

Signpost Series



4a. Lifting the Label

Prostitution is a major problem in the UK. With many people getting involved at an early age, the violence, drug dependence and associated chaotic lifestyle makes it difficult to exit without support. **The National Christian Alliance on Prostitution (NCAP)** exists to unite, equip and empower groups working with people involved in the sex industry to offer freedom and change. The NCAP network is facilitated by Beyond the Streets. This “Signpost Series” was designed to help equip practitioners and the wider Church in tackling pastoral issues for those affected by prostitution.

Beyond the Streets, 2011



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‘One very cold and late night in 1997 I was on outreach in East London, on a slow night. As my teammate and I were talking to Tracey (not her real name) three boys, around the age of eleven, came up to us and hurled abuse at her. Slag, whore, bitch, brass, prostitute. I was stunned, then furious. I shouted at them to clear off home: “she has a name, she’s a person, a special woman—don’t you dare speak to her like that”. I turned to Tracey expecting her to be upset, angry or something. Instead, with a look of amazement on her face, she shouted to the woman on the nearest patch, “Oi! Did you hear that? She just said I was a special woman”. Stunned I swallowed my anger, shocked that someone could be so degraded that they no longer believed they were worthy of dignity and respect. From that day on they were never ‘Prostitutes’, that label would never be used by me, they were ‘Women’.



The example above highlights the importance of seeing the person behind a label. However, for many these terms remain unexamined and relegated to examples of political correctness. Does it really matter what words we use to describe those we work with? This document looks at the various terms used when talking about people involved in prostitution (most of the terms described here are about purchasing sex acts¹ from adults, predominantly by men²).

Language, reflects the viewpoint of the speaker³ and is a powerful weapon that can stir up emotion and shape action. How then, within the context of the ‘oldest profession’⁴, do we describe the sale of sex and the connotations for those who sell it? Given the complexity of the ‘sex industry,’⁵ there is no uncomplicated terminology to describe the payment for sex acts.

The ‘sex industry’ is estimated to be worth approximately **US \$31 billion a year**⁶. It is sex which many presume the sex industry to be about. Yet this global industry is more accurately understood as an abuse of power and/or of vulnerability that preys on the young⁷, vulnerable and marginalised - disproportionately this issue affects women and girls⁸, but it also affects young boys.

¹ ‘Sex acts’ has been used here as it describes the experience that many women have of disconnecting from the experience. We refer to ‘sex’ as a consensual and mutual loving act.

² Overwhelmingly it is men who purchase sex acts from women, transgendered women, other men and children.

³ Ditmore, M. (2006) Encyclopaedia of prostitution and sex work, Volume 1, Greenwood Publishing Group

⁴ Farming is more likely to be the oldest profession.

⁵ Even the term Sex industry needs examining as one that legitimises the sale of sex acts- is this another example of imperfect terminology which needs further examination?

⁶ Jeffreys, S. (2009:152). *The Industrial Vagina: The political economy of the global sex trade*. London and New York: Routledge.

⁷ Girls as young as 9 have been found in brothels in India and Nepal
<http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/nepal.htm>

⁸ Evidence shows that violence against men and boys is nothing like on the same scale, severity, type or nature as the many forms of violence experienced by women and girls... More commonly cited forms of violence against men and boys include sexual violence in contexts of conflict, violence against men in prisons, or homophobic violence. Men may also become victims of violence as a result of participating in armed conflicts, insurgency, civil unrest or gang crime. Gender and Development Network, p8. Violence Against Women <http://www.cawn.org/assets/Booklet%20GADN%20web.pdf> [accessed online, 14/3/11].

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4b. Lifting the Label

Prostitute

The term 'Prostitute' is arguably the most frequently used and universally recognisable. The roots of the word "prostitute" derive from the Latin prostituere 'to expose' (for sale).⁹ It is commonly used to refer to who an individual is rather than what someone does; it becomes an identity which blurs the person behind the label. Generally speaking, due to the stigma involved, most women would not self-refer to themselves as a 'prostitute', preferring to say they are 'working' or 'on the game'¹⁰. Laura Agustin goes further and argues that the word Prostitute "was invented to create a pathetic victim worthy of 'saving'"¹¹.

Prostituted Women

In the 1980's the term 'Prostituted women' emerged as a way to bring about sympathy and as a way of seeing the person not the job¹². Trisha Baptie¹³, who was previously exploited through prostitution, says she has never met a sex worker only 'prostituted women'. This term seeks to recognise the wider system of prostitution and not just the individual woman. The term challenges victim blame by recognising that something harmful has been done to the women and brings the perpetrators of prostitution into the framework¹⁴. On the other hand, some argue that the term 'prostituted women' encourages rather than resolves the distinction between free women in prostitution and forced women in prostitution¹⁵. The term implies that all prostituted women are by definition forced, which could oversimplify the reality.

An example of seeing the person behind the label is demonstrated by Jesus... when he encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Within Jewish tradition this woman would have been ignored completely by someone like Jesus, she was an outcast on two counts: Jews did not associate with Samaritans and men did not speak with women in public. To top this off, she was a woman with 'a reputation' and undoubtedly of lowly status in society. Yet Jesus reaches across all of these barriers and looks to the daughter, created in the image of God, and offers life-giving water.



