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## **‘Decide one more time’: Prostitution and Sexual Intelligence in the Early Writings of Andrea Dworkin**

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### *Abstract*

Andrea Dworkin’s first book, *Woman Hating*, was published in 1974, and written while Dworkin was in her 20s. It is experimental, literary, and ultimately hopeful. *Right-Wing Women*, which had its start as a *Ms Magazine* article in 1977, was expanded into a book in 1983. The most difficult of Dworkin’s works to find today, it was also her least favourite, owing to the academic conventions demanded by the publisher. It is dense, political and unflinching in its criticism. Despite their differences, these two books demonstrate the evolution of Dworkin’s thinking as she grapples with a central feminist contradiction – the need to remake the world while simultaneously living in it. Dworkin’s message in both books is that sexual liberation without sex equality is not the revolution we need. Women aligned with the male Left fail to understand both that Right-wing women are striking a clear-eyed bargain with their oppressors, but also that Left-wing women are in denial about doing exactly the same thing. Forty years later, the contemporary relevance of the analysis developed in these works is striking, even as the legal and material conditions of women’s lives have changed in many ways from the world that Dworkin describes. This article focuses on the resonance of Dworkin’s analysis for the current feminist debates around prostitution. Dworkin was consistent in her identification of prostitution as incompatible with women’s freedom and equality. Read together, these early writings help us to understand why so many women, on both the Right and the Left, believe that their equality can be achieved while other women continue to be prostituted, and why women continue to look the other way when faced with this expression of male sexual entitlement.

### *Introduction: Andrea Dworkin Rediscovered?*

In the years since Andrea Dworkin’s death at age 58 in 2005, there has been a revival of interest in her work. Three of the major contributions to this resurgence are a long essay in *New York Magazine* by Ariel Levy soon after Dworkin’s death,<sup>1</sup> which formed the basis of an introduction

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<sup>1</sup> Ariel Levy, “The Prisoner of Sex” *New York Magazine* (27 May 2005), <https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/11907/>.

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to a reissued edition of Dworkin's book *Intercourse*;<sup>2</sup> an edited collection of her writings under the original title Dworkin intended for her first book;<sup>3</sup> and a biography by historian Martin Duberman, who first met Dworkin in the 1970s during their involvement with the anti-Vietnam War organization REDRESS.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, filmmaker Pratibha Parmar released the documentary film *My Name is Andrea*.<sup>5</sup> Each of these projects was endorsed or supported by Dworkin's husband, John Stoltenberg, including by providing the authors with access to previously unpublished materials. Some of these works attracted trenchant criticism in their handling of Dworkin's legacy from some of her long-time allies.<sup>6</sup> They also served as an opportunity for long-time critics to recycle their disdain for her work.<sup>7</sup>

This essay considers two of Dworkin's more theoretical works from the early part of her career, her first book, *Woman Hating*, published in 1974, and her 1983 book of political theory, *Right-Wing Women*, both of which were re-issued in 2025.<sup>8</sup> In considering Dworkin's analysis and critique of both the political Right, and the progressive Left with which she had been so closely aligned, we are left with the challenging task of creating a world outside these male-

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder, eds. (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: The New Press, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Pratibha Parmar, *My Name is Andrea* (2022); see <https://www.mynameisandreamovie.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Real, "Over Her Dead Body: How Ariel Levy Smears the Ashes of Andrea Dworkin" (2017), <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/levy/>; Phylis Chesler, "Woke Andrea Dworkin" *Tablet* (8 April 2021), <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/woke-andrea-dworkin>.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Jerry Barnett, "Last Days at Hot Slit: A Review" *Quillette* (15 May 2019), <https://quillette.com/2019/05/15/last-days-at-hot-slit-a-review/>. For an excellent reflection on what is missed in much of this criticism, see Dana Glaser, "Andrea Dworkin: Last Days at Hot Slit" *The Chicago Review* (28 July 2021), <https://www.chicagoreview.org/andrea-dworkin-last-days-at-hot-slit/>.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974) [*Woman Hating*]; Andrea Dworkin, *Right-Wing Women* (New York: Perigree Books, 1983) [*Right-Wing Women*]. In addition to *Woman Hating* and *Right-Wing Women*, Dworkin's 1981 book *Pornography* was also reissued in 2025 by publisher Picador: Sophia Stewart, "Picador to Reissue Trio of Andrea Dworkin Titles" *Publishers Weekly* (10 January 2025), <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/96822-picador-to-reissue-trio-of-andrea-dworkin-titles.html>.

dominated and woman-destroying poles. Using the contemporary example of disagreements over the sex trade (an issue of longstanding contention for feminists), we can see the value of Dworkin's analysis for understanding how prostitution functions as an engine of women's oppression for men from across the political spectrum, and why women might gravitate to its defence, regardless of their political affiliations.

### *Woman Hating*

In 1974, when she was 27 years of age, Andrea Dworkin published her first book, *Woman Hating*. Written over several years in Europe and New York City, *Woman Hating* confronts contemporary manifestations of misogyny and traces their historical roots, concluding with a blueprint for a revolutionary future. In *Woman Hating*, we see Dworkin as a keen literary critic, historian and curious observer of scientific developments in sex and reproduction. The work is heavily influenced by Dworkin's experience as part of the progressive Left: fighting against the Vietnam War and police brutality as a student at Bennington College, living with expatriate anarchists and intellectuals in Greece and Amsterdam, and joining the nascent women's movement on her return to the United States.

*Woman Hating* counters the fallacy that second-wave feminism was not "intersectional" and cared only about the interests of middle-class white women. Dworkin weaves an analysis of patriarchy with race and class oppression and warns us that those systems of privilege must also be dismantled as part of the revolutionary process. Dworkin's central thesis in *Woman Hating* is that the liberation of women demands the complete obliteration of all sex role distinctions. Drawing on both ancient mythologies and contemporary scientific theories, she argues for the move toward a "radical androgyny."

