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Feminists and religious conservatives in strange alliance over transactional sex

Opinion: The right to say No is important - and so is the right to say Yes

Fionola Meredith

Sun, Dec 29, 2013, 00:01

Feminists and religious fundamentalists shouldn't mix. If they do find common cause, it's often a sign that one-dimensional moral or ideological fanaticism – rigid adherence, fuelled by heightened emotion, to absolutist messages and beliefs – has become more important than what happens to real people in the real world.

Take the planned introduction of new laws criminalising the purchase of sex in Ireland, north and south. In the North, the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill, proposed by DUP peer and staunch Free Presbyterian Lord Morrow, is now at the committee stage at Stormont. The Bill, which will make it illegal to buy sex, effectively conflates sex workers and targets of human trafficking, treating them not as two distinct and occasionally overlapping categories of people, but as one homogeneous group of oppressed and distressed victims. The apparently unthinkable notion of a woman, or indeed a man, actively choosing to make money from selling sex is entirely absent. Nonetheless, the Bill has been given an enthusiastic welcome by many women's rights campaigners, especially Women's Aid, which justifies its position with the claim that "anyone buying sexual services is supporting sexual slavery and the degradation of human rights". (We don't know what sex workers themselves think about the proposals, because nobody, it seems, bothered to ask them.)

Free choice

The picture in the South is similar. In June, the Oireachtas justice committee backed the introduction of laws against the buyers of sex. This was claimed as a victory by Turn Off the Red Light, an anti-prostitution campaign largely driven by Ruhama, a project of two of the religious orders associated with the Magdalene laundries, and the Immigrant Council, which was founded by a nun from one of those orders and is now directed by a self-described radical feminist. Here, too, the ramped-up talk is all of exploitation and harm, damage and coercion: the notion of free choice and personal agency is dismissed as an impossibility. It seems that prostitutes only exist if they are wrecked, passive creatures, destroyed by the abhorrent appetites of men, and willing to accept guidance and succour. There is a repeated emphasis on "sending messages", both negative and positive: Turn Off the Red Light says that "if one woman is for sale this sends the message that potentially all women are for sale". Criminalising clients, on the other hand, "send[s] a clear message" that in Irish society "it is not acceptable to buy another person like a commodity for personal gratification".

Radical feminists and religious conservatives (or an unholy combination of the two) are able to lead the charge on this issue because both are driven by their united revulsion for transactional sex as a societal evil, either as moral vice or as a form of entrenched violence against women. Both groups are focused entirely on the symbolic “message” they wish to send to society at large: that prostitution is an abomination which must be routed out and eradicated for the good of all. And both are wilfully blind to the consequences of their sanctimonious stance for the very individuals they say they want to rescue and protect: the sex workers themselves, some of whom, inconveniently enough, refuse to allow themselves to be saved.

Flaw of criminalisation

Evidence from around the world shows that criminalising clients does not wipe out prostitution, or even substantially reduce demand. But it does hurt sex workers, placing them at increased risk of violence, exposing them to stress and ill-health, making them feel stigmatised and hunted and completely overlooked when it comes to decision-making processes.

Where buying sex is outlawed, it is the people selling it who pay the price. In 2012, UNAids, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids, stated “the approach of criminalising the client has been shown to backfire on sex workers”, creating “an environment of fear and marginalisation”. What does that matter when the word has gone out – and been enshrined in law – that prostitution is morally an ideologically wrong?

Nobody in their right mind would condone the horrors of trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, or indeed coercion of any variety, where it does exist. But to say that everyone who sells sex is a victim is patently untrue; worse, it is culpably disingenuous, refusing to admit the complicated reality of prostitution, and - for all the rhetoric of degradation and slavery – denying women and men working in the sex industry the power to make decisions, however unpalatable, for themselves.

By indulging in this pseudo-philanthropic meddling (“we know what’s best for you, you must be saved”) these ideologues, both secular and religious, also deprive sex workers of the second most important and hard-won freedom after the right to say no: the right – if they so choose – to say yes.

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Comments (195) ▾

EdwardLeanne 23 hours ago

@EMolly,
Selling or buying chick!

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Emma__Molly 23 hours ago

Your 'uncle' a straight geezer then?

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EdwardLeane 23 hours ago

Liberal democracy never fail to prove that it believes in a completely meaningless world where anything goes as long as it suits its purpose exploitation.

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EdwardLeanne 23 hours ago

Ahh Uncle Edward - stop making a show of yourself.

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KristineWahl 23 hours ago

You only have yourself to blame

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BPDub12 23 hours ago

@Edward - Could you please stop using two different avatars ? One should be enough for you.

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CiaraNíMhurchú yesterday

As much as it makes me uncomfortable to think of any of the men in my life buying sex, as long as the woman isnt trafficked or isnt doing this against her will, then ultimately, it is a womans choice as to whether or not she offers sex for money.

