

An anthology of the  
presentations from the  
Symposium

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# **SEXWORK, STIGMA & RESISTANCE**

## **IN TIMES OF REPRESSION**

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Em.Prof. Ine Vanwesenbeeck  
Dr Marije van Stempvoort  
Dr Marjan Wijers  
Em.Prof. Gail Pheterson  
Dr Marie-Louise Janssen

**27 September 2024**



UvA, VVR & SekswerkExpertise

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March 2025

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# Foreword

Enclosed you will find the presentations, the reading list and the video links of the symposium 'Sex work, Stigma & Resistance in Times of Repression', organised by the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in cooperation with the Association Women & Law Clara Wichmann (VVR) and SekswerkExpertise, Dutch Platform for the Advancement of Sex Workers Rights, which was held at the University of Amsterdam on Friday the 27th of September 2024.

The symposium celebrated the completion of the PhD-theses of Marije Van Stempvoort and Marjan Wijers and aimed to bring together academic research and sex work activism. Both Marije and Marjan obtained their PhDs in 2024 in the UK; Marije at Swansea University in collaboration with the University of Amsterdam and Marjan at the University of Essex. Marije and Marjan have a long history in the sex worker rights movement and researched a topic close to their hearts. Marije looked at student sex work and Marjan focused on human rights and sex workers' rights.

At a time of increasing popularity of right-wing conservative politics and ideologies, sex work finds itself at the crossroads of rights and repression. This raises urgent questions about what this means for sex workers and sex work policies. What have 24 years of 'legalisation' of sex work in the Netherlands brought us? What do the current political developments mean for sex workers across Europe? And how can both studies inform us about how we can destigmatise sex work and enforce sex workers' human rights?

Marije's research zoomed in into the unique position of student sex workers in the Netherlands. Why does the sex industry appeal to some higher education students? What are their experiences and how are they impacted by their intersectional privilege in terms of race, class and education? To what extent is this relatively privileged population of sex workers willing to challenge sex work stigma? And why do some students, besides challenging current views also perpetuate existing stereotypes?

Marjan explored the role of human rights in the European debate on sex work laws and policies. Since the 1970s, sex workers have used the human rights framework to claim legitimacy and to advocate for their rights. However, sex worker rights are under attack by an increasingly influential alliance of conservative Christian organisations, radical feminists, the populist right-wing and left-wing liberals, calling for the further criminalisation of sex work. Both draw on human rights arguments, human rights tool of both empowerment and repression.

The symposium was opened by Em. Prof. sexual development, diversity and health Ine Vanwesenbeeck, who looked back at forty years of research and academic work on sex work. She also chaired the day.

We were honoured to have Gail Pheterson as our guest speaker, to whom Ine referred to as ‘the grand lady of academic sex work activism’. Gail was one of the founders of the international and Dutch sex workers movement, co-organiser of the First and Second World Whores’ Congresses in Amsterdam (1985) and the European Parliament (1986), editor of *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* and author of *The Prostitution Prism*.

Another motivation to organize this symposium was to set up a research network on sex work in the Netherlands. Dr Marie-Louise Jansen (UvA), the initiator of this network, pointed out the need for evidence-based research on sex work. Knowledge and policies on sex work are often based on assumptions or moralities and are seldom inclusive of sex workers’ own voices. For this reason, we launched a Dutch sex work research network. More information about the network and how to join can be found in her presentation.

To accommodate our diverse audience, the working language in the morning was Dutch, whilst we spoke English in the afternoon. For this reason, the collection consists of readings and presentations in both languages.

Finally, we would like to thank the University of Amsterdam, SekswerkExpertise, platform for the advancement of sex worker rights, the Association Women and Law (VVR), the Sex Work Alliance for De-stigmatisation (SWAD), Knowledge and Expertise Centre on Sex Work and Human Trafficking (SHOP) and Humanitas Centre of Expertise Sexuality, Sex Work and Human Trafficking (ESSM) for making the symposium financially possible. Our thanks also go to the volunteers who helped us with the organisation. We hope you will enjoy reading this collection of presentations.

Marjan Wijers  
Marije van Stempvoort  
Marie-Louise Janssen  
Ine Vanwesenbeeck  
Gail Pheterson

February 2025

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UVA, VVR & SEKSWERK  
EXPERTISE PRESENT

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM  
27/09/2024 | 11:00-17:00  
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## SEXWORK, STIGMA & RESISTANCE

IN TIMES OF REPRESSION

GUEST SPEAKER:  
GAIL PHETERSON

CHAIRWOMAN:  
EM.PROF. INE VANWESENBEECK

## PHD THESIS PRESENTATIONS BY

DR MARIE VAN  
STEMPVOORT &  
DR MARJAN  
WIJERS



AT A TIME OF INCREASING POPULARITY OF CONSERVATIVE RIGHT-WING POLITICS AND IDEOLOGIES, SEX WORK FINDS ITSELF AT THE CROSSROADS OF RIGHTS AND REPRESSION. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SEX WORKERS AND SEX WORK POLICIES? WHAT HAVE 24 YEARS OF 'LEGALISATION' OF SEX WORK IN THE NETHERLANDS BROUGHT US? WHAT DO THE CURRENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS MEAN FOR SEX WORKERS ACROSS EUROPE?

THE SYMPOSIUM AIMS TO BRING TOGETHER ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND SEX WORK ACTIVISM. HOW CAN BOTH STUDIES INFORM US ABOUT HOW WE CAN ACHIEVE THE DESTIGMATISATION OF SEX WORK AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF SEX WORKERS' HUMAN RIGHTS?

### PRESENTER INTRODUCTION

**MARIE VAN STEMPOVOORT** WILL ZOOM INTO THE UNIQUE POSITION OF STUDENT SEX WORKERS IN THE NETHERLANDS. WHY DOES THE SEX INDUSTRY APPEAL TO SOME HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS? WHAT ARE THEIR EXPERIENCES AND HOW ARE THEY IMPACTED BY THEIR INTERSECTIONAL PRIVILEGE IN TERMS OF RACE, CLASS AND EDUCATION? TO WHAT EXTENT IS THIS RELATIVELY PRIVILEGED POPULATION OF SEX WORKERS WILLING TO CHALLENGE SEX WORK STIGMA? AND WHY DO SOME STUDENTS, BESIDES CHALLENGING CURRENT VIEWS ALSO PERPETUATE EXISTING STEREOTYPES?

**MARJAN WIJERS** WILL DISCUSS THE ROLE OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE DEBATE ON SEX WORK LAWS AND POLICIES. SINCE THE 1970S, SEX WORKERS HAVE USED THE HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORK TO CLAIM LEGITIMACY AND ADVOCATE FOR THEIR RIGHTS. HOWEVER, SEX WORKER RIGHTS ARE UNDER ATTACK BY AN INCREASINGLY INFLUENTIAL ALLIANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN AND FEMINIST RIGHT AND LEFT-WING LIBERALS, CALLING FOR THE FURTHER CRIMINALISATION OF SEX WORK. BOTH DRAW ON HUMAN RIGHTS ARGUMENTS, MAKING HUMAN RIGHTS A TOOL OF BOTH EMPOWERMENT AND REPRESSION.



## PROGRAMME

10:30 - 11:00 DOORS OPEN, COFFEE, TEA & CAKE

11:00 - 11:30 WELCOME BY DR MARIE-LOUISE JANSSEN (UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM) & OPENING BY EM.PROF. SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT, DIVERSITY AND HEALTH, INE VANWESENBEECK (CHAIR)

11:30 - 12:15 PRESENTATION DISSERTATION DR MARIE VAN STEMPOVOORT. STUDENT SEX WORK IN THE NETHERLANDS: MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES. SWANSEA UNIVERSITY (UK) IN COOPERATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

12:15 - 12:30 LAUNCH OF A DUTCH NETWORK OF SEX WORK RESEARCHERS: MARIE-LOUISE JANSSEN

12:30 - 13:30 LIGHT LUNCH (VEGETARIAN AND VEGAN)

13:30 - 14:15 PRESENTATION DISSERTATION DR MARJAN WIJERS LL.M. SEX WORKER RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD. RIGHTS, RESISTANCE AND MOBILISATION. ESSEX UNIVERSITY (UK)

14:15 - 15:00 PRESENTATION BY EM. PROF. GAIL PHETERSON, ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND DUTCH SEX WORKERS MOVEMENT, CO-ORGANISER OF THE 1ST AND 2ND WORLD WHORES' CONGRESSES, EDITOR OF A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WHORES & AUTHOR OF THE PROSTITUTION PRISM

15:00 - 15:30 DISCUSSION AND CLOSING

15:30 - 17:00 DRINKS



27/09/2024 11:00-17:00  
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**SYMPOSIUM: SEX WORK, STIGMA, AND RESISTANCE IN TIMES OF REPRESSION**  
**AMSTERDAM, SEPTEMBER 27, 2024**

University of Amsterdam (Uva) in cooperation with the Association Women & Law  
Clara Wichmann (VVR) and Sekswerk Expertise, Dutch Platform for the Advancement of Sex  
Workers Rights

Gail Pheterson, Guest Speaker  
Ine Vanwesenbeeck, Chair

Marie-Louise Janssen, Launching of a Dutch Network of Sex Work Researchers

**Dissertation Presentations:**

Marije Van Stempvoort: Student Sex Work in The Netherlands: Motivations And Experiences.  
Swansea University, UK, in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam

Marjan Wijers: Sex Worker Rights And Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance  
and Mobilisation. Essex University, UK.

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**MIJN VEERTIG JAAR IN SEKS(WERK)WETENSCHAP**

**INTRODUCTIE DOOR DE VOORZITTER, SYMPOSIUM 27 SEPTEMBER 2024**

**INE VANWESENBEECK**

Goedemorgen geachte aanwezigen, lieve mensen. Heel fijn dat u allen bent gekomen om luister bij te zetten aan de feestelijke presentatie van de proefschriften van Marjan Wijers en Marije van Stempvoort. En u ziet natuurlijk ook uit naar de lezing van Gail Pheterson, de grande dame van het wetenschappelijke sekswerkactivisme. En we hopen zeker ook op uw enthousiasme over het op te richten sekswerk-onderzoekers-netwerk.

Mijn naam is Ine Vanwesenbeeck en ik mag u vandaag door de dag begeleiden omdat sekswerk een belangrijk speerpunt is geweest in mijn eigen wetenschappelijke werk op het gebied van seksualiteit en gender in de afgelopen 40 jaar. Ik ben zo vrij om even met u terug te kijken op die 40 jaar, met name op de enorme verschuivingen die zich hebben voltrokken in de sociaal-politieke context voor sekswerk en sekswerkbeleid.

Ik begon met sekswerkonderzoek in 1983, in opdracht van het Ministerie van Sociale Zaken waar het prostitutiebeleid (zoals het toen nog heette) belegd was, een betekenisvol verschil met de verankering van de laatste decennia bij het departement van Justitie en Veiligheid. Mijn eerste opdracht was om 'aspecten van dwang en geweld' in kaart te brengen. In diezelfde tijd deed Gail, ook in opdracht van Sociale Zaken, een parallel onderzoek naar stigma, dat leidde tot haar onvolprezen publicatie *Vrouweneer en mannenadel*. Het was voor mij als relatieve nieuwkomer op het onderwerp heerlijk om gesteund te worden door de rijkdom aan kennis en ervaring die Gail ook toen al bezat. Ik zie ons nog zitten daar bij de Mr. A. de Graafstichting met die begeleidingscommissie op de Westermarkt, 1983-1984, lang geleden...

**NEDERLAND GIDSLAND**

Ik wil u hier vooral meegeven dat het toen echt enigszins hoopvolle tijden waren. Nederland was een relatief liberaal land op het vlak van seks en seksuele voorlichting, en werd ook gezien als een gidsland wat betreft prostitutiebeleid. Er lag een wetwijziging in het verschiet - die het halfzachte gedoogbeleid eindelijk zou vervangen door een wet die sekswerk zou legaliseren en normaliseren. Wij zouden gaan laten zien dat het met sekswerk beter, realistischer en respectvoller geregeld kon worden dan in de meeste andere landen waar sekswerk illegaal was en zou blijven.

