

Streets apart

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In the eternal debate about prostitution, there are those, like the Dutch, who advocate legalising it, and those, like the Swedes, who want to get women off the streets by cracking down on customers and pimps. Next month sees the first overhaul of Britain's sex industry for 50 years. So which way will we go? Julie Bindel investigates

Elizabeth Valad, Bridgette MacClennan, Sally Rose White. All were street prostitutes in London murdered by Anthony Hardy, the so-called Camden Ripper, who prowled red light areas looking for women to buy. There is no doubt they were targeted and vulnerable because they were prostitutes, but what could have protected them? Tolerance zones? Tougher policing? We'll never know, but what we do know is that very few reading this will recognise their names.

Since 1990, more than 70 prostitutes are known to have been murdered in Britain. There are bound to be others whose bodies may never be found, because missing prostitutes matter even less than dead ones. Countless others have died as a result of drug overdoses, suicide or Aids-related illnesses.

The Hardy case prompted Scotland Yard to look at ways to increase safety for women in the sex industry and a Home Office review on prostitution, due to report next month, will be the first comprehensive overhaul in 50 years. Its focus is the links between organised crime, drugs, public nuisance and the sex industry, but it is unclear what the government's main priority is. If it is to reduce the numbers involved in the trade, then the reforms must be radical, but if it is to reduce risk for those already involved, it is bound to focus on sticking-plaster solutions that will not translate into long-term change. Police have not been given much incentive to tackle the industry, and often complain about their lack of power to intervene. According to the European parliament's women's rights committee, the illegal sex industry is estimated to turn over more money annually than the total of all military budgets in the world - about £5,000bn.

In the UK, the debate is fierce and polarised. Though prostitution is not illegal, more than 30 separate offences, such as soliciting, criminalise the trade. There are advocates of total legalisation of brothels and designated areas for street prostitution - and those who believe the only way forward is to come down hard on the customers and pimps, and assist women out of the industry. Supporters of legalisation often cite Holland as a shining example.

It is Valentine's Day 2004, but romance is the last thing on the minds of Amsterdam's 5,000 prostitutes. Nor is it on the minds of the men walking in the city's infamous red light area, many of them sex tourists fresh off cheap flights from the UK. The women are not on the streets but encased behind picture windows like shop displays. It's busy in the Walletpjes, home to most of the 500 windows, and the women wait patiently for business. There's plenty to be had.

"I don't fancy the Chink, I'm going for Britney," shouts a young British man to his friends, swaying drunkenly and pointing. Couples of all ages stroll hand in hand, looking at the prostitutes and laughing. "It's the way women look at me that hurts," says Magbula, an 18-year-old Albanian who came to the Netherlands to escape dire poverty. "They judge me and think I'm scum. We expect it from the men."

In one of the many sex shops in the area, rubber dolls with protruding mouths and vaginas, and dismembered buttocks with gaping anuses, provide a cheaper alternative to sex with a real woman. There used to be strict codes of conduct adhered to by most women selling sex: no kissing, no unprotected sex, and anal sex was purely a "specialist" service costing a fortune and provided by few. But the industry is now being shaped by the huge influx of desperate, vulnerable women coming to the EU from eastern Europe, Africa and south-east Asia to work as prostitutes. Most will have been trafficked by criminal gangs or individual entrepreneurs promising them a better life and the chance to earn a lot of money. Once across the border, they will be auctioned and sold on. By now, they owe a vast amount of money to the trafficker for facilitating their journey, and will be made to work off debts by servicing up to 40 customers a day, seven days a week. Their debts can never be cleared because they have to pay half of all they earn to the brothel owner and the rest to the trafficker. They are told that if they go to the police for help, they will be arrested and their families back home will have to pay the price. Trafficking, and a sharp rise in heroin and crack abuse among prostitutes, means the women are increasingly desperate, resulting in customers getting what they want.

"I am always being asked for anal sex without a condom," Rose tells me, nervously looking around in case the brothel owner sees her talking to me. "Can you pay me for my time? They rent these windows out three times each day, so I only have four hours to make enough, and half of that goes to the owner."

By definition, there are no pimps in Amsterdam's red light area. According to Dutch legislation, men who own the windows and brothels, and live off the earnings of prostitution, are now "managers" or "facilitators". A few feet from the windows, men resembling bouncers stand chatting, looking around, checking their merchandise. A customer comes out of a brothel, zipping up his chinos. "Lots of them are so drunk, they fall asleep without doing anything much, which is nice for the women," says Marianne Jonker, former prostitute and now a worker at De Rode Draad (Red Thread), the government-funded sex industry workers' union based in Amsterdam.

