



## **Prostitution: A Problem of Equality, Dignity and Integrity**

There is much argument and debate in society about the issue of prostitution. Gunilla Ekberg, co-executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women states that “in order to successfully find solutions to the problem of prostitution, it is necessary to think about and discuss among ourselves what kind of society we wish to live in.”

Before this discussion, however, we need to take a step back. The first question that needs to be addressed is whether we as a society see prostitution as a problem. Do we see prostitution as an inevitable, inescapable and necessary profession - a profession that has always existed as the ‘oldest profession in the world’? Or do we acknowledge that prostitution is a violation of internationally recognised human rights: equality, dignity and integrity?

*Is prostitution a problem?*

### **A problem for equality**

It is widely recognised that violence against women is antithetical to the establishment of gender equality, and that one of the most severe and devastating practices of gender-based violence is the commercial exploitation of women and girls, which includes prostitution. The United States Department of State determines that few activities are as brutal and damaging to people as prostitution. Field research in nine countries concluded that 60-75% of women in prostitution were raped, 70-95% were physically assaulted, and 68% met the criteria for post traumatic stress disorder, in the same range as treatment-seeking combat veterans and victims of state-organised torture.<sup>[i]</sup>

### **A problem for dignity**

The legitimisation and normalisation of the sex industry has a profound, negative impact on the human rights and dignity of all women. In Australia, the practice of prostitution has legitimised allocating a class of women to be accessed by men for their sexual use, if monetary exchange takes place. The practices that men pay to carry out on women in prostitution are those that would be illegal if carried out without such monetary exchange. The buyer’s economic power means that he determines how the sexual act will be played out. There is no requirement for respectful interaction or ethical treatment of the woman. The result is often physical and psychological trauma - prostituted women experience feelings of numbness, shock, fear, loss of control, nightmares, depression, anger, desensitization, shame and guilt.<sup>[ii]</sup>

### **A problem for integrity**

A study published in 2003 found that 89 % of women in prostitution want to escape.[iii] Yet, the government offers no assistance or retraining programs to enable the high percentage of women who wish to exit the industry to do so. In 1994, the Victorian Liberal Government stated that a function of the Prostitution Control Board should be to assist organisations involved in helping prostitutes leave prostitution and to disseminate information about the dangers of prostitution. Despite this clear responsibility to sponsor exit programs, no such programs were created.[iv]

The prostitution industry takes advantage of the fact that vulnerability remains the prime reason why women 'choose' prostitution. A survey of prostitutes in Queensland found that 90% of women working in legal brothels entered the industry because they 'needed the money'.[v] These women's circumstances are often exacerbated by the fact that women in prostitution have a statistically significant higher incidence of mental illness, substance addiction, or histories of sexual abuse than the general population.[vi] So it appears that for so many women wishing to escape, prostitution is an inescapable profession.

### **An inevitable and necessary profession?**

A pro-prostitution argument states "just as the war on drugs has been an abysmal failure, the war on prostitution has merely led to a giant loss of tax dollars and police time. Where there are willing buyers and sellers, a market will exist, and no amount of vice police or moral lecturing will change that."

So then shall we acknowledge that prostitution is a problem, but it is inevitable? The answer to this question is a resounding, NO!

The country of Sweden has a long-standing commitment to gender equality. They see prostitution as a gender-specific crime and a serious barrier to gender equality in all societies. One of the cornerstones of the Swedish policy against prostitution is the focus on the root cause, the recognition that without men's demand for and use of women for sexual exploitation, prostitution industries would not be able to flourish and expand.[vii]

In short, if there are no willing buyers, a market will not exist.

The Swedish Penal Code on Sexual Crimes deems that "a person who promotes or improperly financially exploits the casual sexual relations for payment of another person shall be sentenced for *procuring* to imprisonment for at most four years." [viii] Since the Act came into force, there has been a dramatic drop in the number of individuals in street prostitution according to information provided by the police, NGOs and social service agencies. The Swedish criminalisation has also meant that the number of men who buy sexual services has fallen drastically, along with the recruitment of women and girls into prostitution.

## **What society do you wish to live in?**

If we as a society deem that prostitution is a problem – a violation of equality, dignity and integrity – and that it is not an inevitable profession, we can ask ourselves: what kind of society do we wish to live in? A society that privileges male desire over women’s rights and freedoms, or a society that firmly rejects the idea that women and girls can be purchased as commodities for sexual use. A society that takes advantage of the poor and vulnerable, or a society that gives women and girls genuine choice and freedom from exploitation. A society that legitimises inequality, and promotes a lack of dignity and respect, or a society that respects and values women and girls.

## **What society do you wish to live in?**

Written by: Tahlia Perry – Policy Officer, Women’s Forum Australia

---

[i] United States Department of State (2004)

[ii] Sullivan (2008), p. 321.

[iii] Farley, M et al (2003) ‘Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder’, *Journal of Trauma of Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 3/4: 33-74.

[iv] Sullivan, M (2008), p. 163

[v] Woodward, C et al.(2004) ‘Selling Sex in Queensland 2003: A study of prostitution in Queensland’, Prostitution Licensing Authority, pg. 31.

[vi] Woodward, C et al. (2004) tables 13 and 15.

[vii] Ekberg (2004)

[viii] Swedish Penal Code, online: <http://www.sweden.gov.se>, (Law 1998:393)