The portrayal of prostitution in society can vary. For some people, prostitution is viewed as a vocational choice and expression of sexual liberation. Subsequently the impact and damage caused by prostitution is very often portrayed as a public health issue and a question of public order only. For others, seeing prostitution as a form of violence against women and a human rights violation allows for a broader range of impacts to be considered.

Attitudes to prostitution: the normalisation of the sale of sex

Prostitution is increasingly becoming normalised as a personal choice, and thus a private matter between consenting adults (Coomaraswamy, 1997). It is clear that prostitution is increasingly being seen as legitimate sex work (Jeffreys, 2003). Kesler (2002) argues that prostitution serves men’s sexual needs and meets women’s economic ones.

There can also be an assumption that prostitution is inevitable and that men are somehow “naturally” inclined to use women for sex. The purchasers of sex do not generate the same attention as the women themselves. Research attention has, in the main, focused on women, with their involvement in prostitution considered problematical, while the actual seeking out, and the buying of sex, has been treated as a normal aspect of male sexual behaviour (Weitzer, 2000).

Those who view prostitution as violence against women call for a radical reconsideration of men’s responsibility in prostitution so that prostitution is defined as a male issue; a question of men’s sexuality and not women’s (Månsson, 2001).

As normalised as the purchase of sex has become, it is clear that prostitution is not present in an institutionalised form in all societies today (Bullough and Bullough, 1996), and that, most importantly, the majority of men do not seek to prostitute women.

Attitudes to different types of prostitution

An enduring myth is that escort prostitution and other “indoor” forms of prostitution is somehow better and indeed safer than street prostitution. However, Raphael and Shapiro (2004) have found that violence occurred in all prostitution activities, but differed in frequency and severity. Women working on the street generally reported higher levels of physical violence, but women in indoor venues were frequently victims of sexual violence and experience, being threatened with weapons more often.
Societal attitudes to violence in prostitution

There is no doubt that male violence against women involved in prostitution is endemic. Miller (1993) found that

- 93.8% of the women in his sample experienced some form of sexual assault
- 43.8% were forced or coerced into sexual activity
- 75% had been raped by one or more of their clients and more than half had been robbed.

Yet the myth of prostitution as consensual sex between adults persists. Miller and Schwartz (1995) point out that women involved in prostitution are uniquely positioned to experience the brunt of many of the attitudes that create violence against women in society as well as the attitudes that allow society to ignore that violence. Other studies have shown a strong correlation with rape myth acceptance and an attraction to violent sexuality in men who prostitute women (Monto, 1999). Researchers have noted the vulnerability of women on the streets describing how women who appear entirely powerless on the streets appear to be the most successful at attracting clients (Morrison et al, 1995).

The impact of societal attitudes on the women

Women working in prostitution become prostitutes in the eyes of others (Brock, 1998). It is this stigma that contaminates a woman’s personal identity and affects every interaction she has, whether that is with her family, her friends or with service providers and officialdom. Research has shown that this stigma presents a need for women in prostitution to have access to a place to go to and “just be”, a place where they don’t need to explain, to lie, to hide and where they will be seen and accepted as the whole person and not just the “prostitute” (Høigård and Finstad, 1992).

The stigma attached to prostitution can strengthen a woman’s negative perceptions of herself as socially unacceptable, and require a woman to hide her previous identity. Creating the ex-role is a key part of recovery from prostitution, which occurs when the person who has broken away frees herself from what remains of the old identity and starts to create a new one. The creation of the ex-role also involves facing the recurrent fear of being “exposed” as a prostitute in their new lives (Månsson and Hedin, 1999).
What the Next Step Initiative told us

Men’s attitudes to prostitution and how the women experience it

Some fellas think that because they pay you they can take more of you. Like a piece of meat and if they don’t get it then they get violent. Some of them seem like the nicest people and then all of a sudden they turn on you.

I used to cry doing the clients at the end so that was traumatic. I hated that and the fear of being attacked. Because I went back to pay off debt they knew I was desperate and I lost the control I’d had before saying what would happen and what wouldn’t happen.

Looking for sex without condoms. Even though they have a wife and kids at home.

The impacts of attitudes

Feelings of guilt and shame came through from the experience of the women in the NSI interviews. And with those feelings, comes isolation and contempt from those around the women:

And it’s a small society so you always see someone you know. It’s like you’re a witch and you’re going to put a bad spell on them or give them a disease. Prostitution is a really bad word. I can’t stress how bad.

My brother got involved in drugs too. Heard I was out on the streets. I denied it, said I was selling drugs not doing business. Very judgemental of me, because of the prostitution. We didn’t talk for months.

Accessing supports

Women in the NSI interviews spoke of their reluctance to tell other service providers of their experience in prostitution:

I wouldn’t open up to anybody else but Ruhama…. Once I nearly told my doctor but it would have changed the relationship.

They also stressed how support available through Ruhama had changed their situation

I feel like someone again. It gave me back my self-esteem. There is no stigma here, no discrimination. Only encouragement. They helped me feel ready to leave the life. Get a job.

Changing public opinion and societal attitudes:

I don’t know how you can change that [attitudes to prostitution]. Maybe a documentary or more publicity in the paper so Irish society knows this is going on and women are suffering.

The women in the NSI research identified education in schools and youth clubs as essential:

Need to be out in the schools. Telling it how it is. Its not easy money. Not glamorous

We need to give more education in schools about sex education, diseases that can be carried, more education actually about prostitution.
Conclusions

More research is needed so that we can fully understand the nature and extent of all forms of prostitution and sexual exploitation in Ireland, as well as the link between the wider sex industry and prostitution.

The attitudes of men as buyers of sex, and society's acceptance of these attitudes, serves to exempt men, and society as a whole, from accountability for the damage and social problems created by prostitution. We need to know more about the conditions that create and sustain a demand for prostitution.

Societal change must be brought about by greater awareness of the realities of prostitution and sexual exploitation. Preventative work with young people on the realities of prostitution needs to be funded and supported by policy makers. Public awareness campaigns are needed on issues such as sexual exploitation; the age of involvement; consent and choice; the inherent violence and long term impacts of prostitution.

1 Operation Quest in 2003 was an initiative by An Garda Síochána to investigate lap dancing clubs and their links with traffickers of women for the purpose of prostitution. Over 100 people were arrested in raids in May 2003 for the employment of illegal immigrants the majority of whom were women from Central Europe.


3 As cited in Monzo (2004:176)

4 As cited in Farley and Kelly (2000)