

Tavistock Policy seminar *Digest*

Young People and Sexual Exploitation – Are we developing child centred policy and practice?

Jenny Pearce introduced the seminar with two short case histories, and with a number of questions, or themes put to the group:

- Why is it that a policy and practice response to the complexities of young people's involvement in prostitution often quickly takes the pathway towards placing young people in secure accommodation?
- Is there an element of us and society criminalising behaviour that we find difficult to contain?
- Is there a way in thinking about policy and practice responses, to young people's involvement in prostitution that allows us to acknowledge the levels of stress that the young people, and those working with them have to hold?

Sue Jago from the Home Office, and Author of the consultation document 'Paying the Price', and Joanna Phoenix from University of Bath then introduced the evening with two very thought provoking presentations.

Contribution from Sue Jago

Tavistock Clinic debate

- *Paying the Price*, the Government's consultation paper on prostitution, focused significantly on children's issues. Some respondents regretted that focus; others were keen to have a new opportunity to develop good practice on prevention, protection and support in the context of what we hope will be a clear and coherent strategy on prostitution
- When considering policy and practice in respect of children one of the first questions we need to ask is how far child-centred policy and practice should take account of differing gender needs
- We also need to consider how policy and practice towards adults involved in prostitution could affect children and young people. Policy and practice which appears to normalise adult prostitution could have an impact on the extent to which children and young people may be coerced; on the response of those who may witness that process taking place; and on the views of children and young people themselves about the acceptability of selling or swapping sex
- *Paying the Price* asked a number of questions about policy and practice in respect of children and young people at risk of abuse through prostitution. The need for preventative measures was a common view amongst respondents who, almost unanimously, saw a key role for schools and for others caring for young people, including the corporate parents of looked after children
- Many agreed that we need a dual approach to prevention:
 - general information for all with a wider purpose in terms of generating discussion about appropriate relationships and behaviour. This should involve both boys and

girls and, it is frequently suggested, would need to be a shared responsibility between schools, Connexions and others to ensure that we reach those absent from school

- plus more targeted work with those considered to be at particular risk. It was generally felt that risk factors are not universally understood by the statutory services and other professionals working with children and young people. There is both a considerable training need and also a need to consider how best to deliver this targeted work in a way which avoids stigmatisation and alienation
- *Paying the Price* also considered the provision of protection and support for those abused through prostitution. Much has been said by respondents about the need for child-focused services, and the current lack of access to services in areas of sexual health, mental health, drug treatment and appropriate accommodation – indeed all those areas key to the support and protection of those abused through prostitution
- A key policy issue for many respondents was the potential for the criminalisation of those abused through prostitution through the street offences – loitering or soliciting. Many favour decriminalisation on the basis that children and young people are victims and should be treated as such
- But not all children and young people selling or swapping sex fulfil society's sometimes narrow view of a victim. A 13 or 14 year old child locked up against his or her will, cut off from friends and family, and forced to have sex with a succession of clients provided by his or her self-styled protector is easily recognisable as a victim
- More difficult to respond to is the young girl or boy on the street for whom coercion may have been rather more 'subtle,' who is determined to carry on selling sex as a survival strategy, desperate to present themselves as savvy and streetwise, in all probability aggressive, foul-mouthed, certainly sexually knowledgeable beyond their years, and who is above all apparently determined that they do not need help.
- Some respondents suggest that we need to keep the option of the street offences to protect local communities from the anti-social behaviour of these young people; others suggest that we retain the offence for those who 'persist' in street prostitution as an option of last resort
- By this stage, when we have repeatedly failed these children and young people, there can be a perverse tendency to shift the blame onto the young people themselves. It is not always easy to see beyond the behaviour on the street to the underlying problems and difficulties that he or she is facing. For some who come into contact with them, there may be a feeling that, if they persist in prostitution despite our best efforts, somewhere along the line they must be at least partly to blame for their own predicament
- Many individuals and organisations have an excellent track record of building trust through offers of help and friendship. But even here there can be a creeping feeling of helplessness – where help and friendship is repeatedly rebuffed, is it only the intervention of the criminal justice system that can force the pace, and provide a real chance to intervene in their lives? Government guidance suggests that a charge should only be brought where all attempts at diversion have failed. Whilst punishment is inappropriate, can criminalisation be justified in terms of the rehabilitative prospects it offers?
- If it cannot, what is the prospect for those who do not fulfil the accepted picture of a child in need, and who 'persistently and voluntarily' returns to street prostitution? How do we

find models of support and protection that enable us to work effectively with these hard-to-reach individuals who need our help most of all.

- There are success stories. There are well-established projects working with this group who have made a significant difference to many lives. But it is typically a slow process. And many other young people receive precious little support at all.
- For the older age group - the 16 and 17 year olds – this work is particularly challenging. The barriers include:
 - a lack of suitable accommodation
 - limited access to health and other services delivered in an age appropriate way
 - the transition period as young people reach 18 and transfer to adult services
- A further barrier seems to be that these young people are simply too challenging. Not just in respect of the behaviour they present, but in respect of the multiplicity of problems that need addressing. Respondents to the review have suggested that many people – and this applies equally to adults – are rejected by stretched services because they are simply too problematic
- There may also be a 'philosophical' barrier – some confusion with the older age group as to whether we are dealing with children, or young adults. Most projects adopt a client-focused approach that supports the building up of a trusting relationship and in which the pace is dictated by the client. We need to question whether this is a genuinely child-focused approach. If we are dealing with abused young people, at very great risk not just from continued abuse but from a range of health issues, should we stop treating them as capable of making a choice to involve themselves in prostitution, and force the pace to remove them from immediate danger and from the influences that keep them in danger?
- Should we consider whether elements of the traditional non-judgmental approach may actually inhibit a young person from making real progress out of an abusive situation?
- Similarly should we be rethinking our approach to confidentiality? Is it possible that the understandable desire to maintain confidentiality can actually result in inactivity and a lack of adequate protection?
- The philosophical approach is not, entirely separate from the resources question. What needs to be considered is what kind of regime would work best if resources could be found to support them? What kind of emergency accommodation would be most effective in removing a young person from danger and providing a suitable setting for constructive work
- For the prostitution review to add anything of real value to the policy and practice in respect of children abused through prostitution there needs to be a period of questioning and challenging. These questions aim to foster that debate.

