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## SELLING SEX TO THE DISABLED

Written by Christian Diemer

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*Imagine a scantily dressed woman gently approaching you, her sensitive hands caressing every centimetre of your body in provocative slowness; deep, glowing eyes set on you, willing lips open in heated expectation while she starts satisfying you... Then imagine that you are disabled. The woman in front of you is a sexual assistant.*

Europe is a progressive region for disabled people. In many countries, people are used to disabled parking spaces and disabled toilets. You find the wheelchair symbol on public transport and can go to a supermarket in a wheelchair and find a disabled-accessible entrance. However, if a person wants to enjoy sex but cannot help oneself to actually have it, can one expect to have a "disabled-accessible sex life?"

Disabled-accessible sex, such is the daily business of Catharina König, an educated sexual assistant working in Bochum, Germany. She is a "sensuous woman with a lot of experience in life and love," according to her website, whose somewhat vague title "touch - massage - encounter" is unfolded in a number of esoteric bullet points: "mutual embracing of bodies", "immersing in new sensuous spaces of experience", and a "journey of feeling, sensing and discovering and giving you enjoyment." But one statement is very definite: "sexual intercourse, oral touching and kissing are not included in my offer. Pornographic fantasies are not catered for." One hour costs €100, plus travelling expenses. Her services address people with disabilities or limitations due to old age or disease.



Photo: Coyau (CC BY-SA-3.0)

Shouldn't all people have equal rights to a sex life?

buy erotic DVDs or appropriate sex toys and how to use them. Of course, I also show them how to masturbate."

That is how sexual assistant Michelle Gut describes her daily work. In 2003, she was inspired by a newspaper article by the Swiss pro infirmis to become a trainee for erotic massages for handicapped persons. "Since I had already massaged disabled clients before and knew about their problems concerning sexuality and having a partner, I found this idea great."

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"Sometimes I have to explain to my clients how to wash their intimate zones if they are physically able to do so. Of course, I also show them how to masturbate."

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There is strong demand for sexual assistants, yet the topic remains highly controversial. When pro infirmis launched an educational programme for sexual assistants, a major drop in donations forced them to withdraw. Many sexual assistants can talk about their profession only to close friends, and even that can be risky. If they are lucky, one of the sentences most heard is: "I could never do that," perhaps along with: "I never knew such a thing existed." The reactions reach from ignorance to disgust, from respect to scorn. Why is that? What reservations do people have?

### THE EQUALITY-HYPOCRISY PROBLEM

*A first possible argument: disabled people are not full-value human beings and therefore have no sexual identity.*

At first glance this argument seems not to deserve serious consideration. It is a part of the way a civilised society sees itself, that at least to a certain extent the disadvantaged parts of it can rely on particular support and integration, especially when their disadvantage is no fault of their own and is beyond of their influence. In theory, nobody would argue in earnest that handicapped or disabled people are not equal human beings.

When it comes to practice in everyday life, however, being taken as a "full-value human being" proves not to be so natural as it may sound – especially when real circumstances, due to severe restrictions, are far from being "full-value." A society should beware the hypocrisy of putting the case for a paradigm of universal human dignity and equality without being ready to accept the far-reaching consequences of this idea. Whoever says all men and women are equal (which is obviously a "should"-statement, a declaration of intention, not a description of a status quo) must accept that all men and women can equally have and live their sexual identity (or at least should be empowered to do so as far as possible). The reality is far from that. People like sexual assistants take the noble ideals verbatim to close the gap and equalise the unequal access to sex between disabled and non-disabled people!

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### PROSTITUTION - A REASSESSMENT

*Another hostile perspective on disabled sex could take umbrage at the close line between sexual assistance and prostitution.*

From a legal perspective, the erotic massage provided by a sexual assistant is a sexual activity, and as it is paid for, it clearly classes as a form of prostitution. But what is so bad about prostitution? From the perspective of romantic love, one can argue that sex should be the embodiment of true and trusting love and thus cannot be practised among strangers or as a paid service. Yet this is by no means an ontological truth; in fact it is a social compromise in the struggle to balance centrifugal forces of stability and promiscuity. In most European societies the compromise points in a direction where an ideals of sex as the culmination of an exclusive romantic love coexist with the ubiquitous availability of sex as a force for self-affirmation, quality of life, and satisfaction.

And sexual assistance generally is more comprehensive and varied than prostitution. Some disabled people cannot even simply enjoy erotic massages due to strong medication or injuries, explains Michelle Gutt. In this case, the sexual assistant's job fulfils their need for relaxation, physical contact, caressing and hugging. On her website, Catharina König points out how important a good understanding with her client is, "to feel and sense what this person needs here and now." Not to even mention the entire field of passive sexual assistance, which has more to do with consultancy and humanitarian aid than with anything obscene. "If I look at my work as a whole," Michelle Gut sums up, "I think that there is a lot more than just a 'service' in what I offer. I accompany my clients for a while, I know them by their real name and address, in the majority of cases I perceive a development and my work has a certain learning effect and, of course, the way I gain my clients is through institutions, psychiatrists or analysts. All these points differ from normal prostitution."



