

# **Prostitution: a contribution to the debate**

**Scottish Socialist Party  
Women's Network**

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# Introduction

by **Catriona Grant**

In October 2002 Margo MacDonald MSP put down a proposal for a bill in the Scottish Parliament to introduce local authority 'Toleration Zones' in order that prostitutes could work without harassment. Tommy Sheridan, the Scottish Socialist Party's only MSP at the time was one of the 18 signatures necessary for cross party agreement. In 2003 the five newly SSP MSPs also signed the proposal for the bill. There has been much debate around Margo MacDonald's 'Prostitution Tolerance Zones (Scotland) Bill', presented to the Scottish Parliament as a Private Members Bill.

Margo had argued that the bill was not pro-prostitution but a bill that would protect prostitutes from harassment, and a step towards harm reduction. From 1985 until 2002 Edinburgh had an informal tolerance area in Coburg Street, Leith. It appeared to work well and a project, Scot Pep opened up in order to support the women working as prostitutes, advising about safety and their choices around prostitution.

However in 2002 the toleration area was moved to Salamander Street, about a mile away. Coburg St had gone from an industrial harbour area to a desired residential area. No one was consulted and the prostitutes were moved on. The local residents of Salamander St perceived the move of the "Toleration Area" to their locality to be an insult and dangerous. Local residents were unhappy which resulted in prostitutes being harassed. Furthermore the relocation meant the women lost access to the resources they once had. After much debate, demonstrations and counter demonstrations, the Toleration Area was ended and the criminalising and harassing of women started in a way it hadn't done so for 17 years beforehand. Women reported that violent assaults on them had escalated. Margo MacDonald presented her bill to the Parliament in this context.

Margo argues that this is a small step in protecting women however I do not think it goes far enough as it only gives local authorities the power to allow a geographical space to be a "Toleration Zone" for prostitutes between certain times or on certain days.

Soliciting remains illegal and local authorities, police and health do not have to commit to any more resources to prostitutes. The proposal explicitly stated that there would be no costs attached therefore there were to be no attached resources to the bill that could have benefited prostituted women. Prostitutes would still be illegal, just "tolerated" in a certain area at a certain time.

At the time of the proposal there had been no or little discussion in the SSP on our position regarding prostitution however a debate soon began.

All six of the MSPs stated that it was not necessarily that they agreed or disagreed with the Bill but they believed that a debate and public discourse was needed on prostitution and the commercial sexual exploitation of women. I would argue that this did happen and would congratulate Margo for bringing this discussion into the public domain and into the socialist movement in Scotland.

At the time of writing and preparing this pamphlet the Scottish Executive had put forward a proposal very different from the Toleration Zones. It is still not clear what the actual legislation will be but initial indicators suggest that prostitutes and buyers of sex will be equally treated i.e. they will both be considered for criminal sanctions.

The SSP still has not agreed a position on prostitution despite seminars, debates and motions to conferences and I would hazard a guess that it may never have a fully worked out position. As the Women and Equality Policy Co-ordinator I would like to have a position however I would prefer an open discourse in order that the discussion never fully goes away rather than half or fudged position that no-one is happy with.

I believe that there is unanimous support that there should be resources for women on a social, emotional and health level. The party seemed to believe that prostitution was a health matter yet there was no agreement whether it was sexual exploitation, whether prostitution is harmful or not and whether women can

choose to be prostitutes or not.

In order to reflect this discuss members of the Scottish Socialist Women's Network agreed to put together a pamphlet in order to involve more women and men - both in the party and beyond - in the debate, discussion and discourse in prostitution.

The pamphlet is a collection of two essays with an introduction and a bringing together of themes at the end - there is no conclusion because we have not concluded the debate.

The women who have been bold enough to put forward their thoughts were self-selected but I believe broadly reflect the positions in the party, they are not unique positions as the themes overlap. We hope to produce a further edition of this pamphlet and other contributions are welcome.

The SSP has been having an ongoing debate regarding women's oppression and liberation and how as socialists we should analyse this, orientate and organize for women's liberation. Some argue that they are feminists and this should be central to party's demands; some argue that they are not feminists but believe that women's struggle is paramount; some argue that women are not as oppressed as they once were and we should concentrate on the traditional class demands and others argue many different positions from the weird to the wonderful.

