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Never Again! Surviving Liberalized Prostitution in Germany

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Never Again! Surviving Liberalized Prostitution in Germany

Abstract

This article, co-authored by a six-year survivor of the sex trade industry in Germany (Sandra Norak) and a psychologist and trauma therapist (Ingeborg Kraus), provides perspectives on the difficulty of withstanding the coercion of traffickers and the difficulties of exiting prostitution in a country in which prostitution has been legalized, normalized and made “a job like any other.” This normalization persuades survivors to believe their traffickers that it is a legitimate occupation and encourages them to endure the violence. Liberalization also has prevented the development of needed trauma services to those seeking to exit the sex trade industry.

Keywords

Germany, liberalized, prostitution, sex trade, trauma, legalization, exit prostitution, organized crime, law, psychological exit, loverboy, brothel, escort service, sexual violence

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We want to thank all the people who contributed to make this article available in English and therefore made it possible to reach a wider audience for the enlightenment about the harm of prostitution. Especially Abolition the l'industrie du sexe Canada for the first translation and Donna M. Hughes and Jody Raphael for editing it.

**NEVER AGAIN!
SURVIVING LIBERALIZED PROSTITUTION IN GERMANY**

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ABSTRACT

This article, co-authored by a six-year survivor of the sex trade industry in Germany (Sandra Norak) and a psychologist and trauma therapist (Ingeborg Kraus), provides perspectives on the difficulty of withstanding the coercion of traffickers and the difficulties of exiting prostitution in a country in which prostitution has been legalized, normalized and made “a job like any other.” This normalization persuades survivors to believe their traffickers that it is a legitimate occupation and encourages them to endure the violence. Liberalization also has prevented the development of needed trauma services to those seeking to exit the sex trade industry.

KEYWORDS

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Sometimes, for us the way appears very long, sometimes too long so that we think we will not have enough power and won't manage to go the way until the end. Exit from prostitution, a *milieu* which has mostly destroyed body and soul, is a very long and painful way which sometimes appears to have no end, and on which one encounters obstacles that apparently can't be overcome.

Again and again, we hear or read about dropouts who in their thoughts wrestle with the notion to go into prostitution again, although they consider their experience in prostitution as traumatic and name prostitution as a kind of violence. This behavior is not understood by many outsiders.

When in our society prostitution is spoken about, you will see that the idea is implanted that it is a job like any other, due to the prostitution-liberalizing law in Germany from 2002. However, prostitution leaves deep scars on body and soul. The exit is not comparable with a simple job change. Once caught in the system of prostitution, affected persons will face difficult struggles to leave or be completely unable to leave.

A physical exit from prostitution, the bodily step into real life, can be managed quite easily, presupposing you have the opportunities. However, physical exit does

not automatically mean a psychological exit. Being in prostitution, affected persons experience the deepest abysses of our society: an immeasurable and unimaginable extent of violence, humiliation, lies, and inhumanity. One can flee from this life physically, but psychologically hang in the thick of memories and pain, and often due to their experiences a deep belief that they are worthless, are unable to achieve anything and deserve nothing else. Physical exit is difficult, psychological exit is even more difficult, because it often takes years or even decades, and it involves breaking through pain and trauma. It is the slow distancing from an earlier life full of violence. This psychological exit is extremely important, and it is not about forgetting experiences, but it is about accepting the non-erasable past, to integrate it into life, and to simultaneously break free from the parallel world of prostitution.

For affected persons it is often not immediately obvious how their wounds from prostitution can appear in daily life, that is what makes it additionally difficult to manage the exit. In the following, we want to explain some obstacles on the way into a new life.

However, first a few facts. I (Sandra) became acquainted with him—the trafficker—who was about 40 years old, on the Internet when I was a minor. At the time of year, I had long, continuing problems with my mentally ill mother, a stay in the clinic due to anorexia as well as self-harm behavior (he knew the circumstances). He said he would love me, would be my savior.

