

Towards a Christian view on the concept of ‘sex work’

It isn't possible to do justice to this topic in such a short article. Nonetheless the thoughts that follow might stimulate reflection.

For a lot of people, the difference between the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘prostitution’ is not particularly clear, and they might even seem broadly interchangeable. That said, many persons of goodwill may prefer the term ‘sex work’ because they feel it carries less cultural stigma than the word ‘prostitution’. We are deeply mindful of issues around stigma, and fully recognise what have been described as the ‘*complicated, derogatory and sexist connotations*’¹ that surround the associated word ‘prostitute’. As an organisation, we never use the term ‘prostitute’, choosing instead to talk of women ‘involved in’, ‘affected by’ or ‘caught up in’ prostitution.² We might at times use the term ‘commercial sexual exploitation’ as an alternative to ‘prostitution’, but it is nonetheless the case that we frequently use the term ‘prostitution’ in public discourse, and we do that in order to align ourselves with a particular position on the subject. According to this position, prostitution is *de facto* exploitation and is intrinsically harmful and dehumanizing. The alternative position, which has gained traction in many quarters, is that of the ‘sex work’ lobby which purposefully uses the language of ‘work’ and defines the transaction as one in which ‘services’ are provided in exchange for money or other resources. Whilst we completely understand that in the popular mind the language of ‘sex work’ may seem to be about the dissolving of stigma and shame, it is important to recognise it as a strongly politicised term and one that is rejected by many who have exited and want what they have experienced to be expressed plainly as ‘prostitution’³. We are deeply committed to the healing of shame and trauma and marginalisation, yet we feel that the language of ‘sex work’ is a false narrative that ultimately fails to promote a culture of honour or set people truly free.

“Women are groomed into believing they are empowered and then at the end of it they are crawling out of hell with all kinds of physical and mental health problems.”

Fiona Broadfoot

So what is work?

Prostitution is sometimes described as ‘the oldest profession in the world’, but Scripture suggests differently. In Genesis 2:15 we find the first account of human work in the Bible where we read that ‘*The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.*’ It is striking that there are two verbs here that apparently hold together— to work it **and** to take care of it, or - according to other translations - to cultivate it **and** to keep it, to tend it **and** to watch over it. The first of these verbs, *abad* in the original Hebrew, already contains within itself a dual meaning of to work and to serve. According to this verb, work has a relational quality rooted in attendance or helping. The second one, *shamar*, is not used anywhere else in the Bible to refer to land care, but rather to ‘keeping’ something, whether flocks (1 Samuel 17:20) or a household (2 Samuel 15:16) or a brother (Genesis 4:9). According to Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis, *shamar* is also frequently translated as ‘to observe’ in the Bible, and carries a range of different nuances including abiding by the dictates of justice, honouring the rhythms of nature, and following the ordinances of God. Davis concludes that the implication of the word ‘observe’ in relation to the land might therefore mean that we are ‘*to learn from it and respect the limits that pertain to it.*’⁴

If Genesis 2:15 provides insight as to the qualitative value of what work is meant to signify at the level of relational intention, we can also deduce from Genesis 4:12 - where Adam sins and is told that the land will no longer yield its strength - something about what work is then meant to bring about. Evidently it is meant to enable the other ‘one’ to release its strength. It is about cultivating and drawing out the potential of something, patiently nurturing its inherent capability to help make it somehow more fully itself. But this other one is then itself also in a position of service. In a community of kinship – another important Biblical theme – it then offers its gift back, or bestows it, as the Hebrew is sometimes translated. Its fruitfulness is a gift given in return. The community of creation is to

mutually serve all its members in this ethic and outcome of work, and in the set of covenant relationships in which work belongs.

