

# From “I am Priceless” to Cheap Betrayal

In the year 2000, Holland became the first country in Europe to decriminalize prostitution. In this respect, it was seen as exemplary. Yet in 2019, the Dutch government has announced that from Jan 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, night-time tours of the so-called “red light district” in Amsterdam will be banned.

Why are they clamping down?

It takes 40 000 signatures on a petition to get the Dutch parliament to discuss a topic. An movement called EXXPOSE (combining feminists and Christians working together) mobilized this number of signatures in early 2019, through a campaign called “I am priceless”.

After the parliamentary debate, the Dutch government promised to announce - before the end of the year - a new fund to assist foreign women who want to leave the vocation. This will include short-term visas to allow foreign prostitutes who visit Holland to learn skills that will enable them to leave the trade. There will also be a clampdown on Human Trafficking.

For one thing, the number of prostitutes in Holland has doubled since 2000. At that time there were about 15 000 and in 2019 there are 30 000. This level of growth was a bit unexpected.

The vocation has attracted both immigration to Holland by foreign prostitutes who wish to work in a more “open” environment, and also the Human Trafficking that goes along with it. This is the dark side of the sex trade, that the proponents of “full decriminalization” never bring up. They prefer to tell you that the existing prostitutes – in their view – might be safer as a result of legalizing the trade. But they don’t let on that by changing the laws in this way, you open a Pandora’s Box.

Full decriminalization is a bad idea always, but especially when unemployment rates are so high. The baseline rate is now 29%. Among youth it is much higher than that. And among young women, it is higher again. They could be needlessly trapped in a vocation that the majority of feminists world-wide consider to be degrading to women.

Oliver Tambo said that a nation that does not take care of its youth has no future. And doesn’t deserve one! In Holland, the number of nationals in the vocation has actually dropped since 2000, being displaced by foreigners.

Neither traditional values (e.g. virginity testing among the Zulus) nor Jewish, Christian or Muslim values are in favour of legalizing prostitution. But one does not need to go into “morality” to articulate the argument in favour of Partial Decriminalization – that is, of going after the men who pay.

Recent research indicates that 90 percent of prostitutes in South Africa are women. We already know how vulnerable women are already, right across the board. We all know how men abuse and sideline women. That is a societal norm, which is not condoned. It is not

exactly the contextual space in which to legalize prostitution. This will release more harm than good – as the Dutch have found out.

The so-called Nordic solution is much better. It shrinks the number of prostitutes. Women take up other vocations. In Sweden for example, the number of prostitutes was cut in half over ten years. There are now about 1500 prostitutes in Sweden compared to about 30 000 in Holland. What a contrast! To the extent that, in Holland, public sentiment is now rising against full decriminalization.

How can the same government that wants to raise the drinking age in SA from 18 to 21 think in these terms? It is totally inconsistent.

This also suggests that Democracy is being diluted in South Africa. Issues that affect small minorities emerge so disproportionately to what is best for the majority.

One academic dissertation written at a South African university concludes:

*“It is submitted that no law should criminalize prostitution per se. The exploitation of the prostitution by others, as well as to oblige someone to enter or remain in prostitution should remain criminal offences. To consider prostitutes as victims rather than as persons willing to engage in lewdness, may help lawmakers to decide which aspect of the conduct to criminalize and thereby arrive at a more enlightened treatment of this social problem.”*

The majority of feminists world-wide agree that this “enlightenment” would lead to criminalizing the prostitute’s clients and/or her traffickers. The writings of Emily Bazelon are helpful in this regard. She is the Truman Capote Fellow at Yale Law School, and she has researched Prostitution widely. For example, look for her article called *“Should Prostitution be a Crime?”*.

In terms of South Africa’s Bill of Rights, there is certainly a clash with the full criminalization of prostitution. The debate is about the road out of this conundrum, which is not disputed. The majority of citizens in South Africa likely agree with the SALRC, that legislators should move in the direction of Partial Decriminalization. This was the conclusion of its most recent review, about a year ago.

So the recent findings and recommendations of Human Rights Watch are out of sync with the majority of citizens in SA and the majority of feminists world-wide. What this exposes, very simply, is HRW’s deeper worship of Humanism. The truth is that most South Africans remain very religious and not inclined to such manifestations of humanist extremism. Chanel Retief only presented that side of a huge debate globally, and the other point of view deserves to be heard as well. How can one reach such radical recommendations from talking to only 46 prostitutes (it is not said how many of these were nationals) in a country of 57 million citizens? And from only three provinces! This was not convincing research.