Jonker says prostitution is a job requiring special skills: "More skills than Tony Blair!" Only 100 of Holland's 25,000 prostitutes are union members.

It's not just some of the prostitutes who are organised. Gerrit Bloemen, a 62-year-old pharmacist, is founder of the Foundation For Man & Prostitute, the world's only formal customers' organisation. Based in Amsterdam, it was set up in 1986 to provide "support and friendship". "We discuss issues from how to combine having relationships with visiting

prostitutes, to how to access the best services." The group's main aim, like that of Red Thread, is to destigmatise prostitution.

Earlier this year, a delegation from Holland visited the UK to promote the Dutch model here. There is plenty of support from those working on health-funded "harm reduction" programmes and those who consider prostitution an inevitability, and part of the appeal is having cohesive legislation and policy, rather than piecemeal initiatives and the occasional police crackdown. Paul Holmes, former head of the Metropolitan police vice unit at Charing Cross, says what is happening in the UK is not working. "So far, the police have failed to offer prostitutes protection. We should offer them the same as victims of domestic violence. They should be thinking, 'I don't have to put up with this, I'll go to the police and get help'."

Brothel prostitution, long tolerated in Holland, was legalised there four years ago. In addition, street prostitution is rife. In 1995, a tolerance zone was set up for street prostitutes in central Amsterdam. The Tippelzone (pick-up area) was promoted as a great way to control the problems associated with prostitution, such as drug dealing, trafficking and violence.

Last year, the local council closed it down. The mayor, Job Cohen, admitted it had become a haven for traffickers and drug dealers, and had not achieved its aim, to break the links between prostitution and organised crime. Earlier this year, Rob Oudkerk, a councillor responsible for education and social affairs policy, was forced to resign when it was discovered he was a regular visitor at the Tippelzone. Legalising prostitution has certainly shaped the opinions of many Dutch citizens - around 70% supported Oudkerk and were opposed to his resignation.

"The Tippelzone was a mess," remembers Aalbert Kuiper, a "regular prostitute user". "It was not safe for anyone except the pimps and drug dealers. You would see girls in a real state there, some who could not even speak Dutch or English. There were regular fights and you would rarely see the police."

Recent research into contrasting responses to the sex industry found that, where it has been legalised, the illegal layer still flourishes. Since brothels were legalised in Melbourne, Australia, 20 years ago, the number of unlicensed brothels has trebled, and street prostitution in the St Kilda area has increased fivefold. Significant numbers of prostitutes do not want to register as prostitutes because of the resulting stigma and a reluctance to pay tax on their earnings. In Melbourne, more trafficked women have been discovered in legal establishments than in illegal ones.

The UK has become an attractive destination for traffickers importing women. This, coupled with the police's "hands off" approach, has resulted in a huge growth in the sex industry over the past 10 years. A recent survey of prostitution in London highlights this. "Bearing in mind we will have only skimmed the surface," says Denise Marshall, director of Eaves Housing, the charity that conducted the research, "what we found is a city saturated in prostitution."

The survey discovered that 10 of the 33 London boroughs now have established red light areas and all have off-street prostitution - Westminster alone has more than 130 identified brothels. This excludes walk-up flats in Soho, brothels advertised covertly in particular ethnic groups and "secondary level" services (escort agencies, chatlines, lap-dancing clubs). Less than 20% of the women working in the 730 saunas, brothels and flats are from the UK.

"This suggests," Holmes claims, "that the vast majority of women working in the off-street industry in London are trafficked. If you don't look, you don't find. So long as police are not given the go-ahead or resources to tackle this problem, it will grow and grow." In the UK, such women are generally seen as a nuisance, rather than in desperate need of help.

Roger Matthews, professor of sociology at Middlesex University, is clear about what is needed. "A welfare-oriented strategy is the only way to get women out. Unless we literally provide everything they need, such as drug rehabilitation, housing, childcare and counselling, they are likely to die. We also need to challenge the myths about prostitution: if I hear one more time that it's the 'oldest profession', I'll scream."

I visit Europe's oldest tolerance zone, often described by UK advocates of legalisation as an example of best practice. Unlike the zones that have been shut due to criminal activity, this one, I'm told, runs like clockwork. At the Marco Polo police station in Utrecht, half an hour's drive from Amsterdam, I meet Officer Jan Schoenmaker, responsible for policing the zone. In April, he was part of a delegation that visited Liverpool at the request of the local council, which is keen to set up its own tolerance zone.

