

The Whoredom of the Left

Posted on Mar 8, 2015

By **Chris Hedges**

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_whoredom_of_the_left_20150308

VANCOUVER, British Columbia—Prostitution is the quintessential expression of global capitalism. Our corporate masters are pimps. We are all being debased and degraded, rendered impoverished and powerless, to service the cruel and lascivious demands of the corporate elite. And when they tire of us, or when we are no longer of use, we are discarded as human refuse. If we accept prostitution as legal, as Germany has done, as permissible in a civil society, we will take one more collective step toward the global plantation being built by the powerful. The fight against prostitution is the fight against a dehumanizing neoliberalism that begins, but will not end, with the subjugation of impoverished girls and women.

Poverty is not an aphrodisiac. Those who sell their bodies for sex do so out of desperation. They often end up physically injured, with a variety of diseases and medical conditions, and suffering from severe emotional trauma. The left is made morally bankrupt by its failure to grasp that legal prostitution is another face of neoliberalism. Selling your body for sex is not a choice. It is not about freedom. It is an act of economic slavery.

On a rainy night recently I walked past the desperate street prostitutes in the 15 square blocks that make up the Downtown Eastside ghetto in Vancouver—most of them impoverished aboriginal women. I saw on the desolate street corners where women wait for customers the cruelty and despair that will characterize most of our lives if the architects of neoliberalism remain in power. Downtown Eastside has the highest HIV infection rate in North America. It is filled with addicts, the broken, the homeless, the old and the mentally ill, all callously tossed onto the street.

[**Lee Lakeman**, one of Canada's most important radicals, and several members of the **Vancouver Rape Relief & Women's Shelter**, met with me one morning in their storefront office in Vancouver. Lakeman in the 1970s opened her home in Ontario to abused women and their children. By 1977 she was in Vancouver working with the Rape Relief & Women's Shelter, founded in 1973 and now the oldest rape crisis center in Canada. She has been at the forefront of the fight in Canada against the abuse of women, building alliances with groups such as the **Aboriginal Women's Action Network** and the **Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution**.]

Lakeman and the shelter refused to give the provincial government access to victims' files in order to protect the anonymity of the women. They also denied this information to the courts, in which, Lakeman said, "defense attorneys try to discredit or bully women complainants in criminal cases of male violence against women." This defiance saw the

shelter lose government funding. “It is still impossible to work effectively in a rape crisis center or a transition house and not be breaking the Canadian law on a regular basis,” said Lakeman, who describes herself as being increasingly radical.

Lakeman, along with the radical feminists allied with the shelter, is the *bête noire* not only of the state but of feckless liberals who think physical abuse of a woman is abhorrent if it occurs in a sweatshop but somehow is acceptable in a rented room, an alley, a brothel, a massage parlor or a car. Lakeman is fighting a world that has gone numb, a world that has banished empathy, a world where solidarity with the oppressed is a foreign concept. And, with upheavals ahead caused by climate change and the breakdown of global capitalism, she fears that if mechanisms are not in place to protect poor women the exploitation and abuse will increase.

“We have never stopped having to deal with misogyny among activists,” she said. “It is a serious problem. How do we talk to each other as movements? We want to talk about coalition building. But we want new formations to take women’s leadership seriously, to use what has been learned in the last 40 or 50 years. We deal with the most dispossessed among women. And it is clear to us that every sloppy uprising, or every unplanned, chaotic uprising, devastates poor women. We need to have thoughtfulness built into our practices of revolt. We do not want the traditional right-wing version of law and order. We work against it. We do not call for a reduction in men’s rights. But, without an organized community, without state responsibility, every woman is on her own against a man with more power.”

“We are seeing a range of violence against women that generations before us never saw—incest, wife abuse, prostitution, trafficking and violence against lesbians,” she went on. “It has become normal. But in periods of chaos it gets worse. We are trying to hang on to what we know about how to care for people, what we know about working democratically, about nonviolence, yet not be subsumed by the state. Yet we have to insist on a woman’s right not to face every man alone. We have to demand the rule of law.”

“Globalization and neoliberalism have accelerated a process in which women are being sold wholesale, as if it is OK to prostitute Asian women in brothels because they are sending money home to poor families,” she said. “This is the neoliberal model proposed to us. It is an industry. It is [considered] OK ... just a job like any other job. This model says people are allowed to own factories where prostitution is done. They can own distribution systems [for prostitution]. They can use public relations to promote it. They can make profits. Men who pay for prostitution support this machinery. The state that permits prostitution supports this machinery. The only way to fight capitalism, racism and protect women is to stop men from buying prostitutes. And once that happens we can mobilize against the industry and the state to benefit the whole anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle. But men will have to accept feminist leadership. They will have to listen to us. And they will have to give up the self-indulgence of prostitution.”

“The left broke apart in the 1970s over the failure to contend with racism, imperialism and women’s freedom,” she said. “These are still the fault lines. We have to build alliances across these gaps. But there are deal breakers. You can’t buy women. You can’t beat

women. You can't expect us to coalesce on the 'wider' issues unless you accept this. The problem with the left is it is afraid of words like 'morality.' The left does not know how to distinguish between right and wrong. It does not understand what constitutes unethical behavior."

Even though many radical feminists are deeply hostile to the neoliberal policies of the state, they nevertheless are calling for laws to protect women and demanding that the police intervene to halt the exploitation of women. The shelter in Vancouver filed an amicus curiae in a case before the Canadian Supreme Court arguing for the decriminalization of those who are prostituted, mostly women and children, and the criminalization of those, mostly men, who exploit them as pimps, johns and brothel owners. Lakeman and the other women have endured fierce criticism, especially from the left, for this advocacy.

