

How prostitution is represented in british television

[Law](#), [Crime](#)



In Britain paying for sex is not illegal. But there are many laws criminalising the activities of prostitution. For years people have been arguing over what to do with the laws on prostitution. Recently, there have been many debates over the legality of it, and eventually stricter laws have been put in place to try and stop the act of prostitution.

Under the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, it is illegal to incite prostitution or control it for your personal gain, banning the running of a brothel, making it illegal to loiter or solicit sex on the streets and the act of kerb crawling. Trafficking is also illegal. Other laws such as public nuisance are used to target the sex trade. Stricter laws are looking are being put in place that will give police the ability to close down more brothels, and licensing rules will change in regards to lap dancing and strip clubs to try and halt their expansion. Despite the many thousands of women involved in the sale of sexual services, and even greater numbers of men who purchase these services, research and publications on prostitution for much of the post-war period has been relatively limited. For most of this period the street trade has been largely confined to certain red light districts and therefore out of sight to the general public” (Matthews, 2008, page 1). Prostitution has always been an issue, but as Matthews states, out of sight is out of mind.

Prostitution was brought to the public’s attention in the late 1980s when growing concerns were acknowledged including; “ The spread of HIV and AIDS, the growth of prostitute support, increased public demands to control street prostitution, the growing preoccupation with trafficking and the visible increase in the number of foreign women involved in prostitution”, (Matthews, 2008, page 1). As well as people worrying about the growth of

prostitution and trying to enforce stricter laws to stop it, there were people campaigning to decriminalise the act.

During the 1980s a number of groups emerged that were trying to promote the rights of prostitutes. The ECP (English Collective of Prostitutes) in the UK, set out to legalise prostitution and normalise the issue. Prostitution is becoming a fast growing phenomenon; “ In London, where prostitutes mainly operate behind closed doors, the number of street customers is estimated at 7, 620 a week (Home Office 2004)”, (Monzini, 2005, page 9). Prostitution seems to be about the problems of relations between men and women, as well as to satisfy male urges.

In Britain the typical male client is a man aged about 30, married and quite well off. If the clients are usually married then why are they seeking prostitutes? ; “ It has been argued that men who are unsure of their capacity for relations with the opposite sex can escape what they feel as a burden of responsibility... recourse to commercial sex often can be seen as a kind of revenge of reaffirmation, however temporary, of men over women”, (Monzini, 2005, page 10). Monzini is stating that men go with prostitutes to regain power that they have lost elsewhere.

A lot of the time being lost in their own relationship. The customer wants to have complete control over the prostitute to make themselves feel stronger and more powerful, this can sometimes lead to violence against the prostitute when they do not comply to the customers needs, mostly being their insistence that the customer wears a condom. It's been argued that people use prostitutes to act out sexual fantasies that will 'undo' the traumas

of childhood; “ Sexual fantasies perform a similar function in adulthood to that performed by daydreams in childhood.

This time the fantasist is in control, and can direct the scenario towards and ultimately satisfying outcome- orgasm” (O’Connell Davidson, 1998, Page 138). Prostitution is often seen as an escape from over complicated relations. When customers go with prostitutes they are trying to kid themselves that the connection is real; “ Customers pick up street girls in their car, or go to places where they are given only a few minutes to do their business; there are even small hotels that rent rooms out not for an hour but for 5 minutes,” (Monzini, 2005, page 12).

The sexual encounter is very short and suggests that in reality there is no connection between customer and prostitute. This can be seen in the television programme Secret Diary of a Call Girl, where Belle (Billie Piper) says; “ Work out what the client wants as fast as you can and give it to him”, (Secret Diary of a Call Girl, 2008). Prostitutes are merely used for sex. There is no real connection or bond between them and the client.

The client wants to have sex and feel wanted, while the prostitute just wants the money, so they try not to get involved. Trafficking has increased hugely in the recent years. Mainly women from across Europe are taken from their families and sent to other countries to work as various things, including sex workers. Data taken from the IOM (Anti-Trafficking Unit of the International Organisation for Migration) gave questionnaires to people that had been reported to the IOM to find out about their recruitment. 103 people trafficked themselves because of several reasons including, having been kidnapped, 5.

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4%, through the use of the internet, television and newspapers, 7.4%, sold by their family, 0.5%, or personal reasons, 84.1%. This data shows that most people began trafficking for their own reasons, but also shows that a huge number of them were forced into it one way or another. The Home Office estimates that there are between 6,000 and 18,000 trafficked women and girls being forced to work as prostitutes in the UK.

