

Sex, money and the regulation of women's 'choices': a political economy of prostitution

Jo Phoenix argues that policy reforms have placed women at greater risk.

The political, social, ideological and economic conditions giving rise to and shaping women's experiences of selling sex in twenty-first century Britain have resulted in paradoxical and contradictory effects.

Prostitution is a form of economic survival in situations where many women have few opportunities for independent financial and social security. Entrance to prostitution is shaped by everyday political and economic structures that: maintain women's economic dependency on men and on families; shape their poverty relative to men; limit their access to full-time, secure employment; place on women the burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities; ensure that welfare security is mediated through and by women's relationships in families and with men; and maintain welfare benefits at near destitution levels.

A decade of New Labour's poverty reduction strategies and welfare benefit reforms have focused on children and been geared to getting women into work with the result that there have been few benefits for young women, women without children and women outside the labour market (Bellamy, Bennett and Millar 2006). In this context, sex remains – as ever – a marketable commodity in women's attempts to provide for themselves without recourse to dependency on the state or individual men.

But prostitution is also a form of gendered victimisation. Selling sex places women at risk of violence, of exploitation, of poverty and of criminalisation (Phoenix 2001). Rape, kidnapping, brutality, exploitation and other forms of violence have long been part of the landscape of prostitution – with street-working women experiencing some of the most extreme instances. Like women's entrance into prostitution, such risks are structured by wider gendered relationships especially the widespread social acceptance of male violence against women and ideals of femininity which promote sex workers as 'beyond the pale' and 'bad' women.

In the sense that prostitution and women's experiences of it are inextricably linked to wider social, ideological, economic and political conditions of existence, little has changed since McLeod's (1982) ground-breaking political economy of prostitution – with three very important exceptions.

The first is the growth of new drugs markets and the relationship between drugs and sex markets. Drugs, especially crack cocaine, have had a devastating impact on sex workers. Drug use, drugs markets and sex markets are now inextricably linked. Sex workers form a substantial client base for drug dealers and drug dealers use drugs to control and exploit working women. Support for people with problematic drug use is not meeting demand. Individual women find it almost impossible to break loose from the cycle of using drugs to survive prostitution and using prostitution to survive and fund their drug habits.

The second change has been a shift in ideology that has produced a deeply contradictory set of prostitution policy reforms in the UK. These reforms make a sharp distinction between the deserving victims of prostitution and undeserving sex workers whose presence on the streets in the UK's major cities is seen to cause community destruction and disorder. Perhaps as a result of the adoption of radical feminist concerns of the 1980s and 1990s, the reforms are based upon an ideology of victimhood that posits that most women's involvement in prostitution is a result of coercion and exploitation by men (Scouler and O'Neill 2007). Social exclusion, political and economic marginalisation and the force of necessity have been all but erased as issues of policy concern.

Take for instance the Department of Health and Home Office's guidance, *Safeguarding Children in Prostitution* (2000) and the Home Office's *A Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy* (2006). In both documents, the 'problem' that the policy addresses is the way in which criminal men coerce women and girls into prostitution by using violence, drugs, debt bondage and intimidation. The solutions are geared towards helping these victims of prostitution leave. In practice, this 'help' has often meant returning women and girls to the statutory and voluntary organisations that provided the context for their involvement in prostitution in the first place i.e. child protection social services, over-stretched drugs intervention programmes, or housing departments or associations, social (in)security benefits that keep women and girls in poverty and so on.

These reforms, combined with other criminal

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justice policy changes, especially New Labour's anti-social behaviour and Respect agenda, have ensured that prostitution (and more importantly, street-based sex work) is seen as being one of the key threats to community safety, cohesion and regeneration. With that, individuals – including children and young people – whose situation is not so easily accommodated within the victim model, or who do not respond to 'help' and are thus thought of as 'choosing' to sell sex, are defined as offenders deserving punishment.

Use of anti-social behaviour legislation against street-based sex workers is now commonplace. An 'enforcement plus support' approach is being used in many local authorities wherein criminalisation is the key strategy used to force individuals to seek help to leave prostitution, or face harsher criminal justice punishment. In practice this has meant fewer fines for prostitution-related offences and a greater use of the full range of criminal justice disposals, from Attachment Orders to Court Orders, compelling women and girls to 'rehabilitate' themselves. Importantly, none of these interventions addresses either the socio-economic conditions that created the impetus for prostitution for many of the women or, at the risk of repetition, the violence and exploitation that women experience. Instead, they make individual sex workers responsible for their own poverty (Phoenix and Oerton 2005). Ironically, *A Co-ordinated Prostitution Strategy* suggested attaching to Court Orders the necessity to attend debt counselling services for women who claim that they are involved in prostitution for the money.

Finally, prostitution policy reform has acted to force an abolitionist agenda (i.e. abolish prostitution) onto the very organisations which work for and with individuals in prostitution. The last 20 years has seen a growth of services and organisations specifically working with and for children and young people involved in commercial sexual exploitation, women and men in sex work and individuals sex trafficked into or around the UK. But, more recent policy reforms based on the notion that women in prostitution are victims are curtailing the range and type of support that sex workers get as statutory and welfare organisations are forced to 'exit' women from prostitution rather than provide non-judgemental help, advice and support (including but not limited to helping them leave) (see Phoenix 2008 forthcoming). So, for instance, many of these organisations now receive at least a part of their funding through the Home Office or local Community Safety and Drugs Partnerships which measure the performance of the organisation in relation to the numbers of women exiting prostitution.

The empirical realities of prostitution are grim. The contradictory effects outlined above are not evenly distributed. The burden of criminalisation and punitive regulation falls, as ever, on the poorest women in prostitution – street-based sex workers. These women are least able to resist the social forces at play. They are criminalised for their attempts to

survive their poverty through sex work, under-protected from the crimes committed against them, made to take responsibility for their conditions of existence and compelled into 'rehabilitative' programmes under threat of further criminalisation. And yet, public and academic debate remains stubbornly focused on questions of 'consent' and 'choice'. If a political economy of prostitution can tell us anything, it tells us that the issue of consent or choice is moot. Women can and do make choices, but not in conditions of their own choosing, and increasingly in conditions made more risky by the very policies put in place to help.

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References

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