An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Speaking Out on Prostitution

by Susan Brownmiller

Susan Brownmiller is a writer and critic and an active member of New York Radical Feminists. The following paper was presented at an all-day filibuster of a New York State Legislature hearing on "Prostitution as a Victimless Crime."

SUSAN BROWNMILLER: Gentlemen, you state that the purpose of your hearing today is to listen to testimony on the subject of prostitution, what you refer to as "a victimless crime." Prostitution is a crime, gentlemen, but it is not victimless. There is a victim, and that is the woman.

I understand in the last week you received some urgent phone calls from several women who consider themselves your peers—women from the New Democratic Coalition, a district leader or two—and they asked you to suspend the hearing. They told you that the women's liberation movement considers prostitution to be a women's issue, along with child care, along with equal pay for equal work, along with marriage, abortion, contraception, and rape. These women told you that they were planning a joint conference on prostitution with the Radical Feminists, and that this conference, to be held before the start of the legislative session, would evolve a new approach, a woman's approach, to the issue of prostitution. But you refused to cancel this hearing, giving ample evidence, I think, to the weight you give to the political power of women. And so, against our will, we are forced to use your hearing as our forum. We do this with regret, in heat and haste, without the proper thought, con-

Copyright © 1971 by Susan Brownmiller, and reprinted with the permission of the author. This article first appeared in Notes From the Third Year.
sideration, and democratic spirit of inquiry that our women's con-
ference will have.

As with most other issues of women's liberation, the problem of
prostitution is unbelievably complex, resting as it does on eco-
nomics, psychology, sexuality, and the male power principle. There
are some who'd say that the male power principle embodies the first
three points I've mentioned: economics, psychology, and sexuality.
To be perfectly honest, that's what I'd say. (Applause)

One fact about prostitution I'm sure has not escaped your notice:
the buyers, the ones who hold the cash in their hand, the ones who
create the market by their demand, they are all men, gentlemen,
the same sex as yourselves.

In the 1940s, the Kinsey Report—which was probably the last
really documented report on sexuality—the Kinsey Report stated
that two-thirds of all American men have some experience with a
prostitute. In 1964, R.E.L. Masters estimated that the figure was
closer to 80 percent. Now, having counted the men in this room, I
don't think we need to play a shell game to figure out which one of
you might have a clean slate.

Now the stock your sex is buying with their dollar bills is human
flesh, for the most part, but not always, the same sex as myself. And
I say parenthetically "not always," because in this city at the pre-
sent time, you can go any evening to the corner of 53rd Street and
Third Avenue, and see men buying other men for sex. This is seldom
talked about, but it is relevant. Again the buyers are always men.

Now the myth has it that the female prostitute is the seller of her
own flesh, that she is a free participant in her act, that she has made
a conscious choice to sell her body. That is a male myth, gentlemen,
one that your sex has rather successfully popularized for your own
self-interest. It has not only absolved you of your responsibility in
this terrible crime of buying another human being's body, it has
conveniently shifted your guilt onto our shoulders. The law in this
city is applied to punish the woman and let the man go scot-free.

Now there is something else that the male sex has always tried to
do to cover up its crime: it has tried to separate the woman engaged
in prostitution from the rest of the women in the culture. It calls her
"the other," it marks her the bad woman, it sends her to jail, and it
tells the rest of us that we are very good and virtuous and we have
nothing in common with her.

Well, gentlemen, I have good news for you. We have seen through
that little myth: the feminist movement identifies itself with the female victim of the male-created institution known as prostitution. (Applause)

MAN: I take it you don’t object to being interrupted.

BROWN MILLER: Now, I am white, and middle-class and ambitious, and I have no trouble identifying with either the call girl or the street hustler, and I can explain why in one sentence: I’ve been working to support myself in the city for fifteen years, and I’ve had more offers to sell my body for money than I have had to be an executive. According to John Kenneth Galbraith, in a recent issue of The New York Times Magazine, 96 percent of all jobs over $15,000 in this country are held by white men. The remaining 4 percent are divided among blacks, browns, and women. Now when I see a young girl hustling on the street, I see a young girl like myself who has ambition. But she has no options. I mean, what else could she be? She could be a waitress, she could be a comptometer operator, she could be a welfare mother, she could be somebody’s wife.

There was a time when I was an unemployed actress, and working to support myself as a waitress and a file clerk. The disparity between my reality situation and my ambition for a better life was so great that I gave serious consideration to the social pressure to do a little hustling. And that is something, gentlemen, I really don’t think that you comprehend. I don’t think that anyone has ever asked you to sell your body, or presumed that your body was for sale. I wonder if a cab driver has ever turned around to you and remarked, “I see you’re a little short of change. Perhaps we could work together. I could steer some customers your way.” I wonder if a man has ever walked up to you in a hotel lobby, and muttered, “What’s your price? Ten? Twenty? I’ll pay it. I’ll pay it.” That happened to me in the Hotel Astor. I wonder if you’ve ever applied for work in a bar-restaurant, and the owner, or perhaps he was only the manager, looked you up and down and said, “Are you sure you’re over twenty-one? Why don’t you come downstairs with me and prove it?”

