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"No Regrets, Coyote": Margo St. James, COYOTE,

and the Recursive Nature of the Sex Workers' Rights Movement

Despite the perception that sex work and pornography have become destigmatized in certain cultural circles, the reality is that sex workers' rights organizations continue to face significant challenges. Groups like San Francisco's COYOTE ('Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics,' founded in 1972 by Margo St. James) and Sex Workers Outreach Project USA (founded in 2003) have been advocating for sex workers' rights for decades, and while progress has been made, particularly on the issue of visibility and destigmatization, deeply rooted societal prejudices and legal obstacles persist. A grant application from the mid-1970s lists COYOTE's primary goals as halting "the abuse and degradation of women who choose prostitution as a means of survival" via the establishment of "legal aid for prostitutes, health services ... community services ... and public education."[1] Modern organization SWOP, according to their website, accessed in June 2024, is focused on "ending violence and stigma through education, community building, and advocacy."[2] The language both of these groups use, separated in time by fifty years, is nearly identical, suggesting that many of the struggles these advocates face may be largely the same in content if not in scope.

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[1] [Re: coyotes, 1973-1977, undated]. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, 81-M32--90-M1, 21., Carton: 1. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

[2] SWOP-USA. "Mission." Accessed June, 2024. https://swopusa.org/mission

One of the critical issues these organizations address is decriminalization. Prostitution remains criminalized in many jurisdictions, which puts sex workers at risk of police involvement and arrest, so many argue that decriminalization would help to protect prostitutes and allow them to work safely and with dignity. Another, not unrelated issue is the safety of the worker. Sex workers are often vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and abuse, by the police, their own clients, and society as a whole. Sex workers' rights organizations generally aim to provide support services, such as counseling, legal assistance, and safe housing, to help sex workers stay safe. Finally, and arguably most successfully, sex workers' rights organizations work to dismantle the stigma associated with prostitution and other forms of sex work. Stigma is at the root of all of the other issues faced by people in the sex industry, and dismantling it would, eventually, make the other concerns irrelevant. However, the hard-won spaces made for sex workers have largely been colonized by people who do not seek to serve the common goal of rights for all in the industry. The issues that sex workers' rights organizations address are as pertinent today as they were decades ago. Sex work activism and prostitute's rights issues are, in a sense, recursive, continually reiterating and relitigating the same core issues in order to ultimately make progress.[3]

Margo St. James & COYOTE

Twenty-five-year-old Margaret Jean St. James had never worked as a sex worker in any capacity before she was brought up before a San Francisco judge on prostitution charges, due to the large volume of people coming and going from her apartment, at the time shared with guitarist Steve Mann. “I’ve never turned a trick in my life,” she remembers protesting, in the foreword to Gail Pheterson's *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*. “Anyone who knows the

[3] Recursion: the process a procedure goes through when one of the steps of the procedure involves invoking the procedure itself. A procedure that goes through recursion is said to be 'recursive'.

language," responded the judge, "is obviously a professional."[4] In the intervening years between that formative 1962 trial and what St. James herself refers to as her 'three-year politicization' during the years 1970-1973, Margo (the nickname she went by both personally and professionally) found consistent employment in the sex work industry and, as a feminist in a liberal bohemian circle, participated in many "consciousness-raising groups," the first of which was known as WHO, or, Whores, Housewives, and Others ("Others" being coded language intended to refer to lesbians). These groups, combined with her on-the-job experiences with systemic abuse, led her to question what was materially being done to advocate for the rights of prostitutes and other sex workers. The answer, it seems, was largely nothing: until a member of the marginalized class was willing to speak out on their own behalf, the issue would not be heard by society at large, even within San Francisco's growing feminist and gay rights circles.

St. James, who had already received the nickname 'Coyote trickster' from novelist Tom Robbins, named her organization COYOTE, or, 'Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics," using this formal association to advocate for the rights of sex workers, including financial security, health care, and legal protections. In order to fund COYOTE and its newsletter, COYOTE HOWLS, which was published from 1974 to 1979, St. James and other members organized fundraising events such as the Hooker's Ball, which became a mainstay of the Tenderloin community, with an attendance of 20,000 in 1978.

Initially conceived in 1974, COYOTE's Hooker's Masquerade Balls were controversial, wild, and exuberant affairs. At these events, current and former sex workers mingled with a diverse crowd that included their pimps, drag queens, journalists, students, artists, paparazzi, and

[4] Pheterson, Gail. *The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness*. Durham: Social Text, 1994. https://doi.org/10.2307/466259, xvii

even the occasional police officer. Media coverage of the Hooker's Balls painted an image of COYOTE's activities as sensational, radical, and all-inclusive: a representative from SAGA in March 1975 hailed the event as a "wild success," noting that the festivities lasted "more than nine hours" and featured "costumes that would have done justice to a mad designer." The scene was a kaleidoscope of gender expression: "men dressed as women, women dressed like men, and every combination paraded through the ball, with bare chests (both male and female) leaving photographers complaining that they hadn't brought enough film."[5] Journalist J.L. Pimsleur in 1984 reflected that "most were in awe of the whole affair," describing attendees such as a "leggy blonde" in "thigh-high boots and a skin-tight back v-cut body stocking," and a "Rubenesque redhead" in "5-inch spike heels and a sprayed-on zebra bodysuit." The event even attracted high society: "socialites like Gardner Mein and Walter Landor rubbed elbows with the Scarlot Harlot and Norma Jean."[6]

