

Presentation at the 'Grosse Freiheit conference workshop: 'Men buying sex and men's responsibility'

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Prostitution: A necessary battle for both women and men

Personally, I have been looking forward to this conference. I have been looking forward because in a heated debate about prostitution you rarely get the chance to contemplate on a deeper level why you are part of a group that wishes to limit the proliferation of prostitution as much as possible.

Actually, my general interest in gender issues and issues regarding sexuality didn't start in my political work but grew out of my days as a history student at University of Copenhagen. Among a lot of other topics, I read about ancient Greek history, including sexuality in ancient Greece. A general feature in the ancient sexuality was that parallel to 'the free space of desires' it was also controlled by conscious choices, especially political choices. Among other, Michel Foucault has described it in the second part of his history of sexuality, 'The Use of Pleasure'. Sexuality was controlled by impulses but was still controllable to a large degree and if a person went too far and overstepped the boundaries, he risked public scorn and humiliation. Furthermore, the Greek as well as the Roman societies were characterized by strong hierarchies. At the bottom of this hierarchy you would find the slaves and the prostitutes in the street – the so-called *pornai* from which the term pornography was coined.

Today, they would be comparable to the drug-addicted prostitutes and foreign prostitutes in the street, who are visible in areas like Vesterbro in Copenhagen.

In my work with ancient history and with Danish politics in 2011 it has often struck me that as a society we don't seem to have evolved significantly during the past 2,500 years.

Allow me to start with a Greek quotation with a stronger focus on society's dealings with young men's seemingly natural urges. More than anything, it makes you think of Amsterdam's Red Light District – before the city council realized how uncontrollable this area was:

"But you found a law for the use of all men; for you, they say, Solon, were the first to see this—a thing democratic, Zeus is my witness, and salutary (yes, it is fitting that I should say this, Solon); seeing our city full of young men, seeing, too, that they were under the compulsion of nature, and that they went their erring way in a direction they should not, purchased and stationed women in various quarters, equipped and ready for all alike. They stand in nakedness, lest you be deceived; take a look at everything. Perhaps you are not feeling quite up to your form; maybe you have something that distresses you. But their door stands open. Price, one obol; hop in! There isn't a bit of prudishness or nonsense, nor does she snatch herself away; but straight to it, as you wish and in whatever way you wish. You come out; you can tell her to go hang, she is nothing to you."

[Athenaeus](#), *The Deipnosophists*, [Book XIII: Concerning Women](#), quoting the comic author [Philemon](#), and also citing [Nicander of Colophon](#), *History of Colophon*; tr. Charles Burton Gulick (1937)

In my opinion, the quotation holds three essential details:

- 1) Men's urges are not fully controllable and must find an outlet to prevent them from having negative consequences

- 2) It's the person buying sex who holds the money and the power and who can purchase any sexual service he may desire at a very low price
- 3) Afterwards, the power balance is made clear because the buyer can ask the prostitute to go to hell as she is really of no value whatsoever when the sexual act is over.

If you then turn your attention to the prostitution issues in Denmark and other countries today, it becomes quite clear that there is no real difference compared to ancient Greece.

Especially the biologically founded approach men's sexuality, I have opposed from the very beginning.

Yes, sex is a wonderful and a central part of 'the good life' but men as well as women can abstain from sex without problems. The brothels are empty when the national football team is playing so of course it is possible just like it is entirely possible for men to postpone their visit to the toilet until it is half-time or the game is over.

Even if there was any truth in the claim about the uncontrollable urges, it wouldn't have changed a thing since no person's needs must be fulfilled at the cost of another person's physiological and mental health.

That brings me back to recent day and the political struggle I have chosen to be a part of.

In early 2003, I became a member of SF - Socialistisk Folkeparti. One of my first actions was to become part of the party's committee for equal rights for men and women. In 2003, no political party in Denmark had a set politic agenda about prostitution like the parties in Sweden where the parliament in 1999 banned the purchase of sexual services. SF was no exception. Something had to be done and something was done. In September 2005, I presented a prostitution program to the central board of SF on behalf on the committee for equal rights – a program, I had written cooperating with another member of the committee. The program was accepted and SF became the first political party in Denmark to have a ban against the purchase of sex as a part of its official policy.

