\$ex Workers Make History: 1985 & 1986 - The World Whores' Congress

Presentation by Gail Pheterson and Margo St. James (Transcript from "Sex Workers and Allies Unite!")

The successful partnership between Margo St. James and Gail Pheterson resulted in two international conferences attended by prostitutes and their allies from all over the world. In 1985 in Amsterdam, delegates at the First World Whores' Congress launched the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights and produced the World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights (see pp. 30-31).

Gail Pheterson:

I am thrilled to be here, and I congratulate the Organising Committee. We're just thrilled to give

you some history. It's not going to be 20 years of partnership; really, it's going to be on the First and Second Congress, 20 years ago. And I say it's a little of Gail Pheterson and a lot of Margo St. James, because I learned everything from Margo, as she was my first mentor in prostitution, and I am very, very grateful to one of my first heroes.

Leading up to the Congress: First of all, right from the beginning we decided to never disassociate from the word "whore," from the word "prostitute," and to claim that this

is sex *work*. Any term that could be used against us—whether we work, whether we don't work, whether we've been accused of working, whatever—we're going to re-appropriate that word, and say, "What ever you call me, I deserve my rights."

Margo St. James:

In San Francisco I started COYOTE in 1973, and in '74 we had our first convention and our first Hookers' Ball. A songwriter friend of mine gave me the acronym for COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics). I ran in the first NOW [National Organisation for Women] Olympics in Golden Gate Park in 1974 and I won third overall. I would have had first or second place, but I couldn't shoot baskets [in basketball].

In Paris in 1975, I met with Simone Iff from the Ministry of Women's Rights [France], Constance and a couple of other women. A French filmmaker, Jacques Prayer, took me to rue St. Denis and introduced me to the women he'd been photographing since the '50s. He also photographed the First Congress in Amsterdam. Simone Iff was in charge of family planning, and she had the balls to stand up for the sex workers.

[This is a photo of] Constance, who was the oldest of our group — and she's gone from us now—with

her dog Grobulia. She always had her little dog, and he went with her when she worked, and when she stood on the street on rue St. Denis with her keys rattling. We met with Simone Iff a few days ago and she had photos in her archives of Constance from decades past.

And of course this [next photo is of] our hero—who I met in '75 at an UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] conference where they were discussing prostitution—Grisélidis Réal.



In 1983 Priscilla Alexander—who worked with COYOTE—and I attended the Sexual Slavery conference [International Feminist Networking Against Female Sexual Slavery, Rotterdam, organised by Kathleen Barry and funded by the Dutch Government]. I had given Kathy Barry the information and contacts around the world to start her book in '77, however, I regret that very, very much. Barry, at the time of this conference, had decided never to appear at the same podium as a prostitute. We had a TV show arranged where we were to have a roundtable with her and Charlotte Bunch, and Priscilla Alexander and myself. And

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PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson ABOVE: Constance & Grobulia, 1st Congress



PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson ABOVE: **Grisélidis Réal, 1st Congress**



ABOVE: Constance & Grisélidis Réal, 1st Congress
BELOW CENTRE: Priscilla Alexander, 2nd Congress



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so we had to do the show separately; 15 minutes for them, and 15 minutes for us. *Alors*, we got the show done, and it worked out fine.

Gail Pheterson:

In The Netherlands, Martine Groen—who is here with us—had started a small group of sex workers. Violette and Margot Álvarez were in that first group, among others. This group provided the first energy in The Netherlands to begin to mobilise the first international conference. I had been in California which is where I met Margo in 1982 and '83. I started to communicate with Martine Groen to see what was happening in The Netherlands. Margo came to Holland after I went back—at the time I lived in The Netherlands—and she connected to those women she had met in France—and Grisélidis—and we started organising.

Next to The Red Thread in The Netherlands we began a Pink Thread. What we decided was that this was a movement for all women, and that prostitutes' rights were critical for the rights of all women—that any woman could be stigmatised as a whore; that there was no freedom for any woman unless there was going to be rights and freedom for prostitutes. But we realised that the sex workers were more of a target group, and we thought, "How we could use this Pink/Red Thread to extend solidarity so that the press, for instance, would not know who was who?" And this was the beginning of The Pink Thread, with Marjan Sax, Martine Groen and myself.

