

# The Red Thread: Whores' Movement in Holland

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## Prostitution in Holland

Holland has the reputation of being rather liberal towards prostitution. Foreigners are often stupefied when they see the women sitting behind the windows, just like that, in the Red Light District. Consequently, in Amsterdam the District is a famous tourist attraction and is recognized as such by the municipality. Although the working conditions of the Dutch prostitutes contrast favorably with those of prostitutes abroad — and although most of them are able to work without being disturbed by the police — they are stigmatized. Women working as prostitutes are considered inferior and are treated as second-class citizens. A lot of them lead double lives because they want to keep their jobs secret. They continually fear discovery, have difficulty making contacts and become socially isolated. Other prostitute women completely withdraw into the prostitute scene which, because of its separation from the rest of society, is also the place of other social outlaws.

In the beginning of the last century, Holland introduced abolitionism into the prostitution legislation. This means that prostitution is not prohibited, but to be a third party, to benefit from the prostitution of others is punishable. In practice, prostitution is tolerated within certain limits, and only in certain places, if the municipality determines that there is no "annoyance." Nowadays, when planning city renovations, many municipalities try to integrate prostitution, often settled in old quarters, into newly-built areas.

The average Dutch citizen feels indifferent towards prostitution, but people who are confronted with it daily in their own neighbor

hoods often protest it. Even in tolerant Amsterdam, people agitated to get rid of streetwalkers in their area. When the women moved to another place through a burgomaster's resolution, inhabitants of the new neighborhood tried everything — from lawsuits to physical intimidation — to chase the women away. Prostitution in Holland is not as accepted as is commonly believed.

Holland has about 15,000 prostitutes. They work in the streets, behind windows, in bars, brothels, clubs, at home or as escorts. Because prostitution policy is almost exclusively defined in terms of "annoyance" to society, a clear tendency to repel the most conspicuous forms of prostitution prevails. In a city like Amsterdam, expensive clubs can be in the limelight without being disturbed, but streetwalkers are driven away from their places. Even as streetwalkers are harassed, the conservative government, via the Department for Women's Emancipation Affairs, supports the Red Thread (the prostitutes' pressure group) by giving it a state grant.

The Red Thread started as a self-help group of prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, initiated by Jan Viseer of the A de Graaf Foundation in January 1984. The Foundation, which houses a unique library and documentation center on prostitution, also provides information on state and municipal policy concerning prostitution. By 1985, the Red Thread was an official foundation. Its aim: to promote the recognition of the occupation of prostitution and to serve the interests of prostitutes and ex-prostitutes. With this end in mind, the Red Thread pursues improvements in legislation, working conditions, social work and public opinion.

The Red Thread has boomed since the first International Whores' Congress, held in Holland in February 1985. The Congress was sparked by Gail Pheterson, an American social psychologist who had worked in Holland, and Margo St. James, founder of COYOTE.

Because of the overwhelming media interest in the Congress, the Red Thread gained national and international attention. At the Congress, most of us came out publicly as prostitutes for the first time. But suddenly, the Red Thread members were regarded as experts representing *all* prostitutes. As such, we were asked to give our opinions about the most divergent matters. Our own and others' expectations put high pressure on us. At first we tried to meet all requests, because we finally had the chance to publicly champion our cause. Later, we felt we had been taken advantage of, especially in the feverish excitement at the time of the first Congress. Questions like: what do you think of seventeen-year-old prostitutes? Do you also stand up for heroin-whores? Is not the market spoiled by women —

especially foreign women — who work at a low price? Does it reassure you that you are registered by the police, or do you think your organization should be responsible for this registration in the future? What about whores who do not want an organization at all? We weren't prepared for these kinds of provoking, sometimes tendentious questions by journalists and others. Although we could often refer to the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights, we hadn't had time to discuss ideological matters among ourselves.

One of the issues we eventually discussed was that the rights we were fighting for, to do our work freely, were rights denied *all* women. Therefore, we contacted feminists in the women's movement to make our own contribution. We exchanged thoughts and ideas and attacked the current opinion that whores help to maintain the subordination of women. The discussion of whether you can be both a whore and a feminist is still raging and has already provided us with a number of advocates. Public interest has been piqued; prostitution has become a hot item.