Sekswerk leek in Nederland minder controversieel te zijn dan elders. Ik herinner me dat ik in die 80'er jaren een lezing gaf in New York waar de animositeit rond sekswerk zo hoog opliep dat er bodyguards voor het podium stonden om sprekers zoals ik te beschermen. En ik herinner me dat ik een lezing gaf in Zweden waar ik heftig uitgejouwd werd omdat ik het had over *job satisfaction*, een concept dat volgens de Zweden natuurlijk niet van toepassing kon zijn op sekswerk. Als ik dan terug thuiskwam voelde Nederland echt een beetje als een warm liberaal bad.

Ook op Europees niveau wist Nederland destijds een zet in de goede richting te geven. Nederlandse parlementariërs van de groene fractie, vooral Nel van Dijk was belangrijk, wisten in 1986 te bewerkstelligen dat het Europees parlement de lidstaten aanzette tot de decriminalisering van sekswerk. 1986! Kom daar nu nog maar eens om! Recenter pleitte het parlement bij de lidstaten voor *demand reduction* en klantriminalisering. Maar destijds voelden we ons hoopvol en best een beetje trots op ons vrije Nederland, waar we korte metten zouden gaan maken met die moralistische kortzichtigheid. Hoe naïef kun je zijn!

### HERCRIMINALISERING

Want die legalisering die kwam er dan weliswaar, in 2000, maar inmiddels is in Nederland sprake van wat we niet anders kunnen zien dan als een sluipende hercriminalisering. Velen van u zijn waarschijnlijk op de hoogte: veel ramen en clubs zijn gesloten, het aantal werkplekken is minstens gehalveerd, gemeenten maken jacht op thuiswerkers, er is sprake van veel regels, verordeningen, controles, verplichtingen en boetes.

En dan is er natuurlijk die vermaledijde Wrs (Wet regulering sekswerk) die al jaren in de maak is met zijn apert repressieve wetsvoorstellen: verplichte registratie, het zogenaamde pooiervverbod, klantriminalisering. Wat we zien is dat de markt van alle kanten wordt afgeknepen. De idee is kennelijk dat als we het sekswerkers maar flink lastig maken - dan houden ze er wel mee op. Een grote misvatting uiteraard.

Hoe heeft het zo ver kunnen komen?

Allereerst is het zo dat de wetswijziging, toen die er in 2000 eindelijk kwam, uitermate halfhartig is geïmplementeerd. Van meet af aan werd duidelijk dat er op landelijk niveau weliswaar sprake was van decriminalisering, maar dat het gemeenten in de uitvoering van het vergunningenstelsel vooral ging om regulering en openbare orde, niet om positieverbetering van sekswerkers.

### INTERNATIONALE CONTEXT

En daarnaast werden de Nederlandse beleidsmakers die toch ook best wel koudwatervrees hadden - eens te meer de verkeerde kant op gedreven door de internationaal enorm toegenomen aandacht voor mensenhandel. Veel analyses zoeken de verklaring daarvoor in de toegenomen migratie, ook steeds meer door vrouwen, en de gekoppelde gevoelens van onrust en bedreiging in Westerse staten.

Ook het Nederlandse sekswerkbeleid is totaal verlijerd richting anti-mensenhandelbeleid en dat kunnen we niet los zien van grotere internationale ontwikkelingen in die richting. Voor Europa is natuurlijk de introductie van het Zweedse model funest. Dat model is door de Zweden uitermate agressief gemarket en met succes. Meerdere Europese landen hebben het inmiddels geïmplementeerd. Het model wordt verkocht als feministisch, omdat het klanten, niet sekswerkers criminaliseert. Maar overduidelijk is inmiddels dat ook de veiligheid en gezondheid van sekswerkers zelf er zwaar onder lijden.

### ROL VAN DE VS

Daarnaast wil ik hier toch ook even de rol van die andere schadelijke mondiale actor benadrukken, de VS. Met name tijdens de regeringsperiode van Bush junior rond de eeuwwisseling (en precies rond die tijd dat in Nederland de wetswijziging werd doorgevoerd) is het *anti-trafficking* frame met hernieuwde intensiteit aan de wereld opgelegd. Bush introduceerde zijn *War on trafficking*, de zogenaamd 'zachte', 'sociale' pendant van zijn *War on terror*. Onder de vlag van die *War on trafficking* zijn sekswerkers

wereldwijd sterker gediscrimineerd, gestigmatiseerd en geweld aangedaan. Zo eiste het Bush regime bijvoorbeeld van ontwikkelingsorganisaties die door de VS worden gefinancierd, dat ze zich expliciet tegen prostitutie uitspraken en sekswerkers welke steun dan ook weigerden, de zogenaamde *Anti-Prostitution Loyalty Oath*. En Bush lanceerde ook de *Trafficking Victims Protection Act*, op basis waarvan jaarlijks alle landen langs de *anti-trafficking* meetlat worden gelegd en politiek-economische sancties tegemoet kunnen zien als ze niet voldoen aan de Amerikaanse *anti-trafficking* beleidsnormen. Navolgende Amerikaanse presidenten hebben dit beleid grofweg gecontinueerd.

De Amerikaanse invloed was ook sterk op het niveau van de Verenigde Naties, en dat is er mede debet aan dat het *UN Anti-trafficking protocol uit 2000*, het Palermo protocol, lang niet zo positief en effectief is geworden als gehoopt en waar het sekswerkcrechtenkamp met man en macht voor gelobbyd heeft. Marjan was destijds intensief betrokken en heeft er mooi over geschreven.

In de VS zelf, is de *anti-trafficking* ideologie en dus het slachtoffer-frame doorgedrongen tot alle niveaus van overheid en samenleving. Lees onder andere Ronald Weitzer en huiver. In de VS is het in ieder geval inmiddels zo ver gekomen dat het begrip *trafficking* steeds verder is verruimd totdat het feitelijk alle vormen van sekswerk betreft.

Honderden miljoenen dollars gaan naar tientallen verschillende anti-trafficking organisaties in de VS. Er is vele malen meer geld voor anti-trafficking dan voor de bestrijding van armoede of ziekte. Nu ging er in de VS altijd al meer geld om in prostitutiebestrijding dan in gezondheidszorg. Maar onder de vlag van anti-trafficking is dat nog exponentieel toegenomen.

#### **ANTI-TRAFFICKING EN NIEUW RECHTS**

Er gaan ook heel veel anti-trafficking dollars naar Europa. Sekswerkprojecten kunnen vaak alleen nog op financiering rekenen als ze zich op de bestrijding van mensenhandel richten.

De anti-trafficking ideologie vindt bovendien vruchtbare grond in een groeiend aantal extreem conservatieve bewegingen. Enkele jaren geleden kwam er een Europees rapport uit dat laat zien dat er, ook toen al, in de EU meer dan 100 extreemconservatieve organisaties aansturen op niets anders dan 'herstel van de natuurlijke orde'. Je zou denken dat sekswerk onderdeel uitmaakt van zo'n natuurlijke orde, maar nee. Dit zijn de organisaties die lobbyen tegen seksuele diversiteit, tegen seksuele rechten, tegen gender, tegen seksuele voorlichting op scholen, tegen 'onze' Lentekriebels. Er is een sterke link met de opkomst van populistisch nieuw hard rechts. En zoals populistten betaamt, bedient men zich van aperte leugens, tendentieuze overdrijvingen, stuitende feitenvrijheid.

Cruciaal is, dat er gaandeweg steeds minder onderscheid gemaakt wordt tussen sekswerk en mensenhandel en dat daarmee de rechten van sekswerkers naar de achtergrond verdwijnen en buiten beeld raken. Migranten sekswerkers zijn daarbij beslist het meest kwetsbaar voor rechteloosheid en repressie. Alles bij elkaar zijn de tegenkrachten zo groot en zo talrijk en worden zo rijk gedoteerd - dat je er bijna moedeloos van zou worden.

#### **VERZET**

Maar natuurlijk is er ook verzet, en ook wel degelijk in kracht toenemend verzet. Wereldwijd zijn honderden sekswerkersorganisaties en -collectieven werkzaam, deels verenigd in de NSWP, het *Global Network of Sex Work Projects*. Onder sekswerkers is er een groeiend bewustzijn van sekswerker-rechten als mensenrechten, zoals Marjan later zal laten zien. Ook het aantal gerenommeerde internationale organisaties dat een rechtenbenadering nu actief steunt - is fors toegenomen. Amnesty en UNAIDS zijn voorbeelden maar er zijn er meer. Dit zijn organisaties die als het ware met de voeten in de klei staan, de dagelijkse realiteit kennen en zich geen rad voor ogen laten draaien door een populistisch anti-trafficking slachtoffer-frame.

In ons eigen land laat overheidssteun aan sekswerkerorganisaties erg genoeg nog steeds sterk te wensen over. Maar er zijn er toch niettemin successen te melden. Wat dacht u van het feit dat we al ruim tien jaar lang en door verschillende kabinetten heen nieuwe repressieve wetgeving hebben

tegengehouden (Wrp Wrs)? Het platform voor de verbetering van de positie van sekswerkers, SekswerkExpertise, is onder andere met dat doel opgericht en voert weliswaar een moeizame maar tot op heden ook succesvolle lobby, (ongetwijfeld) mede dankzij Marjan die geweldig overtuigende brieven kan schrijven.

In het bijzonder, hebben we dus ook nog steeds de verplichte registratie van sekswerkers tegen kunnen houden. Die is zeer ongewenst omdat het sekswerkers die met recht en reden niet kunnen of willen registreren - in de illegaliteit drukt en daarmee complete rechteloosheid brengt. In Duitsland is de registratie wel verplicht geworden en daar blijkt inderdaad dat het overgrote deel van sekswerkers zich niet registreert.

Ook vermeldenswaard is dat In Nederland zich ruim 10 organisaties verzameld hebben in een gecoördineerd programma tegen stigmatisering, SWAD, Sekswerk Alliantie Destigmatisering. Een voorbeeld van een project specifiek gericht op de framing van sekswerkers in journalistiek en publiek debat is *Reimagining*. Met foto's en acties wordt een alternatief beeld van sekswerkers gepromoot en het gestigmatiseerde beeld onderuitgehaald. Enkele foto's zijn in de ruimte hiernaast tentoongesteld, met grote dank aan Mischa en Minke. Spreekt u hen in de pauze gerust aan als u meer wilt weten.

Verder zien we dat een groeiende groep ambtenaren op gemeentelijk niveau echt wel gevoelig wordt voor onze argumenten, evenals overigens sommige ambtenaren in Den Haag. De Raad van State heeft ook ernstige kritiek op de repressieve plannen. Ik heb de idee dat naarmate ambtenaren beter zijn geïnformeerd, meer kennis van zaken hebben over de feitelijke situatie in het veld, ze meer overtuigd zijn dat juist méér in plaats van minder rechten voor sekswerkers de enige weg richting verbetering in de branche is. Het blijft een gevecht van David tegen Goliath gezien de dominantie van het slachtofferframe, maar elk succes, ook het kleine, is belangrijk.

#### **FEITENVRIJHEID EN FEITENRIJKDOM**

Het moeilijke aan de strijd voor sekswerker-rechten is dat we vechten tegen een tegenstander die zich aan de feiten weinig gelegen laat liggen. Repressief sekswerkbeleid is moraalpolitiek, is niet gebaseerd op redelijkheid en evidentie maar op emotie, moralistische emotie wel te verstaan. Want die emoties gelden juist niet het onrecht dat sekswerkers wordt aangedaan. Sterker, een slachtoffer frame dehumaniseert sekswerkers en ontkent ten ene male hun zelfbeschikking en de rationaliteit van hun keuzes.

Dus moeten we blijven proberen feitenrijkdom te zetten tegenover die feitenvrijheid. Ik geef toe dat we waarschijnlijk bij het huidige kabinet geen gewillig oor zullen vinden, want deze regering lijkt op vele thema's stelselmatig weg te kijken van de werkelijkheid. Niettemin moet meer inzicht de weg zijn en is dat ook een belangrijke doelstelling van deze dag, het bevorderen en inspireren van kennis en debat op basis van echt inzicht.

