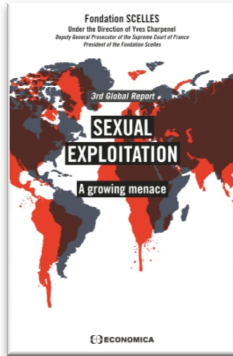




Fondation Scelles

Connaître, Comprendre, Combattre  
l'Exploitation Sexuelle

# Press and Prostitution



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In 2002, Marie-Joseph Bertini noted that women only represent 18% of people cited in the media. After a long study of semantics and statistics of three large, typical nations, she arrived at the conclusion that the main function of the media is to establish a pre-existing symbolic order, with everyone in their respective places. In order to do this, the media does not describe the world, but they prescribe it; they give the people what they think should be the “real” truth: women are subject to their place, where they are dominated.

This remark seems to also apply to the journalistic treatment of prostitution. Indeed, the media continue to portray this theme with a lot of recurring archetypal descriptions, demonstrating a concern for sensationalism rather than a real examination. This is particularly visible in the way in which prostitution activity, the figure of the client, and the procurer are all presented.

## **Prostitution in France as seen from the written press**

In the analysis of press articles treating prostitution in France<sup>1</sup>, the study of individuals working on this topic is particularly instructive. It shows that these individuals can be separated into two distinct groups. On the

one hand, those who oppose abolitionism and the criminalization of the client, on the other hand, those who support both.

The first group criticizes the abolition of exploitation of prostitutes and the penalization of clients. Of the 42 activists of this first group, only 13 have direct contact with a prostitute (31%). In all of the studied articles, the prostitutes (with the exclusion of those who claim directly to the Union of Sex Workers – STRASS) count themselves among those who have the least access to speak and/or who wish to communicate less.

Contrarily, the second group mainly wishes to abolish prostitution and penalize the clients. Of the 35 participating, 28 have a direct link with prostitution (80%). Three-quarters of them exercise, campaign, or work directly in structures related to gender and/or prostitution.

Beyond this first analysis regarding differing opinions, the second theme most frequently treated by the press is that of individuals whose homes adjoin places of prostitution.

The focus is now largely located on their complaints: the complaints which one hears

most often involve the aspects of prostitution that affect their own lives, as also illustrated in the choice of name for a group of individuals, "no prostitution-in-front-of-our-homes."

Very few residents worry about the living conditions of prostitutes. While they are direct witnesses to the conditions of violence in which they operate, it is the nuisance that these activities involve that bother them most. For example, they are not concerned with the health of prostitutes who are infected with diseases, but rather the fear of themselves contracting the diseases (except grassroots organizations directly involved in the health of these women).

### **The image of the client in the written press**

To this topic, throughout the course of 2012, the stakeholders multiplied and varied, but the articles on the client are less numerous

(51) than those discussing prostitutes (384). The debate mostly focuses around the question of the penalization of the client, essentially consisting of arguments in favor or in disfavor of this action. On one side, one third of articles oppose penalization (17 out of 51 articles). On the other side, those who are in favor of the penalization of clients (11 out of 51) account for 21% in total. Another component is the neutral articles (24), who simply state the facts linked to the question of punishments of client, or treat another connected subjects (46% of total articles).

It is interesting to note that of the 51 articles concerning prostitution, only three are written by clients or ex-clients and, always anonymously.

<b>MAIN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE PENALIZATION OF CLIENTS (6)</b>					
First argument : appearing 25 times	Second argument : appearing 18 times	Third argument : appearing 13 times	Fourth argument : appearing 13 times	Fifth argument : appearing 5 times	Sixth argument : appearing 4 times
1 : The penalization of the client would degrade the working conditions of this activity	2 : It is intolerable that others decide, instead of prostitutes (note that many of those who speak in this sense have never used prostitutes either)	3 : It is necessary to differentiate free prostitution and forced prostitution	4 : Wanting to abolish prostitution is a moral concern, therefore it has no place in this debate	5 : Criticism of the Swedish model, presented as biased, dangerous, hypocritical, and difficult to assess	6 : Positive argument (contrary to all other critics) that promotes the merits of formalizing prostitution

