



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

It's not 'sex work', it's prostitution

I met Dr Anna Borg, lecturer and director of the Centre for Labour Studies at the University of Malta, Dr Roderick Bugeja, lecturer and researcher in the area of sexual health, Dr Mary Muscat, lecturer and former police inspector who trains law enforcement officers in substantive criminal law, and Marie Therese Gatt, who has a background in psychology and has worked with victims and perpetrators of abuse. They all make part of the newly set up organisation, *Association for Equality*.

Following that meeting, I decided to interview Dr Anna Borg on the cause they are championing:

What do you feel are the main issues we are failing to take into consideration in this debate?

First of all, we need to ask some important and delicate questions that we seem to be ignoring.

Prostitution is not illegal in Malta, so what exactly is the government planning to regulate – maybe pimping and soliciting?

Do we want Malta to become a hub for the sex industry in the Mediterranean and in the process generate more revenue for brothel owners and pimps?

There are many issues that we seem to be failing to take into consideration, but I will focus on the two most important ones.

Firstly, for the vast majority of women and girls who find themselves in prostitution, this is not a free, conscious choice, and it is nearly always a case of exploiting the vulnerable. This happens because for a large segment of girls and women in prostitution, the entry age is under 18 years of age (EU, 2014). Research also shows that girls are groomed as early as 12-14 years of age. These girls typically come from troubled backgrounds and from dysfunctional families (issues of mental health or addiction, or people who were brought up in institutional care), where it is easier to groom them into this 'lucrative' trade while they are still so young. Others enter into prostitution once they become hooked on drugs or they feel desperate and think they have no other option how to earn money.

Secondly, opening up the sex trade means an increase in trafficked (vulnerable) girls/women and boys/men/trans to service the industry and keep the johns (the prostitute's customer) happy.

Why?

Simple logic. Increased demand as a result of legalisation raises the issue of increased supply.

Where will the girls/women and boys/gay men/trans come from if there are not enough volunteers who want to be prostituted? The answer is: *Trafficking or tricking them into thinking they are going to be doing other work and then leading them into this lifestyle*. Nearly all prostituted persons indicate that they want to leave that line of work but they do not see a way out.

Do you consider this to be a gender issue?

Most definitely!

Over 85% of prostituted persons are female. The rest are trans, gay men and straight men. In 99% of the cases, these people are in prostitution to service

men. Hence, this is clearly a gender issue, where the bodies of women, men and trans people are commodified and used by johns in a patriarchal society. Men decide that a subset of people (in the vast majority girls and women) are 'legitimately' bought and sold to satisfy their so-called 'uncontrollable lust'. The European's Women Lobby, all local women's NGOs and the EU recognise this and are against the liberalisation of prostitution because of its devastating effect on those caught in this trade.

What are the pull factors that encourage women to take on this line of work?

Misery, vulnerability and dire financial problems are the biggest pull factors. No girl generally aspires to be used as a recipient for men to ejaculate on or to have unwanted sex activity or to put herself at risk of disease or to have a sexual relationship with someone who has enough money to use her. Apart from that, drug and alcohol addiction can also act as a pull factors.

Can you give us a snapshot of what is happening at the moment?

In countries where they have opened up the sex-trade things have been degenerating fast.

The sex industry has boomed, and so the number of vulnerable people being lured/tricked/trafficked into the trade has increased as well.

Here are some facts and figures that might illustrate my point:

In the Netherlands, an estimated 60-70% of the women in prostitution were forced by criminal groups (EU, 2014).

In Germany, 87% of prostituted people suffered physical violence, 50% showed symptoms of depression and 25% contemplated suicide.

Apart from that, in New Zealand the Trafficking in Person Report issued by the US Department of State in 2017 noted shortcomings and recommended that they "increase efforts to identify victims through proactive screening of vulnerable populations, including women and children in prostitution" and to "amend the law to define the sex trafficking of children as not requiring the use of force, fraud, or coercion." Furthermore, they are being urged to "expand anti-trafficking awareness campaigns; and engage in efforts to reduce demand of forced labour, including in supply chains, and sexual commercial exploitation, especially of children and foreign women."

