

Police Harrassment of Prostitutes Debbie Homberg and Roz Nelson

Police harassment of women, men and transsexuals who work as prostitutes, has been encouraged and accepted by powerful institutions as police doing a good job on bad women.

The Collective of Australian Prostitutes has been established to express the view that there are no bad women, just bad laws. [By women I refer to all people working as prostitutes.] To stop police harassment of prostitutes there can be no laws allowing police to do so.

The church, courts, media and politicians are the main obstacles in stopping police harassment of prostitute women. It is the opinions and orders of these groups that police act on.

I will briefly describe the group's opinions and orders I refer to.

St. Augustine saw prostitution as being like a sewer under the palace - a necessary evil.

In 1980, Lord Justice Lane sentenced police constable Peter Swindle to three years imprisonment for the murder and dismemberment of a prostitute woman called Patsy Malone (a woman Swindle had arrested). To explain the relatively light sentence for self-confessed murder and mutilation, Lord Justice Lane said that he did not need to deter people from the crime.

The media have more mixed feelings about women who rent their bodies for money. The media use women as salacious sex objects to improve ratings, circulation and advertising campaigns. In serious stories or editorials, women who work in the sex industry are invariably presented in condemnatory, pitying or titillating language. The sex industry is used and accepted by the media, while complaints to the media by the women in

the industry that they are illegally arrested, harassed, brutalised and raped are usually not accepted for coverage or characterised as serious unsubstantiated allegations.

Little attention is given to the controls that men who run most of the sex industry place on the women working in it. Male sexuality which demands to use women as sexual commodities is not publicly discussed as a social problem.

The attitudes and opinions of policy makers ignore the economic conditions and difficulties facing all women, particularly single mothers, homeless, migrant, third world and black women. Many working class women's needs for childcare, housing, education, employment and money are met by prostitution. Some women choose to work in this area rather than be dependent on men in other ways (i.e. 'sell themselves forever for economic security in one gigantic transaction - marriage': J. Scutt). Mainly women start selling sex in a crisis often caused by this society's failure to provide adequate funding of women's services.

Powerful interest groups choose to police women rather than provide for them, and rationalise the choice by saying that they are acting on public opinion and in the public interest.

In 1977, Alan Scott studied public opinion of prostitution for the Royal Commission on Human Relationships. The study showed that 70% of people thought that prostitution was a public service and no matter for the police.

Here is an obvious difference between public opinion and public policy.

Public policy, in daily practice, is that police use legal powers as well as illegally forming protection rackets, which control the

industry. The existing legal sanctions facilitate money and sex being exchanged for warnings on raids, infrequent arrests of men and charges against women which result in small fines or imprisonment.

Private interest groups such as the Darlinghurst Resident Action Group (DRAG) can cause a dramatic rise in arrests by blaming women for the bad conditions which exist in the industry. The sensational publicity residents attracted to clean their streets of prostitutes and increase their real estate values, actually increased the cost of working for the women, forced some women to work in worse conditions, and stopped other women who have been working independently in Darlinghurst for twenty years from working at all. When 'clean up' campaigns are mounted by small interest groups, politicians are not prepared to listen to the women, and on the streets women have to put up with all the regulars being scared off, additional policing or payoffs, increased fines from the court, and assaults or abuse by car loads of men attracted by the publicity.

There is a self-interested brotherhood of property investors, politicians, parlour owners, journalists, police, lawyers, doctors and clients, who privately and professionally use prostitution for their own purposes, and in public refuse to allow women to control their bodies, their work or their money.

The proposal for a government-run red light district would, if adopted, confirm women as slaves to male sexuality and economic interests, and the government as a legal pimp. Most women do not want to be civil servants of sex, nor to be officially registered as prostitutes. You can imagine the difficulty women registered as prostitutes would have getting unemployment benefits.

The current cost to the community of criminalising

prostitute women, and imprisoning them is more than \$30,000 per year per woman. As the state may also take away a prostitute's child to institutions [to become the next generation of homeless persons], and any man a prostitute chooses to live with can be imprisoned for living off the earnings of a prostitute, the actual cost to the community is much greater.

The Collective of Australian Prostitutes was formed to provide support, information and expression networks for all women, men and transsexuals doing sexual work for men.

Collective members are struggling with the stigma, secretiveness, isolation, economic psychological and physical dangers of the sex industry for women to have independent control of their bodies, their conditions of work and their money. We see prostitution as part of the continuum of private sexual relations. Instead of perpetuating problems women face by imprisoning them, we want the millions of dollars allocated to building a new women's prison to go to women's services and for Mulawa women's prison to be emptied.

We want community-based women's services to be funded in Kings Cross. We want women's refuges, housing, rape crisis centres, health, legal and childcare centres to be adequately funded so that they are available to all women.

Prostitutes will not be free from police harassment until prostitution and heroin are decriminalised.

In 1975 the French Collective of Prostitutes went on a national strike and occupied churches to successfully stop police harassment, to abolish all laws relating to prostitution, and to stop a government takeover of the industry. An American organisation COYOTE - Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics - has 30,000 members working on similar aims.