

# Prostitution as choice

by Cecilia Hoffman

By their consent, some women do choose to be in prostitution. Cecilia Hoffman tears this argument apart.

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**N**ina is a young woman who can be found most evenings along Quezon Avenue with other 'pick-up girls'. She has already been caught twice in police street raids and arrested for vagrancy. She has served a short jail sentence (three days); her second will certainly be longer.

Nina was sent by her grandmother from the province to the capital to finish her schooling. During an evening out with school friends Nina used to hang out with, she was raped by two boys. Nina drifted to the streets after that and has been there for two years.

Malou works in a club in Angeles City as a dancer who can be taken out by clients upon payment of a 'bar fine'. She was once married, worked in a factory, and also as a domestic helper in Hong Kong.

The fact that many women return to the street, the bars and the clubs on release from jail, or after factory, household or other employment, is generally considered proof that the problem of prostitution lies with incorrigible women who continue to choose prostitution.

True, several other women are tricked, kidnapped, raped or otherwise

coerced into prostitution. Particularly in countries in the South, countless others in dire economic straits find in prostitution their survival strategy. Untold numbers more have been so abused in childhood or in later life that the experience of prostitution becomes merely part of the cruel logic of their lives. But again, what of the women who appear to choose to be in prostitution?

When Malou worked in the canning factory, rising at dawn to be on time, doing a ten-hour shift, receiving just a bit less than the minimum wage set by law and no social benefits, having to

parry off the sexual advances of her supervisor, wasn't she, at least, a laborer toiling with honor? And anyway, didn't her male colleagues have to put up with the same working conditions?

In fact, aren't men equally poor, equally oppressed by an unjust economic order and the same bad labor conditions, as hard-hit by natural disasters or the effects of militarization on rural populations, as women are? Why then didn't Malou's male colleagues go into prostitution as well? Why didn't they apply at the countless bars, clubs or beer gardens that have signs announcing openings and where no references, no school degrees, no particular skills or qualifications are required?

The question is disingenuous, the answer obvious: Prostitution is about women selling their bodies.

### Male social system

But prostitution is not about women at all. It is a about male social system in place to ensure the satisfaction of male demand for sexual servicing and for objectified sex. The requirement, therefore, is abundant supply of women's bodies, although increasingly, such debased and dehumanized sexuality is also finding use for children's and men's bodies.

Male clients can specify the shapes and colors of bodies they want to use. On a strip of Quezon Avenue in Metro Manila, 'health' and 'entertainment' clubs have display windows of women wearing numbers for men to choose

from. In Japan, agencies openly advertise the full range of bodies offered, from virgins to pregnant women. In Germany, Denmark and elsewhere, one can subscribe to catalogs of women and children, specially those from the South, offered for sale for sexual use. In increasingly technologized and sophisticated forms and representing huge money interests, pornography is a global growth industry that describes, informs, suggests and teaches the uses of those bodies.

In prostitution, it is not with human beings that men interact, but with objectified, dehumanized bodies. A sign in

female body." (Hannah Olsson, *Prostitution*, Stockholm: Liber, 1981.)

### Question of consent

In such a system, Nina's or Malou's individual consent or choice is completely irrelevant. Should they not consent, women are obtained through other ways—through trickery, threat, abduction and sophisticated forms of trafficking—for the supply must be ensured.

But patriarchy, through its social construction of sexuality, also creates the conditions and the conditioning to ensure women's consent. In countries such



a bar in Angeles City, once home of the United States' offshore military facility, reads: "What is a woman? A support system for a pussy." The woman as human being does not exist in the enactment of male sexuality that is prostitution. A Swedish study describes prostitution as "male masturbation in a

as the Philippines, femininity continues to be firmly constructed around notions of pleasing and serving men, sacrificing for them, depending on them. Marriage and prostitution rest on the same premises. Social mores reinforce on the women themselves the notion that their existence and fulfillment are hinged on

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## Violence Against Women

a man. Rewards await those who conform to the traditional role of women in the family and adhere to the ideals of female sexual attractiveness, such as ubiquitous beauty titles, entertainment careers and the plum prize—marriage to a wealthy man. The non-conformists, on the other hand, are slapped with social sanctions. In such a situation, how significant is the whole issue of consent? As Kathleen Barry points out, “Consent to be objectified is a condition of oppression.” (Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, New York and London: New York University Press, 1995.)

And what do women consent to sexually? Filipino women, when referring to sexual intercourse with their husbands, partners or prostitution clients say: “He used me.” Under patriarchy, whether in marriage or outside it, sex is a male prerogative, a male need, a male pleasure, a male right that must be socially recognized, including by women. Rape, marital rape, sexual harassment and prostitution are clear expressions of sexual power.

In some cultural traditions, genital mutilation is an even more extreme expression of sexual power, imposed on 80 million African and Muslim women to ensure that sexuality is totally appropriated by men and totally denied women.

How do women live with the prostitution exchange of their bodies? Knowing full well how their own selves are not seen, let alone wanted, by their clients, women create a prostitution identity—other names and life histories, and all manner of pretenses that conform to customers’ specifications. These

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### ***Malou and her friends talked of sometimes “falling in love” with clients.***

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created identities and personalities also serve to hide away and protect the real self that continues to exist outside of prostitution. And recognizing the dehumanization done to their bodies, the women of Angeles City tell of bolstering their prostituted selves with drugs and alcohol to “drive away the shame,” to “force themselves” to carry out what is required. With the years, says Malou, “What I couldn’t take earlier, I now manage to accept.”

There is yet another aspect to the prostitution of destitute or socially disadvantaged women, particularly women of a long-colonized people. The foreign or white client could be a potential savior from poverty and backwardness if he can be brought to see and value the human being before him. A term that servicemen from the US military bases that occupied Philippine territory for almost a century coined to refer to the women they used gives this naive and touching hope of a “white savior” cruel irony. The term is *LBFMs*, for “*little brown fucking machines fueled by rice*”.

The men wanted mere machines they could use for sex; the women hoped for relationships and to become

wives. The women of Angeles and Olongapo, where the largest US docking station in the Pacific once was, hoped to “become lucky” and marry US servicemen. The few women who actually did were a demonstration of that possibility.

Malou and her friends talked of sometimes “falling in love” with clients. In this sense, prostitution was no mere money exchange for the women; it also meant the possibility of a true human relationship.

### **Crippled sexuality**

Does prostitution, this expression of male class power, then leave men unscathed? Are they always the profiteers of their own social arrangement of sexuality? Can men act out depersonalized, dehumanized, brutalized sex in prostitution, and a truly human experience of sex in an equal relationship with a non-prostitute woman?

Prostitution continually produces and reproduces a male sexuality crippled of emotion and of true human interaction, and that reduces the human experience of sexuality that can and should be fulfilling, joyful and life-enhancing to the empty, the cruel and subhuman.

“The prostitution exchange is the most systematic institutionalized reduction of women to sex. It is the foundation of all sexual exploitation of women. It is the prototype, the model from which all other sexual exploitation can be understood,” Barry said.

It is the men who choose prostitution that are the debasement of women and of human sexuality itself. With their choice, they diminish the humanity of all women and men.