



Tolerating Prostitution? EEA Public Policy Considerations

By Julia Doxat-Purser, May 2009.

With thanks to CARE, Beyond the Streets, International Christian Alliance on Prostitution and the Coalition against Trafficking in Women.

Is prostitution the oldest profession and an unavoidable fact of life? Is it a well-paid job for people with few choices? Is it enough to seek to tackle sexual trafficking but ignore prostitution? Is prostitution really a problem?

To answer those questions some understanding of “prostitutes” and the lives they lead is essential.

Exploitation of vulnerability

- In Calgary, Canada, 86% of interviewed prostituted women had started working **under the age of 18**. (*“Strolling away”* McIntyre 2002, Department of Justice).
- In San Francisco, 57% of 130 interviewees had been **sexually abused as children** (*“Prostitution, Violence against women, and post-traumatic stress disorder”* Farley & Barkan 1998).
- In Portland, Oregon, **85% of interviewees had been victims of incest as girls, 90% had been physically abused**. (*“Prostitution is cruelty and abuse to women and children”* Hunter 1993)
- In Hull, Great Britain, all prostituted children interviewed took **illegal drugs**. 62% of adult street workers said drugs were the reason why they had entered prostitution, 69% said it was why they stayed, and 77% started taking drugs as children. (*“The commercial sex industry in Hull”* Hull Lighthouse Project 2004).
- 72% of Hull’s interviewees had suffered **violence** from adults. 21% had suffered **violence as children, 27% sexual abuse as children**. (*“The commercial sex industry in Hull”* Hull Lighthouse Project 2004).
- 46% of respondents in the Hull study had spent time **in local authority care as children**. 40% had **no educational qualifications** (*“The commercial sex industry in Hull”* Hull Lighthouse Project 2004).
- See the UK’s Coalition for the Removal of Pimping (CROP) for the impact of **“boyfriends” charming vulnerable girls** and slowly taking control of them so that the girls become prostituted and unable to exit. www.crop1.org.uk

A few individuals involved in prostitution are genuinely content with their job and feel in control of their situation. However, laws should be designed to protect and help the majority of prostituted people. A high proportion are vulnerable individuals who have faced or are facing

physical, sexual or emotional abuse, drug or alcohol abuse, homelessness, debt or poverty. Many first worked in prostitution as minors and most had limited or no choice in becoming involved in prostitution.

It is extremely common for a prostituted female to be groomed by a “boyfriend” who then acts as a pimp. Sometimes, prostituted people may say they are OK: but society should look at the power relationship between vulnerable individuals and the pimps and clients. The situation of many people in prostitution is analogous to that of abused wives who deny the abuse and do not wish to leave their abusing husbands. They are afraid, do not believe there is a way out and/or do not have the strength to pursue that way out.

The most common argument for legalising or ignoring prostitution is that it allows poor people to earn a good income. But drug dealing and burglary would also provide a good income. Neither is legal because society understands that harmful activities should be banned.

Danger

Prostitution is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world. The risks of physical assault, sexual violence and verbal abuse are extremely high. The medical risks – for the prostituted person, for the client and for the client’s other sexual partners are also high.

- Of 475 individuals interviewed in 5 countries, **73% had been physically assaulted, 62% raped.** (*Prostitution in five countries: violence and post traumatic stress disorder* Farley et al (1998) *Feminism & Psychology* 8:4.).
- In Canada, the **death rate of prostituted women is 40 times higher** than normal. (*Canadian Commission Special Committee on Pornography & Prostitution in Canada (Ottawa: Department of Justice 1985).*)
- In Spain, the number of prostituted women who are **HIV positive is 10 times higher** than for the rest of the population. (*UNAIDS 2008 “Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic”*)
- Prostituted women are far more likely to suffer from **cervical cancer, chronic hepatitis, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder** and other serious conditions. (*“Bad for the body, bad for the heart”* Farley 2004).

The impact on wider society

Prostitution affects those living in “red light” districts. It affects the health and wellbeing of the families of both prostituted individuals and clients. Since prostitution is closely linked to a chaotic lifestyle, illegal drugs, human trafficking, corruption and organised crime, it puts society at risk and costs a huge amount to police. While helping someone to exit prostitution and recover is expensive, an individual currently working in prostitution is also often a financial burden to society – medical, housing and social work costs include the State caring for the children of people in prostitution and costs related to policing and imprisonment (often not for prostitution directly, but for drugs, burglary and assault).

- In Hull, Great Britain, 31% of prostituted people interviewed had **health problems**, the most common being violence related. 77% of adults in prostitution had **criminal convictions**, only 1 of which was for soliciting. 69% had spent time in **prison**. 65% of all interviewees wanted to exit prostitution. Reasons stated for not doing so were money, drugs and housing issues. (*“The commercial sex industry in Hull”* Hull Lighthouse Project 2004).

- Frequently, prostituted people have **dysfunctional sexual relationships** with their own partners. **Sexually Transmitted Diseases** easily spread to partners, clients and their partners. (*“Bad for the body, bad for the heart”* Farley 2004).

