

18 MYTHS ON PROSTITUTION



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

| TOGETHER FOR A EUROPE |
FREE FROM PROSTITUTION |

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“PROSTITUTION IS THE OLDEST PROFESSION IN THE WORLD.”

Let us change the perspective: pimping could indeed be considered the oldest profession in the world. In any case, just because something has existed for a long time does not mean that it should or cannot be changed. We do not say “murder has been around forever: we cannot do anything about it”. Look at death penalty or slavery for example.



A CHOICE?

“IT IS A JOB LIKE ANY OTHER.”

Do you know any other job where people face a mortality rate 10 to 40 times above the average? Where 60 to 80% of “workers” experience regular physical and sexual abuse? If this is a job like any other, how come so few women from Western Europe take the opportunity? How come the overwhelming majority are migrant women? Does this mean that this so called “job” is only for the foreign women in your country? For the sake of gender equality, should we campaign to promote this job for men? There are trade unions in Europe that do not see prostitution as a job as it is incompatible with the safety and the dignity, as well as the “career” progression, associated with a profession.

“PROSTITUTION BRINGS WOMEN ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE, ESPECIALLY TO MIGRANT WOMEN.”

In times of economic crisis, with high unemployment, with thriving racist attitudes, it would be very easy to say that prostitution is a solution for women in general, and for migrant women in particular. It would even help to reduce unemployment rates! Real issues for migrant women are about: labour market access, qualification recognition and family reunification rights. Economic independence should not come at the cost of harm and abuse. In the 21st century, we have to do better.

“IT IS A CHOICE.”

“If women had more economic choices in this society, they would not choose to be abused in prostitution”, says Fiona Broadfoot, survivor from the UK. Choice is always related to a context. Today in Europe, gender equality is not a reality: just look at the gender pay gap (16%), the prevalence of violence against women (1 in 5 women victim of domestic violence), sexist stereotypes, underrepresentation of women in business, academia and politics (24% of national parliamentarians)... In a context where many women face discrimination, poverty and violence, consent can be bought with money. Extensive research indicates that poverty, family loss, homelessness, drug addiction and a history of physical and sexual abuse combine to make young women vulnerable to entering prostitution. Moreover, the majority of women who enter prostitution first do so very young. Would you want your daughter or sister to choose prostitution? She could start tomorrow.

“PROSTITUTION BRINGS A LOT OF MONEY.”

To whom? According to Interpol in Europe, a pimp earns 110 000 euros per year and per woman in prostitution. If prostitution were such a good job, how come the majority of women in prostitution do not own a car, an apartment or save money for the future? The idea that prostitution brings a lot of money is a myth. Moreover, debating on the amount of money earned in prostitution is a dishonest strategy: whatever the amount, prostitution is about someone buying access to your body and sexuality. Human beings are priceless.

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“PROSTITUTION IS ABOUT SEXUAL FREEDOM, ABOLITION IS ANTI-SEX.”

Let us be more precise: whose sexual freedom are we talking about? Everyone agrees that sexual freedom consists of enjoying sexual health and rights, based on equality and free from any discrimination, coercion or violence (definition of the World Health Organisation). Prostitution is not about sex, it's about power: the purchase of sex is the denial of the other person's desire. Paying for sex is denying another person's right to sexual desire and consists of a profound disempowering of sexual agency in another human being. In other words, buying sex from someone can never be about sexual freedom. Abolitionists are pro-sex: they want genuine sexual freedom and equality between women and men, and this cannot be achieved as long as sexuality is placed within the scope of the market.

SEXUAL FREEDOM?

“PROSTITUTION IS PART OF WOMEN'S HISTORICAL STRUGGLE TO CONTROL THEIR BODY.”