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Can disabled people expect an accessible sex life?

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The erotic massage provided by a sexual assistant is a sexual activity, and as it is paid for, it clearly classes as a form of prostitution. But what is so bad about prostitution?

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Finding a "short, momentous joy in paid arms" may be an extremely ambivalent feeling also for the clients. Klaus Birnstiel, a disabled cultural historian and writer suffering from "unspecific muscular dystrophy," speaks from experience. "The emptiness left by bought sex cannot be described. Anyone who has once looked into the strangely gauged eyes of fairly well-paid callgirls, who has seen himself confronted with his own complexes, feelings of blame, the barely suppressable impulse to somehow and immediately apologise, knows what I am talking about." On the other hand, even if paid sex cannot quench the excessive desire for physical presence, Birnstein himself finds, "as long as certain standards (safe, sane, consensual) are maintained, it is hardly possible to understand what is so condemnable about prostitution after all."

### ADDING DISABILITY AS A PARAMETER

If it is not prostitution that is bad, what is bad about prostitution with disabled people as the customers? Things become delicate when it comes to the sexual autonomy of mentally disabled persons. There are convincing arguments that a child's state of development, its physical power deficit and its hierarchical inferiority in relation to an adult make it impossible for it to act sexually in a self determined way. Therefore paedophile sex is subject to radical taboos and reprehension. When it comes to such mentally disabled persons whose intellectual level is described as being close to a child's, some of the same worries can apply to the legitimacy of sexual assistance. "It is in people's minds that a disabled person is some 'creature' at a stage of childhood, in other words some 'holy' creature who likes to be petted, but with no adult sexual life," as Michelle Gut puts it.

Such an assumption may be sadly right in some cases, but naive and ignorant in many others. It is indispensable to differentiate what "a child's level of development" means. If it means that a person is disabled in a way that the psyche is similar to a child's, it is likely that there is no sexual desire to be satisfied, and no sexual assistant would approach such a person. However, if the mental state is impaired in such a way that certain intellectual functions cannot be carried out as they could by an adult but just as they could be carried out by a child, but the person's psychology is one of an adult apart from that, proven by the existence of sexual desire, things look different.

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"As long as certain standards (safe, sane, consensual) are maintained, it is hardly possible to understand what is so condemnable about prostitution after all."

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Klaus Birnstiel has his own explanation for why it is so difficult for society to face the phenomenon of disabled sex. In times when a serious academic discipline deals with issues of disabled life in society ('disability studies'), there should be plenty of understanding for the fact that the desire for sexual experience exists independently of physical ability or disability. If modern sociology explains sexual identities as not being bound to physical criteria such as (natural) gender, they are not reserved for those who are physically "whole." "If all manliness is only performance of manliness, there is no reason to consider a male performer in the wheelchair less convincing than a man standing with both feet on the ground."

### THE FAIRYTALE OF SEX THAT IS NOT UGLY

So much for the theory. In practice, according to Birnstein: "pure fiction," an "ideal world of social education workers [...] begotten in American seminar rooms and reaching its fruition on the ground of red and green European political correctness." In reality the inadequacy of society's notions of sexuality is rooted precisely in the fact that it accepts physicality only as an effect of discursive communicating and role-constructing. Whilst it seemingly unbinds sex from the body, in reality words fail a society "fascinated more and more by its hygienic autosuggestions" when it is actually required to deal with the physical reality of disabled sex. "A woman suffering from multiple sclerosis at an advanced stage on the dancefloor, a paraplegic in the club: rare images, and even more rarely

do the images turn into physical reality – and activity. For the desire for sexual presence crashes against the limits of a sexuality that has been completely discursivated, that prefers sex ideally void of any body at all: sex that is not dirty, sex that doesn't hurt, sex that never misfires, sex that never steps on someone's toes, and sex that is not ugly." Klaus Birnstiel's search for ways out is far from illusory. "Maybe someone seeks and finds love and by that also the sex. Nowhere it is written that what works out for others cannot work out for disabled. But still, disabled people are perhaps the largest group of the sexually suppressed." Ways out thus consist of "individual fiddling around, blame, shame, repression of memories, trying out, experimenting, testing. And also: sex for money, moments of presence for a few bank notes."

Scratching on the surface of the discussion, it becomes evident what a complex field opens up between the axioms of equality and disability, respect and ridicule, empathy and obduracy, selflessness and taboolessness, compassion and perversion. We know so little about the individual lives and loves of disabled people. It is time to start thinking about them.

And while we do that: it's good for disabled people that they don't have to wait for us. It's good that they can have sex. At least to a certain extent, just as they want.

Sources and links to the organisations:

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