

# STOP the WAR on WHORES!

Excerpt from "The War on Whores: The European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour and Migration," by David Henry Sterry

**Y**ou may not know it, but there's a worldwide war on whores. All over the world, President Bush has tied US financial support to his agenda to criminalise both prostitutes and their clients. I found this out recently at the European Conference on Sex Work, Human Rights, Labour and Migration in Brussels.

For years there's been a debate raging between abolitionists who want to make any exchange of sex for money (voluntary or not) illegal, and sex workers who view the willing exchange of sex for money as a work issue, not a moral issue. These "abolitionists," many of whom have never had sex for money, often contend that any exchange of sex for money is slavery. The sex workers, all of whom have exchanged sex for money, are adamant that they should be able to make money in the sex business if that is their choice. And they insist that they should be able to do so in safe, sanitary conditions, with the same rights as any other worker to ply their trade.

Abolitionists have often used the idea of trafficking (the international buying and selling of sex slaves) to cloud the issue of the voluntary exchange of sex for money. Many claim that if sex work is decriminalised, trafficking will flourish. However, the fact is that in America, sex work is illegal, and there is trafficking. In the Netherlands, sex work is legal, and there is trafficking. Furthermore, it is clear that focusing so much energy on criminalising willing customers of the sex business depletes resources that could otherwise be used to fight real sexual slavery.

Traditionally people in the sex business have not had a voice in how they are treated. They have routinely been jailed, deported, beaten and silenced. Academics, social workers, lawmakers and do-gooders have spoken for them. And prostitutes are tired of it. That's one reason this conference was organised: so that sex workers could speak for themselves about the deadly serious issues at the core of the debate about sex for money.

Here's what happened to me at this historic gathering. On Thursday, October 14<sup>th</sup> I arrived, sleep-deprived, at the Mercure Royal Crown Hotel in Brussels, Belgium. Excited, thrilled—yet terrified that I would be shunned and ostracised as an ugly American stupid white male breeder. This is what it's

now like for an American abroad. Immediately upon my arrival, my fears were quelled: I was greeted sweetly and promptly given the task of assembling documents. I was quite pleased to be put to work, as I come from a long line of beasts of burden—and, as an ex-whore, I live to please.

While stuffing manifestos into whore-red folders, I heard my old friend Scarlot Harlot downstairs practising a speech in Russian. Apparently "bitch" is "bitch" all over the world. Why did I travel 6,000 miles to be here? "*Celebrate. Connect. Challenge.*"

That's what the folder said. Challenge the world's perception of sex workers/prostitutes/whores. Discuss attitudes, laws, policies, the right to work safely and to move freely. Connect with my European sex-worker-friendly brothers and sisters. Celebrate good times, come on!



# Tribute to Grisélidis

(Excerpt)

Hello to all, my colleagues, my sisters, in fortune and misfortune.

*"We, the whores, the revolutionaries, the femmes fatales, the dammed, the ones who are desired by those who need us to reach the Nirvana that their morals forbid them. We, the ones you can't do without, the geniuses, the whores, the only honest ones, the prostitutes..."*

These are the words of Grisélidis, the godmother of all of us. I had the honour to be her friend, her sister-in-arms, and I am very proud that I have been asked to do this tribute at this conference.

She has taught me that the real whores are not those who are called like that. She has taught me to look them straight into the eyes: these intolerant people, the tight-assed, and the tight-hearted and to tell them: *"You are nothing; and we, the whores, are EVERYTHING."* Because we are the ones who possess the real power over body and soul, because our compassion for humanity is immense and endless, because your words are only vain and stinking, because your words are only the illustration of your frustration about our knowledge and our beauty. She has taught me not to let them speak in our name, in our place and that recognition will come from awareness.

I love you Grisélidis, you in your whores' paradise. I wish you lots of wine, gypsy music and beautiful ebony-skinned men who will offer you eternal ecstasy. You can finally rest, we will continue the fight.

♥ Sonja Verstappen



↳ continued from p. 17...

## Kiss My A\$\$! Dinner & Party

Sunday night was the party/performance, at a nightclub in Brussels. The place was packed to the rafters with sex workers and allies in all their feathery finery. Wigs, slits, tits, stiletto heels, big hair, short skirts, silk, leather and lace. By the time the show started the atmosphere was electric, like being in a cloud just before a lightning storm.

After two beautiful poems by two beautiful Swiss sex workers about activist warrior Grisélidis Réal, Scarlot Harlot—looking like a cross between Mae West, the Statue of Liberty, and the Madam at a brothel in Heaven—brought the house down with her unique brand of vaudevillian sloganeering: *"Stop the Wars On Whores!" "Outlaw Poverty, Not Prostitutes!" "Keep the Government Out of My Underpants!"*

Solitaire has legs longer than I am, a river of black hair running down her impossibly long back, and huge spotlight eyes that shine on high-beam. When she paraded onto the stage in a tiny purple see-through teddy to the tune of *I Like the Way You Move*, a hot shiver ran through the room. Lean, lithe and lovely, she played the crowd like it was a violin and she was Itzak Perlman in lingerie. And when she bent over and moved her G-string to reveal a butt plug, the stunned pindrop silence—full of gaping mouths, stolen breaths and bugged-out eyes—was priceless. Shocking this crowd took some doing, but Solitaire did it in spades.