In the 1970s in Europe, women indeed struggled for the recognition of their reproductive and sexual rights, in particular the right to safe abortion. They were denouncing structural gender inequality and therefore any authority imposing its views on women's human rights: religion, tradition... and the market. The commodification of sexuality and women's bodies cannot be considered part of a collective struggle for women's rights: prostitution is about men entitling themselves to buy sex, it is not about realising gender equality.

“SOME WOMEN CLAIM THAT IT IS THEIR RIGHT TO PROSTITUTE THEMSELVES.”

Some people freely accept to work for less than the minimum wage (especially undocumented migrants for example); some even agree to sell one organ. In both cases, our society has decided to protect the most vulnerable and guarantee decent life for all; in such cases, the law therefore condemns the employer, or the buyer of the organ. Similarly, the law should criminalise the sex buyer, not the person in prostitution. Some persons might indeed claim that they choose to be in prostitution; but a democratic society is not built on the basis of individual claims that don't reflect the situation of the overwhelming majority. At stake is the future we are creating, the society we want to live in. In this day and age, we should be more concerned about women's and men's right not to be in prostitution.

“ONLY “SEX WORKERS” SHOULD TALK ABOUT PROSTITUTION, BECAUSE THEY KNOW BEST.”

Should only women who have been victim of domestic violence be entitled to denounce intimate partner violence? Domestic violence is recognised as a structural form of violence against women, that affects us all, women and men, because it is about societal values. Prostitution also affects us all: it conveys norms and representations to young people, it is trivialised and even glamorised by the media and the culture industry. No wonder the insult 'whore' is so widespread! Moreover, for every mediatised "sex worker", there are many survivors of prostitution, who very rarely speak out, because of the trauma linked to their experience. And millions of persons still in prostitution, who are invisible. It is time to listen to them.



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“PROSTITUTION IS USEFUL FOR SOCIETY, ESPECIALLY FOR SOCIALLY ISOLATED AND LONELY MEN.”

Sex buyers do not fit this stereotype: international research shows that the majority of sex buyers are men married or in a relationship, and are more likely to have a larger number of sexual partners (not through prostitution) than the rest of the male population. By justifying prostitution as a social institution, one would imply that some women are to be sacrificed for the “needs” of these men. Luckily, you or your sister/wife/daughter/friend is not part of the sacrificed ones. Women in prostitution are first and foremost women; they should all enjoy the same equal rights and human dignity.

“DEMAND WILL NEVER DISAPPEAR.”

What a sad vision of men.... according to this assumption, men are driven by their so-called sexual “irrepressible needs”, not by their brain. It is all the more surprising to believe, as the majority of men are not sex buyers. Demand is justified by a certain vision of masculinity, related to virility or strength, all stereotypes about men conveyed in our unequal societies. Demand can be reduced by education, prevention and legislation. It is as simple as that. Fatalism is used by people who do not want to change society.



“ABOLISHING PROSTITUTION WOULD LEAD TO MORE RAPES.”

Actually, it is the other way round: studies have shown that men buy sex simply because it is possible. The normalisation of prostitution on the contrary fosters acts of violence against women, by sending the social signal that women are commodities. Nevada, where pimping has been decriminalised, sees the highest rate of rape compared to the other American states. In a study on men, 54% of prostitute-users recognised having had aggressive sexual behaviour towards their partner[s].

SOCIAL UTILITY?

“LEGALISING PROSTITUTION IS THE BEST WAY TO GUARANTEE ACCESS TO BASIC RIGHTS FOR PEOPLE IN PROSTITUTION.”

Being in prostitution is “legal” everywhere in Europe (except Croatia where it is criminalised). The issue of accessing rights is not linked to the legal status of prostitution, it is linked to the migration status of each person: if you are legally staying in a country, you can have access to basic rights, including HIV-testing and health care. If you are undocumented, you will not have access to these rights, including in countries that legalise or decriminalise prostitution; it has nothing to do with being in prostitution or not. In Germany, only 44 persons have registered as “professional sex workers”, out of the estimated 400 000 persons in prostitution. Legalising prostitution (or decriminalising “sex work” and therefore pimping) does not change the stigma on persons in prostitution.

