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In the 80s she became famous for her self-defence courses against rapists. She was one of the most prominent figures of radical feminism until she questioned whether all pornography was misogynous. Today, thirteen years after the first polemical article, Petra Östergren is writing a thesis on prostitution law.



LUM met Petra Östergren in her doctoral student's office in the Division of Social Anthropology. She spends one week per month here and says that she loves the intellectual discussions and the support she gets from her colleagues.

"After 25 years as a freelancer it is fantastic to have a workplace, colleagues and a lunch room", she says.

She started the freelance work in the 80s when for several years she gave courses in self-defence and was involved with the National Organisation for Women's Shelters in Sweden, Roks, and the rest of the radical feminist movement.

"Little by little I started to question part of what Roks represented, in particular their position on pornography and prostitution", says Petra Östergren.

The questioning became mutual. Among other things, the radical feminists were critical of the fact that Petra Östergren also trained men in self-defence. There was an outcry and a complete rift after a polemical article in Bang magazine in which she wondered whether all pornography really was misogynous.

Since then Petra Östergren has tried to understand why these issues provoke such strong feelings. Her premise is that both prostitution and pornography are many-faceted phenomena. Sometimes, she believes, prostitution is violent and degrading and sometimes it isn't, and the same is true of pornography.

"The question is why society and feminists are unable to manage this tension, either intellectually or in policies – whereas we manage it when dealing with other complex phenomena", she says.

Petra Östergren thinks that the Swedish prostitution law, which criminalises the purchaser of sex and therefore forces all prostitution to take place in the shadows, increases the stigmatisation of those who sell sex. Through interviews with sex workers, she has come to the conclusion that many believe the marginalisation and society's view of them is harder to bear than the actual encounter with the client. Moreover, criminalisation can make life as a prostitute more dangerous and makes it more difficult for social services to provide help to those who need it.

Another of Petra Östergren's hobby-horses regarding the prostitution law deals with the fact that the sex workers themselves did not take part in the work on drawing it up. She points out that such a thing would hardly be accepted if it concerned another marginalised group. Views on women play a part in this.

"There is a clear understanding in society of what women may or may not do with their sexuality", she says. "There is a razor-sharp dividing line between women who have sex in a loving relationship and those who do it for financial or other reasons."
You are critical of the way the prostitution law looks today. How do you think it should look instead?

"It is up to the legislators and the sex workers, but I think it is important to get rid of prejudices. Otherwise there is a risk that we get a new law that also hurts those it sets out to protect."

Since Petra Östergren was appointed as a doctoral student in Social Anthropology, she has carried out fieldwork in New Zealand, where the prostitution law is based on a human rights and health perspective – and the sex workers themselves had their say in the legislation. (See fact box)

"I was impressed with what I saw there", says Petra Östergren. "New Zealand has had this law since 2003 and most people, among both the police and the sex workers, are satisfied. Neither prostitution nor violence has increased and the police treat the sex workers with respect."

In her thesis work, Petra Östergren wants to use the prostitution laws in New Zealand and Sweden to make the differences in the political cultures of the two countries clear. She finds it interesting that two countries that both consider themselves progressive in their legislation on prostitution have arrived at two such different solutions. The New Zealand law is, according to her, pragmatic; its aim is to protect those that choose to prostitute themselves while working to reduce prostitution. She considers the Swedish law more utopian:

"In Sweden we want to create an ideal society, sometimes at the expense of marginalised groups", says Petra Östergren, illustrating what she means by quoting the central argument of one of the many participants in the prostitution law debate: it's true, the prostitution law makes things worse for those who sell sex, but it is to a good end – increased equality.

"I think it is interesting to consider what this line of reasoning says about us", she continues. "It is a similar argument to the one behind the stubborn resistance to

setting up a needle exchange programme.”

Now the debate about the prostitution law has gained momentum insofar as the alliance government is investing large sums of money in the fight against prostitution. Moreover there are efforts to "export" the law to other countries. And Petra Östergren observes that the subject of prostitution still provokes the same strong feelings as it did when she first tackled the issue just over ten years ago. Even in the university environment. Like just the other day when she was to present her fieldwork to a master's class.

"Just bringing up the prostitution law without taking a position on the issue myself, which I didn't, provoked incredibly strong feelings. Some thought that I was 'for' prostitution which made them angry, while others were of the opinion that to research the issue at all was a way of reinforcing the Swedish state's control over women's bodies", says Petra Östergren. She recounts how she was disappointed by the fact that she never got to discuss the actual matter at hand, which was her fieldwork. Now she sees that this response was in itself valuable to her research.

How does it feel to go from being a well-known social debater to a researcher? Is there any risk that your research might be considered less objective and impartial?

"I have thought about this a lot and come to the conclusion that I am in fact not alone in being a researcher with pronounced political views", says Petra Östergren. "The difference is perhaps that my opinions do not lie within the prevailing hegemony of views and that I may therefore be perceived as more controversial. I think the strength must lie in the arguments themselves and in not being hypocritical about where one stands."

FACT BOX:

Petra Östergren has written the following books, among others:

- Porr, horor och feminister (Pornography, prostitutes and feminism)
- F-ordet. Mot en ny feminism (The F word: towards a new feminism)
- Att komma till ro med det allra värsta (Coming to terms with the very worst)
- Slå tillbaka! Handbok i självförsvar (Hit back! A manual of self-defence)
- In the autumn she will publish her first work of fiction, a trilogy of novels set in Tornedalen.

New Zealand prostitution law:

Sex workers have the right to refuse to have sex with a client, without having to say why and without any obligation to reimburse the client. Forcing someone to have sex can lead to a 14-year prison sentence. The client or brothel owner may not demand sex without a condom, which can lead to heavy fines. The only form of regulation that exists for independent sex workers is that health information should be displayed and that a licence is required to run a brothel.

Alongside this, work is being done to make it easier for those who want to stop selling sex: they can get social security contributions from day one. Those who want to start working as prostitutes also get information from people with experience of their own with the aim of getting them to think carefully about their decision.

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