Cruciaal is dat we nog meer en gediversifieerd inzicht krijgen in de nadelige en ineffectieve werking van repressie. En in manieren waarop uiteenlopende groepen sekswerkers zich daar effectief tegen kunnen weren. Dat woord 'uiteenlopende' is van belang - want mensen realiseren zich vaak niet hoe divers de populatie sekswerkers is. Over die hele range, te beginnen met de meest kwetsbare groepen, moeten we wegen vinden om de misstanden en de exploitatie en dus de mensenhandel in de seksbranche te bestrijden zonder de hele beroepsgroep te stigmatiseren en het leven zuur te maken. En om die wegen te vinden, is onderzoek nodig, en een op feitelijke gebaseerd debat. We kunnen niet anders dan volharden in die strijd, zij het tegen de klippen op. Het gaat om veiligheid en gezondheid van sekswerkers, om rechten en respect, en om seksuele zelfbeschikking voor alle vrouwen.

Aan de slag dus maar!

# Student sex work in the Netherlands Motivations and Experiences

Marije van Stempvoort, PhD

Swansea University

In co-supervision with the University of Amsterdam

## Why research on student sex work?

Pioneering work in the UK

Context of the Netherlands

→ Presumed 'liberal' climate, regulated sex industry and moderate tuition fees

**Research questions:** *What motivates higher education students in the Netherlands to become engaged in sex work? How do student sex workers in the Netherlands experience their engagement in sex work, and how do they navigate any potential challenges?*

## Research design informed by sex work research ethics

Qualitative modified grounded theory study

Participatory elements



## Study population

- 22 participants
  - 19 students worked as sex workers
  - 3 students considered sex work
- 18 cisgender females
- 3 cisgender males
- 1 transgender person
- Ages 19 - 44
- 18 Dutch, 3 EU, 1 non-EU
- 9 Master - 13 Bachelor students
- Direct and indirect sex work



## Entrances: access to a New Perspective

Many students had stigmatising views on sex work

What caused the change?

- Course work, assignments and projects about sex work
- Extracurricular activities, fellow students
- Media (series, movies)
- The development of critical thinking?

For male students:

- Request from potential clients

I heard sex workers speaking at conferences. I did workshops with them. They were strong, capable activists who had chosen their profession. This was a whole new narrative for me.

Before I met her, I thought that sex work was only for the lowest of the lowest.

Well, when you are 19 and you have the body of an athlete, then you get those kinds of inappropriate proposals.

## Motivations: financial

Student sex work mostly studied through a financial hardship lens

The hardship lens does no justice to the variety of motivations of the students in this study

I identified 4 different socioeconomic profiles:

- Privileged sex workers enjoying a luxurious lifestyle and building up savings
- Middle income students (social loan system) minimising student debts
- Re-entering higher education
- Students who struggle financially

It was not like I needed the money, no. I presumed that I would like it [sex work] and that I would find it exciting.

I really don't like borrowing money. You create debts. You are spending money that is not yours.

## Motivations: intrinsic and other motivations

Flexibility

Precarious labour in other sectors

Experiencing pleasure

- Emotional labour
- Feminist motivations
- Intellectual motivations

It was so convenient when I was writing my thesis. Like, write some and if I had time, I would just do some camming.

I had to work very hard. I did not get much in return. It tired me... I don't want to do it again. It was hard work for little money.

In the shoe shop they often send you home. There is not always much work. They can do that on a zero-hour contract. It lessens your pay.

## Emotional labour

Emotional labour is the adjustment of workers' private feelings to meet the expectations of clients, customers or patients (Hochschild, 1983).

- The students spoke at length about the performance of emotional labour
- Use of cultural and educational capital (Bourdieu, 1984)
- Sex work as a valuable job
- Not gendered
- High in demand



Shared intimacy, a dinner date.  
Going to the ballet and having sex  
after that. **The boyfriend  
experience?** Yes! **Do you like that?**  
Well... I like those clients.

## Feminist motivations

For some students, sex work aligns with their feminist convictions

- Sex work as a response to workplace harassment
- Sex work as a site of subversion of heteronormativity and female sexuality.

For me it is a political statement to do sex work. You earn money with your sexuality which you are not supposed to do as a woman. Men think that they are entitled to get sex for free. They get angry when you ask for money: 'How dare you!'

I think that it is this interaction with men (workplace harassment), that helped me to understand something about sex work in a more clear way than other women would.

## Intellectual motivations

Being able to blend into the two worlds of the sex industry and academia to enhance their studies

- Using sex work experience in papers and projects
- Enhancing sex work research
- Educating other students
- Auto ethnography



## Challenges

- Stigma
- The 'whorearchy'
- The demand for authenticity and boundary crossing
- Safety concerns



## Stigma

The students' main concern

Stigma according to Goffman (1963)

*A stigma is an attribute belonging to a person that discredits the person. However, it is not the attribute itself that causes stigma.*

*Stigma emerges in the relationship between the attribute and the audience.*

It is more severely stigmatised for women. As a woman you are easily called a hooker, whilst as a man it is more like 'that is funny', or something along that line

Sex work stigma intersects with homophobia, classism, racism and the stigma on hiv, amongst others

## The 'Whorearchy'

Sex work stigma can also intersect with axes of privilege

(whiteness, class, access to higher education)

Privilege impacts sex workers' access to jobs

The sex industry is stratified based on:

- Visibility
- Fees
- Identities workers and clients
- Number of clients
- Physical contact

Students spoke at length about their (in)ability to work in the higher echelons



## Identity work at the expense of others

- Several students used the status of their job to manage stigma. By so doing they reinforce the stigma of sex work
- Students involved with activism and students who studied sex work were less likely to use the standing of their sector to manage stigma

I call it 'high-class escort', otherwise people may think that I stand behind the windows. People can be easily judgemental.

Before I met "X" in our self-led group who had worked behind the windows, I had very unnuanced ideas regarding this sector.

## The demand for authenticity and boundary crossing

- The 'single self' and the 'double self'
- Keeping work separated
- Manufactured identity



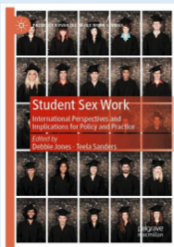
I know that it is because of this [because of her authenticity and the intimate connection she develops with her clients] that it happens so often that men fall in love with me while they are married.

The hardest part of the job is that clients try to trespass boundaries. It is painful for them to realise that I am not their boyfriend in real life.

## What can be learned from the study?

Most student sex workers in this study possessed different layers of privilege. Whilst their experiences are not representative for all sex workers, what can be learned from the study is that:

Sex (and a lot of emotional labour) for money are not intrinsically connected to harm. Sex work can be a suitable occupation for some.



Want to find out more?

Student Sex Work. International Perspectives and Implications for Policy and Practice.

Palgrave advances in sex work studies

Thank you for your attention!

Marije van Stempvoort, PhD  
marijevanstempvoort@yahoo.com

Download thesis





## SYMPOSIUM: SEX WORK, STIGMA, AND RESISTANCE IN TIMES OF REPRESSION

AMSTERDAM, SEPTEMBER 27, 2024

University of Amsterdam (Uva) in cooperation with the Association Women & Law Clara Wichmann (VVR) and Sekswerk Expertise, Dutch Platform for the Advancement of Sex Workers Rights

**Gail Pheterson**, Guest Speaker

**Ine Vanwesenbeeck**, Chair

**Marie-Louise Janssen**, Launching of a Dutch Network of Sex Work Researchers

Dissertation Presentations:

**Marije Van Stempvoort**: Student Sex Work in The Netherlands: Motivations And Experiences. Swansea University, UK, in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam

**Marjan Wijers**: Sex Worker Rights And Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance and Mobilisation. Essex University, UK

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### LAUNCHING OF A DUTCH NETWORK OF SEX WORK RESEARCHERS

**MARIE-LOUISE JANSSEN**

As research has made crystal clear, when it comes to sex work we see a lack of evidence-based research. Knowledge and policies are many times based on assumptions, for example what might be the implications of certain policies, or on basis of ideologies, such as the idea that sex work is a form of female sexual violence, and that all sex workers are victims of human trafficking; or on only moralities, such as the idea that sex work is a form of immoral sexual behavior.

We also see a lack of research in which also the voices of sex workers themselves are heard. Too many times we still talk and analyze *about* sex work instead of *with* sex workers. As a result, we see that sex workers' voices are not always heard in the political discourse on sex work. The question: how can we make good sex work policies on basis of thorough scientific research instead of on basis of myths, assumptions, ideologies or only moralities is therefore a compelling one and a crucial one. Good, thorough research is the basis for effective political lobbying and the development of good sex work policy and sex work activism.

Therefore we want to set up a research network that comes together once or twice a year during which research on sex work will be presented and discussed together.

#### GOALS OF THE SEX WORK RESEARCH NETWORK:

1. To set up a network for researchers, students, sex workers, sex work activists, support projects, health centres, policy makers and other external parties and stakeholders concerned with the Dutch sex industry in its broadest sense.
2. To connect researchers and academics on sex work across disciplines and from different universities.

3. To present and discuss new research on sex work, in the form of lectures, panel discussions, or symposia.
4. To set up and support participatory action research-in collaboration with sex workers.
5. To seek cooperation with other networks, such as the sex work research hub set up by the University of York in the UK. Collaboration with other research hubs, such as
6. To seek cooperation with other networks, such as the sex work research hub set up by the University of York in the UK.

The idea is to rotate this research day at different universities. Also to reduce costs.



**SURVEY QUESTIONS:**

1. Name:  
Would you like to be on the mailing list? If yes please write down on which email address we can reach you: ....
2. What do you think should be the predominant objective of the network?
3. Which topics would you like to discuss?
4. Would your university be interested in hosting the symposium sometime?
5. Would you be willing to make a small annual contribution to keep the network running?



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**SEX WORKER RIGHTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD**

**RIGHTS, RESISTANCE AND MOBILISATIONS**

**MARJAN WIJERS**

The original title of my thesis was “Going beyond dangerous or endangered”. I had borrowed that title from Gail Pheterson, our guest speaker, who back in the 90-ties argued that sex workers across the world could choose between being viewed as either dangerous, and thus in need of disciplining, or endangered, and thus in need of rescue and rehabilitation. Dangerous or endangered, in both cases sex workers are not considered legitimate partners in the political and legal debate and in both cases they are viewed as less ‘worthy’ of human rights than other citizens.

Since the 1970s, however, sex workers across the world have begun to organise and challenge those stereotypes, claiming legitimacy and demanding labour rights and human rights with the slogan ‘sex workers’ rights are human rights’. They mobilise human rights to address violence and other human rights violations against them, to resist their de-humanisation as victims or deviants, and to advocate for the protection of their human rights and the decriminalisation of sex work. And they demand a voice in debates about policies and laws that affect them, captured in the slogan ‘Nothing about us, without us’.

**SEX WORKERS RIGHTS UNDER ATTACK**

However, fed by the dominant anti-trafficking discourse, sex workers’ human rights are under attack by an increasingly influential abolitionist coalition of conservative and fundamentalist Christians, so-called ‘radical’ feminists, the extreme right, and ‘left wing’ liberals who advance the view that sex work is violence against women and a violation of human dignity and who call for its further criminalisation. For those of us who are not up to their ears in the sex work debate, ‘abolitionist’ refers to the historical fight for the abolition of slavery and compares the abolition of prostitution to the

abolition of slavery. Which, btw, is a skewed comparison as the abolition of slavery was not about abolishing a particular type of work but a particular type of relationship, notably ownership of one person over another person.

### **UNHOLY ALLIANCE**

Some call this an ‘unholy alliance’. On first sight it is a weird alliance, indeed, but what they have in common is their dedication to restore ‘family values’, and to re-establish the white middle-class monogamous model of ‘good’ sexuality, based on the conviction that sexuality should be kept within the confines of the romantic couple. Underlying this is a desire to restore what Ine Vanwesenbeeck called ‘the natural order’ and essentialist notions of women (and men) and female sexuality. As stated by Sophie, one of my participants: “We all know that women only have sex for love and for free - which is patriarchy, the purest patriarchy ever”.

Another name for radical feminists is carceral feminists: feminism with a police baton, as Elizabeth Bernstein (2012) puts it. A feminism interwoven with punitive agendas that, instead of seeking economic and social justice, relies on police, prisons and prosecutions as a solution to inequality and social problems.

At the same time, the abolitionist discourse seeks to discipline not only women's sexuality, but also men's by calling for the criminalisation of clients, a good example of the use of criminal law to discipline men's sexual behaviour and restore family values under the benevolent guise of feminism. As one of the German sex workers said: “[Men] should be back in the family with [their] sexuality and all sexuality should be back in the family and nowhere else”.

