

### **Pia Covre on Sex Work**

I have been a sex worker for more than twenty years. I chose this work in order to have more latitude in managing my time, to earn well, and to have more time to devote to my hobbies. Unfortunately, as a hobby I got more and more involved with political activism, which so absorbed me to the point that I was deprived of the time to dedicate myself to sex work. Thus an honourable career as sex worker ended and, bit by bit, I began to organise health-prevention campaigns for sex workers, which resulted in the implementation of European projects in Italy, as TAMPEP, which for nearly 20 years has modelled socio-health interventions that address sex workers. These interventions have stimulated and contributed to the political debate with regard to proper policy choices concerning prostitution and have enabled us to fight for the affirmation of our civil rights and the official recognition of sex work as a valid labour activity. Also, my profound passion for animals and the respect for nature involved me in animal rights and ecological battles. As a result, I even became a candidate for a seat in the Regional Parliament, the national Senate, and the European Parliament under the aegis of the Green Party and with the European left.

The origin of my activism springs from a visceral refusal of acts of injustice that I and my colleagues were forced to swallow because of social stigma and the lack of civil rights. We feel that we are women who are equal to any other woman and that we are socially useful. We do not accept being placed at the margin of society, owing to the Puritanism and the moralism of the State. The State pretends that our society be founded on the heterosexual-oriented model of a Catholic family, while it is well known that this model has for centuries been erected on a double moral standard, with the 'external collaboration' of sex workers and the gay and lesbian world. Otherwise, the concept of the traditional family would have imploded long ago.

Roman Catholic morals are held in awe in my country. After centuries of exploiting prostitutes and using their earnings to construct or restore the churches of Rome and Venice, the Church refuses to consent passage of any labour law that safeguards sex workers and sets them free. At the political level the consideration of ecclesiastic pressure is very strong. In this country we,

The political debate actually nurtures elements foreign to the phenomenon. That is to say that discussion and legislation concerning prostitution is focused on the drama of the trafficking of human beings, rather than prostitution. No one would dare to think of eliminating the agriculture and building industries, construction sites and ports, where illegal or clandestine immigrants are patently exploited. In these instances the safeguards provided under labour laws are applied to combat the exploitation. When the discussion concerns sex work and the sex industry, only the negative side is seen and there are no guarantees for the rights and tutelage of sex workers. I also want to say that here in Europe the politicians fill their mouths with talk concerning the trafficking of human beings and the 'poor victims' that must be subtracted from the despotic traffickers, but then the very laws concerning immigration dictate expulsion for illegal immigrants. If they fail to or are reluctant to press charges against their traffickers, the illegal immigrants that law enforcement officials catch are detained in Centres for Identification and Expulsion (CIE)/Centres of Temporary Permanence (CPT), to include those who lose their legal jobs or lose their right to legal sojourn wind up in a CIE. (See the note below.)

The short-sighted comportment on the part of policy makers produces dramatic effects on the life and working conditions of all sex workers, regardless of gender or working conditions (autonomous or forced), especially in those aspects that regard public health and health-prevention.

In reality, the phenomenon of trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation is emphasised in order to strike a blow against freedom of movement and the freedom to practice prostitution in Europe. Throughout Europe, there is a 'whore-phobia' that rises in the air like a banner. If converted into law, this overwhelming fear will result in increased precariousness, increased acts of violence, and increased dangers for the health of all.

The abolitionist and prohibitionist laws, which have been enacted to punish the clients who buy sexual services and to place limitations on the sex workers, (the prohibition 'to walk a beat' or to self-organise the work within a house, and the authorisation of the police to emit expulsions, fines, eviction orders from a specific locality, and so on) are crazy, and they are the stuff from the Middle Ages and they are illiberal and sexual-phobic because they pretend to limit or proscribe the sexual choices of the people.

These law consent repressive practice on the part of the police, who often abuse this privilege, which is dangerous for all of society. The police seize the condoms from sex workers to confirm the act of prostitution, which encourages a lot of sex workers not to keep condoms on their person. The condom is the only useful and efficacious tool for the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI). This seizure of condoms is a practice common to the police forces in many countries. Many times after a roundup the police show the condoms to the media as though they were trophies. Compliments!

I must confess that as time goes on I have many doubts concerning life. For example, I am not so sure that being involved in party politics is something positive for social development. Many political choices are made for 'strategic' motives, something that fills me with doubt. Decidedly, I have deep doubt concerning the causes of the current economic crisis, which I prefer to call a 'global financial war', because it is nothing but that, a war, and the victims are the poorest. And if this war has knowingly been decided by the forces on high, with the involvement of the politicians, who all show no sense of humanity and responsibility? The lack of funding for the Global Funds for AIDS is just one of the inhumane action of the political caste. These and many other uncertainties spin around in my head. Of one thing I am sure with no shadow of doubt: When I decided to become a sex worker, it was an optimal choice and if I found myself in the same position and the same context, I would again make the self-same choice.

**Note:** The CPT/CIE were inaugurated in 1998. In the past thirteen years 80 000 immigrants, both men and women, have been deported from Italy to their countries of origin. Forced repatriations occur daily under the European border-protection programme, called FRONTEX. Within these centres there have been a number of suspicious deaths which were officially indexed as death due to natural causes. There are gratuitous acts of violence of every sort and horrendous acts of self-mutilation occur with regularity. I cite some known examples for abuse and tragedy: Nabruka, who lived in Italy for 22 years, committed suicide on the eve of her deportation. Sonia was deported, despite her being the mother of four children in Italy, of which two were minors. A formal study maintains that three of every four women taken to the CIE are prostitutes.