The SSP had a difficult debate in 2001 and 2002 about women's representation - which became the "50:50 debate" however in 2002 conference it was agreed (closely) that the SSP should have a mechanism that would ensure (at least) 50:50 representation. In May 2003 four women were elected to the Scottish Parliament and two men, making the SSP unique in socialist politics.

The SSP has organized a protest at HMP Cortonvale in protest of vulnerable, drug addicted and sometimes mentally ill women being incarcerated for non-violent offences.

Women in the SSP (and men too) were on the front line against Precious Life, a misogynist anti-abortion group. Through non-violent direct action we were able to have their horrible pictures of macerated fetuses removed from outside the Glasgow Royal Infirmary - we hung our washing in front of their placards so they were not visible to patients wishing to use the hospital. We campaigned on the streets against sweat shop labour the high street stores peddle and again were on the streets against the proposed stoning of two Nigerian women.

The SSP is involved in many more campaigns around the oppression and liberation of women and more and more women are involving themselves in the campaigns to save their local schools, hospitals, council housing and resources, and to fight for fair wages as the medical secretaries did in 2001 and the nursery nurses in 2004. The strike and struggle for a decent pension involves over a million workers - two thirds of them women.

The SSP sees itself central to these campaigns and offers its political support and concrete resources to best support the campaigns.

Whether the SSP is a feminist party or not or whether members believe themselves to be feminist or not will be an ongoing debate. Whatever happens the SSP as a party of the Scottish working class and at the front of socialist struggle must always pin its colours on the flag against women's oppression and fight tooth and nail for women's liberation as integral to their struggle for socialism in Scotland and beyond.

Catriona Grant  
Women and Equality Co-ordinator  
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## **Notes:**

1. It should be recognised in this pamphlet that men are recognised both as sex workers and prostitutes. However this pamphlet is about prostitution as opposed to sex workers i.e. workers who work in the sex industry (excluding prostitution), and the majority of prostitutes around the world are female.
2. Children are not seen as prostitutes but victims of organised sexual abuse, rape and exploitation.

# **Prostitution: an expression of patriarchal oppression**

**by Mhairi McAlpine**

## **Socialism, Feminism and Prostitution**

### **Introduction and the Context of Prostitution in Scotland**

Prostitution itself is not illegal in Scotland, although many of the activities surrounding it are. Street prostitution is dealt with under the Civic Government (Scotland) Act, 1982, Section 48-1). If convicted these offences are not imprisonable, but are instead subject to a fine (£50 - £500). However, many women eventually end up in prison for non-payment.

Prostitution is classed as a “crime of indecency”, a sex offence in the same category as sexual assault. There is no specific legislation directed at clients in Scotland in contrast to the “kerb crawling” offence in the Sexual Offences (England and Wales) Act 1985.

### **Prostitution and Feminist Theory**

There are three main strands of feminist theory: libertarian, radical and materialist. The first aligns its self with the agenda of individual autonomy, rights, liberty independence and diversity. It views prostitution as a legitimate choice of work: women should be allowed to make money in whatever way they choose, including prostitution. Radical feminists believe that the oppression of women is the most fundamental form of oppression and provides a model for all others. They believe that prostitution reinforces and perpetuates the objectification, subordination and exploitation of women which is necessary to maintain the patriarchy. Prostitution is sexual abuse and must be eradicated by any means necessary. Materialist feminism believes that the objective conditions in which women live define their oppression. Prostitution is a response to poverty and a particular exploitation of women analogous to the more general prostitution of all who sell their labour; it should be legal but heavily regulated.

### **Socialism, Patriarchy and Prostitution**

For socialists, economics determine the limits of freedom. The particular situation of women under capitalism cannot be separated from the conditions that produce it - hence women’s sexuality, desires and identity are related to how their material needs are met. Engels made quite a study of the situation of women, describing how the need to sustain private property led to the development of the nuclear family and the role of women within it.

Within the patriarchal family there is a requirement of maintenance and care of the wife - both to reinforce the husband's status and to continue to benefit from her unpaid labour within the home.

Within prostitution there is generally no such on-going relationship. Abusing a prostituted woman, unless he is caught, has little impact on a client's future return.

### **Prostitution: the commodification of women and their sexuality**

Prostitution as the purchase of a women's body for sexual use is the commodification of women and their sexuality. Nothing is produced in prostitution - the commodity created is the sexuality of the prostituted women.