Now almost 6 years have passed and during these years, I have especially via the March 8 initiative worked to convince both the Danish public and other politicians that it is necessary to have new legislation containing a ban against the purchase of sex combined with new and better social efforts to help persons involved in prostitution.

If someone was to claim that I have merely joined this battle to push myself forward in order to move closer to a seat in the Danish parliament, I would have to disappoint them. I am absolutely certain this is no agenda, which alone would benefit male politicians. Lots of men disagree with me, a fair share of men really don't care and regard a person like me as someone you should just bear with. Besides, a huge majority of the women who support this agenda are going to vote for a woman, come election day.

However, there is no way I would have done things differently. To me, the prostitution issue holds the answer to the question of why I chose to become politically active in the first place. Basically, this issue is about people's treatment of other people and a question of which kind of society that most efficiently promotes the wish to ensure that as few people as possible suffer because of other people's irresponsibility. In short, it comes down to our responsibility towards each other. It really

shouldn't be that difficult but unfortunately, it is. Way too few countries have taken actual steps towards making it illegal to buy sex and through such a law trying to create a society in which no person's short-lived sexual relief holds more weight than another person's long-term physiological and psychological well-being..

Why? Well, maybe because the sexual aspects of life hold such great importance, which means that it contains a potential basis for the false statement that prostitution is there to allow everybody free access to sex. However, that remains a false statement since the ones buying sex have so many opportunities to have sexual encounters without paying for them and without exploiting a vulnerable person. In Denmark, this goes for 92 % of all men buying sex and I simply don't understand that other men are willing to make that choice – paying another person for 'open access.' They know that the prostitute has no personal desire but is often forced into the situation but the buyers don't care. They put their conscience on stand-by and enter an agreement based on false premises. Afterwards, the buyer may be able to leave this agreement behind them but the prostitute always stays within this agreement, which is among the factors that pose an enormous psychological risk of selling yourself as a prostitute.

What is the big deal about 'the man' in this discussion? Basically, I tend to avoid talking specifically about 'men's responsibility'. To paraphrase the famous Danish priest and radical thinker Grundtvig, a person is 'a human being' before 'a man' or 'a woman' and it is therefore the principles and values, which are important and not the specific gender. Still it is a crucial fact that it is mainly men who exploit other people sexually and therefore it is mainly men who have the ability to objectify another human being.

That's why it matters when other men clearly distance themselves from the men who buy sex. This is where the fun stops. Zip your pants and consider whether it's worth it when you are painfully aware of the fact that the woman you are with is acting and basically has stepped out of her body to offer you an empty shell.

That's why it matters when male politicians are willing to step in the way of the approximately 14 % of all men who have bought sex by working in favour of a ban against buying sex and thereby taking away an inherited gender privilege.

That's why it is so important when men of all kinds maintain that the struggle against prostitution of course shouldn't be fought by women alone and that the public understanding for the necessity of this cause will be clear only, if the debate is brought forward again and again by both men and women.

Conclusively, I would like to use this opportunity to send my regards to all those men who have publicly distanced themselves from the purchase of sex. To the men who side by side with the relentlessly fighting women have been in the frontline and received a thorough verbal bashing from prostitution lobbyists and selfish sex buyers. 'Don't interfere with my sex life! I have paid for this service! Even if I don't do it, some other guy will do it and at least, I am nice to her!' 'What is your problem – she has chosen to do this herself!'

As a man, it doesn't win you any popularity contests to speak out against the men who buy sex, the prostitution lobby and scared politicians with a preference for myths about prostitution.

But it must be done – in this country and abroad until the day the Scandinavian countries and then Europe have implemented a ban against the purchase of sex.

Lastly, I will of course salute all the previous prostitutes who in the middle of their own struggle to lead normal lives have found the energy to be part of the debate and the information effort regarding prostitution.

To me, you hold the key to spreading the message of the enormous dangers and constant pretending that is part of life as a prostitute. You have paid and still pay the price but we you're your effort until the day it has become illegal to buy sex and after that, until the day a big majority of men and women realize that the price of buying sex is so much higher than the amount the buyer picks out of his pocket.