Seeing the land as one with whom we are in relationship may seem strange to us. Whereas the Israelites recognized a covenant between themselves, the land and God, modern industrial agriculture has instead objectified the land, recognizing its value only insofar as it delivers rapid and low cost food for the food industry. The result of this intensive use, whilst providing fast and cheap rewards for a time, is eventually erosion, degradation, decimation, loss - for the land itself, but naturally also then for the other members of creation, including ourselves.

So what about 'sex work'?

What does this have to do with 'sex work'? Well, if it is work, how does it fit with this original paradigm? Does 'sex work' nurture the strength and capability of the other and make that person more fully themselves? Is there a blessing received, a bestowing, in return? Or is the ultimate effect one of erosion, degradation, decimation and loss?

To use the language of Saint Ignatius - does it lead to consolation in the end, characterised by joy, tranquillity and a sense of homecoming, or does it lead to desolation in the end, characterised by agitation, loss of hope and a sense of disconnectedness?

"If we want to reverse trauma, we have to tell the truth."

Ingeborg Kraus

Women who have exited 'sex work' often speak of a bell-curve experience⁵ – the initial lure of financial reward or other provision giving way gradually to an array of trauma-related symptoms – addiction, dissociation, anxiety, PTSD, and also pervasive feelings of shame, worthlessness and hopelessness. This is not a universal trajectory but a marked one. That many women entering

commercial sexual exploitation have had experiences earlier in life of childhood neglect or abuse – often sexual abuse – raises important questions about whether 'sex work' might at times be a form of self-sabotage, a means of traumatic re-enactment or an effort at trauma reversal or overthrow⁶. Once inside, women face experiences of violence that have been described as '*near pandemic levels*'⁷, using a phrase that has developed new-found poignancy in the era of Covid-19. And yet 'sex work' ideology nonetheless '*funnels those already socially vulnerable to prostitution straight into it by reframing prostitution so as to gloss over its damage and degradation*'⁸. This is one of its more pernicious aspects according to Rachel Moran, especially since it does so whilst '*agitating for the wholesale decriminalisation of sexual and financial exploiters*'⁹.

The use of the word 'work' obscures all of this harm, and operates as a kind of gaslighting for the women involved: '*Women in prostitution today navigate the emotional and psychological minefield of processing prostitution while steeped in a self-protective defensive ideology that denies the existence of its trauma in the first place. As they deny it to themselves, they deny it to everyone else, and in turn 'sex work' dogma destroys our capacity for empathy and sympathy, because, in this narrative, there is nothing to empathise with and nothing to sympathise about.*'¹⁰ There is also no reason to feel shame. But the trouble is that many women just do. Why? For myriad reasons, not least because shame often gets transferred to victims of abuse¹¹. Saying that shame isn't there doesn't make it not there, and therefore doesn't invite healing. Without healing, the cycle of harm continues.

Against this background, we need to choose and question our words carefully, we need to be judicious about what we appropriate and replicate lest we become unwittingly co-opted into a narrative that conceals or distorts the truth. How are we defining work in our minds or in our conversations? Simply as what we do to acquire money or income? Surely that won't do, because then almost anything becomes work - even crime as long as it produces money. Is work about delivering a service or product? But then what do we mean by a service or a product? Can sex itself actually be sold? Surely not, since it is a mutual act, rather than an item that can be transferred. In which case, the thing that is being sold is not in fact sex at all, but sexual *access* to a person's body.¹² That's a different thing altogether. Could we perhaps re-cast it instead as sexual *services* that are being sold? But '*if sex is just a*

service, then rape is just theft, as Rachel Moran points out: *'If sex is to be equated with any other service, then we cannot complain about the rape of a woman in prostitution any differently than we could complain about someone having their sink fixed and not paying the plumber. Rape is disappeared here.'*¹³ And we might also ask, are those who buy 'sexual services' actually *served*? Aren't they themselves defrauded in their need for genuine connection and covenant, for authentic rest and recreation, which has got confused with either the short-term relief of orgasm or a bogus experience of intimacy achieved only through payment?¹⁴

What, then, of rest?