COYOTE's Hookers' Balls became legendary, transforming from mere gatherings into sensational events where "whores could be out, be proud and be celebrated."[7] Limousines and Rolls Royces lined up, dropping off dazzling groups escorted by flamboyant pimps to engage in dirty dancing to rock and roll, interspersed with a few speeches and a lot of photographs. St. James' ability to attract the press was itself, legendary: "Whenever Margo called a press

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[5] "SAGA, March 1975." Clippings, etc., 1975. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, Microfilm Reel M-143, Item 262. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

[6] Gardner Mein was a well-known San Francisco socialite, Walter Landor was one of the founders of Landor & Fitch, Carol Leigh AKA the Scarlot Harlot was the co-founder of BAYSWAN (the Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network), and Norma Jean Almodovar currently serves as the director of the Los Angeles branch of COYOTE. Before she started working as a sex worker, she spent ten years as a traffic cop, and notable quipped about how, if she was going to screw the public, she at least wanted the going rate. "Draft by J.L. Pimsleur" in: Clippings, etc., 1984.. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, Microfilm_Reel: M-143. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

[7] Sprinkle, Annie. "A HO'S HOMAGE TO THE LATE GREAT MARGO ST JAMES." Facebook post, January 2021. https://www.facebook.com/anniesprinkle/posts/10158341678120141.

conference, the press came running like bears to honey," ensuring not only that COYOTE received substantial media attention but also that the Hookers' Balls were hot ticket events.

The 1984 Ball that San Francisco Chronicle reporter Joel L. Pimsleur attended happened to coincide with the Democratic National Convention, and it was noted for the ironic preference of attendees for the Republican National Convention instead, not due to a desire to advocate in front of a party fond of traditional values, but because "Democrats are good-time Charleys who just want to party" and were less likely to spend money on the services offered by the attendees. Republicans noted for being "better spenders and a little kinkier," were described as "guys who try to project the straightest image up front but are usually the kinkiest behind closed doors—and they pay more."[8] In this same vein lay many of the arguments against St. James' methods: they are, overwhelmingly, pro-capitalist and pro-free market. In her UC Santa Cruz PhD dissertation "Precarious City: Marginal Workers, the State, and Working-Class Activism in Post-industrial San Francisco, 1964–1979," historian Laura Renata Martin argues that St. James' activism can best be thought of as an "example of class-conscious liberal feminism, highly critical of pro-criminalization tendencies within the feminist movement, though not critical of exploitation through the free market."[9] A more charitable tone is taken by sociologist Valerie Jenness, who writes in her essay "From Sex as Sin to Sex as Work: COYOTE and the Reorganization of Prostitution as a Social Problem" that the primary goal of COYOTE was to "sever prostitution

[8] Pimsleur.
[9] Laura Renata Martin, "Precarious City: Marginal Workers, the State, and Working-Class Activism in Post-industrial San Francisco, 1964–1979" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2014), 353

from its historical association with sin, crime, and illicit sex, and place the social problem of prostitution firmly in the discourse of work, choice, and civil rights."[10]

COYOTE's influence was not limited to San Francisco or even to the West Coast, with documented sister organizations reaching domestically as far as Honnolulu's "Dolphin," Detroit's "CUPIDS" (Citizens to Upgrade Prostitution in Detroit and Suburbs), and New York's "PONY" (Prostitutes of New York), and internationally as wide as Melbourne's "PAG" (Prostitutes' Action Group), Toronto's BEAVER (Better End All Vicious Erotic Repression), and London's PLAN (Prostitution Laws are Nonsense).[11] St. James also worked with her (business and, for a time, romantic) partner Gail Pheterson to organize international efforts, leading to the First and Second World Whores' Congresses in Amsterdam and Brussels. At the 1985 First World Whores' Congress, representatives crafted the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights. This charter was an effort to frame sex workers' rights within a human rights context and was formally presented to the media on February 15, 1985. It articulated a comprehensive list of demands, asserting that sex workers should be entitled to the full spectrum of human rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, and the right to work, marry, and bear children. It also advocated for sex workers' rights to unemployment insurance, health coverage, and housing.[12] In her essay "A Prostitutes' Jamboree: The World Whores' Congresses of the 1980s and the Rise of a New Feminism," Harvard University's Meg Weeks describes the Charter as "signaling a sharp divergence from the radical feminist analysis of sex work as 'female sexual slavery' and the Marxist feminist notion that all work under capitalism is

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[10]Martin, Laura Renata. "Precarious City: Marginal Workers, the State, and Working-Class Activism in Post-industrial San Francisco, 1964–1979" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2014), 353.
[11] [Statements of purpose, membership card, list of sister organizations, meeting announcement, 1973-1977, undated]. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, Carton: 1. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.
[12] World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights, February 1985,

coerced," a description that harkens back to Martin's description of St. James' activism as fundamentally liberal and focused on the rights of sex workers to freely engage in free market capitalism rather than the idea that all work is inherently exploitative, a philosophy which, while it may be the dominant one in modern discourse around the subject, was more prominent with British sex workers' rights activists at the time.[13]

