

# Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes in Italy: We Demand

Presentation by Carla Corso from the Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute, Pordenone, Italy

Prostitution must be recognised as a profession. Prostitutes are workers and must be recognised as such.

We demand that the rights of prostitutes—our human, labour and civil rights—be put on the same level as the rights of other workers. In particular, civil rights such as the right to protection of personal safety, the right to health-care assistance and the right to a minimum salary should be granted to prostitutes.

Prostitutes—including migrant prostitutes—must be able to work legally all over Europe.

Our governments must ensure working conditions that respect and guarantee prostitutes safety and health. All mandatory medical check-ups must be abolished, as well as mandatory registration by the police and all other discriminatory measures prostitutes must undergo.

One last appeal: The European Union must close all Temporary Detention Centres. Misery must not and cannot be criminalised. Temporary Detention Centres must be closed because they have even fewer guarantees and rights than prisons.

Immigration is not a crime; migrants should not be treated as criminals and be put in prison for having tried to change their life conditions.

What follows is a brief outline of the activities that the Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes ONLUS.<sup>1</sup> has implemented.



The Committee for the Civil Rights of Prostitutes (CDCP) is a non-profit association that was founded by sex workers in 1982. Its main objective is to provide assistance to prostitutes.

The Committee is one of the founding members of TAMPEP International Foundation which was created in 1993. The Committee implemented and promoted the TAMPEP methodology right from the beginning by realising, assisting and monitoring a wide range of multi-disciplinary projects for sex workers in Italy. The Committee also acts as the

interlocutor for political forces and institutions on a local and national level. We have taken part in and organised public awareness campaigns to fight for respect for the dignity and rights of sex workers and against all forms of discrimination.

Among our activities, CDCP carries out street and workplace interventions for prostitutes; gives out health, legal and job placement information to male and female prostitutes; and liaises with other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). We accompany prostitutes to health clinics and social services; we shelter women, and victims of trafficking; we offer cultural mediation. CDCP organises training courses for prostitutes and ex-prostitutes, social service and health clinic operators, male and female cultural mediators and serves as a consultant to NGOs and the public.

*Our message was loud and clear.*

PHOTO: A. Sorfleet



The Committee operates a multi-regional project in the border towns of Trieste, in Northeast Italy and in San Remo, in Northwest Italy.

*Progetto Stella Polare* is a social protection project aimed at encouraging self-determination and giving support to women who wish to escape from severe slavery-like conditions and sexual exploitation. The Stella Polare Project is implemented by CDCP. This programme is financed by the *Dipartimento delle Pari Opportunità* of the Council of Ministers. Its local partners include: *Azienda per i Servizi Sanitari* N° 1 (ASSI), Triestina (local health board in Trieste); the Comune of Trieste; the Comune of Pordenone; the health board of Pordenone; and the Comune of San Remo. CDCP is also a member of the Northeast network of all projects present in the area and makes use of the national helpline against trafficking: 800 290290.

The project operates on different levels through the following activities:

- mobile street units interventions
- assisted repatriation — if requested by the victim — to the country of origin in collaboration with organisations present in the country
- basic information to immigrants in general (women and sex workers) on legal issues
- training on health aspects aimed at preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), increase the use of contraceptive methods and also provide psychological support, accompaniment to local health centres
- seminars, conferences on social integration in order to combat exclusion and social isolation
- reception of exploited women who intend to abandon prostitution by availing themselves of Article 18 of the Legislative Decree N° 286/98 of the Immigration Law. (This programme oversees the re-integration, schooling, professional training, housing and job placement of the women under protection. (The programme comes to an end after 12 months as regulated by the above-mentioned Article 18, when it is supposed the victim has achieved complete emancipation and self-determination.)

Victims of sexual exploitation who decide to make use of the Social Welfare Work Programme and other forms of protection that the Italian law has provided (Art. 18, DL 286/98) present different



PHOTO: A. Sorfleet

**The banner was carried by a contingent of sex workers.**

problems, due in part to individual characteristics and personal experiences, and also because of factors such as ethnic origins and culture (as is the case of our Nigerian target population). These factors may lead to a critical situation at the moment of insertion into the Social Welfare Work Programme which renders the legalisation procedure very difficult.