Margo St. James:

Getting the feminists to support prostitutes' rights was a difficult job in the States. One of the reasons I came to the continent here was to beat Dworkin and MacKinnon to the punch, and save you all from Kathleen Barry and her "sexual slavery." And with The Red Thread kicking ass—and The Pink Thread, you know, backing them up—I think we did just that. This [slide is of] a cartoon, of course, you can see the hooker is saying,

"Okay you can leave me out of your feminist Bible, but it will cost you 450 guiden per hour."

Gail Pheterson:

That was in the *First World Whores' News*. This was in one of our first magazines.

Margo St. James:

Who says I'm a victim, right? May I say more about the victim thing? Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Kathy Barry had a couple of victims that they would trot out every once in a while. I also ran into that at the UNESCO conference in '75 [World Conference of the International Women's Year (Mexico)], where UNESCO had a victim who was an ex-hooker. However, after I spoke to her privately, she said, "Oh, I'm not really a victim. I'm just doing this because they're giving me a place to live and things to do."

This is a photo of Gail and Jan Visser from Stichting de Graaf in Amsterdam—which is a collection of prostitution information from around the world—and I think one of us had just said that we had this complicity between whores and dykes and a few precious men. So that's why he's holding his head. He didn't want to be precious.

Gail Pheterson:

So, organising the First Congress. Actually, I think that the moment that this idea came about—correct me if I'm wrong, Margo—was on rue St. Denis. We were all having lunch near la Palette, which was a café—the women from Paris will know it. We were there, and the French working women said, "Révolution internationale! Révolution internationale!" And that we should all be there, because we thought we were going to do a Dutch conference first. But they were so eager that we said, "Okay, let's do it."

So we went back to Holland, and The Red and Pink Thread started to organise. Grisélidis Réal started to call everybody she knew, and gave us all of her contacts, and pushed them, and mobilised them, and energised them. Mama Cash made a commitment and helped bring sex workers to the Congress. We couldn't have gotten funding any other way.

The Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (FATW)—based in Utrecht and Bangkok—was very different from the Kathleen Barry contingent talking about trafficking in the United States. We had many a dialogue and discussions, and we knew we wanted to be in alliance with each other. That the pro-rights and the anti-violence movements should not be contradictory—that we were all for rights, and we were all against violence.

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PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: **Gail, Jan Visser & Margo, 1st Congress**



PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE CENTRE: Margo St. James, 1st Congress



ABOVE CENTRE: Lin Chew (FATW), 2nd Congress
BELOW: Terry van der Zijden (standing), 1st Congress





PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson ABOVE: **Grisélidis, Margot, & Cora (far right), 1st Congress**

UTLAW POVERING PROSTED

PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: 2nd World Whores' Congress, Brussels, 1986



PHOTOS COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE LEFT: Margo & RIGHT: Gloria Lockett, 1st Congress

BELOW LEFT: Norma Jean Almodovar, RIGHT: Gloria, 2nd Congress



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FATW were instrumental in making an alliance with Asia—with the groups from Asia, with the women coming to work from Asia.

Okay, [next slide] here we are, it was Valentine's Day—that was Margo's idea—for the First World Whores' Congress in Amsterdam. There's Margo in the middle there, and we're sitting around. [This next slide] is also of the First Congress, Terry van der Zijden is standing in the middle there.

Margo St. James:

We joined up with the housewives; Selma James, the US group called "Wages for Housework." They were demanding wages for their housework, but they were a little bit to the right. We actually fell out in about '80 after Kathy Barry came out with her book.

Anyway, this was in Amsterdam, and we're getting ready for the press conference, and we had the police there. A chief from Rotterdam came, and we got into a big argument about licensing and registering individuals. We said, "No, just the places of business should have a licence, the women no, because it sustains stigma." And the policeman said, "But we have to have registration for social control of women." So afterward — because he spoke English, but I had been listening to the translation from Dutch—I asked him to say it in English, which he did. I told him that he was the most honest cop I'd ever met.

