

A fight for the streets that no



Photo by Ken Firestone

Prostitution and the community

By Judy MacLean
National Staff Writer

It's mostly women on both sides of the fight. Community women see getting prostitutes off the streets as the key to neighborhood survival. For streetwalkers, staying on the streets means personal survival.

Last summer the conflict became suddenly acute in a number of cities.

"It just all of a sudden got worse this summer," Maude Phillips says about prostitution in the MacArthur section of Oakland, Calif.

She and her neighbors organized to put pressure on the Oakland police department. Arrests in the area went way up and now it's relatively prostitute-free during the day.

"But they still do their work after 10:30 at night. My son's always chasing johns out of the back yard. Pimps will be whipping them back there too. And in the morning the streets are filled with paper," she says.

Nearby neighborhoods in Berkeley have had an influx of streetwalkers since Phillips' coalition became active.

►Cleaning up Times Square.

New York's Times Square has been "famous" for prostitution for some time, but this year it got "worse than ever," says Helen Becker, a hairdresser who works at 42nd and Broadway. Angry residents have teamed with storekeepers and theater people to form a coalition to "clean up" the square. On Nov. 15, 1,200 of them marched along the streets, scaring away the usual street people. A sign in a block club window read, "If you're here to pick up a whore your license number will be traced and a letter sent to your wife."

Rev. Robert Rappleyea, a community leader, predicts, "This is only the beginning of the battle. The long-range plans are to declare war. It's come down to a question of survival. People think prostitution is a victimless crime, but it's not. The crime rate in this community is 69 percent higher than in New York as a whole."

In Detroit, says Mary Ellis, of the North Woodward area, "It reached a point of no return this summer."

She and her neighbors—white, black, oriental and arab—joined together and hit the streets every night in groups to picket prostitutes and scare off johns.

"We were out there every night until 2:30 or 3 in the morning," she says.

Word spread, and they formed a coalition. When prostitutes moved to another neighborhood, Ellis's group went there and helped residents picket. They also put pressure on nearby motels to stop renting to prostitutes and demanded more police enforcement and more prosecution by judges.

►It's discrimination still.

The NAACP was one group that joined. "It's no different, making a black woman get in the back of the bus in the South or in the back seat of a car for sex in Detroit; it's discrimination," executive secretary Joe Madison says. As in most cities the majority of Detroit's streetwalkers are black. White woman work as "call girls," in hotels, bars and "massage parlors."

The coalition pressured the *Detroit News* to publish the names of convicted clients in the prostitution report.

"A lot were white men from the suburbs," Madison points out.

They pressured judges to prosecute johns as well as hookers.

"Prostitution is profitable," Madison says. "You get rid of johns, you'll get rid of prostitution, and you'll curtail the problems of drugs and criminal elements."

Madison, like all community residents interviewed, was relatively unconcerned about the fate of Detroit's streetwalkers.

"I guess they just moved to other cities," he says.

"We have by no means cleaned it up," Ellis says, "but we got it off the street."

►A desire to be neighbors.

Stephen Taylor, a Detroit lawyer, says community groups were successful in certain neighborhoods, but they didn't touch indoor prostitution. Taylor believes the effort to eliminate streetwalkers will be futile. He also believes prostitution is none of the state's business. Yet he feels efforts by community groups, though not directed at Detroit's real problems, can be positive.

"The city needs something," he says, "and it springs from a desire to have neighbors and be a neighbor."

In Chicago, anger by community groups last summer resulted in the "Big Sweep" by police. But mostly it just chased women from one neighborhood to another. Cold weather has brought a lessening of the conflict.

The same situations are duplicated in cities all over the U.S. There are varying opinions as to why the sudden increase this year.

►Unemployment is responsible.

Cassie Lopez of Oakland Neighborhood Coalition blames the "terrible unemployment problems" in the area.

Capt. Francis Daly of New York's police youth division says high teenage unemployment drives more young women 16 and 17 into the city every day—and the only way to survive is prostitution.

