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# The prostitution strategy: a response

**Roger Matthews**

London South Bank University

I read the special edition of *CSJ* on 'the prostitution strategy: implications for community safety' with great interest. The various articles included in this edition embody the opinions of some of the most prolific commentators on prostitution in this country and all have conducted extensive research on the subject over the years.

Although there are a number of issues that arise in these articles, I want to address two related questions that I believe cut across these various contributions. The first issue that arises is: should our primary objective be to try to reduce the level of street prostitution, or should it be to find ways of legitimating and institutionalising it by encouraging community tolerance? Second, is the harm minimisation approach, which has been widely adopted in relation to prostitution in this country, adequate?

Paying the Price, the government's discussion document on prostitution states that: '*Prostitution makes victims of many of those involved in it, and of those communities in which it takes place.*' (Home Office, 2004). In their article What's anti-social about sex work? Jane Scoular *et al* (2007) claim that: '*these*

In February a special edition of *Community Safety Journal* (Volume 6, Issue 1) looked at 'the prostitution strategy: implications for community safety'. In this opinion piece, Roger Matthews gives his views on the content of the special edition.

*harms are stated without empirical support or critical analysis*' (p12). This is a surprising statement since the research conducted by some of the authors who have contributed to this article has clearly documented the harms inflicted on women as result of their involvement in street prostitution (see Campbell & O'Neill, 2006). These include: violence, rape, abuse, problematic drug use, mental and physical illness, social stigmatisation and isolation, plus problems of homelessness, loss of children and separation from families, to name but a few. Indeed, there can be little doubt that street prostitutes are among the most consistently victimised groups in the country. Further, the bulk of the available research clearly demonstrates that involvement in street prostitution damages a population that, in many cases, already has a history of victimisation, social exclusion and abuse.

There is also an extensive catalogue of research in this country and elsewhere that has documented in detail how residents' groups have organised to remove street prostitution from their neighbourhoods in an attempt to improve their quality of life (Matthews, 1993; Weitzer, 2000). These 'grass roots' campaigns, which

developed during the 1980s and 1990s up and down the country, have mainly taken place in deprived inner-city areas where the authorities have allowed 'red light' districts to operate. There is nothing 'natural' about the location of these 'red light' districts. They were established as a result of the concerted attempt to deflect street prostitution away from those more affluent areas that have political clout, to those locations that are more disorganised and encompass less powerful communities. These areas tend to experience more than their fair share of social problems and the presence of street prostitution has tended to impact most severely on women living in the area, particularly young women. These women are often reluctant to walk around the streets at night because of threats, intimidation and harassment. In many of these areas the campaigns to remove street prostitution have improved them and, belatedly, persuaded the authorities to take action to support local residents' groups. What was apparent in many of these 'red light' districts during the various campaigns that have arisen was that the presence of street prostitution was widely seen as the biggest problem affecting the area. In a world of 'lightly engaged strangers' there are always some who do not want to engage in local social and political issues but what was remarkable about the residents' campaigns against street prostitution was how strong local feeling was (and in some areas still is) about this issue and how widespread the local consensus was that something should be done about it. Given this history and experience, it is disingenuous to suggest that street prostitution does not have a major adverse effect on residential communities or that such problems can be simply overcome by mediation and awareness raising. If Scoular *et al* (2007) are opposed to Asbos and other measures designed to remove working women from residential areas, it is incumbent on them to suggest viable alternatives.

It should be noted that in the vast majority of these local campaigns, the object of intervention was not so

much the women involved in prostitution but the kerb crawlers. It was widely felt that addressing the 'demand' rather than the 'supply' side of the equation was a more appropriate and effective way to reduce the level of street prostitution. The significant reduction in the number of cautions and convictions for soliciting offences in recent years from over 10,000 in 1991 to just under 3,000 in 2001 is indicative of the changing police and public response to those involved in street prostitution. Increasingly, the emphases are shifting away from enforcement to the provision of welfare and support services aimed at reducing the harms associated with street prostitution and where possible helping women to leave prostitution. In many parts of the country the number of women involved in street prostitution has remained stable or is declining and in some inner-city areas that 10 or 20 years ago had 50 or 100 women working on the street, there are now only a handful on any one night.

The game is changing. The majority of the women currently working on the street are problematic drug users and, although Margaret Melrose is correct to point out that there is a danger of prioritising drug abuse over other problems experienced by the women involved in street prostitution, we have to recognise that the composition of the street sex trade has undergone a major transformation in recent years. Those who remain on the streets are increasingly desperate, disorganised and drug addicted. These attributes are unlikely to increase the desire of local residents' groups to tolerate prostitution in their neighbourhoods. The possibility of establishing so called 'toleration zones' away from residential areas has also proved to be a non-starter and the evidence from Holland and elsewhere suggests that such zones would be likely to create more problems than they solve.

The experience of Ipswich, as the editors point out in their introduction to the special edition, represented in many ways a turning point in public and media attitudes towards prostitution. The fact that a number of

women continued to turn out on the street after the reports of 'working women' being murdered sent out a very disturbing message however. Moreover, the murder of Paula Clennell a few days after she had been interviewed on television saying that although she was frightened, she was going to continue working on the street, was chilling. The role of the police and the local drug action team in this context was woefully inadequate. The inability of the relevant agencies to get women off the streets, even temporarily, without the help of independent donations, was widely seen as an indictment of their approach. It also raised questions about the adequacy of a harm minimisation approach, which does little more than patch the women up enough to allow them to continue putting themselves at risk by working on the streets. The message from Ipswich was that there is a need for a more proactive strategy that goes beyond reducing harms to *removing* harms and their causes. On the other hand, interventions are needed that increase choice and that are designed to maximise the ability of those involved to make an informed choice about their continuing involvement in prostitution.

In *Paying the Price* and other consultative documents, the government have outlined the basis of a strategy that aims to encourage women to get out of prostitution by developing appropriate services and support. At the same time, it has expressed a desire to get tough on pimps and procurers who exploit and abuse women. It is also developing preventative measures to divert young people away from sexual exploitation and it has expressed a commitment to enhancing community safety and improving the quality of life of residents living in 'red light' districts. It has unequivocally rejected the introduction of 'toleration zones' and resisted the pressure to adopt a full-scale policy of legalisation. In many ways the general direction of this policy seems to me, with all its limitations and imperfections, to be both sensible and potentially progressive. The major limitation of this

policy agenda has been the relatively low level of its implementation. The government has been slow in providing the resources and the impetus to make these policies effective.

The various critiques and commentaries included in the special edition of *CSJ* however, give the overall impression that the government policy is fundamentally flawed and misconceived. Consequently, while critical debate is always welcome, commentaries of this type inadvertently serve to provide the authorities with justifications for not implementing the strategy fully. Thus, while remaining critical, we should be supporting the general direction of the proposed government strategy on street prostitution and simultaneously pushing for its full and rapid implementation. The general policy on street prostitution, I believe, is one of the more positive programmes that New Labour has developed, not least because most of the constituencies where street prostitution is prevalent tend to be Labour controlled. If Labour are removed from office and the Conservatives are elected at the next general election the chances are that the policies on prostitution will become increasingly regressive – if history is any guide. We should, therefore, not miss the moment.

These arguments are more fully developed in the author's forthcoming book *Prostitution: A Changing Game* published by Routledge.

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