



HISTORY & POLICY

Connecting historians, policymakers and the media

Wednesday, 8 November, 2006

Prostitutes will still be paying the price under ‘new’ government strategy

Vulnerable women will continue to be denied justice and civil rights under the Government’s new prostitution strategy, a Cambridge historian warned today.

In a new *History & Policy* paper, Julia Laite of St Edmund’s College, argues that the government’s strategy risks driving prostitution ‘out of site, and out of mind’, rather than ensuring fair treatment before the law and helping women to escape prostitution. She says plans to allow prostitutes to work together could provide a legal loophole for pimps and traffickers to exploit, unless more resources are invested in preventing exploitation and abuse.

In *Paying the price again: the ‘new’ coordinated prostitution strategy in historical perspective*, Julia Laite demonstrates how previous ‘crack-downs’ on prostitution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the 1960s, increased:

- off-street businesses, such as escort services and massage parlours;
- incidences of violence and murder against prostitutes; and
- the involvement of exploitative third parties such as traffickers and pimps.

She criticises the Home Office’s failure to learn from the history of England’s current prostitution laws - some of which have barely been modified since the early 19th century - or previous, failed strategies in the development of its new approach.

Julia Laite said:

“Today, a woman known as a ‘common prostitute’ can still be arrested if she is out buying a pint of milk. Once labelled, a woman becomes a legal pariah, her reputation is destroyed and her rights diminished.

“Despite the air of novelty in the government’s strategy, many of its provisions have already been experimented with, and failed. Successive ‘crack-downs’ on street prostitution have

increased the victimisation, stigmatisation and exploitation of women. It is a symbolic coincidence that just three years after the 1885 clamp-down on small 'brothels' forced more women onto the streets, Jack the Ripper became the first-known serial-killer of prostitutes.

“The government’s plan to allow prostitutes to live and work in groups of two or three is a welcome break with 100 years of repression, but history also offers a cautionary tale. Without more investment in police action against pimps and traffickers, this could create a haven for off-street, organised prostitution to operate, while the poorest and most vulnerable will remain on the streets, trapped in the familiar cycle of repeated arrests and stigmatisation.”

Notes to Editors:

1. Julia Laite’s paper, *Paying the price again: the ‘new’ coordinated prostitution strategy in historical perspective* is available at <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/archive/policy-paper-46.html>
2. Julia Laite is a Commonwealth Scholar at St Edmund’s College, Cambridge. She is currently researching the history of feminism, prostitution and prostitution control in late 19th and early 20th century England.
3. Her paper provides a historical critique of the Home Office’s *Coordinated Prostitution Strategy and summary of responses to Paying the Price*, published in January 2006: www.homeoffice.gov/documents/cons-paying-the-price/ProstitutionStrategy.pdf
4. *History & Policy* is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history, see www.historyandpolicy.org for further details. *History & Policy* is funded with a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
5. The initiative was founded by historians in Cambridge and London and is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact:

Mel Porter

History and Policy

Tel 020 7862 8768

Email mel.porter@sas.ac.uk