When I came home from school, I stationed myself immediately at the PC [computer] and spent a long time in different chatrooms. Sometimes he was online, and I began to write to him. We wrote more and more, sometimes every day, he waited for me online and gave me the feeling to be there for me. I spoke with him more and more about my problems, and he showed support and understanding.

It came to the first real meeting, where he invited me to eat. He was my first love, the first person that I had sexual intercourse with.

Up to this point, prostitution was not mentioned. Talking about prostitution began slowly, where he knew that I emotionally hung on him and he was the only person to whom I related. At the weekend I traveled by train to his city. He began to take me on escort tours when he took a prostituted woman to a party and waited for her and his money in the car, and I should wait with him. Later he took me to a brothel with his friends and wanted me to turn tricks.

When I refused, he began to explain, he had great debts and was stuck in difficulties. I had anxiety of losing him. So, I began to turn tricks. I became a full-time prostituted woman, and broke off school, because I could not lead this double life.

How did this come to pass? At the beginning, the alleged love and at the end prostitution? In many cases, and in mine, the beginning of prostitution was coupled with helping my lover, because he pretended to be in financial need and prostitution was the only way to get money, to save him. He spoke about a common future for us, and said that it all will become better. This strategy which is about targeted searching, recruiting and pushing (young) women into prostitution for the purpose to exploit them sexually by faking/simulating a love relationship at the beginning falls under human trafficking and is called the “loverboy” method.” This form of recruiting for human trafficking is getting more common because it is the

safest way for the trafficker to escape prosecution—he can hide behind the alleged voluntariness of the (young) women that are under his control.

Being in prostitution and enduring countless penetrations by strangers, one needs attitudes that trivialize this violence: that it all was bearable and/or not so bad at all. How do you get to such an attitude?

If someone is abused physically and or psychologically early in childhood, the affected person is convinced by the idea that being mistreated is not so hard, deserved, or normal. In psychological traumatology this is called the offender-influenced way of thinking. It is a survival strategy to stand violence better. If the current situation cannot be endured or changed, affected persons often take the perpetrator's point of view, because if they act like offenders want them to act, chances of survival are higher. "If I do exactly what they tell me, they will probably let me alone, and it will not become so bad." Words like "You are worthless" can turn into "I am worthless" and "You will never achieve it" can turn into "I will never achieve it."

This internalization and taking over the offender's ideas due to self-protection becomes manifest until one is grown-up and it determines daily life, not only in the form of a negative self-image but also in the form of a lack of self-protection and self-care. Someone who had to learn enduring violence early as a survival strategy often won't later be able to protect against it. That is a very important point. One's own needs and especially limits are not recognized, because at an early point of time the victims have adapted to the offenders' demands and simultaneously they have had to experience permanent exceedances of limits.

When, in addition, sexualized violence in the form of prostitution is not named as such in society and in a state, but instead trivialized as a service, those offender-influenced ways of thinking will not be terminated but confirmed. With the legality of buying sex, people in prostitution are taught that the violence that they experience in prostitution would not be real violence because it is legal that they can be sold for sexual objectification and (ab)use. The government signals with its liberal legislation: "Prostitution is not violence, but a normal job." This point of view is taken over by many counseling organizations, too. That is dangerous because it misleads a person to get into prostitution without clarifying to them the immense amount of violence that awaits them there.

When the trafficker pushed me (Sandra) for the first time into a brothel during my recruitment as a young adult, I had a very bad intuition and wanted to escape. I was young, unstable, and didn't know how to hold myself and in which kind of dangerous situation I was. He led me towards prostitution, coerced me, and said I should not be embarrassed; it was all *normal*. I remembered the point of view of our government which considers prostitution as a job and that pimps, as well as brothel owners, appear on talk shows, being called businessmen instead of criminals. I remembered that this *milieu* was mainly described as not so bad at all. Exactly this image of *normality* in the prostitution *milieu* is transmitted with Germany's state legislation (prostitution was liberalized in 2002), and so I could not recognize that I was on the way, sliding into the middle of a criminal milieu full of violence. It was not named as a crime and won't be named as one. However, our state has got a responsibility to be a role model and provider of orientation, especially for young and vulnerable people. If it had told me loudly with a prohibition of buying sex: "Prostitution is violence and a violation of human dignity," the human trafficker would have had it much harder to lead me into prostitution.

