

Panel probes prostitution problems

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News Staff

Prostitution is sometimes called the world's oldest profession, but there are some who think they can put an end to it—or at least the legal shortcomings, the poverty, and the ignorance that they believe perpetuates it.

On Friday, 14 September, a panel discussion titled "Prostitution and the Law: Alternatives for Reform" was held at the Law Centre, examining whether the decriminalization of prostitution—the removal of Section 213 from the Criminal Code of Canada—might affect those in the sex trade.

Dawn Hodgins, a former prostitute and now project coordinator and public educator for Prostitution Awareness & Action Foundation of Edmonton (PAAFE), thinks that while the laws need addressing, decriminalization isn't the answer. The problem doesn't lie with the prostitutes, Hodgins believes, but with the johns who pick them up.

"One of the things we know is that 17 per cent of men who are caught trying to pick up a woman off the street have a violent criminal history," Hodgins said.

Decriminalizing prostitution in a public place, Hodgins explained, does nothing to change the violence that occurs behind closed doors, be it within an escort agency, a massage parlour, or elsewhere. The punishments for johns, Hodgins emphasized, need to be tougher and better-enforced.

Hodgins went on to suggest that with the rising cost of living, many turn to prostitution just to survive. However, she said, if one were to target and remove the demand—that is to say, the johns—the huge profit to be made would quickly disappear. So, Hodgins hopes, would the supply.

Another speaker and an advocate for decriminalization was New Democrat MP Libby Davies, representative of Vancouver's notoriously poor and drug-riddled downtown



TARA STIEGLITZ

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS Libby Davies wants prostitution decriminalized.

east neighbourhood.

Were prostitution decriminalized, Davies believes, women of the street would no longer be criminals and would feel more confident in turning to law enforcement and in reporting violence, and it wouldn't take decades for charges to be laid.

PAAFE's executive director, Kathy King, who lost her daughter to the streets, added to this sentiment.

"I remember years ago, talking to a policeman once [about my missing daughter], and this policeman said, 'You don't want to know what goes on,'" King said.

However, Hodgins didn't agree that decriminalization would do enough to reduce the violence and might only encourage people to become involved, which would lead only to more violence.

Instead, she proposed preventative education in the public school system

as part of the health class curriculum. Hodgins believes that men must learn at an early age that buying another person's body is unacceptable. Young women, she said, must learn early on that selling themselves is demeaning and wrong.

"I'm not sure how this idea of selling yourself as a form of female empowerment [makes women] independent of men. It actually makes [women totally] reliant on [men] for every dime," Hodgins said.

It's important this message is taught at a young age, said Hodgins, especially since many get into the trade as minors. Were prostitution simply recognized as slavery, Hodgins said, perhaps all those who participate in it would stop.

"Why are there men in our society who think it's their right to buy other people?" Hodgins asked. "To me, that's the issue. That's it."



ZHENDONG LI

OF MICE AND MEN AND MACHINES Researchers used mice to isolate a genetic link to vision loss also found in humans.

NEWS BRIEF

MICE HELP RESEARCHERS FIND NEW CAUSE OF BLINDNESS

University of Alberta researchers Dr Joe Casey and Dr Yves Sauvé have found evidence that the absence of a gene involved with bicarbonate transport—the transport of carbon dioxide in the human body—causes blindness and may be associated with epilepsy.

Casey, a biochemist, was using mice to study heart defects related to the Scl4a3 gene (anion exchanger 3 gene) in 2005. Although it's very rare for humans to lack a gene, it was important Casey used "knockout" mice—mice lacking Scl4a3—to find out what the

gene's function was.

Knowing that the Scl4a3 gene was also expressed in the retina, Casey contacted Sauvé, a physiologist specializing in retinal studies, to see if the mice had any eye defects.

Sauvé discovered that the mice Casey was studying suffered from a loss of vision, though not necessarily blindness. The vision loss the mice suffered from is similar to hereditary vitreoretinal degeneration (HVD), which causes blindness in humans, and in both cases there is an inner retina problem with neuron response.

Their research led them to a similar study on the Scl4a3 gene done in Germany. However, the German scientists were more concerned with its association with epilepsy. A mutation of

the Scl4a3 gene doesn't cause epilepsy on its own, but there is evidence to suggest it lowers the threshold for epileptic seizures, increasing the chances of a person to have one.

"We're making contact with people studying epilepsy and trying to find a link, but we haven't yet established a link," Sauvé said.

In the future, Casey and Sauvé would like to possibly link a higher risk of epilepsy with a type of inner retina disorder—something that resembles HVD.

"Science links different fields, and we ourselves are surprised when we go in directions we didn't expect, and it is fascinating when this happens," Sauvé said.

— Moly Milosovic, News Writer

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