This so-called Swedish or ‘end demand’ model, sometimes also misleadingly called the ‘equality model’, is particularly promoted by ‘radical feminists’<sup>1</sup>, represented in Europe by the Europeans Women's Lobby (EWL), who argue that reducing the demand for sex work will lead to its eradication and hence the eradication of trafficking.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS ARGUMENTS: SELF-DETERMINATION VS DIGNITY**

Both the anti-prostitution and the sex worker rights movement draw on human rights arguments. While abolitionists claim that sex work constitutes violence against women and a violation of human dignity, arguing that no woman can voluntarily consent to sex work, sex workers and their allies invoke the right to self-determination and to personal and bodily autonomy. According to them, not prostitution itself, but conditions of coercion, abuse, and deceit can make sex work a violation of human rights. Instead of lumping all sex work together, they stress the diversity of motivations, conditions, and experiences of female, male, and transgender, domestic and migrant sex workers.

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<sup>1</sup> See for a critical review of the concept of ‘radical’ in relation to feminism, the presentation of Gail Pheterson, *Passing the Torch of Feminism*, p. 4-5.

Instead of the abolitionist call for the further criminalisation of sex work, they call for the decriminalisation of consensual adult sex work as a precondition to protect their human rights.

Both dignity and self-determination have deep roots in the history of human rights thinking and can be seen as the foundation of human rights as such. There are, however, several problems with using the concept of ‘dignity’ to justify repressive measures. One of the main problems is the lack of a definition: what exactly is meant by ‘dignity’ and who decides whose dignity is violated or not? This is not such a problem when it involves behaviour about which there is a high degree of consensus, such as the prohibition on torture. It becomes problematic, however, when ‘dignity’ is used as an argument to justify prohibitions on behaviour about which there is no such consensus, especially when the citizens whose dignity is supposedly being violated do not feel that way themselves. As argued by Haveman (2000), when the citizens whose human rights one pretends to protect through repression do not feel themselves affected in their dignity, violation and protection of human rights become the same.

#### **MY STUDY: HUMAN RIGHTS AS A TOOL OF BOTH EMPOWERMENT AND REPRESSION**

In my study I show how human rights are used as both a tool of empowerment and a tool of repression. As the sex workers in my study describe, through the framing of sex work as violence against women and a violation of human dignity and by conflating sex work with trafficking, the anti-sex work movement uses the human rights framework to exclude and silence sex workers and call for the further criminalisation of sex work, turning human rights into a double-edged sword.

In addition to interviews with sex worker rights activists from national and European sex worker rights organisations, the majority of whom were sex workers, I carried out three country case studies. I chose Germany, France, and Spain because all three countries have a strong sex worker movement but under the influence of abolitionist/radical feminist ideology, adopted repressive sex work laws and policies. Germany introduced forced registration and counselling for sex workers in 2016, France criminalised clients of sex workers in 2016 and in Spain in 2018 the government contested the right of sex workers to unionise. In all three countries, human rights of sex workers are at stake and in all three countries sex workers went to court to challenge repressive laws and policies and defend their human rights.

Focusing on the cases of Germany, France and Spain, I show how through the gateway of human dignity and female victimhood the anti-sex work movement uses human rights to create a hierarchy of what I call human-ness<sup>2</sup> - in short: who deserves human rights and who not -, to contain ‘deviant’ sexuality, and to call for the further criminalisation of sex work, while dehumanising sex workers and relieving states of their accountability for the protection of the human rights of sex workers. This may sound a bit abstract but I hope to explain it the coming half hour.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the concept of ‘human-ness’ to refer to what Meyers calls ‘attributions of humanity’: “the ways in which the rights discourse ascribes variable humanity to certain categories of people”(Meyers, 2014).

After discussing the use of human rights to disqualify sex workers and the resistance of sex workers, I focus in this presentation on the case of France.

### **THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL**

While a growing number of international organisations such as Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2017), Human Rights Watch (2019) and UNAIDS (2023), advocate for the decriminalisation of consensual adult sex work as a precondition for the protection of sex workers' human rights, on the national level policies have taken a shift towards more repression and criminalisation. In many cases, this is justified by the argument of combating human trafficking.

The most visible example is Sweden which criminalised clients of sex workers in 1999 followed by among others France in 2016, despite a growing body of research demonstrating its negative impact on the safety, health and rights of sex workers. Other examples are the introduction of forced registration and counselling of sex workers in Germany and, let's not forget, similar proposals in the Netherlands for forced registration of sex workers in a national database.

### **FEMALE VICTIMHOOD, CONSENT, AGENCY AND HUMAN-NESS**

Whereas framing sex workers' rights as human rights affirms sex workers' humanity and denounces their dehumanisation as 'deviant others', framing sex work as violence against women and a violation of human dignity has the opposite effect. Arguing that dignity is a key indicator of contemporary understandings of the human, Stewart Cunningham (2018), for example, notes how representation of sex work as 'beneath humanity' runs the risk of dehumanising sex workers and reinforcing existing stigma.

Similarly, defining all sex work as violence against women not only strips sex workers of agency, but also obscures the real violence against sex workers: consensual sex and rape become the same. If sex work is 'paid rape', as abolitionists call it, then sex workers can be raped with impunity, because "rape is their work", as Freja, one of my Danish sex worker participants, put it.

Like dignity, I argue, agency as the ability to make one's own decisions about one's life, is seen as a key indicator of humanity and of what is generally considered to distinguish humans from (other) animals. An inherent element of agency is the ability to give or withhold consent. A key concept in abolitionist discourse is the irrelevance of consent: according to them no woman can voluntarily consent to sex work. Which, btw, is a remarkable position to defend in the age of 'me too', where the relevance of women's consent in matters of sexuality is increasingly recognised. Sex workers who claim the capacity to make their own decisions are dismissed as damaged persons, as lacking awareness of their oppression, or as part of the 'pimp lobby'. In all cases they should not be listened to. The price of this type of 'protection' is that sex workers become non-persons, objects instead of subjects. "Empty vessels", as Freja put it. "Seminal spittoons", "vaginal slime" or "pieces of meat", as some abolitionists like to call sex workers.

By uniformly portraying sex workers as victims and denying them the capacity to consent, sex workers are deprived of agency and therefore of human-ness. It reduces sex workers to the status of children, it banishes them from the public debate, and it removes the obligation for states to consider core human rights, such as equality before the law.

### **WHO IS CONSIDERED TO BE HUMAN**

This places sex workers in a position where they first and foremost have to 'prove' that they are human. And that is exactly what happens, as expressed by the sex worker activists I interviewed. When asked what the slogan 'sex worker rights are human rights' meant to them, the question of 'who counts as human' and is therefore entitled to human rights was a common thread in their responses. Many of them talked about how their value as human beings was being questioned and how they had to fight for their humanity to be recognised and to be treated as full and equal members of society. For them, the slogan meant first and foremost that sex workers are human beings who should be treated in the same way as other human beings. This made convincing the public that sex workers are human beings a crucial part of their advocacy. Ava from Ireland, for example, commented that the human rights framework would have more value "if we can get Irish people to see us as human beings". This also means, Freja from Denmark added, that there is no different set of rules for sex workers than for everyone else, and that what is harmful to other people is also harmful to sex workers:

If criminalisation is going to hurt everybody else, then it follows that it's also going to hurt sex workers. If the idea is that it's impossible for sex workers to meaningfully employ the concept of consent to their sex life, if that's not a good way of looking at everybody else, then why would it be a good way to look at sex workers? It's really about not suddenly thinking fundamentally differently, and what kind of boundaries and needs they have. It just means sex workers are human beings.

In addition, for most sex workers in my study, human rights were closely linked to the recognition of sex workers as workers who contribute to society.

### **THE CONFLATION OF SEX WORK AND TRAFFICKING**

A third inroad into the human rights framework is the conflation of sex work and trafficking, usually accompanied by inflated and unsubstantiated figures on the number of women and girls trafficked for 'sexual exploitation'. By consistently conflating trafficking and sex work, anti-prostitution activists ideologically hijacked the human trafficking discourse to realise their goal of abolishing sex work and in doing so transformed the anti-trafficking movement into an anti-prostitution campaign. To this aim, the concept of 'force' or 'coercion' is rhetorically broadened to include economic circumstances or family responsibilities.

The conflation of sex work and human trafficking, is especially used to discredit sex workers' call for decriminalisation. This is argued by claiming that the vast majority of sex workers are forced and that

even if there are exceptions - labelled as ‘happy hookers’ - protecting the human rights of the victims justifies sacrificing sex workers’ human rights. As my German participants related, any appeal by sex workers to human rights was countered by the abolitionist lobby with the ‘victim argument’, casting violations of sex workers’ rights as ‘minor inconveniences’ that they should be happy to endure for the ‘greater good’: the rescue of victims. As Camille recorded, “This was the wording, that we help save the poor victims from their horrible fate. So, they used it against us”.

Pitting the ‘happy hooker’ who only cares about making money against the ‘poor (migrant) victim’ played a crucial role in the disqualification of sex workers as legitimate partners in the debate on the ProstituiertenSchutzGesetz (ProstSchG), and was used by the anti-sex work lobby to position themselves as the ‘good ones’ who stood up for the human rights of the victims, as opposed to the privileged happy hookers who didn’t care about them. The German Christian Democrats (CDU), for example, used it as a justification for not talking with sex workers about the bill, arguing that they did not “talk with people who just are interested in earning money but not in the human rights of prostitutes”.

This makes it extremely difficult for sex worker organisations to critically question the trafficking framework as an effective tool to address exploitation and abuse in the sex industry, as any criticism is used against them as proof of their ‘selfishness’ and ‘indifference’ to the suffering of the victims. It also makes it harder for sex worker organisations to use a labour rights framework, as abolitionists use this to claim that sex workers are denying the violence and exploitation that takes place in the sector. As one of the sex worker activists said:

If we are critical of working conditions in the sector, it is used as evidence that sex work should be criminalised. But if we say we are happy with our work, it is used to disqualify us as ‘happy hookers’.

## OVERARCHING THEMES

The overarching theme that runs through all three framings of sex work – as violence against women and a violation of dignity and the conflation of sex work and trafficking - is that of female victimhood and the use of human rights to place sex workers *as sex workers* outside the human rights system as holders of rights and absolve states of their accountability for the impact of laws and policies on the human rights of sex workers. In all three cases the human rights framework itself is used to exclude sex workers from human rights and to reinforce particular sexual norms that reify emotional and relational intimacy, or more particular, the white middle-class heteronormative and monogamous model of ‘good’ sexuality, while excluding and punishing those who transgress them.

Once sex workers are stripped of their human-ness, they are stripped of their entitlement to protection of their human rights. Consequently, human rights violations of sex workers are ignored, not deemed relevant or considered acceptable as collateral damage ‘for the greater good’, be it the rescue of innocent

maidens or a world without prostitution, that is, without prostitutes.

A second theme that runs through the abolitionist campaign for increased state control and criminalisation of sex work, as raised by my participants, is the relationship between class, race and trust in the state, criminal law and the police. State oppression of sexwork and sex workers may be accompanied by many blatant human rights violations, such as assault and harassment by the police, extortion and blackmail, rape, and arbitrary arrest and detention. As pointed out by Juno Mac and Molly Smith (2018), while for white middle-class women the police may be their best friend, for sex workers and other marginalised groups the police are not a symbol of protection, but a real manifestation of punishment and control. This makes the call of the anti-sex work movement for further criminalisation of sex work deeply racist and classist and runs through any discussion in which white, middle-class, non-sex working feminists advocate the criminal justice system as a solution to social and other problems. The kind of feminism Elizabeth Bernstein coined carceral feminism.

Thirdly, the development of the anti-sex work debate cannot be separated from anti-migration policies and fears of ‘being flooded’ by foreign prostitutes. In all three countries, Germany, France and Spain, the turn towards increasingly repressive sex work policies took place against the backdrop of a growing presence of migrant sex workers and is embedded in broader anxieties about immigration control and loss of national identity. In France, several authors draw parallels between the French debate on the ban of the hijab and sex work, highlighting how women's heads and bodies have become a battleground as symbols of French identity.

### **THE CASE OF FRANCE**

In 2016, after having been rejected three times by the Senate, the French National Assembly adopted the penalisation of clients. The law prohibits the purchase of a sexual act, aimed at “strengthening the fight against the prostitution system and assisting prostituted persons”. The criminalising of clients comes on top of the existing criminalisation of all activities related to sex work.

