



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

The debate on 'sex work'

As Dean of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing I feel compelled to call for serious-minded reflection on this delicate matter. The starting point of this debate needs to be focused on a human rights discourse around sex-workers and also acknowledge agency. I also feel that it is timely to pull this theme out of the shadows. Most people like sex and want sex, others choose to buy sex and others to sell sex.

We need to recognise that whilst the vast majority of people involved in this sector are heterosexual women, men and people from the LGBTQI+ community are also either forced or choose to engage in sex-work.

My position on this matter is governed by the notion that 'sex-work' devalues and objectifies the person. I also believe that this debate needs to be framed within a context whereby sexist attitudes towards women are still predominant in our society. Moreover, whilst it is not up to me to take a moral stance, I consider the act of 'sex-work' as problematic unless it is the sole informed decision of those concerned. My petition is that we tread diligently before any decision on changes in our legislation are taken.

Regarding the evidence base, it has to be noted that the approach of the abolitionists to blur the distinction between women selling sex and women sexually exploited does not seem to be helpful. The problem is that sexual exploitation by third parties is no longer separated from violence inflicted by clients. It is, however, not possible in the framework of this note to find out whether this is because the evidence base is so small or whether this approach contributes to the lack of evidence. Nevertheless, qualitative studies exploring clients' attitudes report a higher readiness of men buying sex to use violence than other parts of the population.

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I believe that it is the duty of those in decision making positions to consider the following, as we place this matter on the agenda:

1. The debate needs to be founded on the human rights of sex-workers – all else should follow.
2. The debate needs to take into consideration myriad issues, namely, decriminalisation of sex-workers, high quality support services (medical and social), pimping and sex-trafficking, training of professionals (including the police and judiciary), improved legislation and public and educational campaigns.
3. The debate needs to be mindful of the fact that women working as sex-workers are at a higher risk of contracting STDs and other infections due to multiple sex partners.
4. The debate needs to be watchful on the evidence that seems to be indicating that for the majority, factors such as



poverty are seen as strong push-factors forcing women into prostitution.

5. The debate needs to avail itself of the various reports and empirical evidence that show that sex-work does not exist without exploitation.
6. The debate needs to frame the fact that women, who are mostly affected by this phenomenon, tend to come from broken-down families, want to escape their environment and are somehow vulnerable.
7. The debate needs to focus on the fact that indicators seem to show that the majority are lured into this profession with the promise of luxurious life and money.
8. The debate needs to look at the fact that sex-workers when hooked into the system find it extremely hard to get out of it.
9. The debate needs to keep in perspective that in circumstances when sexual activity lacks arousal it creates potential physiological problems.
10. The debate needs to relay the concern that this situation is a representation of a patriarchal society in which men feel entitled to have sex when they want to.
11. The debate needs to take into consideration the fact that sex-workers are stigmatized so heavily that they find it hard to reach out for help and are mistreated to the level that they cannot act independently. Their self-worth is probably shattered and they develop a very low concept of themselves.

Several studies prove that prostitutes are at a heightened risk of violence, escalating to lethal violence. Therefore, some women's rights groups take the view that all prostitution should be re-

garded as a form of gender based violence. Women's rights organisations, among them the European Women's Lobby, are campaigning for prostitution to be banned. The European Parliament, in its resolution of 5 April 2011, agreed with this approach and in October 2013 about 50 MEPs publicly joined the EWL campaign 'Together for a Europe free from prostitution'. Additionally, prostitutes also report violence by police and law enforcement agents, as well as other forms of degrading treatment by the authorities.

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I believe that for this reason we need to:

- Analyse meticulously what happened in other western/Nordic countries and study the impact on sex-workers (and as a consequence on society);
- Commission research so that empirical data will be led by an intelligent and intelligible debate rather than base our strategies on impressions and/or populist arguments;
- Commission research on the collateral impact of sex-work, for example, on human trafficking;
- Rationalise the debate because the number of women entering the sex-work business by choice is assumed to be higher.
- Caution is applied because it is unfortunate that the discussion on disabled person's sexuality in Malta is focusing mainly on access to paid sex, giving the impression that intimate relationships outside sex-work are beyond the reach of disabled

people. This concern merits particular focus.

One should keep in cognisance that;

"The most conservative official statistics suggest that 1 in 7 prostitutes in Europe are victims of trafficking, while some Member States estimate that between 60% and 90% of those in their respective national prostitution markets have been trafficked. Moreover, the data available confirm that most trafficking in Europe is for the purposes of sexual exploitation, principally of women and girls"....According to a report published in 2012, prostitution is a global phenomenon and involves around 40-42 million people of which 90% are dependent on a procurer. 75% of them are between 13 and 25 years old. The prostitution market is a highly globalized and "industrialized" phenomenon where millions of women and children from deprived backgrounds all over the world are bought and sold by criminal circles to macro brothels which can exploit hundreds of victims at once.

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This is a complex matter that merits not only ample space for discussion but also a debate that must converge women organisations, women who work in this sector and researchers. Politicians need to stand to their role and listen to what the major issues are before changing or introducing new legislation.

*Author's note:
Credit to Dr Charmaine Borg for her advice on this matter*

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