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“WE MUST COMBAT TRAFFICKING, BUT PROSTITUTION HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH IT.”

Such claims contradict the reality: if prostitution has nothing to do with sex trafficking, what exactly are women trafficked for? According to EU data, 62% of trafficking in the EU is for sexual exploitation. Trafficking is profit-driven, and has a direct link with the prostitution markets, where the demand fuels the supply. It is estimated that the benefits from trafficking for sexual exploitation amount to US\$ 27.8 billion. And where does this money come from? From the buyers, like in any other business. This is why prostitution and trafficking are intrinsically linked.

“WITH THE SWEDISH MODEL, PERSONS IN PROSTITUTION FACE MORE VIOLENCE AS PROSTITUTION GOES UNDERGROUND.”

If buyers can find and meet with women in prostitution, so can the police and social workers! By criminalising sex buyers, the Swedish model changes the relationship between women and buyers: buyers are the criminals. Women in prostitution, who have been to Germany before joining Sweden, said to the Stockholm police prostitution unit that there is much more violence in legal brothels as sex buyers are entitled to do what they want, as they are the “clients”. Social workers in Sweden see that persons in prostitution feel more confident to come forward for assistance. On the contrary, in countries where brothels are legal (like Australia or Germany), service providers and law enforcement say that they have limited access to women. Legalising prostitution will not change the reality: prostitution is a form of violence. 68% of women in prostitution suffer from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, like victims of torture or veterans of war.

UTOPIA?

“WE SHOULD NOT CRIMINALISE SEX BUYERS BECAUSE THEY CAN SAVE WOMEN OR IDENTIFY VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING.”

Maybe you have watched “Pretty woman” too many times. A sex buyer who “saves” a woman, or report a case of trafficking, is still a sex buyer. The existence of “nice sex buyers” does not reduce demand, it just comforts a romantic vision of prostitution that has nothing to do with reality. Moreover, the “nice sex buyers” are a very tiny minority among sex buyers: punters’ websites are very revealing in that perspective. Here are some quotes: “Reasonable blow job but just a bad attitude and making no effort to look interested or even pretend to enjoy”; “it was like fucking an attractive sack of spuds” (The invisible men Tumblr).

“ABOLITIONISTS WANT TO PROHIBIT PROSTITUTION.”

There is a great difference between the prohibitionist approach, which criminalises all actors in the system of prostitution, including prostituted persons, and the abolitionist approach that targets only the buyers, pimps and traffickers, in other words those who hold the power of choice. Simply penalising everybody does not address the root causes and gendered nature of prostitution. Abolition is about qualifying the structural, economic, psychological and physical violence inherent to prostitution, and therefore protecting the persons affected, and criminalising the perpetrators, i.e. the sex buyers. Abolition is about proposing concrete alternatives to persons in prostitution and changing mentalities.

“THE ABOLITION OF PROSTITUTION IS UTOPIA.”

Abolishing prostitution does not equal eradicating it. Rapes, murders or paedophilia are prohibited, but still exist. What is important is the social norm conveyed by legislation: it anchors amongst human rights the principle that the human body and sexuality are not for sale. It creates the conditions for a genuine equal society to be realised.

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ASSESSMENT OF TEN YEARS OF SWEDISH & DUTCH POLICIES ON PROSTITUTION¹

THE NETHERLANDS²

On 1st October 2000, the Netherlands lifted the ban on brothels dating back from 1911. Since then, several studies from the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice (WODC) and from the national police force (KLPD) have studied the impact of the decriminalisation of pimping in the Netherlands.

THE SITUATION OF PERSONS IN PROSTITUTION HAS WORSENEDED.

