

# Blaming disease on female sex workers

## A LONG HISTORY

Tiphaine Besnard

Sex work has been part of my personal and intellectual life for nearly five years. As a Master's student I studied 19th-century medical and psychiatric ideas about female prostitutes in France, and a year ago I started doing sociological interviews for a doctorate. My knowledge of sex work also comes from my own experience as a sex worker for the past three years and my activism with STRASS, the French sex-worker union founded in 2009.

From my reading I realised that medical and psychiatric notions have been central to how people think about female sex workers, both in the 19th century and today. Medical ideas about the dangers of sexual contagion in public spaces in France were already abundant when AIDS appeared. The model of prevention we hear about now is similar to the one that linked moral concepts of sexuality with health in the 19th century.

### 19th-Century Knowledge

At that time, medical knowledge was very homogeneous, all coming from educated men of the privileged classes. These doctors' medical principles actually reveal their fantasies and stereotypes about women, the working classes and sexuality. They warned men, especially bourgeois men who read medical treatises (formal published texts), against the dangers of extramarital sex, commercial sex and sex outside their own social class. These medical men believed in a supposedly obvious link between immorality and disease, both mental and physical. They presented female prostitutes as a threat to the population while ignoring the very real dangers these women were exposed to.



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Medical Inspection at the Rue des Moulins Brothel, 1894/ 在一个妓院进行医疗检查, 1894年*

During the last five years I have been disturbed by the fact that in France most people still take for granted that sex work is a high-risk activity in terms of HIV. After studying 19th-century medical history on French prostitution, I realised that ideas about syphilis were like those about HIV today.

### Pseudo-scientific Ideas

In spite of numerous studies that have proven that sex work and sex workers do not *cause* AIDS, the public mind is still filled with pseudo-scientific ideas about dangerous prostitutes'

bodies. The public is still afraid of moral contagion from paid sex and still links immorality and disease. It is common, for instance, to hear, even from the medical community, that the more sexual partners you have (in particular, strangers and people who pay), the more you are likely to get sick. The assumption seems to be that monogamous sexual relationships and fidelity are the safest sex practices.

For those who believe homosexuality is a sin, the fact that the first cases of HIV were detected in homosexuals made the disease seem like a

punishment for immorality. Stereotypes about homosexuals revived old beliefs equating disease and immorality, and the link between HIV infection and 'abnormal' sexual practices was reinforced in the public mind. Even if no epidemiological studies in France have demonstrated the prevalence of HIV in sex workers, pseudo-scientific notions about the risk of contamination by prostitutes began to circulate in the late 1980s. It is striking also that the risk of contagion has always been presented as a threat to men, especially in relation to female street sex workers, who seem to symbolise sickness, depravity and danger.

### How People Talk about Disease

My doctoral work studies the social representation of sex work in contemporary Paris and Montreal, Quebec, which means the system of values and ideas people express when they talk about it. I am just at the beginning of this work, and most of my reading has been legal and academic, especially French. But the fieldwork I am doing now is in Montreal. I started by interviewing ten people in Montreal whom I found through advertisements I placed on Internet classified websites, asking for anyone interested in helping me study social representations of sexuality.

I advertised in order to meet people at random, and, although I did not specify that my special interest was prostitution, two of the men who agreed to talk to me had been clients of sex workers. Both of these mentioned *les rumeurs* (rumours) about female street prostitutes, who were supposed to be *moins protégées* (less protected) and *dégoûtantes* (disgusting), while escorts were supposed to be *vraiment surveillées* (really watched and controlled) by owners of clubs or pimps and therefore 'cleaner'.

When I arrived in Montreal in May 2012, the *Conseil du statut de la femme du Québec* (the Women's Council of Quebec) had just published its 2012 report on prostitution, which said it is necessary to stop considering prostitutes as criminals but also to abolish the sex industry. Since the provincial government uses the Conseil's reports to conduct policy, I wanted to interview two women from the Conseil, the director and the author of the report. I wanted to know why they spend so much time trying to abolish sex work, why they believe in abolitionism and where they got their knowledge about sex work. Both of them said that female

street sex workers are *vraies épaves* (true wrecks), victims of violence and disease. The other six persons I interviewed (one trans person, three men and two women) were very diverse in their lifestyles and ideas about sexuality, but all of them had negative perceptions of street sex workers that came from the media – from television in particular.

### Sex-worker Activism

Protecting the public from syphilis and AIDS has always been the excuse for forbidding sex work in both France and Quebec. I was a spokeswoman for STRASS in 2011 when the media were reporting about proposals to reopen brothels in France, where they have been forbidden since 1946. I tried to explain to journalists how sex workers are discriminated against by the traditional obligations of brothel work (mandatory testing for diseases and registration as prostitutes), but all that appeared much less important to them than the idea of Public Health. They are willing to sacrifice a whole community for the supposed benefit of other members of the population, just as they were in the 19th century.

