



WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ABOLITIONISM



Abolitionism is a term used to describe movements that are seeking to abolish a system (slavery), institution (prisons), or law (the death penalty). When applied to prostitution, abolitionism is about **opposing sexual exploitation and fighting for an end to the prostitution system.**

* THE HISTORY OF ABOLITIONISM

Abolitionism emerged in the 19th century in opposition to the “hygiene” campaign and its associated regulations that were aimed at curtailing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases by imposing medical and police controls on prostitutes. The effect of the regulations was to normalize prostitution and pimping, which was vigorously opposed by many women who were organizing against the “white slave trade,” as sex trafficking was called during that time. In 1875, Josephine Butler led these women in founding the International Abolitionist Federation. The actions of the Federation led to the drafting of the *International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Trade*, which was approved by France on April 6, 1912.

Abolitionist organizing continued, and, in the wake of the UN’s *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* in 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed, on December 2, 1949, the *Convention on the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others*. According to the 82 countries that signed the Convention, “**prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger**

the welfare of the individual, the family and the community.”

Today, feminist abolitionists, or, as they are sometimes called, neo-abolitionists, continue to fight trafficking, sexual exploitation, and pimping by calling for the **decriminalization of prostituted persons and the criminalization of those who prostitute and exploit others (johns and pimps).**

* WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ABOLITIONIST

Being an abolitionist above all means believing that **prostitution is a form of violence that undermines women’s equality.** It is also means believing that this form of violence, like rape or murder, is not inevitable and can be fought through education, the punishment of johns and pimps, decriminalization of prostituted women, and effective measures to help women who want to exit prostitution or have already gotten out.

“We say that slavery has vanished from European civilization, but this is not true. Slavery still exists, but now it applies only to women and its name is prostitution.”

Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*



Being an abolitionist also means:

- **Organizing side by side with prostituted women**
Abolitionists stand with prostituted women and struggle at their side for their decriminalization and for an end to violence, police harassment, and the social stigma from which they suffer. Many prostitution survivors have formed abolitionist groups (in Canada: EVE – formerly Exploited Voices now Educating, and Sextrade 101) or joined existing abolitionist groups such as the member groups of the Women's Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution.
- **Struggling for women's equality**
Abolitionists organize against prostitution and all forms of violence against women, and also against the patriarchal system underpinning this violence. Fighting for the abolition of prostitution also means fighting against hypersexualization, the rape culture, and the commodification of the human body.
- **Organizing for social justice**
Abolitionists oppose the commodification of the human body and reject the trend toward individualism that idealizes individual choice. They instead advocate a social vision, and, in support of women's efforts to exit the sex industry and prevent women's entry into prostitution, call for a "citizenship income," more social housing, and an end to systemic inequalities such as colonialism, racism, and poverty.

* ABOLITIONISM ACROSS THE WORLD

In 1999, **Sweden** passed legislation known as "Women's Peace" that punishes the purchase of sex and acknowledges prostitution as a form of violence against women and a major obstacle to equality. **Norway** (2008) and **Iceland** (2009) followed Sweden's lead and criminalized johns and pimps while decriminalizing prostituted women. Because of the actions of these three pioneering countries, we speak of the "Nordic model" when we refer to an abolitionist legislative program.

In December 2013, **France** passed an anti-prostitution bill that enshrines the abolitionist principles it adopted back in 1960. The bill was accompanied by a fund of 20 million euros for the prevention of prostitution and social and vocational assistance for prostituted persons, as a way to provide women with practical alternatives.

On February 26, 2014, the **European Parliament** passed a report presented by Member of Parliament Mary Honeyball calling on European states to follow the "Nordic model" to fight prostitution.

Ireland, England, and Finland are currently considering passing abolitionist legislation. This is also the case in Canada, which, in December 2013, was ordered by the Supreme Court to change its prostitution laws. /