Schoenmaker is proud of his work. He takes us to the enclosure where sex takes place, just behind the Toppelzone. There are 12 parking spaces separated by 6ft-high wooden partitions, as well as one for cyclists, or those who wish to stand up to have sex. "The council haven't cleaned up yet," he explains. "They do it on Sundays." The floors of the cubicles are littered with tissues, used condoms and cigarette butts. There are empty food cartons, clumps of hair and human excrement, and, incongruously, torn gift-wrapping paper. In one, a pair of men's underpants lies among the debris. How does having a designated area keep the women safe? "They have to come to the police station to register before starting work, so we can make sure they are not trafficked or underage. Also, we know who to look for if they disappear."

Schoenmaker translates some graffiti on the wall. "Dear kerb crawlers, we hate you men. We want to get as much money from you as possible." A response scrawled opposite reads, "Fucking whores, you must be fucked until you drop on the ground. We fuck and suck you until your cunt is very sore. Thank you."

Do the women ever report violent attacks? "Oh yes, we do get that. I am recommending that the cubicles are painted different colours, so a woman could say, 'I was raped in the red cubicle' which would make DNA testing easier. Imagine looking for DNA among all this," he sighs, pointing to the mountain of semen-soaked articles covering the ground. There is no doubt Schoenmaker cares about the women and the neighbourhood. Maybe that is why the zone has not yet been threatened with closure.

That evening, the pick-up area - a stretch of road behind an industrial estate - teems with women. They stand in skimpy outfits on a bitterly cold night, hoping to be picked by one of the faceless punters creeping along in their vehicles. I count 45 cars in five minutes.

In Holland, prostitutes are treated as service providers. Social services fund the "drop-in living room for prostitutes", a mobile home parked in the zone every night. The women can access hot drinks, food, condoms and needles, medical services and showers. A physiotherapist occasionally visits to advise on the best sexual positions in the confines of a car.

Rebecca has come in from the cold and is eager to talk. Pale and thin, she tells me she is 19, but looks younger. "I'm only on the streets until I save enough to buy a car." Her boyfriend put her on the streets when she was 15 and, although she has escaped him, she has found it impossible to get off the streets. "I was unlucky to meet him, and there was no one to help. The tolerance zone is great in some ways, but it can make it easier to carry on doing this. Everyone seems to accept it as a way of life, but I don't like it."

Kim, 36, has been in prostitution for 12 years. "I needed to make quick money and it seemed an easy option. Problem is, once you've been a hooker, it brands you for life. I don't care what the law is or how well the police treat you, everyone knows you're a whore." Is she happy? "What's happy? Who can honestly say they are happy? I don't like feeling happy, because that means I have so much farther to fall."

Several of the women are putting on make-up in the dressing-room area. Nina, a transsexual from Romania, is complaining about two young African women who have turned up to work. "There is no way they have registered, they are too young, and I bet they're illegal. I saw their pimp hanging around. That sort has to do whatever the client wants, which makes it difficult for the rest of us to refuse."

Ali and Moiud are the social workers on duty, coordinating the condom and needle distribution. Ali kisses each condom for luck before handing it over. "So they get customers quickly," she explains. "There's a lot of competition out there." Young men who seem to be "looking out" for the women are riding up and down on their bicycles, and a few men are "window shopping" - driving around gaping at the women with no intention of buying. One is openly masturbating. There is no sign of the police.

At the Dutch Institute for Prostitution Issues, Marieke van Doorninck is positive about tolerance zones and legal brothels. "A good legal sex industry is your best instrument against an illegal circuit."

There is a growing body of evidence, however, that legalisation is a green light for traffickers and pimps, because a legalised system is an unpoliced one. "Legalisation leads to massive expansion," argues Sheila Jeffreys, author of *The Idea Of Prostitution*. "Once prostitution is legitimised as an acceptable commercial practice, few ethical barriers exist to prevent newly brutal forms of exploitation."

What most people engaged in this debate agree on is that the women's safety is paramount. Proponents of legalisation insist that criminalising the trade puts the women in danger, whereas those who want prostitution abolished say selling sex can never be safe, and legalising it is condoning abuse.

Tryne, who tells me she is a crack addict, is waiting behind Amsterdam's central station for her fourth customer of the evening. Her short black hair is tucked under a woolly hat and her jeans and heavy boots are in stark contrast to the usual image of a street prostitute. "I wouldn't be here if anyone had ever tried to help me get out," she says, rubbing her hands against the cold. "The only help that exists for us is free condoms. I don't like what I do, but to most people here it's a sound profession. I'd like to see them come out of their offices and try it." Why doesn't she work in one of the zones, or from a window? "No way am I giving my money to pimps. When you work in red light areas, they know where to find you."