Due to the issue of a lack of representation, a major concern of St. James' when founding COYOTE was whether it would be appropriate for herself to become a figurehead of the movement because she had been working in the industry for such a short amount of time (at her estimate, around four years).[14] St. James was also white and had a support system and other means of income to fall back on (at the time she founded COYOTE she was working not only as an escort but also as a maid and private investigator), some things that raise questions about whether her relatively privileged position might overshadow the voices of those who were more vulnerable within the community.[15] Indeed, St. James' capacity to navigate these multiple roles highlights the complexities of privilege in movements aimed at social change. While her involvement brought attention and legitimacy to the cause, it also posed the risk of centering the movement around a figure who might not fully represent the most marginalized voices within the sex worker community. In analyzing St. James' role and the dynamics of her organization, it becomes apparent that privilege can both open doors and amplify voices within mainstream discourse and dilute the representation's authenticity. This underscores the importance of ongoing reflection and structural adjustments within organizations to ensure that their advocacy remains

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[13]Weeks, Meg. "A Prostitutes' Jamboree: The World Whores' Congresses of the 1980s and the Rise of a New Feminism..": 288.
[14] Pheterson, xvii
[15] Of note is the fact that St. James does not list sex work on her CV.
[Margo St. James resumes, passport, arrest record, EKG, biographical essay, 1973-1980, undated]. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, 1., Carton: 1. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

true to the diverse realities of their constituents and that they resist replicating the system they seek to dismantle. Despite COYOTE's efforts toward inclusivity, as demonstrated by the diversity celebrated at their Hookers Balls, their communication often fell short of this ideal. Official bulletins and newsletters frequently mentioned women of color in a tokenizing way, and transgender women (who represented a significant portion of the sex worker community) were scarcely acknowledged and always grouped with cisgender males and potentially genderqueer crossdressers under the generic label of "male" prostitutes (for example, when talking about the percentage of arrests for prostitution, a position paper proclaimed that "15 percent are male prostitutes (mostly transvestites and transexuals)").[16] While COYOTE's leadership remained entirely composed of cisgender women, when St. James and Pheterson moved to Europe in 1986, COYOTE experienced a change in management for the first time. St. James' longtime second in command Priscilla Alexander (identified in a San Francisco Chronicle article about the organizational shift as a "feminist educator") left in charge of the group alongside Black sex workers' rights advocate Gloria Lockett (identified in the same article as a "former prostitute").[17] With the promotion of Lockett to co-chairwoman, COYOTE finally had its first executive of color, and much of the tokenization of Black prostitutes was adjusted to a more substantial representation in their literature and advocacy.[18]

St. James and COYOTE's activism emerged with a vivid, flamboyant aesthetic and unabashedly sex-positive stance, attracting a broad spectrum of young feminists, and drawing support from those both inside and outside the sex trade. This occurred during the second wave

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[16] National Task Force on Prostitution, "DECRIMINALIZATION OF PROSTITUTION: A Position Paper," 1.
[17] "COYOTE'S New Leadership," Sylvia Rubin, SF Chronicle, 2/25/86
[18] Clippings, etc., 1988.. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, 81-M32--90-M1, 275., Microfilm_Reel: M-143. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

of feminism, when a diverse range of causes were being championed by feminists and women's liberationists, including reproductive rights, workplace equality, gay and lesbian rights, and sexual liberation. However, sex work remained a contentious and often overlooked issue within these circles, viewed by many feminists of the time through a lens of exploitation and victimization, often neglecting the voices and agency of the sex workers themselves. In an essay published in the San Francisco Sentinel, Camille Roy cites Joan Nestle's exploration of the historical overlaps between the lesbian and sex worker communities. Nestle notes the common adversities faced by both groups, stating, "The vice squad controlled our world and we knew clearly that there was little difference between a whore and queer when the raid was on."[19] However, as lesbian separatist-centered radical feminism gained momentum, sex workers were increasingly marginalized within these feminist circles, labeled once again as 'the other.' This schism illustrates how women's discomfort with sex work and prostitution became a part of radical feminist rhetoric, often reducing prostitutes to mere victims of sexual exploitation, a perspective steeped in conservative, middle-class sexual taboos. Nestle further critiques the feminist approach to sex work as being influenced by "hysterical" terms like "sexual slavery," which she argues serves to enforce a narrow, moralistic view on the diverse realities of sex workers, and only serves to further "whorephobia," often reflecting broader societal fears rather than a radical feminist stance.[20]

Whorephobia, as defined by activists and scholars, represents a societal fear and hatred of sex workers. It manifests in various forms of discrimination and violence, reducing individuals in the sex industry to non-entities devoid of rights and dignity. Historian Melinda Chateauvert

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[19] Roy, Camille. "In the Life: Whoreophobia and the Underworld of Sex Work." *SF Sentinel*, September 4, 1987.
[20] Roy, Camille.

articulates that whorephobia effectively reduces sex workers to figures unworthy of concern, viewed either as nuisances to be removed from communities or as criminals deserving incarceration.[21] This extreme form of stigma not only socially ostracizes sex workers but also exposes them to higher rates of violence and murder, supporting the grim assertion by activists that "whorephobia kills."

Gail Pheterson's earlier concept of "whore stigma" laid the groundwork for understanding how deeply this specific form of stigma is woven into the social fabric.[22] Defined in the 1990s, whore stigma refers to the social and legal branding of women suspected of being or acting like prostitutes. Pheterson's insights reveal that this stigma not only targets sex workers but also regulates the behavior of all women who deviate from accepted sexual and social norms. This stigma forces non-prostitutes to distance themselves from sex workers and prostitutes, further entrenching the discrimination against the latter. Author Melissa Gira Grant points out that the distancing behavior perpetuates whore stigma in dire ways, noting that as long as society labels some women as whores, other women are conditioned to view such a label as akin to a social death—further enabling violence against sex workers by creating a sense of impunity among perpetrators.[23] This stigma is not just a social phenomenon but has been institutionalized by police, healthcare workers, and the justice system, making it a significant barrier to achieving sex workers' rights.