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While *Women Hating* received praise from other notable feminists, and led to some high profile speaking engagements, its print run was small and Dworkin was disappointed with its reception. She would have been aware, for example, of the adulation that mainstream reviewers gave to Kate Millett's 1970 work *Sexual Politics*, to which Dworkin's work clearly owes some of its structure and insights.<sup>9</sup> But while Millett took on the modern Western male "canon," including D.H. Lawrence, Arthur Miller and Norman Mailer, Dworkin's analysis focuses on less-exalted, explicitly sexual works, such as *The Story of O* and the counter-culture pornography magazine *Suck*. Similarly, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, was published the following year to wide readership, chosen as a "book of the month club" selection and was widely read by middle-class women who were beginning to embrace the practice of consciousness-raising.<sup>10</sup>

In *Woman Hating*, Dworkin alludes to her personal experiences with male power, but the sense of those experiences is much more muted than in her later works. This may be because the terror of her husband's abuse was too near and the threat too real to allow for it to be channeled into her work. It may also reflect the fact that the book was conceived and originally co-written with Dworkin's friend Ricki Abrams, before Abrams abandoned the project. Dworkin noted in a rare autobiographical essay that the book "was not a book written out of an ideology. It came out of an emergency, written half underground and in hiding. I wanted to find out what had

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<sup>9</sup> My 1979 re-print of *Sexual Politics* proclaims on the cover that it is a "World Bestseller" and includes adulatory blurbs from *The Evening Standard*, *Time*, *The New Statesman* and, significantly, the *New York Times*, a publication that consistently misrepresented and derided Dworkin's work throughout her life. In a speech to the National Organization for Women Conference on Sexuality delivered in 1974, and later published in the collection *Our Blood*, Dworkin describes *Sexual Politics* as a transformative work that "proved to many of us...that everything that happens to a woman in her life, everything that touches and molds her, is *political*."

<sup>10</sup> Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

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happened to me and why. I knew *only* that it was impersonal.”<sup>11</sup> By “impersonal,” I understand Dworkin to be saying that the abuses she had experienced were not about her as a person, but about something systemic that was being visited on her: in Kate Millett’s phrasing, the personal was political. Dworkin’s consideration of what that system might be leads her to the conclusion that what was being visited on her was the expression of misogyny.

In *Woman Hating*, Dworkin brings a critical lens to the counter-culture Left, a theme that she will return to throughout her writings. This is the movement that has consumed her attention since college, but she has come to realize that its promise of freedom does not extend to women. In particular, the sexual revolution has fundamentally been about increasing men’s access to women for intercourse, not about exploring women’s pleasure, with or without men.

The subject of prostitution does not feature prominently in *Woman Hating*. We know from her writings that at various times as a young woman Dworkin exchanged sex for money, although the details of those experiences did not feature prominently in her work.<sup>12</sup> We also know that for much of Dworkin’s life she was poor or in a precarious financial position; she lacked a steady income from her writing, and had to endure a punishing schedule of public speaking engagements to survive.<sup>13</sup>

Dworkin never included prostitution within her understanding of “free love” or sexual liberation. For her, prostitution in the contemporary context was always unfree, and an example of male dominion over female sexuality. The false separation between virgin and whore was another one of those distinctions that was essential to holding up an oppressive system founded on

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<sup>11</sup> Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, volume 21 (New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995), <http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/dworkin/AutobiographyII.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) at 96-97.

<sup>13</sup> Duberman, *supra* note 4 at 110.

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false dichotomies. She criticizes the valorization of prostitution in *The Story of O*, a popular sado-masochistic pornographic novel first available in English in 1965, which had been published to critical acclaim in left-wing circles. In the book, a woman referred to as O gives herself over to unlimited sexual abuse by her master and his friends, branding and piercing herself to demonstrate his ownership of her body. Dworkin rejects the double-double think that re-casts O's degradation and subjection as the source of her power. She writes:

A precise corollary of possession is prostitution. The prostitute, the woman as object, is defined by the usage to which the possessor puts her. Her subjugation is the signet of his power. Prostitution means for the woman the carnal annihilation of will and choice, but for the man it once again signifies an increase in power, pure and simple.<sup>14</sup>

Dworkin calls this a vicious caricature of old-world religious prostitution, where the priestesses/prostitutes in the temple were venerated for their powers of fertility and generation. The characters in the story of O, by contrast, do not menstruate or become pregnant.<sup>15</sup>

This same analysis is applied to the counter-culture sex magazine *Suck*, which Dworkin notes should be a part of "our community,"<sup>16</sup> created as it was by the radicals who talked of liberation:

What it comes down to is this: through the use of drugs, through sexual living out, through radical political action, we broke through the bourgeois mental sets which were our inheritance but retained the humanism crucial to the liberalism of our parents. Our goals are simple enough to understand: we want to humanize the planet, we want to break down the national structures which separate us as people, the corporate structures which separate us into distinct classes, the racist structures which separate us according to skin color; to conserve air, water, life in its many forms; to create communities which are more than habitable – communities in which people are free, in which people have what they need, in which groups of people do not accumulate power, or money, or goods through the exploitation of other people.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Woman Hating* at 60.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 61.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 75.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 77-78.

