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Rhode Island Take Back the Night

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**Rhode Island's 27th Annual
Take Back the Night March**

September 30, 2005

Good Evening,

It is an honor for me to be here for the 27th Annual Take Back the Night March. Women uniting to take back the night in marches have symbolized women's resistance to sexual violence and their declaration of freedom and dignity for decades. "Speaking out" against violence is the way we break the conspiracies of silence that the perpetrators try to impose on us.

Tonight's march is dedicated to the memory of Andrea Dworkin, that fearless, feminist campaigner against all forms of sexual violence, including rape, incest, pornography, and prostitution.

We have come a long way in our movement to end violence against women. We've made significant progress in holding batterers accountable. We have rape-abuse hotlines and trauma recovery centers. Sexual harassment is now a violation of women's civil rights.

But we still have battles to fight – and win. We lost the fight against pornography because the pornographers convinced the courts that when you photograph acts of sexual violence, it becomes someone's "speech," and is therefore protected by the First Amendment. The good news is that a new generation of young people are reading the writings of the anti-pornography campaigners and uniting to renew the anti-pornography movement. We will not give up. Remember, it took suffragists 72 years to get the right to vote in this country.

Tonight, I want to talk to you about another form of sexual violence, one that Andrea Dworkin addressed many times -- the violence of prostitution. In her important speech entitled "Prostitution and Male Supremacy," she said: "Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman's body. ... And

no woman gets whole again later... because too much is taken away when the invasion is inside you, when the brutality is inside your skin."

In prostitution, women are used over and over every night by men who only want to know them as the fantasies they project onto them. As Dworkin says: "The only analogy I can think of concerning prostitution is that it is more like gang rape than it is like anything else. ... The gang rape is punctuated by a money exchange. ... You give a woman money and whatever it is that you did to her she wanted, she deserved. ... With the money he can buy a human life and erase its importance from every aspect of civil and social consciousness, from the protections of law, from any right of citizenship, from any concept of human dignity and human sovereignty."

There couldn't be a better time and place than right now in Providence, Rhode Island, to memorialize Andrea Dworkin and vow to carry on her work. As many of you know, there is a controversy about what to do about the expanding sex industry in Providence, particularly the massage parlors.

What do we know about the women in massage parlors in Providence or in any city in the U.S.? Almost exclusively they are Asian. They are victims of sex trafficking brought into this country from Korea, China or Thailand. They are held in captivity through threats, beatings, rapes, debt bondage, and ignorance of how to get help. Many times they don't even know they deserve help.

And I don't mean they are victims of sexual slavery as some sort of feminist rhetoric. I mean literal slavery. We have about 10 massage parlors right here in the city. Can anyone here say they have ever seen one of these women? Actually seen one of them come out and go for a walk?

The Asian women in massage parlors have no freedom of movement. They are locked in or guarded day or night. They are moved from city to city by taxi services operated by the organized crime rings.

According to Andrea Dworkin: “When men use women in prostitution, they are expressing a pure hatred for the female body... It is a contempt so deep, so deep, that a whole human life is reduced to a few sexual orifices, and he can do anything he wants.” That’s the life these women are living.

My friend Lisa Thompson suggests we should call these networks of sex slave camps – sexual gulags. We have a gulag archipelago in the U.S. These camps dot the cities and towns all over this country.

So what has Rhode Island proposed to get rid of these sexual gulags in our midst? Criminalize the victims! Make it a crime to be enslaved and forced to have sex with as many men a day as can pay the money. We have to resist this proposal because it is no solution at all. It only further victimizes the women, and lets the perpetrators go free.

The liberation of these women from sexual slavery is a project for all of us. We need to work for their freedom and to get Rhode Island to put the perpetrators in jail where they belong. All the perpetrators -- the traffickers, the pimps, the managers, the people who rent space to them, the drivers of delivery services, and the men who buy the sex acts. All of them are involved in committing acts of sexual violence against vulnerable victims.

The good news is that there is now a global abolitionist movement against sex trafficking that is gaining momentum. The movement is composed of people from a broad political spectrum – from feminists to conservatives, from liberals to faith based groups. They are uniting in what I believe is the human rights struggle of our time – against the ability of men to buy women and children for sex acts and for exploiters to profit from their sale.

I look forward to working with you here in Rhode Island so that we can take action locally as part of this global abolitionist movement. The time is right. The legislators are now willing to consider other approaches that don’t criminalize the victims. Let’s seize the moment. As we march tonight, let’s tell the city that we are here to liberate more women from sexual violence. There couldn’t be a better memorial for Andrea Dworkin.