

State Feminists vs. 343 Bastards

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Berlin — Feminists across Western Europe are sounding the alarm. Prostitution, they claim, has become today's "white slavery," with ever more women from Bulgaria and Romania, Africa and Asia being forced, tricked or seduced into selling their bodies.

But in doing so, these activists are creating a schism in the movement, between those who see prostitution as another form of male oppression and those who see it as a possible means of female empowerment.

Much of the debate is centered in Germany, where prostitution is legal. As a result, the German author Alice Schwarzer said, the country has become "an El Dorado for human traffickers, a paradise for johns from all over the Continent," who come in busloads to frequent the new "mega-brothels" in Cologne, Munich or Berlin.

And, indeed, prostitution is big business here. In bordellos along the borders with France and Poland, countries where prostitution is illegal, groups of visitors are often offered flat-rate packages. Though exact numbers are rare, experts estimate that there are as many as 400,000 prostitutes in Germany, serving more than a million clients and churning out a hefty revenue of 15 billion euros a year.

Ms. Schwarzer is a leading proponent of recriminalizing prostitution, a position that puts her at odds with her erstwhile allies on the left. After all, prostitution was legalized under the coalition government of the Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder in 2002. The idea, said the Green Party politician Kerstin Müller, one of the architects of the law, was to give registered sex workers a way to "get out of the shadows," including making them eligible for social security.

To Ms. Schwarzer, though, such a system simply locks in place a misogynist power structure: "Prostitution is not the exception, it is a mass phenomenon." Ms. Schwarzer's position is common in other parts of Northern Europe, where a sort of "state feminism" has been on the rise for decades. In the name of protecting women, in 1999 Sweden criminalized the hiring of prostitutes, turning the judicial gaze on the johns and away from the women.

Such a law works well in a place like Sweden, where the political consensus is to subordinate one's personal needs and desires to the common good.

"In Sweden, there are many more men who consider themselves feminists than anywhere else in the world," said the German journalist Thomas Kirchner, a correspondent for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. "Men have to ask themselves: Do I really want to satisfy my urge, even if that means supporting a system that humiliates and exploits thousands of women? What image of women do I teach my children?"

The Swedish model is being taken up across the Continent: Northern Ireland, Belgium, Finland and Lithuania are all about to follow suit.

But Ms. Schwarzer and Sweden represent just one side of the debate. Organizations that represent sex workers have pushed back aggressively. They argue that the women for whom they advocate — such as the sociology student earning a little extra money in a high-priced escort service, the ex-prostitute who opened up her own business and who claims to love her job — are a social category that simply does not exist for the feminist prohibition movement, which sees only victims of oppression.

Resistance to this new state feminism has nowhere been as vivid as in France, where a new law imposes a fine of 1,500 euros on people caught soliciting a prostitute (they are also required to undergo awareness classes on the dire situation of prostitutes and the dangers of sex work). The French philosopher Elisabeth Badinter declared the proposal “a declaration of hate toward male sexuality.” She has made common cause with a growing number of Frenchmen — as diverse as the novelist Frédéric Beigbeder and the lawyer Richard Malka, who defended Dominique Strauss-Kahn against charges of rape — who deny that their visiting prostitutes constitutes anything other than a private transaction between consenting adults.

A petition called “343 Bastards” — an allusion to a notorious abortion-rights campaign in 1971 of “343 sluts” — stated that “some of us have gone, go, or will go to prostitutes — and we are not even ashamed.” They added, “everyone should be free to sell their charms, and even to love doing it.”

What this debate obscures is the crucial difference between prostitution in general, which can certainly be about consenting adults doing what they want with their bodies, and human trafficking, which no one should tolerate or provide excuses for. Unfortunately, state feminism, in its desire to make a stand for women, ends up punishing those who are most open about their willingness to pay or be paid for sex, while pushing the evils of human trafficking and forced sex work further underground.

Instead of cracking down on the men who frequent prostitutes, the authorities should be focused on the criminal networks that bring in women from Eastern European countries to the European Union.

Punishing johns in general is a kind of fundamentalism that doesn't befit a liberation movement. By becoming a state religion, feminism can only lose.

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