

NOT FOR SALE

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“Women like being prostituted.” That was the message suggested by the person I was speaking to, and it took me by surprise. In all my years of helping women survive and recover from the sex trade, I have never met a woman who chose or enjoyed selling herself. Far from it. The women I met—my friends—told me story after story of abuse, exploitation and long-term suffering. All of them wanted out but didn't know how to escape. And I didn't know how to help them, either.

Prostitution is an oppression that's been around a long time. And the complex realities of the women who face its evil are intense. Physical, emotional, spiritual and sexual abuses are the makings of a prison. Even when the prison door is open, it is extremely difficult for women to step out to freedom.

I talked to a woman who spent 25 years in various forms of sexual exploitation. She said it “killed her soul.” That's a deep wound. Why would people suggest that women who are caught in such an abusive and damaging trap actually like it? Why would women go on the news and say they enjoy selling their bodies when the statistics concerning prostitution are so glaringly different?

In a study of 854 people currently or recently involved in prostitution from nine different countries including Canada, 63 percent had been raped; 89 percent wanted to escape, but did not have other options for survival; and 68 percent met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. Hardly a strong case, statistically, for liberation.

What would motivate a society to suggest that the buying and selling of women's bodies is an acceptable practice, even though we know how damaging this is to our society, relationships and personhood? These questions are worth thinking through. Last December, the Supreme Court struck down Canada's prostitution laws. Canada has one year to decide and establish a new legal framework for how it is going to deal with women caught in prostitution. It is important for Canadians to be informed of possible options, so here's a breakdown:

1) Legalize Prostitution

Some think introducing a legalized framework for people caught in the trap of buying and selling human beings will make things “better” for them. But by “better,” they don't mean it will be good, just that they will be “safer.” Proponents of this theory suggest that legalizing indoor prostitution is safer because women can call the police for assistance and panic buttons in brothel rooms will reduce the risk of violence. It's a theory. But that's where it ends. Every country that has chosen to legalize the sex industry has suffered from an increase in illegal prostitution, and human trafficking has flourished.

The Trafficking in Persons Report (June 2007) notes: “Prostitution and related activities—including pimping and patronizing or maintaining brothels—encourages the growth of modern-day slavery by providing a facade behind which traffickers for sexual exploitation operate. Where prostitution is tolerated, there is a greater demand for human trafficking victims and nearly always an increase in the number of women and children trafficked into commercial sex slavery.”

In Amsterdam, which has the most famous “red light district” in the world, the mayor

recently asked the UN for some help with their fast-growing human trafficking problem. Instead of creating a legal framework that protects victims from exploitation, Amsterdam ended up creating a modern ghetto of poor, exploited women.

Australia is often cited as another liberation hot spot as brothels have now been legalized in every state—in some for almost 17 years. I worked as a chaplain to many brothels and established a chaplaincy network that visits dozens of brothels every week in different cities around Australia. We learned a lot by getting to know the women who work in brothels. One thing we recognized was the link between legalized prostitution and human trafficking.

2) Criminalize Prostitution

The proponents of legalization suggest that this is the only other alternative. It's certainly the model with which we are most familiar. Rather than see women as victims of sexual exploitation, many countries around the world prosecute the women who are prostituted on our streets. Such was the case with the recent Canadian law struck down by the Supreme Court. Rather than offer women a way out of a terrible and abusive reality, the law suggested that it was their fault. Sex workers were often charged with the crime of solicitation and fined or jailed. This punishment only further victimized women.

Many of the women I worked with were unable to access social housing or schooling because of a solicitation charge on their record. Others faced huge fines that forced them to work in the illegal trade even longer to try and get out from under the burden of this kind of legislation. This is a flawed understanding of prostitution as well.

Catherine Booth, who founded The Salvation Army with her husband, William, shared her thoughts on this topic 150 years ago. "Prostitutes were not so much sinning as were sinned against," she said. Perhaps as she heard stories and journeyed with women, she understood the complexity of the oppressive nature of the sex industry.

3) A Three-Pronged Approach

So, if legalization and criminalization are not options, what can we do?

Twelve years ago, Sweden faced this exact question. When they studied the root causes of prostitution, they concluded that prostitution is essentially a form of violence against women. That perspective changed everything. Suddenly, the country understood that they could no longer tolerate a practice that was violence disguised as entertainment.

Before we go on, think about domestic violence in Canada. Twenty-five years ago, we considered domestic violence to be a "private" issue. We thought that women who liked to live with an abusive husband were making their own choices and it was none of our business. But something shifted. As we understood more of the realities of violence and oppression, we realized that it was not OK for women to be beaten and oppressed. We decided not to tolerate violence against women. We decided that it was everyone's responsibility. We decided to open shelters and programs to support women who wanted to leave abusive situations. We decided that women didn't have to testify against their abusers before they could be charged with a crime. We decided to teach our children that violence is not an acceptable practice and we educated people about these decisions.

This is exactly what Sweden did with prostitution. They decided to treat the women who were caught in the grip of prostitution as victims of a crime. They also decided to treat the men who pimped them or paid for their services as perpetrators of that crime. And then they did something essential to change the minds of the nation—they offered ways out of

prostitution to the women who had no options. This included re-training, counselling, medical and housing support, and educating the public (especially children). If you were to ask a young adult male in Sweden what he thinks about prostitution today, he'd be disgusted at the idea.

To summarize the three-pronged approach: 1) Decriminalize the women; 2) Criminalize the buyers; 3) Offer exit programs and provision for victims.

When the Swedes changed their laws around prostitution, their official government website read: "We want the world to know that in Sweden, women and children are NOT FOR SALE." Wow.

Could we envision a country where prostitution would no longer be necessary, viable or profitable? Wouldn't it be nice to announce to the world that we lived in a country that protected its most vulnerable members?

The good news about this approach is that it's working. After 10 years of adapting the new laws, Sweden launched a study to test its new framework. As other countries' prostitution rates continued to soar higher, Sweden's kept decreasing.

The mindset of the nation had changed. And even more fascinating was the conversation that Interpol overheard in secret phone taps of human traffickers who suggested avoiding Sweden as it was too much trouble. If women and children are not for sale, human sex trafficking will not gain a foothold.

Next Steps

So Canadians have many choices. They can legalize the sex industry in Canada and pretend that women are choosing to sell themselves into degrading and permanently damaging situations. They can criminalize women again—toughen up on crime and victimize those who are already caught in an oppressive cycle. Or they could join the tide of empowerment and freedom for women everywhere. They could embrace the Nordic model and announce to the world that, in Canada, women and children are not for sale.

Will this work overnight? Of course not. The social nightmare that is prostitution in Canada has taken years to create and it will take years of persistent action to reverse its effects. But it will be worth it.

Take the example of politician William Wilberforce who devoted much of his life to the abolition of the British slave trade. At the time, every nation thought slavery was the only thing that made sense. Even those who didn't really like the idea still thought that it was impossible to change. Wilberforce's great work was that he changed their minds and his efforts led to the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. Wilberforce enabled people to envision a world where slavery didn't exist.

This is our time to envision a world where women and children don't have to sell themselves into sexual slavery in order to survive. We can be part of changing and challenging this oppression. Let's live the dream.

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