Harmful gender attitudes

Since there is an imbalance of power between the prostituted person and the client, and since most prostituted people are female and most clients are men, prostitution perpetuates unhelpful attitudes towards women. Where laws and the media are seen to tolerate prostitution, more people accept the idea that women exist, at least in part, to satisfy the sexual needs of men.

- Nevada is the only US state where prostitution is legal. In 2006, Nevada’s **rape rate** was 42.7 per 100 000 of population. The US average was 30.0. Las Vegas had a rate rape of 46.3, Los Angeles 21.6 (*“Uniform Crime Report”* 2006 FBI).
- In Sweden, where it is illegal to purchase sexual services, 80% of the Swedish population supports the law, thanks to a public education campaign revealing evidence about clients, prostituted people and their controllers. (*“Ten reasons for not legalising prostitution”* 2003 Raymond). During the 2006 World Cup, researchers asked male football supporters their opinion on buying sex. No Swede said that prostitution was acceptable. (*“Tackling the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking”*, 2008 Rachel Davies, CARE)

Prostitution and human trafficking

There is a strong link between prostitution and human trafficking because prostitution is a lucrative industry that makes trafficking worth the risk. Most trafficking victims in Europe work in the sex industry. Some trafficking victims may deny that they are victims but one must bear in mind their vulnerability. They may be afraid, traumatised, dependent on drugs or ashamed, knowing that, if they get sent home, their families will disown them – or traffic them again.

- The United Nations Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings estimates that between 1 and 4 million women and children are trafficked every year, mainly for the sex industry. The International Organisation on Migration estimates that **half a million are trafficked into the European sex industry every year**. (*“The International Debate regarding Prostitution and trafficking in women”* Ekberg 2003)
- A study in the Netherlands concluded that **80% of prostituted women working in brothels were trafficked**. (*“The Relationship between organised crime and trafficking in Aliens”* The Budapest Group 1999).

Legalisation of Prostitution as an answer?

Where prostitution has been legalised, statistics on prostitution, trafficking and crime have increased, not decreased. Legalisation does not lead to most prostituted individuals and brothels registering, following health and safety rules etc: most victims’ lives are too chaotic, and too many of their controllers are too busy maximising their profits.

- In **Australia**, prostitution was legalised in some states in the 1980s. Since then, **human trafficking has tripled**. In Victoria, it is estimated there are 400 illegal brothels and only 100 legal ones. It is estimated that trafficked women earn their controllers \$1 million per week. (*“International Debate regarding prostitution and trafficking in women”* Ekberg 2006).

- In the Netherlands in 2001, prostitution accounted for 5% of the economy, a **25% increase** since before legalisation. Amsterdam's ChildRight NGO estimates the number of **children in prostitution tripled** between 1996 and 2001. (*"Ten reasons for not legalising prostitution"* Raymond 2003).
- In Sweden, where buying the services of a prostituted person is illegal, the percentage of men purchasing anyone for **prostitution has decreased** from 13.6% in 1996 to 8% in 2008. (Nordic Institute for Gender Studies, October 2008.)

Conclusion

The exploitation of human beings is always wrong. The victims of human trafficking are exploited human beings. They deserve support so that they can rebuild their lives. The evidence shows that prostitution in general also exploits. Very few prostituted people are in control of their careers and lives. Instead, most suffer deprivation, violence and health problems, unable to escape from the control of pimps or a desperate need for money, with no alternatives. They may claim to be fine but that is usually because of their vulnerability. Legalizing prostitution makes the situation worse – the evidence shows that more people end up being prostituted both legally and illegally.

The European Evangelical Alliance calls on governments to investigate the reality of the lives and backgrounds of people working in prostitution, not just asking simplistic questions, nor listening to the articulate spokespeople who represent a tiny minority. We call on governments to look at the evidence for what happens (to the prostituted and to wider society) when prostitution is legalized. We call on governments to have compassion for all who are exploited. We are confident that, as they do this, politicians will eschew the legalization of prostitution as an option and will stop pretending that prostitution does not matter. We urge politicians to reconsider laws and policies on prostitution to help the victims of prostitution and to punish clients and controllers.

Bibliography

- "Tackling the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking", Rachel Davies, CARE 2008.
 "Ten reasons for not legalising prostitution" Janice Raymond 2003
 "The International Debate regarding Prostitution and trafficking in women: refuting the arguments"" 2003 Gunilla Ekberg
 "The commercial sex industry in Hull" Hull Lighthouse Project 2004
 "Strolling away" McIntyre 2002, Department of Justice
 "Prostitution, Violence against women, and post-traumatic stress disorder" M Farley & H Barkan 1998
 "Prostitution is cruelty and abuse to women and children" Susan Hunter 1993
 "Prostitution in five countries: violence and post traumatic stress disorder" M Farley et al 1998 *Feminism & Psychology* 8:4.
 "Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic" UNAIDS 2008
 "Bad for the body, bad for the heart" M Farley 2004
 "The Relationship between organised crime and trafficking in Aliens" The Budapest Group 1999
 "Uniform Crime Report" FBI 2006