

Canadian court OKs legalized prostitution

By Michael Foust

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OTTAWA (BP)--A Canadian court decision overturning the nation's anti-prostitution laws will lead to an increase in human trafficking and violence against women if it stands, Christians in the country and other like-minded groups warn.

A lower court judge struck down the anti-prostitution and anti-sex workers laws Sept. 28, ruling that the laws -- instead of protecting prostitutes -- actually contribute to the "danger faced by prostitutes." The ruling could be appealed.

"I find that the danger faced by prostitutes greatly outweighs any harm which may be faced by other members of the public," Justice Susan Himel of the Ontario Superior Court of Justice wrote.

In her 132-page ruling, Himel said the laws violated the country's Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Canada's version of the Bill of Rights. Legalizing prostitution, Himel said, would allow prostitutes and brothel houses to hire managers, drivers and security personnel as well as to screen potential clients by conducting background checks.

Three prostitutes filed the lawsuit.

Canadian Attorney General Rob Nicholson released a statement saying the government is "seriously considering an appeal" and that it will fight to ensure the law addresses the "significant harms that flow from prostitution to both communities and the prostitutes themselves."

Gerry Taillon, national ministry leader for the Canadian National Baptist Convention, also expressed concern.

"This decision has adverse ramifications for Canadian society and opens the door for increased abuse of women and an expanding of the horrific practice of human trafficking," Taillon told Baptist Press. "We appeal to our government to oppose this with reasonable legislation in coherence with accepted standards of decency and the respect for persons."

Opponents of prostitution fear the country will go the way of European countries such as the Netherlands, which saw a dramatic increase in the demand for prostitutes once the practice was legalized. The Netherlands sex trade makes an estimated \$1 billion each year.

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, which is urging the government to appeal the ruling, released a report in April pointing to research showing prostitution "has historically signified" an increase in the number of "women and children being trafficked into the commercial sex trade."

"One year after the legalization of brothels came into effect in the Netherlands, eight Dutch victim support organizations reported an influx of the number of trafficking victims," the report said. "Not only did human trafficking rates increase significantly, but the legalization of brothels also brought with it an increase in child prostitution. ChildRight, an Amsterdam-based organization, estimated that child prostitution rates skyrocketed, nearly quadrupling between 1996 and 2001."

The report also rejected the argument that prostitution is a voluntary career choice that must be respected.

"Numerous studies show that the majority of women in the sex trade did not in fact make a fully consenting, rational choice to enter the trade," the report said. "Real choices, such as careers in medicine, law, nursing or politics were not available. Rather, faced with harsh realities, their choices were heavily guided by questions of survival, such as how to feed themselves and their children. These 'choices' weren't really choices at all, but more so, means and strategies of survival."

The case is *Bedford v. Canada*, and the case's namesake -- 50-year-old prostitute Terri Jean Bedford -- herself has a history of abuse as a teen.

"She had a difficult childhood, and was subjected to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse," Himel acknowledged in her ruling. "At the age of 16, she was sent to a boarding house in Windsor, Ontario by the Children's Aid Society. Shortly thereafter, she met an abusive 37-year-old drug dealer and drug addict who became her live-in boyfriend. He introduced her to drugs and she became addicted. Ms. Bedford says that she began prostituting as a 'necessary evil' to fund her and her boyfriend's addictions."

Nevertheless, Bedford celebrated the ruling and called it "emancipation day for sex-trade workers."

But Patricia Paddey, a writer and TV producer, asserted that legalizing prostitution would dehumanize the women and "reinforce the idea that human beings can be counted in dollars and cents, when in God's eyes we are priceless." The Gospel, she argues, demands that Christians speak up.

"The purpose of the Christian Gospel has always been to set captives free; and that's why Christianity has -- and will continue to -- weigh in on the prostitution debate," Paddey wrote in a column at NationalPost.com, a Canadian news website. "It is part of the mandate of believers in Christ to speak out for the oppressed. It is an activism that stems not from moral one-upmanship, but from a belief in the beautiful possibility of redemption."

"If Judge Susan Himel's ruling should ultimately stand, Canada will have failed countless girls and women who eke out a living as prostitutes by effectively legalizing their exploitation," Paddey wrote.

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