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She is critical of Germaine Greer, a regular contributor to *Suck*, for asserting that women should not deny men sex or be too uptight about matters of sexuality. For Greer, sexual liberation for women amounted to getting “to the stage where you really could ball everyone.”<sup>18</sup> Foreshadowing the rise of the incel movement, Greer points out that women are a commodity, and that we should expect that men would be frustrated by their inability to have sex with “young girls with clear eyes,” since they will see this denial as one more example of how they have been shut out of the American Dream. Dworkin’s identification of the false logic in this reasoning is clear:

Here is the ever-popular notion that women, extending our role as sex object, can humanize an atrophied world. The notion is based on a false premise. ...the pill was supposed to liberate women by liberating us sexually....But the pill served to reinforce our essential bondage – it made us more accessible, more open to exploitation. It did not change our basic condition because it did nothing to challenge the sexist structure of society, not to mention conventional relationships and couplings. Neither does promiscuity per se. Greer’s alliance with the sexual revolution is, sadly but implicitly, an alliance with male chauvinism because it does not speak to the basic condition of women which remains the same if we f--- one man a week, or twenty.<sup>19</sup>

The question, of course, is how to identify a third option that avoids these pitfalls. If we need to unshackle ourselves from the bourgeois repression of patriarchal marriage and the nuclear family, and equally reject the false liberation of the sexual revolution, where do women, and humanity, go from here? For Dworkin, the answer lies in a complete breaking down of all gendered roles and hierarchies. In the final part of the book, “Androgyny: The Mythological Model,” she advocates for a return to the state of nature rooted in ancient traditions. This requires nothing less than the destruction of culture:

As individuals, we experience ourselves as the center of whatever social world we inhabit. We think that they are free and refuse to see that *we are functions of our particular culture*. That culture no longer organically reflects us, it is not our sum total, it

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<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 81.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 81-82.

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is not the collective phenomenology of our creative possibilities – it possesses and rules us, reduces us, obstructs the flow of sexual and creative energy and activity, penetrates even into what Freud called the *id*, gives nightmare shape to natural desire. In order to achieve proper balance in interhuman interaction, we must find ways to change ourselves from culturally defined agents into naturally defined human beings.<sup>20</sup>

Yet exactly what this state of nature would mean for human sexuality is concerning. At various points in the chapter Dworkin appears to be celebrating the potential in bestiality and sexual acts with children.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that, in *Woman Hating*, Dworkin has not completely relinquished the ethos of “more sex must be good” that was part of her indoctrination into the Political Left, which she still considers her “community.” *Woman Hating* leaves us with the real concern that our imagination cannot transcend the limits of what we have been conditioned to see, especially where that conditioning is premised on the idea that what we are doing is transgressive or defiant of traditional authority. Dworkin speaks of breaking the “incest taboo,” for example, as necessary to the destruction of the nuclear family, with no recognition of father-daughter incest as a central tool of the patriarchy. Androgynous pansexuality or multisexuality is the aspirational goal, but how we are to practise it in a context of patriarchy and other forms of oppression, without falling into the Left’s trap of disparaging women’s refusal to have sex whenever men want it, is not clear. Dworkin’s conclusion is that these practices will emerge naturally and authentically when we break down what is holding them back, but it is hard to understand why these authentic processes were ever displaced in the first place if they are so well-aligned with human flourishing.

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<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 157.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 187-192.

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*Right-Wing Women*

Nearly a decade later, in 1983, Dworkin published her book *Right-Wing Women*.<sup>22</sup> The book began as a lengthy article for *Ms Magazine* based on Dworkin's attendance as a press representative at the national convention on the Equal Rights Amendment. In the book, Dworkin attempts to understand the thinking of the sizable contingent of women who opposed the Amendment, and along with it abortion, lesbianism and women's economic equality. She takes seriously the question of what the Right offers these women. She rejects the casual dismissal of these women as fools or under the thumb of their husbands. Instead, she offers a serious and penetrating evaluation of what conservatism promises to women. She also credits right-wing women with seeing through the false promises of the Left.

Dworkin's biographers and anthologizers are quick to note that despite her criticism of the Left, she was aligned with Left wing politics all her life, suggesting that was her true political home.<sup>23</sup> I expect that reaction both conforms to these writers' own leanings, particularly in the binary and polarized political landscape of the United States, but also to their desire to refute the charge that Dworkin was in league with the religious Right on the issue of pornography. I think Dworkin's analysis is actually much more sophisticated than this simple label suggests. In her later anthology, *Letters from a War Zone*, she refers to the men of the Left and Right as the men who love to hate each other,<sup>24</sup> and argues that these terms set up a male-defined political spectrum, which feminists need to transcend or dismantle along with every other male-defined institution.

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<sup>22</sup> Until recently, the book was out of print and hard to find, but it has since been reissued: Stewart, *supra* note 8.

<sup>23</sup> Fateman and Scholder, *supra* note 3 at 27; Duberman, *supra* note 4 at 244.

<sup>24</sup> Andrea Dworkin, *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: Dutton Books, 1989).

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*Right-Wing Women* begins with a chapter that interrogates the rise of prominent conservative women such as Anita Bryant and Phyllis Schlafly. Dworkin rejects the line that women are “naturally conservative” because of their attachment to home and family. Equally, however, she rejects the idea of the woman as sexual servant, the “happy hooker” eager to serve men’s needs.<sup>25</sup> Dworkin notes that these are not opposites; the right-wing woman does not oppose the idea of woman as sexually servile, she just requires that the woman have only one master, her husband.<sup>26</sup>

Dworkin recognizes that right-wing women are not simply living their own preferred lives, separate and distinct from feminists. Their embrace of female inferiority and servitude is accompanied by fervent opposition to the aspiration of other women for freedom. These women sacrifice the interests of other women to preserve what they can of their own lives: they are the perfect foot soldiers, but they are committing suicide.<sup>27</sup> In all her writing, Dworkin is realistic about the struggle of women to try to unearth the reality of their male-defined lives. The process is painful and made difficult by the fact that there is no place to stand outside the world that we live in, in order to see it clearly.

Dworkin returns to and further develops her critique of a male-dominated construction of sexual freedom or liberation. She reiterates her view that sexual liberation did not free women, but rather freed men to use women sexually. Girls of her generation thought that their

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<sup>25</sup> *Right-Wing Women* at 14.

