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Prostitutes' Movements— the Fight for Workers' Rights¹

Sex work is a popular topic in the media, often discussed with regards to moral issues in a highly emotionalised register. When *Amnesty International* in 2015 underlined the basic fact that “Sex Workers’ Rights are Human Rights”, a huge debate followed, questioning if and how prostitution can be defined as work. Carol Leigh, who co-founded the US prostitutes’ movement in the 1970s, coined the term ‘sex work’ as early as 1978. The term is supposed to highlight the simple fact that prostitution is work for which people selling a sexual service receive payment. According to *Amnesty International*, ‘sex work’ describes consensual sexual exchanges between adults. In fact, with this meaning the term ‘sex work’ is extensively employed both inside and outside the scientific community, as well as by political activists in the field of prostitution. But as media discussions about prostitution still show even 40 years after establishing ‘sex work’, its definition as ‘work’ is still called into question. Moral issues have had a greater influence on media discussions of prostitution than the questions of why people—mainly women—choose to offer sex work, and how sex workers themselves define their service.

Additionally, besides the fact that the term ‘sex work’ emphasises prostitution as a form of labour in a capitalist society, the term ‘sex workers’ also describes prostitutes as active subjects. And these subjects have voices and demands which should be included in any discussion about prostitution. To enrich these ongoing debates, some sex workers’ voices and struggles are prioritised in this issue of *Moving the Social*. The journal takes a closer look at European and American actions and movements for prostitutes’ rights in interdisciplinary articles by scholars from different fields. Sarah Beer (Sociology), Giovanna Gilges (Cultural Pedagogy and Gender Studies), Kate Hardy (Work and Employment Relations), Mareen Heying (History), Joana Lilli Hofstetter (Social Sciences) and Megan Rivers-Moore (Women’s and Gender Studies) each help to shed light on the sex worker activism which has taken place since Carol Leigh coined the new definition of ‘sex work’.

1 I would like to thank Vivian Strotmann, the Managing Editor of *Moving the Social*, for the outstanding cooperation during the creation of this issue and her critical gaze for detail.

Women like any Other

One of the first major public actions by sex workers in Europe took place in France. Starting on 2 June 1975, about 150 prostitutes occupied a church in the city of Lyon for more than a week in order to draw public attention to their working conditions—meaning widespread mistreatment by the police and society. Only shortly before the strike, some of the prostitutes' colleagues were killed while streetwalking and the police did very little to try to solve the murder case. That can be seen as a key moment which caused them to go on strike.² A strike is commonly defined as the withholding of work as a negotiating tactic in a labour dispute. Hence, by naming their form of political protest a 'strike', the activists in Lyon made it very clear that they themselves regarded prostitution as a form of labour and wanted the world to regard them as workers, fighting for better working conditions and workers' rights. This message reverberated in the French media, and their voices were heard and discussed. Even though a legal change did not follow, 1975 can be seen as the starting point of a development which led to prostitutes' movements in several European countries, some of which were even partly connected. In 2015, a huge demonstration in Lyon was held to commemorate the strike of 1975 and the meaning it still has today for several activists. Joana Lilli Hofstetter analyses the networks and connections of contemporary European sex workers' movements in her article in this issue.

"We are women like any other!"³, proclaimed the striking sex workers in 1975. By identifying as average women, they emphasised that they did not see a fundamental difference between sex workers and other working women. The group *Coyote*, part of the powerful US prostitutes' rights movement, argued along similar lines, stressing that "a prostitute is being paid for her time and skills to give warmth, affinity and desire." The price for her service depends on these skills. *Coyote* concluded: "In reality, a prostitute is being paid for her time and skill, the price being rather dependent on both variables. To make a great distinction between being paid for an hour's sexual service, or an hour's typing or an hour's acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there."⁴ Here it

2 For further information on the French occupation and the consequent fights see the autobiography of one of the main protagonists: Barbara/Christine de Coninck: *La partagée*, Paris 1977. The occupation was analysed by Lilian Mathieu: *An Unlikely Mobilization: The Occupation of Saint-Nizier Church by the Prostitutes of Lyon*, in: *Revue française de sociologie: An annual English selection*, 42:1 (2001), pp. 107–131. Voices of sex workers who participated in the French strike can be found here: Claude Jaget (ed.): *Prostitutes: Our life*, Bristol 1980.