In France and Quebec, as in most places in the world, sex workers actively promote HIV prevention by requiring clients to use condoms and knowing more about safe-sex practices than the general population. Many sex-worker organisations, such as Stella (a group founded in 1995 in Montreal) are run by current or former sex workers. These organizations say *We are not the problem. We are part of the solution.*

Since the 19th century, moral stereotypes about prostitution have remained much the same. The new abolitionism, an international movement influential in both France and Canada, sees AIDS as one of the multiple bad consequences of prostitution. Improving the working and health conditions of sex workers is considered less important than making the sex industry disappear. These politics tend to worsen working conditions for sex workers and to put women in danger of contagion, rather than protecting them.

### About the author

Tiphaine Besnard's book *Les Prostituées à la Salpêtrière*, published in 2010 by l'Harmattan, describes medical and psychiatric ideas about female prostitutes in Paris at the end of the 19th century.

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# 将疾病传播于工作者的归性者

## 一段漫长的历史

Tiphaine Besnard

过去五年来，性工作一直是我个人生活和精神生活的一部分。作为一名硕士研究生，我研究19世纪法国的医学界和精神界对性工作者的看法。一年前，我开始准备博士论文，进行了一些社会学采访。而我自己对于性工作的认知，则来自于我自己在过去的三年中从事性工作的经验，以及参与STRASS的活动。STRASS是法国的一个性工作者工会，成立于2009年。

从我的阅读中，我发现无论是在19世纪还是今天，人们如何看待性工作者主要受医学和精神学概念的影响。艾滋病出现的时候，在法国已经出现了很多关于性途径传播疾病风险的医学看法。我们今天所听到的预防的模式，和19世纪把性和健康联系在一起道德观念很类似。

### 19世纪的认知

当时，人们掌握的医学知识大多来自受教育的特权阶级，所以这些信息都是非常类似的。医生们所实践的医疗准则实际上体现了他们对女性、工人阶级和性的想像和刻板印象。他们提醒男性们，特别是那些能够阅读医学论文（正式出版物）的中产阶级男性，通奸、商业性行为和在在本社会阶层之外的性是危险的，是不被允许的。这些医生相信，精神上 and 身体上

的不道德，与疾病之间存在这明确的联系。他们认为妓女是对人民的威胁，同时忽略这些女性可能面临的真正危险。

在法国，大多数人仍然认为性工作就是艾滋病高风险的行为。在过去的五年中，这使我深受困扰。在研究了法国19世纪关于卖淫的医学史之后，我意识到，当时对梅毒的看法和我们今天对艾滋病的看法其实是相似的。

## 伪科学的思想

尽管很多研究已经证明，性工作和性工作者并不会导致艾滋病，但公众仍然被伪科学的认知所蒙蔽，认为妓女的身体很危险。公众仍然害怕商业性服务传播疾病，把不道德和疾病联系在一起。例如，你经常会从一般人，有时甚至是医生那里听说，你有越多的性伴侣（特别是陌生人或是需要付钱买性的人），那你就越可能生病。这个假设认为，一夫一妻和忠诚的性关系是最安全的性行为。

第一例艾滋病在同性恋人群中发现的事实，让那些认为同性恋是一种罪过的人，更加相信艾滋病是对不道德行为的惩罚。对同性恋的刻板印象，使得这种古老的、认为不道德行为导致疾病的旧有观念重新复苏。因而感染艾滋病和“不正常”性行为的关系，在公众的观念中得到了加强。尽管在法国并没有任何流行病学的研究证明性工作者的高艾滋病风险，但20世

纪80年代后期关于卖淫传播疾病的伪科学概念传播开来。令人惊讶的是，人们只讨论疾病传播对男性产生的威胁，而完全忽略对女性工作者的影响。这些女性似乎象征着疾病、堕落和危险。

## 人们如何谈论疾病

我的博士后研究是关于当代巴黎、蒙特利尔和魁北克性工作的社会代表性。社会代表性指的是人们在谈论性工作时所意味着的价值和理念。我刚开始这项研究，我阅读的大部分是法律和学术文献，而且主要是法语的文献。但我现在所开展的田野调查在蒙特利尔。我在分类网站上发布广告，招募那些愿意帮助我研究性行为的社会代表性的人。

我通过发布广告来招募受访者，因为我希望我的采访对象是随机的。尽管我并没有具体说明我的兴趣是研究卖淫，但有两个受访者曾是性工作者的客人。这两人在谈到街头妓女的时候显示出他们有自己的认识，更少听信谣言。人们通常认为街头性工作者是缺乏保护的和恶心的，而伴游由于被俱乐部的业主或者皮条客监视和控制着，所以会比街头妓女会更“干净”一些。

