

Sex Workers' Advocates Seek Same Rights
by Vanessa Forro Vindicator Sept. 2004 (1)

It's another semester. My next to last semester, yet I can already predict the angst, stress, and utter time-consuming year ahead of me. Ah, but that's not why I'm writing this piece. I had a very good summer vacation, aside from taking some classes. After the first six-week term ended I took off for Los Angeles to visit a friend. I also took this chance to meet a woman many people have never heard of, but who is quite well known among many liberal feminists. Her name is Norma Jean Almodovar and I came to know of her while doing research on the topic of prostitution and the sex industry. After reading article after article and cruising countless web sites on this topic, I came upon a nonprofit organization called COYOTE (an acronym for Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics). COYOTE was created by Margo St. James and Norma Jean Almodovar in the mid-1970s and the organization advocates for sex workers' rights and giving these women an avenue to voice their concerns, which were all too often ignored given the nature of their work. While gathering information for a research proposal, I figured who else to help me out better on a topic such as prostitution than someone who was involved in the business and has been all over the world speaking on behalf of sex workers' rights. I emailed Norma Jean with some questions about which direction I should focus my research. One of the questions I asked was one in which most everyone would deem fair and unbiased: "Does society's perception about prostitution influence whether prostitutes seek help or not?" Now, all social science research is supposed to be as unbiased as possible, and this question posed a clear bias, however good were my intentions. Norma Jean's response was, "What makes you think *all* prostitutes want to seek help?" This was a very big wake-up call for me because I had always seen prostitution as a human rights violation and the women as victims. I gathered that this perception of prostitutes as victims stems from previous research I've done on the international sex trafficking of women and children. So, after redoing my entire research paper (which I got an "A" on by the way) I wanted to learn more about this side of the sex industry and what justifications these women had for choosing to work in the sex business.

I arrived in L.A. on July 3, celebrated our nation's independence the following day with a massive jumbo marshmallow fight post fireworks display on the San Diego beach (which, by the way, was very fun, yet, surprisingly painful). Norma Jean invited my friend and me to her home because neither COYOTE nor her other organization ISWFACE has an office or a home-base. I was very honored to be welcomed into her home, as was my friend. Her home was very nicely packed to the brim with binders full of articles, newspaper clippings, reports, posters, press releases, etc. all about prostitution, sex work, trafficking, you name it! For me, it was like walking into a library I knew was out there, but was only able to imagine. She started by clarifying some definitions of prostitution and sex work by using great analogies of sex work with every day American institutions. For example, she said that a lot of people believe it is all right to arrest prostitutes and put them in jail because it saves them from violence perpetrated by male customers or pimps. However, if we imprison prostitutes as a way of saving them from becoming victims of violence, then why aren't married women locked up as well in order to protect *them* from becoming victims of domestic violence? Domestic violence is a huge problem in our country, and yet we don't put married women in jail or ban the

institution of marriage simply to protect wives from being beaten by their husbands. The key word here is *choice*. Many women in the sex industry in the United States choose to work in such a business, not because they are forced to do so (although there are cases of forced prostitution, which is a heinous and degrading crime), but because they can and they make a lot of money doing it. If protecting women was in the best interest of the law, then marriage, like prostitution, would be illegal, too.

Another point Norma Jean made was that most of the images of prostitution are of hookers and women (and men) who work the streets. In reality, street prostitution comprises only about 10% of the sex industry. Also, when studies claim that STDs and HIV/AIDS are on the rise among prostitutes, those numbers comprise about 2% of the entire sex industry (the sex industry includes massage parlors, media (videos, magazines, the web), strip clubs, escort services, etc.). Obviously, these numbers speak for themselves when generalizing such statistics to a large population that is largely stigmatized by society because of the nature of their work.