3 Margaret Valentino/Mavis Johnson: Introduction, in: Claude Jaget (ed.): *Prostitutes*, 1980, pp. 7–31, p. 15.

4 *Coyote* quoted from: Wendy Chapkis: *Live sex acts: Women performing erotic labor*, New York 1997, p. 70.

becomes evident that any distinction or hierarchy of typically female jobs was rejected by the activists. Due to the fact that sex workers often have not been perceived as average women, it took considerable courage and effort for them to stand up against existing stereotypes and fight for workers' rights. Sarah Beer calls attention to this aspect in her article in this issue.

A uniform and immutable definition of 'work' does not exist. In examining this aspect, it is helpful to engage with an approach taken by philosopher and feminist Marxist Silvia Federici in 1975. In Federici's essay "On sexuality as work", in which she points out the "schizophrenic character of sexual relations" between men and women, she summarises that for women in heterosexual relationships sex is not only work, "it is a duty"⁵, because their husbands expect them to do it. In 1975, Federici—who was part of the global feminist campaign 'wages for housework'—highlighted that there are several fields in which women are exploited purely because they are women, in an effort to reduce them to their supposed 'natural' role. Especially as housewives, women are forced to do reproductive work at home. Federici wrote:

We want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create what will be our sexuality which we have never known. And from the viewpoint of work we can ask not one wage but many wages, because we have been forced into many jobs at once. We are housemaids, prostitutes, nurses, shrinks; [...].⁶

Here she focuses on reproduction as work which could include prostitution. It was done by wives for free, as an expected 'labour of love' in marriage, but sex workers received money for it. Selling sex is an option to earn money in a capitalistic and gender-divided society. "Under capitalism the majority of adult human beings must sell their labour power for some fraction of its value in order to obtain the means of subsistence for themselves and for those who are economically dependent upon them."⁷ Selling a sexual service is an aspect of sexuality in capitalistic societies: "The 'selling' represents the transformation of labor into an exchange value [...]."⁸

5 Silvia Federici: On Sexuality as Work, in: *The Commoner Care Work and the Commons*, 15 (2011), pp. 88–94, p. 90, first published in 1975.

6 Silvia Federici: *Wages Against Housework*, Bristol 1975, available at: caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/silvia-federici-wages-against-housework (accessed on 8 March 2018).

7 Christine Overall: What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work, in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17:4 (1992), pp. 705–724, p. 709.

8 Gregor Gall: *An Agency of Their Own: Sex Worker Union Organizing*, Lanham 2012, p. 4.

A Vindication of the Rights of Whores

Influenced by and referring to French and U.S. activism, a lot of sex workers in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s strove for the recognition of their profession and initiated prostitutes' rights organisations in their countries.

In February 1985, the first International Prostitute's Congress took place in the Netherlands, in Amsterdam. It was organised by the Dutch group *De Rode Draad*. The group's founder, Jan Visser, spoke with Giovanna Gilges and the resulting interview can be found in this issue. Among other things, Visser describes the circumstances under which the Congress took place. Sex workers came together from many different countries, including the Netherlands, France, West-Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Sweden, Canada and the USA. More broadly, women supporting sex workers came from various countries, including Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Yugoslavia and Italy. The participants were united by one goal: to improve their working and living conditions.⁹ The sex workers and supporters approved a "World Charter For Prostitutes' Rights", regarding 'Laws', 'Human Rights', 'Working Conditions', 'Health', 'Services', 'Taxes', 'Public Opinion' and 'Organisation'. The Charter ended with the claim: "Organizations of prostitutes and ex-prostitutes should be supported to further implementation of the above charter"¹⁰, and: "We are in solidarity with workers in the sex industry."¹¹ The participants founded the *International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights* (ICPR) located in the Netherlands. ICPR connected and coordinated the worldwide struggles for prostitutes' rights. Even though the situation in every country was different and, therefore, legal demands differed, the participating activists had one thing in common: a feeling of isolation in society, which is why fighting together and in solidarity was an important aspect for them. At this first congress, the participants discussed women's working conditions and working fields in general, concluding "that truly voluntary choices for women were uncommon at best and that especially poor women in poor countries had few or no alternatives."¹² Often, women decided to perform sex work because of a lack of opportunities.