[Next slide] That's Peggy Miller from Canada, Grisélidis, Eva from the UK, and Katia from France. These were sex workers from Switzerland, Grisélidis, Margot from The Netherlands, Cora from Germany. Then there's somebody from Sweden in middle of the picture with the wig and the hat—who you'll see is here—who was also at the First Congress and spoke brilliantly.

Gail Pheterson:

Just one thought here. This, of course, is not the history of the Congress, but the history of the protagonists of that Congress. I think it would be so wonderful if there were collections in all the countries of these kind of photos—to have the history of the activists who have meant so much.

Margo St. James:

On the screen now is what Constance was saying. I'll read it so that it will be translated for you:

"In 1975 there was the revolt of prostitutes who sat in churches, but nothing has changed. The French Government had mandated a High Magistrate to discuss with the prostitutes what could be done to improve the situation. His report was only about taxes and fines, which increased, and increase all the time."

This photo is of the First World Whores' Congress with Gloria Lockett—a Black woman from San Francisco and Oakland who joined COYOTE in '78—who says:

"They busted me, my man, and another Black woman. We were also working with seven White women who they made testify against us. We have some horrible laws we are fighting, and we have to keep fighting. They don't want women to think. They don't want women to like what they are doing. One of the reasons they were so hard on us was that none of us were on drugs. None of us were dependent on anybody but ourselves to make our living, and we liked what we were doing. They couldn't understand that so they came after us, and they think they got us. I don't think so."

Gloria is now running a group that we called CAL-PEP (California Prostitutes' Education Project). She's been funded through the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. She gets about half a million a year to run the program in Oakland and Berkeley and East Bay—across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco—and they're doing a great job. She's also on my board at the St. James Infirmary.

This is a picture taken at the First World Whores' Congress—the Hookers' Ball—Marjan Sax, Tania Leon, a friend of Gail's, myself wearing a feather boa, and my mother Dorothy, who is still alive and kicking and totally supportive. I couldn't have done it without her help. When someone called her to ask that I come to this conference she was overwhelmed and delighted, and she couldn't wait to tell me when I got back from shopping.

This is a picture of people at the Masquerade Ball at the Krasnapolsky Hotel in Amsterdam; that's Gail dressed up like a hooker. In fact, when she

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ABOVE: Entering the European Parliament, 2nd Congress



ABOVE: Marjan Sax, Tania Leon, Margo & Dorothy, 1st Congress



ABOVE LEFT: Dolores French, 2nd Congress
BELOW RIGHT: Gail Pheterson dressed as hooker, 1st Congress





WORLD CHARTER FOR PROSTITUTES' RIGHTS

(Produced by the International Committee for Prostitutes Rights founded at the First World Whores' Congress in Amsterdam, 1985.)

LAWS

- Decriminalise all aspects of adult prostitution resulting from individual decision.
- Decriminalise prostitution and regulate third parties according to standard business codes. It must be noted that existing standard business codes allow abuse of prostitutes. Therefore special clauses must be included to prevent the abuse and stigmatisation of prostitutes (self-employed and others).
- Enforce criminal laws against fraud, coercion, violence, child sexual abuse, child labour, rape, racism everywhere and across national boundaries, whether or not in the context of prostitution.
- Eradicate laws that can be interpreted to deny freedom of association, or freedom to travel, to prostitutes within and between countries.
 Prostitutes have rights to a private life.

HUMAN RIGHTS

- Guarantee prostitutes all human rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of speech, travel, immigration, work, marriage, and motherhood and the right to unemployment insurance, health insurance and housing.
- Grant asylum to anyone denied human rights on the basis of a "crime of status," be it prostitution or homosexuality.

