

HARM MINIMISATION VS ZERO TOLERANCE: A
COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRESS REPORTING OF THE
VICTORIAN STREET PROSTITUTION DEBATE

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the role of the print media in the Victorian street prostitution debate. A comparison of the coverage in the two daily Melbourne newspapers, The Age and the Herald Sun, suggests an overt ideological division between the conventional philosophies of harm minimisation and zero tolerance. Some conclusions are drawn about the implications of this rather limited debate for the political construction of social problems in Victoria.

In recent years, the media has appeared to play an increasingly influential role in shaping the public policy agenda. Given the narrow ownership of the Australian mass media, it is hardly surprising that much media coverage has sought to guide proposals for policy reform in a neoliberal direction (Argy 1998, pp.224-225; Bessant & Watts 1999, pp.353-59).

In particular, *sections of* the media seem to have reinforced conservative explanations of, and solutions to, social problems (Beresford et al 1999;

Putnis 2001). For example, the *tabloid* media has played a significant role in promoting public hostility towards the unemployed, and portraying them as welfare cheats and dole bludgers. A prime instance of this stereotyping was the vicious 1996 attack by Channel Nine's 'A Current Affair' on the Paxtons, three naïve, unemployed young people from Melbourne's disadvantaged western suburbs (Beder 2000, pp.158-67; Twentyman 2000, pp.83-88).

Similarly, the tabloid media has often opposed the liberalization of illicit drug laws. For example, a 1997 campaign by talkback radio hosts and the Sydney tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, seems to have been significant in destroying Federal Government support for the ACT's proposed heroin trial (Lawrence et al 2000). As we shall see, the tabloid media appears to have a particular distaste for harm minimisation programs.

The Victorian Street Prostitution debate

The Inner City Melbourne suburb of St Kilda has had a distinctive street sex trade since World War Two. For many years, Fitzroy and Grey Streets were regarded as unofficial red-light zones. However, this trade seems to have increased significantly in recent years, and to have shifted beyond the major thoroughfares into adjoining residential streets (AGSPAG 2002, pp.27-28 & 43-44).

The street sex trade has often provoked friction between prostitutes and local residents (Johnston 1984, pp.338-347; Neave 1985a, pp.48-49 & 254-255; Neave 1985b, pp.47-64; Perkins 1991, pp.110-112; Sullivan 1997, pp.103-05). The formation of the Port Phillip Action Group (PPAG) in late 1999 renewed this tension. PPAG sought the establishment of a designated sex work area in an industrial district away from residential areas. They also demanded increased police patrols to discourage sex workers (PPAG 2001).

In February 2001, PPAG organized a public march to the St Kilda Town Hall of over 300 people against street prostitution. The march provoked two smaller counter-marches (by the Prostitutes Collective and a radical Left

group respectively) in defence of sex workers, and attained enormous media publicity (Mendes 2002a, p.51).

The State Labor Government responded to this public confrontation by establishing a consultative, bipartisan reference group to be known as the Attorney General's Street Prostitution Advisory Group (AGSPAG). The AGSPAG group consisted of representatives of sex workers, police, local traders, welfare agencies, and local government, and included two members of PPAG. Yet despite its diverse membership, the group's agenda was arguably driven by the needs of local residents rather than by the health and safety concerns of street sex workers.

This was in part because the government's principal concern was to manage local community angst about street prostitution, rather than to address the structural causes of street prostitution (McNamee 2002, p.12). In addition, the formal AGSPAG structure and forums tended to favor the local middle-class resident groups who were vocal and effective in articulating their demands. In contrast, the sex workers appear to have have found these structures intimidating, and would perhaps have benefited from less formal outreach meetings and consultations on their own turf. One consequence of

this apparent bias in the political process towards the rights of residents was that only limited consideration was given by AGSPAG to expanding support services for sex workers (AGSPAG 2001, pp.27-29; AGSPAG 2002, pp.88-91; McNamee 2002, p.15).

The Final Report of the Group released in June 2002 recommended the establishment of tolerance areas in the City of Port Phillip, and the establishment of legal designated street worker centres for street sex workers to service clients (AGSPAG 2002). The tolerance areas were not to be located in close proximity to child care centres, schools, places of worship, or residential or retail areas. The street worker centres required parliamentary approval, and it was always unlikely that the proposed legislation would pass the conservative-dominated Upper House. However, in August 2002, the government withdrew the legislation due to an apparent lack of community support following a campaign by some local residents and traders against the proposed tolerance area sites.

The Methodological Framework of the Media Analysis

The researchers used the Lexis Nexis and Electric Australasia newspaper data bases to acquire all articles that appeared in the *Melbourne Age* and *Herald Sun* on street prostitution from February 2001 (the time of the PPAG march) to September 2002 (following the shelving of the AGSPAG recommendations by the government).

A code analysis was developed for analysing the media coverage based on type of reporting (e.g. editorial, news or opinion piece), views expressed about the trial of tolerance zones and sex centres (pro, anti or neutral), ideological perspective (harm minimisation, zero tolerance or other), and news sources (eg. local residents and traders, politicians, police, sex workers, local government, brothel owners etc.).

Harm minimisation is defined here as a concern to reduce the adverse consequences of drug use for both the community and individual drug users, rather than to prevent drug use per se. It implies that drug use should be viewed as a public health, rather than a criminal or legal issue. In contrast, the zero tolerance model views drug use narrowly as a criminal and moral

issue, and favors strategies directed solely at abstinence (Mendes 2002b, p.141).

