

News from Ireland: Saving in the name of scrub

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<http://rabble.ie/>

The need to “clean” Ireland of sex workers and the sex industry isn’t new. In the early 1920s the Legion of Mary, led by Frank Duff, decided to close down Dublin’s infamous Monto. Reputed to be the biggest red light district in Europe it is estimated that up to 1,600 women and girls worked there at any one time. The Monto catered for all tastes and social backgrounds, even King Edward VII was said to have popped his cherry there. The area had to go. The moral guardians of Irish society had made a decision that you couldn’t have all these wayward women having sex for money and, perhaps even worse, sex outside of marriage. To hell with the fact that many of the women who had worked the streets would end up in the Magdalene Laundries or destitute with no means to support themselves. The Monto was by no means some utopian paradise for sex workers, but it did give many women control over how they made an income. Not that women controlling their own lives was very en-vogue at the time.

The other link in the chain, the Magdalene Laundries, were businesses run by the religious orders such as the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. The Laundries might have had the goal of ensuring that the women who entered them were penitent and atoned for their sins, but they were also successful financial enterprises. They held lucrative laundry contracts from state bodies and local businesses. To the religious orders who controlled the Laundries, the prisoners who resided within them were not only “fallen women” but also financial assets. Those wanton sluts could work for their forgiveness and the good nuns would clean Ireland, and make more than a few quid while they were at it.

Ninety years later, it would appear that women are still needing saving and Ireland is still needing to be cleaned of sex work and, more importantly —sex workers. While some people may personally find the notion of paying, or being paid, for the ride a bit icky, that isn’t really a legitimate reason to try and ban it. We can all agree that trafficking and pimping are horrible things but they don’t happen in all aspects of Irish sex work. Yet this is how the argument is constantly framed by those who campaign for its abolition. Yes there are people trafficked into

Ireland for sex, but a lot of those who work within the sector make a decision to offer their services for cash. Painting every sex worker as a trafficked and oppressed victim is helpful to no one. It's a lazy cliché in the same way that most print media features about the issue will inevitably be accompanied by a stock photo of a woman leaning into a car window wearing fishnet tights, a mini skirt and heels. But it serves a purpose, and that's to characterise this already stigmatised group as something they're not. Which is homogenous. Not all sex workers in Ireland are either trafficked by pimps or desperate smackheads. What better way to eradicate a marginalised group's voice than to completely dehumanise them?

This may come as a shock to some, hell it might even disgust some, but there are sex workers in Ireland who are grown adults and consenting to what they're doing and having sex for money and pretty much just getting on with their lives.

It certainly disgusts Ruhama, an organisation with the dubious origins of having been founded as a "joint initiative of the Good Shepherd Sisters and Our Lady of Charity Sisters", which according to its website has a "long history of involvement with marginalised women, including those involved in prostitution". That'd be the Magdalene Laundries that were mentioned earlier. Ruhama, as part of the Turn Off the Red Light coalition, have been one of the driving forces behind the push to introduce a Swedish style anti-prostitution law in Ireland. The Swedish model basically criminalises the punters, the mostly male clients of mostly female sex workers. If you're of the view that sex work is... like totes evil, and must be eradicated whatever the cost, then fine, but the cost is borne by those women who work in the industry itself, not those who pontificate on the morality of it.

For Laura Lee, a Dublin-born escort, "the Swedish model has several serious adverse effects. It pushes the trade further underground —further criminalisation means they need to pull further away from the authorities. This brings risks." For Laura these risks are further exacerbated by the added threat of homelessness as landlords can be accountable if their premises are being used to sell sex from. For an independant woman working out of her home this could mean that nervous landlords evict them both their homes and their incomes. The consequences of introducing this law are that it makes earning a living more dangerous for the women involved, not less.

Ultimately organisations like Ruhama are adding to the stigma that sex workers face everyday in Ireland. This stigma isolates and marginalises women who work within the sex industry here. For Laura working in Ireland meant that: "As soon as it was known what I was doing, I had people shouting abuse at me across the street. I went to Dunnes one day and I had a young lad behind me and he said 'I didn't know that they sold hookers here. I wonder if they do two for one.' I just noticed that in nightclubs people would avoid me. It's like, we'll tolerate her but not really."

