

Somebody's daughter, somebody's friend

The murders of five young women in Ipswich in 2006 horrified the nation. The media were heavily criticised for their fascination with the personal lives of the victims. **Cari Mitchell** of the English Collective of Prostitutes discusses how violence against sex workers is reported

The slaughter of five young women in Ipswich in December led to an unprecedented outpouring of public concern and showed that the Government, police and media are out of step with public opinion.

The media was caught off guard. A *Guardian* journalist told the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) that she and other reporters arrived in Ipswich expecting to find condemnation of how the women, who were sex workers, had lived their lives. Instead they found compassion and the view that everyone in society deserves to be safe from attack, whatever their occupation or lifestyle.

Drowning in a torrent of public criticism for dehumanising the murder victims by calling them "prostitutes", headlines such as Vice Girl Killer (*The Times*) were sometimes later softened to, for example, Women Murdered in Suffolk (*BBC Online*).

This is a far cry from the 1981 trial of the Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, when the ECP picketed the High Court to protest at comments (reported uncritically in the press) by the then Attorney General, Sir Michael Havers. When prosecuting Havers said of the victims: "Some were prostitutes, but perhaps the saddest part of this case is that some were not. The last six attacks were on totally respectable women."

Ipswich residents were expected to be voracious in their opposition to street workers. But they have defended sex workers who were being driven out by zero tolerance policies, and are primarily concerned for their neighbours' safety. One letter we received spoke for many:

"The police and local authorities have never taken the welfare of the young women seriously and I'm not convinced that they would be making the efforts they seem to be now if there

were not so much press interest... There have been other disappearances over the years as well as lots of assaults and these have just dropped off their agenda."

The murders have led to demands for a change in the law. As a sex workers' organisation we have personal experience of the impact criminalisation has on safety. Along with many women, including those in Ipswich who organised security measures for themselves and their friends, we know that when prostitute women are not safe, no woman is safe.

Many serial rapists and killers have histories of domestic violence, yet violence against women is rarely a police

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priority. The conviction rate for reported rape is a scandalous 1.6 per cent in Suffolk. Over 200 women are murdered each year, half of them by partners or ex-partners. Too many of these murders remain unsolved.

Violent attacks that go unreported or do not result in conviction, allow violent men to attack again and again, and even go on to murder. The Yorkshire Ripper scandal was followed by Fred and Rosemary West, Ian Huntley, Anthony Hardy and others, all of whom had been reported for violence many times before finally being convicted. Many women and girls would still be alive if their attackers had been prosecuted, convicted and appropriately sentenced the first time they struck.

In 1995 we helped two women bring

the first private prosecution for rape in England and Wales when the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) refused to prosecute. The victims, who had been raped at knifepoint by the same man in almost identical circumstances, had been dismissed as "unreliable witnesses" because they were sex workers. Yet Christopher Davies was convicted and sentenced to 11 years on the very evidence the CPS had deemed "insufficient" to prosecute. Davies' previous conviction for attempting to kidnap a young woman into a van fitted with ropes that could tie people down, had resulted in only a six-month prison sentence.

The private prosecution set a precedent. It established that prostitute women are entitled to protection, and that justice can be won, that prejudices can be overcome if the evidence is properly gathered and presented.

Women who have suffered rape, domestic violence or racist attacks generally get a raw deal from the criminal justice system. The conviction rate for domestic violence is under 5 per cent and 7 per cent for racist attacks. Prostitute women are more vulnerable because of criminalisation: treated as criminals, most do not report for fear of being arrested, having their children taken away, being evicted or deported.

The tragic Ipswich murders must not be used for more "tough on crime" policies which further criminalise people's private lives. Whatever any of us thinks about men paying for sex, safety must be the priority.

The proposal to criminalise clients based on legislation introduced in 1999 in Sweden arrogantly assumes that researchers know what's best for those they research. It disregards prostitute women's experience of such criminalisation. Swedish sex workers report that women have been forced underground, the stigma women face has increased, there is less time to check out clients,

regularly clients have been chased away and women displaced across the border into Norway. Even supporters of the Swedish model admit that promised resources for women to leave prostitution have gone mainly to the police and criminal justice system.