However, the sad truth is: our state believes that sexualized violence against women is normal because its liberal legislation on prostitution means nothing else. Moreover, that is what people are guiding themselves with, that's how children grow up, believing that it isn't violence when people in prostitution are penetrated daily and deprived of their dignity and worth.

Sadly, what I take from my time in the milieu is, that in all the years in which I have worked, the majority of the men have seen the suffering and the discomfort of the women, but ignored it and continued the sexual act. Like animals, they have fallen over me and the other women without respect, without attention, without dignity.

I spent time with hundreds of other prostitutes and what I saw and heard was that the wishes of the men became more deviant: oral without a condom belongs today to the standard program, sperm kisses more and more popular.

There were many moments in which I had wishes that the door would have opened and the police would have ended this complete inhumanity. But how? Even if the door was opened, yes, it is legal, the woman was not physically compelled, she even laughs, while she at the same times breaks inside, which is unfortunately not visible to the outside.

I lived for a long time in a brothel with other prostituted women, also some who had no pimp behind them and were doing this "freely." Moreover, believe me, I will never forget these pictures of contempt, force, of brutality. And I ask you: when a woman, pumped with alcohol and often other drugs, in order to bear that, lays lifeless on the bed offering herself, lets herself be forcibly penetrated and lets herself be humiliated because...she is already broken inside, is that something that can be sanctioned in society, or should be sanctioned? Is that compatible with individuals' worth?

However, it is violence, and these traumatic experiences in prostitution often lead to posttraumatic stress disorders whose symptoms might complicate reintegration into a life outside of prostitution, because they exist, but for outsiders, they are often invisible and, due to the fear of being socially rejected, they are often hidden. After experiences in prostitution, diverse situations (not only characteristics of culprits, but also stress, the time of year, sounds, *etc.*) could be triggering and cause fears; this might come along with physical reactions and block entry into a new life as well as assumption of new social contacts. Extreme feelings that were dissociated during the time in prostitution might be aroused by small things in daily life and make connections to new acquaintances insecure, which can build up a vicious circle because it strengthens feelings of being lonely that can only be understood by certain persons from the red-light milieu. That increases the danger that dropouts slip into prostitution again. Frequent symptoms, for example, are panic attacks and dissociative phenomena. In many cases, these symptoms lead to a limitation on the ability to concentrate so that existence becomes torture. Besides trauma, physical illnesses are very common.

A further problem in leaving prostitution is that a life in it isolates you. This isolation is an intended strategy of perpetrators for binding persons more intensively to them. Lonely people are easier to control than people who keep in touch with others. Many people who prostituted themselves are completely lonely when they exit and have to start at zero because they only have contacts in the red-light milieu. Many have gone into prostitution at a young age and therefore couldn't

finish school or learn a job. They come out of prostitution and don't see any prospects for themselves. To catch up on lost time and what was stolen from you personally and professionally in prostitution, it takes several years; besides refurbishment of a painful past, it demands a large amount of patience and a firm belief in yourself-something that was shattered in prostitution experiences.

In prostitution, violence rules, but despite this, many have the feeling that they had at least a place within it. Life outside of it appears strange as if they will never be welcome and accepted in this new world. A formerly prostituted woman who is known to us looked for a job after her exit from prostitution and tried it with honesty. She told her potential employer that she was in prostitution, now looking for an exit. She received the following answer: "My wife will have a problem if you work here and were a prostitute, but if you want, we could meet in private in a hotel tonight. I would pay well." For the woman, this encounter was deeply humiliating. She wanted to fight out of a system of prostitution in which she was objectified and degraded to a commodity. Instead of support, she was affixed with this stamp: "You're worth nothing else than being used sexually." People in prostitution feel the same. When they have such an experience in their phase of exiting, it is probable that they lose hope and fall back into the system. When nobody else wants me, if I am worthless, if I can do nothing else, so the thoughts, they will go back to the old places. For affected persons, it is very difficult to escape this milieu.