<sup>26</sup> Dworkin references the phenomenal success of Marabel Morgan’s book *The Total Woman*, which valorized the traditional patriarchal marriage while simultaneously ensuring that the husband is kept sexually interested and satisfied. Morgan’s book sold half a million copies in hardcover alone, and thousands of women took her “Total Woman” courses, which advised women to be ready and willing for intercourse at any hour of the day or night: Andy Taylor, “Marabel and Charlie Morgan: Being a *Total Woman* May Mean Love Under the Dinner Table” *People Magazine* (7 April 1975), <https://people.com/archive/marabel-charlie-morgan-being-a-total-woman-may-mean-love-under-the-dinner-table-vol-3-no-13/>.

<sup>27</sup> *Right-Wing Women* at 19.

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experience would be more equal than what their mothers had endured, but they were sadly mistaken. In what is perhaps the most devastating passage in the book, she captures this experience of disillusionment:

The girls were idealists especially because they believed in peace and freedom *so much* that they even thought it was intended for them too. They knew that their mothers were not free – they saw the small, constrained female lives – and they did not want to be their mothers. They accepted the boys’ definition of sexual freedom because it, more than any other practice, made them different from their mothers. ... They decried the stupidity of their mothers and allied themselves with the long-haired boys who wanted peace, freedom, and fucking everywhere.

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[T]he dream for the girls at base was a dream of a sexual and social empathy that negated the strictures of gender, a dream of sexual equality based on what men and women had in common. ... It was – for the girls – the dream of being less female in a world less male, the eroticization of sibling equality, not the traditional male dominance.

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Empirically speaking, sexual liberation was practiced by women on a large scale in the sixties and it did not work: that is, it did not free women. Its purpose – it turned out – was to free men to use women without bourgeois constraints, and in that it was successful.<sup>28</sup>

We know that even though Dworkin is writing in the third person, this is very much a first-person account. Dworkin concludes that, in light of this evidence, Right-wing women were not wrong to see the reality of what the world offers to women and to think they were making the least bad deal. After all, she points out, Leftist men also wanted wives and whores.<sup>29</sup> In a social context of male dominance, right-wing women understood the logic of promiscuity: what one man can do, ten men can do ten times over. In *Right-Wing Women* we see a much less optimistic Dworkin than we do in *Woman Hating*, where she was still committed to the nobility of the

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<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 90-91.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 68-69.

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shared project of revolution. That revolution, carried out under the auspices of male supremacy, did nothing to alter the material conditions of women's lives or their capacity to flourish as human beings.

Dworkin is passionate and compelling in her examination of female intelligence in *Right-Wing Women*. Men, she cautions, do not permit female intelligence that ends in anything other than reproduction or whoring.<sup>30</sup> Dworkin wants to create an environment in which women can assert their moral intelligence in the form of their capacity for decision-making, but also their sexual intelligence, which asserts itself through sexual integrity and sexual self-determination.<sup>31</sup> The prostitution of women is antithetical to their sexual freedom, and for Dworkin results in the annihilation of their sexual intelligence.<sup>32</sup> (She notes that incest does the same thing, a notable departure from her simplistic view of "intergenerational eroticism" in *Woman Hating*).<sup>33</sup>

In *Right-Wing Women*, the subject of prostitution is central to Dworkin's analysis of the empty promises for women of both the male-defined Right and the Left. Dworkin repeats the assertion of Victorian feminist Victoria Woodhull that, in a society where women are the property of their husbands, it is hypocritical to denigrate prostitutes while celebrating marriage. Either way, those who barter their body also barter their dignity.<sup>34</sup> At the end of the book, she argues that women are socially controlled by men through one of two models – the brothel model and the farming model. The first is expressed through prostitution and the other through motherhood.<sup>35</sup> These models are not as distinct as men would have us believe; the same women

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<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 53.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 57.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 174.

can be both prostitutes and mothers. Prostitution is then considered suitable employment for poor women who do not have the protection and income of a husband for whom they can provide reproductive labour.<sup>36</sup> In this way, prostitution becomes accepted as suitable treatment for some women, who can be penned in, displayed and used as sex for men. What makes this acceptable is money, which generally flows through the hands of the woman in prostitution to another man (her pimp.)

The final chapter of *Right-Wing Women* is an analysis of antifeminism. Dworkin argues that antifeminism manifests itself through three overlapping or complementary models – the separate but equal model; the woman superior model; and the male dominance model. Each of these models finds expression in the conviction that God or nature has ordained certain truths about the differences between men and women.<sup>37</sup>

Reading *Right-Wing Women* today is important if for no other reason than the descendants of these same women continue to have enormous political clout in propping up the system of male dominance in America. One of them now sits on the United States Supreme Court.<sup>38</sup> They make updated versions of the same arguments they made thirty years ago, arguments that continue to dovetail nicely with the interests of men in positions of power. Today in the United States, access to abortion is being severely limited in a majority of states, especially for rural and poor women.<sup>39</sup> Men are able to buy ever more powerful guns, which are

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<sup>36</sup>*Id.* at 164.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 180.

<sup>38</sup> Emma Brown, Jon Swaine and Michelle Boorstein, “Amy Coney Barrett Served as a ‘Handmaid’ in Christian Group People of Praise” *The Washington Post* (6 October 2022), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/amy-coney-barrett-people-of-praise/2020/10/06/5f497d8c-0781-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/amy-coney-barrett-people-of-praise/2020/10/06/5f497d8c-0781-11eb-859b-f9c27abe638d_story.html); Sarah Jones, “Andrea Dworkin Saw Trump’s Female Enablers 40 Years Ago” *New York Magazine* (15 March 2025), <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/andrea-dworkin-right-wing-women-feminism-trump.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Weiyi Cai, Taylor Johnston, Allison McCann and Amy Schoenfeld Walker, “Half of U.S. Women Risk Losing Abortion Access without *Roe*” *The New York Times* (7 May 2022),

used to kill and threaten women in the home and to commit mass murders.<sup>40</sup> Women who report men's physical and sexual violence are disbelieved and sometimes sued.<sup>41</sup> Violent, misogynist pornography has expanded from magazines and videocassettes to being accessible in limitless quantities through the smartphones owned by most of the adolescents in the United States and Canada. All of these outcomes are the result of decisions made by men, for men, with great deliberation. But these things could not have happened as they did without the collusion of women, not only on the Right (for guns and abortion) but also the Left (for pornography and prostitution).