One year later, in October 1986, the second international *Whore's Convention*, mainly organised by the ICPR, took place in the European Parliament. This time, 150 participants came from 15 different countries. The conference report, edited by sociopsychologist Gail Pheterson, titled *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, underlined the feminist approach of this conference—it was about women's rights. The title referred to Mary Wollstonecraft's

9 Gail Pheterson: Turning out the Charter at the First World Whores' Congress, Amsterdam, February 14, 1985, in: Gail Pheterson (ed.): *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, Seattle 1989, pp. 33–39.

10 Ibid. p. 40.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p. 33.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman from 1792. Wollstonecraft fought for equal rights for women just as the activists fought for equal rights for sex workers. Besides the shared feeling of breaking through isolation, problems in so-called developing or industrialised countries differed significantly. Working and living conditions varied, and the sex workers' demands differed as well. This is why, instead of a third World Congress, activists organised a European Congress, which took place in October 1991 in Frankfurt/Main in Germany, where 300 people came together, half of them sex workers. The congress was mainly organised by the prostitute self-help group *HWG*, which is portrayed in the article by Mareen Heying in this issue. The European Congress was titled "Prostitution is work"; activists underlined the aspect of prostitution as work, as this was especially important to them. Therefore, the political goal of the congress was the recognition of prostitution as work, both legally and within society. The participants from 14 European countries, despite their different cultural backgrounds, all agreed that prostitution should be recognised as work, that prostitutes had to have legal rights, and that every prostitute should have the freedom to choose the services she offers. The right to self-determination was the key demand the participants agreed upon. Further European-wide demands were almost impossible to find, and it was difficult to create alliances since every country had its own laws and regulations.

Additionally, sex workers held congresses in other countries and regions all around the world. Organised congresses in Latin America are mentioned in Kate Hardy and Megan Rivers-Moore's article in this issue. Political struggles have always been at the centre of these congresses.

Continuously diverse groups of prostitute activists are connected in a *Global Network of Sex Work Projects* (NSWO). All over the world, prostitutes' movements developed in the 1980s and 1990s, and with them, sex workers' self-esteem grew. They defined prostitution as work and saw themselves as workers who did not receive the same rights and state protection as other workers—and that is what they started fighting for.

This Issue: Prostitutes' Rights Movements in European and American Countries

This issue of *Moving the Social* focusses on women's issues, as sex work is predominantly executed by women, and the protagonists of the political struggles which are described were predominantly female sex workers. The contributions show that the movements' collective claims were often female-specific. This issue offers an insight into the development of prostitutes' movement's in Europe, especially in the Netherlands and West-Germany, as well as in Canada and Latin America (Argentina, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Colombia).

Giovanna Gilges interviewed Jan Visser, the founder of the Dutch prostitutes union *De Rode Draad*. They discussed the union's development, along with legal and social changes in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s, which affected sex workers.

Mareen Heying looks at the German *Hurenbewegung* (whore's movement) as a social movement and describes its development in the period from 1980 to 2001, assessing how it gained public attention.

Joana Lilli Hofstetter describes and depicts current European movements and their links to historical movements. She discusses the challenges sex workers in Europe face today and raises questions about the influence of neo-abolitionism.

Sarah Beer describes the Canadian movement. She gives a close historical overview from the middle of the 19th century to the present day, analysing the development of the law and relevant Supreme Court decisions, and how prostitutes were stigmatised as a 'social problem'.

Kate Hardy and Megan Rivers Moore look at developments in Latin America, from the 1990s until 2017. They explore the *Network of Latin American and Caribbean Sex Workers*, asking how conceptual ideas of prostitutes' rights may be transformed and discussed.

The articles discuss links between sex workers' movements, local labour movements, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even people challenging sex workers. Various national peculiarities become apparent. They show that laws regulating prostitution have mainly been influenced by shifting moral ideas and that sex work is linked to the working conditions of women. The contributions address several questions: Who is qualified to speak for sex workers? In which ways are sex workers stigmatised? Do the media and society respond to the demands of the movements—if so, how? What images of sex workers were created in the investigated countries?

How sex workers unionised and organised themselves worldwide was outlined by Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema in 1998.¹³ Changes during the last few decades have been described by Gregor Gall in 2016.¹⁴ There has also been research on prostitutes'

13 Kamala Kempadoo/Jo Doezema (eds.): *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition*, New York 1998. On actual debates in diverse countries see: *Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, GAATW* (ed.): *Sex Workers Organising for Change: Self-representation, Community Mobilisation, and Working Conditions*, at: www.gaatw.org/resources/publications/941-sex-workers-organising-for-change (accessed on 8 March 2018).

