

The Harsh Reality of Prostitution

By Theodore Dalrymple

“Who is more to blame,” asked the 17th-century Mexican nun and poetess [Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz](#), “she who sins for pay, or he who pays for sin?”

In the abstract, the blame should probably be equally apportioned, since there could not be one without the other, but the moral questions raised by prostitution have long perplexed both writers and governments.



The Oscar-winning film “Anora,” though it ends sadly for its main character, implies that, under the right circumstances, the life of a prostitute can be “a glorious cycle of song,”

to quote Dorothy Parker.

The reason for the relatively favorable depiction of prostitutes in film and literature is to challenge the unfavourable view that almost everyone instinctively has of them, and to remind us of their common humanity. Censoriousness can easily translate into cruelty, which is no doubt why some people (in medical journals, for example) insist on renaming prostitution as “sex-work” and prostitutes as “sex-workers.” No one has yet done the same for pimps,

however; they have not yet become "sex-work managers" in the mealy-mouths of those who employ the new euphemisms.

In my medical career, I had some patients who were prostitutes. A few of them had made a more-or-less respectable lives for themselves, giving their children a good education and trying to prevent their daughters from following in their footsteps.

But mostly their lives had been extremely sordid, punctuated by violence, marked by continual exploitation, disgust with what they were asked to do, poverty, drug-addiction and—with age—declining returns. I can still hear in my mind's ear the demented screams of a dying old prostitute, who even in her 60s sold herself for a cigarette.

Some people—intellectuals, mostly—have suggested that it is a basic human right to prostitute yourself: after all, they say, it is your body to do what you like with. This I have spoken on a discussion panel with a sociological researcher, a rather prim and proper lady, who had found in her research that prostitutes liked their job because of the relatively high pay (certainly above the minimum wage), the flexible hours, the ability to decide how much to work, and so forth. For such prostitutes, said the researcher, prostitution was work like any other, except rather better.

At the same time, however, I was living on a very nice road, near to which were hotels catering to commercial travellers, and into which street prostitutes were bussed by a pimp (who suddenly had the idea) from a nearby impoverished town every evening. I recognized them as drug-addicted, malnourished, and old before their time. There was not much happiness to be seen on their faces, to put it mildly.

The local council ran a service from a circulating white van to bring them hot coffee and contraceptives, some of which ended up in our front gardens, or in the gutter. A redoubtable

neighbour of mine chased the prostitutes and their pimp away, but only to somewhere else in the city. She even confronted the pimp who pointed a gun at her. She told him not to be ridiculous and to put "that thing" away.

It has often been said that prostitution is the oldest profession and certainly no society has been able to do away with it entirely, as no society has ever been crime-free. This has suggested to some that it is pointless to try to do anything about it—as the Roman poet Horace said of nature, though you try to throw it out with a pitchfork, it will still return.

But in the circumstances, to do nothing is impossible: to do nothing is to do something, namely encourage it. But what should be done?

All kinds of approaches have been tried. In Sweden, for example, prostitution is not illegal for the prostitute, but for her client. Irrespective of the results of this, it is hypocritical, or at least inconsistent: it is like legalizing the production of fentanyl and then criminalizing its consumption.

In the Netherlands, there is a famous, or infamous, red-light district in Amsterdam. There, prostitution is tolerated, and it is said that violence towards prostitutes has declined as a result. But in what kind of society are women displayed as in shop windows, for potential customers to gape at as trout or crabs are sometimes kept in restaurants for diners to choose from? The women in question are often trafficked by people smugglers and are under the control of pimps, their lives at best those of indentured laborers, at worst those of slaves.

All this is done in the name of harm reduction; and of course such abuses, more hidden, are committed by criminals elsewhere, in other jurisdictions, under different laws. But is the quality of life made better by bringing out into

daylight for everyone to see what was formerly hidden? Amsterdammers do not think so; and the red-light district of their city, which has the seal of semi-official approval, is one of the most melancholy sights in the civilized world that is known to me. Life cannot be lived entirely out in the open in the name of supposed honesty.

In Britain, prostitution is legal but soliciting for custom is not, which is both inconsistent and unrealistic. It leads to arbitrary enforcement of the law and obvious opportunities for police corruption. But outright prohibition does the same, insofar as complete suppression has been proved impracticable.

Nevertheless, the choice is not between a perfect solution and no solution at all. The idea of harm reduction brings harms of its own, sometimes intangible, but greater than those it is supposed to reduce.

At the very least, we should not portray prostitution as in any way amusing or glamorous. I recall an adolescent girl of solid middle-class background, intelligent and normally destined for a successful career, who was dazzled by the supposed glamour and drama of the low life. She ran away from her comfortable home and soon fell in with two drug dealers. They imprisoned her and addicted her to heroin by forced injections, in the hope that they could turn her into a prostitute in return for heroin. One day, though, they killed her, or she killed herself, with too large a dose. They called a low-life lawyer for his advice, which was to dispose of her body in the local reservoir.

No, prostitution is not a glorious cycle of song.

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