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[21]Chateauvert, Melinda. *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to SlutWalk*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014.
[22] Pheterson, Gail. (1994). The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness. Social Text. 37. 39. 10.2307/466259.
[23]Mgbako, Chi Adanna. "The Mainstreaming of Sex Workers' Rights as Human Rights." *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 43 (2020): 92.

The legacy of Margo St. James and COYOTE marks a pivotal transformation in the advocacy for sex workers' rights. Their initiatives transcended traditional activism, as they helped fundamentally challenge societal and legal perceptions of sex work through events like Hooker's Masquerade Balls and the formulation of the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights. While it may not seem like much now, COYOTE helped not only amplify the visibility of sex workers but also redefined them as rightful bearers of civil liberties and human dignity. St. James Herschelf, through her personal leadership and strategy of engaging with the media with dramatic public events, broke through mainstream prejudices, bringing the conversation about sex workers' rights into public and political arenas, not only shifting public perception but also sparking discussions within legislative frameworks that previously marginalized or ignored the voices of sex workers. COYOTE's efforts to frame sex work within the context of labor rights and civil liberties challenged both legal norms and the feminist movements of the time. By advocating that sex work should be recognized as legitimate work, COYOTE pushed feminist and workers' rights groups to reconsider their positions on autonomy, agency, and the economic realities of sex work. This was a significant departure from the prevailing narratives that either victimized or criminalized sex workers. Furthermore, the internal evolution within COYOTE, marked by a gradual but significant inclusion of diverse voices, mirrored the broader dynamics of the movement and its evolution to this day. The transition in leadership to include advocates like Gloria Lockett highlighted a growing recognition of the need for inclusivity and representation in advocacy movements, which has continued to influence current sex workers' rights activism. In essence, the efforts of St. James and COYOTE succeeded in carving out a space for sex workers within the discourse of rights and dignity, even if it is a space that the movement struggles to remain in control of. Their work remains a critical reference point for

understanding and advancing the rights of sex workers, and they serve as a foundational blueprint for how to navigate the complexities of advocacy.

Discourse and Stigma

The modern discourse around sex work remains largely unchanged from what it was in the 1970s. While the dominant culture has become overwhelmingly more accepting of sex and sexuality than it was half a century ago, many of the openings and spaces that activists create are colonized by capitalism. A growing acceptance of sexuality did not pave the way for legislation regarding the rights of sex workers; instead, it allowed individuals from the sex industry to achieve individual stardom. Prominent examples include Xaviera Hollander, the celebrated former call girl, madam, and memoirist who co-authored 1971's "The Happy Hooker" (which later inspired a film starring Lynn Redgrave); pornographic actress and public access television host Robyn Byrd (star of "Debbie Does Dallas" and "The Robin Byrd Show"); and sex therapist "Dr. Ruth" Westheimer. This phenomenon highlights the appearance of change without substance, and the commodification of these stories often undermines the feminist goals of empowerment and agency for all sex workers. The visibility of certain figures can overshadow the broader, more complex issues faced by the sex worker community, reducing the conversation to marketable personas. While media representation and rhetorical space for critical thought around sex work may have expanded, these changes often seem distinct from institutional arrangements of power that could affect real progress. Activists' efforts to open discourse on sex workers' rights frequently get co-opted by capitalist interests, transforming potential sites of genuine change into platforms for celebrity culture, capitalizing on the sensational aspects of sex work, drawing public attention but rarely advocating for the systemic changes needed to improve

the lives of sex workers, because profit is prioritized over meaningful social change. This dynamic perpetuates a cycle where the spectacle of sex work is elevated, while the substantive demands for labor rights, safety, and decriminalization are marginalized. For instance, the normalization of pornography in mainstream culture has not translated into better working conditions or rights for performers. Instead, it has often led to the glamorization of the industry while obscuring the exploitative conditions many workers face. Similarly, the rise of sex-positive celebrities has not always aligned with advocating for the needs and rights of all sex workers, particularly those who are marginalized by race, class, and immigration status.

The advent of the internet has also significantly transformed the landscape of sex work, introducing new platforms and opportunities for marketing, client engagement, and community building. Online platforms like OnlyFans, ManyVids, and Patreon have democratized the industry to some extent, allowing sex workers to generate income directly from clients without intermediaries. Digital platforms offer enhanced safety and anonymity compared to traditional means of prostitution, stripping, or performing in pornographic films. Sex workers can communicate with clients behind the safety of a screen, reducing the immediate physical risks traditionally associated with the profession. Additionally, the ability to manage their business remotely allows for a greater degree of anonymity and control over personal information, which is crucial in a profession often stigmatized and criminalized.

