



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
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Prostitution is violence against women – let's refuse to be any part of it!

All organisations working with prostituted persons are aware of the level of violence they are subjected to on a daily basis and are fighting for this violence to be recognised as such, for complaints made by prostitutes to be addressed and for their attackers to be judged and punished. As the vast majority of people in prostitution are women, violent attacks in prostitution are, in the main, attacks against women, even though male prostitutes are also subject to some types of violence. Faced with this violence, social workers on the ground have developed opposing visions of the policies that need to be put in place to improve the day to day life of prostitutes and to reduce the violence they are subjected to. Some believe that it is the working conditions of prostitution that are at the root of the problem and that if they are improved (by providing places which have better protection, relaxing the laws and granting a legal status to prostitutes), it would reduce the risk of violence for prostitutes. For the EWL and its members, it is the very existence of the system of prostitution which enables violence against the prostituted person to take place and, in order to reduce violent attacks in prostitution, we need to abolish the system of prostitution because it, in itself, is a form of violence against women.

Violence against women in prostitution

An international survey¹ undertaken by five NGOs in four countries (France, Austria, Spain and Italy), with the financial support of the Daphne Programme, highlights the multiple forms of violence suffered by prostituted women:

First of all, *physical violence*, which is mainly perpetrated by the prostitute-users, but also by procurers, traffickers and brothel owners. In the international research study undertaken by Melissa Farley², 73% of prostituted persons interviewed stated that they had been subject to physical attacks during prostitution and 62% reported that they had been raped. Between one third and half of the women raped were raped repeatedly. Street prostitutes were subject to a higher level of violence and assault but working as a prostitute in an enclosed space was not enough to avoid rapes and attacks. Prostitute-users were the most common attackers regardless of the type of prostitution. Almost all physical attacks were of a sexual nature. The presence of alarm bells in the brothels to call for help is an emblematic example of the latent violence of the system of prostitution.

For many women in prostitution, violence is part of their everyday life and it is often one of the factors behind women getting involved in prostitution. In a study carried out in Quebec in 2003 on women street prostitutes,³ a quarter of the women interviewed reported having been subject to marital violence before getting involved in prostitution. The Feminist Collective against Rape in France⁴ reports that since the

¹ *Femmes et migrations en Europe, stratégies et empowerment*, Cabiria, 2004.

² Melissa Farley et al., 'Prostitution in five countries: violence and post traumatic stress disorder', *Feminism and Psychology*, 8, 1998

³ Dominique Damant et al., « Trajectoires d'entrée en prostitution : violence, toxicomanie et criminalité », *Le journal international de victimologie*, n°3, avril 2005

⁴ <http://www.prostitutionetsociete.fr/societe/sexisme-egalite-hommes-et-femmes/cfcv-le-viol-un-moteur-pour-la>



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launch of a free telephone help-line (Viols-Femmes-Information, (Rape-Women-Information) in 1986), whereas the people answering the phone did not ask any questions on this point, more than 380 people (including 88% of women) spontaneously declared that they had been or were still involved in prostitution.⁵ In this group, all of them had been subject to serious sexual violence during their childhood, all of them were pushed into prostitution by someone close to them. We can see from these cases a clear link between rapes (in the plural) during childhood, domestic abuse and getting involved in prostitution. This was described by Virginie Despentes as 'Rape makes the best hookers'.⁶

There is little discussion about the *mental health consequences* associated with repeated violent attacks. Approximately 68% of people interviewed by Melissa Farley⁷ met the criteria for a diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, also suffered by victims of torture or soldiers fighting in wars. The researcher Judith Trinquart studied the psychological and physical consequences of prostitution: the main psychological traumas, which take the form of psychological detachment, are a result of being subjected against their will to repeated sexual relations.⁸ Finally, a Canadian report on prostitution and pornography concluded in 1985 that women prostitutes had a mortality rate 40 times higher than the national average.⁹

Prostituted persons are also victims of '*political abuse*' through repression by the state, which on the one hand adopts laws directly attacking prostituted persons, while furthermore denying rights to prostituted women or those who have experiences intolerable institutionalised violence. In France, the law on passive soliciting has made the situation for prostitutes worse as it has forced them to move into more isolated and dangerous areas and portrays prostitutes as delinquents. Abuse from the police-force is widespread. Rape by police officers hit the headlines in September 2007 in France with the trial of seven police officers who were found guilty of raping four young foreign prostitutes. The report of the proceedings notes that: 'the facts are not an isolated case but represent widespread practice amongst the members of their division'.¹⁰ And when the prostituted persons are brave enough to complain, the outcome is often not in their favour, as the majority of complaints lodged do not end in conviction or are turned against them. One example of this was a case of rape and sequestration which took place in Toulouse (France) in 2004 where the outcome was that the attacker had to pay....100 euros for the price of the 'service'. In 2001, again in France, the Montpellier Court of Appeal freed a man accused of raping a prostitute: a 'work-related accident' according to the assistant public prosecutor.