“Once you label me you negate me”

Søren Kierkegaard

Sex Worker

The non-gender specific term 'sex worker' was originally coined by Carol Leigh¹⁶ who intended to move away from the negative connotations of the 'whore stigma' and recognise sex work as a legitimate form of work¹⁷. The term encapsulates a broader definition to include all elements of the sex industry and it intends to be a sign of empowerment rather than victimisation. It seeks to recognise women and men's autonomy and to ensure that those involved are protected and have equal access to their human rights.

This popularised term, however, can have the opposite effect of Leigh's purpose and instead perpetuate the stereotype of the 'Happy Hooker', the 'Belle de Jour' or 'Pretty Woman' who is sexually liberated. In this framework, sex work is presented as an empowering lifestyle 'choice' for women, with the sex industry promoted as a quick fix to debt¹⁸, poverty and unemployment; 'Migrant sex workers' are those who have crossed international borders. But rather than facilitating the

⁹ Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prostitute> [accessed online on 20/10/10]

¹⁰ p343 Spector, J. (2006) (eds) *Prostitution and Pornography: a philosophical debate about the sex industry*, Stanford University Press.

¹¹ Agustin, L. (2005) cited in Ditmore, M (2006:476) *Encyclopaedia of prostitution and sex work*, Volume 1, Greenwood Publishing Group.

¹² p346 Spector, J. (2006) (eds) *Prostitution and Pornography: a philosophical debate about the sex industry*, Stanford University Press.

¹³ <http://sisyphus.org/spip.php?article3290>

¹⁴ p9, Jeffrey, S (2009) *The Industrial Vagina: The political economy of the global sex trade*. London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁵ Matthews, R. (2008) *Prostitution, Politics and Policy*, Routledge-Cavendish, Oxon.

¹⁶ <http://www.bayswan.org/sexwork-oed.html> accessed online on 2/7/10

¹⁷ http://www.amrc.org.hk/alu_article/sex_workers/an_interview_sex_workers_are_workers

¹⁸ Certainly there are a minority of women in the west making vast amounts of money; however some researchers say it is short term and has many strings attached. One study calculated that a prostituted woman received only 8% of her gross earnings after subtracting the substantial costs she was required to make in DeRiviere, L. (2006) 'A Human Capital Methodology for Estimating the Lifelong Personal Costs of Young Women Leaving the Sex Trade'. *Feminist Economics*, 12 (3), July, 367-402.

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4c. Lifting the Label

desired empowerment, this term can make it more difficult for those involved to get support when violent incidents do occur. This violence, which is often carried out by purchasers of sex, becomes framed as a hazard of the job and part of the 'chosen' lifestyle which makes the harm of the buyers invisible.

Sex Slave

The Slavery Convention of the League of Nations¹⁹ (1926) states that slavery is 'the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised'. Slavery therefore implies a host of 'un-freedoms', not all of which are exclusive to slavery. Whilst this term maybe helpful in recognising the extreme state of trauma and degradation experienced by those who have been treated as 'sex slaves' the term leaves little or no room for recovery or the remaking of their identity. This term has also been criticised for not recognising people's power to resist, making them childlike or a passive object.²⁰

"Stigmatising labels not only overlook the inherent beauty and divine image of God's creation, they easily create in us a subtle and damaging attitude shift. When we choose to use a label we often separate ourselves from the people we have called 'prostitutes, johns, punters, pimps and madams"

Mark Wakeling

Trafficked Victims

Public and political awareness of human beings who have been trafficked has risen sharply in the last decade²¹. Along with this a more recent term has emerged, that of the 'Trafficked Victim'. Even between these two sentences, a sharp difference arises; in the first sentence, the subject is 'human beings', and trafficking is expressed in the passive voice, whereas in the latter, the label of 'Trafficked' is used and 'human beings' has disappeared. In addition, the word 'victim' extends further than humans to any living creature; 'woman' and 'man' are lost in the term 'victim', and we thereby operate linguistically on a different level that removes the humanity of the women and men who are/have been trafficked.

"I've talked to survivors of prostitution who are out. I do not use the word prostitute because it dehumanises people. We don't refer to battered women as a 'batteree'. We don't turn the woman into what was done to her. So I would prefer to use the verb 'prostituting,' the adjective 'prostituted,' or 'in prostitution.' Women who are 'in prostitution', women, survivors, who are 'out.'"

Michelle Farley

Whilst a term that recognises the status of someone's victimisation is essential at a legal, enforcement or policy level, in terms of support services a more person-centred approach that explores both the victimisation and their identity outside of being a victim is needed.



¹⁹ Definition found at <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavery.htm> [accessed online 17/3/11].

²⁰ O'Connell Davidson, J. (2006) Will the real sex slave please stand up? *Feminist Review* 83.