An article found in the Telegraph newspaper tells of how young schoolgirls are being forced into prostitution; “The MP said he knew of cases in his Huddersfield constituency where girls first met young men, perhaps driving “flash cars” outside school who made the initial contact. They then took them out and introduced them to drink and drugs before embarking on a sexual relationship.

The girl would believe they were with their first boyfriend but before long, older men would then take over, forcing them to have sex and selling them to others” (The Telegraph, 21st January 2009). Julia O’Connell Davidson suggests that people become prostitutes due to extreme, poor living conditions, and a bad way of life; “People will generally surrender such powers over their person to others only under very particular social, political and economic conditions- conditions which effectively limit their ‘choices’ to a set of alternatives which are not of their choosing.

In some cases these relations present people with a stark ‘choice’ between abject poverty or prostitution, or between violence, even death, or prostitution”, (O’Connell Davidson, 1998, Page 3). O’Connell Davidson is saying that people are using prostitution as an escape. It is very much a last

resort for many people, who turn to the business for help and for money so that they can survive. For a lot of girls prostitution is a better way of living than their normal lives, where some may get beaten by family members or other such things.

Research by Karen Sharpe shows other reasons as to why girls begin prostituting themselves; “ Women were introduced to the profession, or at the very least were directly influenced or encouraged to turn to prostitution, by friends or other members of the family who were either currently involved, or who had previously been involved in, the prostitution business,” (Sharpe, 1998, Page 41). This is a whole separate issue. It shows that many girls are not choosing the life of prostitution as an escape but because they are forced into it. Another reason for turning to prostitution is about money.

Many young girls are getting into the sex industry to pay their way through university or college. An article in the TimesOnline shows a study undertaken by Kingston University, which shows a 50% rise in the number of students resorting to prostitution or other jobs in the sex industry over the past six years. “ In a survey that asked 130 students whether they knew any friends involved in the sex industry, one in 10 said they knew of students who had stripped, lapdanced or worked at massage parlours and escort agencies to support themselves. Just over 6% said they knew students who worked as prostitutes,” (Times Online, October 2006).

This is a frightening amount of young people getting into the industry to get themselves out of trouble. Prostitution is not really a choice for most people anymore, it’s a way to survive. Finally the problems surrounding prostitution

are being taken seriously, with plans being made to put in more laws to try and stop prostitution. With all this being put into motion comes the release of *Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, glamorising sex work and giving the impression that being a prostitute can be a good career choice for young women.

September 2008 saw this programme aired on our televisions.

It is based on a book called *Belle De Jour: The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl*. The television show stars Billie Piper as Belle De Jour, the high class prostitute. The show brought in nearly two million viewers when the first episode was aired. Throughout the first series ratings fluctuated, ending the series with just under one million viewers. The second series never reached one million. So why the sudden drop in ratings? Only 8 complaints were filed after the show was first aired. Having watched the show it is clear to see that there is no real story line to it.

Secret Diary only gives an insight into sex work through an agent; there is no realism to the show. Belle seems to live a very glamorous life. She was not forced into prostitution because she was homeless or poor like so many others are, but instead she chose the career path for herself; “ So why do I do it? Well, because I love sex and I love money” (*Secret Diary of a Call Girl*, 2008). In a year Belle earned over ? 100, 000. Young girls watching the show with money problems or children to support could easily get the idea that being a prostitute is not such a bad thing.

The show offers no realistic view of street prostitution and the dangers of it. While Belle has an agent who she checks in with after meeting every client it does not assure her safety. In episode 6 of series 1, she encounters a slight

problem with a client. When she goes to call her agent he turns nasty; “ I don’t want you to call anyone. I’ve paid for you. Please take your clothes off,” (Secret Diary of a Call Girl, 2008). Many researchers on the subject of prostitution suggest that one of the reasons men buy sex is to do with power; “ Buying sex as an exercise of power for disempowered men,” (Sanders, 2008, Page 40).

Sanders is suggesting that men are purchasing sex because they have lost power elsewhere in their lives and paying someone to do what you tell them to is a way for men to regain the power. This is a possible explanation for why the man in Secret Diary got angry because Belle was not doing as she was told, making the client feel belittled, as he no longer has the power. Secret Diary of a Call Girl is not a very good representative of the industry of sex work. It only gives an insight into the work of escorts and is based on the stories of one girl. Crimefighters- The Vice, was aired on television in 2008.