In New Zealand, "foreign women from Asia are at risk of sex trafficking. Some international students and temporary visa holders are vulnerable to forced labour or prostitution. A small number of Pacific islands

and New Zealand (often of Maori descent) girls and boys are at a high risk of sex trafficking. Some children are recruited by other girls or compelled by family members into sex trafficking" (TIPR, Report, 2017). Furthermore, in spite of claiming to bring safety to prostitutes, at least five prostituted women have been murdered since 2003. In one case, a 24-year-old woman was strangled, bound, raped and run over after an argument with a john resulting from his refusal to use a condom (Gerlich, 2018). In all countries where it has been legalised, the stigma of being a prostitute has not diminished, as was envisaged, not has their protection and safety improved.

What model should this country consider adopting?

The Nordic Model.

This is endorsed by the EU, the European Women's Lobby and all local organisations working to protect girls and women and who lobby for gender equality. This model has been implemented by forward-looking countries which have adopted a feminist stance, including Sweden, Iceland, Norway, France, Canada, Northern Ireland and Ireland. In this model, prostitution is considered a form of violence against women and is not tolerated because it is harmful to those involved and to society in general. Furthermore, this model recognises that those involved are likely to be victims of circumstance and that the power dynamics between these victims and the johns (who have the money) and pimps (who earn the money) are not equal.

Why can't sex work be considered the same as any other job?

'Sex work' is a favourite term among pimps and those involved in trying to legitimise the sex industry. It gives a nice veneer to an ugly reality which is often tainted and interlinked with crime, trafficking and drugs. 'Sex work' normalises all of this and renders it a normal job, when clearly it is not. No other job carries such high risks and such a high degree of violence for those involved. No other job is as lucrative for pimps, and so it is understandable that they want to normalise sex work.

Do you have empirical evidence of what prostitutes want?

International research suggests that up to 89% of prostituted people want to leave but do not see a way out or another viable option to survive. Local research carried out with prostituted people who make use of Dar Hosea's services clearly indicated that they do not want prostitution to be legalised. We

can draw parallels with Germany, where less than one per cent of prostitutes have registered themselves as prostitutes.

Why are you against the legalisation of prostitution?

Regularising prostitution would mean regularising abuse and violence against a group which is already vulnerable. Can you ever regularise abuse or violence just because it is a lucrative business? Obviously not. Legalising prostitution is a gift to pimps, traffickers and those who stand to gain from it. Legalising prostitution would mean legalised harm for the benefit of the few, while society picks up the cost which comes in the form of more people falling ill due to physical (HIV and Aids, Syphilis, Gonorrhoea, HPV) leading to cancer, Herpes) and mental health problems (Violence, Post-traumatic stress disorders, Depression, attempted suicides, drug taking, drink problems). Furthermore, decriminalisation will simply encourage more people, especially those coming from poor or abusive backgrounds and school dropouts to use prostitution as any other option to make a living.

What are you inviting politicians to take cognisance of once this issue starts being debated in Parliament?

That they need to take a stand. They can either take the side of the pimps, johns and brothel owners and close their eyes to the ugly underside of prostitution that feeds on the vulnerable, or they can choose to protect the vulnerable, the weak and the poor and recognise that prostitution is a form of violence against them, and decide to stop it by making the exchange of money for sex illegal. They cannot sit on the fence.

The sale of human organs has been made illegal across the world. So, if selling one's organs is not allowed, should putting your whole body up for sale be made legal? There is something incredibly inconsistent here that does not make sense to us.

What do you predict the impact of this matter will be on society if we regularise this issue?

We are no different from other countries when it comes to prostitution. Look at what has happened in Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand. Malta risks becoming a Mecca for the sex industry. With an increase in demand, the number of prostituted and trafficked women will surge exponentially, thus leading to the victimisation of yet more girls and women.

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Dr Andrew Azzopardi
Dean Faculty for
Social Wellbeing,
University of Malta &
Broadcaster - Ghandi xi Nghid
www.andrewazzopardi.org