

april 9 2016, 1:01am, the times

## **We need to punish punters not prostitutes**

janice turner

### **Men don't 'need' hookers, they want them. Let's follow the enlightened Nordic countries and curb this vile sex trade**

I was interviewing a former prostitute when she casually mentioned the birth of her fifth child: "I was having sex with a punter at the time." What? "Yeah, on Brixton Hill. I gave birth on his jacket. He gave me an extra £40 'for the baby'." Hang on. Did he not notice you were nine months pregnant? She shrugged: "Men see what they want to see."

So what did he see, this man? Because even if she wasn't pregnant, anyone with eyes could tell she is very poor — periodically homeless, I learn — drug-addicted, troubled, ill, desperate. Did he see a quick release, a dirty thrill, a receptacle? When discussing prostitution much is said about women: maybe it is time to talk about men.

France certainly thinks so. This week it became the fifth European legislature to adopt the Nordic model which decriminalises the sale of sex but makes buying it a crime. If caught, French punters will pay a €1,500 fine, €3,750 for repeat offenders, and have to attend classes to learn about conditions faced by prostitutes.

What might they learn? That most were sexually abused as girls in chaotic homes or in care; many were pimped out by men who claimed to love them; use drugs or booze to mute the physical and mental abrasion of serving many rough strangers. In France about 90 per cent are from poorer nations. Forget that happy hooker, Belle de Jour soft-porn fantasy. Even London's top madam with a roster of "high class" ex-models, interviewed by *Tatler*, said: "There's a numbness. A lot of girls come from not-great backgrounds . . . there's a reason why they're doing what they're doing."

A young woman recently described herself to me as a “pro-sex feminist”. She believes “sex work” is benign, should be legalised, celebrated even. Tell that to women at the charity where I’m a trustee, I thought, two with prolapsed insides, all desperate for better lives. Then tell me if what they endured was sex or sexual abuse. And whether you’d like to do this “work”.

The “world’s oldest profession” we say. Like that’s the end of the story. Prostitution is inexorable, eternal, encoded in civilisation’s DNA. And fundamental to that is the notion it is necessary: that male sexuality is so dark, volcanic and all-powerful that denying it a commercial outlet will bring forth rape and violence. Yet the “men can’t help it” argument has been defeated elsewhere. Few now believe rape is driven by “irresistible” girls or that wives must accede to all conjugal demands.

The simple truth is that men don’t “need” prostitutes: they want them. In France, 343 influential men, including Dominic Strauss-Khan’s lawyer, launched the Bastard Manifesto against the new legislation under the banner “hands off my whore”. The government, they said, was “legislating on their desires”. Their angry scream of entitlement only boosted the Nordic model cause.

Surveys into punters find that the majority are married, many are young professionals with lots of sexual partners: not the lonely widower of myth. They choose prostitutes because “they do exactly what I say”, “you don’t have to please them”.

Decriminalisation, however, only increases demand. Prostitution is reclassified as part of the leisure industry: pimps are given free rein. In Germany, 12-storey mega-brothels have “gang-bang” floors, menus catering for the roughest tastes. Some charge a flat rate for an “all you can screw” deal, others offer a cheery lunchtime special of a Bratwurst, beer and a shag. Women as a side-order: what a brave, “pro-sex” new world. It’s no coincidence that the Nordic model was pioneered in the most gender-equal countries: Sweden, Norway and Iceland. Here women are assisted to leave prostitution and, unafraid of prosecution, they can report violent punters. Since 1999 the number of Swedish prostitutes has halved. The trade hasn’t been “driven underground” as opponents always claim: demand has simply dropped. Because a new generation of young men is taught that buying women’s bodies is shameful. Isn’t that the message for all our sons?

In Germany around 400,000 women are now in prostitution: most are east European migrants. Legalising encourages sexual trafficking, as the Netherlands has discovered. If business is booming, the pimps have to fill those canal-window cabins somehow. When the decriminalisation lobby shouts “listen to the sex workers” they mean a voluble, relatively well-off Soho few. Not Romanian teenagers locked in Amsterdam massage parlours, serving 20 men a day,

The Home Affairs select committee has begun an inquiry “to assess whether the balance in the burden of criminality should shift to those who pay for sex rather than those who sell it”. As in France, the Nordic model is gaining force although to the horror of Labour women Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell support decriminalisation. But then I’ve rarely met a man on the left who, having applied his huge progressive brain to this “women’s issue”, doesn’t come down on the Bastard Manifesto side. As if the right of women to safety and dignity was trumped by the male desire to get laid. Britain is about to have a new debate about this old subject. Already the two models have been tested unofficially. Leeds has instituted a tolerance zone where the police turned a blind eye: punters flooded in and a woman was killed. By contrast, in Ipswich, after five murders by Steve Wright in 2006, police pulled up kerb crawlers, threatening to expose them: trade fell away.

The Home Affairs select committee has begun an inquiry “to assess whether the balance in the burden of criminality should shift to those who pay for sex rather than those who sell it”. As in France, the Nordic model is gaining force although to the horror of Labour women Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell support decriminalisation. But then I’ve rarely met a man on the left who, having applied his huge progressive brain to this “women’s issue”, doesn’t come down on the Bastard Manifesto side. As if the right of women to safety and dignity was trumped by the male desire to get laid.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4730212.ece>