# *Challenging the prostitution trade*

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

- March 2012 -

*Rescue those being led away to death* (Proverbs 24:11)



*Christ with the Woman Taken in Adultery*
- Guercino (1591-1666)

## Spiritual and physical harm done by prostitution

Selling sexual intimacy brings spiritual, physical and psychological damage which sadly degrades and exploits people - sometimes with fatal results:

**Spiritual damage** occurs because the prostitution trade degrades people by activities that sadly contradict the dignified creational status of humanity. As all people are made in God's image, our dignity and self-value are damaged when his gift of sexuality becomes a consumer commodity that is subject to bargaining, purchase and retail. Hence the warnings detailed in Leviticus: *"Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute"* (19:29), and in the Book of Proverbs: *a prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread* (6:26).

**Physical damage** occurs as prostitutes feel the pain of repeated sex, and are often threatened, physically assaulted, or raped. This is clear from a study of 130 adult prostitutes working in San Francisco, that found:

- 82% had been physically assaulted;
- 83% were threatened with a weapon;
- 68% had been raped while working;
- 68% experienced post-traumatic stress disorder;
- 88% wanted to leave prostitution;

- M. Farley & H. Barkan, *Women and Health*, 27:3 pp37-49, 1998.

It is also clear from *Backstreets* by C. Hoigard & L. Finstad (Polity Press, UK, 1992) - the first long-term study of individual Western prostitutes:

> *... the women talked about violence in a strange way .... they could relate kidnappings, confinement, rapes, and death threats as if these were almost normal occurrences* (p62).

## The psychological harm done by prostitution

Psychological damage occurs as sex workers dissociate mentally from their actions. This especially happens because prostitutes are frequently required to tell lies - pretending they are enjoying sex with each customer, claiming falsely that the work is meaningful, and hiding the pain they often feel. When an actor portrays a part, the audience understands that a role is played, which the actor and audience can freely discuss later, but prostitutes must perpetuate the lie. Many prostitutes must also tell lies to themselves, saying prostitution is a good activity and a proper career choice, or a valid means of gaining wealth.

Hoigard and Finstad found deep emotional damage was done to women in all cases that they studied. Initially, the prostitutes they interviewed stated they enjoyed their work, but later each one independently confided that they had been deeply emotionally damaged:

> *Prostitution tears feelings out of women's bodies. ... emotional coldness from the public prostituted "self" spreads and takes possession of large portions of the private "self". It is virtually impossible for the women to have a love life while they're tricking. This effect can last for months, even years after prostitution itself is a thing of the past.*
>
> *.... Memories of countless, faceless customers pass like a panorama before her and make sexuality loathsome ....* (pp114-115).

Melbourne writer Sheila Jeffreys (a feminist lesbian) made similar findings about the psychological harm done to prostitutes, and she has published her research in *The idea of prostitution* (Spinifex Press, 1997). Jeffreys quotes Marianne Wood (a brothel prostitute) who describes legal, licensed brothel prostitution in Melbourne, sharing in sorrowful detail some of the things that most prostitutes are required to do.

Similar damage was also found by Tony Cichello, a clinical psychologist at Royal Perth Hospital, who has conducted outreach clinics for prostitutes. He told the WA *Scoop* magazine (Autumn 2000, p36) that sex workers tend to "switch off" in order to cope - creating chronic stress that can result in drug abuse, self-alienation, poor self-esteem and depression.

Many prostitutes despise their customers (usually males). This can produce lasting damage to the person's ability to relate normally, and this often leads to the development of same-sex relationships.

## Drug use in the sex industry

Many people turn to drugs as a means of coping with the pain of sex work, but then are trapped in the trade, through drug dependency. Hoigard and Finstad found nearly 90% of prostitutes they interviewed used drugs, but their research did not find any prostitutes or ex-prostitutes who had made significant long-term financial gain, since their earnings are often immediately spent to support drug use that is *a central element in many prostitutes' every day life* (p24).

## Implications of a legalised prostitution trade

A legalised sex trade increases the problem of prostitution by facilitating the promotion and increase of the sex industry. Instead of eliminating the illegal trade, legalisation gives society two systems - one legal and the other unlawful.

Hence the *Age* newspaper (2/3/1999) reported that after the legalisation of the sex trade, the number of illegal brothels in Melbourne tripled in one year, and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (11/11/2000) has reported a quadrupling of the number of brothels in Sydney only a few years after decriminalisation. This is scarcely surprising, because many persons who operate unlawfully will have little interest in become law-abiding, simply if the illegal trade becomes lawful.

Paying taxation, ensuring occupational heath and safety, and funding the entitlements of workers, are behaviours which law-breakers simply do not support. Legalisation also erodes the moral argument against governments pressuring unemployed persons to apply for work in the sex trade - and it facilitates the promotion of so-called sex work as a legitimate career option.

Many MPs agree they would not want their daughters to be influenced to work as prostitutes. So instead of engaging in the hypocrisy of allowing someone else's daughter to become a prostitute, parliamentarians have a responsibility to ban the sex trade, in the recognition that the impact of harmful actions can only be minimised by keeping them illegal.

Since prostitution is an inherently damaging activity, governments should not give the sex trade any lawful status. The legalisation of the prostitution trade erodes the ideal that government must commend socially valuable behaviour, while curbing harmful action. Further, as governments legalise the sex trade they disqualify themselves from expressing concern about its harm, and they gain a stakeholding in the activity (as a source of employment and taxation) - though governments could face massive litigation for negligence.

## The value of laws against the sex industry

While prostitution may be impossible to eliminate, laws against this trade provide the only way to restrict its damaging influence. Such laws should target pimps or madams who enlist workers, operate brothels, advertise to recruit, promote sex services, frequent brothels and live on the earnings of a prostitute.

Laws should also enable the courts to challenge the behaviour of drug-using prostitutes, requiring them to participate in rehabilitation and counselling, as an alternative to being fined or jailed, without recording any conviction.

Such laws would serve valuably as a means of extending grace in society, though legislation is often regarded as a blunt and ungracious response. Laws banning the prostitution trade help to inform society (especially its youth) that prostitution is not a legitimate job. In these ways, laws against prostitution will help deliver people trapped in the trade, while also preventing others from being ensnared. Governments may also wish to apply the approach of several nations which in the early 21st Century began to challenge the customers of prostitutes - by banning the purchase of sexual services. Sweden (from 1999) helped to pioneer that valuable approach to preventing the commodification of people.

## Christians ministering to bring liberation

God's people can challenge the sex industry in two ways. Firstly, through seeking the passage and enforcement of bans on the trade, thus helping to prevent more people from entering prostitution. Second, we may reach out to people in the trade - just as Jesus loved and challenged sinners, and could say: *... prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ....* (Matthew 21:32).

Christians may heed the example of the Lord Jesus as he ministered to a woman caught in adultery (John 8). Jesus upheld the law against this behaviour, but he also rescued her from death, rebuking those enemies who had preyed on this woman and had entrapped her for their own foolish aim (to ensnare him).

The Lord Jesus then exercised mercy towards this woman, urging repentance: *"... neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin"* (John 8:11).

Family Voice AUSTRALIA
4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
ddl@fava.org.au www.fava.org.au
Phone: +618 8223 6383

Bible quotations from the New International Version © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society - used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.