While the Swedish law is promoted, New Zealand's experience of decriminalisation is ignored. Yet the New Zealand Prostitutes Collective describes the benefits:

"Some women have come off the street and advertise using their mobile phones. There has been no increase in numbers of women working as prostitutes. Decriminalisation has made a big difference to whether women feel able to report rape and other violence."

Here in the UK, a 2006 review of the prostitution laws reinforced the Government's punitive approach despite evidence that zero tolerance and police crackdowns turn women into "undesirables" and push them into more isolated areas, away from the protection of the community. The resulting fines and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders keep women working or land them in jail, wrecking their lives and separating them from their children.

In Ipswich, these policies were pursued with devastating consequences. One local woman described how "prostitutes used to work yards from each other... but efforts to disperse the women away from the red-light area had driven them apart".

Domestic violence, homelessness, poverty and debt are acknowledged, even by the Government, as major factors driving women into prostitution. We estimate that 70 per cent of prostitute women are mothers, mostly single mothers. Yet a single mother with two children is expected to live on £156 a week and may lose 40 per cent of her benefit if she refuses to name the often violent father of her children.

Women on average receive 52 per cent of men's income (Black women earn even less); 30 per cent of children are living in poverty; housing benefit for young people has been cut; thousands of asylum seekers have been made deliberately destitute; student grants have been abolished; and many industries run into the ground. No wonder many turn to drugs and prostitution to survive.

It is 10 times safer to work off the streets. Yet in 2005 the Government increased the sentence for brothel-keeping (the charge most commonly used against women working together from premises) from six months to seven years.

Anti-trafficking legislation that claims to protect women is targeting immigrant women working from premises for arrest and deportation. It has provided a cover to raid premises where there is no suggestion of trafficked vic-



Sex workers protest: English Collective of Prostitutes church occupation, 1982

tims being held. In the last few months, three women have approached the ECP for help after being accused of trafficking or related offences. In all of these cases the women were either not working as prostitutes or were working collectively with other women with no force or coercion involved. Were it not for the diversion and disinformation so-called trafficking provides, the police could not justify targeting women working independently and more safely in this way.

Urgent change is needed before more women lose their lives. In Ipswich many of the resources made available to help women off the streets while the murderer was at large have already disappeared, and the police have rapidly gone back to arresting street workers, making clear that once again their priority is prosecution not protection. It's

The English Collective of Prostitutes demands for women's safety include:

- An end to the criminalisation of consenting sex which increases all women's vulnerability to violence. Time and resources now spent arresting and prosecuting sex workers, and non-violent clients, should be redirected towards protecting prostitute women and children from violence. Laws against rape, domestic and other violence should be vigorously enforced, whoever is the victim.
- An end to the government, police and social services treating children like criminals when they survive by begging or prostitution. The reinstatement and increase of benefits and safe housing for under-18s. An increase in the minimum wage.
- Abolition of the term "common prostitute" which labels sex workers as guilty before the case is heard in court.
- Abolition of ASBOs which target,

time to look at decriminalisation and how the experience in New Zealand can help us.

It's also time to look seriously at viable economic alternatives to prostitution. Most sex workers are mothers struggling to support families or young people struggling to survive. Many have been in care or have had their children taken from them. Many are in debt. Some choose prostitution as the best of a set of bad choices. Like women everywhere, doing two-thirds of the world's work for 5 per cent of the world's income, we are fighting for more money, less work and an end to criminalisation. If the billions currently being squandered on war and destruction came to women, the primary carers everywhere, and to our communities to fulfill people's needs, no-one would be forced by poverty into sex with anyone.

criminalise and breach the human rights of prostitute women and young people in particular, and have resulted in increasing numbers of vulnerable people being sent to prison.

- Repeal of anti-trafficking legislation which is primarily used to deport women. Human, legal, civil and economic rights, including protection from police and courts, health care, welfare benefits and the right to stay and to seek employment, for immigrant and refugee women facing violence and exploitation.

- An end to kerb-crawling legislation which makes it more dangerous for prostitute women to work, as we have less time to check out clients.

- Services that are independent of the police and criminal justice system and viable economic alternatives so that anyone who wants to leave prostitution has the help and support to do it.

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