I was next, and as I looked out at all those beaming sex workers' faces from all over the world—the rentboys and ladyboys, the whores and the hustlers, the disenfranchised and the reviled, the hated and the desired, the objects of revulsion and lust—I was overcome. All these people had travelled many miles to be here, to try in some way to make the world more fair and humane and safe.



Strange and amazing to say a line, then wait and hear my words in Russian, then French. I had been a little worried that it would make my show too long and too weird. But for me it accentuated how we were doing something global, and yet incredibly personal. In my show I portray a client who is a tantric sex expert. My piece climaxes when she has the mother of all climaxes. I've always said that Orgasm is the ultimate international language, and this proved true on that Sunday night in Brussels. It felt like we all came together in a celebration of sex work and being human.

Gypsy Charms, my new Scottish stripper friend, asked me to play a client getting a lap-dance from her. After the dance I was to yell at her, growling gruffly about how bad her body was. To me this illustrated a subtle part of sex work that I experienced over and over when I was in the business, and which no one had really discussed at the conference: how clients inflict their sexual pain on the sex worker. How as a whore I absorbed so much sexual illness from my clients. As a race, humans seem to suffer so much sexually, and sex workers are a well into which the world dumps its sex misery. In the piece, I was told to reach up and touch her, which is strictly forbidden. When I did it, she reached back and slapped me. The crowd reacted audibly, happy to see an abusive client get some of his own back. I thought of the men standing outside the booths in Amsterdam, drunk and screaming horrible degrading things at the women behind the glass, laughing like sadistic barbarians.

After the show an amazing DJ ripped some crazy mad tunes, with all manner of Afro/Latino/Euro-trashing rhythms thrown into the pot to create a tasty stew. Boys danced with boys. Girls danced with girls. Boys danced with girls. Girls danced with boys. Trannies danced with everybody. It was a slamming jamming euphoric release. A celebration.

## Street Action

So now we had to pile into a bus and go to the street demonstration. If you've ever tried to move 150 sex workers through the European Parliament you know how difficult that can be. Somehow we succeeded. Then suddenly there we were on the steps of the Brussels stock exchange. I thought ruefully of all the bankers who rent us, then revile us.

...continued on p. 20. ↪



PHOTO: Jean-François Poupel

**Marianne Schweizer (.ch) & Claudette (.ch) read "Homage"**



PHOTO: Jean-François Poupel

**Scarlot Harlot (.us) from the United Sluts of America**



PHOTOS: Jean-François Poupel

**LEFT: Camille Cabral (.fr) & RIGHT: "Mistress Zezetta" (.fr)**



↳ continued from p. 19...

We assembled on the steps with the red umbrellas we'd been given. It was a beautiful sight, like a field of blooming poppies with sex worker flowers growing under them. A huge banner read:

*"SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS = HUMAN RIGHTS!"*

Instantly it was a mob scene, as onlookers gawked and gaped, glued to the spectacle of the whistle-blowing whores dancing and chanting: *"Vous Couchez Avec Nous, Vous Votez Contre Nous!"* ("You sleep with us, you vote against us!")

Journalists hungrily buzzed about with notepads, microphones and movie and still cameras, hunting for the nectar of the right angle to make the news.

Suddenly there were sirens, and the police showed up. My first impulse as an American was that they were going to arrest us. Great! I thought, this is the best thing that could possibly happen. I saw us on the front pages of the *London, New York, and Los Angeles Times*; on the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera: 150 Sex Workers Arrested in Brussels!

Alas, sadly, they were only there to keep the peace. After about 45 minutes, we took off through the streets of Brussels, a police car clearing the road for us. It was a joyous celebration, and a challenge to the public: we're here, we're not who you think we are, and we're not going

away. As we moved through the streets of Brussels singing and chanting with our red umbrellas and our banners, we were cheered and waved at by walkers, drivers and passersby. Yet someone later told me that a couple of Belgians commented, *"They should all be killed."*

We passed a group of boys, maybe nine years old, on bicycles. They started cheering and shouting sweetly with boyish enthusiasm, staying with us for quite a while, having a fine

old time. I smiled as I thought that maybe they'd grow up with an image of sex workers as fun, smart and political, instead of seeing them as the uneducated, drug-addicted wretches of society.

During the march, one of the members of our contingent was passing out cards for our organisation. She gave one to an onlooker, who looked at it, then at us, and asked what the card said. Our member translated: *"These are sex workers."* Onlooker scanned the card, looked at us, and asked, *"What's a sex worker?"*

Our member explained, *"People who work in the sex business, like prostitutes and strippers."* Onlooker's eyes went wide: *"I am a stripper and a prostitute. And transsexual. May I join you?"* Our member said we would love to have her. She introduced Onlooker to one of our own transsexual sex workers, and they walked arm in arm through the streets, exchanging life stories.

Yes, of course, there is much to do; the situation is dire. But I, for one, left excited, encouraged and inspired. From the streets of Brussels to the European Parliament, our voices are being heard. □

### **Assembling on the stairs.**

PHOTO: Maj Christensen



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