²¹ Kelly, L. (2005b) "You Can Find Anything You Want": A Critical Reflection on Research on Trafficking in Persons within and into Europe in IOM International Organisation Migration, (2005) Data and Research on Human Trafficking: A Global Survey, IOM: Geneva.

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4d. Lifting the Label

If we call them 'Victims' does that make us 'Rescuers'?

Whilst there has been much debate about the appropriateness of this term, it is argued that the use of the term 'victim' results in the glamourisation of the role of the 'rescuer'. Furthermore there is the danger that the 'rescue industry' exists to further its own political/religious agenda rather than empowering the people who are caught in it. The harm becomes clear when the 'Rescue Industry'²² 'benefits themselves rather than their less lucky sisters'.²³

Punters, pimps and paedophiles

Lastly, no discussion on the use of certain terms would be complete without including those who buy sex acts. Research tells us that it is predominantly men who buy sex but the terms often vary, with 'clients', 'customers'²⁴ and 'punters'²⁵ the most used when referring to men who buy sex from adults. When talking about buying sex acts it becomes clear that the 'choice of language is by no means innocent'²⁶, reflecting the viewpoint of the speaker. Donna Hughes argues that terms which make men's behaviour seem normal should be avoided altogether and terms such as 'criminals, perpetrators, predators, child molesters or child rapists' should be used instead²⁷. However these terms have also been criticised as further demonstration of the use of labels.

How does Jesus treat the 'perpetrators'?

In the New Testament, Jesus demonstrates a counter-cultural way that not only extends love and value to those who are on the margins of society but also to those who are perpetrators of abuse, injustice, and exploitation. Consider Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1 – 9). Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector who had oppressed and exploited others and had built his wealth on it; yet Jesus singled him out amongst the crowd, saw the person behind the label, and honoured him and his house. Ultimately Jesus' love of Zacchaeus transformed his life and brought restoration.

²² Agustin, L. (2007) *Sex at the Margins: migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books.
²³ p192 in Agustin, L. (2007) *Sex at the Margins: migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books.

²⁴ Sanders, T. (2008) *Paying for Pleasure; Men who buy Sex*, Willan Publishing.

²⁵ Macleod, J., Farley, M., Anderson, L., and Golding J., (2008) *A Research Report Based on Interviews with 110 Men Who Bought Women in Prostitution*, Women's Support Project, Glasgow.

²⁶ Niemi, J. (2010) What We Talk About When We Talk About Buying Sex, *Violence Against Women*, 2010; 16; 159.

An issue of language

Essentially 'words create worlds', and they can destroy as well. When, instead of using 'person' or 'woman' or 'man', we use words like 'prostitute' or 'victim' or even 'survivor' (words which we might use with best intentions to speak truth and to empower) we erase the words that fit us perfectly and preserve our dignity and our worth as beloved creations of God. For example, if we use 'person in prostitution,' we maintain 'person' as the primary identity of the subject and 'prostitution' becomes the secondary term that highlights the system they are in; in other words, the subject is a human being, who is involved in prostitution. Otherwise, if the subject is 'a prostitute', we have said that their identity is contained in their participation in sex for money.

The effect of labelling

Labels have a dehumanising effect which ultimately reduces a person's story, hopes and dreams into shorthand use. Our language fails to hold together the individuals' unique resourcefulness and their experience of victimisation – this is a difficult tension not easily resolved.

It seems there are few terms that do not reduce people to an object to be discussed, spoken for or about. Our language needs to be continually reflected upon. No word is perfect and none of the terms described here do justice to the person who is the subject of the discourse²⁸.

Distinguishing between the person and the system of prostitution

However, where we must use terms to describe those we work with let those words distinguish between the person and the system that holds them. Terms such as 'women/men/people involved in prostitution' or 'people who have been trafficked' and 'men who buy sex acts' begin to remind us to look at the person behind the label.

“I've lived for 43 years and been in prostitution for only three of those years - why should that define me?”²⁹

²⁷ p3 Hughes, D. (2004) *Demand for Child Victims: Myths and Realities Concerning Child Trafficking*, Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies, December 1-2 Available at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/pubtrfrep.htm> [accessed online on 5/7/09].

²⁸ p477 Ditmore, M. (2006) *Encyclopaedia of prostitution and sex work*, Volume 1, Greenwood Publishing Group.

²⁹ Beyond the Streets Biennial Conference, 2010.

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4e. Lifting the Label

Our part?

Whilst also advocating for specialist support, challenging demand and journeying alongside those who have been sexually exploited, our part is to reclaim space for the person behind the label. Our vision is to enable people to remember who they have been created to be – a person – and someone's **daughter, son, grandchild and they are very precious to God**. The use of labels can either harm or help that process, but to remove the labels that keep people where we have defined them is certainly good news.

Psalm 139: 13 – 16

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Questions for Reflection:

How does this paper impact on your perception of the Sex Industry and the people within it?

What implications are there for our practice or our use of language?

Further Resources:

Chab Dai (2010) Terminology + Dignity.

A helpful paper in the use of dignifying terms when working with children who have been exploited:

http://www.chabdai.org/download_files/Terminology%20+%20Dignity%202010%20Nov.pdf