- The study 'Daalder'³ carried out for the Ministry of Justice unveils that:
- "There has been no significant improvement of the situation of persons in prostitution".
- "The prostitutes' emotional well-being is now lower than in 2001 on all measured aspects".
- "The use of sedatives has increased".
- Requests for leaving the industry were in high demand, while only 6% of municipalities offer such assistance.

50% TO 90% OF THE WOMEN IN LICENSED PROSTITUTION "WORK INVOLUNTARILY".

These data were unveiled in 2008 by the national police force (KLPD) in a study on the sector of legalised prostitution entitled "Keeping up appearances".⁴ In this study, the Dutch national police force gives a very worrying assessment of the law decriminalising procuring. Direct cause of the study is the Sneep-case, where two Turkish-German procurers, together with 30 accomplices, were condemned for exploitation of and violence against more than 100 women in the Netherlands, in Germany and in Belgium. What is striking is that all the women, who have been exploited with extreme violence in the Netherlands, were in the legal, licensed, taxpaying and State sanctioned brothels.

ORGANISED CRIME KEPT THE CONTROL OVER THE LEGAL SECTOR OF THE SEX INDUSTRY.

In 2011, a deputy mayor of Amsterdam, Lodewijk Asscher, also the new figure of the labour party in the Netherlands, stated that decriminalising procuring has been a "national error"⁵ and that the government has been "reprehensibly naïve". A report made jointly by the City of Amsterdam and the Ministry of Justice⁶ shows indeed that a great part of the legal sector of the sex industry perpetuates exploitation and trafficking in human beings. Half of the permit-required businesses of prostitution and coffee shops (marijuana) have one or more managers with a criminal record.

DECRIMINALISING PROCURING AND LEGALISING THE SEX INDUSTRY DID NOT PREVENT FROM AN INCREASE IN 'HIDDEN' OR 'ILLEGAL' PROSTITUTION.

In 2010, the RIEC Noord-Holland, a government body in charge of crime prevention, unveiled in a study⁷ that only 17% of the prostitution advertisements published in newspapers and on the internet are placed by licensed brothels.

¹ Assessment produced with the support of Mouvement du Nord France - ² General source: 'On legalised prostitution in the Netherlands', Karin Werkman, 2012. - ³ Daalder, A. L. (2007). Prostitution in The Netherlands since the lifting of the brothel ban [English version]. The Hague: WODC / Boom Juridische Uitgevers. ⁴ KLPD [Korps Landelijke Politiediensten] – Dienst Nationale Recherche (juli 2008). Schone schijn, de signalering van mensenhandel in de vergedene prostitutiesector. Driebergen. - ⁵ http://www.lemonde.fr/m/article/2011/12/23/pays-bas-flop-de-la-legalisation-de-la-prostitution_1621755_1575563.html. ⁶ Gemeente Amsterdam, Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie; Projectgroep Emergo (2011). Emergo – De gezamenlijke aanpak van de zware (georganiseerde) misdaad in het hart van Amsterdam. Achtergronden, ontwikkelingen, perspectieven. Amsterdam: Boom Juridische Uitgevers. - ⁷ RIEC Noord Holland (19 October 2010). Methodiek 'Inzicht in prostitutiebranche'.

SWEDEN⁸

The Swedish government published in July 2010 an evaluation of its 1999 law which prohibits the purchase of sex (and not the selling of sex).⁹ The evaluation was led by the Ministry of Justice.¹⁰

BY TACKLING THE DEMAND, THE PROHIBITION TO PURCHASE SEX FUNCTIONS AS A BARRIER AGAINST THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ORGANISED CRIME, TRAFFICKERS AND PIMPS IN SWEDEN.

According to the National Police, the law contributed to the fight against international networks of procurers. By tackling the demand and therefore reducing their possibilities to gain from the exploitation of prostitution, Sweden has discouraged criminal networks to invest on its territory.¹¹

THE NUMBER OF PERSONS EXPLOITED IN STREET PROSTITUTION HAS HALVED AND THERE IS A GENERAL STABILISATION OF THE NUMBER OF PROSTITUTED PERSONS, COMPARED TO THE SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES.