Prostitution is the commodification of sexual relations, taking it out of the sphere of mutual pleasure and into the domain of the market. Quite apart from the damage done to women, this commodification of sexuality affects men as well.

It fosters the notion that better sex can be bought for more money and an attitude that sex is a service which women provide for them either for favours, on-going economic commitment or hard cash transforming male sexual attitude in to one that views women as objects for sexual pleasure.

A major and increasing problem within the sex industry is the level of trafficking. This modern day form of slavery involves women and children being held in debt bondage and

prostituted until they pay off the ever-increasing debt or are uneconomic to sustain.

**“Prostitution as the purchase of a women's body for sexual use is the commodification of women and their sexuality. Nothing is produced in prostitution - the commodity created is the sexuality of the prostituted women.”**

### **Prostitution: an expression of patriarchal oppression**

Engels demonstrated how patriarchy developed to serve the needs of capitalism by the appropriation of female labour for the sustenance of the male worker and the passing of private property down through a male lineage. The maintenance of patriarchal society is thus fundamental in supporting capitalism.

Prostitution allows men to assert their power over women in a manner which is unacceptable in any other sphere.

Despite rising female power in many industries, the existence of an industry in which women are always subordinate reinforces the illusion of male privilege.

The existence of prostitution oppresses women in a more general sense than the oppression and dominance asserted with each individual act - it sustains an attitude that women are sexual objects for sale or hire.

Many common female insults imply the sale of sex, reinforcing the concept of prostitution as a threat to keep women in their place.

The patriarchal family is based on the notion of monogamy. The transfer of private property through the generations requires assured paternity, thus limiting the wife's sexuality. Prostitution, as opposed to consensual extra-martial affairs, ensures that the financial obligations to any offspring are negated, maintaining the "proper" transfer of property.

### **Prostitution: violence against women.**

The Scottish Office, now Executive, adopted the UN general assembly definition of violence against women<sup>[1]</sup> in 1996.

Prostitution frequently involves physical harm and threats to women, while research has clearly shown psychological damage and damage to prostituted women's sexuality.

In a study of prostituted women from five countries, 62% had been raped in prostitution. An English study found that over the course of a year, 87% of those who prostitute on the street are the victims of violence. In Glasgow seven prostituted women were murdered in six years.

Prostituted women are by and large poor; it is infrequently chosen as a career open when other means of economic survival are available.

It eroticises economic power - the thrill of being able to purchase sex is a driver for many of those who use prostituted women.

Economic coercion to perform sex acts is a violation of women's integrity and can only be understood within the continuing economic discrimination against women.

In the UK, the average age of entry to prostitution is 14. In a five country study, it was found that 89% want to leave immediately - the most frequently found barrier to this goal was the lack of anywhere to go.

When those who are drawn in are children and those who wish to exit cannot - the deprivation of liberty is clear. Each contract is not a freely chosen pursuit but an expression of captivity.

### **Experiences of Legalisation**

#### *The Netherlands*

Over the last decade, as pimping became legalised and brothels decriminalised in the Netherlands, the sex industry expanded by 25%. The sex industry now accounts for 5% of the Dutch economy.

In 2000 the Ministry for Justice argued for a legal quota of foreign prostituted women to meet the demand. The government has also recognised prostitution as an economic activity - allowing women from the EU and former soviet bloc countries to obtain working permits for prostitution. Child prostitution in the Netherlands also increased dramatically in the 1990s

#### *Victoria, Australia*

Whereas there were 40 legal brothels in Victoria in 1989, in 1999 there were 94 along with 84 escort agencies following the legalisation of the industry in addition to many illegal venues.

Legalisation has normalised the industry with the pimps being considered legitimate businessmen and sitting together with the police and lawyers on the Prostitution Control

Board.

Rather than controlling prostituted women individually, they now do so with the full backing of state regulation.

Brothels are listed on the stock exchange, allowing those with money to profit from women's exploitation and abuse with out getting their hands dirty. Of all the states and territories in Australia, the highest number of reported incidences of child being prostituted.

### *Experiences of Criminalising Purchasers: Sweden*

In 1971, Sweden saw the appointment of a Sexual Crimes Report designed to update Sweden's antiquated laws in this area.

The view of the report was that the state should be involved as little as possible in people's sexuality, which was expected and welcomed, however it also proposed the legalisation of prostitution.