"In the progressive left it is popular to be anti-state," she said. "It is not popular to say we have to press the state to carry out particular policies. But all resistance has to be precise. It has to reshape society step by step. We can't abandon people. This is hard for the left to get. It is not, for us, a rhetorical position. It comes from our answering the crisis line every day. There is cheap, thin rhetoric from the left about compassion for the prostituted, without ever doing anything concrete for the prostituted."

This stance, one I support, turns Lakeman and the collective's other women into outsiders among those who should be their allies.

"We have been denounced. We have had our funding attacked. Our members have been attacked. We have been boycotted," she said. "We are shamed in public events. We are called homophobes, transphobes, hypermoralistic, pro-state, hateful of men and anti-sex." The legalization of prostitution in Germany and the Netherlands has expanded trafficking and led to an explosion in child prostitution in those two countries. Poor girls and women from Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa have been shipped to legal brothels there. The wretched of the earth, part of the neoliberal model, are imported to serve the desires and fetishes of those in the industrialized world.

Forced labor in the global private economy generates illegal profits of \$150 billion, according to a report by the **International Labour Organization**. The ILO estimated that almost two-thirds of the profits, \$99 billion, came from commercial sexual exploitation. More than half of the 21 million people the ILO estimates as having been coerced into forced labor and modern-day slavery are girls and women trafficked for sex. They are moved from poor countries to rich countries as if they were livestock. The report does not cover internal trafficking in which women are transported from rural to urban areas or from neighborhood to neighborhood. Traffickers hold out promises of legitimate, well-paying jobs to poor women, but when the victims show up, the traffickers or the pimps strip them of their documents and throw them into a crippling debt peonage, a burden that stems from trumped-up fees or having to borrow money to obtain the drugs used to addict them. The average age at which a woman enters prostitution is 16. In one study the **average age at which prostitutes died** was 34. Women forced into sexual slavery in Europe, the ILO estimated, can each generate a profit of **\$34,800 a year** for

those who hold them in bondage.

Lakeman called what has happened in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands “the industrialization of prostitution.”

Sweden in 1999 criminalized the purchasing of sex. Norway and Iceland have done the same. The two responses—the German model and the so-called Nordic model—have had dramatically different effects. The German and Dutch approach normalizes and expands human trafficking and prostitution. The Nordic approach contains it. Sweden has cut street prostitution by half and freed many women from sexual slavery. Lakeman, citing the Nordic model, calls for criminalizing the buying, rather than the offering, of sexual services. Those whose bodies are being sold should not be punished, she said.

Since December the purchase of sex has been illegal in Canada. The Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act, or Bill C-36, criminalizes the purchase of sexual services and decriminalizes the sale of those services. It restricts the advertisement of sexual services and communication in public for the purpose of prostitution. But the law has triggered fierce opposition, and it faces threats of a legal challenge. The Ontario premier, the Vancouver Police Board, law enforcement officials and some other political bodies and politicians have announced they will not implement it. The New Democratic Party, Canada’s second-largest party, and the Liberal Party have said they will work for the legalization of prostitution. There is no guarantee that the law will hold as economic and sexual inequality widens across the globe.

“The global trade, particularly of Asian women, has been steadily worsened by the neoliberal policies of First World countries,” said Alice Lee, part of the Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution. “These policies are grounded in social disparities of race, class and gender. They create conditions that force poor women to migrate. Those who support legalizing prostitution often argue that trafficking is bad, but prostitution is acceptable. But trafficking and prostitution are inseparable.”

“Asian women are trafficked primarily to earn money in prostitution to support their families,” she said. “And we are developing generations of women who are prostituted and are abandoned to exploitation. When we were in Cambodia we went to a neighborhood where women aged out as prostitutes in the 20s and where 90 percent of the women became prostitutes. Communism in China stamped out prostitution, at least visible prostitution. But with Chinese capitalism, prostitution is everywhere.”

“Women in China work for a dollar a day in factories,” Lee said. “Traffickers trick these women into prostitution by offering an escape from their despair with a promise of better jobs and improved working conditions. In mining towns and centers of resource extraction women are recruited and brought in as prostitutes to service the men. They are brought into military bases and to tourist sites. Where there is economic exploitation, militarism and ecological destruction, women are being prostituted and exploited.”

“For women of color, prostitution is an extension of imperialism,” Lee said. “It is sexualized racism. Prostitution is built on the social power disparities of race and color.

Women of color are disproportionately exploited through prostitution. This racism is not acknowledged by those in First World countries, including the left. Sexualized racism renders us invisible and irrelevant. It makes it impossible for us to be considered human.”

“Third World women are used in the developed world for domestic labor, the care of the old and the undisciplined sexuality of the men,” Lakeman said. “Our liberty as women cannot rest on this deal.”

Many indigenous women on the streets in the Downtown Eastside have been severely beaten, tortured or murdered or have disappeared. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police in May 2014 issued a report that said that 1,017 indigenous women and girls in Canada were murdered between 1980 and 2012, a figure aboriginal women’s groups contend is too conservative. As prostitution and pornography become normalized, so does male violence against women.

“When some women are bought and sold,” said Hilla Kerner, an Israeli who has worked at the shelter for 10 years, “all women can be bought and sold. When some women are objectified, all women are objectified.”