### *The Sex Work Bargain*

The trigger for my re-reading of these two books was my experience of writing, speaking and doing *pro bono* legal work for women's groups in Canada who seek to oppose the sexual exploitation of women in the prostitution and pornography industries.<sup>42</sup> Through this work, I

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/07/us/abortion-access-roe-v-wade.html>; Latoya Hill, Samantha Artiga, Usha Ranji, Ivette Gomez and Nambi Ndugga, "What are the Implications of the Dobbs Ruling for Racial Disparities?" *KFF* (24 April 2024), <https://www.kff.org/womens-health-policy/issue-brief/what-are-the-implications-of-the-dobbs-ruling-for-racial-disparities/>; "Interactive Map: US Abortion Policies and Access After Roe" *Guttmacher* (2025), <https://states.guttmacher.org/policies/>.

<sup>40</sup> Michelle Martin and Emma Bowman, "Why Nearly All Mass Shooters are Men" *All Things Considered, National Public Radio* (27 March 2021), <https://www.npr.org/2021/03/27/981803154/why-nearly-all-mass-shooters-are-men>; Lizzie Dearden, "93% of Killers in England and Wales are Men" *The Independent* (11 March 2021), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/women-murders-men-ons-sarah-everard-b1815779.html>. In Canada, 187 women and girls were killed in 2024; 93% of the known killers were men: Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, "#CallItFemicide 2024 Report," <https://femicideincanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/2024Infographic-ENG-1.pdf>. The killing of women and girls that involve male accused persons in Canada has increased 27% from 2019 to 2022: Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability, "#CallItFemicide: Understanding Sex/Gender-Related Killings of Women and Girls in Canada, 2018-2022," <https://femicideincanada.ca/callitfemicide2018-2022.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup>Madison Pauly, "She Said, He Sued: How Libel Law is Being Turned Against MeToo Accusers" *Mother Jones* (March/April 2020), <https://www.motherjones.com/crime-justice/2020/02/metoo-me-too-defamation-libel-accuser-sexual-assault/>; Mandi Gray, *Suing for Silence: Sexual Violence and Defamation Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2024).

<sup>42</sup> In particular, I acted for interveners in *Little Sister's Book and Art Emporium* [2000] 2 SCR 1120; *Bedford v. Canada (A.G.)* [2013] 3 SCR 1101; *R. v. Barton* [2019] 2 SCR 579; *Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law Reform v. Attorney General* 2023 ONSC 5197 and *R. v. Kloubakov* 2025 SCC 25.

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have acted from the conviction that these institutions are demonstrated engines of women's oppression, reflecting and reinforcing male dominance and the subordination of women on the basis of their sex, often intersecting with other grounds such as Indigeneity, race, class and disability. I have demanded and expected that state actors would recognize this, and use the legal tools at their disposal to interfere with these violations of women's rights.

Over the more than two decades that I have been engaged in this work, I have seen increasing numbers of women who self-identify as feminists devote their energies, and in many cases their careers, to the opposite point of view. This work has included not merely the claim that it is better to use non-state methods, or legal tools other than the criminal law, to address the harms of the sex industry, but rather that the sex industry itself is something to be affirmed or validated as a source of income, an expression of agency, and a positive good in society.<sup>43</sup> I am therefore faced with a version of the same question that Andrea Dworkin confronted in *Right-Wing Women* – how can we understand why women, in a society that remains male-dominated, and in which violence against women continues at an alarming pace, would choose to endorse the prostitution industry? In particular, this requires an explanation of the refusal of these women to make any connection between the way women are treated in prostitution and the male violence, harassment and other forms of inequality and oppression that affect all women.

Dworkin's analysis of the false promises for women of both the political Left and the Right

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<sup>43</sup>For example, Jody Raphael has described some of this recent work celebrating the sex industry, published by academic presses in the United States: Jody Raphael, "Academic Presses, Publishing Prostitution Apologists" (2022) *7 Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*, <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1332&context=dignity>. There are many similar examples in Canada, including *Red Light Labour: Sex Work Regulation, Agency, and Resistance*, Elya M. Durisin, Emily Van der Meulen and Chris Bruckert, eds. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

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under male supremacy provides a cogent framework for criticizing contemporary movements to legitimize and normalize the practice of prostitution as “sex work.”

By contrast, feminists who identify as prostitution abolitionists ground their analysis in an understanding of the role of prostitution in reinforcing women’s subordination. The commodification of sexuality is the commodification of women precisely because prostitution reduces women to body parts and sexual functions, because it is women who have been defined as the sex(ed) class.<sup>44</sup> Feminist abolitionists endorse and are guided by Dworkin’s analysis that the continued existence of prostitution is both a cause and a consequence of sex inequality.

The arguments of prostitution abolitionists, when they are acknowledged at all, are usually dismissed as being no more than a Right-wing argument that prostitution is immoral, or an essentialist argument that conflates voluntary “sex work” with trafficking. It is true that Dworkin thinks prostitution is “wrong” in the sense that it harms women and is antithetical to sex equality. In this sense prostitution as a practice is immoral, that is to say unethical, in the same way that wife battering or rape is immoral – not out of some Right-wing religious conviction that sees prostitution as a threat to traditional marriage, but because it violates women’s human rights.

