

The Evidence About Prostitution That The New York Times Ignored

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On May 5, Emily Bazelon, staff writer for The New York Times, published an article—“Should Prostitution be a Crime”—that had been months in the making. I know this because Bazelon interviewed me for it during an hour-long phone call and an exchange of more than 30 emails.

What strikes me now is her reaction when I mentioned that the women in my movement often have to deal with journalists who come to the issue of prostitution with their biases intact and their objectivity fragmented.

“I am not biased,” she snapped.

“I am not suggesting you are,” I replied. It occurred to me, however, that she probably had a reason for being defensive, and, sure as night follows day, it turned out she did.

Bazelon's mischaracterization of the issue of prostitution, in my opinion, was confirmed and reaffirmed in her article in ways too numerous to document here. Her piece has had to be corrected three times (including her contention that Dutch prostitution is confined to Amsterdam, when it is, as any European could tell you, countrywide.) U.S. psychologist and academic Melissa Farley, who was quoted in Bazelon's article, has filed a demand for correction of Bazelon's misquote of Farley; as of this writing (June 1, 2016), the New York Times has refused to correct it.

Bazelon also stated that there had been no reported cases of trafficking in New Zealand, somehow managing to miss that on April 14, 2015, Naengnoi Sriphet was sentenced to 27 months in prison by Auckland District Court for recruiting women from Thailand to work in a “massage parlour” in Auckland.

Bazelon's fact-checker contacted me to ask whether it would be fair to say that I believed Amnesty International had taken its pro-decriminalization stance from pimps and sex-traffickers. I responded that it would not be fair to say so without qualifying that statement, and I reminded her of what I'd told Bazelon several times already: that Amnesty International had taken their cues from the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, then co-chaired by Alejandra Gil, who has since been convicted and is serving a 15-year sentence in a Mexican prison for sex trafficking.

Bazelon ignored my conversation with her fact-checker and attributed to me a one-line fragment of what I'd said, making no mention of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, Gil or her sex-trafficking conviction.

Bazelon then invited Amnesty to respond to me without ever fully disclosing what it was in fact responding to.

Bazon also drew from an anonymous letter to repeat unfounded allegations that the organization Apne Aap, a front-line service provider in India, was responsible for the physical assault of Indian women and girls. Of all the misrepresented pieces of information in her article, this was surely among the most egregious. What responsible reporter repeats allegations from a letter that's signed by nobody? Apne Aap has sought a correction related to these erroneous comments in The New York Times.

Another issue is Bazon's characterization of Sonagachi, the Indian city of Kolkata's notorious red-light zone, as housing "high-end" brothels." I have walked the streets of Sonagachi and interviewed women in the brothels there. The area is the biggest red-light zone in all Asia, comprising dozens of interconnecting streets and lanes. It is home to thousands of prostituted women and girls who are forced to exist in frankly despicable conditions. Heavily painted children, all of them female, stand in clusters on the corners, waiting to be bought and used by grown men.

I will never forget how they watched me with a disturbing mix of wariness and vacancy in their big, dark, kohl-rimmed eyes, or the psychological wound I felt knowing that I had often looked back at people in just that same way. My own eyes had been the blue, Irish version of theirs in my early adolescence when I was waiting to be bought in the red-light zones of Dublin. I felt pain and shame, knowing what my gaze caused these girls to feel. As they were feeling that hurt that is very particular to public degradation, I was reliving its memory.

There is a reason I refuse to visit zoos. I know what it's like to be the exhibit. That is what Sonagachi is: an open-air human zoo where the exhibits are female and the patrons are male, and the "entertainment" goes way beyond looking. It is a cesspit and a hellhole, and to refer to any aspect of it as "high-end" is risible and contemptible.

One of the most striking things about Bazon's account, however, was not what she reported. It was what she did not report. I had put her in touch with Sabrina Valisce, a former New Zealand pro-decriminalisation lobbyist. Valisce spent over 20 years, on and off, in New Zealand prostitution and as a volunteer with the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective, where she advocated for the decriminalization model before it passed into law. She then learned, in the most intimate and brutal way, the folly of Amnesty's call to decriminalize "all aspects" of the sex trade. Valisce now campaigns for the Nordic Model of criminalizing pimps and johns, decriminalizing prostituted persons and offering real, viable exit services so that women can start exercising some of the "choice" liberal feminism keeps telling us about.

New Zealand is the only country in the world that has implemented the full decriminalization model championed by Amnesty International, and Valisce has lived it firsthand. Below is the word-for-word evidence, given to Emily Bazon and subsequently forwarded to me by Sabrina Valisce, that was not printed by The New York Times:

"I worked pre- and post-law reform. The Prostitution Reform Bill passed into law to become The Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) in 2003. The good part of it was that the threat of a criminal record was removed. This would happen under The Nordic Model also. I volunteered at the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective (NZPC), so I was

[able to compare our decriminalization] goal ... to the results. I, and others who were agitating for decriminalization in New Zealand, we always wanted the power to be placed firmly in the hands of the prostituted person/sex worker. Decriminalization didn't do that. The power went to the brothel owners, escort agency owners and johns. Immediately following the PRA, the pimps became legitimate businessmen. They introduced "All-Inclusive." An "All-Inclusive" is a single fee paid by the john to the brothel/escort agency via the receptionist. This means that the prostituted person/sex worker has no power of negotiation. It also means that the pimp decides her earnings (most are women). The pimps gained the power to decide what a "service" would be paid and how much of that belonged to them. They also gained the power to withhold the woman's earnings or even deny any existence of those earnings. Prior to law reform we negotiated our own money and decided our own services.