One thing is certain: exit from prostitution is extremely difficult, it is a stony way, often characterized by desperate situations and apparent hopelessness. However, re-entry into prostitution is not a helpful step to a way out of misery, but an additional hurdle. Re-entry into prostitution is not a step towards liberation as some suppose and therefore think about going into it again, but instead brings one back to the same condition-complete destruction of body, spirit, and soul-that you once have left exactly because of these reasons.

Re-entry is like a kind of trivialization of heavy traumatization against one's sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-respect. Many important abilities like this have not been developed when entry into prostitution happened very early or got lost in prostitution. Abilities that you have discovered and developed after exit will fade away again with re-entry. It is like pressing a reset button. Re-entry into prostitution is not a temporary solution, and it never progresses.

Nevertheless, *prostitution is sexual violence*; these mechanisms of violence rule. They push affected individuals back into it and lie far from the logic that those not taking part are capable of understanding. When everything is clarified, and one has knowledge about the system and its mechanism, about the violence, its causes and consequences, then insufficient help and lingering injuries can pull the affected person back into prostitution and sabotage the exit. A reproach on a personal level should not be made to individuals who return to prostitution.

However, a return to prostitution should never be publicly presented as a solution. At this point, the abolitionist approach begins, which wants to get people out of a system, even if prostitution in Germany is still called a normal service and the Nordic Model could not become law. Abolitionism knows: a re-entry into prostitution is not a way out, but a continuing violation of borders that destroys a human more and more instead of pushing her forward. It does not heal wounds but rips them open again.

What is important is increased and simpler access to trauma therapy to order to better overcome heavy obstructions after prostitution and the exit. It can help to get to know limits, to acknowledge them and to free oneself from violent relations and/or ways of life. Only the one who understands what happened, can, when she wants, seek solutions and find a way out. Overcoming the consequences of trauma is of enormous importance, but impossible if the action which caused the trauma or with which other traumas are re-enacted are continued.

Sometimes the way of leaving appears so long that you want to surrender, because you think you do not have enough power and will never reach the end of the tunnel, but you should go on for yourself until you have reached the goal.

Also for me (Sandra), the way out of prostitution was a long and difficult one. Just the physical exit and to catch up on school education by studying at university seemed nearly impossible. In 2012, I started catching up on the university entrance diploma when I was still in a brothel. People laughed at me: "You will never achieve it." I was carrying this message around with me for a long time. I had internalized it, but eventually, I started defending against it. I wanted to achieve it. I wanted to leave. I wanted a life.

In 2014 I managed to exit from prostitution and caught up on the university entrance diploma. Today in 2018 I am about to finish my studies. For six years I have been catching up on education that was stolen due to begin in prostitution. I knew: education is the key for getting out of misery. Wanting to leave prostitution behind and finally to leave it means to accept the huge challenge of fighting oneself back into life, something that might make you despair from time to time.

The trauma might be anchored in your body and manifest itself in different ways. After my exit, disorders as a consequence of trauma did not only manifest themselves in the form of panic attacks which made my daily life unbearable due to dyspnea and a feeling of transient loss of consciousness. They also manifested themselves in my musculoskeletal system that became so weak that I could hardly walk. Suffering violence weakens body and soul. Having to suffer violence that isn't officially recognized as such weakens body and soul even more, because you convince yourself, it all couldn't be so bad and expect yourself to stand things that are not to be withstood.

Later I asked myself how I could have been enduring it for six years. Numbness from alcohol helped, and also dissociation of which I was only aware later. Dissociation is a mechanism of the body. Your body separates feelings from your consciousness to enable you to suffer unbearable violence. It took several years until I realized what dissociation is, how it works, and in what way it had helped me. It can manifest itself in different ways: in me, it was the feeling of not really being present, and all senses dampened, like being in cotton wool. I noticed myself and my life as behind a soundproof wall of glass. I was walking through life like through a tunnel. So, one feels fewer soul and body pains-that is the goal. I was permanently in a trance-like state, and it took a long time to let go of this automatically strong protection so that I could finally feel myself and the life around me with full senses again. For a long time, I did not know what was going on with me, what was wrong, and the preventive behavior that resulted from this as well as the social pullback drove me more into isolation.