WORKING CONDITIONS

- There should be no law which implies systematic zoning of prostitution. Prostitutes should have the freedom to choose their place of work and residence. It is essential that prostitutes can provide their services under the conditions that are absolutely determined by themselves and no one else.
- There should be a committee to insure the protection of the rights of the prostitutes and to whom prostitutes can address their complaints.
 This committee must be comprised of prostitutes and other professionals like lawyers and supporters.
- There should be no law discriminating against prostitutes associating and working collectively in order to acquire a high degree of personal security.

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got interviewed by the press they put it in the press that she was a hooker, and so that sort of bore out the intent of them forming The Pink Thread to support The Red Thread—to confuse the public about, "Can you tell?" No, of course they couldn't tell. What are whores? They're just women.

Gail Pheterson:

So at the end of the First Congress there was a vote to form the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR). We made a *World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights*—up until five in the morning the last night of the Congress. And we had plans for a Second Congress at the European Parliament. The reason that we had these plans is that at the press conference there was somebody from the European Parliament who got very excited about this, and said, "*I want to open up the doors of the Parliament*."

Now as you know the title was "World Whores' Congress." This goes back to what I said at the beginning about the word "whore." One of the position papers from the First Congress, stated that the word "whore" is used to stigmatize women, the word "prostitute" is used to criminalise women. Rather then disassociate from the social or legal labels used against us, we identify with both, and we demand our rights as whores, as prostitutes, as working women. Now this was about women and the impulse at that time was a feminist—and we used that word in this context—a feminist women's movement. We also were allied with men in the sex industry, with trangendered people in the sex industry, but the motor at that time was very much a women's movement. We nonetheless made sure to say—and this got developed as you'll see in the Second Congress—that we are in solidarity with all women in the sex industry.

Okay, [next slide] that's Annemiek Onstenk, in red, who was the person at the First World Whores' Congress press conference. She said, "I'm going to open up those doors through the Greens." [Next photo], there's Nel van Dijk—sitting next to Margo—at the Congress, who supported the idea and spoke up for it. She was a Member of the European Parliament.

Grisélidis continued to be not only the networker, but the educator; always with a book, always to show this or that, always with her writing. And next there are the countries that were represented. Those that are in—I don't know if that is rose or purple—were represented by sex workers. Those in white were represented by allies of sex workers. There were about 150 people—though it looks like more—and we didn't call them "sex workers and allies." We called them "participants and guests," and the reason was that in the whole middle section of the Parliament were sex workers and former sex workers, and they were the only ones who had speaking and voting privileges. But those people—beforehand in the preparations chose the lawyers, the doctors, the social workers, the researchers, who they trusted. They were invited for the sidelines, and they could be asked questions by the sex workers. So there we are.

Margo St. James:

I've always felt that one person can start a movement, but they need some friends: a reporter, a journalist, an academic (cum Gail), a lawyer, and, of course, a hooker. Four people helped me start COYOTE, but I had a lot of help from the musicians and artists and politicians that I knew, who would always say in private, "Of course you're right, Margo," but in public they wouldn't dare speak up. So we made it a popular thing—a fun thing—by producing the Hookers' Balls, by having events, by writing, getting things written, by making films—like Carol Leigh does now. This is before computers and before video, so it was a lot harder, but we did it.

Gail Pheterson:

I've just been told that we have two minutes, and we're just entering the European Parliament, so I think we'll go fairly quickly through the photos. There we are at the European Parliament. Annie Sprinkle is the photographer in the middle there: "No taxation without representation." Helen Buckingham from London: "Key themes: human rights, health and feminism." Pia Covre from Italy: "The Italian Constitution equals social dignity, that's what we want."

Grisélidis represented France because at the last minute there was no French prostitute to come. But Carol from Marseilles called crying that day and said, "Give them this message: We are absolutely determined to go to the World Court in the Hague to get our rights honoured from the point of view of simple human respect."

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HEALTH

 All women and men should be educated to periodical health screening for sexually transmitted diseases. Since health checks have historically been used to control and stigmatize prostitutes, and since adult prostitutes are generally even more aware of sexual health than others, mandatory checks for prostitutes are unacceptable unless they are mandatory for all sexually active people.

