

Israel's law against slavery

A revolutionary law recognizes prostitution as violence against women, a significant achievement for a country under permanent siege.

by Phyllis Chesler



Bravo, Kudos, every kind of Kol Ha Kavod, to all those Knesset members, on both the right and the left, especially former Justice Minister, Ayelet Shaked, and Gilad Erdan, then-Minister of Internal Security (now Israel's new Ambassador to the United Nations), who worked on the [face criminal charges](#).

Dr. Anat Gur is a pioneering Israeli therapist, the founder of the Women's Wisdom Center, a professor at Bar Ilan, and an author (*Women Abandoned: Women in Prostitution*, [long-time Dr. Melissa Farley](#), namely that the complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorders among prostitutes are more severe than the Stress experienced by many combat veterans of more recognized wars. Dr. Gur told me: "While exploited in prostitution, they are completely disassociated and disconnected and cannot afford to

tell what is really happening to them."

Poignantly, Dr. Gur described the rehabilitation process, which included working in "simple jobs at minimum wage. But I remember how when each of them got the first poor salary they said it was the first time they could enjoy the money because it was unpolluted money, money not obtained through humiliation and torture and violence. The money they made in prostitution was wasted on drugs and harmful things and they did not really earn or support their children with prostitution."

Dr. Gur hopes to begin operating more "government funded apartments" for mothers and children by this fall. In her opinion, this law has achieved two things: "both a significant budget allocation for the rehabilitation of people, and an accompanying budget to criminalize the clients of prostitution."

Such legislation is not an insignificant achievement for a small country under permanent siege.

This is not the first time that I've been called upon to write about the Israeli heroes who were and still are fighting violence against women in Israel.

In the summer of 2003, Leah Grumpeter and Nissan Ben-Ami, of the Israeli Awareness Center, contacted me about one artist's very personal boycott against Israelis.

For a decade, Grumpeter and Ben-Ami had been fighting legislation that would have legalized and normalized prostitution. They had organized a conference on this hotly debated subject and wanted to show a particular film, one that exposed the nature of prostitution and what it does to girls and women.

However, according to Grumpeter and Ben-Ami, the Swedish filmmaker, Lukas Moodysson, had "personally bought back the

distribution rights for Israel” and would not allow its showing at their upcoming conference about such trafficking in Israel.

The hit film, *Lilya 4-ever*, is a relentless and lyrical work about female sexual slavery. Professor Donna Hughes, who had testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee about global trafficking, compared the film to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Moodysson’s film depicts the abandonment and betrayal of Lilya, a teenage Russian girl, by her mother and maternal aunt, leaving her vulnerable to a sweet-talking pimp who traffics her into Hell and death in Sweden. The film had been shown in many countries where trafficking, brothels, and other human rights abuses flourished. But he would not show the film, not even once, not even to assist a conference that wanted to expose the extreme danger and harms of prostitution.

What could I do? Well, I published a piece about the anti-Semitic prejudices of great artists and about the nature of boycotts. Within 24 hours, Moodyson was all over my email confronting me. Unbeknownst to me, a Swedish journalist Louise Eek, had also just written about the matter. Within 48 hours Moodyson had relented and allowed the conference to show his film, once, non-commercially, at the conference.

Amazed but humbled, I once again understood that, sometimes, the pen is as mighty as the sword.

First published in