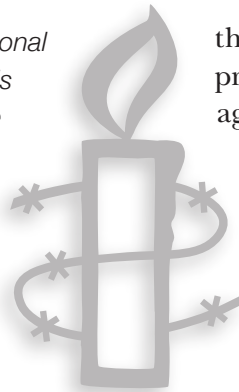


# Patricia Kaatee, Liv Jessen and Janni Schulerud Talk Human Rights

Transcript from the plenary session "Sex Workers and Allies Unite!"

**P**atricia Kaatee is with Amnesty International Norway. Liv Jessen is head of Norway's national resource centre on prostitution, the Pro Sentret (Pro Centre) which offers information, counselling and outreach to sex workers. She received Amnesty International Norway's human rights award in 2004 for defending the human rights of sex workers. Janni Schulerud is with PION (Prostitutes' Interest Organisation Norway).



## Patricia Kaatee:

I will just briefly say something about Amnesty International (AI). We are an international human rights organisation with 1.8 million members in almost 120 countries around the world, and we have branches in 80 countries. Our vision is of a world where everybody is able to enjoy their basic human rights and freedoms as set forth in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Amnesty's mission is to promote and defend everybody's human rights, and especially the right to physical and mental integrity.

In 2004 AI launched a campaign called "Stop Violence against Women." We did this because we acknowledge that violence against women is one of the fastest-growing and most serious human rights violations all over the world. According to the World Health Organisation, one in three women is being forced into sex, is beaten or raped at least once in her lifetime. The underlying cause of violence against women lies in discrimination against women, which denies women equality with men in almost every sphere of society. And control of women's sexuality is central to maintaining the subordination of women. Sex and sexuality are highly politicised: women's bodies are often used as political battlegrounds. This is true in war and also in peacetime. Society tends to be particularly violent towards women who are transgressing against society's norms of sexuality. So when we were deciding to whom we were going to give our human rights awards, we saw that even

though every human being is entitled to the protection of basic human rights and redress against abuse, many sex workers are facing discrimination, particularly in the criminal justice system. So, within the context of our "Stop Violence against Women" campaign, we looked to a person who had defended the human rights of one of the most marginalised groups in society: prostitutes and sex workers. A person who has relentlessly claimed that society has a duty to secure every woman her human rights and to provide her with social services. A person who has spoken up for the rights of women in prostitution, who are mostly invisible in the public sphere.

We decided to give our first human rights award to Liv Jessen, who leads the *Pro Sentret*. And I think that we as an organisation feel that, by that acknowledging the role that Liv has played in Norwegian society, we acknowledge the rights of people in the sex industry, and specifically of women in the sex industry. But our action has had consequences for the public debate in Norway that we had not foreseen, and it has changed the way in which Amnesty International Norway has been working for the rights of people in the sex industry. It has become the start of working together with organisations for women prostitutes and also with other women and men in the sex industry. It has been a challenging experience.

## Liv Jessen:

I'll ask you a question: "What makes you a human being?" The famous Danish philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup says that what makes you human is the fact that you are acting according to your human nature. He talks about trust, mercy and compassion as important human standards; it's natural for all of us to act according to these standards. Aristotle stressed the fact each human being must exist in relation to other people, in dialogue with other people. But most philosophers describe a human being as a person with

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PHOTO: Quentin Deltour (Espace P)  
“Sex Workers of the World Unite!”

↳ continued from p. 37...

free will and, accordingly, one who is responsible for her choices. It is choice that makes you a human being; a subject in your own life.

A Norwegian philosopher Hans Skjervheim talks about objectifying other people: “By objectifying the other person, you attack the other person’s freedom. One who is cunningly objectifying the other is master.” What has this to do with sex work and prostitution? Or, more precisely, what has this to do with people who sell sex?

Since the 1970s there has been, at least in my country—and I hear in many other countries as well—a radical feminist theory stating that prostitution is to be considered as violence against all women. This theory lives alongside those stating that there are two kinds of women: the Whore and the Madonna; the indecent and the decent—we, and the others.