According to TORL sex work is bad. But they wouldn't even deign to call it sex work. As far as they're concerned, it's "prostituted women" and never "work". And they're very concerned with trafficking. Less so when it's young Asian men who are trafficked into Ireland to sit in weed

greenhouses as prisoner botanists, but they're not having sex so it doesn't matter right? They believe all sex workers are abused and that Ruhama, and only Ruhama, can represent the legitimate voices of sex workers. It's a far cry from what many sex workers on the ground will tell you. They're mostly absent from any of the public debate. Their voices aren't worth hearing because at the end of the day, they're only prostitutes and sure what would they know?

For most groups involved with the TORL coalition their motivations are probably fine. If you've got an organisation like Ruhama in front of you and they're telling you that prostitution is a form of violence against women and the Swedish law has been great at reducing prostitution and trafficking—you'll probably buy it. Aside from the fact that the Swedish government admitted in its report to UNAIDS last year that they actually hadn't a clue how much prostitution there was in Sweden because it was so hidden. Oh, and the Swedish police have reported that trafficking has grown significantly since that particular law was brought in.

The Magdalene Laundries existed to control women's lives, and made money, but rescuing modern Ireland's fallen women is worth quite a bit too. You could never be certain of their motivations but you can certainly speculate as to why some organisations are involved in this. Laura Lee says of the motivations: "Their agenda seems to be nothing more than continued funding. Government funding and salaries. It suits them to portray the sex industry in a very bad light. The rescue industry is worth big money. They're all saying we're pimped and trafficked—even if we're jumping up and down saying no we're not." When actual sex workers are telling a different story to TORL, you could be forgiven for asking the awkward question, 'Who might know the most about being a sex worker?'

When it comes to how Ruhama actually conduct their campaigns, to be honest, many of the media friendly sound bytes that TORL deal in are simply made up. Like the one where they say "we have a coalition of one million people who support us". It's a dodgy claim to make considering the "one million" figure is based on the membership numbers of the trade unions that have publicly supported TORL. Those same trade unions don't exactly make a habit of balloting their membership to see how many of the members actually support the initiative. And one could be forgiven for wondering how many of those million have paid for sex in Ireland?

TORL continually sight the figure that there are 800 women advertising sex for sale online in Ireland at any one time. Which is basically plucked from the sky or as they term it, "from searches of internet websites". In some reports they have mentioned that there were up to 468 women advertising on Escort Ireland but they never mention where the 800 figures comes from. Are the same women advertising on multiple sites or the same women who have multiple ads on Escort Ireland. Elsewhere they have maintained that the Swedish legal framework results in lower levels of prostitution than in neighbouring countries when there is no credible evidence-based research that backs up these claims.

Rachel, a Romanian escort working in Dublin for the past number of years questioned these figures and the absence of sex workers own voices in the debate, "When you have a headache you go to the doctor, but the doctor will not claim that majority of people in Ireland suffer from

headaches but what Ruhama say that the majority of escorts are working against their will because of the ones that they worked with... All the escorts advertise on Escorts Ireland so I don't know... They say they want to fight against human trafficking but all the escorts I know work of their own free will. I remember the raid last year, 200ish accommodations were searched by the police and they didn't find one single escort who was trafficked or working against her will."

But despite the good intentions of those who are genuinely behind TORL it doesn't take away from the fact that criminalising buyers makes things more dangerous for sex workers. The fear of the potential consequences of criminalisation are pretty evident for Rachel, 'if condoms will be used as a proof of sex with a client (if it is criminalised) then sex workers might stop using them. The repercussions of this type of fear for the health of the women and their clients is obvious.

Criminalisation pushes the industry further underground and creates more pimps. It also gives the Gardai more control over these women's lives. And it means that two women who are both sex workers and share an apartment for safety and security might be convicted of brothel-keeping. For a law that would supposedly be about protecting women and making their lives better, it reeks more of the anti-deviance policies of those who cleared out the Monto ninety years ago. Sure just bring back the Good Shepherd Sisters, Ireland still needs to be saved. You can't be having filthy, dirty, sinful, sex for money. No, you should be out cleaning jaxes for minimum wage. If you can't pay your ESB bill or put food on the table for your kids? Well so be it. Better than being a whore and all that.

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