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Emma__Molly yesterday

You have no problem with your partner buying sex from another woman.....

Did you get to secondary School.....are you still there?

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LonerganMcKail yesterday

No she has a problem with that. She has no problem with women taking the choice to sell sexual encounters.

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MichaelEdwards yesterday

Emma, You took Ciara's honest and generous comment and twisted it to the Nth degree for no reason that I can see other than to insult her. The sign of a good education is the ability to absorb an opposing view without assimilating it. Gratuitous insults are demeaning to the insulter, not the insulted.

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[2 more](#)**justwilliam102** 23 hours ago

Well Emma.....That Phdfor stupidity was it?

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KristineWahl 23 hours ago

I have heard it was f*ckology

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[2 more](#)**MichaelEdwards** 23 hours ago

Chuckle! Good one KW

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KBJohnMac 23 hours ago

Spot on Michael - its totally understandable and honest of Ciara to say what she said and the truth of it is that most of us would be uncomfortable with a female relation of ours selling sex. But part of that is because we still judge women by what they do sexually - its like a woman's true worth/respect is gauged by her sexual purity. Personally , as long as she was comfortable with her decision and operated in a genuine secure establishment, my discomfort with her decision would be alleviated.

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ManolisSafos 20 hours ago

CiaraNíMhurchú. I need to say this to you and to those who appear to support Fionola Meredith's viewpoint. Women in the sex industry are never comfortable with their decision to be there. There is no question of choice. All the data shows that they enter the industry out of economic necessity. By definition they are never in a remotely secure environment . No woman in the industry is safe. Fionola Meredith can waffle on about choice for as long as she likes from her newspaper desk, far removed from the realities of the sex industry. If women in the sex industry had the comfort of the right to choose, they would choose to get out.

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James Sweeney yesterday

The billionaire religious orders who finance this campaign against sex workers and have brazenly refused to compensate the girls and women they trafficked into slavery in their laundries need to be exposed because they are discriminating against a minority and they don't know what they are talking about. The following is part of my letter published in "The Sunday Times" on the 15th September 2013. Cont....

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James Sweeney yesterday

We need to be listening to informed opinion from people like Dr Graham Ellison of Queen's University Belfast and Dr Susan Dodillet of the University of Gothenburg in Sweden who says that the Swedish model has made sex workers more vulnerable and has not decreased sex trafficking a great deal. The German system of legalizing sex work has been the most successful and has cut down on trafficking and made working conditions safer for sex workers.

Just recently in a testament to Swiss pragmatism and orderliness, Zurich has introduced a prostitute park with a system of drive-in, "sex-boxes" which will improve security.

To combat coercion and pimping, all the prostitutes working in Zurich must now have a licence. A total of 283 permits has been issued so far. Zurich drew inspiration from Cologne, in Germany, which opened sex-boxes in 2001.

When you criminalize something you drive it into the hands of criminals and instead of that let us follow the example and experience of the most sophisticated countries in Europe for a change.

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dianesweets yesterday

James, i think your informative comment has just created heart-attacks to the 'ban-it-all-brigade' across the country. They'll need a few minutes to recover..

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James Sweeney yesterday

Good, Diane, because they're inherited backward thinking insults their intelligence. Father Peter McVerry who works on the front line of homelessness and drug addiction and for whom I have the greatest admiration says all drugs should be legalised and his job would be much easier and it would get rid of the criminals totally.

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Kevin Windle 22 hours ago

Sorry James, but I had to comment on your naive liberal rubbish about the decriminalising of drugs. I'm always shocked by the number

of intelligent people who fall for this claptrap. The idea that we could simply decriminalise drugs and all the criminals would pack up their bags and go look for a job is laughable. There are many holes you could pick in this type of argument but a simple one is to question how would your decriminalised drug system work? Because unless you were willing to have a government led system which supplied free heroin to 12 year olds then the criminals will still have a market to supply and prey on.

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James Sweeney 21 hours ago

The naive liberal rubbish you mention is the deeply held belief of none other than a man who has given his life to working with and helping drug addicts the incomparable Jesuit priest, Father Peter McVerry. Now if you are better qualified and have more experience than him I would like to hear about it and I would like you to supply your source showing the number of 12 year olds on heroin in Ireland.

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ManolisSafos yesterday

Fionola Meredith seems to think that she has a right to be prescriptive on what feminists should and shouldn't be involved in. If you think about it, this is the very essence of anti feminism. It does reflect however an attitude that has stunted and continues to stunt the growth of real feminism in these islands. Feminism has been hijacked by run of the mill female journalists who seem to think that because they are journalists they are feminists. This article confirms that this is not the case

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KBJohnMac yesterday

I think she's criticising the strain of feminism that thinks its entitled to tell women what is acceptable in their eyes that those women do with their bodies. And if they decide to sell sex , well, then they are letting down self-proclaimed real femininists who rail against the patriarchy. That's why femininism generally boils down to one group telling another what boundaries their autonomy has. She's right when she criticises any feminist ideology taking precedence over evidence.