This report and its aftermath sparked a major debate and the emergence of the second wave Swedish women's movement.

While many women welcomed the "new tolerance" (as it was termed at the time), to start tolerating prostitution was a step too far.

In 1977, the Minister for Justice was forced to abandon that recommendation of the Sex Crimes Report and commission a Prostitution Report led by women.

The Prostitution Report was published in 1981<sup>[2]</sup> and a further report on prostitution was commissioned in 1995. This led to the "Security for Women" bill in 1998 which included the criminalisation of the purchasers of sexual services, with penalties ranging from a fine to 6 month imprisonment.

A key component of the legislation was specific funding for exit strategies for women wishing to leave prostitution, including specific benefits, specialist drug and alcohol services and accommodation.

At the time of implementation it was estimated that there were 2,500 prostituted women in Sweden with approximately 600 working in street prostitution, this has now been reduced by 80%.

Over 500 men have been charged under the act and the law has an 80% approval rating from the public five years after implementation.

Sweden claims that in 2004 no women were trafficked into the country for sexual exploitation, in contrast to 16,000 in neighbouring Finland.

**“Brothels [in Victoria, Australia] are listed on the stock exchange, allowing those with money to profit from women's exploitation and abuse with out getting their hands dirty.”**

## **Conclusion**

### *Is prostitution per se desirable?*

There would appear to be no consistent position on the left which regards prostitution as per se desirable - even among those calling for its deregulation or legalisation, most would appreciate that one of the fundamental drivers is poverty and the economic

situation that women find themselves in under capitalist society.

Although trade unions including the GMB and the Sex Workers Union call for changes in the law to stop the targeting of prostituted women, and argue against criminalisation, I think that the calls for prostitution to be accepted as a legitimate profession are misguided

If we accept that prostitution is undesirable and one which we would not wish to see in a socialist society we should examine methods of eradication.

Some would argue that this call is utopian, but then this is predicated on a view that the elimination of exploitation, a key demand of socialism, cannot be achieved.

## **How can we eradicate prostitution?**

The recent debates in the party have demonstrated that no-one is happy with the current laws which target prostituted women - on that we would appear to agree.

Experiences of legalisation have shown to increase the numbers of prostituted women, the powers of the state and the market over women's sexualities and the acceptability of prostitution as a legitimate form of recreation. Legalisation does not further an eradication agenda.

Only the legal targeting of the purchasers of sexual services, and a complete decriminalisation of those prostituted, together with effective support for exit strategies can effect both the social and economic changes that are required to eradicate prostitution.

## **Footnotes:**

*1. The term violence against women means any act of gender based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or in private*

*2. This report concluded that "Prostitution is about violence and oppression, endless female oppression, drugs and crime, power and subjection, the objectifying of women, and men who buy access to the most vulnerable of people in order to confirm, time and again, false manliness".*



# Prostitution and Power

by Dawn Fyfe

The debate surrounding prostitution has increased dramatically in the past two years. The introduction of the “Prostitution Tolerance Zones (Scotland) Bill 2003” has partly been responsible for this.

Although this debate is welcomed it is unfortunate that it did not predate the Bill which has directed discussions towards how as a society we respond to prostitution, without first clarifying our understanding of it.

Very often when you ask people why prostitution exists they will discuss drug addiction and child sexual abuse. These are very real factors that can lead women towards and prevent them from exiting prostitution, however, they should not be viewed as the cause. The debate around drug use for example should continue in the context of services and support for women. It is estimated that around 95% of women involved in street prostitution in Glasgow are intravenous drug users.

Prostitution however predates this trend and women throughout the decades have reported beginning or increasing their use of substances to cope with their experience of prostitution. This would suggest that although reducing heroin use amongst women, for example, would support those ready to exit prostitution, it would not necessarily have an effect on the existence of prostitution in society.

Women would find others ways of coping with their experiences and the reduction in drug use would not reduce the demand, which would continue to encourage profiteers, such as pimps, brothel owners and traffickers, to supply women for prostitution.

The cause of prostitution is the demand by men for sexual services in exchange for money or other payments.

This is a result of structural inequality between men and women within our society allowing men to buy access to a woman’s body purely on his ability to pay and her poverty and/or vulnerability. This is an issue of power rather than sexuality.

As Kate Millett (1975) highlighted, “It is not sex the prostitute is really made to sell; it is degradation. And the buyer, the john, is not buying sexuality, but power.”