The advent of OnlyFans and other, similar sites has had another interesting effect: a shift toward the appeal of amateur pornography, something that has opened lucrative opportunities for sex workers. Heather Berg, a gender studies scholar, describes this as the “decentralization of the industry,” where porn performers are increasingly producing and monetizing their own content, thus reclaiming control from a traditional studio system that often distributed profits

disproportionately to higher-ups.[24] This shift from traditional studios has allowed for a more diverse array of pornographic content to become popular. Mainstream porn has frequently been criticized for adhering to very specific, often racist, body standards, but the reality of viewer preferences does not reflect these ideals. The rise of OnlyFans has facilitated the emergence of what Feona Attwood, a professor of cultural studies, calls "new sex taste cultures."[25] While the platform still favors those who conform to the traditional porn aesthetic, there is now a broader representation of body types available to be on view, and performers with non-normative bodies are now able to earn significantly more money from their labor. The platform-based model also presents the potential for more equitable pay for performers of color due to its being free from the interference of studio executives who regularly undervalue said performers of color.

While digital platforms provide new opportunities, they also introduce new challenges. A modern moral panic regarding the internet's role in child sex trafficking has influenced U.S. legislation negatively impacting sex workers through the passage of laws like 2018's Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (FOSTA-SESTA). These laws, ostensibly designed to combat sex trafficking, have had severe repercussions for consensual adult sex work. Networking platforms like Reddit and Craigslist tightened restrictions on content related to sex work, and Backpage, a major site for adult classified ads, was shut down. These changes drastically curtailed the ability of sex workers to generate income online and inadvertently forced many into more dangerous, offline working conditions where they have

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[24] Weil, Benjamin. "Sex Work Is (Gig) Work: Assessing the OnlyFans Effect." *The Baffler*, no. 63 (2022): 81. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27159030

[25] Weil, Benjamin.

less control and face greater risks.[26] If they lose the ability to recruit clients themselves, sex workers might be forced back into abusive relationships with pimps, something that, in 2018, Laura LeMoon, co-founder of Safe Night Access Project Seattle, was already observing:

> Pimps seem to be coming out of the woodwork since this all happened … They're taking advantage of the situation sex workers are in. This is why I say FOSTA/SESTA have actually increased trafficking. I've had pimps contacting me. They're leeches. They make money off of [sex workers'] misfortune.[27]

In this climate, the need for secure digital and physical spaces for sex workers becomes even more critical. The community of sex workers is expanding, and the traditional safeguards that once offered some protection are becoming insufficient due to the evolving nature of the industry and its regulation. This expansion and the shift in regulatory approaches are prompting sex workers to prioritize self-preservation, sometimes at the expense of collective security and advocacy.[28] It is evident that if sex workers are to continue their professions with dignity and safety, there must be a concerted effort to develop legislation that acknowledges and protects their rights explicitly.

The longstanding tradition of the rescue narrative significantly shapes public discourse around prostitutes and prostitution, often overshadowing the agency of sex workers by depicting them as passive victims in need of salvation. Many depictions of prostitutes in popular culture,

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[26] Cole, Samantha. "Pimps Are Preying on Sex Workers Pushed Off the Web Because of FOSTA-SESTA." *Motherboard*, April 30, 2018. https://perma.cc/M9JW-E7ER.

[27] Poster, Winifred R. "Data Battles, Platform Shutdowns, and Digital Rights in Surveillance: Labor Politics in the Online Sex Industry." *St. Louis University Law Journal* 65 (2020): 191.

[28] Weil, Benjamin.

from Julia Roberts' Hollywood Boulevard streetwalker who must be saved from her life by a wealthy beau in 1990's Pretty Woman, to the Western archetype "Harlot with the Heart of Gold," rely on the idea of a man deciding to look past the circumstances a woman finds herself in, seeing the good in her despite her career, and, in an act of chivalry and charity, removing her from the sex trade entirely, often making her his wife in the process.[29]

In other cases, the prostitute was never an innocent young thing at the mercy of her circumstances, in cases like that of the mythical Saint Mary of Egypt, who led a life of "public prostitution," was repelled from the doors of a church, and only managed to atone for her "wicked life" by living "absolutely alone" in the desert for forty-seven years.[30] Mary's tale illustrates a more extreme transformation narrative that reinforces the idea of prostitution as a morally reprehensible lifestyle. The prostitutes in modern-day stories like Mary's tend to be from marginalized communities, and with these two dominant narratives, we are essentially saying that prostitution is one of the most horrible things a woman can find herself doing, and only certain women (innocent, helpless, and, more specifically, white), deserve rescuing from it.[31] This is reminiscent of the historical "white slave trade" panic, where the narrative focused on white women being trafficked by foreign or racialized men, invoking racist and unfounded fears that led to harmful legislation like the Mann Act in the United States, which was misused to prosecute consensual interracial relationships under the guise of combating forced prostitution.[32]

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[29] "Pretty Woman" itself references Francesco Maria Piave's 1853 opera "La traviata" ('Fallen Woman') where courtesan Violetta has a tempestuous romance with upper-class Alfredo.

[30] MacRory, Joseph. "St. Mary of Egypt." In *Catholic Encyclopedia*, edited by Charles Herbermann, vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910.

[31] There is a third type of prostitute character that occurs mostly in 19th century fiction: the 'saved and saintly prostitute.' Fantine from Les Misérables is probably the most prominent example: because everything she did was for her child, she became a martyr. The 'rescuer' in her narrative is the release of death from tuburculosis.

[32] Baker, Carrie N. "Racialized Rescue Narratives in Public Discourses on Youth Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in the United States." *Politics & Gender* 15, no. 4 (2019): 773-800. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000661.