SERVICES

- Employment, counseling, legal, and housing services for runaway children should be funded in order to prevent child prostitution and to promote child well-being and opportunity.
- Prostitutes must have the same social benefits as all other citizens according to the different regulations in different countries.
- Shelters and services for working prostitutes and re-training programmes for prostitutes wishing to leave the life should be funded.

TAXES

- No special taxes should be levied on prostitutes or prostitute businesses.
- Prostitutes should pay regular taxes on the same basis as other independent contractors and employees, and should receive the same benefits.

PUBLIC OPINION

- Support educational programmes to change social attitudes which stigmatize and discriminate against prostitutes and ex-prostitutes of any race, gender or nationality.
- Develop educational programmes which help the public to understand that the customer plays a crucial role in the prostitution phenomenon, this role being generally ignored. The customer, like the prostitute, should not, however, be criminalised or condemned on a moral basis.
- · We are in solidarity with workers in the sex industry.

ORGANISATION

 Organisations of prostitutes and ex-prostitutes should be supported to further implementation of the above Charter.





PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: In the European Parliament, 2nd Congress



PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: "Bad Girls Go Everywhere," 2nd Congress



PHOTOS COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE CENTRE: Jeffrey from Australia, 2nd Congress BELOW: Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, 2nd Congress



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Eva from England talked about the new law that had come in to replace the same idea of harassing prostitutes, especially immigrants. Norma Jean Almodovar who had written a book, *Cop to Call Girl.* She used to be a cop. She said: "Let me tell you, there's a difference between a prostitute and a politician. There are some things that a prostitute won't do for money." From Austria, "We oppose the hypocrisy of making prostitution legal for taxes, but denying social rights."

The Foundation Against Trafficking in Women, represented by Tang and Lin Chew. Nina from the Philippines, spoke for the right not to work as a prostitute—and about women's lack of choice—and, "Why don't they trust us? Because we're not White, because they think we're prostitutes, so they don't believe we were forced."

Right to safety in Australia, they talked about their *Ugly Mugs List* to identify dangerous men. In West Germany, they talked about the friction between German and foreign whores, but that they support foreign women to work, and any laws against them are racist, and in collusion with the profiteers.

Germany said that, "Compulsory medical checks are the state's deepest invasion into the private world and rights of prostitutes." Helen Buckingham again: "Legalised prostitution will not stop AIDS; they'll just push us in brothels. That's not the way to contain the epidemic."

Carla Corso — who's here now, who was a very, very central spokesperson at the Second Congress — was against separate clinics for prostitutes. She said, "They're ghettos for us. All women have a vagina, so why should we divide ourselves into prostitutes and non-prostitutes? I think it's absurd." And then here is a photo of Jeffery from Australia, with safe sex. Dolores French did a demonstration on how you can put on a condom on a banana, and how you can do on a client so that he didn't even know. She started the organisation Hooking Is Real Employment (HIRE).

Feminism was the other topic. Pieke Biermann says about the separation between feminism, the women's movement, and the prostitutes' movement, "It's artificial, and I don't think it was invented by prostitutes, neither by feminists." Terry van der Zijden—who's here right now—said, "I think that working in prostitution is one way to become sexually autonomous, and if we experiment with sexuality within the framework of prostitution we have the possibility of arriving at self-determination in all other areas of our existence as women."

Women from Austria said, "What is the difference anyway between prostitutes and feminists?"

Helen Buckingham went to her colleagues in a brothel and told them about a feminist meeting that she went to, and said, "It should be about women like us, because it's about money and our chances." And one of her colleagues says, "Oh, is feminism about that? I thought it was about burning bras, and I'm not burning mine. It's much too expensive."

Carla and Pia talked about their association for decriminalisation and against stigmatisation.

Transgender rights and young people's rights were represented by Dolly, among others, who said that transvestites had a particular situation: not accepted by their families or nearest and dearest. She left home at 14 to go to Milan to earn money. Danny Cockerline—who died in 1995—was very central; he was the person to push and raise the issue of solidarity with transexuals and tranvestites. As a result of his interventions, the position papers gave greater solidarity with these groups. There he is with Jeffrey—leave the boy alone!