Individual men and women may not recognise this as their experience of prostitution, however this does not change the structural inequality that encourages and allows prostitution to exist.

There is evidence, however, that some men do choose women who are most vulnerable, for example visibly under the influence of alcohol or drugs or pregnant. This, however, does not stop the experience for women being a sexualised act against their person. (Farley, 2003).

Some try to justify prostitution by using examples of women who use prostitution to stabilise their financial situation.

The vast majority of women who leave prostitution, leave with less than they when they started. Also as Julie O’Connell Davidson, (1998), points out even women who feel in

control of their situation they are, in effect, only giving up less of their “unfreedom”. If women do not provide the service that is demanded there will be no exchange. Ultimately it is the man who is in control. This lack of power is the link between all forms of violence against women.

In 2002 police in Scotland recorded 36,010 domestic disputes, of which 90% of the victims were women (Scottish Executive). In 2002 only 5.6% of all reported rapes in England and Wales resulted in a conviction, (Kelly et al, 2005) and although men, particularly young men, are increasingly becoming involved in prostitution, current research estimates that four out of five people selling sexual services are women, (Home Office, 2004), and the vast majority of those buying are men.

It is an imbalance of power that allows all of these forms of abuse to continue and it is that imbalance we should be challenging.

Most people involved in the debate surrounding prostitution agree that there should be more services available for women, regardless of what legislation is in place.

The presence of the current legislation, e.g. that women are currently charged whilst men are not, however, means that additional services are required to counteract the negative effects of this legislation.

An increase in support services for women is desperately needed. Until, however, we recognise that the act of prostitution is itself abusive we will never be able to provide the services women need.

There have been many research projects, regarding women’s experience of being involved in prostitution, taking place across the globe and although there are different experiences in different parts of the world, women consistently express a desire to leave prostitution, (Lim, 1998, Farley et al, 2003, Hotaling, 1999).

Furthermore research has shown that many women involved in prostitution experience the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, (Farley, 2003). This is not necessarily connected to the high levels of violence and abuse, including rape, many women experience (Farley, 2003, Bindel, 2004, Silbert and Pines, 1982), but also the general experience of prostitution.

As one woman puts it, “It is internally damaging. You become in your own mind what these people do and say with you. You wonder how could you let yourself do this and why do these people want to do this to you?” (cited in Farley, 2003).

Prostitution is often referred to as the oldest profession. The idea being that prostitution has existed as long as men and women. This however ignores the research which connects the massive growth in prostitution to the growth of capitalism and colonisation. This continues to grow with globalisation and the huge growth in trafficking of women and children has seen an extension to the vulnerability of women from developing countries. If we accept as socialists the connections between prostitution and capitalism, then our aim should be to eradicate it. This may not be in our lifetime, but have we at any other

**“The cause of prostitution is the demand by men for sexual services in exchange for money or other payments.”**

time reduced activities towards equality because capitalism, and therefore discrimination, is currently too strong a force to change things today?

When we challenged domestic violence we did not choose to “manage” it in the short term because women said they loved their partners and wanted to stay. We recognised that we had to challenge and criminalise the act of abuse, whilst providing services for women who were not ready or could not leave.

So why are we considering managing prostitution through tolerance zones? I believe this is because prostitution reflects the inequality of women throughout the world. Women are not meant to feel safe in certain circumstances. We are taught from an early age not to get into strangers cars and not to walk down dark lanes.

Stanko, (1990), found that, “... as all women reach adulthood, they share a common awareness of their particular vulnerability. Learning strategies for survival is a continuous lesson about what it means to be female.”

This by default puts the responsibility on women to protect themselves and allows men who abuse to remain invisible. Women involved in prostitution are therefore are viewed as choosing not to protect themselves.

As Marina A Barnard puts it, “A woman who prostitutes already violates the norms of appropriate female behaviour and cannot be further violated” (cited in Bradby, 1996).

Choice is a luxury for those that have equal opportunity. Therefore when we manage prostitution we are managing the abuse of women and children who have few or no choices.

Furthermore we cannot view one piece of legislation, such as the Prostitution Tolerance Zones Bill, in isolation. We have draconian immigration laws that leave women with no recourse to public funds. Where

will these women turn? Will they “choose” to enter prostitution? Should a woman from the East End of Glasgow with a drug addiction and/or experience domestic violence be regarded as less vulnerable just because she has access to benefits?