The politics of rescue has been a pervasive element even within movements that aim to support sex workers. For example, COYOTE, despite its advocacy, sometimes echoed rescue rhetoric in its formal demands. An issue of COYOTE Howls from 1973 proposed issuing citations instead of incarceration and suggested "token fines" be used to fund scholarships for women seeking to exit the sex industry.[33] While likely intended as a compromise with law enforcement, such measures inadvertently reinforce the notion that sex work is inherently undesirable and that sex workers need to be saved or rehabilitated by external forces. This narrative has long-term consequences, as demonstrated by modern rehabilitation programs that aim to "save" sex workers by training them in economically unviable and gender-stereotyped roles, further stigmatizing them and diverting resources from initiatives that could genuinely improve their conditions. The contemporary "rescue industry," identified by cultural critic Laura Agustín includes a variety of actors from government bodies to evangelical groups whose interventions often result in abuses against sex workers, including brothel raids and detentions under the guise of rescue and rehabilitation.[34] The sex workers' rights movement seeks to dismantle these harmful narratives by embracing a human rights framework that recognizes sex workers as the most knowledgeable spokespersons about their own lives, countering the notion that they lack agency and require rescue. By declaring "Rights, not rescue," sex workers assert their position as agents capable of articulating their needs and advocating for change. This movement emphasizes the importance of centering the voices of directly affected communities in

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See also*: Policing Sexuality: The Mann Act and the Making of the FBI* by Jessica R. Pliley.

[33] [Re: coyotes, 1973-1977, undated]. Records of Coyote, 1962-1989, Carton: 1. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute.

[34] Agustin, Laura Maria. *Sex At the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. London: Zed Books, 2007, 4.

human rights activism, acknowledging their capability to make informed choices, even in the face of economic and social constraints imposed by global capitalism and systemic inequality.

Institutional Violence

A mid-1980s publication by the National Task Force on Prostitution, "Violence Against Prostitutes" by Gloria Lockett and Priscilla Alexander, details some of the various abuses sex workers faced at the hands of the police (who were, ostensibly, supposed to treat them as any other citizen). The stories all come from women who, at the time of their stories, worked as prostitutes, but specifically worked as call girls, placing classifieds in newspapers advertising their services instead of walking the streets like many of their other contemporaries. Although they might have been marginally safer than their colleagues who did solicit customers on the streets, they still faced horrifying abuse. One woman, identified as Jody, was working as a prostitute but was not even 'on duty' when she was threatened with an ice pick and raped by a man who abducted her off the street near the hotel she was staying at with some friends. Rescued by her friend identified as Gloria, Jody and her friends disarmed the man of his ice pick and called the cops, who proceeded to barge into the group's hotel room and attempt to arrest both Jody and Gloria for assaulting the man who had just violently assaulted Jody. When they protested that it was self-defense and he had raped her, one of the police officers "told her it was impossible because I was a prostitute and could not be raped" and the man was "too drunk to do anything."[35] When the cops grudgingly believed Jody's story and detained the man, his ultimate punishment was three hours in a detention cell for public intoxication. "At the time I was only 17

[35] Lockett, Gloria, and Priscilla Alexander. "Violence Against Prostitutes." Published by the National Task Force on Prostitution, mid-1980s, 1.

years old and still believed in our justice system," she writes. "Even though I am a prostitute, I feel as though I should still be entitled to protection from the police."[36]

Another young woman, identified as 'Karen," details how she was manipulated and groomed by a vice officer in San Francisco. After befriending 15-year-old Karen under the guise of helping her avoid arrest, the officer exploited her vulnerability, ultimately coercing her into endangering herself by leaving her pimp and letting him become her pimp instead, giving him a cut of her earnings in exchange for protection from other vice officers (It is unclear if he pimped Karen out to his own coworkers: in her own words, he "would bring all of the vice officers by, where I was working, one at a time, so I could see them, and so they wouldn't arrest me.")[37] This abusive dynamic was not unique to Karen and this specific officer, and it only serves to illustrate the exploitative relationships that can exist under the cover of law enforcement, with officers using their power to become the very criminals they are sworn to protect against.

Sex workers faced (and continue to face) not only arrest but also physical and psychological abuse at the hands of the police, abuse that is best described in the words of the women who personally experienced it:

> The LAPD would round up a group of prostitutes and they would put them in the police car, they would take their purses, dump them on the ground, and make us pick the things up out of the gutter. When they decided who was going to jail, looks were a big factor. They would take the hands of the women who were not going to jail, and they would burn them on the hood of the engine. The women who were going to jail were piled in the back seat, usually six, seven, or eight women. The police would drive us around for an

[36] Alexander/Lockett, 1.
[37] Alexander/Lockett, 1.

> hour or so, handcuffed, with people sitting on us. One time, the car was so crowded, one officer made me sit on his lap, handcuffed. In Hollywood, the police arrested me for 'obstructing justice' when I warned another prostitute of his presence. Both of my arms were almost broken when he picked me up by the handcuffs and threw me into the back of a pickup truck.