It is a series following a vice squad around Nottingham who are tackling the problem of street prostitution. In one particular episode (23rd October) a man is caught with a prostitute in a park late at night. In another episode (27th September) a man is caught in an alleyway with a prostitute. The programme offers a realistic insight into the work of street prostitution and how bad it really is. Men are paying ? 10-? 20 to have sex with these women in dark, dingy parks, down grotty alleyways and even in front of people’s houses. One episode shows the vice squad interviewing several prostitutes from around the area and finding out how they really feel about it. The general consensus from them is that they are ashamed of themselves and

would rather be doing anything else but prostituting themselves. One prostitute has been in the industry for 15 years and has averaged 10-15 men a day. This being true she would have slept with over 75, 000 men in her time as a prostitute. In response to this she says; “ It is just a job,” (Crimefighters, 2008). She has been prostituting herself for so long now that she does not seem to have any real feelings towards the job in hand.

After watching this episode it is clear to see that most of the women in the area began prostituting themselves because they are homeless and addicted to drugs or have children to support. But the money they do make goes straight on more drugs. These prostitutes are spending up to ? 200 a day on drugs and the money they are making is going straight on more drugs. It is a vicious circle that they will not get out of without help. Unlike Belle, these women hate their jobs; “ They make my skin crawl. I’m not out here for fun. I can’t stand them touching me,” (Crimefighters, 2008).

This shows that these prostitutes are selling themselves because they have no other choice. They become reliant upon the money they are making that they cannot get themselves out of it. Street prostitution is dangerous.

Crimefighters helps to show that there are dangers to being a prostitute and that people can turn nasty. ; “ I could get picked up one day and chucked out in a ditch”, (Crimefighters, 2008). One prostitute said this on the programme. Clearly there is a danger to selling your body on the streets, as there is no one looking after your well being.

Research has shown that women get pushed into prostitution for one reason or another and are then too afraid to stop selling themselves because they

are scared of being killed by whoever is controlling them; “[JP: Why didn’t you just stop giving him the money and stop seeing him?] Coz he’d kill me. He’d beat the hell out of me. I know that. You just know it at the back of your mind. It’s easier to just do what he wants” (Margie, aged 32). [“ JP: Why didn’t you go to the police about him?] Coz I’ve felt his punches. Anyway, it doesn’t matter if I did, coz wherever I go he’d hunt me down” (Sammy, aged 18). If you haven’t got their money- the money they want- you’ve had it. You could end up dead” (Patsy, aged 42) (Phoenix, 1999, Page 162). These comments from former prostitutes in Phoenix’s book show just how dangerous prostitution can be. *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* does not show the dangers of prostitution and is a poor portrayal of what it is like to sell yourself. Research says that men have discovered that they can use their genitalia as a weapon of force. “ Men discovered that they could rape and women discovered that they ‘ could not retaliate in kind’,”(O’Connell Davidson, 1998, Page 119).

Over 300, 000 women are raped a year. Prostitutes are raped on average 8-10 times a year and are constantly at risk of violence. Men can get very nasty if they are not given what they want, which is the main danger for prostitutes. O’Connell Davidson goes on to argue that; “ Rape became not only a male prerogative, but man’s basic weapon of force against women, the principal agent of his will and fear,” (O’Connell Davidson, 1998, Page 119.) In conclusion, *Secret Diary of a Call Girl* is not a fair representation of prostitution.

In a world where more laws are being put into place to stop the legality of paying for sex, there really is no room for television shows glamorising the work of the sex industry. Although the portrayal of working in the escort business is reasonably accurate, it does not account for street prostitution, an act of the sex industry that is growing bigger and increasingly more dangerous; “ The client will participate in the sex market if his willingness to pay for the first unit of prostitution exceeds the price of prostitution,” (Giusta, 2008, Page 20). This shows that men are only willing to pay as much as is parallel to their want of sex. In countries with an uneven income distribution and discrimination in the labour market, where the clients are typically rich and the possible sex workers are poor, we should expect more sex sold at lower prices”, (Giusta, 2008, Page 32). Giusta is telling us that more men are likely to pay less for sex. Meaning that the number of clients using street prostitutes is likely to incline, causing a massive problem for our society. In London alone there are 7, 620 street clients a week. Unless it is made illegal to pay for sex, this problem is only going to get worse.