Discussion.

The discussion opened with the question 'what about the focus on the abusers?' from a practitioner who said that her experience was of young people who shared similar stories of abuse, neglect and let down by the system, and wondered if enough was being done between agencies to share information and intelligence about perpetrators.

A representative from the Police Vice and Clubs Squad responded to this, talking about the development of more pro-active responses from the Clubs and Vice officers, who work both broadly in raising awareness, and in targeted early interventions with juveniles at risk, particularly

with Looked After Children. He described a positive relationship with Social Services and with other child protection agencies, though in his words this was a 'new field' for the police forces. He said that 3 men have been charged this year and said that the Metropolitan Police will not charge under 18's with sexual offences, rather they will be taken into 'police protection'. He described this as the position that was endorsed nationally by ACPO.

A subsequent contributor, from Social Services talked about what she believed was needed from services supporting these young people. She said that services were trying to 'catch up with these young people's life experiences', of abuse, addiction and neglect. She described one young woman saying "what can you give me?", when prostitution gave her the money she wanted. She went on to raise the issue of accommodation, saying perhaps this was something that should be highlighted in any policy response, and properly resourced, then this might offer something of value to these young people, adding that you can't give them back their childhood.

Perhaps this girl may be heard to be raising a larger question, which is 'can you give me anything that might be of greater value than money?'

A further contributor talked about how services and policy makers are just beginning to listen to young people, and that in some ways perhaps society has not moved on considerably from the time when hostels were established for 'young women in moral peril' suggesting perhaps that as a society we are too ashamed to hear about and acknowledge these young women. She said it was important, in making policy, not to jump to an answer. Government should fund pilot initiatives, that listen to what the young people themselves say they want, rather than see it in terms of how practitioners can best deal with the problems. She added that not enough resources went into thinking about 'what works', and that we needed to explore models of care.

The next contributor gave a clinically based example, describing three children in a playground, two of whom were engaged in sexual activity, and a third who was taking pictures with a mobile phone. What she reminded us was that in this particular situation, triangulated by the voyeur, there was a great deal of excitement and that it was important to think about what is it about the situation that motivates those involved - what is the attraction of this behaviour? She suggested that for these young people perhaps it was that while being watched they exist, and for such vulnerable young people, whose sense of themselves is often so extraordinarily weak, this is a potent feeling.

In thinking about the perverse attractions of abusive ways of life, one perhaps understands more how difficult it is to effect any change, and the issue of whether professionals and services who are committed to working with these people are able to make non-abusive, non-perverse, or non-delinquent alternatives persuasive and attractive to both victims and perpetrators is central to good practice.

The following contribution added to this, describing the complexities of 'that place between secure accommodation and the street'. He questioned what it is that we can capture and explore, and what are the opportunities for change in this middle ground in which practitioners work? He said that the current situation is one where people are trying to work with very complex problems, within a framework that doesn't acknowledge these complexities, but rather leads to oversimplification 'so any complexity goes out the window'. Again he raised the issue of accommodation posing the important question of 'How does one come up with a notion of accommodation that is different, and embraces the complexities of young people's needs?', going on to say that Government and others have an important task, working across departments in creating another way of accommodating these children.

A later contributor talked about the circularity of these young people going between abusive and neglectful family lives and the street. She said that she felt the extraordinary tenacity some of these young people showed was more a reflection of how horribly affected they were moving from one dreadful situation to another, rather than being a reflection of their bravery.

The discussion then turned to the question of language, with one contributor saying that she felt it was important to be careful about the terms of reference, sexual exploitation or prostitution, and that this impacted upon how young people were perceived, as victims rather than criminals. This led to a discussion about age, criminalisation and how we view young people engaged in these behaviours. This was contrasted to the way that the young people often viewed themselves as having a choice, and their sense of their own identity.

One contributor suggested that by offering a non-judgemental stance perhaps practitioners unwittingly were maintaining the status quo. A further contributor described a project from California that had a very charismatic director who took a more proactive approach with the young women that was along the lines of "This is what we have to offer but you have to behave to have it -if you make the choice to go back on the street then this isn't the place for you". She wondered if perhaps in the UK practitioners are constrained by an 'open door' policy?

Others said they would err more on the side of an 'open door' approach as it often took young people some time to engage with services.

The confusion, and somewhat artificial boundaries around age, and notions of choice and identity, perhaps reflect the difficulties of working with those who are both undoubtedly victims, through suffering abuse themselves, but who at the same time are not 'innocent', and can behave in ways that offend or cause significant harm to others. Perhaps it is important also to acknowledge that these young people are doing something that in societies terms we think of as wrong, and in therapeutic terms we might think of as self-destructive.

Perhaps the question we can ask ourselves is how do we find a way of working both with their vulnerability and their responsibility, without holding them responsible for the behaviour of others?

In a way what was mirrored in the discussions about the need for new ways of accommodating these young people that was neither the rigid, unrelenting boundaries of secure accommodation, nor the boundarylessness of the street, was the need for a framework (philosophically, in terms of practice, and supported by policy commitments) to 'accommodate' the complexity of the difficulties for these young people, and the complexity of the feelings, and responses they evoke in those struggling to contain them.