MAIN ARGUMENTS FOR THE PENALIZATION OF CLIENTS (7)						
First argument : appearing 19 times	Second argument : appearing 15 times	Third argument : appearing 14 times	Fourth argument : appearing 11 times	Fifth argument : appearing 10 times	Sixth argument : appearing 10 times	Seventh argument : appearing 3 times
1 :Prostitution is thought of as a place of profound inequality between men and women, a relationship of domination, a violence of gender (mental and physical) causing severe effects	2 : Refusing the sale of the human body, sexual exploitation, and the normalization of the sale of humans for the defense of human dignity	3 : Prostitutes are thought of as individuals in vulnerable situations, already under stress (economic, emotional, family, etc.), and in clandestine situations, which makes the argument of free choice irrelevant	4 : Necessity of prevention on the subject of prostitution so that prostitutes can escape the system and create a new life	5 : The myth of the “good” client is deconstructed: this person does not exist in reality	6 : Comparisons of situations of different countries in which prostitution was legalized or abolished, such as Netherlands/Germany on one side and Sweden on the other	7 : The deconstruction of the widespread idea that prostitution is the oldest profession in the world and therefore it is impossible to stop

<b>OPPOSING THEMES OF THE TWO GROUPS</b>		
	AGAINST	FOR
	THE PENALIZATION OF THE CLIENT	THE PENALIZATION OF THE CLIENT
<b>THEME 1:</b>  LEGALIZATION OF PROSTITUTION	<p>The legalization of prostitution would provide prostitutes with better living conditions. This is said without relying on any specific study. The first three speakers simply imagine that the formalization allows those who engage in this activity and who reject the networks to live better. The fourth person, an activist of STRASS, for her part announced that “the associations have been saying that the more repressed prostitution is, the more working conditions are deteriorating”. Yet there is no mention of the names of the associations in question, or their sources. Thus, the assertion that the formalization of prostitution would be beneficial and prostitutes would deviate from organized crime, remains totally unsupported here.</p>	<p>Two supporters of the criminalization of four clients are based on real-life examples to support the assertion that legalizing prostitution would actually be an invitation for criminal networks. The first speaker takes the example of Eros Center, where “the majority of prostitutes who exercise is not voluntary”, without citing sources. However, the individual interviewed on this issue is the author of a book on prostitution. The second speaker takes the example of the Netherlands and Germany to show that “regulation is the most effective way to increase the market of ‘sex worker’, to open the ‘Eros Centers’ where one practices rapid prostitution, and to protect the interests of procurers, so that they become mere managers, hoteliers, businessmen like the others”. Indeed, these countries do not punish individuals collecting “rent” from prostitutes who pay to exercise within these institutions.</p>
<b>THEME 2:</b>  THE CONSENT	<p>The theme of articles opposing the criminalization of the client – as well as for the issue of legalization – simply stated this opinion without any further argument. The mere fact that some prostitutes engage in this activity voluntarily is enough.</p>	<p>To say that everyone is free to make his own life choices without taking into account their context means that everyone is completely free at any point in his life, and no determinism weighs on him.</p>

### The profile of procurers in the written press

In the articles discussing prostitution, the figure of the procurer is central (312 articles out of 747, 42%), in contrast to that of the client. The subject of the procurer is treated very carefully. The majority of articles are only concerned with judicial facts. In general, the 314 articles address two main topics:

- Acts of justice against highly organized procurers, acting mostly through networks (142 articles, 46%);
- The "Carlton de Lille" affair and the connected elements (111 articles, 36%).

The remaining 18% deal in decreasing order with "Julot Casse-croûte," "massage" parlors, the figures available on the subject, various facts, stories of people, such as (former) prostitutes, and the actions of one of the sons of Muammar Gaddafi on the Côte d'Azur.

Of the 312 articles dedicated to procuring in the French press, 303 are written in journals, 9 texts are written by people (not journalists) who are truly engaged.

No journalist article truly attempts to describe the character of a procurer, probably because there is no doubt about it. As the customer remains a mystery, it is assumed that the procurer is either a brutal, misogynist, "bad guy" often from Eastern Europe, or a determined man in a precarious situation, living on the earnings of his wife. In the first case, journalists do not research the personality and history of the individual. In the second case, the procurer - sometimes called "Julot Casse-croûte" - is frequently presented as a confused man, experiencing social and emotional difficulties. He is also often described as so in love with his wife he agrees to abide by the "choice" of the latter to exercise prostitution activity.

In general, individuals are rarely referred to as procurers, but rather they are "Julot" and their workers act in a "voluntary" manner. The tone of these articles is quasi-empathetic, as if the men were to be pitied more than the prostitutes who work for them. The articles are often written in a way to emphasize the distress of the "Julot," or his indignation, completely erasing the victim –the prostitute. Within this phenomenon, one can see the resurgence of the well-established idea that all women must belong to a man, as shown in particular in the work of Françoise Héritier. The owner has by definition the right to freely dispose of his property. If his wife adopted a perceived attitude degrading to a woman, it is ultimately the man, who inflicts his opinion on his wife, that reflects the shame and therefore pity.

