

# TRAUMA AND PROSTITUTION

SCIENTISTS FOR A WORLD WITHOUT PROSTITUTION



**TO:**

Human Rights Council on Prostitution and violence against women and girls  
New-York

**Subject:**

Input for SR VAWG's report on violence against women and prostitution

## **Decriminalizing the Purchase of Sexual Services: Lessons from Germany**

Karlsruhe/Germany, January, 8<sup>th</sup> 2022

Dear Madam/Sir,

Time and again, articles are published that portray prostitution as a job like any other. This may be the case for some. However, they only represent a minority. These representations of prostitution do not reflect the reality as it is lived in Germany for the majority but they have a lasting impact on the false image of this activity and influence politicians to the extent that they pass laws that are useless for the women involved in prostitution and completely disconnected from their realities. Most women suffer severely in prostitution and become ill as a result.

"Trauma and Prostitution" is a network of German scientists from the fields of medicine, psychology and psychotraumatology who offer medical and therapeutic help to women in prostitution. Our daily experiences with these women are very different from what the mainstream propagates.

Prostitution cannot be described as work, as it is highly traumatizing. Numerous studies and our daily experiences with these women prove that post-traumatic stress disorder is very common among women in prostitution. Many try to numb their fears and pain with alcohol and other addictive substances and thus develop additional addictions. Even after years of therapy, women say that although they can objectively see their worth, they do not feel it. They continue to feel worthless, just as they were treated in prostitution.

And that was our motivation to speak out against buying sex, because we are virtually mandated by the state to restore the dignity and health of women, but at the same time the state sends the message that men have the right to trample on the dignity and health of women in prostitution. We clarify: about the realities of prostitution, its damage to health and its social impact. All members are calling for the introduction of a ban on buying sex along the lines of the Equality Model. This network was founded by me in 2014 and now counts 213 experts.

### **Testimony from doctors and psychotraumatologists:**

Forced prostitution and “voluntary” prostitution are inextricably linked. That is why it’s hard to separate the two and to treat them differently. The entry into prostitution is usually preceded by experiences of violence in childhood – in this context, it’s inappropriate to speak of “free choice”. Here, too, there are countless studies showing a connection between violent experiences in childhood and prostitution. Many women lacked protection in childhood and consequently didn’t learn self-protection. These women learned how to “switch off” early on.

Many women are victims of human trafficking, some manage to break away from their exploiters and remain in prostitution because their self-worth has been broken there and they can’t see any other option for themselves. Also in these cases, prostitution cannot be considered voluntary.

Because prostitution has been normalized in Germany, attempts are made to offer prostitution as an option to earn money. Women who entered prostitution this way also develop severe PTSDs. I also had such women in therapy. Sadly, many Ukrainian refugees have slipped in this way into prostitution. They have fled the violence of war and are now experiencing sexual violence at the hands of German men in Germany.

Sexuality requires an interplay of mind and body. In order to be penetrated by strangers, it is necessary to switch off instinctual reactions which otherwise would inevitably occur: Fear, shame, alienation, disgust, contempt, smell, pain etc. The phenomenon of this switching-off is called “dissociation”. Additionally, alcohol and drugs help to endure the psychological pain. The use of the vagina as an unfeeling “work instrument” is only possible in a state of dissociation.

This is why the consequences of trauma are so widespread in prostitution. The frequency of developing PTSD in prostitution is more than twice as high as for victims of war.

As a consequence of liberalized prostitution law in Germany, sex buyers have become more extreme and are asking for ever riskier practices. Violence against prostituted women has consequently increased.

Menu-like lists of sex buyer demands circulate online. Abroad these create a visceral reaction and are viewed as descriptions of torture. Here, too, the German government evades responsibility by criminalizing some services, but considers others acceptable: including anal sex, fisting, French kissing, scrotum licking, deep throat, orgies, urinating on women,...

Of course, these risky sexual practices have led to an increase in sexually transmitted infections. A scientific study from 2008 carried out under Dr. Wolff studies the developments in the area of health and well-being with a focus on STIs. 26% had an STI that required medical treatment. 42% had an acute infection or had had one in the recent past.

Inside the brothels, women are “locked-in”. The brothel owner controls daily life, which means he decides who may come in and who may not. Women in brothels do not experience a life of self-determination. They are, as Detective Superintendent Paulus describes, *“from the very start prisoners of a mostly criminal subculture that rules the red-light districts. In the hierarchy of this milieu, they are at the very bottom. They have no rights, no protections, they are helpless.”*

The women have a completely asymmetrical relation to the men. Today the prostitution market consists of c.90% women from poorer EU-countries in the East. Approximately 30% are under 21-years-old. The majority does not speak German. They do not practice safer sex, they cannot assert their boundaries. They are in a situation of complete inferiority. They do not have the power to make demands. For 30,-€ they do anything the sex buyers want. They are completely overwhelmed, completely traumatized.