It is also true that feminists who oppose prostitution do sometimes say that prostitution is not a choice, but that claim is also willfully misunderstood. Not all women who enter prostitution do so as girls, or continue under the threat of beatings from a pimp, although both of

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<sup>44</sup> Some recent books explaining this position include Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2008); Julie Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); Janice Raymond, *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade* (Lincoln: UNP/Potomac, 2013); Reem Alsalem, “Prostitution and violence against women and girls: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences” UNGA, 56th Sess, UN Doc A/HRC/56/48 (7 May 2024).

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those situations are common enough features of the sex trade.<sup>45</sup> What we know, however, is that all over the world, those in prostitution are overwhelmingly racialized, Indigenous, poor, and female. Prostitution chooses them. Some women with more social capital enter prostitution notwithstanding other options, usually because they believe that they can make a lot of money quickly. Such stories are vital for the industry and for recruitment of new girls. The glamorization of prostitution is a longstanding cultural trope, from the *Story of O* discussed in *Woman Hating* to the tell-all *Happy Hooker* memoirs of the 1970s, the movie *Pretty Woman* in the 1980s, and the current examples of normalizing prostitution as a way to pay for university and the celebration of young women becoming “sugar babies” to a single rich client or “sugar daddy.”<sup>46</sup>

Feminists who oppose men’s purchase of women’s bodies in the sex trade do so because they understand that regardless of an individual woman’s reasons for being there, and regardless of her experience of any given sexual transaction, prostitution is a practice in which men direct women to do what men want sexually, acts that the women would not otherwise willingly do, but for the money they need. Having sex you do not want to have is, in Canadian law at least, sexual assault.<sup>47</sup> Prostitution is a practice in which women wanting money is enough to make people ignore that women do not want the sex. For most women, these unwanted sexual impositions

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<sup>45</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Trafficking, Prostitution, and Inequality” (2011) *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberty Law Review* 271.

<sup>46</sup> Jacqueline Motyl, “Trading Sex for College Tuition: How Sugar Daddy Dating Sites may be Sugar Coating Prostitution” (2013) 117 *Pennsylvania State Law Review* 927; Shamani Joshi, “Inside the Mind of a Sugar Daddy” *VICE* (8 January 2021), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7k9e3d/psychology-behind-sugar-daddy-relationships-dating>; Naomi May, “‘Anora’ Is A Modern Cinderella Story For Our Times” *Elle* (2 March 2025), <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/culture/a64008690/what-is-anora-about/>.

<sup>47</sup> *R v. Ewanchuk* [1999] 1 SCR 352. See also Rebecca Whisnant, “(Not)Buying It: Prostitution as Unwanted Sex” (2017) 2 *Dignity* art. 9.

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need to happen daily, multiple times with different men, in order for them to meet the demands of their pimp and/or earn enough to get by.

What abolitionist feminists have not spent a lot of time doing is trying to unpack the reasons that the movement to decriminalize and destigmatize prostitution is so attractive to so many women who also identify as feminists. Why have these women not acknowledged the destruction of women's moral intelligence inherent in prostitution? Why have they settled instead for trying to "reduce stigma" to gender-neutral "sex workers?" Dworkin's analysis in *Right-Wing Women* is helpful for answering these questions. Recall that her original task was to try and understand the logic, the moral philosophy, of women who had largely been dismissed by feminists as brainwashed by their husbands and their churches into opposing abortion and equal rights, deserving of pity or scorn, but not to be taken seriously. Dworkin's achievement in this book is to take these women seriously, and to understand that because their underlying logic lines up with male power, it is likely to triumph, especially if feminists do not meet it head on.

What if we were to apply the same analysis to the women who identify as feminists (and as part of the political Left) and yet support prostitution? Is there a similar underlying logic that propels them toward the sex work bargain? What do they gain, and what are they prepared to sacrifice, in order to hold this position? The first strand of their support for the sex industry comes from the misidentification of having lots of sex with liberation, a false equivalency that Dworkin recognizes from personal experience. Under the banner of "sex-positive" feminism, this stance ignores male power as a system and clings, despite all evidence to the contrary, to the idea that more sex on men's terms means more freedom for women. While this is meant to be a celebration of women's agency, it fails to account for the way that women's credibility and status are degraded through their sexual use. This is not to say that women must or should be tainted

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in some way by being sexual; this is a tenet of patriarchy that needs to be dismantled. But as Dworkin recognizes in *Woman Hating*, this cannot be achieved through having more sex for men's pleasure in a male-defined system, and no system is more male-defined than the transactional sex of prostitution.

The movement to oppose sexual violence against women gets mainstream support so long as women are posting anonymized accounts of their experiences and demanding no consequences for actual men. When women identify their rapists and batterers and seek an end to impunity for violence, they are sued for defamation, grilled by Senate judiciary committees and exhaustively cross-examined in an attempt to show that they are liars. The slogan accompanying the #MeToo rallies is to "believe women" but why? Why *should* anyone, and in particular men in power, believe women's accounts of the atrocities they are subjected to by men in the workplace, the street, their educational institutions and their homes? What authority do women have to demand that they be believed, when women are sexually available to men in prostitution around the clock, in a seemingly inexhaustible supply? The only way to reconcile these realities is to treat the women in prostitution as a separate class, different from other women.<sup>48</sup>

Feminists have been unanimous in rejecting the separation of women into male-defined categories of virgins or whores, dividing women according to standards that make the "good" category out of reach for most women. This false binary is a trick, one that serves the interests of male power. Yet labeling women who have accepted money for sex "sex workers," in the aim of reducing stigma against them, does much the same thing. Their identity is now sexual; their

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<sup>48</sup> Melissa Farley, Inge Kleine, Kerstin Neuhaus, et al., "Men Who Pay for Sex in Germany and What They Teach Us About the Failure of Legalized Prostitution" (8 November 2022), <https://prostitutionresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Sex-buyersEnglish-11-8-2022pdf.pdf> at 14.