In his book *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, Norman Wirzba contrasts the healing and emancipatory nature of true Sabbath rest with what he calls the *'adventures in artificiality'* that so often masquerade in its place. In the case of sex 'buying', the 'worker' is often a short term fix in a cycle of tension and relief that operates for the 'buyer'. She is his leisure product, part of his escapism, part of a cycle of compulsion that has features of addiction and is in fact rooted in restlessness. Distraction rather than satisfaction. In the case of the 'worker', if dissociation has become her survival mechanism to cope with what she does, is she able to switch this off and move into authentic peace and enjoyment during other moments of life? In many cases this proves hard to do. As one exited woman said of her experiences: *'This mechanism of "going out of the moment" helped me to endure all this but I could not get rid of it, which made my daily life disastrous.'*¹⁵

There are others affected too. A growing body of research looking at the *'shadow women'* behind the men who pay for 'sexual services' - their wives, girlfriends and daughters - suggests a multiplication of harmful effects on the lives of those around the 'sex buyer'.¹⁶ In research carried out by Ingeborg Kraus, one woman described the decay of her marriage: *'Over the course of years, I experienced him becoming emotionally uninvolved in our family life. His sexuality changed, too. Again, and again I tried to speak with him about it, but he refused to talk to me. There were times when he touched me in a different way than normal. Today I know that it was because he had been to a prostitute beforehand. I felt it but couldn't name it. I told him: "You're treating me like a prostitute, you're touching me like a piece of meat." There was no more intimacy. There was no more tenderness, it was only about creating stimulus.'* 'Sex workers themselves have to create mental and emotional defences to protect themselves from the guilt of their complicity. For Andrea Heinz it became too much: *'Any mentioning of a girlfriend or wife would cause me to experience overwhelming sadness and guilt [...] I began to see the harmful impact that my part in the industry caused. I was acting as a mule for the patriarchy by championing and perpetuating the objectification of women, the exploitation of our sexuality.... I felt I was betraying women.'* If we go back to Genesis and think about the law of multiplication that sits within the working relationship - fruit generating seeds, which then in turn generate more fruit, which then in turn generate more seeds, and so on - isn't this law of multiplication meant to cause an ever increasing flow of provision and bounty and blessing, not an ever increasing augmentation of harm?

Fraud

As Christians, we understand that the battle we fight is not against flesh and blood but operates at a spiritual level. The battle lines that exist are certainly **not** drawn against those who choose to call themselves 'sex workers' and indeed we are well aware that they often already feel besieged by criticism, even hate, by various sectors of society. It is a source of significant sorrow to us to witness, for example, the vilification or lampooning to which they are frequently subject in the media. They are too often reduced to symbols of other people's constructing, made into convenient vehicles of projection and various forms of othering. A book published last year by two 'sex worker' activists describes the frustration and inaccuracy of binary characterisations such as the empowered 'happy hooker' on the one hand or the victim in need of 'rescue' on the other.¹⁷ The latter point is a particular challenge to us. It is vitally important to keep listening to activists such as these, and also others.

Juno Mac, who co-authored¹⁸ the book, recently spoke in a podcast¹⁸ about her own experiences both as a 'sex worker' and as a leader and campaigner. She is strikingly articulate and astute, and it is both instructive and

humbling to track her levels of reflection on what she does and why, to note her respectful choices in terms of how she engages with those who disagree with her, and to hear her accounts of solidarity and generosity within the 'sex worker' community. Towards the end of the podcast, and without any discernible self-pity, she then speaks of the 'trauma' of having sex for money, and notes that being 'a prostitute for ten years is to carry a lot of scars sexually'. She talks of the sexual connections that arise between 'sex workers', a subject that intrigues her, and identifies this as linked to the 'deleterious effect' that 'sex work' has had on their sexuality and the 'specific kind of safety' that they can find with each other. She also describes the function of sexual roleplay and BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, and sadism and masochism), explaining these as associated with a very identifiable human need to find 'a way to regulate our nervous system'.

