

SISTER OUTSIDERS

what you won't hear inside the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry

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WEEKS 7 - 8:

PICKTON NO 'MYSTERY' – JUST A JOHN GIVEN IMPUNITY

For years the police knew Willy Pickton solicited women for prostitution with drugs and money in Vancouver. He transported, in his identifiable red truck, women too drugged, scared or dope sick to give sexual consent to Port Coquitlam where he “partied” with them and others who had been lured with lies. He deceived, confined, threatened, assaulted, used and killed many women in the truck and at the farm. He released many of them alive from the truck and even from the farm during the time period when he was regularly killing women. VPD Deputy Chief Constable Doug LePard says “it is a mystery” why Pickton killed some that he prostituted and why he did not kill others.

The Missing Women Inquiry deals with that ‘mystery’ partly by stringing together a possible story from the facts that we have. How about this one?

Let's suppose Pickton, raised in squalor and violence was surrounded by men of squalor and violence, including the Hell's Angels across the street and his brother next door who toadied up to that gang by running a biker bar, Piggy's Palace, and bringing in women for prostitution. Gang members, local politicians, off-duty cops, and others wallowed in that business.

For Pickton, violent porn, strip bars, live sex shows (like those live-streamed from the gang involved Number 5 Orange bar across the street from the VPD) and all manner of prostitution were normalized. Wives, girl friends, daughters and ‘party girls’ were controlled with violence and contempt and the Pickton family's money.

Pickton like the men around him used women as prostitutes regularly. In that activity he had no need or willingness to please women or to win them to pleasing him. He learned to use women selfishly and more and more brutally, with impunity. He, like the men he knew, expected those women to do what he said and to tolerate sexualized violence. No authority stopped him.

Women, however desperate and drug-sick, became increasingly repelled by his stench and degraded by his exploitation of their drug addiction and their poverty. Some began to dare to refuse him. He hired others (including two women) to pimp for him on the street and in the Vancouver harm reduction centers. No one interfered with that pimping or that prostitution.

Maybe his sexual expectation, socially indulged as it was, could not be satisfied. Maybe in that first murder she could not override the effects of drugs and degradation in spite of his expectations that she do so. His sexual expectations were not met. He exploded in sexist rage at her failure to satisfy him and killed. Or maybe she, the anonymous first of the dead, was sexually used so cruelly by him that she died.

He had the means to evade being caught. He was accustomed to not being held accountable.

But he would not do without. Why should he? Every authority set an example of contempt for the poor, for the Indigenous, and for women. The behaviour of every authority told him that men were entitled to sexual satisfaction as long as they could pay for it. And he could pay for it – his family sat on land worth millions to developers.

Women were to satisfy him. Women in desperation had to do it and why shouldn't he take advantage?

He went back to the streets for more women.

Some women became wary of him and warned others. He exploited the faint hope women placed in the buddy system. He used the comfort of the Downtown Eastside drop-ins where no one would denounce prostitution for fear of being heard to denounce these un-consenting women. He paid degraded women to trick the more and more desperate women into thinking they would be safe if they followed the harm reduction tips and did not go alone. People knew it. The cops knew it. No one stopped it.

Having been ignored in his soliciting and everyday brutality, having been allowed by complacent authorities and complicit men to grow into a sexist monster, he congratulated himself on his cleverness and ingenuity. Pimps, managers, drivers and scouts did not and perhaps, he thought, could not stop him.

When he needed help his brother was there. When the cops finally did come to interview Willy in the summer of 1999, his brother told them to come back in the rainy season. The cops who daily conduct warrantless searches of the body cavities of Downtown Eastside women, waited another five months to talk to Willy. And when Willy consented to a search of his property, the cops didn't even bother. After all, he was only a john even if he was a stinky old john. And he was a stinky old john with access to money and lawyers and secrets to keep about what went on at Piggy's Palace.

The squalor and evil madness that had become his life was the stuff of snuff movies and sexist horror shows. But his impunity and the trajectory it supported seems not such a mystery.

The real mystery of class contempt, of racism, of women's oppression remains hidden at this Inquiry. Why do ‘the experts’ from Lowman to LePard and this Inquiry staff – with all the powerful authorities they represent – still fail to see the long accumulated and aggregated list of international crimes of violence against women?

At the very least, we see a man soliciting for the purposes of prostitution, woman assault, sexual assault, drug possession for the purposes of trafficking, sexual harassment, threatening with violence, stalking, confinement, kidnapping, trafficking for the purposes of the prostitution of others, assault with weapons, attempted murder, and obstruction of justice. Investigating, arresting, charging and convicting for any of these crimes might have prevented the monstrous murders.