Dutch police say they regularly check the window areas and Tippelzones for trafficked women or minors, but Jola Vollebregt, policy adviser on trafficking in human beings for the National Police Agency in Zoetermeer, admits, "We do not have the manpower to monitor every night." The establishments are visited by bureaucrats with clipboards who have to be satisfied that health and safety regulations are being met. One thing they look out for is that bondage equipment allows customers to free themselves quickly in the event of fire.

Driving me around the Walletjes in Amsterdam, taxi driver Rudi talks about his fear for his daughters growing up surrounded by so much exploitation. "You see the 'lover boys' - young North African men who romance the girls, then pimp them. Then they say, 'What are you complaining about? Prostitution is a good profession, and I am just your agent.'" That morning, Rudi was asked by a British tourist, "Take me to a brothel, a cheap one with young girls."

Countries that have legalised prostitution, such as Germany, Holland and some states in Australia, have all seen an increase in the trafficking of women. Sweden, meanwhile, has seen a significant decrease.

Malmskillnadsgatan, the old street prostitution area in central Stockholm, is deserted except for a lone woman sitting on a wooden crate by the roadside. "She's mad," the taxi driver says. "No customers would come here - they could get arrested. They just go to the strip clubs and brothels now."

In 1999, Sweden became the first country in the world to introduce a law on prostitution that decriminalised the selling and criminalised the buying and attempted buying of sexual services. In other words, those involved in prostitution are seen as victims of a crime, and the customers the perpetrators. According to a study on prostitution in Europe, the number of men seeking prostitutes in Sweden is 13% lower than in the rest of the continent. Sweden is hoping to help introduce the law in neighbouring countries, such as Denmark

and Finland, and attends meetings worldwide to put on the agenda the issue of abuse within prostitution.

As the law was introduced, the government released €800,000 (£539,000) to services to assist women to leave the sex industry. Supporters of the legislation see it as part of a long-term strategy to eradicate prostitution, and raising public awareness seems to be working: a 2003 opinion poll found that 80% of the public supports the law. In April, Swedish children on a school trip to Kenya filmed their teachers apparently fraternising with prostitutes and entering a brothel in a red light area, and went public with the footage after the headmaster refused to act. One said it was "disgusting that we had gone to help these people for them to be exploited in this way".

Nevertheless, there are vocal critics of the Swedish model. Petra Östergren, a Swedish writer and social commentator, says the very women who are at the centre of prostitution policy are rarely heard and often feel discriminated against. "Most of the sex workers I have interviewed reject the idea that there is something intrinsically wrong with their profession, or that they should be subjected to therapy or retrained."

Gunilla Ekberg, Sweden's special adviser on prostitution and trafficking, challenges the argument that the law discriminates against women in the sex industry. "The Swedish government's position is quite clear - prostitution is abuse and should not be tolerated. Women must be assisted to leave the sex industry, not helped to remain in it. The buyers are the ones who should meet the cost of prostitution, not the women and men in the sex industry."

Ekberg was part of a delegation that visited Glasgow last year, to help persuade police officers and others that the Swedish model is the way forward. Glasgow has an estimated 1,400 women working the streets, more than 90% of them addicted to heroin. Many are funding their own and their partner's habit, some being controlled by a "drug pimp" who allows women to build up debts with him before forcing them out on the street to earn money to pay him back.

The 40-odd miles between Edinburgh and Glasgow has been described as the longest road in Europe and when it comes to prostitution policy, that could not be truer. Whereas Edinburgh has been lobbying for the reintroduction of its street tolerance zone, scrapped after complaints from residents and businesses last August, Glasgow city council has adopted a zero tolerance approach to prostitution and considers it abuse of women. "If we had the Swedish legislation, we could do much more to help women out of prostitution," says Jan Macleod of the Scottish Coalition Against Sexual Exploitation. "But in Edinburgh what they're asking for is more like the Dutch legislation."

Glasgow-based journalist Jean Rafferty, who spent a year researching prostitution for her book *Disposable Women*, says there is no evidence that tolerance zones protect women in prostitution. "Zones were not created to help the women, but to dump them somewhere away from 'respectable folk'. Those in Edinburgh were an insult to the women - horrible, dangerous places with no proper protection."

Glasgow city centre is pretty much deserted at 11pm on a Thursday night, except for the dozen or so women standing around in as little clothing as possible, so desperate for heroin that they are out whatever the weather. Two young men in a bus shelter keep an eye on a woman dressed in regulation miniskirt and heels, and move her on when they see me approaching.