### **PUBLIC AND POLITICAL DEBATE**

The law was the result of a strong mainstream feminist movement in combination with traditional neo-abolitionist groups and 15 years of campaigns and parliamentary reports denouncing prostitution as a violation of human rights and advocating for its abolition. Fixed elements in the debate were the conflation of sex work and trafficking; the framing of sex workers as damaged persons; and the use of inflated numbers of trafficking victims, incest rates among sex workers, and profits of pimping. By defining sex work as male violence against women the law was framed as a women’s rights issue.

Arguing that the majority of sex workers were victims and that if there was no demand for sex work criminal networks could not make a profit, the criminalisation of clients – who were framed as ‘sexual predators’ - was put forward as necessary ‘to ensure the dignity of the person and public order’.

Sex workers were silenced as victims of traffickers or pimps, or as damaged persons, either by child abuse or prostitution itself. A French variation was the dismissal of sex workers as victims of 'symbolic violence'. A specific French concept, which was used in both the debate on sex work and the ban on the hijab, and which refers to victims who are “unconsciously complicit in their own domination or even claim the right to their own domination”. This by definition invalidated any possibility of consent or claim to rights. Specific to France was also that the fight against the ‘prostitution system’ was presented by the socialist government not only as a feminist issue but also as an anti-capitalist struggle, with sex work being framed as the ultimate capitalist commodification and exploitation.

As described by Calderaro and Giametta (2019) France’s construction of the ‘problem of prostitution’ should be seen within broader political anxieties over poor ‘black’ neighbourhoods - which were explicitly localised as sites of sexual violence and oppression of women - and immigration control. Drawing parallels between the debate on the hijab and sex work, they describe how, in the name of women’s rights, moral and racist arguments came together in the debate on sex work. Poor and working class clients of sex workers were pathologised as ‘bad’ sexual subjects “who have no place in the civilised space of the Republic”, while they were simultaneously racialised “as ‘regressive’ sexual subjects who did not know how to treat a woman with respect and who were likely to exploit (their) women by buying sex from them, pimping or trafficking them”.

#### **OPPOSITION TO THE LAW**

The law met strong opposition of sex worker organisations, social, health, and human rights organisations and pro-sex workers’ rights feminist activists, as well as from the National Advisory Commission on Human Rights (CNCDH) and the Defender of Rights (Ombudsman). They uniformly pointed out the law would relegate sex workers to more remote and dangerous locations, reduce their negotiation power with clients, increase reliance on third-parties, decrease access to health and social care as well as willingness to report violence to the police, and add to their precariousness and vulnerability.

#### **GOING TO COURT: SEX WORKERS HEALTH AND SAFETY AS ACCEPTABLE COLLATERAL DAMAGE**

In 2018 sex workers trade union STRASS, Médecins de Monde, and several other NGOs and individual sex workers filed a complaint with the French Council of State. They argued that criminalising the purchase of sexual services, even between consenting adults and taking place in a private space, violated their right to privacy, freedom of enterprise and contract, as well as the right to respect for private life as laid down in art. 8 of the European Convention of Human Rights. In addition, they held the law violated their right to health by forcing them to work in isolated and clandestine ways, which exposed them to increased violence and health risks (Le Bail et al., 2018).

The French Court, however, ruled that the criminalisation of clients was in accordance with the Constitution. Adopting the abolitionist reasoning that the majority of sex workers were victims enabled

by the demand for paid sexual services, the court did not consider the criminalisation of all use of prostitution, including, I quote, sexual acts “presented” (sic) as freely entered in private between consenting adults, a “manifestly inappropriate means” to reach the aims of the law. It also rejected the claim that the law violated the right to health of sex workers, stating that:

It is not for the Constitutional Court to substitute its assessment for that of the legislature on the health consequences for prostitutes of the contested provisions since that assessment is not, in the state of knowledge, manifestly inadequate.

Three things stand out in the judgment of the Court. First how the Court, without any critical question, accepts the conflation of trafficking and sex work with no regard to questions of consent and coercion, as well as the unsubstantiated assumption that the majority of sex workers are victims. Secondly, its leaning on the concept of dignity without discussion of its controversial character. Thirdly, perhaps most significant, that it fails to independently test the impact of the law against the obligation of the state to protect the right to health of sex workers and simply ignores the abundant evidence of its harmfulness. In essence, the court, in the name of protecting human rights, declares the protection of sex workers from actual violations of their health and safety irrelevant, or at least not worthy of further investigation. They are reduced to collateral damage.

A final issue is the problematic use of human dignity in the name of protecting public order as a justification for repressive measures against a particular group of citizens, in casu sex workers, even when the activity is consensual and sex workers themselves do not feel violated in their dignity. Instead of protecting citizens from the state, the primary function of human rights, the defence of human rights is used to protect the state from a particular group of 'undesirable' citizens, be they sex workers or Muslim women wearing headscarves. When violation and protection become the same, human rights become an empty shell. As Thierry, one of the sex worker participants, said,

[T]he penalisation of clients is a way to impose a society norm. [...] We don't do it for sex workers, we do it for the society to maintain [this norm], for everyone to understand that prostitution is bad. As politicians, as lawmakers we have an obligation to say what are the society norms and good behaviour. [...] So it is not about protecting people.

## **EUROPEAN HUMAN RIGHTS COURT**

In December 2019, 261 sex workers working in France brought the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). They maintained that the law violated their right to life (art. 2), the prohibition of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment (art. 3) and the right to privacy and sexual and personal autonomy (art. 8) of the convention. They were supported by 19 community, health, and feminist organisations. In the press release they stated:

For years, sex workers have been warning of the dramatic consequences of the penalization of clients and the repressive policies against them. Whether they are victims of exploitation or forced

labour, regardless of their degree of autonomy in the activity, sex workers denounce a measure which makes them more precarious, increases their vulnerability and exposes them to violence and high risks for their health (STRASS et al., 2019).

In July this year, the ECHR delivered its disappointing judgement, in which it upholds the French law, calling upon the lack of consensus on sex work and sex work policies and the ‘highly sensitive moral and ethical questions’ prostitution raised (para. 149). Examining the case solely under Article 8 (privacy and sexual & personal autonomy), it concluded that, “in light of ... the issues raised by prostitution,” France had struck a fair balance between competing interests and had not exceeded its margin of appreciation (para. 166).

Sex workers went to the ECtHR hoping that for once it would be about their human rights and not about morality and ideology and whether sex workers are capable of self-determination. Instead, by limiting itself to Article 8, the ECtHR, like the French courts, simply reduced the case to the question whether sex work can be consensual, thereby putting into question sex workers’ capacity to self-determination, and avoiding examining the law’s actual impact on sex workers’ safety and health. This omission is critical, as the real issue is not whether sex workers have the capacity to give or withhold consent, but whether France’s criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services endangers their life, health and freedom from inhuman treatment.

In doing so, it disregarded the agency of sex workers, put ideologically driven and unsubstantiated assumptions before the lived realities of sex workers and the well-documented detrimental effects of criminalisation on sex workers’ health and safety, and reinforced harmful stereotypes of sex workers as disempowered victims. By subordinating the human rights of sex workers to ‘the greater good’ and failing to examine the impact of criminalising clients on their health and safety, the ECHR once again reduced sex workers to collateral damage in the name of protecting human rights.

The ECtHR’s decision does not stand on its own, but is emblematic of its reasoning in other cases involving women’s agency and bodily autonomy, such as those concerning [the right to wear a face veil](#), [access to home births](#), and the legal limitations on [reproductive rights](#), and underscores the need for a more inclusive, evidence-led and rights-based approach (van Leeuwen & Wijers, 2024).

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Evidently, human rights have a strong rhetorical value, both to support sex workers’ claims to recognition and rights, as well as to legitimise the exclusion of sex workers from human rights. Human rights have given sex workers a tool to fight the systematic and everyday abuses they face, but also lead to violations in its name. In the end, human rights are as much a site of power as any other politics of inclusion and exclusion, who belongs and who does not. Yet, to speak with Radna Kapur, a postcolonial feminist legal scholar, while there is a need to address the complicity of human rights in interventions that harm more than help, still rights are radical tools for those who never had them. It is that potentially

progressive and transformative power that makes it worth to keep investing in them, even if it is a long and challenging way.

To finish with a small example of the increasing discrimination and stigmatisation of sex workers: when I tried to download my dissertation – which as you know has the word sex work in it -, LinkedIn consistently responded with “something went wrong, please try again”. When I changed sex worker to sx work(er), my text downloaded fine.

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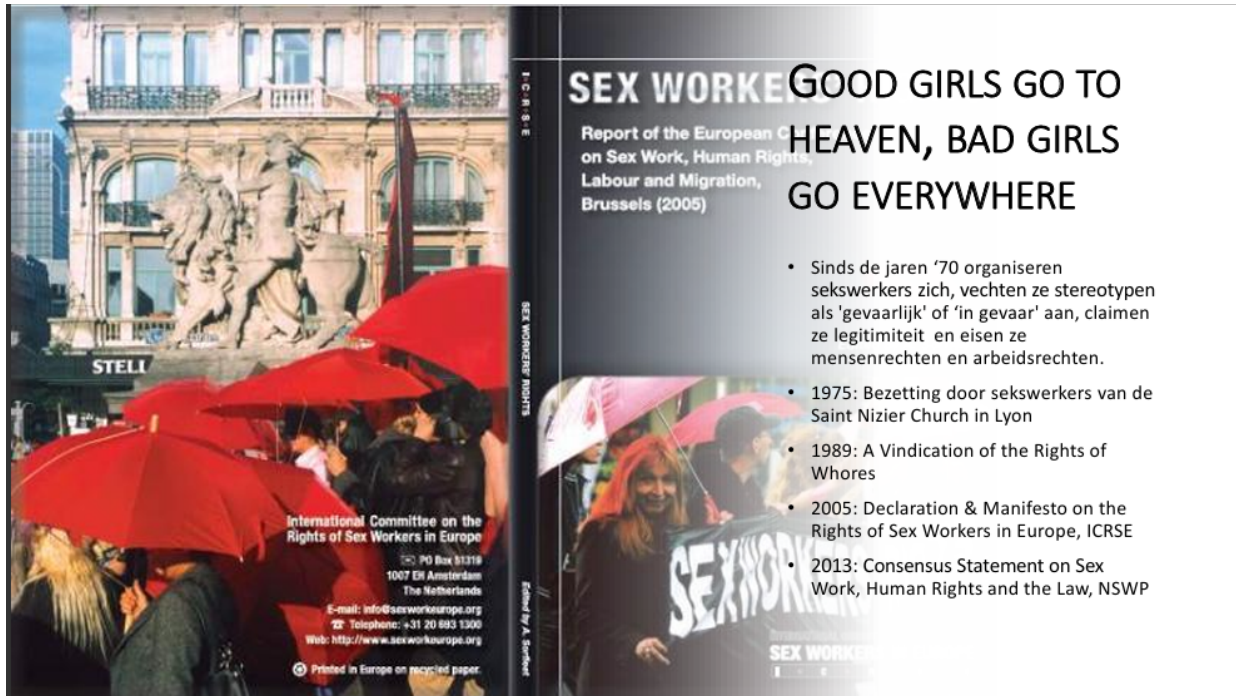
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**MARJAN WIJERS,  
PHD**



- Wat is de rol van mensenrechten in het publieke, politieke en juridische debat over sekswerkbeleid?
- Hoe mobiliseren sekswerkersorganisaties mensenrechten in hun strijd voor rechten?
- Hoe worden mensenrechten gebruikt door andere partijen, zoals de anti-sekswerkbeweging, beleidsmakers en rechters en hoe antwoorden sekswerkersorganisaties hier op?





2016 PROTEST ABOLITIONIST GROUPS AT HEADQUARTERS OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL IN LONDON

Gevoed door het dominante anti-mensenhandel discours en het groeiende aantal migranten sekswerkers, liggen de rechten van sekswerkers onder vuur door een steeds invloedrijkere 'abolitionistische' alliantie van zgn. 'radicale' feministen, conservatieve christenen, radicaal rechts en een nieuwe generatie 'linkse' liberalen.



