



PERSPECTIVES



100 YEARS & COUNTING

The enslavement of women within the Sex Industry

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One hundred years ago Josephine Butler, the Anglican champion for the rights of those caught in prostitution to be treated as equal citizens, tirelessly called on church leaders, politicians and ordinary men and women to look afresh at the horrors entailed in commercialised sexual labour. A cornerstone of her work was to seek legislation to limit what she saw as the State recruitment of women into prostitution for the benefit of the armed services across the Empire. On the centenary of Butler's death it is salutary to note that the British Empire might have passed away, but the horrors and degradation of what Butler saw in prostitution has continued and been transformed in the contemporary scourge of trafficking for sexual exploitation and a commercialised sex industry.

Pollution

With ecological problems of our environment currently polling first position in our national political concerns, according to various Gallup polls, it is interesting to note the origin of the word pollution. The first use of the word pollution, recorded around 1340, described it as the "discharge of semen other than during sex". This is significant because I would like to suggest that contemporary trafficking for sexual exploitation is a pollution which should be of major concern in our social ecological awareness. In the processes of obtaining a woman for trafficked prostitution, not only is there deception, force, intimidation and systematised abuse, but there is also multiple rape enacted on the young woman or girl, both by her captors and on those who buy her services in the massage parlours, terraced houses, serviced apartments and clubs where she is worked. Here there is 'pollution' for reasons other than love and mutual respect in conditions where terms such as consensuality have been utterly denied their meaning.

Amongst those with whom I have personally worked, there are many whose bodies have been polluted for as little as £25 per half hour. This purchase of women's bodies by morsels of half hour acts of exploitation, as many as sixteen to twenty times a day, six days a week, leaves a woman exhausted and spent by her experiences in the centres of so called development and contemporary cool. She is imported like a commodity, her life sold on in airport lounges, strip clubs, erotic bars and the back rooms of terraced suburban houses for £2,000 - £8,000 pounds when she is fresh. If she is used, non compliant or pregnant then her price is as little as that of an old beaten up car. This is the contemporary defilement of humanity taking place on the streets of Britain today.

The new slave trade

In 2007 this is the new slave trade. A trade in which enslavement through loss of control of one's destiny, of one's movement and use of one's body twenty four hours a day, seven days a week is now defiling our common humanity and the image of God among us. One of the difficulties in confronting prostitution as the abuse that it is, is because it is linked with an ancient practice of violence against women's bodies which has become part of the culture. Phrases such as 'the oldest profession in the world' and the idea that prostitution entails some form of choice whereby women are able to earn more 'on their backs than on their feet' mean that prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation are still relegated to minority interest status in our ethical world of outrage. They are not in the forefront of contemporary Christian ethical thinking. Consider only for a moment: when did you last hear a sermon on the ethics of sexual relationships and the purchasing of bodies for sexual gratification, said a prayer written for such a purpose by liturgists, or sang a hymn in which the radical equality of women's bodies with those of men were celebrated and sanctified?

We give thanks to God for the witness and achievements of the work of Josephine Butler in raising the awareness of churches and politicians

alike to the 'double moral standards' involved in the use of prostitution, but we need to build on her witness and insights surrounding the global abuses of prostitution. Congregations may think that there is little that they can do to impact on the increasing acceptability and ubiquity of lap dancing clubs, grooming of youngsters as immature as 12 years old, sex tourism, use of massage parlours for sex, and internet purchasing of sexual services from on line brides, courtesans and abusive images.

On your doorstep?

However it has given CHASTE pause for thought that the first young women who were 'liberated' at least temporarily from the shocking situation of being trafficked for sexual exploitation, were two young Thai women held in a DIY brothel in an ordinary house in the lee of the twin towers of Beverley Minster. These young women were close neighbours of not only the Vicar, but of numerous members of the congregation and in the sound of the Minster bells. And no-one knew. Only those who visited the brothel for sex and those who held the young women there against their will.

What can churches do?

There are three very specific actions:

First of all Christians have a clear mandate to be appropriately informed about the issues and the reality of the abuse of over 4,000 women within trafficking for sexual exploitation in the UK today.

Secondly connections need to be clarified between the abuses of UK based prostitution and the global abuses of trafficking which tend to capture the attention of the tender hearted.

Thirdly the importance of supporting specifically equipped organisations such as CHASTE, which are tasked to develop the advocacy, response and capacity of the churches to relieve suffering, expose injustice and bring about an end to this evil or in our contemporary speak this profound ecological dysfunction of our humanity. A specific action would be to join in the Not for Sale Sunday which CHASTE is launching in 2007.

For more information on the work of CHASTE and her partners log onto www.CHASTE.org.uk