This treatment was nearly universal, not exclusive to the SFPD. Several more cruel and unusual punishments were detailed by another woman interviewed for the same National Task Force paper:

> The first time Deborah got arrested, she was handcuffed behind. The officer was drunk and tried to kiss her and fondled her breasts and body in the elevator of the hotel. In San Jose, the police drive you around and leave you off in dark areas. In Las Vegas, the police almost broke Deborah's arm when they arrested her. In Berkley, when the police used to drive us around in their cars for hours, one officer pulled into a very dark alley and demanded a blow job. In Hollywood, a police officer who had responded to an ad in the paper (by that time we had stopped working out on the street) came to out house in a car without a license plate. He pulled out his handcuffs so he could handcuff me to the bed and have intercourse with me. Luckily I ran away.[38]

These stories collectively paint a grim picture of the systemic abuse and exploitation faced by sex workers at the hands of law enforcement. This pattern of misconduct highlights an urgent need for reform and accountability in how sex workers are treated by the police, reinforcing the

[38] Of note is the fact that this woman could not even describe what this man did to her as attempted rape. This speaks to a widespread internalization of what officers told 'Jody': that "prostitutes cannot be raped." Alexander/Lockett, 2.

foundational goals of the sex workers' rights movement to seek justice and protection for all individuals, regardless of their profession.

The discussion of police violence against sex workers is an area where the lack of discussion of and with transgender female and genderqueer prostitutes is particularly noticeable. The origins of the sex workers' rights movement in the U.S. are deeply intertwined with the early struggles of the queer liberation movement and, naturally, the struggles of queer prostitutes, some of who may invariably identify as men, transgender women, transvestites, or other genderqueer identities.[39] Significant early resistance included the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria Strike and the 1969 Stonewall Riots, where transgender women and other sex workers played crucial roles. The Compton's Cafeteria riot, an event long overshadowed in queer history by the uprising at the Stonewall Inn, underscores the significant, yet often overlooked, contributions of sex workers in these movements. Located in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, Compton's Cafeteria was a hub for transgender prostitutes who often suffered brutal police harassment, including but not limited to being sexually assaulted, wrongfully arrested and jailed, shaving their heads in jail in an attempt to dehumanize them, and placing them in jail cells with men where they would then be vulnerable to even more abuse.[40] The situation escalated in August 1966 when some of these women alongside other patrons of the establishment fought back against the police's attempts to arrest them.[41] This incident should mark a critical moment in queer and sex workers' rights activism, but because of a cultural refusal to acknowledge these

[39]Chateauvert, 8-10.
[40] Mgbako, 96.
[41] Gossett, Che, Reina Gossett, and AJ Lewis. "Reclaiming Our Lineage: Organized Queer, Gender-Nonconforming, and Transgender Resistance to Police Violence." *Scholar and Feminist Online* (2012). http://sfonline.barnard.edu/a-new-queer-agenda/reclaiming-our-lineage-organized-queer-gender-nonconforming-and-transgender-resistance-to-police-violence/.

types of events if they did not specifically happen at Stonewall Inn, the cultural significance of it has largely been minimized.

Three years after the Compton's Cafeteria Strike, sex workers were again at the forefront of a pivotal event in the queer liberation movement: the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. During a routine police raid, patrons fed up with constant and violent harassment, resisted arrest, marking a significant moment in the fight for LGBTQ rights. In the aftermath, Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, both genderqueer people of color who engaged in prostitution, co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). This organization not only provided shelter to homeless queer youth and trans individuals, including sex workers but also became a crucial support network within the community. Rivera and Johnson often funded their activism using their earnings from sex work, which they saw as both a survival strategy and a statement integral to their movement's efforts. Despite facing significant prejudice within the broader queer community, notably from radical feminists, often lesbian separatists, who dismissed them as "female impersonators," Rivera ardently defended the rights of trans women and homeless queer youth, many of whom relied on sex work as one of their few available options to alleviate poverty amid widespread discrimination Her advocacy highlighted the criminalization and marginalization of those who turned to sex work as one of the few available means of combating pervasive discrimination. These critical contributions by sex workers during the formative years of the queer liberation movement helped lay the foundation for the prostitutes' rights movement that emerged in the United States in the 1970s.[42]

[42] Chateauvert, 8-10.

Decriminalization

Annie Sprinkle, a sex worker at Manhattan erotic massage parlor Spartacus Spa, first heard of the idea of decriminalization through a 1975 issue of Margot St. James' COYOTE Howls newsletter: "I'd been working in massage parlors for two years and never once heard anyone ever mention the idea of decriminalizing prostitution. It seemed like magical thinking, a far-fetched, absurd idea."[43] This sentiment underscores the perceived radicalism of such ideas at the time, and Sprinkle's reaction (seeing decriminalization as "magical thinking" and "far-fetched") reflects a common sentiment among sex workers and the general public alike, who had been conditioned to view sex work through a lens of criminality and moral failure. The societal and legal construction of the sex worker's body as inherently criminal has deep historical roots, and this dehumanizing view perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and violence, making it difficult for destigmatization efforts to gain traction. The notion that the body of a prostitute is a site against which no crime can be committed not only marginalizes these individuals but also strips them of legal protections afforded to others. This criminalization extends beyond individual acts to encompass the very identity of sex workers, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and societal biases.