Lee Lakeman

NO, DOCTOR, WOMEN ARE NOT SAFE IN BROTHELS

Sarah Mah
Asian Women Coalition Ending Prostitution (AWCEP)

On October 17th and 18th, Dr. Kate Shannon showcased her research findings for the Missing Women Inquiry. She studies prostituted women. Euphemisms flowed as prostitution was squeezed into her ‘scientific framework’. Johns are “clients,” brothels are given the palatable label “indoors.” The circumstances of women's lives are reduced to vague and arbitrarily defined categories – “for the purposes of this analysis”. “Police harassment.” “Enforced Displacement.” “Working in outdoor spaces.” She calls these factors “predictors of an increased risk of violence,” and passes them off as the causes of harm to prostituted women, even though these “predictors” are in fact *correlations*. Causation of violence is, of course, the john and the pimp.

Simple science aside – it is these factors, Dr. Shannon says, that interfere with women's ability to “look for indications of potential violence” in a john, and her ability to “negotiate safety,” such as condom use. Repeatedly she reinforces the rigid and narrow nature of her study, and her goal to “focus on the context of how violence impacted negotiation and safety.” Her solution: remove laws against prostitution and allow women to work indoors, “[allowing] sex workers to have some measure of safety, access to services and reduced exposure to violence.”

The world that Dr. Shannon advocates for, as an academic in public health and epidemiology, is a world where women are expected to bargain for their safety and their health, and the state is expected to grant them that “freedom”. But women have fought for so much more from the state and for international and human rights laws that affirm that women shouldn't have to negotiate for their survival.

Dr. Shannon's proposed world is not a hypothesis. It's a tried-and-failed reality. Women are already expected to rely only on themselves for their survival and that of their children. Prostituted women are already expected to negotiate with power they do not have over a john. Women already get zero interference from police and the state when violent men threaten their lives. And women are already ‘indoors’ in Vancouver – and still face beatings, rape, and murder. The problem? Dr. Shannon never includes these cases, “for the purposes of this analysis”.

Dr. Shannon proceeds to identify Kingsway and Victoria as one of four “geographical hot spots” where prostituted women on the street experience a “higher than normal” pressure from johns to skip condoms. She goes on to argue that it is the law and police enforcement of the law that displaces women away from services and endangers them. It is in places like this, she suggests, that women would have the most to gain from full decriminalization which would allow them to move indoors.

Surely, one at the helm of this research would know this area well for its reputation. The newly-branded “Little Saigon” is a district well known for its abundance of Asian massage parlours – just like its namesake, devastated by American troops, has been made synonymous with pimping and brothels. It's no secret that Asian women are prostituted and often trafficked into these brothels. Local newspapers profit from ‘adult ads’ that use the appeal of racism to sell Asian women. An AWCEP survey of the now-defunct Craigslist erotic classifieds revealed 60% of the online ads featured Asian women, and most highlighted race and racist stereotypes. Coercion, language barriers, violence, and threats of deportation are all too common and familiar to women in these circumstances. If the Inquiry is going to consider prostitution law reform in the name of ‘safety’ it should consider these women too.

And yet, trafficked and prostituted Asian women have been made invisible at the Inquiry. The commission will not hear about the women beaten in massage parlours. They will ignore the Asian women indoors who face dangers from pimps and johns, not to mention the profits members of organized crime make off these women. What we are left with is the racist assumption that Asian women, in particular, want to prostitute, and the racist decision to erase Asian women from the Inquiry because they are assumed to be safely indoors.

Brothels have failed Asian women here, and around the world. No, doctor, prostitution is not safe for women. Not even indoors.

shut out ... but not shut up

A WORLD OF ITS OWN?

After 7 weeks of talking amongst themselves, *Sister Outsiders* questions some of the language gaining acceptance in the Missing Women Inquiry room.



★ “MARGINALIZED”? WHO DID THE MARGINALIZING + HOW?

Lee Lakeman

“Marginalized”. Over and over that is how the women are referred to at the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry. “Marginalized women”. Those using the term may mean to be respectful but they are missing the point. The point is: Who creates the ‘main stream’? Who sets its margins? Who controls its centre? And who did the marginalizing?

They use the expression as a description of the women. But nobody is born with a tattoo saying “marginalized”. Although it is true that girls are treated differently from birth and part of that treatment is to push them out of reach of what is normal for boys. When Aboriginal babies are born they are pushed far from the privileges and security we hold out for most white babies. And life choices are shaped by class relations – by who controls what, who owns what.

As we are raised, too much is determined by how close we are to that gathered power centre of class race and sex. Aboriginal girl children are pushed beyond any safety buoys and safe guards in the centre of our society’s ‘main stream’. Pushed sooner and pushed farther. But even girls, even brown baby girls, even poor brown baby girls, have a chance of survival and are not always pushed to the most dangerous far margins are they?

Who pushed these women to the life threatening and life destroying margins and when? Who denied them the resources at the centre, available to the ‘main stream’ of Canadian residents and when? Who kept them from accessing what belonged by right to everyone and how?

