

Ireland's Prostitution Debate.

This is an issue that needs to be treated with a sense of urgency. It is Ireland's issue but Dublin appears to be on a different page to Belfast and more likely in a different chapter. This could have serious consequences.

To prosecute users of prostitution (the johns) is bound to have a remarkable effect on their numbers. When you investigate the 'Swedish model' of dealing with prostitution you will uncover a success story within Sweden, but the problems associated with the purchase of sex have migrated elsewhere. Prostitution has largely been removed from Sweden's streets, but has it also been driven underground? If so, this would make it much more difficult to control and possibly more violent for the victims of human trafficking. Most research has shown that the numbers of trafficked women and girls into Sweden have been reduced however this form of illicit trade can rarely produce accurate numbers due to the secrecy of black market trading.

Although more inconvenient, Swedish johns are simply going somewhere they will not face prosecution - Denmark and Germany for example are receiving more sex tourists. There is even evidence to suggest that Thailand and Cambodia are also receiving more although this might be because other developed nations are exporting more sex predators. The sex trade in South East Asia unfortunately continues to expand and is a hub for human traffickers acting with apparent impunity – an example briefly outlining what happens when left unchecked will be looked at later.

Dublin and Belfast really need to work together on this issue by getting policies and legislation implemented within the same time frame. If not, Belfast will see their problem rapidly decrease while Dublin will be likely to see an influx of johns, an increase in organized crime and even more women and girls trafficked in - and it doesn't stop there. The three countries on the other side of the Irish Sea need to follow suit or they will also experience an increase in sexual predation. Some people may argue that the problem will migrate from Ireland, but this issue is about girls being trafficked into the horrific brutality of serial rape and torture in sexual slavery.

Strong political will and general support from the people exists and Ireland will reap the reward of fast action. Countries that have not prioritized the issue now have organized crime syndicates that have become so advanced and well established that they can stay ahead of the law. They have managed to infiltrate the political and legal systems and corrupt decision making appears to be part of these countries' accepted culture.

It is shameful to our country to hear our unmistakable accent in parts of South East Asia known for paedophilia. It is a mammoth task for dedicated organizations like the IJM (International Justice Mission) and APLE (Action Pour Les Enfants) to collect enough evidence against paedophiles to make a conviction. Often it takes years of surveillance and evidence gathering in order to make a conviction. Even then the offender can still walk away due to the fact that his home country has not established a legal relationship with the country in which the offence took place. Ireland could do a huge amount by joining the few existing countries, like the US, who have laws in place to prosecute their nationals who travel and prey on the vulnerability and the innocence of children.

The illicit sex trade and sex tourism really has had a devastating effect on many nations and it matters not what stage of development they happen to be in. It has changed the thinking processes of many who are subjected to poverty (and greed) in ways that are inconceivable to our society. Poverty forces people to take risks and in so doing children's futures are endangered by traffickers making false promises. Parents are also literally selling their own daughters into the sex industry in the hope that the financial returns will buy them food, shelter, a bike or a car, an electronic gadget or education fees for their sons. After the initial transaction the family often will never see their daughter again or receive any more money. Sex tourism also removes males from legitimate employment because the illicit trade in people is much more lucrative. It encourages corruption within government and develops a police force that cannot, and indeed must not, be trusted. Many police officers in South East Asia get protection money from pimps and brothel keepers or actually own the brothels. If developed countries like Ireland collaborated, much could be done to reverse this growing trend.

While discussing prostitution and human trafficking we must never forget to include pornography. Stockpiles of magazines and DVDs are evidence of a continuing slave trade where women, often beaten into compliance, are objectified and subjected to ridicule and insults. Pornography is widely used to 'train' children so that they can learn how to satisfy the men who prey on them. The majority of women in pornography are there because they are poor, desperate, addicted to drugs and trafficked; many have been sexually abused as children and many indeed are children. They are there because they have very limited choices.

Testimonies from women have described how pornography was used to break their self-esteem, to blackmail them into prostitution and to keep them there. They have told how it was used to humiliate them and how it stimulates and condones the rape and abuse of children. No matter what form it comes in, pornography has a

destructive effect on the life of its victims. Rape and other forms of abuse are styled to cater to the sexual fantasies and perversions of male customers.

The viewing of pornography has been directly linked to instances of rape and gang rape as men are stimulated and want enact what they have been watching. It has been linked with increased sexual violence and male hostility towards females. Men using pornography experience one-way sex. In body and mind they are totally dominant over the female, demonstrating clear abuse of power over the powerless.

The absolute control of a pimp or brothel keeper over their trafficked victims needs to stop. Girls with barcodes on their flesh which display their ownership takes us back to skin branding hundreds of years ago to the time of the transatlantic slave trade. Girls who are forced to hand out cards (that sometimes they cannot read) explicitly detailing their sexual services to potential customers remind us of the slave markets. Incidentally one such market selling children was recently uncovered in Guanzhou, China. Those who are forced to endure this extreme loss of dignity and basic human rights deserve our attention not our ignorance. They have been forcibly denied a voice, so through our action, legislation and political will we must represent them. Just because they might not be on Irish turf does not mean that we should shun them.

A question that is asked worldwide during discussions on our contemporary slave trade is 'why don't they try to escape'? The simple answer is they do try, but they don't always know which country they are in and often don't speak the language. They may be forcibly hooked on drugs to make them compliant or may be locked up. Some are murdered in front of their fellow captives when they do try to escape, or are brutally beaten and gang raped. Without a passport, money or even shoes, where would they go? Western Europe is still at the stage of arresting victims of trafficking, holding them in detention centres and then deporting them back into the hands of their initial traffickers.

We need to separate victims from criminals and develop policies that treat such victims with dignity, providing assistance and a safe place to stay. The criminals who control trafficking, if left unchecked, can rot our society. Luckily it looks as if Ireland has caught this issue before it's completely out of control, unlike so many of our near neighbours in Europe and countries in Asia.

Modern slavery, in all its forms, is blight on humanity but one which can be treated and cured. Ending slavery forever will be a long and extremely difficult task. It will involve the compliance of the UN, governments and strong political leaders. It will fail if there is no political will and little funding made available to combat the

traffickers and the slaveholders. Wealthy countries need to stop creating the demand. They need to stop exploiting an abundant cheap labour and sex market in their ever-increasing desire to maximise profits. Likewise, governments of the developing world need to stop creating the supply by not selling their own people. Incorruptible legal systems and harsh sentencing of criminals should be mandatory. Systems need to be in place to recognise and rehabilitate victims instead of treating them as illegal immigrants and deporting them. This often returns them to their traffickers and locks them in a repetitive cycle of trafficking and abuse.

Every time we ignore human trafficking we condemn the poor, the voiceless and the vulnerable to exploitation. We need to inform everyone that slavery exists. We need to raise awareness and force governments to act. We should never doubt that we can do something - and talking about it is a great start.

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