Another form of violence against prostituted persons is the *public eye* – insults, humiliating words, robberies, racist prejudice, as well as abuse from the media. A newspaper reported the story of the man who had to pay for the 'service' for having raped and locked up a prostituted woman thus: 'Bizarrely, the prostitute made a complaint of rape because she had not been paid'.¹¹ Bizarrely! The same approach was

⁵ On 5 April 2011, 40392 rape victims and victims of other sexual attacks had called the freephone number « Viols-Femmes-Information » ; <http://www.cfcv.asso.fr/>

⁶ In *King Kong Théorie*, Grasset, 2006

⁷ 'Violence against women and post-traumatic stress syndrome', *Women and Health*, 1998

⁸ Voir la thèse de Judith Trinquart : <http://ecvf.online.fr/IMG/pdf/Trinquart.pdf.pdf>, an dits manifesto :

<http://stopauxviolences.blogspot.com/2010/01/article-du-dr-judith-trinquart-non-la.html>.

⁹ *Special Committee on Pornography and Prostitution*, 'Pornography and Prostitution in Canada', 1985

¹⁰ <http://www.prostitutionetsociete.fr/politiques-publiques/droits-des-personnes/sept-crs-juges-pour-viol-sur-des>

¹¹ *La Dépêche du Midi*, 7 octobre 2004



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taken in April 2009 for another case¹²: 'A 20-year old Toulouse native was taken in for questioning after robbing a prostitute but also got a free sexual service under threat of a knife'. 'A free sexual service under threat of a knife' is not someone deciding not to pay – it is called rape.

Violence is widespread in prostitution. This is not a coincidence. What happens in prostitution is not unique or different. It is part of what is happening for all women in our societies. If we focus on violence against women in prostitution, we must make the link with women in general, to keep an overall view of society and to not exclude the sector of prostitution from the rest of society and the balance of power at play, whether it is sexist/patriarchal, racist, classist or neo-liberal/capitalist.

The system of prostitution is a form of violence against women

The system of prostitution is not one that is external to society; it is an integral part of what we have created and what we continue to create every day. Violence against persons involved in prostitution is directly related to violence against women more generally. These acts are not isolated but rather the result of a patriarchal and historical system institutionalising the domination of women by men and the unequal social relationships between women and men. Violence against women is both the cause and the consequence of inequality between women and men; and women's vulnerability is not only a symptom of violence against women, it is also associated with the omnipresent discrimination in our patriarchal societies.

The issue of prostitution is directly related to equality between women and men and it is important to keep reminding ourselves of this link and to include it in the fight for women's rights and above all the right of all human beings, whether women or men, to live without violence.

Over the last sixty years, the women's movement has made it possible to achieve rights which had been denied (or never granted) to women: the right to vote, the right to education, the right to financial independence by demanding access to a personal bank account, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to divorce, the right to contraception, to abortion, the right to maternity and parental leave, the right to stand for election. In short, there have been many steps forward but many of these exist in law but not enough in practice. Today, there is an illusion of equality where many people think that equality is a day-to-day reality for all women and that feminists are exaggerating. The statistics and facts however prove that equality is not a reality. Men are still in the majority in decision-making positions across the board. It is men who for centuries have passed laws which are unequal or which are simply not favourable to women. Of course, men did take part in the changes and the laws which have changed things in favour of equality between women and men, but patriarchal structures still have a strong influence on the their implementation or prevents other laws from being developed. The phenomenon of violence against women is an emblematic example: while rape is recognised as a crime in more and more countries and there is an increase in awareness amongst women of their right to report offences, women's associations report persistent impunity of perpetrators of this violence.¹³

¹² *La Dépêche du Midi*, 13 avril 2009

¹³ CWASU, *Different systems, similar outcomes? Tracking attrition in reported rape cases in eleven countries*, April 2009



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The recognition in politics of the structural nature of violence against women, i.e. the fact that these attacks are a tool of male domination, was very difficult to achieve. In Europe, it was only from the 1950's that countries started becoming aware of this crime and to recognise it as such. Next came the recognition of marital rape as a crime and the abolition of the marital right to sexual intercourse, which only occurred very recently for some countries (1990 for France for example). Something we took for granted is not so straightforward. Is it easy nowadays to talk about being raped, beaten or sexually harassed in work? How many more remarks of the type 'she was looking for it' do we have to hear? Even when the victim was wearing tight jeans... (a reference to an English case this year¹⁴).