Thanks to the experience of TAMPEP International and to the work that Stella Polare and other projects run by the CDCP, it has been possible to achieve a greater sensitivity when communicating with migrant sex workers, and to develop suitable intervention methodologies that could be applied in these cases.

## Prostitution Scene

CDCP research indicates that the majority of sex workers present in Italian cities and regions are migrants. Few Italian sex workers are present on the streets, and about half of them also work indoors. The largest group of migrant sex workers are Nigerians. In some cities they represent 60 per cent of the sex workers on the street. Eastern European sex workers from Rumania have recently replaced the once-massive presence of Albanians.

In certain areas 10-15 per cent are transgenders, and more than 25 per cent in others.

Overall, 50,000 sex workers are estimated to be present in Italy. The following table (*see p. 60*) gives estimates of the proportion of migrant sex workers by ethnic origin. (Male prostitution has not been included.)

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Pia Cove (with bullhorn) at Red Umbrellas March in Venice, 2001. (<http://www.parasite-pogacar.si>)

## The Red Umbrella

The red umbrella was chosen as a symbol of sex workers' struggle for equality and rights during the street protest that ended the Brussels conference.

The parade of red umbrellas carried by marching protesters created a strikingly beautiful visual interruption of the daily bustle in Brussels' public streets.

The red umbrella was first used as symbol by sex workers in Venice, Italy during the 49<sup>th</sup> International Venice Biennale, June 6-8, 2001. The Red Umbrellas March began at the "Padiglione delle Prostitute" (Prostitute Pavilion) set up in a public space at Giardini, part of the famous international art biennial. Using megaphones, the Red Umbrella Marchers called attention to the struggle for sex workers' civil rights as they paraded across Venice through the city centre, before winding up at the A+A Gallery. Sites important to Venice's social history of sex work were identified along the march—noted were such famous Venetian courtesans as Veronica Franco and Gaspara Stampa, as well as present-day sex-work locations.

Participating activists, individuals, organisations and groups came from Australia, Cambodia, Germany, Italy, Taiwan, Thailand and the USA to take part in this World Congress of Sex Workers, held in conjunction with the Venice Biennale. Using street theatre, performance, video documentaries, exhibitions and media appearances, the Congress presented principles for sex workers' self-help, organisation, education and protection, and emphasized issues facing sex workers in Asia's huge, booming sex industry.

The World Congress of Sex Workers was organised in part by the *Comitato per i Diritti Civili delle Prostitute* from Pordenone, one of Italy's leading organisations for the protection of sex workers' rights.

The ICRSE has adopted the red umbrella as its symbol to honour all sex workers who have dared to resist discrimination and oppression. □



ILLUSTRATION: Petra Timmermans

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### Ethnic Origin of Migrant Sex Workers\*

African . . . . .	50%
Eastern European . . . . .	35%
Latin American . . . . .	13%
Asian . . . . .	2%

\* CDCP estimates

## The Merlin Law on Prostitution

The Merlin Law of 1958 guaranteed the freedom of women prostitutes from state-sponsored brothels and obligatory health and police controls. However, we are dealing with a law that contains abolitionist tendencies. As a result, it punishes aiding and abetting prostitution, luring clients (a crime that was reduced in 1999 to an infraction for which you can be fined); and it excludes the possibility of organising prostitution in closed surroundings (public locales, clubs, and apartments).

In practice, for many years court verdicts have applied the Merlin Law in a very repressive manner. Therefore, prostitution is mostly carried out on the streets. For foreigners there are no specific prohibitions against the practice of prostitution nor is there a law that affirms the right to practice prostitution. The situation of immigrant women who practice prostitution is much worse than that of Italian women because the foreign women are often illegal immigrants. □

## Footnote

1. The acronym, "ONLUS" stands for "*Organizzazione Non Lucrativa di Utilità Sociale*," a fiscal category for associations, foundations and cooperative societies.

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