Radical feminist theory states that it is men who are in power, men who can choose. The prostitute is a victim—an object, or less—forced to sell sex for whatever reason. To look at prostitution in such a one-dimensional way leads to the same result as viewing it as a Whore/Madonna dichotomy. The prostitute will still be the “other woman”—not like me (a non-prostitute). I am a subject who can choose, and she is not.

Thus, the radical feminist theory leads us astray. This feminist movement with this theory, has to be an opponent to prostitutes as such. As long as they do not recognise the prostitute’s right to choose, for whatever reason, her own life, they will deprive one group of women of their human right to self-determination. This is also why they never listen to prostitutes with whom they disagree.

These prostitutes “do not know what’s good for them;” they have “false consciousness,” because no woman can, in this analysis, choose prostitution.

Two Norwegian feminists, Cecilie Hoigard and Liv Finstad, state in their book *Back Streets: Prostitution, Money and Love* that “no one wants to rent out her vagina as a rubbish bin for hoards of anonymous men’s ejaculations.” This view rejects a person’s right to choose prostitution. The only prostitutes these women accept are the repentant sinners, the survivors—those who have come to their senses. Prostitutes who disagree with them politically or otherwise are objectified and looked upon as children, not capable of making their own choices.

A radical feminist group in Norway says strikingly, “We can of course not leave the politics of prostitution to the prostitutes, any more than we could leave drug policy to the drug addicts.” As a longtime feminist and a former radical feminist—so I know what I am talking about—I have always believed that the essence of feminism was to fight for the rights of every woman to choose her own life; to be a subject in her own life; to be a hero in her own life. Whether I disagree with her choices is irrelevant: she has the right to choose. The right to choose is in fact what makes one human; what makes one a person.

All our efforts and achievements in the field of prostitution in the coming years should be based on the best of our humanistic tradition—solidarity and empowerment—rather than on condemnation, expulsion, or suffocating pity.

The radical feminist critics came after me very vehemently after AI awarded me this prize. They raised my status as the number one hated object in Norway. I have been there for many years, but this was one level higher than before. The bottom line was that they were very angry with me and with others who stood against the Swedish law [that makes it a crime to pay for sex; being paid for sex is not against the law]. They were fighting very, very hard for the Norwegian Government, or Norwegian politicians in different parties, to impose the Swedish law. At that time I had been working with Janni for about almost twenty years, and, she and Gitte were very, very, very good, on the front line of all the struggles and debates on fighting the Swedish law. So I definitely share this prize with at least those two, and many, many other women.

I will end by saying that what was most pleasant about getting this award was that I was passing through the Pro Centre one day — we have a drop-in centre where a lot of women sit all day — and I overheard one woman saying to the others: “Listen, listen — we won the prize!”

Thank you.

**Janni Schulerud:** (*Liv is translating*)

Janni is saying that a small delegation of Norwegian and Swedish sex workers went down to Amnesty and gave them flowers to thank them for putting these questions on the agenda, so pleased were they with this level of respectful recognition.

**Patricia Kaatee:**

I must say it was a very strange experience, because there had never been any whores as such at the offices of Amnesty International Norway. My secretary general wanted to do this well. I saw that he was struggling with his prejudices, but we had a good meeting. And through these initiatives, the living and working conditions of people working in the sex industry have come to the forefront of our work. I think that the human rights framework should and could be used more effectively

to promote the human rights of sex workers, because human rights are for everybody. Everybody has the right to be respected, regardless of their occupation, gender, or ethnicity. I also agree that the human rights movement has not been together with you enough in your struggle. I see that the feminist movement has supported you, at least in some countries, and I do hope that the “Stop Violence Against Women” campaign that AI is conducting will prove to be a vehicle that makes it possible to have a closer working relationship.

As a final note, last year we began discussing whether or not Norway should prohibit the buying of sex. And then this prize came, and the radical feminist movement saw it as an argument, which it was not. And suddenly AI was thrown into this debate. So I was really on the verge of tears when Janni and Jesper came with flowers and said, “We are supporting you, and we are so glad that you are going into this debate” — and I think it actually changed the debate to a certain degree. What you also see now within the feminist movement is a much more balanced debate about prostitution. Previously it was more “the prostitutes are the traitors.” But now we are seeing more differentiations within the debate. So it has been changing politics. □



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