In NZ, prostituted persons are considered Independent Contractors; yet in practice women are, in fact, employees without any benefits of being employees. They are told when shifts start and finish, what the rates are, what to wear, and what to do. Some places even have a minimum amount of shifts per/week. There can be any number of fees and fines; shift fee, advertising fees (without receipts I might add), late fines, room fines, presentation fines, drivers fees for out-calls, fines for being sick and missing a shift and even laundry fees. All brothels and agencies say they are drug-free. I've yet to see one where this is true. I could get any drug I wanted on any day of the year in every place I ever worked.

Decriminalization also saw a 400% increase in "service providers" / prostituted persons. This wasn't solely in response to increased demand. It was also in response to the pushing of the image of sex-work as empowering, luxurious and glamorous, through TV shows like "Secret Diary of a Call-girl." Brothel owners and escort agency owners also increased the amount of 'their girls' on shift. Where once it had been 4-8 [girls], it was suddenly 15-28 per night shift. This was fuelled by the johns wanting a lot of choice. Johns wanted the cheapest service, with the most extras, with the most amount of girls to choose from: the younger and newer, the better. So the pimps drove down the prices to get their patronage. This, of course, had a roll-on effect of lowering prices on the streets and in private sole contractors. It also saw girls competing by offering more and more to get the jobs.

The PRA was meant to make it safer and enforce safe sex practices. In reality, it's done the opposite. "Passionate" is code for kissing, including deep tongue kissing. Prior to the PRA this was an absolute taboo in the trade. No one did it. After the PRA, nearly everyone does, despite the huge risk of cold sores, which is herpes simplex. I saw, for the first time, oral sex being performed without barriers. The code for this is NBJ, which stands for Natural Blow Job. CBJ is the code for Covered. We had no terms for these things before [decriminalization] because we considered it a betrayal of the sisterhood. Safe sex had been rigidly internally policed. All that has gone by the wayside since high competition and lowered rates. Girls are also now expected to let men cum as many times as they can within the booked time. It was never that way before. They paid once and received one service.

Porn has changed the trade dramatically. More johns expect a kind of violence to be acceptable. I'm not talking about punching and beating, though that can and does happen now, just as it always has. I'm talking more about gagging, throttling, spanking, and hard pounding. The rise of gonzo porn has normalized sexual violence. Under the Nordic Model, prostituted persons / sex workers would command far more power to draw boundaries because johns could be criminalized with a phone call. Under the circumstances in NZ right now, prostituted persons /sex workers are putting up with it because they desperately need the money.

So, I repeat, the power went to the pimps and johns despite that never being the goal. I respect and adore the people I worked with at NZPC because I know [that] they, like me, wanted everyone in the sex trade to have legal protections, power of conditions and negotiation, and a way to be as safe as possible. It's been very hard to admit we failed, but I feel morally obligated to do so. I still want the original goal and I believe the Nordic Model offers the best chance of making that happen."

It is frankly disturbing that Valisce's testimony was left out of an article that included so many voices calling for exactly the legislation she has experienced as disastrous. It is vital that her voice is heard now, when Amnesty International has just told the world that New Zealand-style prostitution laws, which decriminalize pimps, brothel owners and johns, should be rolled out across the globe.

Valisce, of course, will be an enormous inconvenience to Amnesty and others who are committed to the pretence that decriminalizing human rights violations against women is some kind of positive forward step. Some people, though, will listen to her, and when they do, it will be no thanks to The New York Times.

In private conversation with me, Valisce said that because of the "seemingly endless fines and fees" set by pimps, together with the 50 percent cut they took, it was not uncommon for her to be used by her first john of the day for free. She described the situation as "debt bondage rape." She also said:

"In one brothel, I witnessed Thai women who barely spoke English, lived on premises, were kept separate, and never left the building. We were told they were "visiting sex workers." I didn't want to believe it was trafficking, but on some level I knew. Over a decade later while reading a book that described trafficked Thai girls in great detail, I had flashback memories of this. I contacted the author and gave the name of the brothel owner, the one I had worked for. The author contacted the woman whose story it was, and asked for the name of the brothel and who owned it. It was the same pimps in a different brothel. This was no coincidence.

I dedicated over two decades of my life to law reform for the sole purpose of placing power into the hands of people in prostitution. I saw the travesty of pimps and johns taking that power for themselves and using it against us. I believed it was against the spirit of the law and we'd fix it. The more I looked into fixing the problems, the more the Nordic Model provided the solutions, because it disempowers those who would abuse us sexually and financially. It's not people's opinions that are stealing incomes and lowering charges, or beating, raping, and

killing people in prostitution. It is pimps and johns. The way to protect people in prostitution is to recognize who the real criminals are, which the Nordic Model does."

It is to be hoped, going forward, that institutions of influence will pay attention to voices of experience from within these regimes. Sabrina Valisce fought long and hard for what she believed to be right when she campaigned to pass New Zealand's Prostitution Reform Act. She was subsequently violated and abused within the same system she fought for. It took courage for her to publicly admit she was mistaken. Now that she is speaking out about it, we owe it to her—and to women around the world—to listen.

Rachel Moran was prostituted for seven years in Dublin and other Irish cities, beginning when she was 15. She extricated herself from prostitution at the age of 22, and completed a degree in journalism from Dublin City University. She has been involved in the political push for the Nordic Model in Ireland since 2011 and has spoken at numerous international locations, including the European Parliament, United Nations Plaza and Harvard University. She works with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Equality Now, Turn Off the Red Light campaign, Donor Direct Action, the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution and the European Women's Lobby. She is the founding member of SPACE International (Survivors of Prostitution-Abuse Calling for Enlightenment) and author of the best-selling memoir, "Paid For: My Journey Through Prostitution."

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