Today I am another person. Once weakened by the consequences of trauma, today I can climb mountains and have developed an imperturbable self-confidence

so that I know 100% that I can do what is before me and what I have fought so hard for. I enjoy every small detail. Since I have left prostitution, I discovered the world anew. I have become stronger, and nothing can shock me. One thing is clear: I will never forget prostitution, but I have climbed out physically and psychologically. For always!

The prostitution-liberalizing law of 2002 has been considered a failure for several years. Often it is argued that people in prostitution should organize themselves and fight for their rights, but this is difficult or even impossible, because they perish in prostitution-not after years, but immediately. For me, the inhibition threshold to get intimate with the first punter was very high. Feelings like disgust and nausea, shame, grief, and fear made it nearly impossible for me to do it. I soon began screaming and crying. When the act was over, something inside of me got destroyed. I wanted to scream, but I could not do it anymore. I wanted to cry, but I could not do it anymore. My feelings were numbed and killed. The ability to defend and resist gets more and more lost the more punters you have because due to unwanted penetration not only does dissociation rule your body, but your personality gets more and more broken. The act of penetration means a permanent humiliation and degradation as an object of sexual use. You are deprived of human dignity and stop noticing yourself as a human with feelings. This is one of the reasons why many victims of human trafficking remain in prostitution. Their personality, their will, their identity are broken. It is absurd to assume that these victims will resist and fight for their rights. It is the government that has the assignment to protect these victims! That is why it is scandalous that the Green Party, which had initiated the law in 2002, didn't listen to critical voices about prostitution at its Feminist Future Congress September 7-8, 2018 but instead still sticks to its liberal legislation on prostitution.

Leaving prostitution behind is a struggle for oneself against obstructions and self-doubts, against a state that normalizes this violence by legitimizing it instead of criminalizing it. Our society should start to understand that prostitution is violence and the exit from it is very difficult due to these external conditions. Germany should open its arms and doors instead of closing them. The creation of assistance for exiting is enormously important because in Germany we have too few avenues of help.

For those exiting prostitution, it is important to believe in good things, in respectful relations, in love and real friendships, despite all obstructions and difficulties. The key is patience as well as hope and trust in yourself that the exit will be successful, that things will become better and that one will find a permanent exit.

An important point for those exiting is the inner process of the psychological exit. An inner process, a deep conviction, that prostitution because of violence that happens there, can never again be an option. An inner process, that one will never let herself be humiliated, because one is valuable and her worth is inviolable. An inner process, that one never again gives up her self-love, that customers never have the power to injure and traumatize. Germany must finally wake up and punish those who commit violence-the buyers. However, we hope and wish that with this text, that until Germany has understood its duty to protect, those exiting prostitution do not give up, re-entering prostitution. For this reason, this is our message to all women, who have thoughts of re-entering prostitution:

Prostitution: never again!

Editors' Note

It is not *Dignity's* policy to print articles under a pseudonym. In correspondence with Sandra Norak, she explains why it is not possible for her in Germany now to use her real name. Because this explanation provides further important information about conditions within the country for survivors of prostitution, despite the fact that it has been decriminalized, we (Donna M. Hughes and Jody Raphael) thought it important to print it here, with her permission, as an addendum to the article.

Sandra Norak's Comment on the Use of a Pseudonym



I decided to tell my prostitution and human trafficking experience to the public because I wanted to be free and not have to hide anymore. My motivation for this is that no victim of sexual violence should have to hide anymore. At first, I wanted to use my real name. My work doesn't feel whole or authentic with a pseudonym because one important thing is missing—my real identity.