We are all charged with investigating how these women, including these Aboriginal women, get marginalized out of education, jobs, community and even the social nets that are meant to protect us all from hitting the ground. Who among us left them or pushed them or leaves their sisters still in the miserable relationships with violent men? Who are the johns and hotel bawdy house owners exploiting

them in the lower mainland sex industry? Who are the lazy beat-cops targeting petty poverty crime while their disinterested bosses ignore the sexist violence? Who leaves these women to the street commerce of lies and illusions, to the drug trade of self-medication, corrupt druggists and gang violence? What policies force their migration on every trucker’s route from small communities to urban ghettos? Who issues them numbers and spots in line-ups for dinners or court rooms or blankets or make-up or john’s? Who leaves women sick and disheartened to fend for themselves among predators on miserable welfare rolls with worn out social workers, impossible welfare rates and the harm reduction centers of despair?

But our ignorance or social guilt or personal discouragement cannot dissuade us from the political job at hand. Even with its mandate ridiculously limited by the BC Liberal government, even with the exclusion of the voices of self-organized advocates, this inquiry must, at the very least, answer this: How did both VPD and RCMP police forces and prosecution for the crown discriminate against/marginalize these women? Having driven women into hideous conditions, how did these state institutions deny them life-saving police and crown protection?

The governments of Vancouver, of B.C., and of Canada who control those police forces and those crown services help to create the ‘main stream’ with social and economic policy. At the same time, they create the margins with enforcement, restrictions, limits and budgets – and they have responsibility for who is pushed by whom.

We want the rest of the names, the names of the policies, the names of the pushers, the names of the discriminators.

Who pushed these perfect baby girls to the deadly margins of our society? Who marginalized them and how?

★ WHY NOT CALL THEM WOMEN?

Hilla Kerner

Darrell Roberts, one of the “independent” counsel at the Missing Women Inquiry was right to criticize the RCMP with their new use of the “STW” initials (Sex Trade Worker) whenever they erased a victim’s name in the evidence submitted to the inquiry. It is “stigmatizing” he said and “disrespectful”.

The federal government lawyer, in her job to defend the RCMP, claimed that Sex Trade Worker is the “commonly used” “respectful”, “non-stigmatizing” term to use.

But it is not common agreement to do so. Roberts, in defense of “Aboriginal interests”, didn’t agree. We have reason to believe that some of the families and some of the dead refused the term.

It might be a mere nuance to those who have not put their minds to the question of prostitution; but it is as loaded and as political as words can be. The term “sex trade worker” pretends that prostitution is a chosen life, a profession or just a job, a fair exchange of labour and money. The evidence given in the Missing Women Inquiry completely contradicts this notion.

And, in any case as Mr. Roberts asks, why not call them victims? We say, why not call them women?

AN OPEN LETTER TO SUSAN DAVIS FROM HILLA KERNER

Dear Susan,

I listened carefully to your testimony at the Missing Women Inquiry on October 31, 2011.

I’ve been thinking about what you said and I want to ask you some questions that no lawyer in the court room asked you:

You described a middle class up bringing with access to a rich education like music, and occupational training like hair dressing. Why were you pushed to seek income through an escort service?

You testified that you were denied an escort license because you had a criminal record for your associations with gangs. Were any of the men in the gangs criminalized? Were any of them criminalized for being a pimp or a john?

You answered that the majority of the attacks you suffered in the sex trade were while you were “working” on the streets. I understand this means that you were also attacked by johns and pimps while you were “working in-doors” – but not as frequently. Am I right?

You told the Commission that sometimes even when you judged that a john might be dangerous, you would still go with him because you needed to pay rent. Would you agree that neither you, nor any other woman, should be in that position? Would you agree that when a woman is prostituting because she needs the rent money, she really has no choice?

You stated that it is not easy to exit street prostitution and a few times you slipped back. We are told the same by so many women who call us. We are told the same by women who succeed and join us after their struggle to exit prostitution. What do women need to exit prostitution? What should the federal or provincial or municipal governments provide to women to enable them to exit prostitution?

You were right when you explained that women are still on the street and are still forced to engage with violent johns because “Poverty hasn’t been evaporated”, “There are no beds for detox and recovery” and “Women need to feed their children”.

Earlier this year on a CBC Radio interview I heard you say: “Put that in place (livable wage and livable welfare) and maybe I would talk about the abolition of prostitution. But it’s not going to happen.” Have you given up in the face of the neo-liberal state’s abandonment of women?

Susan, our power is in our passion, our commitment and our numbers. The more of us who fight together for women’s equality and liberation, the greater our chance to win. Will you join me?

Sincerely,
Hilla

SISTER OUTSIDERS IS PRODUCED ON BEHALF OF THE VRRWS COLLECTIVE

Vancouver Rape Relief & Women’s Shelter
24 hour crisis line: 604-872-8212 • www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca



shut out ... but not shut up



**Flesh Mapping —
Prostitution and Trafficking in Canada**
A Continuing Education Course
Feb 1, 2012 – April 18, 2012
6.30-9.30 pm Location TBA

Join local and international activists + guest lecturers to discuss international law, human rights, women’s rights + activist practices. Weekly documentaries featuring global conversations on key issues.

To pre-register: call 604-872-8212 or email us at: info@rapereliefshelter.bc.ca.