Now these were all experiences that happened to me at a time of my life when perhaps I looked more vulnerable than I am today, and when I was certainly more desperate. And I want to say without theatricality that I was lucky. I had options that most other women don’t have. I managed to use my ambition in a positive man-
ner. I managed to become a writer, what Caroline Bird called "a loophole woman." There was, of course, one other option I could have exercised. I could've gotten married.

So now, perhaps you can understand why I identify with the prostitute, and why, when I see a front page headline in the New York Times, "Mayor Stepping Up Drive on Prostitutes and Smut," I know that in a very real sense it is me and my entire sex that the mayor and the New York Times are talking about. And when this mayor appoints a task force of six men and no women to study the problems of pimps, pornography, and prostitution, giving equal moral weight to each category, I know that his failure to appoint even one woman to this task force is not an oversight, it's just that the boys decided they've got to get together and do a little superficial something to preserve their fun.

Now I am worried that your purpose in holding this hearing today is to open the doors to the legalization of prostitution. Mr. Pete Hamill, for one, has waxed eloquent on the subject in New York magazine and in the Village Voice, extolling the virtues of a legal brothel he had visited in Curaçao, where he got a clean lay at a fair price with a medical guarantee of no venereal disease. A recent article in Look magazine reports on the first legal American brothel outside of Reno, Nevada. Perhaps you saw the story. In an interview with the pimp in charge, a white man described as sporting two diamond rings on his fingers, this pig said, "First of all, the customer doesn't have to worry about getting V.D. The girls are checked every week by a doctor, and once a month they get a blood test."

Gentlemen, if you intend to extend the definition of government-inspected meat to the sale of human flesh, you will do it over our dead bodies. The women's movement will not tolerate the legalization of sexual slavery in this state. Yes, there is a prostitution problem. It is expressed by Judge John A. Murtagh, who has written: "Most of the men who visit prostitutes would be considered normal." It is expressed by Judge Morris Schwalb, who began to hold prostitutes in his court without bail after he got some complaints from friends of his who were in town for a Bar Association hearing. They claimed that they were actually being harassed by women on the street. Well, if Judge Schwalb were to put on a skirt and walk down 42nd Street, or even Fifth Avenue, any afternoon, despite his
hairy legs, I think he would begin to understand for the first time in his life what street harassment is all about. It is women who are being harassed on these streets in New York City, day and night, and they are being harassed by men and not the reverse. Yes, there is a prostitution problem, and it is expressed by Mr. Pete Hamill who daydreams about women in clean little stalls, medically approved and at a price a workingman can afford.

There is a serious problem in our society, when women with ambition must sell their bodies because there is no other way that they can earn fifteen thousand a year. There is a serious problem in our society when men think that access to the female body is, if not a divine right, at least a monetary right.

There has been but one in-depth study on the gratification men get from paying for sex, and that study was conducted in the 1920's. And perhaps that is the area in which you gentlemen could begin your research. Perhaps it is the only valid study a man could make in this day and age on the subject of prostitution. You might begin with Marshall Helfand, who, according to the *New York Times* of July 24th, was arrested and charged with promoting prostitution. Mr. Helfand is the owner of Tune Time Fashions at 520 Eighth Avenue, if you want to know how to reach him. Or perhaps you may want to fly in Mr. Weldon Case of Elyria, Ohio. Mr. Case was arrested along with Mr. Helfand and charged with patronizing a prostitute. He said in court that he was the president of the Midwest Intercontinental Telephone Company, which operates in twelve states. I think a garment center boss and a major corporation president might have some very interesting insights on their concept of manhood and their psychological need to pay a woman for the use of her body.

Prostitution will not end in this country until men see women as equals. And men will never see women as equals until there's an end to prostitution. So it seems that we will have to work for the full equality of women and the end of prostitution side by side. One cannot occur without the other. In the meantime, it seems to me, it's foolish to prosecute a woman for a crime in which she is the victim. But it is equally reprehensible to let a man go free for the criminal act of purchasing another's body.

Now that concludes the formal part of my testimony. I had a great deal of difficulty writing these words down because, as the
poet Adrienne Rich once said in another context, "this is the oppressor's language." And it's very clear when you start to write about prostitution that you're using the oppressor's language, which is the male language. The institution is defined by the woman: prostitution; but it is the man who does the buying. There is no formal word to describe that man; we just have a couple of slang words like "john," "trick," that the prostitute uses. There is no formal word. Perhaps that's because it's all men, and men have never felt the need to use the specific word in the language that defines something that is their province. Anyway, I've had trouble, and because of that I feel that other women from the movement must speak now....