

European Lexicon of Prostitution

19th-21st centuries

Author-s:

[Lilian MATHIEU](#) [1]

Abstract

The lexicon of prostitution reflects both the social reality of this phenomenon and the various ways in which it has been considered a public problem. To refer to all people living from the sale of sexual services using a common term not only contributes to marking them out as a separate group but also suggests a particular relationship to the norm and, more generally, to the social world.

Article

The administrative regulation of prostitution, implemented in a large part of nineteenth-century Europe, distinguished between several subcategories of “public girls” (*filles publiques*). “Numbered girls” (*filles en numéro*) were registered in brothels (*maisons de tolérance*), while “card-carrying girls” (*filles en carte*) worked independently; the “insubordinate” (*insoumises*) refused to comply with registration and mandatory health checks and risked going to prison. One also finds a departure from the norm in the case of the resolute opponents of regulated prostitution, the English abolitionists. For these Puritan Christians, the term “fallen women” expressed at once paternalistic compassion and the condemnation of a practice that must have offended them deeply.

Legal terminology also reveals a lot about the way in which, historically, the phenomenon of prostitution has been understood. At the turn of the 19th-20th century, regulations regarding prostitution adopted in Norway, Finland and Sweden were part of a broader set of laws against vagrancy. When Franco's Spain proclaimed the abolition of regulated prostitution in 1962, it was through a law called the fight against “social dangerousness” (*peligrosidad social*). Describing prostitution as “immoral” (*sittenwidrig*) until 2012, the Austrian Supreme Court considered the contract between prostitutes and clients as null and void. It is not insignificant that, in Ireland, it was at the moment of the decriminalisation of homosexuality, in 1993, that the fact of being identified as a “common prostitute” ceased to be a crime. It should also be noted that many of these laws were formulated in a gendered way, presupposing that prostitution could only be exercised by women for male clients.

The adoption of abolitionist legislation in many European countries after the Second World War was accompanied by a lexicon prioritising the idea of prostitutes as victims defined—as in France for example—as “socially maladjusted” (*inadaptées sociales*), the potential victims of “exploitation” by pimps. This concept has been challenged since the 1990s under the influence of two antagonistic movements: one advocating the recognition of prostitution as a profession, the other defining it as intolerable sexist violence.

It was not until the 1970s that prostitutes began to express their own positions publicly, and it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that they were able to develop genuine militant organisations. The unprecedented public expression of prostitutes was accompanied by the promotion of a new

vocabulary. The very term prostitute (in French *prostituée* – a past participle suggesting the passivity of the person in the process that led to this condition) was criticised for its negativity and replaced by “sex worker” (*travailleuse du sexe, trabajadora sexual*, etc.) From this followed the adoption of a vocabulary of workers’ rights that sought to integrate prostitution into the economic field—the “sex industry” referring not only to prostitution but also to activities of a better established legality such as pornography or erotic shows—and to allow “sex professionals” to enjoy the advantages and protection reserved for workers.

Some countries have responded positively to these requests for professional recognition and institutionalization. This has been the case in the Netherlands since 2001 where, after a political process invoking “realism” against “moralism”, the contractual relationship between prostitutes and the owners of the establishments where they work has been normalised, and the establishments subject to regulations regarding hygiene, security and access conditions.

Dutch policy is based on a distinction between “free” prostitution, which is to be normalised through integration into the world of work, and “forced” prostitution, the victims of which are to be rescued and the perpetrators prosecuted. The crime of procuring of prostitutes (*proxénétisme*) has not, therefore, completely disappeared in the new legislation, but certain practices which previously fell into this category (such as running an establishment for the purposes of prostitution) are no longer categorised as such. A more neutral vocabulary of “employers” (the owners of brothels in the Netherlands are grouped together in an “association of entrepreneurs in the relaxation sector”), “third parties” and “intermediaries” has therefore come to replace the more strongly connoted term “procuring.”

In contrast, Sweden has defined prostitution as sexist violence since 1999, following the adoption of a feminist law known as the “women’s peace” (*kvinnofrid*) which criminalised the buying of sexual services. Even though the legal texts were formulated in a neutral way, prostitution is envisaged once again as essentially exercised by women for a male clientele, ignoring the growing share of male and transgender prostitutes. Swedish policy was held up as a model in many countries where feminists and abolitionists advocate its adoption. This is the case in France where mobilisation in the linguistic field is particularly evident. Prostitutes become “survivors of prostitution” (*survivantes de la prostitution*) to underline the traumatic dimension of this experience, while the clients become “prostituters” (*prostituteurs*) in order to emphasise their responsibility in the perpetuation of the phenomenon of prostitution.

The fact that prostitution is, in the majority of European countries, carried out predominantly by foreigners, has also contributed to the revival of an older theme around which abolitionism was internationalised in the late nineteenth century: that of human trafficking or the trade in human beings (in French: *la traite des êtres humains*). The term “trade” is associated with an overwhelming historical reference, the Slave Trade, which conjures up images of kidnapping, the tricking of innocent, naïve victims, forced displacement and being violently constrained to perform a repugnant activity. This semantic field of enslavement explains why the question of whether foreign prostitutes consented to their migration and to their involvement in prostitution is the subject of such heated debate between abolitionists, feminists and advocates of “sex work.” The distinction in English between “human trafficking”, referring to a form of slavery undergone passively, and “human smuggling” (referring to the facilitation of the illegal crossing of borders by foreigners who are the agents of their own migration) neatly sums up this opposition between two irreconcilably antagonistic conceptions of prostitution.

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