

COMMENTS ON *TAKING STOCK: A SYMPOSIUM CELEBRATING THE NEW YORK STATE JUDICIAL COMMITTEE ON WOMEN IN THE COURTS*¹

GLORIA STEINEM

Sex trafficking is rooted in the cults of gender, race, class, and profit—and they flourish here, too. Here is a quote:

There is proof of regularly organized kidnapping . . . and deportation of girls, not only abroad, but to the . . . lumber camps of Michigan and Wisconsin In January, a Representative appeared before the House Judiciary Committee of the Michigan legislature, confirming . . . that a regular trade in young girls existed between Milwaukee, Chicago and the mining regions of the Upper Peninsula . . . the punishment is totally inadequate to the crime . . . The freedom, innocence and lives of such women are of less account in law than . . . property. If these girls were robbed . . . the law would punish the theft – but robbed of themselves, enduring such brutal outrages that [they may live] only from two to twelve months, there have yet been passed no laws . . . policemen, judges and sheriffs are found aiding and abetting . . . the traffic in girls from one part of the American continent to another is . . . a well-organized plan The number of women and girls constantly reported “missing” is startling

I know that none of that quote surprises the many here who worked hard for four years to finally achieve New York State’s first ever law against human trafficking. It won’t surprise those who know that a sex trafficking survivor is far more likely to be arrested as a prostitute than her captor is to be arrested for trafficking her.

It doesn’t surprise Rachel Lloyd, creator of GEMS, who probably could have written it.

It doesn’t surprise me either, not after years of following the Minnesota Pipeline of blonde Scandinavian farm girls to their corners and short life

¹ These comments were originally delivered at *Taking Stock: A Symposium Celebrating the N.Y.S. Judicial Committee on Women in the Courts 25th Anniversary* in April 2011.

expectancies in Times Square, or interviewing prostituted women and girls in Las Vegas—whose average age is 14—and seeing that the county where it's legalized is the worst. What's in Vegas must not stay in Vegas.

In fact, that quote about sex trafficking was written in 1893. You'll find it in *Woman, Church and State* by Matilda Joselyn Gage. She was the most radical member of a triumvirate with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She never gave up her belief that sex trafficking and every flouting of the human will was neither natural nor inevitable.

Does anyone have the right to sell anyone else's body? Absolutely not. Does each of us have a right to sell our own body? Yes. But I have to say that after nearly forty years of talking with prostituted women, children, and men, I've met only three who say they did so without fear, economic need, or child abuse that convinced them early and deep that they had nothing but a sexual value.

The problem is that as soon as we call it "sexuality," all bets of balance and equality are off—like calling something "religion" or "national interest." When it comes to the cult of gender, ideas are hard to challenge—or even to see as open to challenge—because they are exaggerated versions of the earliest ways we may have been taught to see people as groups rather than unique individuals. Our ideas of dominant and passive, subject and object, may literally feel like "home."

After all, gender domination tends to be the first way we learn it's okay for one group to eat even though they don't cook or clean; to be paid for working outside the home even though the other group does the important work of raising children that is mysteriously called "not working;" to give orders and enforce them with control and even violence over those they are supposed to love; to ignore or consider inevitable the fact that females are the objects of most violence around the globe.

So here is both the good news and the bad news of being human: our brains are more malleable than those of any other of our animal relatives; indeed, 80% of them develop after birth. Therefore we are more subjected to our surroundings, to our community, to shaming and to restriction, to inspiration and to image, to story and to example.

If we meet in groups like these, we create a critical mass of people who challenge hierarchies of sex and race and class and ethnicity and anything else that isn't chosen and earned. Each of us is both part of a community and a unique combination of heredity and environment that could never have happened before—or again. We are way more the same as human beings than we are different as females and males.

Olaf Palme, who was the chief of state in Sweden, said gender roles were the deepest cause of violence on earth because they normalized dominance and submission; therefore, it was the duty of every nation to humanize them.

He was the only chief of state I know of to understand this. Even now,

our media almost never remarks on the fact that the Cult of Masculinity is the heart of terrorism, whether in the home as domestic violence, or in the street as political violence. The Cult of Femininity also supports the fiction of masculinity. We must take responsibility for a failure to name it, resist it, and rebel. When violence is normalized and disguised as sexuality, we must all name that lie.

In this room, we may be uprooting the deepest cause of violence—the gender roles that become the model for race, class, and begin every hierarchy.

Democracy starts with our bodies. Together, we can do this.

