

Finn Mackay, chair of the London Feminist Network, speaks on « Prostitution and Andrea Dworkin’s relevance to young feminists » at the Andrea Dworkin Commemorative Conference.

I’m going to stand up here, because God knows I’m short enough without sitting down as well. *[laughter]*

Well okay, firstly, thank you very much for inviting me to speak at this important conference, and I really am very honoured to be here, and especially alongside such distinguished company. I’m going to start with a quote from Andrea Dworkin on prostitution. She says :

I am talking about prostitution per se, without more violence, without extra violence, without a woman being hit, without a woman being pushed. Prostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman’s body. Those of us who say this are accused of being simple minded, but prostitution is very simple.

and it is on this issue that I should like to speak about today, for two main reasons.

Firstly, because we have, for the first time in this country, a national debate on this issue through the Government consultation process titled *Paying the Price*. And secondly, because I believe that this process presents us with a window of opportunity in which to drive forward change in public opinion on this issue, and this is important because we need change both from above, and below. At the moment things are moving forward at a governmental level, and yet on the ground many women, and especially younger women, often have no opportunity to hear feminist views on prostitution. Into this gap on the ground has come the voices of the prostitution lobby, who, while they are not new, have certainly been stepping up their campaign, motivated against the proposals from Government. Now, of course, prostitution is not the only issue on which feminist voices have been silenced. And indeed, since the backlash against

the Second Wave began in force, we have seen our movement fragmented and misrepresented on probably most issues. But with the public interest generated around *Paying the Price*, now is the ideal time to try and correct some of those misrepresentations, and to ensure that the truths we know about prostitution are told.

So what are the key proposals from *Paying the Price*? Firstly it is important to note that, despite confusion in the press, prostitution is not being legalised, primarily because it isn't illegal in the country currently. The main crimes associated with it are loitering, soliciting and kerb crawling, and unfortunately, there is no suggestion to remove the crimes of loitering and soliciting. The key areas identified are prevention, tackling demand, developing routes out, ensuring justice, such as enforcing penalties for kerb crawlers, and tackling off-street prostitution, mainly with a concern for trafficking. And although we are not looking at a Swedish-style law coming into effect here any time soon, and although these proposals are by no means perfect, this strategy should be welcomed, because it is a huge step in the right direction. We have heard the minister responsible for this strategy, Fiona Mactaggart, asserting that society would be likely to view prostitution very differently if we saw men who pay for sex as child abusers and rapists, and this is an indication of how far the Government has come on this issue. And indeed the document is a sea change from what was originally mooted for a strategy by David Blunkett when the consultation process began in 2004, with talk of tolerance zones.

So what we have to do now is make sure the Government delivers on the promises that it has set out and dedicates the funds for support, such as safe housing, drug treatment, exit programmes and campaigns against demand. And this is no more than what the vulnerable women in prostitution deserve as a matter of urgency, if we are to stem this pervasive and growing institution, which, along with the pornography industry, has become one of the last publicly defended and accepted forms of violence against women. Because although we may have won significant battles in the channels of parliament, we cannot leave it at that. Our Government has set out a clear

position on prostitution as preventable, and not inevitable, but that doesn't mean this view is shared by the wider public.

All too often, public opinion seems to be that the way to make women safer in prostitution is to legalise the whole of the so-called « sex industry. » Now where is this propaganda coming from? Given the tone of *Paying the Price*, it is not surprising that the pro-prostitution lobby have been rallying against it. The defence of prostitution has also come from unlikelier quarters. For example, we have seen the trade union GMB recognise the International Union of Sex Workers, and the Green Party proposes legalisation on the grounds that the state should not interfere with the sexuality of consenting adults. But I believe that we do have allies in the trade union movement, and in the left as a whole. As Janice Raymond pointed out in her comprehensive article on the ILO, we have an excellent example from Venezuela, where the Government has consistently refused to recognise so-called sex worker unions on the grounds that this is simply promotion of prostitution. So these movements are not our enemies. It is ignorance of the simple facts of prostitution that enables the pro-prostitution lobby to manipulate the debate on this issue into one of workers' rights, and away from women's rights, and more importantly, away from women's human rights.

But all too often for many women, and young women, those are the only arguments they hear on prostitution. Only recently for example, I attended a fringe meeting at the NUS Women's Conference, where a group called Education Not For Sale hosted a speaker from the International Union of Sex Workers to talk about « Workers, not victims: the struggle for sexual freedom ». And there, a group of student women were informed that prostitution is an area where women can feel good about their own bodies, where they can explore their sexuality. We were told that trafficking is mainly a myth, and that we should speak instead of « migration for sex work, » and besides (and I quote), *the amount it costs to be brought over from Thailand you can pay back in less than six months, if you work hard.* Honestly. There was much talk of women's agency and workers' rights, and

most women at this meeting were silenced by what they had heard. They did not raise their voices in disagreement, disbelief or disgust. They did not question the position from which this woman spoke, but I don't think this is because there weren't women in the room who were questioning and disbelieving, I think it was because the debate has been framed in the guise of liberalism and women's rights and what we have to do, is remove the lies that cloak this issue, and take back this debate to the real facts of prostitution, in order that we can create a space in which women are allowed, and validated, to disagree with and question the dominant discourse on this issue.

