

Amnesty can no longer claim to defend human rights if it backs decriminalising prostitution

The world's most high-profile human rights organisation is either unable or unwilling to see that prostitution is a system of interrelated human rights abuses.

BY RACHEL MORAN PUBLISHED 4 AUGUST, 2015 - 17:19

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It has been about 18 months since women's rights activists everywhere were left reeling from **Julie Bindel's exposé** of Amnesty International's determination to decriminalise pimps and punters in the global sex trade.

The news was received with shock and disgust from those of us active in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation. There was also - especially from those of us who've lived the sex trade - a deep sense of betrayal.

The bald reality is that when you have been brutalised in a system which is founded on inequality and shaped by the consistent violation of your human rights, you expect the most recognised human rights group on earth to acknowledge the wrongness of that system.

Yet in its **recently leaked "Draft Policy on Sex Work"**, Amnesty displays its blind ignorance to this understanding. The headline of Resolution 2.3 reads: "International Board – Policy calling for the decriminalisation of sex work".

The document itself is a sight to behold. It refuses to recognise that commercial sexual exploitation is a highly gendered abusive practice, and in numerous places throughout the document, Amnesty considers recommending the decriminalisation of punters, pimps, brothel owners and others who exploit women for financial gain or sexual gratification in the global sex trade.

The human rights organisation repetitively recommends the decriminalisation of all parties responsible for human rights abuses in prostitution, while insisting "that states can impose legitimate regulations on sex work, provided that such regulations comply with international human rights law".

The problem is that pimping out human beings and buying sexual access to the bodies of human beings are themselves breaches of human rights law. It is mystifying when the most high-profile human rights organisation on earth puts together a document endorsing those engaged in human rights abuse; it is more perplexing still when Amnesty needs to be reminded of the very Human Rights Instruments its proposals contravene.

One would expect that Amnesty would know their resolution is in direct contravention of at least three UN Conventions. Since they are ignoring the fact, it is timely to remind them:

- The UN convention of 1949 articulates specifically that prostitution and trafficking and such slavery like practices “are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person”
- Article 6 of the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (1979) declares: “State Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.”
- Article 9.5 in the **Palermo Protocols** calls on State Parties to take measures to discourage the demand that fosters the exploitation of persons which leads to trafficking.

Many Hollywood celebrities have signed an **open letter released by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women**, which makes clear that Amnesty’s resolution is damaging and in contravention of the articles above. Because Meryl Streep, Anne Hathaway, Emma Thompson and other notable Hollywood personalities have given their support, the letter has been deliberately reframed as a document put together by the Hollywood elite. Not so.

The statement was written by CATW, a group that has been on the frontline of the struggle against sex trafficking for decades, and was signed by numerous human rights NGOs, women’s rights activists and sex trade survivor groups long before the first Hollywood personality was involved.

There are now more than 600 signatures of individuals and groups. However, these signatories have been ignored - because it is easier to attack actors, their Twitter feeds having been swarmed with vicious pro-prostitution lobby vitriol since the article was first published.

Another distortion of truth in the push-back against the Hollywood celebrities who’ve signed this letter is that they are "against decriminalisation". No. They are, just like us survivors and human rights activists who first signed this letter, fully on board with the decriminalisation of people in the sex trade. What we, and they, are against is the decriminalisation of pimps and punters that Amnesty proposes endorsing.

The general public needs to take a serious look at what Amnesty is considering condoning. Our abolitionist colleagues in former Soviet bloc countries tell us there are villages in Romania and Bulgaria where many of the women between 15 and 25 have left, because they are all being prostituted in the legal brothels of Germany. **German police themselves** have spoken out against this horrendous manipulation of their laws by international pimping gangs.

In New Zealand, which is often held up as a model of decriminalisation, the situation is no better. One young New Zealand woman who contacted me recently told me that, although she desperately wants to get out of prostitution, it is simply not possible as there are no exit strategies of any kind in a country where prostitution has been decriminalised. She is 28 and has been in prostitution since she was 14 years old.

Where prostitution has been given the government's stamp of approval and repackaged as legitimate "sex work", there is no onus on governments to provide exit strategies - any more than they’d be expected to provide exit strategies for women in nursing, hairdressing or childcare. Women like this are simply abandoned by the state.

The full decriminalisation of all parties involved in prostitution was implemented in New Zealand in 2006 (after being carried by just one vote). This is exactly the legal model Amnesty is proposing, but already women in the trade and New Zealand politicians are publicly voicing regret over their decision

– not least because **prostitution has not decreased overall**. Even the MP most initially welcoming of it **has expressed concerns**, while a former prostitute told a parliamentary committee that "being raped and sometimes gang raped came with the job".

Contrary to the claims of the sex industry lobby, sex trafficking does not stop in countries where the pimping and purchase of women has been decriminalised. This has been the case in New Zealand, **Germany**, Holland and every other country foolish enough to roll the dice with this sorry social experiment. The reason for this is simple: where prostitution is legitimised, the market expands. Where the market expands, human bodies are required to accommodate it. Amnesty must know this, but it is pushing ahead anyway.

From what I can see, those with the decision-making power in Amnesty International are suffering from a case of "White Male Syndrome". They are either unable or unwilling to see that prostitution is a system of interrelated human rights abuses. Perhaps this is because most of Amnesty's board members in the Western world (where these proposals originated) are middle-class Caucasian men who have not suffered oppression on the grounds of their sex, class or race.

To quote from a **public statement released by the women I work with in SPACE International**:

Prostitution is a straightforward and blatantly obvious system of unequal power relations, which operates to subjugate females in relation to males and to compound and conserve that subjugation by the intersection of further oppressions such as class and race.

Amnesty members who are concerned about this need to contact their local sections to express their opposition.

If we don't funnel our outrage into action, Amnesty will likely go ahead and make the biggest mistake in its history.

If that happens, reputational damage will be the worst thing the wealthy voting board members of AI will have to deal with. But they will not have deal with paid sexual abuse from punters, beatings from pimps, and a PTSD rate higher than that of soldiers returning from combat.

A closing message? Just this: Let's give Amnesty International that "controversy" they were so worried about.

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