NOT  
FOR  
SALE



## DE OMSTREDEN RELATIE TUSSEN MENSENRECHTEN EN SEKSWERK

Sekswerk als een schending van de menselijke waardigheid, vergelijkbaar met slavernij: geen enkele vrouw stemt vrijwillig in met sekswerk

vs

Erkenning van sekswerk als werk: het recht op persoonlijke en lichamelijke autonomie (recht op privacy)

(ECHR: The right to make choices over one's own body, *Pretty v. UK* 2002)

Menselijke  
waardigheid vs  
zelfbeschikking

- Waardigheid en zelfbeschikking kunnen beide worden beschouwd als twee pijlers van de mensenrechten, maar kunnen tot heel verschillende resultaten leiden
- Waardigheid is een sleutel begrip en tegelijkertijd niet gedefinieerd
- Problematisch als het gebruikt wordt als rechtvaardiging voor repressieve maatregelen tegen een groep die zelf niet het gevoel heeft dat hun waardigheid geschonden wordt. Wie bepaalt wiens waardigheid wel of niet wordt geschonden?

## Het gebruik van mensen-rechten om sekswerkers uit te sluiten van mensenrechten bescherming

Mensenrechten als middel om een hiërarchie van 'mens-zijn' te creëren, wie mensenrechten verdient en wie niet, en om het witte monogame middenklasse model van 'goede seksualiteit' te herstellen, terwijl tegelijkertijd sekswerkers worden ontmenselijkt.

Toegangspoorten tot het mensenrechtensysteem:

- Sekswork is een schending van de **menselijke waardigheid**
- Sekswork is **geweld tegen vrouwen**
- Vereenzelvigen van sekswork en **mensenhandel**



## Sekswork als geweld tegen vrouwen: consent, agency en menselijkheid

Agency als sleutelindicator van hedendaagse opvattingen over mens zijn: het vermogen om beslissingen te nemen over iemands leven, om toestemming te geven of te onthouden

Sekswork als geweld tegen vrouwen: uitgangspunt dat geen enkele vrouw vrijwillig kan instemmen met sekswork (en als ze zeggen dat ze dat wel doen zijn ze dom, ziek of corrupt)

Seksworkers worden non-personen, dingen: lege hulzen, zaaddozen, een stuk vlees

Door seksworkers het vermogen tot het geven of weigeren van consent te onzeggen, worden ze gereduceerd tot kinderen & worden staten ontheven van de verplichting om rekening te houden met fundamentele mensenrechten

## Gelijkstelling van sekswerk en mensenhandel

- Paradigmaverschuiving van een 'arbeid & rechten' frame naar een 'slachtoffer & misdaad' frame -> redding van het 'stemloze (migranten) slachtoffer' vs. de harteloze 'happy hooker'
- Omvorming van de anti-mensenhandelbeweging in een anti-sekswerkcampagne: 'End Demand' campagnes, criminalisering van klanten
- Uitbreiding van het begrip dwang naar economische omstandigheden of familie verantwoordelijkheden
- Opgeblazen en ongefundeerde cijfers over het aantal slachtoffers van mensenhandel
- Rol van antimigratiebeleid:

*... sekswerk en mensenhandel door elkaar halen is een goed middel om migratie te bestrijden*



## Mensenrechten als een tweesnijdend zwaard

In alle gevallen wordt het mensenrechten-systeem zelf gebruikt om sekswerkers *als sekswerkers* uit te sluiten van mensenrechten en specifieke seksuele normen te handhaven die emotionele en relationele intimiteit benadrukken, of meer in het bijzonder het heteronormatieve en monogame witte middenklasse model van 'goede' seksualiteit, terwijl degenen die deze normen overtreden worden uitgesloten en gestraft.



## Frankrijk: criminalisering van klanten (2016)

- Prostitutie = schending van mensenrechten & mannelijk geweld tegen vrouwen
- Alle sekswerkers zijn slachtoffers van mensenhandelaren of pooiers, of mentaal beschadigd door kindermisbruik of prostitutie
- Strafbaarstelling van klanten is noodzakelijk "om de waardigheid van de persoon en de openbare orde te waarborgen".
- Breed verzet van sekswerkers, sociale, gezondheids- en mensenrechten organisaties, o.a. STRASS, Medecins du Monde, Nationale Adviescommissie voor Mensenrechten

## Sekswerkers vechten de wet aan voor de rechter

- 2018: Sekswerkers, Medecins du Monde & verschillende NGO's dienen klacht in bij Frans Constitutioneel Hof
- Criminalisering schendt recht op privacy, vrijheid van onderneming en contract, recht op gezondheid, en recht op privéleven art. 8 EVRM (het recht op persoonlijke autonomie en seksuele vrijheid)
- Constitutioneel Hof Frankrijk (1 feb 2019):

Volgt het argument dat de meerderheid van de sekswerkers slachtoffers is wat mogelijk is door de vraag naar betaalde seksuele diensten.

Strafbaarstelling van het gebruik van seksuele diensten, met inbegrip van seksuele handelingen die "gepresenteerd" (sic) worden als vrij aangegaan in de privésfeer tussen instemmende volwassenen, is geen "kennelijk ongeschikt middel" om de doelstellingen van de wet te bereiken



# EHRM

In december 2019 brengen 261 sekswerkers die in Frankrijk werken de zaak voor het Europees Hof voor de Rechten van de Mens (EHRM).

Zij stellen dat de wet in strijd is met art. 2 (recht op leven), 3 (verbod op marteling en onmenselijke en vernederende behandeling) en 8 (recht op eerbiediging van het privéleven) van het verdrag schendt. Ze worden gesteund door 19 community-, gezondheids- en feministische organisaties.

In april 2021 verklaart het Hof de zaak ontvankelijk admissible.

In juli 2024 oordeelt het Hof dat de wet binnen de beleidsvrijheid van Frankrijk valt, zich beroepend op het gebrek aan consensus over sekswerk en de vraag of sekswerk vrijwillig kan zijn, d.w.z. het vermogen tot zelfbeschikking van sekswerkers.

(Fleur van Leeuwen & Marjan Wijers. When Ideology Trumps Rights: The ECtHR's Rejection of Sex Workers' Human Rights in *M.A. and Others v. France*. *Oxford Human Rights Hub*, 11 October 2024)



## **Symposium: Sex Work, Stigma, and Resistance in Times of Repression**

Amsterdam, September 27, 2024

University of Amsterdam (UvA) in cooperation with the Association Women & Law Clara Wichmann (VVR) and Sekswerk Expertise, Dutch Platform for the Advancement of Sex Workers Rights

**Gail Pheterson**, Guest Speaker

**Ine Vanwesenbeeck**, Chair

**Marie-Louise Janssen**, For the launching of a Dutch Network of Sex Work Researchers

Dissertation presentations:

**Marije van Stempvoort**: *Student Sex Work in the Netherlands: Motivations and Experiences*. Swansea University, UK, in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam

**Marjan Wijers**: *Sex Worker Rights and Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance and Mobilisation*. Essex University, UK.

## **PASSING THE TORCH OF FEMINISM<sup>1</sup>**

**Gail Pheterson**

**In memory of Sietske Altink**

Historian, activist, archivist, and dear friend

It is a joy to be back at a Dutch university. My main university base in the Netherlands - from 1979 to 1984 - was the University of Utrecht, where I was *wetenschappelijk medewerkster* in psychology and women's studies.<sup>2</sup> In 1983-84, I took a sabbatical leave in the United States at the University of California, Berkeley, Institute for the Study of Social Change. That's when I met North American sex work activists - Margo St.James, E. Kitch Childs, Priscilla Alexander, Gloria Lockett, Scarlot Harlot, Flo Kennedy, Dolores French, Annie Sprinkle, Danny Cockerline, and more -and that's where I first mobilized the Bad Girl Rap Groups with the sex worker organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) for "any woman who has ever been stigmatized as bad by her work, color, class, sexuality, history of abuse, or just plain gender."<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, I was in touch with Martine Groen, feminist therapist in

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<sup>1</sup> At the invitation of Marjan Wijers, I wrote this commentary in response to her dissertation: *Sex Worker Rights and Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance and Mobilisation*.

<sup>2</sup> This event was bi-lingual, Dutch-English, thus allowing me the pleasure of interspersing Dutch terms at will. The closest English equivalent of *wetenschappelijk medewerkster* is associate professor.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B of Pheterson, Gail. *The Prostitution Prism*. "Alliance between whores, wives and dykes: Proposal for a work group to demystify and eliminate the division of women into bad, good and perverse." pp. 132-136. Also in French (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001) and Spanish (Barcelona: Bellaterra, 2023).

Amsterdam, who was facilitating a  *hoeren praat groep* [whores' rap group] in Amsterdam with, among others, activist leaders Violet, Margot Alvarez, and Ans van der Drift. That group would soon become the launching pad for the *Roze/Rode Draad* [Pink/Red Thread] alliance of women within and outside the sex industry. When I returned to Utrecht from California, my psychology department was keen to integrate me in their sexology program, but my politics were anything but sexuological. Rather than hormones, chromosomes, sexual orientation, deviation, phobia, dysphoria, or euphoria, I was into women, us women: their/our economic autonomy, sexual agency, work, travel, political authority, and social equality among ourselves and with men. I left the university for awhile to organize full-time with sex workers against State harassment, fining, discrimination, and exclusion and for solidarity among women. Years of building alliances to expose and resist racism, anti-Semitism, classism, and lesbophobia among women - *het bondgenootschap* [alliance] *project in Nederland* - prepared many of us feminists to listen to the women-in-transgression who knew the men in-and-out of uniform.<sup>4</sup> Rather than disassociate from sex workers, we began to follow their lead. I did continue to teach at universities, here and there, with a stint as *gast hoogleraar* [visiting professor] in psychology in 1986 at the University of Amsterdam - *toen op de Vijzelstraat* [then on Vijzel Street]. That semester coincided with our organizing the Second World Whores' Congress at the European Parliament in Brussels. It was thus a time of television appearances, radio gigs, newspaper interviews, and a sort of coming out to my professor colleagues as a feminist on the whore side of the track. That was forty years ago. Today's university students were not yet even in the wombs of us feminists. I wish I could say that sex workers are treated with more respect now than a half century ago and that feminists across the world are now comfortable identifying with sex workers as they strive for political legitimacy, economic independence, sexual liberty, and geographic mobility. Helaas, the dominant voice is still - and ever more self-righteously - not whore-friendly. Despite the mobilization this last half century of an energized international network of sex worker activists and scholars, women - and those treated like women - are still very much under attack for taking their bodies, monies, and lives in their own hands. And the attack comes not

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<sup>4</sup> See Pheterson Gail. 1982. "Bondgenootschap tussen vrouwen: Een theoretiese en empiriese analyse van onderdrukking en bevrijding." *Psychologie en Maatschappij*, n°20, pp. 399-424; for an English version, see "Alliance Between Women: Psychological Processes Against Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Heterosexism," Institute for the Study of Social Change, University of California at Berkeley, 1984; also: fall 1986, "Alliances between women: Overcoming internalized oppression and internalized domination" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 12 (1) - p. 141 160. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/494302>

only from male-dominated State authorities, but also – however self-sabotaging - from other women. Prostitution - sex work - may indeed be more legitimate than decades ago as a research topic in the academy, though rarely is it recognized as legitimate gainful employment.

Marjan Wijers and I often sat in the same room across the past decades, be it on my *Zocherstraat* [Zocher Street] balcony in Amsterdam, in Utrecht, in Madrid, or in Santo Domingo. She began her journey at the *Stichting tegen vrouwenhandel* [Foundation against traffic in women] and I began mine in de *Roze Draad van de Hoerenbeweging* [Pink Thread of the Whores' Movement]. Her dissertation offers an informed and insightful flashback of prostitution debates and a probing analysis of present-day whore struggles for justice in European courts of law, especially in Germany, France, and Spain. By the way, I deliberately use the terms *sex worker*, *prostitute*, *whore*, *hooker*, *ho*, or *pro* interchangeably to defuse the stigma attached to any of those denominations, all the while insisting on decriminalization of prostitution and full civil rights of sex workers.

Looking back, and imagining myself sitting on the floor *op de Zocherstraat* drinking a *kopje koffie* [cup of coffee] with Marjan Wijers, Lin Chew, Martine Groen, Violet, Margo Alvarez, Ans van der Drift, Loes, Moni, Marjan Sax, Jan Visser, Sietske Altink and so many others, I know of no other country where pro-rights whores and anti-trafficking rescuers had more *gezellige ruzies* [warm-hearted arguments] than in the Netherlands. Although Marjan Wijers began her activism under the banner of anti-trafficking, she never doubted the wisdom of the whores and always denounced the hypocrisies of the rescuers.