Modern-day, sex-positive, pro-sex work feminists, for example, Juno Mac and Molly Smith, United Kingdom-based writers of the book *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights,* are arguing for very similar reform to what St. James and her contemporaries proposed generations previously, and others generations before them. However, Mac and Smith's criticisms are more Marxist in focus than COYOTE's, largely arguing that most of the primary criticisms of sex work (namely arguments surrounding the exploitation of the body) are

[43] Sprinkle.

ultimately criticisms of capitalism as a whole, challenging the notion that sex work is uniquely degrading or harmful, and instead positioning it within the larger context of labor rights. Even though she was quoted in the November 14, 1975 issue of The Pioneer saying “Anyone working solely for financial gain is a prostitute," Margo St. James was far from Marxist, and was, at her core, fundamentally liberal and libertarian, opposing “the policing of sexual morality” and believing “in the free market and the opportunities available to women through legal employment as sex workers.”[44]

Mac and Smith are particularly critical of the Nordic model, which criminalizes the purchase of sex but not the sale. They argue that this model, often lauded by its proponents as a means to protect sex workers, paradoxically puts them at greater risk. By criminalizing clients, the model drives the industry underground, compels sex workers to accept potentially dangerous clients to maintain their income, and restricts their ability to negotiate safe working conditions. As Mac herself says in her TEDxEastEnd talk, under such a model, "If you need their money, you need to protect your clients from the police," which inherently compromises safety.[45]

The push for full decriminalization is framed not just as a legislative change but as a fundamental human rights issue. Removing criminal penalties for fully consensual sex work is seen as essential for protecting the rights and safety of sex workers. This approach allows sex workers to seek help from law enforcement without fear of retribution, access health and social services more freely, and generally work under safer conditions. Advocates argue that decriminalization leads to better health outcomes for sex workers, reduces the stigma they face,

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[44] "Margo St James Speaks: 'Anyone Working Solely for Financial Gain is a Prostitute.'" *The Pioneer*, November 14, 1974.
[45] Mac, Juno. "What Do Sex Workers Want?" YouTube video, 14:56. Posted by "TEDxEastEnd," February 26, 2016. What do sex workers want? | Juno Mac | TEDxEastEnd

and more importantly, recognizes their agency and autonomy. The economic arguments for decriminalization also play a significant role. By framing sex work within a framework of labor rights, advocates aim to align it with other forms of work that are protected under labor laws. This alignment would provide sex workers with the same protections and benefits available to workers in other sectors, such as the right to organize, the right to legal recourse for grievances, and protection from exploitation and abuse. The example of New Zealand, where sex work was decriminalized in 2003, offers valuable insights. Juno Mac highlights that in New Zealand, people can "work together for safety" and "employers of sex workers" are "accountable to the state."[46] This model has not led to an increase in sex work, as some had feared, but has made the industry much safer for those involved. Crucially, the legislation was crafted in collaboration with sex workers, ensuring that their needs and experiences directly informed the policies affecting them. This push towards decriminalization, while still facing significant opposition, represents a critical step towards acknowledging the agency and autonomy of sex workers. It challenges long-held biases and stereotypes and seeks to reframe sex work in terms of labor rights and human dignity, aiming for a societal shift that recognizes the value and humanity of all work.

Conclusion

Margo St. James and COYOTE pioneered a radical shift in advocating for the rights and dignity of sex workers that reverberates throughout today's sex work advocacy. Their work was not only about confronting legal barriers but also about challenging societal perceptions that marginalized sex workers. St. James's approach questioned and reshaped public discourse: the

[46] Mac, Juno, TEDxEastEnd.

groundwork laid by St. James is a testament to the power of individual voice in catalyzing social change.

The stigma attached to sex work is both ancient and tenacious, deeply embedded in societal, cultural, and media narratives. This stigma goes beyond mere social disapproval, manifesting in discriminatory practices that marginalize sex workers. The discussion around stigma is not just about changing attitudes but about actively dismantling systemic barriers that perpetuate discrimination. Advocates like Juno Mac and Molly Smith have built upon the foundation laid by early activists, advocating for a vision of sex work that challenges prevailing capitalist critiques and calls for the recognition of sex work as legitimate labor. Their work emphasizes the intersection of economic justice and human rights, pushing for a paradigm shift in how sex work is understood and legislated.

Institutional violence against sex workers remains one of the most daunting challenges within the movement. This violence is not random but is sanctioned through policies and practices that target vulnerable communities. The abuse, neglect, and discrimination that sex workers face from police, healthcare providers, and other state institutions are symptomatic of a deeper societal problem that views sex workers through a lens of criminality rather than humanity. Addressing this issue requires more than reform, it demands a revolution in institutional attitudes and operations, ensuring that sex workers are protected under the law and treated with the respect and dignity afforded to other citizens.

The advocacy for decriminalization is perhaps the most critical aspect of the sex workers' rights movement. Decriminalization offers a way to significantly reduce the harms associated with sex work, including violence, stigma, and legal persecution. By removing criminal penalties

for prostitution, advocates argue, we can create safer working conditions, improve public health outcomes, and affirm the autonomy and dignity of sex workers. The example of New Zealand's successful decriminalization provides a model that can be adapted for different legal systems worldwide, and only ensures better protection for prostitutes, supporting their rights as workers.

The recursive nature of the prostitutes' rights movement reflects a broader pattern seen in most human rights struggles with the continual push and pull with prevailing social norms, the setbacks faced, and the progress made through relentless advocacy. Each cycle of the movement reassesses and builds upon the work of previous generations, adapting strategies to new challenges and opportunities. This cyclical process is essential for the evolution and eventual success of the movement. Reflecting on the cycle, the impact of those who have fought tirelessly for the rights of sex workers must be acknowledged. Their legacy is not just in the laws changed or the policies reformed but in the lives empowered and the communities transformed. Each time the cycle repeats itself it moves one step forward, growing stronger, more inclusive, and more resilient. This is both a historical record and a call to action, a reminder that the struggle for justice and equality is ongoing, and that, despite how futile it may seem at times, every generation of feminists has an important part to play in shaping a more equitable society.

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