I spot another woman shivering in a doorway. Jean seems old for a street prostitute; thinning hair hangs in lank threads around her once-pretty face, her rotten teeth framed by lips covered in cold sores. I ask how old she is and she says 35. I don't need to cover my surprise because she was expecting it. "I'm not on drugs," she insists, though the telltale signs are there. "I started coming out to the streets when my husband took my children off me 10 years ago." How old are her children? She can't seem to remember.

I offer to buy Jean a cup of tea and she suggests a "place around the corner". It turns out to be a double-decker bus, donated to Evangelical group Salt & Light by Stagecoach tycoon Brian Soutar, after he heard about the initiative to introduce heroin-addicted prostitutes to God. "What would you rather be doing: walking the streets having sex with strangers to pay for your drugs, or being comforted by God?" volunteer Anne Wallace asks a sobbing woman who is shouting that she has just been abused by a punter. In the bus, the women are talking about the police, and how the majority treat them like human beings. Cliff Richard's music threatens to drown out a woman shouting about the no-smoking policy on the bus.

"I've been doing this for 10 years," says Sue, a 28-year-old from Leeds. "Back home, the police would be arresting you left, right and centre, which is daft, because you just have to do more punters to pay the fines. That means the girls daren't report attacks, because if you have a couple of outstanding fines, the last people you are going to for help is the police."

Rafferty would advocate legalisation, because she believes it will increase safety for the women, but she would also introduce an "anti-monopolisation" clause: "In Amsterdam, a handful of pimps own the windows and brothels, and the women have to pay them a small fortune. How can you be independent in those circumstances?"

Nanette Pollock, a former DCI in charge of policing prostitution in Glasgow when seven prostitutes were murdered in the city in the 1990s, disagrees that legalisation offers women any protection. "I ran an unofficial tolerance zone in Glasgow for years, which meant we knew where the women were and could look out for them. It did not mean we were 'tolerating' prostitution; it just meant the women weren't being picked on by police. Once you make it official, we are condoning prostitution, and if you look at the hell they live in, no one, least of all the police, should do that. It's like giving up. If punters want to attack the women, they will, zone or no zone." Pollock believes the only way to tackle prostitution in the long term is to help women out of the industry.

A walk around Amsterdam's red light district challenges the myth of the happy hooker. I approach a number of the women in windows and ask if they are willing to talk, but they all refuse, one saying her "boss" would not like it. They look far from happy to be stuck there

in their underwear; many have the glazed, desperate look of heroin users, and some beckon you in. They pass the time by text messaging, watching TV and knitting. One is playing solitaire. Nearby, burly North African men are watching closely, often stopping to speak to the sex tourists, offering advice about the girls. "The pimps have now become managers," says one police officer on patrol who doesn't want to be named. "The legalisation has helped them more than the women, and we now have a reputation as the sex capital of Europe." In its in-flight magazine, Dutch airline KLM cites the red light district as a "major tourist attraction".

Back in Glasgow, I meet Doll and Tracey at the Routes Out Of Prostitution intervention project. Both are heroin addicts on methadone treatment programmes. Doll is 39 but looks older, her face lined and scarred, with an unhealthy, grey pallor. "I started prostitution because of my heroin habit," she says. "My son is an addict, so I was working for his as well. Since I've been on the methadone, I have a new lease of life. Just knowing I don't have to go out on to the streets at night has saved my life."

Tracey is 29 and was in prostitution for 10 years. She is full of praise for the intervention team. "I'd be dead without them. No one wants to be out there on the streets. It's changed for the worse, with so many of the women being desperate and rolling the punters."

According to former vice unit chief Holmes, very little is known about the UK's sex industry. "How are we supposed to know where the trafficked women are, and the kids, if we don't monitor it? Police are not given the resources to do that and, unlike burglary and car crime, it has never been a policing priority."

Holmes is clear that legalisation is not the answer. "In my 32 years working in vice, I can count on one hand the number of working girls who were not coerced or abused. Before we even think about legalisation, let's throw the kitchen sink at trying to remove the violence and coercion from prostitution. If we achieve this nirvana that those lobbying for legalisation imagine, then we can talk."

In trying to decide what to do about the sex industry, the Home Office prostitution review team has looked closely at both the Swedish and Dutch models. Where cities such as Liverpool are following Schoenmaker's line and trying to establish easier ways for prostitution to occur, Ekberk in Sweden is clear about what needs to happen in the UK. "Stop punishing the women and start focusing on the men who create the demand. Helping women escape means lives will be saved. We abolished slavery. There should be no room in any society for the buying and selling of women and children's bodies."