Randy Newby, spokeswoman for "Coyote," an organization of and for prostitutes in San Francisco, says she gets calls every day from secretaries who've lost their jobs and are ready to hit the streets. They want to know how to keep from getting caught or hurt.

The proliferation of massage parlors has cut into the streetwalker's business. Capt. Lawrence Hepburn of New York prostitution squad says. The women, their numbers already swollen, are forced to work longer hours and become more aggressive.

"Unemployment hits black women hardest," Madison says. "It's clearly discrimination. These women can't get the kind of jobs they want."

John F. Decker, who teaches at DePaul College of Law in Chicago and has done research into prostitution, cites something else: a more permissive sexual atmosphere in the U.S. sends many middle-aged married men to streetwalkers.

"They ask, 'what have I missed?'" he says. "They have been bombarded with sexual stimulation ranging from movies like 'Deep Throat' to the shocking sexual behavior of their own children," he says.

►A red light district needed?

Opinions also vary about what should be done. Some say a red light district, surrounded by a nonresidential area, is the answer.

But in Boston, recent events in the "Combat Zone," just such a district, have made that seem less tenable. When the Harvard football team was visiting the city last night, two were killed. The city was shocked—not, evidently, that the football team was there, but at the level of organized crime, violence and police corruption that was exposed.

Others point to Detroit's zoning laws which require 51 percent of surrounding residents and businesses to agree to the opening of sex shops and "adult" bookstores. The laws and militant community action have apparently chased prostitution to more lenient cities, but if every city tried it, it would just up the ante and prostitution would probably return somehow.

Just as residents seem unsympathetic to the situation of streetwalkers, the few people who defend prostitutes seem unconcerned about the effects on the community.

The ACLU has been a staunch supporter of the rights of streetwalkers. They have initiated court cases against anti-loitering and other laws aimed at prostitutes.

When New York ACLU chair Edwin J. Ennis' neighborhood became a haven for streetwalkers, he announced he would move, hardly a solution for a whole neighborhood.

►It's the johns' fault.

Newby says women are raised to believe their position in life is to go to bed with a man one way or another. Then women who can't get other jobs become hookers to survive.

one's really winning

"If you have to break the law to survive, there's something wrong," she says. "It's the johns, the men with power, who've closed all the other doors to these women. Then they turn around and solicit them. Do you think she wants to be there? Out on the street where it's cold and rainy? No, but if she advertises in the paper she gets arrested. When a resident says, 'I am a victim'—because a prostitute looks offensive—that's violating her right of free association and expression. Myself, I find fat men with cigars offensive, but I can't have them all arrested."

Newby says she offered to tell the Oakland City Council how to get the streets cleared.

"But they weren't interested," she says.

First would come forcing the massage parlor owners to pay masseuses better so they wouldn't be forced into prostitution to make ends meet. Second, "Let the women advertise in a paper like the *Berkeley Barb*; they'll be off the street."

What about decriminalization?

Newby believes decriminalization would help both hookers and communities.

"At first there would be havoc—more people in the streets," she says. "After a while women could advertise. It would be more scattered."

The National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union also support decriminalization. ACLU's position is that prostitution, a "victimless crime," should not be punished. NOW works closely with Coyote and believes that it's going to happen no matter what and that prostitutes shouldn't be scapegoated as criminals.

Decriminalization would break the link between prostitutes and other criminals, Newby believes, and so keep away a lot of what now plagues communities where prostitutes gather.

"It's for protection from the police and john brutality that she runs with drug addicts and dope dealers. She doesn't like it any better than anyone else. If she were no longer a criminal she wouldn't have to hang with them," Newby explains.

Legalization, on the other hand, won't help. The distinction between decriminalization and legalization is that legalization means state regulation and the establishment of red light zones; decriminalization means no regulation.

"Then the police decide who's a hooker, herd them into a red light district and arrest them for being out of it," she says. "Prostitutes then have four more pimps—the federal, state, county and city governments."

She cites Nevada, where prostitution is legalized. Women the police don't sanction or those who don't like conditions in the brothels end up right back in the communities, walking the streets and illegal once more.