However, after years of sexual violence many survivors have to completely rebuild their lives. They struggle with posttraumatic stress, finding a school and education, and most of them are alone.

In Germany, you cannot fight against the organized system of prostitution (and organized crime) with your real name when you have nothing and when you *are* nothing for most of the people in this society. And unfortunately, the truth is: in Germany, and I think also in a lot of other places, prostituted women are treated as the garbage of society.

After I escaped prostitution I worked very hard to get an education and a university-entrance diploma. I know that education is the only way out of this misery and I wanted to have something in my hands to fight against the system if nobody else is there or supporting me. And I can do this as a lawyer.

After escaping prostitution, I was alone and I can tell you, if I had spoken about my past to someone, I would not be at university now. I made the way to university because after prostitution I was wearing a mask so that nobody could see where I was coming from. Otherwise I would not get internships or jobs. It's sad, but that is the truth. I had no support, like many others in this field do not.

I decided to wait until I have finished my studies before going public so as to not have problems getting my law degree for which I am working very hard. But I was not able to be silent anymore. I am now speaking publicly not with my name but with my face and my story in German media and TV. People know that I am pushing for the Nordic Model—and there are strong groups who are trying to stop the abolitionist movement and the persons involved. The punters don't want to lose their opportunity to buy and abuse the women. The traffickers don't want somebody talking about what happens in Germany, such as how much trafficking exists and what the traffickers' strategies are, and I talk about all these things. They

know that if I have my law degree there is one person more fighting the battle against them.

Even sometimes the police are publicly denying the situation as I have described it, although I have lived and experienced it! After two prostituted women were murdered in one town where I was prostituted, I wrote an article for a newspaper about what happened in the town when I was there. I talked about my experience with prostitution and human trafficking and that it is very common in this town. The press consulted the police and asked what they thought. The police said that they have no problems with human trafficking. I was in a lot of places in and near this town: in flat-rate brothels (where men bought me for € 10 [Euro]), normal brothels, and escort services. However, sometimes people don't believe survivors. Even not the police.

If I would now tell my real name, I would be in danger to not get my law degree or perhaps to get a very bad law degree. Organized crime (and I had a lot to do with these people when I was in prostitution) is everywhere and their hands are everywhere. I am already in danger that my degree might be influenced, but even more so if I would use my real name publicly.

To be able to finish my studies is so important that I decided to keep silent about my real name. Also, the majority of society will not take you seriously until you have achieved something. School education and university education are very important for sexual violence survivors. And as long as we are not living in a society which really respects and helps sexual violence victims I think it is important to first finish school/university education or at least live in a safe environment, and then fight openly and with my real name against the system.

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We want to thank all the people who contributed to make this article available in English and therefore made it possible to reach a wider audience for the enlightenment about the harm of prostitution. Especially *Abolition the l'industrie du sexe Canada* for the first translation and Donna M. Hughes and Jody Raphael for editing it.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sandra Norak (a pseudonym) is 29 years old. She was in prostitution from 2008-2014. Now, she is about to finish law studies in Germany, specializing in European and public international law (especially international criminal law and international protection of human rights). She works to raise awareness about the system of prostitution and different forms of human trafficking like the "loverboy-method." She is also doing prevention work in schools to teach young girls how to identify and protect themselves and friends from "loverboys." She was part of the German TV documentary *Brothel Germany—The Billion-Dollar Business in Prostitution* which was nominated for "Prix Europa" 2018. Her homepage is: <https://mylifeinprostitution.wordpress.com/>

Ingeborg Kraus, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and expert in psychotraumatology. From 1995 -2002, she did humanitarian work in Bosnia and Kosovo, especially working with women victims of sexual violence. She assisted in setting up one of the first shelters for women victims of domestic violence in Kosovo. Since 2011, she has her own counseling practice in Karlsruhe, Germany. In 2013, she co-founded the Stop SexBuying Network in Germany; in 2014, she started the appeal of the German Psychotraumatologists Against Prostitution; and in 2015, she initiated a petition to abolish prostitution in Germany. She

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