And we don't need to look hard for the facts on prostitution; even our own Government's document, *Paying the Price*, paints a grim but accurate picture of the levels of prostitution in our country today. Facts such as that 80,000 women work in on-street prostitution alone. Most enter this institution under eighteen years old, likely much younger, as we know the global average age is just fourteen. The majority have spent time in local authority care, and many report being subject to violence and abuse as children. And Andrea Dworkin always said that incest was a boot camp for prostitution, and the figures here bear this out, as at least 45% of the women in prostitution report childhood sexual abuse. Not only are prostituted women affected by violence and abuse before they enter this institution, but once within it they face disproportionate levels of rape and male violence. Canadian studies report a 40% higher risk of homicide, and in this country it is estimated at 12%. But let us just think for a minute about what exactly it means to be disproportionately affected by male violence in a country where the reality of this is already unacceptably high for all women. Where one in four women are suffering domestic violence, where at least 50,000 women are raped every year, where two women a week are killed by a male partner, in a world where male violence is actually the leading cause of death for women worldwide. Now, these figures give us only an idea, a glimmer, of the routine levels of violence and abuse that women in prostitution face, and it is no wonder that the majority of women want out, with one Canadian

study reporting that 95% of their respondents working in prostitution wished they could leave.

But as well as the billions of incidents of rape, battery and homicide that are committed against women in prostitution, there is the matter of the very institution itself. The very business of prostitution as a whole is a violation and violence against all women, against all of us. The fact of prostitution is that its very existence depends on a class of people (and yes, I do think women are a class), that is women, who are for sale and a social assumption that those people born into the male sex enjoy a natural right to buy and sell those Othered people. Every hierarchy we know in patriarchal society plays out in prostitution, not just along the lines of sex, but race and class, for example. It is no surprise that in every country where research has been done it has been found that the majority in prostitution are poor women, are black women, are immigrant women. Real equality and freedom cannot exist as long as prostitution does. The suggestion of women's equality, in a world where the value we all share as women is that our bodies have a price, will never be anything more than just that, a suggestion. As Andrea Dworkin said, while any one of us is being bought or sold, none of us are free. And this is why legalising the so-called « sex industry » can never make women safer; the fact is it will make all women less safe, including the women within it.

Legalisation has not made women safer in Amsterdam, where following legalisation, child prostitution increased by over 300%. It hasn't made women safer in Australia, where trafficking and the illegal prostitution sector rose by a third in just one year after legalisation. And unionisation will also not make women safer, not least because, as we know, unionisation is simply legalisation by the back door. Now off-record, most trade unionists agree that for prostitution unionisation is unworkable, but they argue that for the wider industry it may be viable, such as in chatlines and strip clubs, et cetera.

They demand rights for these women, and yet the means they offer to grant them involves undermining every human right we know, while legitimising and promoting a multi-billion dollar business built on the oppression of women. When the offer of workers' rights comes at such a high price, we can deduce that concern for our safety and equality is not what's on the table. We have to demand our rights as human beings first, and that means committing to closing down the so-called « sex industry », not expanding it! And if we are to do this we need to make the real facts of prostitution heard for all women, including young women. Because I believe that we do have many allies out there, who as yet have simply not heard our arguments. We need to tap into the rising tide of anger and dissatisfaction that I see growing amongst young women who are sick of the constant, pervasive objectification of women's bodies in our society; young women who are alarmed and angered by the uncommented instances of sexual harassment and rape in their lives, in their universities and colleges, on their campuses and in their halls. And I do think that a tide is turning.

Last year in November the London Feminist Network organised a Reclaim the Night march in honour of Andrea Dworkin, and nearly 700 women, mainly young women, from all over the country, from student unions and university women's groups marched through the streets of London against rape and male violence. And already women's groups and students' groups are organising events to build for this year's march, in order that it be even bigger than the last. We always follow the march with a rally, and last year we had a reading of a Take Back the Night speech by Andrea Dworkin. And afterwards, one young woman remarked to me that she couldn't believe it was the words of Andrea Dworkin because she quite agreed with it! *[laughter]*. And up until then, of course, all she had heard were the myths and the lies about Andrea's work. For me this sums up the potential of feminism today, and it is no wonder that our enemies are trying so hard to silence us, misrepresent our arguments and alienate us from public debate, because in reality the debate is very simple, and it is not one about workers' rights. It is one about men's rights.

Do we, as a society accept that men have a right to buy and sell women's bodies whenever they choose, or do we not? The existence, pervasiveness, growth and sheer long history of prostitution is not an example of its normality, for there are many other shameful blots on our humanity and dignity that have lasted just as long. Next month marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, a long battle that in many ways is still not won. But we took a step 200 years ago that we wouldn't have done with excuses and acceptance, and in so doing, we committed to an idea of an equal world, and we became closer to it, for the benefit of us all—and we must do the same with prostitution. Just like them, nobody has the right to expect us to excuse or accept any form of oppression, based simply on how long it has been in existence. No, we will not defend the indefensible or excuse the inexcusable, and we will win. And maybe 200 years from now we will all be free. Thank you.

Original transcription by [Laurelin in the Rain](#) — thanks!