Some people believe that prostitution should be viewed as a legitimate form of work, such as the GMB union. The difficulty is that as a society we are demanding equality and respect for women in the workplace based on their skills and knowledge, not on how sexually available they are to men.

We have all heard stories of student nurses turning to prostitution to subsidise their poverty level loans and grants. Legitimising prostitution would leave us in the ridiculous situation where we would support a student nurse experiencing sexual harassment by a colleague, and then we would support her “right” to experience the same treatment if she were also involved in prostitution.

As the Polaris Project, who campaign against commercial sexual exploitation puts it, “....dignifying prostitution as work doesn’t dignify the women, it simply dignifies the sex industry.”

Anyone who is trying to change the current situation is right. We cannot carry on punishing women for the abuse they experience at the hands of some men. We need to review the law and services for women and men. More money should be ploughed into

**“A woman who prostitutes already violates the norms of appropriate female behaviour and cannot be further violated”  
Maria A. Barnard**

services such as harm reduction services, including health and medical and additional funding for services to support women to reduce or end their involvement in prostitution. Furthermore all men, and women, must be encouraged to see prostitution for what it is, an abuse of power. Whilst we continue to criminalise women and do not punish men for their involvement we should expect that some men will use women in prostitution without understanding the inequality involved.

Men are entitled to the information they need to make positive choices. Research has found that “The more often men purchased sex acts the more likely they were to accept the idea that sex is a commodity”. This in turn lead to an increase in attitudes that justified violence against women, (Monto, 1999, cited in Hughes, 2004).

This debate is long overdue and it is useful to theorise, discuss practicalities and encourage more political debate. We must clarify however what the Scottish Socialist Party’s ultimate aim is. Do we want ultimately to eradicate prostitution? If the answer is yes we must take care not to support actions that move us further away from this goal and should strive to break down the system that continues to treat women involved in prostitution as second class citizens.

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# Coming together... towards a debate

by **Catriona Grant**

25.9.06

Hopefully this collection of essays will bring more debate.

The SSP has not committed itself to a position on prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women though at the October 2006 Conference a motion was put forward from Edinburgh Central branch calling for a policy similar to the Swedish model of decriminalizing the selling of sex and criminalizing the buying of sex. We will see what the conference brings us. To see the position please check the SSP website on [www.scottishsocialistparty.org](http://www.scottishsocialistparty.org) for the status of the motion.

At present the Scottish Executive in the Scottish Parliament have put forward a Bill dealing with prostitution which calls for the criminalizing of both the buyer and the seller and dealing with prostitution more as an anti-social behaviour than dealing with it as a health matter or the exploitation of women. To check the outcome of this Bill please check the Scottish Parliament website on [www.scottishparliament.uk](http://www.scottishparliament.uk)

Whatever happens - the SSP does not want to condemn prostitutes despite some of our members' feelings on prostitution.

Some of us strongly believe it is gross commercial sexual exploitation of women and others believe it is a crass symptom of an ailing class society that exploits men's sexuality as well as women's; others believe prostitution is a difficult choice some women make in order to make ends meet. Whatever the analysis, the majority of the members and supporters of the SSP support progressive legislation and resources to assist and support prostitutes.

Women (and men) organised in the English Collective of Prostitutes and the Soho Branch of the GMB that organises sex workers put out the following statement regarding the bombing and occupation of Iraq in 2003.

They were affronted and very angry at women's groups and organizations for picketing a lap dancing club called Spearmint Rhino when they saw the focus of feminist activity to be against the war and occupation in Iraq.

In an open letter printed in the Guardian they stated: "Women and our children pay most for war and weapons. We are 70% of victims of armed conflict, 80% of refugees and displaced people. More than 50% of refugee and asylum-seeking women have escaped from rape and are threatened with deportation back to rape.

"At least 500,000 children have died in Iraq as a result of sanctions and many more will

die if bombing starts. Are their mothers worried about lap dancing? Are such feminists worried about anything serious? Why, and on whose behalf, are they ignoring this crisis for humankind...

“No reference is made to the women workers in these clubs - once again some feminists think they know better what’s good for other women. How sexist and arrogant! Most women in the sex industry are supporting families. Many are single mothers, many are immigrants or asylum seekers denied benefits and other resources after fleeing Western-backed wars or dictatorships.

