

Legalising prostitution legalises a fantasy – that sex does not involve the self

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Opinion: 'Why is it that if someone buys a vote from a councillor, it is seen as corruption, but if someone buys the use of someone's body, it is somehow liberation?'

If a wife discovers that her husband is buying the "services" of a woman working in prostitution, the sense of betrayal is immense. Why is that?

There are questions that are central to the debate about prostitution. Are there some things that should not be sold, even if a person is willing to sell them? And if you buy consent, does that destroy the meaning of consent?

To look at the first question in a different way: is the buying of sex closer to buying a vote for planning permission than it is to buying a service? Are there some things that it is wrong to buy?

Why is it that if someone buys a vote from a councillor, it is seen as corruption, but if someone buys the use of someone's body, it is somehow liberation?

One narrative sees prostitution merely as work. Whether I choose to wait on tables, or sell sex, it is all the sale of a service. To see prostitution in any other way is to be moralistic, and prudish.

What people choose to do with their own bodies is their own business, and to suggest otherwise is to be paternalistic and entirely out of touch with modern reality. The only taboos are situations where there is force involved, or people are underage, or being exploited.

Writer and activist Kajsa Ekis Ekman is a 34-year-old Swede who tackles this narrative head-on. She says that talk of selling sex makes it seem as if sex were a noun, or an object, that somehow can be sold independently of the self.

It's as if sex were something that "a person can carry around, hand over to somebody else or leave under the doormat if the recipient isn't home".

She talks about how people working in prostitution claim that what is for sale is not the "self". "This is how the idea of prostitution is formulated today: a self that sells her own body."

Ekman writes: "Her body has miraculously wrenched free, and stepped into the marketplace, becoming one of many commodities for sale, while her self remains in command, holding the reins, directing sales from a distance and raking in the profits."

Sexual abuse

Separating the self from the body, strangely enough, is what happens in sexual abuse. Survivors describe leaving their body, going somewhere else in their heads, observing as though it were happening to someone else.

There is one further step. Sex becomes something separate from both self and body. Everywhere from academic journals, to the comments on Irish Times articles, it is patiently explained that the woman or man is not selling his or her body, but only sexual services.

One such commentator who claims to work in prostitution says that of course she is not selling her body, because it is not as if she is selling her organs. After the transaction is over, her body is hers to do with as she

wishes again.

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/legalising-prostitution-legalises-a-fantasy-that-sex-does-not-involve-the-self-1.2001623>