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source of income (even if partial or episodic) becomes part of this identity, reified in a way that women who earn income from cleaning or teaching or driving a taxi do not experience.

The logic of prostitution apologists does not rest solely on the sexual liberation fallacy, however. Most of the feminists who support prostitution do not claim that women enjoy the sex with buyers itself for the woman's own sexual ends. Yet organizations defending the sex trade like to put forward the claim that many "sex workers" enjoy their work or prefer it to other kinds of jobs they have had. This is a relatively new development, and represents a shift from acknowledging that prostitution is difficult and dangerous but arguing the state should permit it because women need the money. Some writers have tried to recast what the women are doing as "care work" of particular value to men with disabilities,<sup>49</sup> unapologetically othering disabled bodies as not being capable of producing actual desire in another person.

Certainly, the contemporary rhetoric of women who support the sex trade is that most women who are in prostitution enter as adults and want to be there, except perhaps for some very small number who are therefore trafficked and so are not sex workers at all.<sup>50</sup> Since acknowledging that anyone might not be having a good time in the sex industry is problematic for their narrative, some feminist champions of the sex industry go further and refuse to acknowledge that anyone is coerced into prostitution – trafficked women become "migrant sex workers" or fictional products of a "moral panic."<sup>51</sup> Sexually exploited children are labeled

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<sup>49</sup> Giulia Garofalo Geymonat, "Disability Rights Meet Sex Workers' Rights: The Making of Sexual Assistance in Europe" (2019) 16 *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 214; Cecilia Benoit, Andrea Mellor and Zahra Premji, "Access to Sexual Rights for People Living with Disabilities: Assumptions, Evidence, and Policy Outcomes" (2023) 52:8 *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 3201.

<sup>50</sup> For a cogent analysis of the way language is elided in the pro-prostitution research, see Debra Haak, "Re(de)fining Prostitution and Sex Work: Conceptual Clarity for Legal Thinking" (2019) 40 *Windsor Review of Law and Social Issues* 67.

<sup>51</sup> Anna Zobnina, "Women, Prostitution and Migration in Europe: Not a Sex Work Story" (2017) 2 *Dignity* 1.

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“youth sex workers” and offered the same harm reduction services as adult women, rather than being treated like other victims of child sexual abuse.<sup>52</sup>

This illuminates the second major belief system of the pro-prostitution feminists – that a central tenet of feminism is affirming women’s agency, in the sense that their decisions are by definition to be validated and supported. Somehow, the expression of agency in this context is enough to end the analysis. At its core, this conflates liberalism with feminism. Women choose to be wives, soldiers, drug mules, surrogate mothers, to remain in abusive relationships, among many other things, but the mere fact of choosing does not make these institutions immune from feminist analysis and critique when those choices are made in a context of male supremacy and female subordination. Of course some women choose prostitution in the context of a system that places monetary value on their sexual availability to men. In places where women have achieved comparatively greater economic and social equality, however, not enough women choose prostitution to meet the male demand for it. Because the male demand is treated as inevitable, natural and normal (conclusions reinforced when it is legalized), this means the supply must be increased to meet the demand. This can be done in one of two ways. First, women can be imported from jurisdictions where women are too poor to have the alternatives that some women in richer countries have. Second, local women can be convinced that they do in fact want to enter prostitution, because they will make good money and they will not be stigmatized for doing so.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *R v. Alcorn* 2021 MBCA 101. See. e.g. Carrie N. Baker, “Racialized Rescue Narratives in Public Discourses on Youth Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in the United States” (2018) *Study of Women and Gender: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA*, [https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg\\_facpubs/14](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/swg_facpubs/14); Jo-Anne Madeleine Stoltz, Kate Shannon, et al., “Associations Between Childhood Maltreatment and Sex Work in a Cohort of Drug-Using Youth” (2007) 65 *Social Science & Medicine* 1214.

<sup>53</sup> New Zealand, the only country in the world to have adopted a full decriminalization model, uses both techniques: Renee Gerlich, “No Country for Whistleblowers: A Response to the Culture-Wide Promotion of Prostitution in New

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Dworkin describes this as a way of thinking that sees the individual will as entirely resident in the woman rather than constructed by the conditions in which she exists. As she notes, there is a real danger here. Treating the decision to be a prostitute as an expression of a woman's authentic individual will means that she can also be punished for that choice, which has been the dominant mode of dealing with prostitution in many countries. For many decades this was achieved through criminalizing her directly, but removing this specific legal punishment does not mean that she will no longer be seen as deserving of punishment in other ways. Prostitution feminists argue that they can protect women by destigmatizing prostitution and treating it like any other job. But destigmatizing prostitution (which Leftist men outwardly welcome) does not succeed in destigmatizing the prostitute herself, only further entrenching the entitlement of the buyer. Men have no interest in ceding this position of power, in which they are doing what is inevitable, and women are serving the function for which they are intended. The hierarchy is ingrained in the very act of purchase, because the money reinforces the inequality between them.

The beliefs that more sex means more freedom and that, in the context of prostitution, women's apparent choices cannot be questioned, may be enough to explain the sex work bargain. One could go further, however, and argue that women who take this position are striking a bargain that is not that different than right-wing women who oppose abortion. Seeing the world as it is presently, they seek to make the best deal that they can. This may include leaving the satisfaction of the worst of men's sexual demands to a class of "sex workers," accompanied with efforts to mitigate the most harmful aspects of the practice for the women in that class.

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Zealand" (3 January 2018), <https://prostitutionresearch.com/no-country-for-whistleblowers-a-response-to-the-culture-wide-promotion-of-prostitution-in-new-zealand/>.