We have had organizational problems, mostly over unequal division of tasks. We especially felt a need for our own office to work from, to collect our knowledge and material, to meet, and to be accessible.

Today, the group is made up of an eighteen-member core, directly surrounded by a circle of interested women who appear at meetings now and then and want to keep informed but do not (yet) want to commit themselves. Of course, the Red Thread concerns itself with the interests of male prostitutes, too. For some time a few men were active within the Red Thread, but unfortunately not at the moment.

We are the negotiation partners in all kinds of deliberation with policy makers, social workers, and women's organizations. We are also regularly asked to give information or lectures. It strikes us that people are sometimes very eager to have a 'real' whore in their deliberations.

While we have the knowledge that only prostitutes possess, we do not have enough expertise in other fields to present our policy adequately. Therefore, we are now getting specific training to learn how to influence policy and handle publicity.

This year, we received a grant enabling us to hire a staff of three women. Of course we are making great plans now, but for the time being we are busy strengthening our organization, extending our activities and bringing new members.

Two subjects which receive most of our attention at the moment, AIDS and the working conditions of prostitutes, are discussed below.

## AIDS

Even before AIDS was widely and openly being discussed in Holland, we realized that, after homosexual men and I.V. drug users, we would be the next scapegoats. When the research on AIDS transmission by heterosexual contact started and we were asked to serve as research subjects, we said that it was not us, but men and women who regularly have sexual intercourse without condoms who should be examined. We fight the idea that we should be considered sick and dangerous simply and solely because we ask money for sex. We do not shut our eyes, however, to the fact that some of us are not free to choose between working with or without condoms. Too little public attention is paid to the fact that women can be forced to work without protection. The same holds true for the question of how we can prevent becoming AIDS carriers. That is why we try to convince customers and proprietors that fucking without condoms is dangerous for everyone's health. People who have unsafe sex run the risk of getting infected — not whores who use condoms. We try to change the public's automatic connection between prostitution and AIDS by also focusing on other occupational diseases such as back problems, bladder and kidney infections, and stress. We emphasize that these ailments can be reduced by better working conditions.

## Working Conditions

Improving the working conditions requires a number of legal changes which are imminent: abolishing the brothel prohibition and replacing it with a licensing system which should end compulsion, violence and exploitation, such as compulsory long working hours, being forced to do certain services, and playing the prostitutes off against one another. Aspects of safety — for instance, alarm- and fire-installation and good sanitary facilities — should be self-evident and not exceptions we should be 'grateful' for. Often, only matters like labor contracts and the payment of social premiums and other taxes are discussed. We think that these duties cannot be introduced until the rights of the prostitutes have been established. We do not want to be tied down in laws and rules made to control prostitution. We only wish for changes if they offer improvements.

# The Pink Thread

*Marjan Sax*

The Pink Thread is the sister organization of the Red Thread. It came into being on the eve of the First International Congress of Whores in January 1985. The initiative to start Pink Thread came from two women who had helped found the Red Thread: Martine Groen, who directed the prostitute self-help group, and Gail Pheterson, who set up "alliance groups" of women in both the United States and in Holland. Their method was simple: they approached women whom they knew or thought were interested in the subject of prostitution, invited them for a pleasant evening, and the Pink Thread Amsterdam was a fact.

## What is the Pink Thread?

The Pink Thread is a group for all women, whores and non-whores, forming a bridge between members of the women's movement and prostitutes.

The relationship between feminists and prostitutes has not always been good. Prejudices and a lack of information about one another's situation stand in the way of good cooperation. For instance, a lot of feminists regard whores as victims of male society. They are convinced that prostitution should be abolished and the prostitutes saved. Self-confident whores who say they need no pity are hardly understood. The opinion is that they let themselves be reduced to objects knowingly and willingly. Prostitutes, on their hand, look askance at feminists. They often find them "frustrated man haters" who are not even capable of dressing attractively and who, in fact, "just need a good screw." The prejudices on both sides are fed by fables about the whores' trade and the often negative publicity about the women's movement. However, the misunderstanding is espe-