

Out of Sight Out of Mind

Pimps, Prostitutes, and Gold Medals

By: Winnie Small

Considering the amount and range of coverage of the 2010 Olympics in both mainstream and alternative media, there is a shocking paucity of recognition of an issue that hits women and children, especially those further marginalised by race and class inequalities – the Olympic sex trade. It seems forbidden for women in prostitution, feminists, First Nations activists, or any other concerned people to speak of the sexism, racism, and colonialism that will become apparent as a largely male tourist demographic participates in the sex trade as they follow the Olympics to Vancouver.

It is truly bizarre—influxes of men into nations are quite plainly seen as opportunities for the prostitution industry. The legal and illegal sectors of the sex trade industry traffic and exploit women (and men, and children), and many men buy into it. Some news-stories, true to racist/classist misogynist form, are going with the tagline “the world’s oldest profession”—which is phallicious: it implies that it was the first thing women did for wages in past economic systems, as if it is in women’s nature. In truth, as

feminist historian Gerda Lerner argues, prostitution as we know it began when slave owners realised they could sell the rape of their enslaved to other men for a large return on profit—it was the monetary exploitation of their bodies combined with the realisation that the sexual pleasure they got in raping others could be transferred to other men.

Pro-sex work organisations want to legalise prostitution and set up government-approved brothels. It is explicitly stated, by both supporters and detractors, that this is being done for the Olympics next year, with the businesses behind it stressing that yes, it will be done in time for the influx of male spectators. Incredibly, some reporting on the proposal of legal brothels in Vancouver has the audacity to claim that the women in prostitution claim they are needed for the Olympics. The West Coast Cooperative of Sex Industry Professionals (WCCSIP) is eager to say that legitimate businesses will fund a “co-operative brothel” for the games.

Most support for getting women in street prostitution into indoor prostitution illustrates how this has little to do with support for their safety, health, hu-

man rights, or dignity. Supporters often plainly state it is about “cleaning the streets up” and “protecting children from seeing it.” In other words, predominantly white, middle class people don’t want the “good people” to see. This is further evident in Vancouver, where the criminalisation of homeless people is thorough, with loss of shelter, no sit no lie laws, and police violence against squatters. Another common argument is the tax revenues that could be gained.

It’s illustrative to look to already legal systems of prostitution to demonstrate results in terms of “cleaning up the streets” and providing women for male consumers. In legal brothels, only women are tested for sexually transmitted diseases, never the customers. Research by Mary Sullivan of women in legal brothels in Australia, Janice Raymond of Holland, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women of Germany, and Melissa Farley of Nevada show how little attention is paid to the women’s safety. Women are provided with safety tactics including hostage negotiation tactics and panic buttons, which suggest a safer environment.

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