In the affair of Carlton de Lille, the argument for the defense of Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) renews this idea that the true victim is the man, and not the woman, who is still suspected of being a temptress. Everything lies in this charade. During the "libertine" parties, it would have been impossible to determine that some women present were prostitutes. This idea is presented by one of the lawyers of DSK as follows: "*Il [DSK] pouvait parfaitement l'ignorer car figurez-vous qu'à ces soirées, on n'est pas forcément habillé et je vous défie de distinguer une prostituée nue d'une femme du monde nue* (He [DSK] could well ignore the prostitution because one imagines that on these evenings, one is not necessarily dressed, and I challenge you to distinguish a naked prostitute from a naked woman of the world)" (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012). This sentence, a rare symbolic violence, reflects the common thought that every woman is potentially a sinful dormant, ready to play as an object of desire, that is to say to fulfill the man's destiny of women as objects. Simply, there is a type of women which one must pay

for and the other ones are free, but must testify their ways.

In other words, one returns to the classic archetypal images of the woman and the Holy Whore, which are exclusive of each other and classify women between honest, respectable mothers versus sinful, attractive, bad women. Except that in modern times, it would be difficult to differentiate; these two categories are typically so distant from each other, but they are found mixed and indistinguishable because of the nudity in particular, as if only the clothes allow men to differentiate the types of women. This also implies that a naked woman is necessarily a "whore," a body always available to men. By triggering the desire of men - still often presented as uncontrollable - she becomes the object of the desire, and of this gratification of consuming power. Therefore, she is powerful because she has a power that man cannot control, so men reduce her to the ontological figure of a "whore," in order to render her less powerful and more controllable.

The very rare articles, from former prostitutes, that discuss procurers are very alarming. And yet, a certain reserve characterizes a large percentage of these few stories, as if not all could be said.

This, without a doubt, demonstrates the fear that procurers provoke. They are violent, cruel, and do not hesitate to threaten the families, adapting their methods to the beliefs of the family, such as witchcraft rituals performed on African women.

A former British prostitute explains that procurers mostly use the method of discrediting the word of survivors. This reduces individuals, and thus causes others to doubt the veracity of their stories of terrible experiences, which could affect the glamorous image of prostitution. In opposition with clichés representing procurers as individuals assuming their condition openly, the author explains that in reality, they have become

much more subtle, and therefore more dangerous.

### **In conclusion, a failed mission...and lots more work**

In his book on the French press, Pierre Albert highlights the existence of "French" critical journalism of expression and commentary. Yet when the French media cover prostitution, they are anything but critical. Rather, they merely report the facts matching many clichés - sometimes tearful, sometimes liberal-voyeuristic. They rarely question the root causes of prostitution, a subject remaining rather unknown to the public. The media reflects again and again the same archetypal representations of prostitution, maintaining the public's idea that prostitutes are willing and free in their sexuality, instead of women exploited against their will. Whatever the theme of the article, the tone is often descriptive, giving great detail on the outfits and shapes (observed when subjects are female). Photos, always centered on the body of prostitutes, illustrate this desire to expose prostitution, failing to hear or to really dig into the ins and outs.

The overall result is clearly catchy, perhaps because of what the mental representations of prostitution are, and thus the journalist describes not what he sees but what the reader wants him to see. Or maybe just because it sells.

In 2004, the Fondation Scelles noted on the subject of prostitution in the media that "*l'approche est parfois sensationnaliste ou misérabiliste ; le goût pour l'histoire individuelle, le fait divers teinté de paternalisme, occulte toute analyse de fond sur les causes structurelles et l'ensemble des acteurs concernés* [the approach is sometimes sordid or sensational; the taste for the individual history, the facts are tinted with paternalism, and hide the structural causes and all the actors]", the conclusions are the same in 2012.

The history of prostitution shows precisely the vicious circle: the prostitutes are thought of as willing, a minority of them claim it (who wants to be a victim?); Sensationalist media reproduce the discourse that readers feed upon and everyone is convinced of the natural quality of this activity and therefore its necessity. Therefore, in *Causette* of February 2013, 75% of French people consider prostitution as inevitable. As a result of a lack of consensus, public powers are not able to set up a project company without prostitution. Media abandon their critical approach on the prostitution issue. Their eyes on this activity have essentially a self-indulgent, nostalgic view. Instead of asking the right questions, sorely missing from debates, they tend to perpetuate stereotypes that ultimately sustain prostitution, by harping that prostitution is "the oldest profession in the world." Clearly, there were healers, hunter-gatherers, or midwives before. In fact, this is the oldest lie in the world.

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<sup>1</sup>A total of 747 press articles of 2012 were studied and reviewed by Fondation Scelles. The articles are gathered daily from hundreds of French and English news sites from a number of keywords related to prostitution. These items come from major national and regional newspapers, as well as several news sites online. This massive and diverse sample allows a glimpse of how the issue of prostitution is treated in the French press.