

Trafficking and Prostitution – and the Differences that Don't Exist

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Trafficking and Prostitution are two areas that are very easy to separate; and they would be, as they are inhabited by two groups of women whose experience is characterised by two different kinds of coercion, two different kinds of force.

In one group, trafficked women, we will find the young Eastern European woman who has been tricked onto an international flight under the pretence that she is to be an au pair, only to find herself gang-raped and imprisoned in a brothel. We will find the African teenaged girl who has been kidnapped and sold within the female slave trade, sometimes with the added psychological violence of voodoo rituals to incapacitate her mentally as well as physically. In Canada we will find young women and girls of native descent trafficked to brothels in numbers far disproportionate to the females of the white population, because their lives are deemed less valuable, because the western world has decided them to be so.

I will focus for a while on the situation here in Ireland, with which of course, being an Irish woman, I am most familiar. Our national television broadcaster, RTE, aired the documentary 'Profiting from Prostitution' in the spring of this year. It focused on what was going on in Irish brothels, along with how they are organised and run. It also included interview evidence from numerous women; some trafficked, others having ended up in the brothels by what I call 'the traditional route'.

Some of the video footage was truly shocking. One Asian woman babbling, seemingly out of her mind on some substance, was not in a position to have a conversation, never mind involvement in any kind of sexual exchange. The only thing she said that made any kind of sense was "Work here, live here. No go outside"

A young African woman described in broken English her years of sexual slavery in Ireland, beginning when she was only twenty years old:

"I went to Waterford. After Waterford I went to Kilkenny, then Enniscorthy, then Navan. She (the pimp) would text me the address of the place where they would tell me to go this day. I have to do it because, I don't know, it's what I have to do because I was so scared. I don't want her to come and kill me. I had nobody to run to".

Asked how the clients treated her, she responded:

"The first man that came, I was crying to the man. The man called the woman that I refuse him sleeping with me. Anything could happen to me, so I don't have any choice. Whenever they come, I always tell them my situation, crying to some of them, but some of them, I don't cry to them. Some of them, the way they treated me, violence, calling me names, 'bitch' 'whore', you know, things like that".

“When I look at myself in the mirror in the morning I cry. I don’t even eat. I was thinking ‘what kind of a life is this?’ Men coming in, going out, coming in, going out. So I said, this is not the kind of life I want for myself, you know? I don’t even know what is going to happen to me. I don’t know where to go; it was what I had to do because I had nobody to run to”.

The words of that African girl haunt me for two reasons. Firstly, because I feel such compassion for her. Secondly, because I so identify with her, because the truth was, neither did I. I will include some text here from a blog I wrote this spring, which best explains the constraints of my own choices:

‘Many people think of choice as I might have done, had I never worked as a prostitute. For many, choice is something perceived akin to standing in front of a deli-counter. Choose this, choose that, pick out your preferred option. The men who choose which woman they’d like to fuck as they stare at those lined up for their consumption understand choice in just this way. Their concept of choice is rooted in the privilege of a genuine alternative. Their concept of choice itself is limited.

‘Choice does not always present as balanced; it does not always offer a different-but-equal alternative. When I think of my choices they were simply these: have men on and inside you, or continue to suffer homelessness and hunger. Take your pick. Make your ‘choice’.

‘People will never understand the concept of choice as it operates in prostitution until they understand the concept of constraint so active within it. As long as the constrained nature of this choice is ignored it will be impossible to understand the pitiful role of ‘choice’ for women within prostitution.

‘I’m going to reveal something very personal now, and I’m going to do that simply to illustrate how warped the concept of choice was in my circumstances. I had a conversation recently with my sixty-something relative who is currently spending a few months visiting Ireland, after having lived forty years in America. She reiterated something I’d heard many years ago in our family. It was a conversation my paternal grandmother had with the psychiatrist treating my parents in the local mental hospital. My grandmother (and this was before I was ever born) had made an appointment with the doctor, very upset as she was that my manic-depressive father and his schizophrenic girlfriend had just announced their intention to marry.

‘She wanted to know what could be done. How could this marriage be stopped? How could these two very unwell people be allowed to go ahead and marry? The doctor told her that mental illness could not be used as a reason to curtail a persons civil liberties and that was his view of the matter. But what, my grandmother wanted to know, would happen to any children born into that union?

‘I wish I could go back in time and give my grandmother a hug for having the compassion and the foresight to think of where that situation would leave us. She was right to worry. It left us in state care, one after the other. And as a young teenager it left me homeless, hungry, and prostituted, in that order.

‘The constraints of my own choices began even before I did. And if we were to shift this situation into the deli-counter analogy, there is no young girl standing there deliberating on what choice to make.