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JamesRo65673509 yesterday

Men buying women like pieces of meat is a disgusting practice and they should be arrested and their names put in the paper. That would obviously quickly reduce demand, and if demand is reduced, supply will be reduced.

The Swedish law is the best for this because Prostitutes will no longer fear the guards.

Liberals like Fionola won't be happy until they reopen Monto (before Independence, Dublin had Europe's biggest red light). I daresay Fionola's children won't be working there.

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JamesRo65673509 yesterday

Sure I know about the Swedish Model. I lived in Stockholm for 4 years. I also lived in Holland for 6 Months. Though it would take about 10 seconds to see the difference the law makes on the street between Amsterdam and Stockholm.

The Rose Alliance is an organization of "sex workers". I hardly think they are unbiased, do you?

There is of course still prostitution in Sweden. You can't stop it 100% in just the same way as you can't stop speeding or any other crime 100%.

The fact is the Swedish law has reduced the number of streetwalkers in Sweden.
Legalizing prostitution (as in Holland) will increase the number of prostitutes.

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LonerganMcKail yesterday

You've got a very twisted view of people in general there James. Sex is merely an enjoyable physical activity between (usually) two people. Sex isn't always highly intimate, I think you're confusing 'making love' with casual sex.

Where you might say man buys woman like piece of meat others might say woman makes easy cash taking advantage of male weakness.

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MichaelMichael 23 hours ago

LonerganMcKail, so you'd be happy with your partner/sister/mother making "easy cash" by "taking advantage of male weakness"?

What utter rubbish you talk. There is nothing 'easy' about sexually servicing those who need to pay for their sexual kicks.

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LonerganMcKail 23 hours ago

Well if it was what she wanted to do and she was happy doing it I can't see why I'd be unhappy?

I don't feel I'm talking utter rubbish; in my experience casual sex is pretty easy.

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KBJohnMac yesterday

Exactly - it reduced streetwalkers in Sweden - where did they go? Even Skarhed report admits there was no definite link between the 1999 law and the drop in streetworkers b/c internet and mobile phone which enabled many to work indoors instead. I'm sure that you're also aware that Kuosmanen Report showed that 86% of Swedes believe the law has failed to reduce prostrn. Btw , the Rose Alliance findings were backed up by the outreach programme in Oslo, Pro-sentret, who have been strong critics of law. Norwegian Conservative ,Liberal and Progress parties all want law abolished as a result.

Yes, I believe sexworkers like the Rose Alliance are the most important people to liase with on the issue , certainly not feminists on either side, or religious groups.NZPC were key people involved in NewZealand's 2003 Act which is the model advocated by amongst others WHO and UN.

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KBJohnMac yesterday

The phenomenon of 'LUST' demands that people treat each other as 'pieces of meat' all the time. Do you really think that husbands and wives have sex purely for pro-creation or as expressions of true love ? Or do they 'ride' each other for self-gratification reasons - in which case , is it ok to use your husband / wife as a piece of meat for gratification , once marriage is in place? As long as human beings are sexual creatures , people will always trade sex for money,financial security,companionship , fame , lust - as long as its consenting , who the hell are you or I to judge their character?

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Eglintonia yesterday

I thought all sex was transactional. You live and learn.

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Bona__Bona yesterday

yeah.....pimps.....

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Bona__Bona yesterday

Sex workers??? What next ? The beatification of Page 3 martyrs ??

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KBJohnMac yesterday

What - you think Page 3 Models should be sneered at , and don't deserve respect ? Thinking like yours creates the 'environment of fear and marginalisation ' that the UN report statedand you just thought you were only trying to be funny....

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ColmGillis yesterday

'Transactional sex', 'sex industry', 'sex workers', its so full of euphemisms and tries to say that prostitution is the same as a builder coming in to decorate your home.. The UN report she cites is concerned with one issue only. How to reduce HIV globally, It is not concerned with wider, legitimate goals of society, such as encouraging men and women to marry. No one would accept someone in their family making this 'career choice' and I doubt that Fionola would accept a brothel opened in her 'hood. Encouraging people to get married and to respect their marriage is a far better way of reducing HIV/AIDS, along with treatment for those who have it, although you can count on the liberals to veto this.

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KBJohnMac yesterday

Actually, WHO ,UN,Special Rapporteur on Human Rights,UNWomen,Amnesty etc all recognise a persons right to sell sex and reject any form of criminalisation.You also miss that the quoted report recognises 'environment of fear and marginalisation' . People have sex for lust,power,financial security yet we see that as acceptable.But if cash is the instrument of consent,then the moralists cry 'oh god,how can any decent person do that'. Wiping bottoms in an old folks home, or holding down two jobs at minimum wage is ok ,but selling sexual services????' .More rights for sellers of sex not condescension,please

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Bona__Bona yesterday

This comments forum is RIDICULOUS....

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