She speaks with empathy and her words offer insight and understanding, but isn't there more we can hope for in life than carrying a lot of scars from our work and having it affect something as fundamental as our sexuality so that we need to

seek out particular places of safety? Isn't there more we can hope for than mechanisms of emotional coping or pain management that give us only temporary escape or release - mechanisms that trade in illusion and that, as we have seen, ultimately lead to various forms of desolation? Isn't this a tactic of the enemy – to bind us to something that has all sorts of collateral damage in our lives, and in the lives of those around us, whilst making us believe that this is the best we can hope for, so that we even become advocates for our own cheatedness? How can we go along with this? Love compels us to challenge this narrative because ours is a different story, one in which an unregulated nervous system can be healed and pain can be faced, in which we don't need to limp through life half broken by the things that we think keep us together, half breaking those around us in the process. In an anxious, addicted world, peace still has a Name.

In Dante's 'Inferno' which describes a journey down into the various regions of hell, the poet places the sin of fraud deep in the lower reaches, lower than almost every other type of sin including, incidentally, violence or lust. Fraud for Dante was especially malign because of its intentional distortion and mockery of the truth, its cynical twisting of the bonds of human love and mutual responsibility into something wholly counterfeit. Fraud is embodied in the poem by the beast Geryon who arrives in such a way that what is first visible is only his face and torso. His face is of a good man but below the ledge lies his serpent's tail with a scorpion's sting. It is an arresting image of fraud with its calculated yet concealed cruelty.

Isn't 'sex work' ideology essentially a defrauding of numerous parties, including those who advocate for it? Isn't the term itself essentially fraudulent, given the difference between its appearance and its sting? Given the devastation it causes wouldn't it be more obvious and accurate to talk about sexual *exploitation* rather than *sex work*? There is no single word in the Bible meaning exploitation, but rather a cluster of words¹⁹ that we have translated variously in English as defrauding, exploiting, robbing, cheating or taking advantage of. An etymological theme in these words is an over-reaching beyond one's own proper bounds to seize what rightfully belongs to another, leaving that person in a state of deprivation. This contrasts markedly with the Biblical definition of work that we considered at the beginning of this essay, and especially with its attention to the limits and integrity of the other. In Italian, the word for exploitation - *sfruttamento* - still borrows from an agricultural context and literally means the total dis-fruiting of something, the stripping of its fruit to the point of exhaustion. This conveys something profoundly antithetical to the generative nature of work, and indeed one definition adds a sobering observation with regard to the consequence of this dis-fruiting: that in removing all the fruit from the tree – which is its seed-bearing potential - you in fact remove its hope of a future.

Sometimes another language can help us recover what may have got lost in our own, and for those of us who are people of faith, we of course have another language and lexicon altogether: the Bible. When we study Scripture

"In the course of the therapy I realized how little my participation in prostitution really had to do with sex and how much with the fundamental holes and pain that I felt and wanted to numb. [...] I had to take on board the idea that prostitution is anything other than satisfying. It gives more or less a heavy rush, but directly afterwards this empty feeling-and with it the need to anesthetize myself with intoxication once more as soon as possible."

Former sex buyer

and absorb the depth and texture of its language, and when we consider the world through its lens again, we realise how easily influenced we can be by the cheapening and misuse of words in the culture around us, and how easily we have been co-opted into its ways of thinking and talking. One of the tasks for a prophetic community, according to Walter Brueggemann, is to allow Scripture to 're-describe'²⁰ the world for us, to let it challenge the language and mechanisms of fraud and to 'provide a way in which the cover-up and the stonewalling can be ended'²¹. We cannot do this simply through dismantling lies; that only leaves a vacuum. We have to invite people into a different story, and one that is actually lived, not only recounted. And that is the real challenge before us.