## **Feminism**

At the beginning of the thesis, Marjan writes: “As a feminist, human rights lawyer, and sex worker rights activist, I support sex workers’ struggles for human and labour rights. As such, I prioritize sex workers’ voices, perspectives and experiences” (MW, p.7).<sup>5</sup> Marjan is a feminist with the knowledge and tools of a lawyer, the integrity of a sex worker ally, the steadfast persistence of an activist, and the critical mind of an intellectual. I applaud her perseverance, clarity, and well-placed respect for those who know The Life, “the only street fighters we’ve

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<sup>5</sup> MW refers to the dissertation of Marjan Wijers: *Sex Worker Rights and Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance and Mobilisation*. For full manuscript: <https://repository.essex.ac.uk/38493/> Contact address: [m.wijers@hetnet.nl](mailto:m.wijers@hetnet.nl)

got,” to quote radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson in her 1974 iconic collection of essays *Amazon Odyssey*.<sup>6</sup> Yes, in the 1970s, sex workers were among the most avant guard radical feminist warriors for women’s liberation. Their force was independence: asking for the money, walking the streets at night, wearing whatever they pleased, knowing men’s vulnerabilities, taking their pleasure, hanging out or hiding out, and mocking the hypocrisy of social conventions. They paid dearly for their transgression – still do. They were - and continue to be - the scapegoat for all women, an object lesson for women with independent ambitions and a criminal buffer zone between submissive women and dominant men (*buffer zone* and *object lesson* are again Ti-Grace’s terms). Sex workers - criminalized as prostitutes and stigmatized as whores - were the *tramps* of our sex whose function was to warn the *ladies* to stay in line. And staying in line meant denouncing prostitution: condemning the clients and pitying or thrashing the prostitutes, all the while renouncing or hiding or rationalizing their own transgressive liberties. Indeed, it is important to emphasize the self-denial required to avoid the whore stigma and the slippery slope of such denial, for example when one sacrifices control of one’s body, sexuality, relationships, education, or mobility in obedience of gender codes or State laws.<sup>7</sup>

It took a radical feminist analysis, one I share with Ti-Grace and Marjan, to validate the tramps and seduce the ladies into open civil disobedience of sexist norms. I say *radical* since the analysis was *fundamental*. It denounced the criminalization in law and stigmatization in society of women for their independence: economic, geographic, and sexual independence, in that order. Curious it is that the ladies are now considered, even by their outlaw sisters, to be the radical feminists. I thought that feminism was a subversive movement led by daring whores and unshackled dykes. Have those whores and dykes surrendered the torch of radical feminism to lady accomplices of the status quo? As I read Marjan’s thesis, I kept posing this question. I shall get to the central topic of her dissertation - human rights, but I think it is useful to first focus on the other interweaving framework of her thesis: feminism.

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<sup>6</sup> Atkinson, Ti-Grace. *Amazon Odyssey*, 1974, p.124.

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of the whore stigma as a general mechanism of social control, see Pheterson, G. *Vrouweneer en Mannenadel: Over het stigma Hoer* (also in English). Ministerie van Sociale Zaken and Werkgelegenheid. The Hague, DCE: juli 1986. The manuscript is easier to find as Chapters 3 and 4 of Pheterson, G. *The Prostitution Prism*. Amsterdam University Press, 1996.

Although Marjan asserts her own feminist engagement from the onset, the feminist etiquette falls thereafter almost entirely to those who denounce the sex trades and deny sex workers voice, legitimacy, and equality with other persons in all aspects of life. Those denouncers and deniers become the “radical feminists,” “reactionary feminists,” “abolitionist feminists,” “neo-abolitionist/radical feminists,” and - collectively - the “neo-abolitionist and radical feminist anti-sex work trans-exclusionary movement.” The battle becomes a contest “between sex workers’ movements and feminist movements,” a labelling that places sex workers outside and antagonistic to the feminist movement. In fact, those feminists hostile to sex commerce do not recognize sex workers as feminists, so it is no wonder that sex workers take a defensive stance. Once in her dissertation, Marjan refers to those who strive to eradicate prostitution as “so-called radical feminists,” thus suggesting they are not true feminists. They are, however, designated by governments - including the United Nations - to be The Voice of Feminism. As government appointees of our sex, they claim that prostitution is, by definition, violence against women, thus to be abolished, a stance contested by sex workers and their allies who demand decriminalization of the trade and the same labor rights as other individuals. Whereas Marjan refers to those pleading for the eradication of prostitution as so-called radical feminists, she puts in parenthesis the label (feminist) to qualify sex worker allies (MW, p.13). Nowhere are the sex workers themselves referred to as feminists. And yet, sex workers have been among my most astute political mentors over the past half century. I salute them - especially the migrants moving back and forth from South to North and East to West. I salute them as feminist forerunners against the mystifications, hypocrisies, and onslaught of the sex class system.

Two asides here: Firstly, when I say feminist, “I mean,” borrowing the formulation of French social anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, “not only [those who] call themselves so, but every woman who resists material, physical and psychological constraints and limitations of possibilities for thinking and action that domination imposes on the oppressed.”<sup>8</sup> Secondly, I am deliberately putting women at the center of this analysis, since women are designated by the State to be the prototype prostitute, be she a criminal or, to use Jo Doezema’s term, an

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<sup>8</sup> « *Les féministes - et je n’entends pas par là seulement les mouvements qui se désignent ainsi, mais toute femme qui résiste* »...« *aux contraintes matérielles, physiques et psychologiques* » [et aux] « *limitations des possibilités de pensée et d’action que la domination impose aux opprimées* »...(my translation). Mathieu, Nicole-Claude. « Bourdieu ou le pouvoir auto-hypnotique de la domination masculine, » *Les Temps Modernes*, n° 604, mai-juin-juillet 1999 : 286-324, citation p. 25.

*injured victim*.<sup>9</sup> I, nonetheless, include all sex workers, wherever they place themselves or are placed by others on sex, gender, and sexuality continuums. Clearly injustice glued to the sex industry extends across multiple whore stamps on this or that illicit or aberrant *kind of woman*, all rounded up together under a sexist State apparatus of racist, xenophobic, colonial, classist, homophobic, and transphobic discrimination and downright persecution.

Back to us ladies and tramps: prostitution (the term used in law) has been a faultline of women's liberation movements since, at least, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marjan Wijers brilliantly dissects the juridical, social, philosophical, and political dimensions of contemporary feminist clashes among women in Europe and beyond; the beyond being the migration tracks of both those with jobs in the sex trades and those with jobs in NGOs, universities, and governments. Juridically, she looks at concrete court cases; socially, she examines stigma, discrimination, and hypocrisy; philosophically, she deconstructs contrasting meanings imputed to notions of dignity and integrity; and politically, she exposes the hidden agendas of governments in their complete erasure of sex workers from the body politic. She demonstrates how governments instrumentalize feminism to rationalize controls of borders, revenues, migrants, transgender populations, homosexuals, and especially women, the ultimate pawns and work force of sexist regimes.

Governments cultivate, manipulate, reinforce, and instrumentalize fractures in women's movements. They then ramp up ideological credit under the guise of protecting women from harm. And this is where the double-edged sword of human rights begins to swing.

## **Human Rights**

There is a long and noble commitment among peoples and nations to *human rights*. In this historic tradition emerged the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on December 10<sup>th</sup> (my mother's birthday), 1948 (year of my birth), and in this historic tradition emerged the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights, adopted by the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) in 1985 on Valentine's Day. (It was Margo St. James, pioneer sex worker activist of the United States, who chose the date for the congress. She loved Valentine's Day. Upon the death of Margo in

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<sup>9</sup> Doezema, Jo. "Ouch! Western Feminists' Wounded Attachment' to the 'Third World Prostitute.'" *Feminist Review*. 67 (1):16-38 (2001).

2021, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors officially declared February 14<sup>th</sup> to be henceforth *Margo St. James Day*.) For both the United Nations and the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, the notion of human rights emerged as a rallying call for protest against atrocious inhumane treatment of a targeted group by an oppressive State. Such protest is well-taken and continues to find reason in the treatment of women and a myriad of other subjugated people by States around the world. But humane treatment is no guarantee of social equality, self-possession, or political agency.

Hannah Arendt, political theorist referenced by Marjan in her thesis and key reference of my own thinking, considers human rights to be important as a condition for political rights - as a right to have rights.<sup>10</sup> The *right to have rights* promises protection from harm, but does not, in itself, grant rights to act on one's own behalf and on behalf of one's society. She notes that "declarations [for] human rights" [... show] "an uncanny similarity in language and composition to [declarations] of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals."<sup>11</sup> I might likewise evoke the language of societies for the protection of the *unborn* (referring to embryos and fetuses lodged in human bodies) or to *Mother Earth*, as in protection of the seas and the forests.

In her book titled *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt, US historian of the French Revolution, explains that, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a distinction was made between those defined as passive citizens, such as women, children and foreigners, and those defined as active citizens (presumably men, adults and natives, although unnamed in her text, as in dominant discourse). Only active citizens had political rights. She writes:

"Eighteenth-century people, like almost everyone in human history before them, viewed women as dependents defined by their family status and thus by definition not fully capable of political autonomy. They could stand for self-determination as a private, moral virtue without establishing a link to political rights. They had rights, but not political rights."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Origins of Totalitarianism. Imperialism*. Chapter Nine, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," First published in 1948 (in *Monthly Review*) and then in *Origins* in 1951.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 172 in the 1968 edition of Harcourt Brace & Company, New York.

<sup>12</sup> *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: Norton, 2008, p.67.

Along the same lines, Nicole-Claude Mathieu gives two meanings to belonging in a society: (1) to be a part of (2) to be the property of.<sup>13</sup> Passive rights alone make one the property of those with active rights. People with passive rights are entitled to protection, but not to self-possession or self-determination.

Returning to Hannah Arendt, “the meaning of human rights became the standard slogan of the protectors of the underprivileged, a kind of additional law, a right of exception necessary for those who had nothing better to fall back upon.”<sup>14</sup> Alice, Dutch sex worker interviewee in Marjan’s thesis, goes right to the crux of the matter when she says “...with human rights, you often think of people who have no rights, people who are in prison or who are pitiful”...“it is weird,” she says, “that there is a slogan for [human rights], as that already shows that they [in this case, sex workers] don’t have them.” “The rules are more important than human rights, the rules are more important than people.... Nice, human rights, if you have them.” Alice goes on to express her preference for the slogan ‘my body my business’ over the slogan ‘human rights.’ With ‘my body my business’, she says, “I think of tough women who claim their autonomy and independence... freedom!” (MW, p. 96).

Likewise, Freja, a Danish sex worker interviewee, declares that human rights “never really [have] to do with the security and autonomy of the sex worker” (MW, p.101). Marjan illustrates the pronouncements of Alice and Freja with empirical evidence of the systematic degradation, danger, and constraint imposed on sex workers by anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking organizations and their government facilitators. By the way, Marjan’s bibliography is a goldmine of analyses and information. I was particularly struck by Ine Vanwesenbeeck’s scathing exposé of anti-trafficking movements.<sup>15</sup> Basically, as Freja, Alice, and others who know from experience testify, sex workers are punished, not protected, and restrained, not set free, by those who pretend to care for them and pretend to know their interests better than they do. In fact, such condescension and assault discredit the *so-called feminist* parvenus,

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<sup>13</sup> Mathieu, Nicole Claude. “Banalité du mal et ‘consentement’, : des non-droits humains des femmes. In : Caloz-Tschopp, Marie-Claire. *Hannah Arendt, la “banalité du mal” comme mal politique*. Vol.2. L’Harmattan, 1998, pp. 162-172.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *op.cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> Vanwesenbeeck, Ine. “The Making of ‘The Trafficking Problem’”. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 2019, 48: 1961-1967.

while undermining the pariah whores, those who take the shocks from both sides: the ones used by the dominant class to obscure oppressive measures (under the guise of protection) and used by the subordinate class (other women) as the sacrificial lamb.<sup>16</sup>

### **From Human Rights to Civil Liberties**

In the 1985 Valentine's Day Charter of the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (drafted at De Graaf Stichting in preparation for the First World Whores' Congress in an all-night intense encounter of sex workers and a few of us whore-identified disciples), the term *civil liberties* was immediately coupled with the term *human rights*:

“Guarantee prostitutes all human rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage [freedom to marry, thus freedom from forced marriage or freedom to divorce] and motherhood [freedom to mother, thus, freedom not to mother, freedom from forced pregnancy or access to abortion services] and the right to unemployment insurance and housing.”<sup>17</sup>

So, drafters of the Charter considered human rights as preamble to civil liberties. Recognition of one's humanity was the precondition, but certainly not the ultimate target of our manifesto. Our aim was agency, as Alice said, freedom, freedom to make decisions, to work, to move in public space and across borders, to access resources and to speak out - be it to negotiate a fee for services rendered or be it to plead one's case in a court of law. Such freedoms are active rights, political rights, at odds with protectionist agendas that silence the oppressed, control national borders, appropriate women, preserve gender norms, monitor illicit revenues, and track undocumented migration. Autonomy is illegal for those with passive rights, however well-intentioned and benevolent may be their overseers.