‘There is only a young girl standing waiting for what’s already been selected and pre-wrapped for her, and she can take it or leave it. Those are her options. That is her ‘choice’.’

People will say (and rightly say) that the trafficked child or woman and the destitute child or woman constitute two different situations. Yes, they do – but what is so often ignored is that they also constitute two different situations that culminate in exactly the same place; with both sets of women lying with their legs open on a brothel’s bed. In both situations, choice has been severely constrained. In both situations, the fear of one outcome leads to another. In both situations ‘choices’ have been made that lead to women’s bodies being sexually accessed against their will, which is lived as sexual molestation, in both cases.

In the case of the trafficked woman, she can ‘choose’ to keep kicking and screaming and ignoring the threats against herself and her family. Nobody sees this as a choice that she might be maligned for not making. In the case of the woman who is either in destitution or in fear of destitution, she can keep kicking and screaming mentally, and ignoring the reality of the economic threat against herself and her family, but people *do* see this as a choice that she is maligned for not making. The bald-faced reality however is that both women are caught in two different versions of the same bind, and both women pay the same price for it. The difference is that the latter group of women pay an additional price – it is the price of a socially-assigned culpability.

I will return now to the situation in Ireland.

Ireland’s best known online escort agency ‘Escort Ireland’ was proven in the documentary I’ve mentioned to have advertised women trafficked internationally by one notorious criminal gang, who were busted by the Police Service of Northern Ireland in an operation codenamed ‘Apsis’. The operation would have been better named ‘abscess’, in my opinion. This situation would be better expressed by the likening to a pustule or a boil.

The documentary tracked the movements of prostituted women nationally through the Escort Ireland website and in doing so revealed a disturbing pattern of constant motion from city to city and town to town, where these women, advertised as ‘independent escorts’, were shown to be anything but independent and in fact were being prostituted under the direction and control of international pimping gangs.

The women documented were very racially and ethnically diverse. They had been trafficked from South America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia. This left the viewer with one incontrovertible fact: the women whose bodies feed this trade are black women from Africa, brown women from South America, lighter-toned women from Asia and white women from several countries in Eastern Europe. What links all these women from various ethnicities and nations? Well, it’s the fact that they’re women, of course, which means that what we’re seeing here is gender-based slavery. We are so used to thinking of slavery as being something that is imposed by one race upon another that we are now witnessing slavery being imposed by one gender upon another – without the capacity for recognising it for what it is – without the social competence to assign it its true name.

About six weeks after the ‘Profiting from Prostitution’ documentary another Irish documentary was aired. It was called ‘Ireland’s Vice Girls’, in an unfortunate editorial decision. The content, however, was revealing and important. Again,

several women were interviewed, each with a different background, some having come to prostitution through trafficking, others through what's commonly understood as 'personal choice'. What stayed with me after the documentary was the response of one woman, one of those who had supposedly made this 'choice'. Her attitude towards prostitution and the men who used her within it was starker, more marked and more undeniably fixed than anything expressed by any of the trafficked women. She said 'If I ever had to do one more punter, one of us would be leaving in a body bag'.

The woman who said these words spent ten years in prostitution, and I must ask, do these sound like the words of a woman who made some kind of benign and autonomous choice? Does a woman who'd rather kill or be killed before she'd return to prostitution sound like a woman who was ever involved in it through true autonomous choice in the first place?

People view prostitution and trafficking as distinct because they want to, because they need to, or because they've been taught to – or perhaps a combination of all of the above. But women like myself understand, through our personal lived experience, that these are not two different individualised experiences. They are not distinct and separate and wholly apart at all, and the only real difference of note is that a woman prostituted through destitution or the fear of it can never say 'I was forced'. She can never say that because the world will never accept that, and she, consequently, must deal with a far greater weight of shame than the woman who can say she was physically forced.

I think we need to really examine, as a people, what we *understand* about the concepts of choice and force, and I think that until we do, we will *never* be able to decipher that murky hinterland with which the vast majority of prostituted women are intimately familiar; that place that bridges the gap between wanting to and having to; that place where so many women must occupy before they make a decision that is not a decision, a choice that is not a choice. It is a place that is imbued with a certain heaviness; the weight of an oppressive and secret force.

It is currently largely unrecognised – but it needs to be recognised. It needs to be unmasked. It needs to be understood for what it is. Because, as I have written in my memoir 'It is a very human foolishness to insist on the presence of a knife or a gun or a fist in order to recognise the existence of force, when often the most compelling forces on this earth present intangibly, in coercive situations'.

FreeIrishWoman

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