

LIFT**Living in freedom together:
Rethinking prostitution in Tower Hamlets**

Submission by LIFT to Amnesty International's Global Policy Consultation on Sex Work

About LIFT

We are a community group called [LIFT](#), living or working in Tower Hamlets, comprised of researchers, activists, Amnesty International members and survivors of prostitution, who strongly believe that prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls. We work with local residents, the police, the Council and women involved in prostitution, to campaign for better support provision for prostituted women in Tower Hamlets, and for law enforcement efforts to concentrate on men who exploit women in prostitution.

Our position

We are writing to urge you to reconsider your recent proposal regarding prostitution. We have a great deal of admiration and respect for the work of Amnesty International. Indeed, it was through Amnesty's violence against women campaigns that some of us first came to take action on these issues. This is why we feel it is important to speak out on this issue - it would be a disservice to Amnesty to take this stance, and would undermine the work you have done on violence against women and girls.

To be clear, we support the call for women involved in prostitution to be decriminalised. We have seen in Tower Hamlets how criminalisation of women exacerbates the vulnerabilities women face and places the blame on prostituted women, rather than the men who abuse and exploit them in prostitution.

We strongly object however, to the proposal that men should be free to buy sex. This stance ignores the unequal power dynamics at play between men who buy sex and prostituted women; and normalises the abuse that is inherent in prostitution.

Gender inequality and violence against women

It is overwhelmingly women and girls who are exploited through prostitution. And in the minority of cases where men and boys are also exploited, it is still men who are the buyers. This purchase of bodies for sexual access by men creates and reinforces a wider culture of male sexual entitlement which perpetuates gender inequality. It affirms an idea that women's value is to please men sexually rather than to achieve their full human potential. This supports a culture where every nine minutes one woman is raped in the UK.

We are baffled by Amnesty's proposal that men's entitlement to buy sex should be considered a human right – to promote this as a right is to directly feed into the narratives which make violence against women possible. Amnesty's primary concern must be for the rights of women and girls not to be abused, rather than the right for men to abuse women.

The relationship between men who buy sex and prostituted women can never be equal as it is predicated upon the dehumanisation and objectification of women. When women are viewed as objects that can be bought for sexual access they are no longer viewed as human beings with thoughts, feelings, emotions and aspirations. Dehumanisation is the first stage of any oppression. And it has consequences. Women involved in prostitution are 18 times more likely to be murdered than the general population (New Philanthropy Capital 2007).

Prostitution is harmful

Total decriminalisation will not solve this issue. Levels of violence are high across all legal models, reflecting the basis of prostitution in the dehumanisation of women. As academic Melissa Farley highlights, “In the Netherlands, where prostitution is legal, 60% of prostituted women suffered physical assaults; 70% experienced verbal threats of physical assault; 40% experienced sexual violence; and 40% had been forced into prostitution or sexual abuse by acquaintances” (Farley 2004).

The safety of women involved in prostitution is our primary concern. And it’s important that measures are put in place that make women’s lives safer. However, if the violence perpetrated by men who buy sex is not criminalised then we actually create a situation where women’s lives are less safe – where the abuse women experience is normalised and made invisible. We create a situation where there is no support for women to leave prostitution as it is not recognised as harmful. The ultimate way to protect women’s safety is help them to leave prostitution.

There is a vast research base which demonstrates that prostitution leads to enduring psychological impacts such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and dissociation (Farley et al 1998, Coy 2008, Farley 2003, Roxburgh et al 2008). Dissociation is the separation of mind and body, a survival strategy used by prostituted women and rape survivors alike. Whilst at the time it enables women to survive, after women leave prostitution, the impacts of dissociation endure, such as feelings of numbness, disconnection from reality, and lack of ownership of one’s body. Our conversations with local organisations that support women have highlighted that this element of harm is often overlooked. This point is important as it highlights that prostitution cannot be construed as simply a job like any other. The emotional labour that goes into surviving prostitution and the consequent mental health impacts are not the same as the impacts of other jobs.

Constrained choice

The background of women involved in prostitution suggests that it is very vulnerable women/girls who are drawn into it. The average age of entry into prostitution globally is 14. UK research shows that women have often experienced previous sexual abuse and/or have backgrounds of local authority care or poverty (Home Office 2006, 2004). Choices to enter prostitution are framed by these experiences. In Tower Hamlets we are concerned that there may be an increase in the numbers of women involved in prostitution due to impacts of the recession and austerity.

The Global South

We are conscious that Amnesty needs to consider the different contexts that prostituted women are living in around the globe – for example, in a Western country there may be more state support for women to leave prostitution and access alternatives than in some countries in the Global South. Many states have weak rule of law and police and criminal justice systems which discriminate and worse against poor and marginalised people. In these cases, where the relationship with prostitution and poverty is so stark, it is tempting to believe that legalisation is the only option for safeguarding women. However there are a few things to consider here:

Involvement in prostitution is often a result not only of gender inequality, but also of wider global economic and racial power disparities. In India it is the ‘untouchables’ who are most likely to sell sex due to a lack of alternatives and roles prescribed in the caste system. In the UK it is migrant women, most likely trafficked, who comprise 80% of women in indoor prostitution. In Tower Hamlets too, it is often the poorest women with little access to alternatives that end up in prostitution. The point is that we cannot simply accept that those women who are marginalised by gender, race and class, are choosing prostitution. We cannot sit back and accept that this is inevitable – we must challenge the factors that lead to prostitution being the only option for these women in the first place. This begs the question; do we want to consign the most marginalised women to a lifetime of abuse? Or do we want to fight for all women to be considered equal to men and have the same access to education and employment, thereby preventing them from having to enter prostitution in the first place? Perhaps Amnesty’s move to address economic and social rights should focus on the myriad ways that women and girls are discriminated against globally which inhibits their access to these rights.

Trafficking

We are also concerned that this stance would undermine Amnesty’s work against human trafficking. Countries that have legalised prostitution have seen a dramatic increase in trafficking (U.S. Dep’t of State 2008, Bindel & Kelly 2003). The Netherlands hoped that legalising prostitution would help decrease trafficking, but it in fact led to an increase in trafficking. Traffickers are able to take advantage of the situation in the Netherlands by masking the fact that women have been trafficked, and by coaching the women how to prove that they are self-employed ‘migrant sex workers’. It is much easier for traffickers to operate in countries where men who buy sex are not criminalised. The proposal to support full decriminalisation would merely create conditions where it is easier for women, affected by profound gender, racial and class discrimination, to be trafficked.

Survivors

We urge you to listen to the voices of survivors of prostitution. It can be very challenging for survivors of prostitution to speak out. As with other forms of violence against women, women often feel they are to blame, are isolated and feel judged, don’t want to re-live their experiences and prefer to put it behind them, may be suffering PTSD and other conditions, and therefore, for their wellbeing, it is not in their interest to speak out. As you should be aware, the vulnerable voices in society are seldom heard. We would encourage you therefore to make an active effort [to listen to those survivors who are speaking out](#).

To take up the proposal would send a clear message that the abuse of women through prostitution is condoned by Amnesty International, eradicating the good reputation that Amnesty has on combatting human rights abuses. It would be a catastrophe for gender equality and for the movement to end violence against women and girls. We urge you therefore to reconsider and to instead take a stand against the abusive system of prostitution.

Yours sincerely,

LIFT

For further information please contact info@liftcampaign.org.uk

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