Porn: There was another panel on the alliance between prostitutes and porn stars. Annie Sprinkle, who said she preferred porn. She'd been a prostitute, and she thought that porn was a lot more fun and satisfying. There she is [on the screen] at was one of our evening activities—Danny and Annie and Veronica Vera.

At the press conference at the Second Congress we faced some harassment—luckily not a huge amount—so *we* set the conditions.

So, the final evening activity: Margo and I have a little, final thing. This was performed by Betty Pearl and Natascha Emanuels.

Margo: You were a daddy's Madonna. You smart little girl, you were raised a Madonna so you became a feminist. You're trying to take back power.

Gail: You were daddy's Whore, his pretty little woman. You were raised a whore so you became a prostitute. You are trying to take back power.

Margo: You think you're politically liberated, but you're so unhappy. You're not liberated at all.

Gail: You think you're sexually liberated, but you are so oppressed. You're not liberated at all.

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PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: Danny Cockerline & Annie Sprinkle perform, 1st Congress



PHOTO COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: Jeffrey & Danny Cockerline, 2nd Congress



PHOTOS COURTESY: Gail Pheterson

ABOVE: Natascha Emanuels & Betty Pearl perform, 1st Congress BELOW: Hounded by the press at the 2nd Congress



TIME Magazine

Monday, October 13, 1986 (p. 1.)

WORLD NOTES: BELGIUM

To Brussels with love

Just what were all those hookers doing in the hallowed halls of the European Parliament in Brussels last week? The moral outrage echoing in the corridors may have suggested that a recreation of Sodom and Gomorrah was being staged. Reason: about 125 prostitutes, including three men, were attending the Second World Whores' Congress. They were in Brussels at the invitation of the Green/Alternative European Link, an alliance of environmentalist and independent leftist parties.

Delegates to the three-day conference reaffirmed such objectives as decriminalising adult prostitution and abolishing red light districts. Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome was a pressing issue. Said Margo St. James, founder of the National Task Force on Prostitution, a US prostitutes' group: "People are too afraid to come out in the streets these days." But most of the women were irrepressibly optimistic. One wore a T-shirt emblazoned with the message:

"GOOD GIRLS GO TO HEAVEN, BAD GIRLS GO EVERYWHERE."

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are obsessed.

Margo: You were over-protected as a child. You're sick!

Gail: You were neglected as a child. You're sick!

Margo: All you care about is career and politics. You're obsessed.

Gail: All you care about is sex and money. You

Margo: You always say that women should be economically independent, but most feminists can't even earn their own living. You're stupid.

Gail: You could be economically independent, and what do you do? You keep men, and give them all your money. You are stupid.

Margo: You've had bad experiences with men; you hate men. You all hate men.

Gail: You've had bad experiences with men; you hate men. You all hate men.

Margo: You don't take care of your body, you never look fresh, you don't even use a deodorant. You stink!

Gail: You are diseased, you got VD. You use cheap perfume. You stink!

Margo: You think you know it all, but you don't know anything; you're naïve. You're arrogant.

Gail: You think you know it all, because you've been with so many men, but you are exploited. You are arrogant.

Margo: You are a lesbian; you don't like sex with men, but you sure could use a good fuck. You are lonely women.

Gail: You're either frigid or nymphomaniacs, but you could use some real love-making. You are lonely women.

Margo: You think that you're emancipated; I'm the emancipated woman. I've taken back power.

Gail: You think that you're emancipated; I am the emancipated woman. I have taken back power.

Gail & Margo: We are emancipated women.

Margo: Are you really a Madonna?

Gail: Are you really a Whore? \Box

- ▼ Margo St. James founded the first prostitutes rights' group (COYOTE) in the USA. She lives in San Francisco.
- ♥ Gail Pheterson lives in Paris, France and is author of *The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness* (1986), *The Prostitution Prism* (1996) and editor of *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (1989), which features full transcripts of the First and Second World Whores' Congress.