Norma Jean knows a lot and it's probably because of her long history outside as well as inside the sex industry. She has been a sex worker's rights activist since the early 1980s after leaving her job as an LAPD officer. She witnessed firsthand the injustices and corruption within the force, not only against prostitutes, but also the hand many police officers played in drug trafficking, having sex with girls as young as 10 years old, imprisoning innocent people at the expense of taxpayers money, and the list go on. Norma Jean decided to make a social statement, so she quit her job as an officer with the LAPD to earn an honest living as a Hollywood call girl. She started writing an autobiographical book called *Cop to Call Girl*, in which she aired out her former colleague's dirty laundry. Unfortunately, this venture did not go over well with the LAPD and they set up a sting operation in order to catch her soliciting her new profession. She was charged with one count of pandering and spent eighteen months of a three to a five-year prison sentence in the California Institute for Women. Her unfinished manuscript for her book was confiscated by none other than the LAPD, but all the while Norma Jean would not keep quite. She appeared on countless television and radio shows such as *Donahue*, *David Letterman*, *Joan Rivers*, and *Montel Williams*, speaking out about the injustices in not only her case, but of hundreds of cases of women being tricked, charged, and set-up simply for selling something of their own volition. She showed my friend and me the *60 Minutes* interview which was taped while she was serving her sentence. I found her courage and sense of humor throughout the whole ordeal quite inspiring. Her book was eventually published 10 years after she started it despite having her manuscripts confiscated and never returned.

Norma Jean has served as the executive director for COYOTE L.A. since 1984. In 1995, she was an official nongovernmental delegate to the United Nations Fourth World Women's Conference on Prostitution, and, in 1998, she was a co-chair of a panel on the topic of sex work at the 12th World AIDS Conference in Geneva. Over the years, Norma Jean has been a guest lecturer and speaker on more than six hundred radio and television talk shows worldwide.

After meeting with Norma Jean, I felt overcome by so much information that pertains to my passion: women's rights and in particular sex workers' rights. I should mention that I am a women's studies minor and I currently work for a wonderful organization that helps fund programs primarily for women and girls in the Cleveland

community called the Women's Community Foundation. As an American woman who believes in the freedoms and rights which proclaim to be equal regardless of gender, it's quite disheartening and sick to hear about rape, assault, and murder cases being dismissed solely based on the grounds that the victim is a prostitute. Some judges have even gone as far enough to say that the law doesn't protect prostitutes, as if their profession designates their inhumanity. Also, prostitution investigators have been (and still are) able to have sex with prostitutes in order to make an arrest. I think one of the major problems when someone starts to talk about prostitution is the stigma attached to the profession as well as the terminology. For example, prostitution has purely sexual connotations (intercourse); it's the selling of sexual favors for money. However, if you take sex out of the definition prostitution can be defined simply as the selling of one's services for money. In a way, we're all prostitutes in one way or another. I prefer the term 'sex work' because it entails a broad spectrum such as, stripping, flagellation, dominance, exotic dancing, escort services, and sexual favors including intercourse. I also like the fact that many organizations like COYOTE and ISWFACE advocates not only for sex workers' rights but they also teach safe sex, taking care of yourself, and expressing other talents (i.e., ISWFACE). I use sex work (sex industry) and prostitution interchangeably here because sex work (industry) includes the latter professions and prostitution is the exchange of services from sex workers and their customers.