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We might go further still. Fundamentally, the sex work feminists appear to accept, but rarely articulate, a belief about men's demand for sex that rests in biological determinism. Male demand must not be interrogated or limited, because it is inevitable. Sometimes this is explained away by saying that the sex drive is natural for human beings, although women do not buy sex from men or other women in large numbers to satisfy their own "natural" sex drives. When they do, verbal and physical abuse is not an accompanying feature. Dworkin writes that having millions of men around the world working in brothels would be seen as a denial of men's human rights.<sup>54</sup> She may be right, but the very notion is beyond the scope of our imagination because the equivalency is a false one. In fact, if millions of men's jobs were to service a succession of women for hours on end by giving those women oral sex – women of all ages who would choose the man they wanted based on their preferences from the line-up provided – would this really be the equivalent to what millions of women actually do in the prostitution industry in order to get by? Do we believe that it is only the absence of a market that prevents men from choosing this? And if they did choose it, would they be diminished by it in the same way? What insults could their women clients even call them? Would the men fear being strangled or beaten by their female clients? For the analogy to even make sense, we need to imagine a world in which the experience of being male in the world is unrecognizable from what it is now. The fact is that most of the men and boys in the prostitution industry are purchased by other men, not by women. That some men are also used in the way that women are used does not amount to equality for women.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Right-Wing Women* at 179.

<sup>55</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Prostitution and Civil Rights" (1993) 1 *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 13.

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The denial that prostitution has anything to do with a sex hierarchy is also sometimes accompanied by reminders that transgender people are also purchased in prostitution, as if the fact that men also buy (mostly female-identified) trans people for sex makes the industry any less sexual or any less gendered. Note that this is not the “radical androgyny” of *Woman Hating*, but rather an attempt to erase the sex-based nature of the harms under the guise of inclusive language. If all we can see are individual people buying and selling according to their own needs and desires, then there is nothing systemic to challenge.

The sex work feminists claim their moral high ground from the paradoxical assertion that decriminalizing or legalizing the very institution that is the source of extensive and well-documented harms to women will protect women from those same harms. In other words, the institution is not harmful, only some of the men using it, who will not play by the rules. By normalizing men’s purchase of women for sexual use, the bad men will be thwarted because the women can now protect themselves, or call on a series of protections offered by the brothel managers. (Note that this cannot offer even this false hope of added protection to women who prostitute from their own homes or hotel rooms, who can be quite open and visible about engaging in these activities and still wind up dead.)<sup>56</sup> It also obliterates any considerations of the harms to women of repeatedly engaging in sex acts not grounded in their own desires.<sup>57</sup>

The promise of the feminist-supported brothel amounts to saying to women that if they service men sexually in these places and in these ways, they are less likely to be assaulted or

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<sup>56</sup> Two representative cases in Canada are *R v. Barton* 2019 SCC 33 and *R v. Evans* 2009 BCSC 1615, both involving Indigenous women murdered by white male sex buyers in hotel rooms or apartments equipped with security cameras.

<sup>57</sup> Many women in prostitution report a need to dissociate during the sex act as an act of psychic self-preservation: Stefan Tschoeke, et al., “A Systematic Review of Dissociation in Female Sex Workers” (2019) 20 *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 242.

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killed. The notion of “choice” is turned on its head – legalization is seen as a way to give more women the ability to negotiate what sex acts they will perform, to insist on a condom, etc. In fact, it is the men who choose – they are not assigned a random “worker” at the brothel – they choose the woman they want, often after perusing online pornographic photographs of her taken by the pimp who runs the establishment. They decide what sex acts they want, and find someone who can be paid to do them. Claiming that decriminalizing men’s sex purchase, and their profiteering from the prostitution of women, actually protects women, is an argument that men of the Left, who think of themselves as progressive on women’s issues, can seize with alacrity.

There is an element of self-preservation in not having to confront the darkest examples of men’s behaviour toward women. We see this same trend in attitudes toward men’s battering of women in the home. Nowadays, wife battering is usually given a gender-neutral name: domestic violence or intimate partner violence.<sup>58</sup> The criminal law is rejected as an example of the carceral state; women are given safety planning as a form of harm reduction; and women’s agency is supported by helping them reunite with their batterers if they “choose” to do so. This is of course far more accommodating of the current system of male power than trying to remake it completely. It is certainly not hard to see why so many women have accepted that trying to get men to change their behaviour towards women is just too much, and that is easier to change your attitude than your material reality. This is exactly the same mindset of the “Total Woman” movement of the 1970s and 80s, only directed at embracing the brothel model rather than the farming model. The cost of believing that prostitution can co-exist with progress toward

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<sup>58</sup> Liz Kelly and Nicole Westmarland, “Naming and Defining ‘Domestic Violence’: Lessons from Research with Violent Men” (2016) 112 *Feminist Review* 113.

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women's equality is a sell-out of marginalized women convincingly packaged as caring about the interests of those same women.<sup>59</sup>

Andrea Dworkin spoke from her own experiences of male violence to try and understand what had happened to her as something more than an individual, personal hard luck story. Feminists who support the prostitution industry say that doing so is about listening to sex workers. They do not, however, listen to the women who describe their involvement in prostitution as harmful, their reasons for entering prostitution as reflecting their unequal position, and their perceptions that exiting is impossible. Either we see the actions of women who support the prostitution industry as a desperate accommodation to what seems like an unchangeable reality, or we see it as an expression of self-interest in a system that rewards, at some paltry level, their endorsement of it. *Right-Wing Women* ends with the somewhat cryptic line: "Decide one more time." I understand Dworkin to be saying that we do have a choice as women, a choice to fight antifeminism in all its forms, or to accommodate ourselves to it. The resurgence of interest in her work by contemporary feminists should remind us that women deserve true freedom – not the selective protection of the male-defined Right, or the false freedom of the male-defined Left.

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<sup>59</sup>Rachel Moran and Melissa Farley, "Consent, Coercion, and Culpability: Is Prostitution Stigmatized Work or an Exploitive and Violent Practice Rooted in Sex, Race, and Class Inequality?" (2018) 48 *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 1947.

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