Prostitution as it occurs today in Germany is overwhelmingly forced prostitution and prostitution born from poverty where the main profiteers are third parties.

Sporer, head of an anti-trafficking unit, says that we have a minimum of 100.000 people who are victim of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, 500 to 1000 times more than recognized by the police.

Violence is also expressed in the high daily rent in brothels (women are having to pay up to 180€ daily), which means that women are seeing 6 buyers before they earn a single euro.

The working conditions are disastrous. Many work, eat and sleep in brothels. They live in a lawless parallel world with no access to the outside. Women are being sold in Germany according to the laws of most brutal capitalism: Profit maximization and low cost.

The work shifts in of themselves pose a health risk: Prostituted women are having to be “available” to customers around the clock and consequently often sleep for just five hours a night.

Gynaecologists like Dr. Heide who works with women in prostitution are reporting that pregnant women are in high demand among sex buyers. This means that late abortions are very common or that many women are giving up children for adoption shortly after birth. The physical and emotional stress caused by women having to offer sex conveyor-belt-style isn't just risky for the pregnant woman, but also for the development of the fetus inside her body.

Reports like that of gynaecologist Liane Bissinger describing the bodily harms of prostitution are a harrowing read. She reports destroyed intestinal floras, illnesses regarding teeth/mouth/jaws, skin eczemas, whole body pain and frequent hip joint pain (from having to endure the heavy weight of sex buyers and their violent thrusts for hours on end), irreversible damage to the pelvic floor leading to urinal and stool incontinence.

Street workers who work with prostituted women often report that the women they meet have lost touch with themselves. They react fearful or apathetic. It seems obvious that the last thing they need is sex. But sex buyers see this and “don't give a damn”. They laugh about it and enjoy themselves.

How is that possible to not see the other person's distress, to just focus on one's own desires?

It's clearly possible, because legal sex-buying communicates to men that they have a right to sex and to using women. The woman is locked into a socially constructed image, an image of the "unsatiable sex beast". Other needs she may have are invisible. She is dehumanized, she is only that: A body with no soul. This allows the sex buyer any form of unscrupulousness, his compassion is blocked, and indifference takes its place. The recent study on sex buyers in Germany done by Farley prove this: 55% of the 96 sex buyers interviewed have observed pimping or human trafficking, 62% have suspected that the women were victims of human trafficking, 28% believed that prostitution has negative effects on the women.

Some sexbuyers have come to see me for therapy. A therapeutic question is: What signs were there in contact with the women that indicate that they experience buying sex as a form of violence? Here are a view replies:

- I booked a woman for 12 hours on New Year's Eve and after we had sex she stopped talking to me. She refused to speak to me for the remaining 10 hours.
- Another woman only wanted to have sex in complete darkness.
- Most women went instantly into the bathroom after sex and remained there for a very long time. When they came back out they made me leave instantly.
- One woman said that it was better for men to visit prostituted women than to rape women. When she said this she almost cried because in that moment she realized how she was experiencing prostitution.
- One woman said, „No woman wants this.”
- One sexbuyer was a regular client of a woman and she told him that her father had sexually abused her in childhood.  
*My reply: Well, I think that she needed something else than having sex with strangers, so why did you keep seeing her?*  
His answer: Because I paid for it.
- A different sexbuyer:
  - „I saw her shaking and she told me that she didn't want to do it, that she was only doing it for the money.”
  - *My reply: And? What did you do then?*
  - Sexbuyer: I had sex with her.
  - *Me: Why did you? She didn't want to.*
  - Sexbuyer: Well, I paid for it.

And that is exactly what prostitution is: You are paying for unwanted sex. For these men the exchange of money seemed to justify the rape. But for the woman, it remains rape, despite the act going unpunished. A law that permits the purchase of sex makes perpetrators invisible and means victims are no longer perceived as victims.

## **Conclusion:**

Germany's liberal prostitution policy has contributed to an explosion of the demand and an increase in violence against women in prostitution. It amounts to a collective degradation of women across society. It cements inequality between men and women and equates to a capitulation in the face of male violence against women. It operates as a catalyst for forced prostitution, pimping and human trafficking and has made Germany into the brothel of Europe. German politicians bear a historic responsibility in the evolution of a sex industry that claims thousands of victims of sexual exploitation every day.

Prostitution destroys people. Prostitution is serious violence. To call prostitution “work” is to cover up the violence. It is an attitude that contributes to women slipping into a life of violence that they can hardly escape. Prostitution can and should neither be framed as work nor as an opportunity. Buying sex must not be allowed.

With best regards,

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PhD in psychology and internationally renowned psychotraumatologist. She has worked with many trauma victims, including many women who were victims of prostitution and human trafficking. She has written and published a variety of works on the connection between trauma and prostitution. For years, she has been giving lectures and training courses on the subject worldwide. She has been invited to speak before parliaments including e.g., the Assemblée Nationale in Paris, the Italian Senate and Parliament in Rome, the Parliament in Madrid and Germany.