All right, so everyone has their own views about sex work, or prostitution, but can anyone really make an educated opinion about women (and men) in this line of work without using examples they've seen on television shows, the news, or simply chalking it up to immorality? Can one actually claim they know a lot about sex work if they haven't really thought about the enormous industry it actually is in the U.S.? The sex industry grosses approximately \$40 million each day. This includes videos, clubs, the porn business, etc.(U.S. News & World Report, 11/22/93, Vol. 115, Issue 20). And we say we look down on the sex industry! Look at all the people making the big bucks by taking their clothes off, having sex, and getting paid for it! But is the porn business illegal? No, because it's regulated by the government, and as long as the government is making money off of the porn industry they don't care. But as soon as some woman figures she can be making the same amount of money doing the same thing minus an agent, a publicist, and all the "extras" that go along with being in the entertainment business, she's dubbed a prostitute and arrested. Wait a second, then couldn't these agents and publicists really be considered pimps, or johns, since they are taking a piece of the entertainers money which they earn from their "talents." Wouldn't all entertainers (musicians, actors/actresses, comedians/comediennes) be considered "prostituting" their talents and giving a portion of their income to their agents and publicists? Even the government, if you want to get general, are everyone's pimp since they take a load of taxes from all of our hard work and daily toil in whatever job we may have. Margo St. James made an excellent point stating, "with the exceptions of people born exempt from toil because of the silver utensils in the orifices, everybody is some sort of whore." * insert footnote

Most often people throw in the moral and ethical elements of why prostitution is wrong. They claim that taking off one's clothes and dancing naked is demoralizing and further subjugates women as mere commodities. Honestly, I used to think this way, too. When I worked as a bartender in a strip club, I always wondered how the girls could do

it! Although, I did make more money than them, without shedding an ounce of clothing. I used to think, "Hey, I make more money without stripping, how come they can't bartend, too." But, I figured if they did what I did, then there wouldn't be any strip clubs and I would be out of a job. So I guess it goes hand in hand; they do their work and I do mine. There would also be that one or two strippers who were actually good and made the work they do very exotic and skillful (you have to be skillful to do pole work). When they got up there on the dance floor I loved to watch how they moved to the music and twisted and turned on the stage. It's quite impressive if you look at stripping in a not so sexual way and more as an artful, erotic dance. Anyway, a good example of this is the movie 'Striptease' with Demi Moore and Burt Reynolds. Burt Reynolds plays this high-end politician whose largest constituents are faith-based groups. However, what his God-fearing constituents fails to realize is Reynold's quite profound addiction to strip clubs and beautiful women. Moore depicts an FBI secretary turned club dancer who becomes the object of Reynolds' character's affection. Moore strips to earn enough money for an appeal to win custody of her daughter from her drug-addicted, petty criminal of a husband. The hypocritical part is that Moore is denied custody because of the nature of her job all the while giving private \$3,000 dances to Reynolds, the "respected" politician. Now I know this is simply a movie, but it's not far from real life. Take, for example, the infamous Heidi Fleiss. She and her entourage of escorts were earning a very good living catering to the needs of Hollywood's rich and famous as well as many of California's most-respected government officials. (A little bird once told me that the judge who resided over her trial was once a customer of hers). So, who is respected more: the women who provide the services and are paid or the customers, the individuals the people elect to represent their interests, values, and (moral) ideals? What? What's that? They are only human? Who are more human, the buyers or providers? We're all human, with the same needs, cravings, impulses, and desires. So, I guess the point I'm getting at is that morals should be kept out of the equation especially when it comes to sex. All it boils down to is that society has a way of digging a deeper hole of hypocrisy when it comes to sexual self indulgence.

There are tons of articles and opinions on the decriminalization versus legalization of prostitution which is a topic too detailed in and of itself to talk about here, so I provided some links to my favorites below. It's not often a person is able to meet someone who has pioneered a sexually liberating path for women in this country, especially one that incorporates loving your body and taking it all off! Norma Jean not only showed me another side of the sex industry, the side that involves smart, funny, entertaining, and artistic women, but she also exposed me to the current injustices and toward sex workers within our legal system. It also made me see women who work in the sex industry by their own will not as victims of patriarchy, but as victims of a society whose views are so skewed by the media, false representations of the sex industry, and the ever-present, hypocritical moral mentality that we lose sight of the fact that they're people, too.

Legalized Prostitution: regulating the oldest profession.
<http://www.liberator.net/articles/prostitution.html>

www.iswface.org

www.alexanderrenault.com/almodovar.htm