14 Gregor Gall: *Sex Worker Unionization: Global Developments, Challenges and Possibilities*, Palgrave 2016.

rights movements in specific countries, for instance in the USA¹⁵ and Brazil¹⁶, as well as in Asia¹⁷, Africa¹⁸ and Australia¹⁹.

Still important to mention is the Italian committee for prostitutes' rights: *Lucciole*.²⁰ In 2001, they used several fully opened red umbrellas in a huge demonstration in Venice, because “red is a great colour of the fight”.²¹ Impressed by this inspiring and powerful appearance, a red umbrella has become the symbol of the struggle for prostitutes' rights all over the world.²² The symbol of the red umbrella is often used in political actions by prostitute's rights activist worldwide, including the celebration of the “International Sex Workers Day” on 2 June. The date commemorates the beginning of the church occupation in Lyon in 1975.

Even though sex workers continuously underlined the idea that selling sex is work from 1975 onwards, and finally *Amnesty International* in 2015 argued in a similar direction, debates still persist whether to call this kind of labour ‘work’ or not. The following pages seek to inspire a better understanding of how European and American sex workers defined and define their working conditions and what they are fighting for. This issue of *Moving the Social* gives insight into the diverse actions and movements of sex workers and demonstrates the various ongoing struggles of prostitutes' movements.

- 15 Frédérique Delacoste/Priscilla Alexander: *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry*, Pittsburgh 1987; Ronald Weitzer: *Prostitutes' Rights in the United States: The Failure of a Movement*, in: *The Sociological Quarterly*, 32:1 (1991), pp. 23–41; Valerie Jenness: *Making it Work: The Prostitutes' Rights Movement in Perspective*, New York 1993; Melinda Chateauvert: *Sex Workers Unite: A History of the Movement from Stonewall to Slutwalk*, Boston 2013.
- 16 Friederike Strack: *Mulher da Vida – Frauen des Lebens: Brasiliens Prostituierte im Widerstand gegen Stigmatisierung und Repression*, Berlin 1996.
- 17 Svati P. Shah: *Sex Work and Women's Movement*, New Delhi, New York 2011.
- 18 Janet M. Wojcicki: *The Movement to Decriminalize Sex Work in Gauteng Province, South Africa, 1994–2002*, in: *African Studies Review*, 46:3 (2003), pp. 83–109.
- 19 Andrew Hunter: *The Development of the Theoretical Approaches to Sex Work in Australian Sex-worker Rights Groups*, in: Sally-Anne Gerull/Boronia Halstead (Eds.): *Sex Industry and Public Policy*, Canberra 1992, pp. 109–114. On New Zealand look: Catherine Healy/Calum Bennachie/Anna Reed: *History of the New Zealand Prostitutes' Collective*, in: Gillian Abel et al. (Eds.): *Taking the Crime out of Sex Work: New Zealand Sex Workers Fight for Decriminalization*, Bristol 2010, pp. 45–55.
- 20 Elisa Ottaviani from the University of Bologna worked on this movement; her thesis entitled “Da prostitute a *sex workers*. Il movimento politico delle prostitute in Italia” from 2014 is not published by now.
- 21 Pia Covre, one of the founders of *Lucciole*, in a personal conversation with the author, Pordenone June 26 2016.
- 22 The Red Umbrella Fund is a global fund to support sex workers' fights. For more information see: www.redumbrellafund.org/ (accessed on 8 March 2018).

This issue contains Stefan Berger's collective reviews "What is New in the History of Social Movements?" The issue concludes with a further article by Darcy Ingram and Sarah Smart. In "Governance, Politics, and Environmentalism in the Age of Mass Recreation: The Campaign Against 'Village Lake Louise'", they discuss environmental conflicts in Canada and campaigns against a ski resort development in the 1970s, as part of the environmental movement.

Mareen Heying is lecturer at the History Department of the University of Düsseldorf. She has written her doctoral thesis on prostitutes' movements in Germany and Italy during the 1980s and 1990s at the universities of Bochum and Bologna. She has mostly written on sex work and communist resistance against Nazi-Germany and focusses on Labour History, Social and Gender History in the 20th century. She is currently preparing a post-doc project on working-class districts as spaces of activity and resistance of everyday life of the working class, from the 1870s to the 1930s.