Decriminalization is not yet on the agenda of any city where there was conflict last summer. Too many forces line up against it; from churches that take a moral stand to police who stand to lose the "take" they get from looking the other way, to most of the government and most community groups. A variety of police campaigns and zoning proposals are, however, on the agenda.

Although cold weather has temporarily put a damper on the situation, all the ingredients are still there—residents who want livable neighborhoods, high unemployment for women, minorities and teenagers, and men with money to spend. The outlook is not good.

A Streetwalker

Linda stands between two parked cars on a street in Chicago's Uptown. In sub-freezing weather, she's wearing a halter top and a light, unbuttoned jacket, waving down men in cars. When a police car rides by, she crouches in the snow behind a car. A minute later she's back again, waving for her next "date."

When asked, she says she knows her presence and that of other prostitutes angers community people. "But it's none of their business, really," she says. "O.K., we do make lots of noise with our whistling and hollering for them men to stop. But if they tell me to move, I'll move on down the street. They call the police three or four times a night, and they throw hot water, bottles and rocks down on me. I say, hey, don't give me that stupid stuff."

She thinks it's to be expected that men would try to solicit other women in the community—"Only natural."

Coyote's Randy Newby says society's attitudes push prostitutes "into the bottom of the barrel." Within the hierarchy of prostitution it's streetwalkers like Linda who endure the harshest working conditions. They face bad weather, hostility and danger that women who work in bars, massage parlors or as "call girls" can avoid.

Things have gotten so bad in the block Linda works that three months ago a hooker was murdered there. "A lady said she saw the man who did it. She could have screamed, 'Hey, let her go,' or called the police. But nobody would help, and she had been dead for eight hours before they found her."

Now Linda works that corner alone—others are afraid. "Right after it happened, I was scared and I went down the street. But I can't make money down there, there's too much competition. So I come up here by myself," she says.

Like the majority of streetwalkers, Linda is black. White prostitutes are more likely to be able to work hotels and bars. She's 17 and has worked the streets since she was 14.

"I just ran into this dude and he talked to me about it. He had diamonds and stuff that I liked. I didn't graduate from grammar school, didn't know any jobs, so I tried it."

"I'm not planning to do this all my life," she continues. "When I get about 30 I'll retire. I plan to have everything I want out of life—that's the point of being out here. I don't want to be an old woman who stares out of her house and got nothing to show for the days she worked."

Violence is part of her nightly 9-to-6 shift. "I might run into a fool," she says. "Sometimes if they act too foolish I jump out of the car." She used to work on the west side, but hasn't returned there since she was stabbed in the leg when a man tried to rob her. She can get no help from the police if she's assaulted in the course of her job because her job is illegal.

She used to have a room where she took her clients, but the man who rented it to her was kicked out of the building. "Now, we go in the cars," she says.

Linda thinks it would help if prostitution were legalized. She could get health checkups, work a normal eight-hour day and pay taxes like everyone else. "Now we pay more taxes than anybody. During the big

crackdown last summer I was paying \$200 a night." The constant arrests and fines that never really eliminate the prostitution trade have led some to call cities like Chicago the biggest pimp of all.

Linda has been talking to me in a fast-food restaurant, but is anxious to leave. "I can't stay—my man will get after me if I stay here too long," she says.

She walks back into the freezing night, dodging cannily behind cars, watching with one eye for a customer, the other for the police.

The Community

Once prostitutes begin regularly to do business in a neighborhood, every woman who lives there becomes a prostitute to the men who cruise by. A woman who lives in Chicago's Uptown complains, "The other day, a man followed me for blocks, trying to proposition me. Even though I didn't respond, he pursued me, like I was some sort of animal." She and other women who live there are afraid to go shopping without their husbands.

Helen Becker, who works on 42nd and Broadway in New York, says men proposition her all the time on the way to work. "Believe me, I'm no youngster," she says, "but the men come up and say things, and then the women say, 'move out of my area.'"

Her daughter says, "You walk down that street, the men say such disgusting things to you, suddenly you feel dirty, like you should go home and take a bath."