当我于2012年5月到达蒙特利尔时，魁北克的妇女委员会刚刚发布了2012年的卖淫调查报告。该报告称我们有必要考虑不要再将妓女当作罪犯来对待，但同时也

要求取消性产业。由于省级政府根据委员会的报告来制定政策，因此我希望采访委员会的两名女性工作人员，即主任及该报告的作者。我想知道她们为什么花费那么多时间来试图取消性行业，为什么她们相信废除主义，以及她们从哪里获得关于性工作的知识。她们说，街头性工作者是沦落的女性，暴力和疾病的受害者。我采访了另外6个人（一名跨性别人士，三名男性和两名女性），他们自己本身的生活方式以及关于性行为的看法都很不同。但一致的是，他们都对街头性工作者持负面的看法。他们对性工作的认知主要来源于媒体，特别是电视。

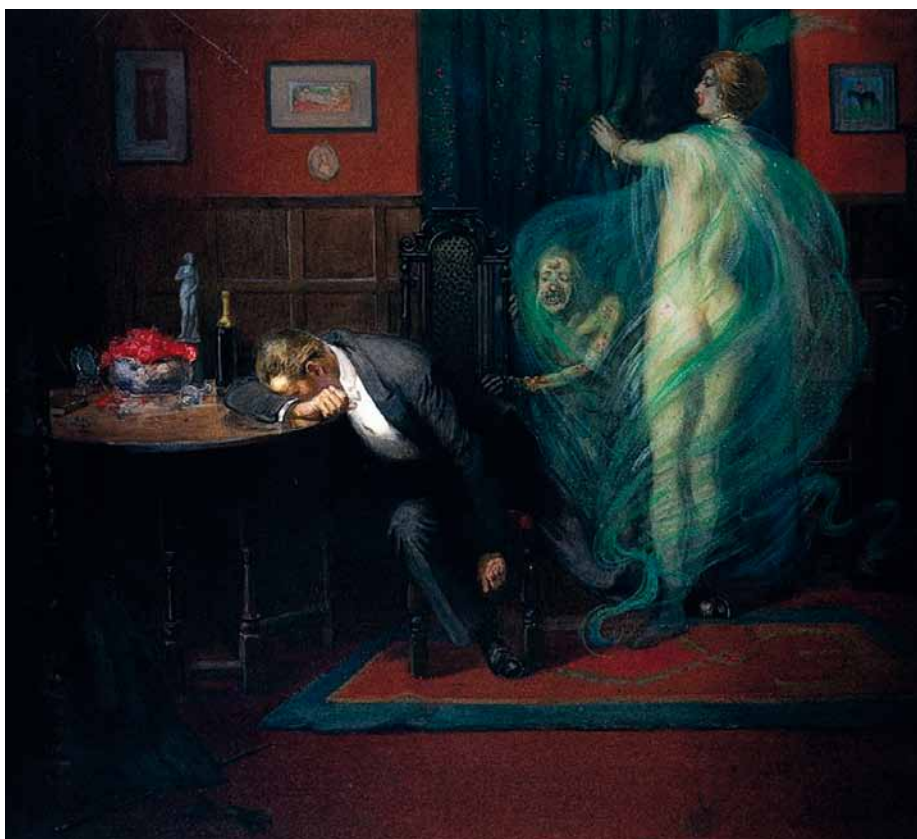
## 性工作者运动

在法国和魁北克，人们以保护公众免于艾滋病和梅毒为由禁止性工作。在法国，妓院自1946年起就被禁止。2011年，媒体开始报道在法国重开妓院的提案。我从那时起开始担任STRASS的发言人。我试图向记者解释性工作者是如何被传统的妓院管理所歧视（强制检测和登记在册）。但跟公共卫生的立场相比，妓女的权利无足轻重。这些女性愿意为人们臆想的公共利益而牺牲整个社区，就像她们在19世纪时一样。

和世界大部分地方一样，法国和魁北克的性工作者比一般的民众更积极地促进艾滋病预防。他们要求客人使用安全套，向客人传播性安全知识。很多性工作者组织，如斯特拉（1995年在蒙特利尔成立的组织）由正在或曾经从事性工作的人运行。这些组织呼吁：我们不是问题的根源，我们是解决问题的人。

自19世纪以来，人们关于卖淫的道德认知和刻板印象仍然大致相同。新的废除主义是一个世界性的运动，在法国和加拿大都很有影响力。该运动认为艾滋病是卖淫造成的众多不良后果之一。与取消性行业相比，改善性工作者的工作和健康状况显得无足轻重。这往往会使得性工作者的工作条件更加恶化，使他们暴露在疾病感染的风险中，而不是使他们获得保护。

Richard Tennant Cooper, Syphilis, 1912, Wellcome Library/CC/梅毒, 1912年



## 关于作者

Tiphaine Besnard的新书《妇女救济院》2010年由l'Harmattan出版社出版。该书描述了19世纪末期巴黎医学和精神病学对妓女群体的认知。

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