After the fight against the 'droit du seigneur', incest, sexual harassment and rape, the system of prostitution remains a place where men can continue to use their domination and violence against women while pretending that all parties are consenting. Money however does not create or guarantee equality. Paying for a sexual act is the same as imposing it, of course not with physical force, but through money, i.e. financial domination. While we know that in Europe the poorest people are women, it is essential to make the link between the inequality between women and men and access to financial resources and work, and men's control over women's body and sexuality. Therefore, paying for a sexual relation is a type of violence, as it is part of a relationship which is intrinsically unequal between two people, most often between a man who has the money and a woman who needs it.

Prostitution in itself with its commercial nature servicing male domination is therefore a form of violence against women: money makes women's bodies a commodity which the prostitute-user takes full possession of, going beyond what is prohibited by society in its efforts to realise equality between women and men and fight against violence against women.

If indeed these acts of physical and psychological violence occurred in another context, they would be considered as sexual attacks, cruelty, abuse and rape. Why is it that when they occur within prostitution, they are not considered as such? Is it the money that makes them different?

Prostitution, a man's affair

Let's talk now about men, who are often left out of the debates and invisible when we speak of prostitution. And yet, they are in the majority of 'buyers'. And as we know well, the market always seeks to meet demand and this includes a demand for 'sexual services'. It is rare that we question the origin of this demand – as if it was not to be questioned. And yet, what brings men to pay for sexual relations, or to be violent with prostituted women, whether they are prostitute-users, traffickers or brothel owners?

The sociologist Saïd Bouamama demonstrated elements of the answer in the survey which he conducted in 2004 on 'clients'¹⁵: revenge, the wish to find a place to be able to dominate and hating women are the

¹⁴ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1270113/Youre-guilty-rape-Those-skinny-jeans-tight-remove-jury-rules.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.mouvementdunid.org/Les-clients-en-question-Enquete-d>



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motivating factors pushing men towards prostitution. A study completed in Great Britain in 2009¹⁶ found that for a quarter of all men interviewed (27%), the concept of rape as applied to a prostituted woman is simply 'ridiculous'. Prostitutes 'cannot be raped'. Once he has paid, the prostitute-user feels like he, in some way, is entitled to do whatever he wants. Furthermore, using prostitutes seems to produce in some men an unequal perception of the relationship between women and men, where violence has become banal: 54% of clients admit to having displayed aggressive behaviour of a sexual nature towards a partner who was not a prostitute.¹⁷ One example of an ad for a Spanish strip club: 'She won't say anything if you sleep with one of her friends. She can wait for you twelve hours a day and still be ready; she won't ask you where you are coming from, nor who you have been with; you can ask her whatever you want and she won't get angry. If you don't understand what she is saying, it's not important.' What kind of a relationship between women and men can we expect in a society which tolerates this type of 'market'?

These facts clearly show the persistence of strong patriarchal images in our societies where men have the right to control the bodies and sexuality of women, to have access to them whenever and however they feel like it. Nevertheless, policies at all levels (both national and European) claim to want to fight violence against women and produce many declarations of intent to this purpose. **But how far are we prepared to push the analysis of the origins of this violence? Is it possible to fight against this male violence while at the same time allowing men access to the bodies of some women?**

We all agree that we have to fight against violence in the world, violence against women and against prostituted persons. Yet, the very existence of the system of prostitution in the 21st Century brings up this question: what type of image are we projecting of our societies which accept to buy and sell some of their members? It is urgent that we condemn this violence against prostituted persons but at the same time we must continue to see it within the context of the ongoing violence of men against women, which proves that prostitution is a tool of a patriarchal society. The recognition of the system of prostitution as violence against women and its abolition is a prerequisite for achieving true equality between women and men.

Main source: 'Prostitution: Violence with no name', *Prostitution et Société* (a quarterly publication by the Mouvement du Nid), n°168 and 169, January – June 2010

¹⁶ Melissa Farley, Julie Bindel and Jacqueline M. Golding, 'Men who buy sex. Who they buy and what they know. A research study of 103 men who describe their use of trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution, and their awareness of coercion and violence', *Prostitution Research and Education et Eaves*, 2009

¹⁷ Montoo, Mac Ree, 'A comparison of the male customers of female street prostitutes with national samples of men', *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 2005