I recall giving a lecture 25 years ago in New York for Columbia University's Program on *Sexuality, Gender, Health, and Human Rights*. I titled my lecture “The Nitty Gritty of Human Rights: Sex, Work, Travel and Money.”<sup>18</sup> I don't recall saying anything about human rights in

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<sup>16</sup> Again drawing on Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey*, 1974.

<sup>17</sup> Pheterson, Gail (ed.) *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, citation p. 40. First published by Seal Press, 1989. Reprinted with additional archival material in San Juan, Puerto Rico: Biblioservices, 2019: <http://www.rightsofwhores.com/>

<sup>18</sup> Pheterson, Gail. “The Nitty Gritty of Human Rights: Sex, Work, Travel and Money.” University Public Lecture. Seminar of the *Program on Sexuality, Gender, Health and Human Rights*. Director Carole Vance. Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, 19 April 1999.

my hour-long lecture. I do remember speaking about sex, work, travel and money. I nonetheless put the expression *human rights* in my title, just as the director of the program, Carole Vance, used it to title her curriculum. Human rights had become the umbrella for justice, already decades ago (actually since the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and increasingly so to this day. I became more reticent in using the term when I read and reread Hannah Arendt's critique of the protectionist trap of human rights frameworks and I am even more reticent now after studying Marjan's thesis. There are many others wary of the framework, many referenced by Marjan - including another sex worker ally, Ratna Kapur, self-identified as "a post-colonial feminist legal thinker." Marjan stresses the rhetoric value of human rights and joins Ratna in asserting their potentially progressive and transformative power.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps, although rhetoric can be more mystifying than enlightening - as Marjan vividly demonstrates with what she calls the double-edged sword of human rights.

Imagining a sword dual between those who plea for sex worker rights and those who deny such rights, clearly the scientific and ethical commanding hand is with sex workers and sex worker allies. Their research irrefutably shows the failure of the challengers, even according to their own objectives. Those who seek to abolish the sex industry fail to eliminate or even diminish it, while their strategies invariably increase repressive State measures that exclude, harass, rob, isolate, and stigmatize marginalized populations.

Marjan's Wijers' investigation is a superb contribution to the stream of sex work research, including the work of Ine Vanwesenbeeck, Jo Doezema, Kamala Kempadoo, Laura Agustin, Elizabeth Bernstein, Carole Vance, Melissa Ditmore, Milena Jakšić, among many others. Those individual scholar activists join forces with those working collectively in national and transnational sex worker organizations, such as ESWA, SWAN, and NSWP, to name only a few among the hundreds worldwide. We have won scientifically in demonstrating the hidden agendas and oppressive consequences of abolitionist, prohibitionist, or regulationist prostitution schemes. And yet, despite massive mobilization in The Life and even in The Academy, sex workers in defense of their political rights are not winning; they are not defeating the State and the State's accomplishments in courts of law - or not enough, be it in Germany, France, Spain, or elsewhere. And when they succeed in reforming prostitution laws,

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<sup>19</sup> Kapur, Ratna. (2006). "Human Rights in the 21st Century. Take a Walk on the Dark Side." *Sydney Law Review*, 28(4), 665–688.

the reforms often fail or fall short of fundamental change. Luca Stevenson, former coordinator of the European Sex Workers Alliance (ESWA), wonders whether focusing on law reform might silence more radical voices for social justice and expose sex workers to “a lot of risk without direct benefit to them” (MW, 138). Milena of the Sex Workers’ Right Advocacy Network (SWAN) tells that focusing on legal change can actually worsen the situation of sex workers, for example in countries where there is no prostitution law, such as in Kyrgyzstan (MW, p.94).

Why are we not winning the struggle? And what can we do about it? Here are a few reflections to open discussion:

### **Status Crimes**

I suggest that the *why not* (why aren’t we winning) lies in women’s subordinate status in society as passive citizens ruled by dominant active citizens. Paid sex work - prostitution, no matter the law - is a status crime for those without the right to have rights. At best, one can be authorized for conditional rights, circumscribed permissions, or tolerance without rights. Passive citizens - or, even more disenfranchised, passive aliens, be they categorized as migrants, trafficked persons, or injured victims - have no right to act on their own behalf or to participate in public debate and collective decision-making. They may be granted protection or rehabilitation as precious - or soiled - property, but not active rights as social agents.

For those reduced to a status, a passive status, it is criminal to act. Many of us know the trap of laws that, in principle, do not criminalize prostitutes, but that criminalize everything the prostitute - sex worker – must do for her work: asking for money, negotiating the price, determining the service, renting a room, standing on the street, sitting behind a window, and so forth.

Likewise, control of one’s own fertility is a status crime, whether to carry an illicit pregnancy to term or to terminate a pregnancy. One needs State authorization to handle one’s own uterus. Once again quoting Arendt (writing in regard to stateless refugees in the 1940s), “...one is placed in a situation where, unless he (let’s say “they”) commits a crime, [their] treatment by others does not depend on what [they] do or do not do”<sup>20</sup> Although Arendt never addressed

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<sup>20</sup> *Op. Cit.*, p. 176.

women's subjugation to men, we can extrapolate theoretically that specifically female crimes (whether committed by cis-gender women or someone else doing female-designated work) are generally crimes of agency, be they to transgressively terminate a pregnancy (abortion) or negotiate sexual service (prostitution). Those designated passive citizens or aliens have no rights to act as self-determining political subjects and they risk punishment if they do so.

Since individuals ARE social actors, they risk punishment simply by doing what they need to do to survive, eat, work, love, and move about the world. In introducing her research on Nairobi sex workers, British historian Luise White tells about her initial bias with questions like "Did you think it was dangerous to be a prostitute, that you could be arrested for it?" Looking back self-critically, she writes: "These women did not become prostitutes to be safe, they became prostitutes to make money; they made that perfectly clear to me."<sup>21</sup>

Active persons - healthy, curious, engaged, intelligent, caring citizens of the world - take risks. The object of women's liberation movements is not safety, but - as Alice said - freedom. Of course, we object to being shot dead, locked up, or deported for taking our lives in our own hands; thus our demand for active rights are coupled with protests against violent reprimand by men, State, and society. And this is where our bold and risky transgression of repressive treatment gets coopted to throw us or our sisters into supposedly protective State custody.

### **Passing the Torch of Feminism: From Constraint to Liberty**

I suggest that the double-edged sword of human rights is interlocked with the double-edged sword of anti-violence activism among feminists. In the 1980s, feminists were sometimes classified as pro-rights versus anti-violence, a rather ridiculous contrast since one would think that all women wanted rights and opposed violence. But there was a difference in orientation, since we pro-rights activists wanted more liberty for women and the anti-violence activists wanted more government intervention to protect women from men. I ask myself if the emphasis on human rights these past decades hasn't sabotaged the movement for liberty by reinforcing protectionist ideology. Anti-violence has become the anchor of feminism worldwide. Outrage against men's violence against women is justified, certainly, but the reason for men's violence has been obscured, as has the common cause of women for active

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<sup>21</sup> White, Luise. *The Comforts of Home, Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*. London: University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 23.

political rights. The reason for violence against women is not men's failure to punish their cruel brothers and protect their vulnerable sisters. The reason is institutional control of women. No one knows that better than whore-branded sex workers. I think it is time to pass the torch of feminism back to those trailblazers.

Marjan Wijers carried out her first extensive study of these issues nearly thirty years ago, together with Lin Chew, in an international investigation on *Trafficking in Women: Forced Labor and Slavery-Like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour, and Prostitution*. Their study de-isolated the subject of prostitution, thus integrating it in broad social justice movements. One of their concluding recommendations goes as follows: "The law should treat women as subjects accorded with rights as independent persons, as workers and as migrants, and never as objects of exchange or dependents to be controlled."<sup>22</sup>

In closing, one last anecdote: I remember an incident at the February 14, 1985, Valentine's Day press conference of the First World Whores' Congress at the Krasnapolsky Hotel here in Amsterdam. A Dutch policeman stood up with an earnest question for the sex worker panel: "But ladies," he asked, feigning respect, "if we grant your demands, how will we control women?" Margo St. James, moderator, was so thrilled with the transparency of the question that she asked him to please repeat it in a loud voice. "**Ladies,**" he asked again, "**if we grant your demands, how will we control women?**" He was baffled by the laughter and applause from the whore panel. Margo said she had never before met such an honest cop.

Gail Pheterson. "Passing the Torch of Feminism." Commentary on the dissertation of Marjan Wijers: *Sex Worker Rights and Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance and Mobilisation*. Symposium: "Sex Work, Stigma and Resistance in Times of Repression." University of Amsterdam, September 27, 2024.

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<sup>22</sup> Wijers, Marjan and Chew, Lin. *Forced Labor and Slavery-Like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labor, and Prostitution*, GAATW, Bangkok and STV Utrecht, 1997.



## **Symposium: Sex Work, Stigma, And Resistance In Times Of Repression**

Amsterdam, September 27, 2024

University of Amsterdam (Uva) in cooperation with the Association Women & Law  
Clara Wichmann (VVR) and Sekswerk Expertise, Dutch Platform for the  
Advancement of Sex Workers Rights

**Gail Pheterson**, Guest Speaker

**Ine Vanwesenbeeck**, Chair

**Marie-Louise Janssen**, Launching of a Dutch Network of Sex Work Researchers

Dissertation Presentations:

**Marije Van Stempvoort**: Student Sex Work in The Netherlands: Motivations And Experiences.  
Swansea University, UK, in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam

**Marjan Wijers**: Sex Worker Rights And Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance  
and Mobilisation. Essex University, UK

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### **VIDEO LINKS PRESENTATIONS**

Ine Vanwesenbeeck: Introduction

<https://hva-uva.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=bf93c842-c3b3-4b38-b56e-b21a00e9d743>

Marie-Louise Janssen: Launching of a Dutch Network of Sex Work Researchers

<https://hva-uva.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=0d4ed951-8e0a-457f-af33-b21a00ea14ac>

Marjan Wijers: Sex Worker Rights And Human Rights: A Double-Edged Sword. Rights, Resistance  
and Mobilisation.

<https://hva-uva.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=1c656138-060f-41de-ac4c-b21a01092a64>

Gail Pheterson: Passing the Torch of Feminism

<https://hva-uva.cloud.panopto.eu/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=430bcf35-d7ac-427d-af47-b21a0109cb7d>



READING LIST SYMPOSIUM: SEX WORK, STIGMA, AND RESISTANCE IN TIMES OF  
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AMSTERDAM, SEPTEMBER 27, 2024

### SHORT READING LIST

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***“Human rights are as much a site of power as any other politics of inclusion and exclusion, who belongs and who does not.”***

*Dr Marjan Wijers*

At a time of increasing popularity of conservative right-wing politics and ideologies, sex work finds itself at the crossroads of rights and repression. What does this mean for sex workers and sex work policies? What have 24 years of ‘legalisation’ of sex work in the Netherlands brought us? What do the current political developments mean for sex workers across Europe?

The symposium aimed to bring together academic research and sexwork activism. Centred around the doctoral studies of Dr Marjan Wijers and Dr Marije van Stempvoort, its core question was:

What can both studies teach us about reducing the stigma around sex work and enforcing sex workers’ human rights?