"If you're part of a community that's poor, black and underprivileged," says Detroit NAACP's Joe Madison, "then you're told you have to accept the trash prostitution brings with it. And by trash, I mean all the white men who sit home in the suburbs criticizing Detroit for being dangerous, and then come into the neighborhood just to get a piece of ass."

Worse than the hookers and johns, many residents feel, is the accompanying crime. "We have older people who can't cook who were afraid to go out for their meals," says Maude Phillips of the MacArthur section of Oakland, Calif. "They were so afraid of the pimps and other men hanging around they just stayed indoors and went hungry."

Before the community pressured the police last summer, there had been two murders within a block of Phillips' house and beatings were routine.

"These people worked so long to get comfort in their later years," Phillips continues, "then they're not even able to get out the door."

"We have nothing against prostitution per se," says Mary Ellis of Detroit's North Woodward-John R. Community Assn. "But don't walk my streets." Like many community residents, Ellis worries about children who find used contraceptives and pantyhose in the street and witness sexual acts.

"How about our rights? We live here," said a sign carried by a 7-year-old in a recent anti-prostitution demonstration in New York.

The long-range effect on a community can be devastating. "Where do my rights begin? There are homeowners' rights," says Mel White of Angry Residents Mobilize in a primarily black community in Detroit's far northwest. "Nobody has a right to deteriorate a whole neighborhood. We

could see the whole street change. The city stopped cleaning, parking got way out of line, things began going on in our side streets."

Increased police protection doesn't always help either. Particularly if she is black, a community resident risks being arrested in a police dragnet.

In Chicago's Uptown, an 11-year-old girl reported she was repeatedly harassed by overzealous undercover police agents trying to entrap hookers.

Most community residents are not concerned with what will happen to streetwalkers. They just want them moved away. Cassie Lopez, a neighbor of Phillips in Oakland, says, "We say get them out of the community, or pretty soon there won't be any community."

Is There A Solution?

It's hard to live in a neighborhood where streetwalkers congregate, where you constantly fear insults, propositions, assaults and random violence.

It's also hard to work as a hooker, dodging the police, fearing a crazy john, an angry resident or perhaps a beating from your own pimp.

It's tragic that streetwalkers and neighborhood people are locked in conflict. Tragic because there probably is no good solution within the structures of American society today.

Prostitution is said to be the world's oldest profession. James Pasto, a San Diego lawyer who defends massage parlors, says trying to stop prostitution "is like sticking your finger in a dike, trying to keep the water out and another hole keeps popping open. As long as they have a demand, there's going to be a supply."

Like many of the men spoken to in preparing these articles, Pasto believes prostitution to be a natural part of human sexuality.

And he does have a point. As long as women are raised to aspire to be sex symbols and denied other ways to support themselves, why should they be hunted like animals for selling their bodies?

Decriminalization is a good reform that would make life far easier for prostitutes, keep them from relying on criminals for protection and perhaps even lessen the blight on communities.

But it's not enough. Why should we acquiesce in a situation where men buy women's bodies and women are forced to sell themselves?

Coyote says all women sell their bodies one way or another: Housewives trade sexual favors for a lifetime of support; prostitutes do it for a fixed amount. Whether the analogy really holds, I suspect that as long as any woman has to trade sex to feed her kids or to get ahead in some way, there will be hookers out on the streets.

Prostitution will never end because of more arrests or harsher sentences. It's a problem much larger than a neighborhood can handle.

It will only end when every woman can control her own life, has access to education and a decent job, and enough resources to live. We're a long way from that now. But unless building a society that guarantees real equality and power for women becomes a goal, communities and streetwalkers alike will continue to suffer.

There's gold in them thar dumps

By Linda Siskind

Sacramento, Calif. Garbage, it seems, is becoming very valuable. "Rising costs of energy and virgin material will gradually make solid waste so valuable that cities may someday be selling their garbage to private resource-recovery systems," said the *New York Times Magazine* last year. And in California that seems to be a real possibility.