“To picket lap dancing clubs is to invite more raids and deportations everywhere, and therefore more rape and murders of women who end up on the streets...

“Military budgets deprive women and children everywhere of water, food, healthcare, literacy, decent wages, pensions thus causing death and devastation well before any bombs hit the ground. “Those of us who have been speaking out against spending on weapons of mass destruction and their use in war are outraged that any woman can prioritise protesting against lap dancing over anti-war protest at this time.”

They recognised themselves as workers and wanted to make demands similar to those made by socialists in relation to the war.

But is it right to make a false dichotomy between being against war and being against the sex industry who commercially exploits women?

Many “feminists” who would have been against the super-corporation of Spearmint Rhino would have been against the war too but there are issues regarding those workers and how they organise themselves, and I think it is only fair that we listen to these workers too about their rights and concerns. However, they cannot have a monopoly on what is said regarding the commercial trade in sexuality and sex work.

In 1998 women dancers went on strike at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco for the right to join a union and to be recognised as workers with workers’ rights.

They were successful in their strike and set up a union called Exotic Dancers’ Alliance, an association that wants to improve the working condition and status of strippers. However it is not just strippers and dancers who see themselves as workers, many prostitutes do too. Organised prostitutes in England have produced the following demands, which we as socialists need to explore:

- \* Decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work involving consenting adults.
- \* The right to form and join professional associations or unions.
- \* The right to work on the same basis as other independent contractors and employers and to receive the same benefits as other self-employed or contracted workers.
- \* No taxation without such rights and representation.
- \* Zero tolerance of coercion, violence, sexual abuse, child labour, rape and racism.

**“Some of us strongly believe it is gross commercial sexual exploitation of women and others believe it is a crass symptom of an ailing class society that exploits men’s sexuality as well as women’s; others believe prostitution is a difficult choice some women make in order to make ends meet.”**

- \* Legal support for sex workers who want to sue those who exploit their labour.
- \* The right to travel across national boundaries and obtain work permits wherever we live.
- \* Clean and safe places to work.
- \* The right to choose whether to work on our own or co-operatively with other sex workers.
- \* The absolute right to say no.
- \* Access to training - our jobs require very special skills and professional standards.
- \* Access to health clinics where we do not feel stigmatised.
- \* Re-training programmes for sex workers who want to leave the industry.
- \* An end to social attitudes which stigmatise those who are or have been sex workers.

It should be remarked upon that they do not demand legalisation or the creation of tolerance zones. There appears to be the difficult coming together of a recognition that prostitutes can be sexually exploited and violated women yet workers at the same time.

However, the Scottish Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation states:

“We oppose efforts to categorise prostitution as ‘sex work’. Legislation or legitimising the activity will not remove the harm caused but would simply legitimise that harm. We do not view prostitution as a choice for women, irrespective of age, and believe that it is contradictory to condemn child prostitution whilst condoning or ignoring adult prostitution. “Neither do we recognise the false distinctions between forced prostitution and so-called ‘free’ prostitution.

“All prostitution is exploitative of the person prostituted, regardless of the context, or of whether that person is said to have consented to the prostitution.

“Sexual exploitation eroticizes women’s inequality and is a vehicle for racism: black women, minority ethnic women and indigenous women suffer disproportionately”.

The debate continues, both in the SSP and beyond. As socialists we must fight, truly fight to eradicate the causes of sexual exploitation and violence against women and children and we must discuss all the points made regarding prostitution even if they make us uncomfortable.

As socialists we are not moralists deciding on what is sexually right and wrong. We do, however, need to decide what class demands we make regarding prostitution, men’s violence against women and how to end the sexual exploitation of women and children - and what behaviour is tolerated by socialists and what is not - or we fail the tasks as socialists.

Hopefully the SSP - both the men and the women of the socialist movement - will be able to reflect, debate and contribute to this difficult and uncomfortable discussion in order that we truly work for the eradication of sexual exploitation of women both here in Scotland and throughout the world.

## **Further information:**

Scottish Socialist Party Women's Network

If you are interested in getting involved in the SSP Women's Network or would like to join the Scottish Socialist Party, contact:

Scottish Socialist Party  
70 Stanley Street  
Glasgow  
0141 429 8200  
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This is a draft pamphlet prepared by the SSP Women's Network as part of an ongoing debate on the issue of prostitution and sex work.

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