

TAKING SEX OFF THE MARKET

by Anna Marie White



Jennifer Jessie Allan started out life in the Yukon like many others of her generation: the eldest of three sisters in a family struggling to stay together. Eighteen years later, after doing time in foster care and several juvenile centres, she found herself entrenched in the sex trade of Vancouver's downtown east side as a full-time prostitute. After eight years, through the help of a local outreach mission, she was able to radically remake her life. Today she is an ardent advocate for the rights of prostitutes and runs her own outreach to help women struggling to get out of prostitution. If you ask her how to help women in prostitution through policy reform, she'll tell you point-blank, "Give them a way to get out."

She dismisses any talk of legalization and denounces any reforms that would give prostitution legitimacy as a 'profession' of choice for young women. The semantic revamping of 'prostitution' into 'the sex trade' may seem like mere political correctness gone overboard, but it is helping to fuel the belief, particularly in European countries, that prostitution is best addressed by legitimizing it as its own rightful industry.

Two years ago, Germany chose to deal with prostitution through legalization. Seemingly overnight, brothel owners joined the ranks of other respectable entrepreneurs and began paying taxes on earnings and offering health insurance plans to employees. They also gained access to databases of hopeful job seekers to whom they could send a request for

personnel. Employment centres could not legally refuse requests from brothels nor discriminate their staffing requests from those of other businesses.

In January 2005 an unemployed 25-year-old German waitress was told her unemployment benefits could be cut if she refused to take a job in the sex industry. Trained as an IT professional, she refused the job and attempted to sue the employment centre for trying to force her into prostitution—with no luck. Given Germany's completely legal sex trade, a brothel is as legitimate an employer as the neighbourhood gas station.

A *UK Telegraph* news story reporting on the case quoted Hamburg lawyer Merchthild Garweg, "[The employment centres] are already prepared to push women into jobs related to sexual services, but which don't count as prostitution.

"Now that prostitution is no longer considered by the law to be immoral, there is really nothing but the goodwill of the job centres to stop them from pushing women into jobs they don't want to do," said Garweg. Germany's laws not only fail to protect women who are at high risk for sexual exploitation, but they also threaten hapless job-hunters.

In contrast, permissive Sweden—long-time bastion of 'free love'—clamped down on prostitution in 1999 after three decades of a legalized sex trade. It toughened laws that punished the johns

and got rid of those that punished the prostitutes. Squelch the demand and you'll put the supply out of business—so goes the theory.

Yet what to do with the world's oldest profession? One Swedish commentator and ardent feminist points out that just because prostitution has always existed does not mean it always must. She notes that giving women real power—since 1998, Sweden has had the second highest number of female parliamentarians in the world—eliminates the need to perpetuate pseudo-power structures. Yet given that Rwanda occupies first place in female parliamentary representation, it is likely not the panacea for global exploitation of women that some feminists may wish.

Sweden's law-and-order approach to prosecuting the 'clients' and not the service provider has faced tough critics from groups like Vancouver-based Pivot who advocate legalizing prostitution here in Canada. Regardless of criticism, Sweden's reforms to prostitution laws seem to be working. In fact, the results are hard to ignore. Early reports say Sweden has cut street prostitution by 50 per cent and that more women are choosing to exit prostitution now than at any other point in their country's history.

Perhaps Jennifer is on to something that took Sweden thirty years to figure out. What exploited women really want is a way out of prostitution, not more laws to help keep them on the market. 🍀