California legislators recently completed two days of hearings on various options for managing the state's garbage. Arrayed before them were representatives of all who want to get their hands on more garbage: private collection agencies, which control 70 percent of the garbage statewide and 75 percent nationwide, and think past, present and future garbage belongs in dumps; Union Carbide Corp., which sells \$50 million plants to convert garbage into fuel, a popular proposal except for the cost and the fact that thousands of tons of garbage a day are mandatory for economic operation of the plants; and the recyclers, who with "messianic fervor" say the future health of our planet requires us to waste less and reuse more.

Although no fists were flying, the stage was set for a future battle when and if the legislators actually take sides. So far, they are only considering legislation to control hazardous waste disposal, regulate private garbage collection rates, adopt container reuse policies and put money into recycling and energy-producing demonstration projects.

Legislators are looking at recycling with more interest now that the nation's oil and minerals are becoming scarcer and more expensive. But they haven't yet met the issue square-on and demanded a change in our throw-away economy—by ending, for instance, the surcharge on recycled freight that makes virgin material cheaper to transport, or ending the depletion allowance on mining resources that makes virgin resources cheaper to extract.

►Getting the most out of resources. Nevertheless, legislators here seem to be committed in principle to getting the most out of our

resources, and that means getting the most out of our garbage.

"Waste is something you don't want, period," explains Dr. Paul Palmer, a chemist. "There's nothing wrong with it other than it happens to be in the wrong hands." He told the legislators he makes money selling one company's waste chemicals

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to another company or individual who doesn't think of it as waste at all.

Those who have the most to lose from such an attitude are in the business of hauling garbage to be dumped—"God's way of getting rid of refuse," as one witness put it.

An industry spokesman said recycling won't work because it usually means separating out certain types of garbage at home, and "the ladies won't do it."

After the dump, nicknamed the "garbage cemetery" by one witness, the disposal companies favor delivering large amounts of garbage to energy conversion facilities. A few such large-scale facilities are operating or planned in the U.S., but only on the condition that communities supply an established amount of garbage every day or pay the cost of the missing garbage. That condition and a cost estimate of \$77 million are holding up approval on an energy conversion project in Westchester, N.Y., right now, despite enthusiastic support from the county executive.

►Supporters for energy conversion. Large-scale energy conversion has its supporters in California,

too. A \$400,000 study of the San Francisco Bay Area's waste for the state's Solid Waste Management Board is expected to recommend just such a project—and here the recyclers and garbage establishment are already sparing partners.

The plant, if built, would need to consume 90 percent of the Bay Area's garbage and to have a guarantee of that amount for a number of years, thus eliminating much of the potential to recycle and sell the valuable ingredients in the trash. The Bay Area study estimates there is enough metal in the area's garbage to make 125,000 medium-sized cars, enough aluminum for 100 jumbo jets, and so on. Environmentalists here particularly want to see organic wastes used as compost to keep an agriculturally vital delta area from sinking.

The chief critic of large-scale energy conversion plans is the president of Berkeley's Solid Waste Management Commission, Ariel Parkinson. Those who favor large-scale energy conversion, she testified, are really saying "it is easier to take hundreds of millions of dollars out of the pockets of taxpayers for capital investment than it is to get them to change their habits—specifically to put materials in separate piles."

Parkinson is not against making energy from some of the garbage (like plastics and other unrecyclables) but unless small-scale conversion plants can be built, she advocates simply burning the waste to produce energy. She cites a recent report from the General Accounting Office that confirmed that direct combustion is the only commercially viable way of getting energy from garbage right now.

Already Berkeley has received four offers for its municipally-owned trash—from two chemical companies, one city and one private utility-private garbage collection combine. The city knows it has its hands on something valuable, and isn't saying yes to anyone yet.

Gov. Jerry Brown has also referred to urban waste as a "gold mine." In California, people aren't looking down their noses at garbage any more. Linda Siskind is a San Francisco-based freelance writer.



Urban Waste: a potential gold mine

Photo by Cidne Hart/LNS

socialist revolution

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