth divides women further, putting some women in charge of exploiting the rest of us. In their submission to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (Vienna, 1 March 1990), *Housewives in Dialogue*, the NGO which runs the King's Cross Women's Centre where the ECP is based, spelled out the implications of counting women's unwaged work in the GNP for bringing women together.

" . . . the issue of getting women's unremunerated work counted is a great unifier of people and unifier of issues. From the point of view of women's enormous unwaged workload, the issues of equality, development and peace are inseparable, and, despite undeniable differences in access to wealth of all kinds and in labour time and workload, women in industrialized and Third World countries are seen to be in fundamentally the same boat: unwaged for their first job, low-waged for their second job, and overworked both inside and outside the home.

. . . Since an important part of the wealth which can cut down on their work is in the military, it is clear that women's overwork is directly

connected with resources annually poured into military budgets, East and West, North and South."

Counting prostitute women's work unveils the sex work and emotional work all women are forced to do - at home, on the job, on the street - gratifying men's sexual needs and egos with understanding and encouraging smiles, words and acts. Counting all women's work, including sex work, is a strategy for crossing the divide between sex workers and other women. A strategy which strengthens all women's case for compensation - in the form of wages, services and other resources - for the poverty and overwork which have been forced on most of us. A strategy which cannot be bought off with careers for a few women.

Unlike people who accept prostitution as a necessary evil or a necessary therapy, we are organising to put an end to prostitution. When women are able to claim back the wealth we helped produce, the economic conditions which have forced millions of women, children and young people everywhere to sell their mind, bodies, time and skills in order to survive or improve their standard of living, will no longer be there. As women win the financial means to refuse sex work, prostitution will cease to be accepted or needed.

Counting women's work is already transforming what many regarded as utopia into reality. While governments discuss whether and how to count women's work, and whether they can avoid paying for it once it's counted and women know how much it's worth, women are coming together to redefine what we mean by work - a first step towards refusing to do it, and therefore a first step towards the abolition of prostitution not only in the sex industry but in every industry.

The recognition of the work prostitute women do is inseparable from the abolition of the prostitution laws which criminalise women for refusing poverty and/or financial dependence on men. The laws hide, mystify and devalue sex work and sex workers, thereby covering over how much sex work all women are doing. Yet, like any other workers, prostitute women are in the best position to decide when they must defend their right to their jobs in order to defend themselves. In campaigning for and winning better, legal, working conditions sex workers are refusing the work of illegality, stigmatisation and other violence and discrimination - and redefining what and how much work they will agree or refuse to do.

We often hear of projects to "rehabilitate" working women through training or other jobs. However well intentioned these projects are, they often fall short of supporting prostitute women's demands against the laws, and stand aside in the face of police violence and social prejudice against working women.

Yet, the abolition of the laws is a priority for millions of women worldwide. All women must be able to control their own bodies and their own money, and to refuse to be institutionalised by criminal records, zoning, police computers and/or compulsory health checks. Only then will sex industry workers and other women share the same human, legal, economic and civil rights to protection from violence and extortion of every kind.

Nina Lopez-Jones

Point of reference for the English Collective of Prostitutes and co-ordinator of Legal Action for Women, a grassroots legal service for all women based at the King's Cross Women's Centre, London.

March 1990