¹ Tiggey May, Alex Harocopos and J.M. Hough, *For Love or Money: Pimps and the Management of Sex* (London: Home Office, 2000)

² There is another subtle, but important, reason for this choice of language. By describing a woman as somehow entangled in the snare of prostitution we leave room for the possibility that its origins lie beyond her. In fact, the Bible suggests that women are led to prostitute themselves as a result of the sins of others cf. Leviticus 19:29. It even suggests that sexual prostitution is a direct consequence of spiritual prostitution, of the people of God turning away from Him - Hosea 4:12-13. In other words, it is God's people who are in fact the ones guilty of instituting prostitution.

³ These include campaigners such as Rachel Moran, Fiona Broadfoot, Tanja Rahm, Andrea Heinz and others.

⁴ Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p.30.

⁵ Cf. Andrea Heinz, *On Exiting from Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Insights from Sex Trade Experienced Persons*, in *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* (2020) Vol. 5: Issue. 1

⁶ Cf. Ingeborg Kraus, *Trauma as the Pre-condition and Consequence of Prostitution* (Lecture delivered in Edmonton, Canada hosted by The Sexual Exploitation Working Group, 16/9/2016). Retrieved

⁷ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, *Shifting the Burden*, (APPG: London, 2014) p.5.

⁸ Rachel Moran, *The Dangerous Denialism of 'Sex Work' Ideology*, in *Prostitution Narratives. Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, eds. Caroline Norma and Melinda Tankard Reist (Australia: Spinifex Press, 2018) p.27.

Cf. *Childhood Polyvictimization, Adult Violent Victimization, and Trauma Symptomatology: An Exploratory Study of Prostitution Diversion Program Participants*, in *Journal of Family Violence* (2019) Vol.34, pp.733–743.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.24.

¹¹ This is a point powerfully illustrated by Carolyn Spring's resource, *The Great Exchange* (www.carolynspring.com)

¹² Cf. Igor Primoratz, in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics, Second Edition*, ed. Ruth Chadwick (London: Academic Press, 2012)

¹³ Rachel Moran, *The Dangerous Denialism of 'Sex Work' Ideology*, in *Prostitution Narratives. Stories of Survival in the Sex Trade*, eds. Caroline Norma and Melinda Tankard Reist (Australia: Spinifex Press, 2018) p.27.

¹⁴ Cf. Robert Weiss, *Sex Addiction 101: A Basic Guide to Healing from Sex, Porn, and Love Addiction* (Florida: Health Communications, 2015)

Cf. William Struthers, *Wired for Intimacy, How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2009)

Cf. Natalie Hammond and Jenny van Hoof, "This Is Me, This Is What I Am, I Am a Man": *The Masculinities of Men Who Pay for Sex with Women*, in *Journal of Sex Research* (2020) Vol. 57 Issue 5, pp.650-663.

Cf. Maddy Coy, Miranda Horvath and Liz Kelly, "It's Just Like Going to the Supermarket": *Men Buying Sex in East London* (Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit: London Metropolitan University, 2007)

¹⁵ Cited in Sandra Norak, *Loss of Self in Dissociation in Prostitution; Recovery of Self in Connection to Horses: A Survivor's Journey*, in *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* (2020) Vol. 4: Issue 4

¹⁶ Donna M. Hughes, *Seeing the Shadow Women: The Hidden Victims of Prostitution*, in *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence* (2020) Vol. 5: Issue 3

¹⁷ Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolted Prostitutes. The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London: Verso, 2018)

¹⁸ Juno Mac *Interrogang?! - Why Are People Into That?!* Audio podcast, 31/8/2020. Retrieved from: <https://app.podscribe.ai/episode/51160153>

¹⁹ For example the Greek verbs *pleonekto* and *apostereo*.

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *A Text that Redescribes*, in *Theology Today* (2002), Vol.58 (4), pp.526-540.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (USA: Fortress Press, 1978) p.49.