The evaluation of the Swedish law shows that:

- The number of persons exploited in street prostitution has halved since 1999, while it tripled in Denmark and Norway for the same period. There is no evidence of more Swedish men going abroad to buy sex.
- Prostitution through the Internet has increased in Sweden as it has in other countries, due to the development generally of online technology. However, the number of individuals that are sold via Internet web pages/ads is much larger in neighbouring countries such as Denmark and Norway.¹²

- The proportion of prostituted persons from third-countries did not increase in the same way it exploded in neighbouring countries.
- There has been no increase in 'hidden' prostitution. Social services and the police highlight that prostitution cannot completely 'go underground' as it needs some form of publicity to attract sex buyers.

THE LAW PROVES TO CONVEY NORMS AND VALUES: MENTALITIES HAVE COMPLETELY CHANGED IN 10 YEARS AS THERE IS TODAY MORE THAN 70% OF PUBLIC SUPPORT TO THE LAW.

While the majority of the Swedish population was opposed to the prohibition of the purchase of sex before the adoption of the law, 10 years later three surveys have shown that more than 70% of the population support it fully. The support is stronger amongst youth: this shows that the law has played a role in conveying norms and values.

THE PROHIBITION ACTS AS A DETERRENT FOR THE SEX BUYERS: THERE IS A DECREASE OF THE DEMAND.

According to surveys in Sweden, the proportion of men who buy sex has decreased. In 1996, 13.6% of Swedish men said they had bought someone for prostitution purposes. In 2008, it is only 7.8%. This decrease might be overestimated due to the reluctance to admit a crime in a poll. However, a great number of interviewed men said they do not buy sex anymore because of the law. The Swedish police consider that the legislation prevent many men from buying sex.¹³

⁸ General source: 'Briefing on Swedish law and policies on prostitution and trafficking in human beings', Gunilla S. Ekberg B.S.W., JD, 2012. - ⁹ Website of the Swedish government: <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/13358/a/149231>. - ¹⁰ It is interesting to notice that this positive assessment has been made by a government led by the political party which, 10 years earlier, had voted against the law as it was in the opposition side. - ¹¹ This deterrent effect has been confirmed by police phone-tapping activities which reveal the lack of 'profitability' of procuring investment in Sweden. - ¹² In 2007, the Swedish national agency for social affairs studied during 6 weeks the ads posted in the Internet and took inventory of only 400 persons proposing sexual services. In 2008, more than 800 persons in Denmark, and almost 1400 persons in Norway were proposing services on the Internet only. Source: <http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/pdf/rap-info/i3334.pdf> (p. 226). - ¹³ Since the legislation coming into force in 1999, 4225 men have been apprehended.

The European Women's Lobby has initiated,
together with Mouvement du Nid France and Fondation Scelles:

BRUSSELS' CALL

'TOGETHER FOR A EUROPE FREE FROM PROSTITUTION'

More than 200 NGOs, from all over Europe and beyond, have signed it.

The Brussels' Call states the following key principles:

- Prostitution is a form of violence
- Prostitution is a form of exploitation of inequalities
- Prostitution is a violation of human dignity
- Prostitution is a violation of human rights

Signatories of the Brussels' Call call on EU Member States to adopt policies which would guarantee:

- The suppression of repressive measures against prostituted persons
- The criminalisation of all forms of procuring;
The development of real alternatives and exit programmes for those in prostitution;
- The prohibition of the purchase of a sexual act;
- The implementation of policies of prevention and education, to promote equality and positive sexuality;
- The development of prevention policies in the countries of origin of prostituted persons.

They also state that the European Union and its Member States should entirely review their policies against trafficking in human beings, as they are unlikely to achieve meaningful results as long as the impunity of procurers and sex buyers is not addressed.



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