

Prostitution from 1800 to today

## Abolitionism

### The Campaign to Abolish Regulated Prostitution (19th - 21st century)

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#### ABSTRACT

Abolitionism is a European movement for the abolition of regulationism, which began in England in 1869. The movement brings together prohibitionists, advocating the end of regulationism and the banning of prostitution, and abolitionists opposed only to regulated prostitution. At the end of the nineteenth century, abolitionism extended its scope to include the struggle against the white slave trade. In the twentieth century, regulationism having been abolished, the term most often refers to opponents of all forms of prostitution.



Created in France around 1800, regulationism did not meet with immediate opposition. However, opposition emerged after its introduction in England in 1869, where doctors and women challenged this “French system.” The Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, led by the feminists Elizabeth

Wolstenholme and Josephine Butler, immediately denounced the iniquity of this law that was based on sexual double standards: only women were penalised, their clients never troubled. After six years, this struggle led to the founding, by Butler, of the British, Continental and General Federation for the Abolition of Prostitution. Its name attests to its European ambitions, as well as expressing the idea that a European practice required a European solution, which was an innovative claim to say the least. This "crusade," as Butler referred to it, was tinged with religiosity and moralism: it was about rescuing "fallen women." This judgement was shared by most Europeans, as evidenced by the terms used to refer to prostitutes, which are also used as general insults; as such, they constitute a European lexicon of prostitution. Butler condemned prostitution and wanted to set her 'sisters' back on the right path. Abolitionists in France put forward criticisms of a different nature: the feminist philosopher Maria Deraismes considered that brothels (*maisons de tolérance*) were concessions to male demands; the left-wing feminist publicist Yves Guyot, meanwhile, put forward legal, political and public health arguments. In 1876 he started an abolitionist campaign in *Les droits de l'homme* in which he denounced regulationism's lack of respect for human rights since prostitutes were exempt from common law under this system and its instrument, the *police des mœurs* ("vice squad," literally "police of morality"). This system was thus contrary to human dignity and to the universality defended by many abolitionists. Its injustice was flagrant, as it only targeted prostitutes and ignored the responsibility of clients. The public health argument, meanwhile, was rejected by the abolitionists: doctors such as the Frenchman Fiaux demonstrated the ineffectiveness of regulationism in its fight against the spread of venereal diseases, since women subjected to regulation were even more affected than clandestine prostitutes as a result of unhygienic medical inspections. Despite the divergent views of the activists, the International Abolitionist Federation against Regulated Prostitution (IAF), which published the *Continental Bulletin*, was created in Geneva in 1877. The abolitionist movement, often supported by Freemasonry and Protestant milieus, grew into a strong Europe-wide network through the federation of national branches and the organisation of large congresses in the 1880s. The Genoa Congress in 1880, in the presence of representatives of 1600 workers' associations, voted through "a manifesto designed to promote the abolition of legal prostitution." Soon, two tendencies came up against each other within the IAF: prohibitionists, who wanted to ban regulationism and prostitution, emphasising human dignity and morality, and abolitionists, who opposed regulationism but who fervently defended liberalism, and who did not, as such, demand a ban on prostitution when it involved two consenting adults participating in a contract that should not concern the state; some even claimed that women should be free to use their bodies as they wish. In February 1900, the German radical feminists gave priority to the fight against regulationism in the name of a "moral duty" towards individuals. In Russia, opposition to regulationism, led by philanthropists and socialists, was focused on the spread of venereal disease (Congress on syphilis, 1897) and on the exploitation of "white slaves." Throughout Europe, abolitionist petitions demanded the closing down of "brothels" and called for government action, such as the establishment in Italy of a commission "charged with giving its opinion on the revision of the regulations." Private and militant initiatives increased around the turn of the century: in France, "L'Œuvre libératrice" of the feminist Avril de Sainte-Croix, the leading figure in French abolitionism at that time, opened shelters to help the rehabilitation of prostitutes; in the Netherlands, "Night Mission" hoped to act against prostitution by addressing the "customers of houses of debauchery" in the main cities. A handful of abolitionist victories (England, 1883) did not prevent the Europe-wide success of the pseudo-scientific theory of the "born prostitute," who could be identified by bodily indicators such as the extent of body hair or the size of the clitoris (Lombroso and Ferrero, *The Criminal Woman and the Prostitute*, 1866).

Disagreements within the IAF receded into the background in the face of the urgent fight against a new "scourge" encouraged by the revolution in transport: the "white slave trade" around Europe and towards other continents. Abolitionists underlined the responsibility of regulationism and its brothels which provided a huge opportunity for pimps. While the struggle against the white slave trade encouraged differences to be put aside, it weakened the original abolitionist cause: the product of an English movement at the end of the 1890s, the International Bureau for the Suppression of Traffic in Women and Children (which equated women and children, much to the dismay of feminists) accepted regulationism as a means of control, with moralising and conservative overtones. The opening of military brothels during the First World War reflects the failure of abolitionism. Only revolutionary Russia abolished regulationism but, from 1929, it harshly repressed prostitutes, considered deviants and interned in forced re-education centres. Regulationism did not completely disappear in Europe until the mid-twentieth century. On 2 December 1949, the United Nations adopted the "Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others," which it considered incompatible with human dignity. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, abolitionism is often confused with prohibitionism, although opposition to neo-regulationism is giving it

back its original meaning.

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