
Prostitution in WA

Since August 1975, several developments have led to the current heightened level of awareness regarding the victimisation and discrimination against many of the working prostitutes in W.A.

Through a series of public meetings held late in 1975, it became evident to many members of the public and at least one senior member of the police force that the current laws relating to working prostitutes in this state seemed to be applied in a discriminatory manner whereby prostitution by certain women in certain establishments was tolerated by the police.

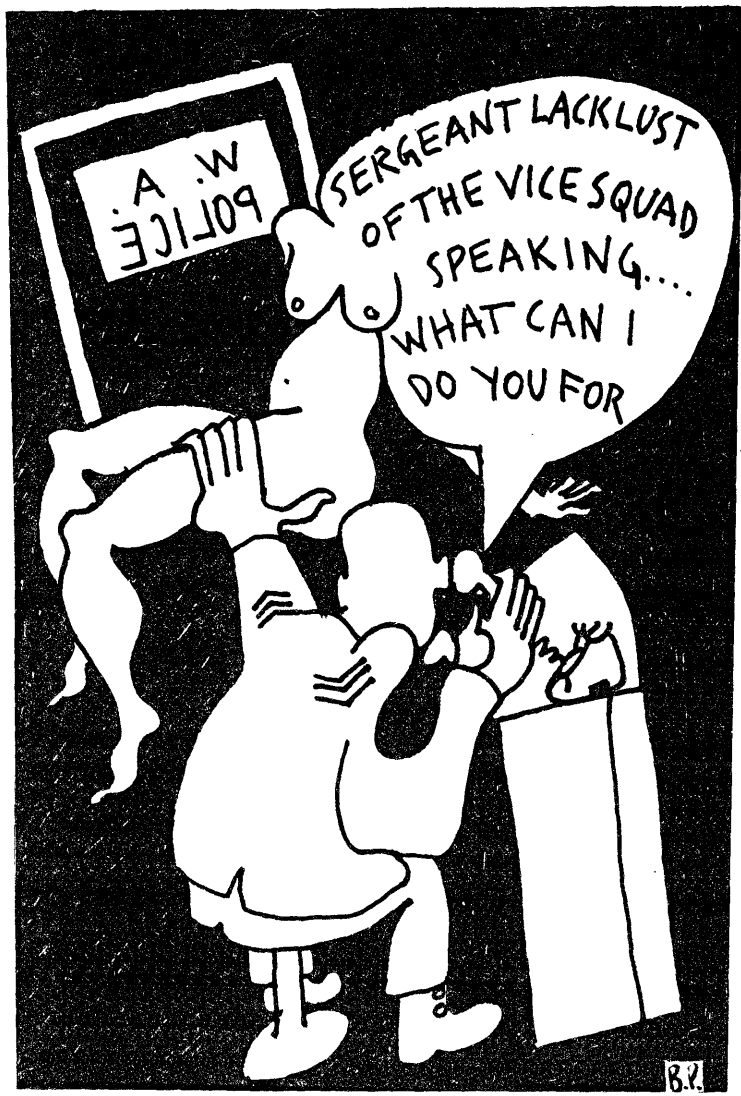
This apparent "policy" of toleration, containment and control by the police became the major concern of the Civil Liberties Association in pressing for a Royal Commission into all aspects of prostitution in this State.

At the same time the Minister for Police put forward a proposed series of amendments to the Police Act which sought to severely increase the penalties and conditions under which working girls could be prosecuted. It was this latter development that led a concerned number of individuals to form a committee (later to become Women's Electoral Lobby Subcommittee on Prostitution) with the major aims of:

- (i) letting working women in Perth and Kalgoorlie know the full extent and meaning of the proposed amendments to the Police Act and the implications for them;
- (ii) setting up a method of communication between the working women and the committee which would enable them to have a public voice in an issue which so vitally concerns them as a group;
- (iii) preparation of a submission recommending changes in the current laws which would reflect as closely as possible the opinions of working women on how prostitution should run in this State.

Developments.

- (a) Newsletter "Pro's and Con's"
To date, five issues of "Pro's and Con's" have been dropped to the majority of the working concerns in Perth. The first issue outlined in detail the proposed amendments to the Police Act. Subsequent issues have dealt with the Royal Commission: decriminalisation and legalisation; action by French and American prostitutes; prostitution as related to the Women's movement; contributions from working prostitutes and madams printed in



full in the forum section.

Feedback from the workers has been friendly and favourable in terms of support for the group's activities; personal contact and written contributions received.

(b) Police Amendemnts

After delivery of the initial "Pro's and Con's" outlining the severity of the new bill, it became evident that there was strong feeling by the women against any tightening in penalites. Lobbying against the harsher penalites by several groups (W.E.L., Humanist Society; Members of Parliament; Civil Liberties Association) and many individuals for a wider inquiry into prostitution resulted in the dropping of the amendments byt he Minister for Police.

(c) Royal Commission

It is evident that the current Royal Commission into allegations of police impropriety in administration of the law regarding prostitution represents a grudging concession in the face of mounting public pressure and criticism. Two fo the reasons outlined by H.O. Clokie in his "Royal Commissions if Inquiry" accurately reflect the current feeling as to why the commission was appointed –

- (i) to forestall public criticism or prevent anticipated political pressure;
- (ii) to postpone as long as possible the consideration of a question distasteful to the government and, at the same time, to pacify some politically powerful sector of the public. (1)

It is clear that an inquiry into prostitution with wider terms of reference would have been of more value to the issues under consideration. Commissions hearings have finished and the Commissioner's report will be available within a month.

(d) Research

The subcommittee is currently researching both practical and theoretical considerations relating to prostitution in local; over-seas and cross cultural context.

It is evident that any indepth analysis of the discrimination and exploitation of women in this profession must be related to the position of women in our society.

The prostitute is the subject of very powerful and persuasive myths within society ranging from popular misconceptions such as "prostitutes cause V.D." to the muth that prostitution is a social evil that exists because of the individual personality make-up of the prostitute rather than social and economic factors in

society.

In the words of a group of women endorsing decriminalisation — ‘prostitution is the outgrowth of social and economic conditions affecting women; therefore its current status of illegality is unjustified’.(2)

In summary, any proposal for legislation — whether it involves some form of legislation or total decriminalisation — must take into account the feelings and views of the workers themselves and the current social climate. A status of women group such as the Women’s Electoral Lobby endorses total decriminalisation and individual freedom of choice in how one uses one’s own body.

However, as assessment of the current community awareness indicates the ideal of decriminalisation is unlikely to succeed at present, and the current exploitation and discrimination against working girls could possibly be more realistically met by a liberal platform of legalisation totally removed from police control.

References:

- (1) *H.O. Clokie & J.W. Robinson (1937) Royal Commissions of Inquiry. Stanford University Press 123.*
- (2) *Women Endorsing Decriminalisation. Prostitution: A Non-Victim Crime? in Issues in Criminology, Volume 8, Number 2 (Fall 1973).*

This item should have appeared in issue 3 with the other West Australian material, but was mislaid.