The Media and the Construction of Social Problems

All public policy processes have a structure within which problems are defined, and particular agendas set. The actions of various stakeholders – interest groups, consumers, bureaucrats, and the general public – then converge to influence the adoption and implementation of particular policies by government (Palmer and Short 2000, pp.32-33; Edwards 2001, pp.4-7).

As noted by Schon (1979), problem definitions are strongly influenced by the telling of ‘stories’ about social issues. These stories are underpinned by metaphors based on certain purposes and values which name and frame the concerns to be addressed, and the possible solutions. Depending on the metaphors used, it is possible for the construction of social issues to proceed down entirely different paths. For example, a low income area could either be defined as a slum that requires regeneration, or alternatively as a vibrant and healthy community.

The media plays an important role in constructing definitions of social problems via the use of various techniques of reporting including the use of metaphors, the mobilizing and focusing of public opinion, the selective use of evidence, and the use of language based on particular values (Beresford 2000, pp.136-139). As we shall see in the street prostitution debate, The Age and Herald Sun respectively used different techniques to present differing constructions of the same problem.

The Age used mainly conventional news reports and editorials to support the government's harm minimisation perspective. Particular emphasis was placed on the potential of the AGSPAG recommendations to reduce harm to the St Kilda community, and to relieve the friction between local residents and street sex workers. Less attention was given to the structural causes of street prostitution, and the particular needs of street sex workers.

In contrast, the Herald Sun used a range of techniques including biased news reports and opinion pieces, selective use of sources, and emotive and sensationalist metaphors to articulate a zero tolerance perspective. The Herald Sun narrowly identified street sex work as the problem to be addressed, and ignored contributing structural factors.

The Melbourne Age

The Age is owned by the Fairfax Press, and is generally regarded as one of the three or four quality Australian newspapers (Loane 1997, p.57). The Age appeals particularly to an educated/professional audience, and currently has an average daily circulation of 196,000 readers. The Age generally articulates a soft, small 'l' liberal approach to social issues, and has often been labeled (fairly or otherwise) as sympathetic to the positions of the Australian Labor Party (Mendes 2000:55).

On issues such as illicit drugs, *The Age* has persistently advocated a harm minimisation position. For example, the newspaper strongly supported both the ill-fated 1996 proposal by the Kennett Government to decriminalize the use and possession of small quantities of marijuana, and the equally unsuccessful 2000 proposal of the Victorian Labor Government to introduce supervised injecting facilities for heroin users (Mendes 1996, p.19; Mendes 2002b).

However, *The Age* has generally been reluctant to advocate more radical constructions of social problems that would lead to alternative solutions such

as *structural reform*. These solutions could arguably lead to a more explicit focus on the social and economic empowerment of excluded groups. For example, advocates of structural or demand reduction link illicit drug use to broader social inequities and injustices. The solution then lies with macro-economic reforms involving a redistribution of wealth and income (Goldberg 1999).

Equally, *The Age* has rarely critiqued the economic rationalist as well as human rights assumptions that underpin harm minimisation measures. Whilst supervised injecting facilities and tolerance areas may help keep illicit drug users and street prostitutes alive, they can also be seen as a form of social control which aims both to reduce harm to the population, and to reintegrate ‘deviant’ groups with the capitalist economy *via returning them to mainstream social and employment structures*. Harm minimisation measures appear to reflect a variety of professional, political and community interests and agendas that go well beyond the needs of service users (Zajdow 1992; Mugford 1993; Zajdow 1999; Miller 2001).

As we shall see, *The Age*’s emphasis on harm minimisation tended to reinforce the limiting of the street prostitution debate to either conventional

harm minimisation or zero tolerance measures. To be sure, *The Age* made some reference to structural factors associated with street sex work such as poverty and drug dependency. However, there was little extended discussion of the link between street prostitution and broader economic, social and gender inequities, and/or discussion of potential structural solutions such as increased health, housing, and welfare supports (Neave 1985a, pp.425-456; Dixon 1997, pp.32-40; Pyett & Warr 1999, p.195; Mitchell 2000, pp.6-8; McNamee 2002). Rather, *The Age* accepted the parameters of the AGSPAG process which was to primarily concentrate on addressing the concerns of socially included groups such as local residents and traders, rather than on empowering marginal groups such as street workers who were excluded from the community (Mendes 2002a).

The Age's reporting of the Street Prostitution debate

The Age published a total of 32 articles during the monitored period. They consisted of 25 news reports, six editorials, and only one opinion piece.

The news reports used a wide range of sources including the Port Phillip Action Group (11 occasions), other local residents (11 occasions), the ALP

Government (11 occasions), the Liberal Party Opposition (11 occasions), police (6 occasions), the City of Port Phillip (13 occasions), local traders (6 occasions), individual street workers (5 occasions), Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry or RHED (formerly known as the Prostitutes Collective) (3 occasions), local welfare agencies (1 occasion), and specialist academics such as Professor Marcia Neave (2 occasions).

In general, the news reports were balanced, and fairly presented both sides of the harm minimisation vs zero tolerance debate. *However, the interpretation of harm minimisation was relatively conservative in terms of prioritising harm to the community rather than to street workers.* As noted above, many of the reports tended to emphasise the concerns of local residents and traders around public nuisance issues, and *gave only limited consideration to the concerns* of street workers.

For example, early reports referred to resident concerns around St Kilda becoming an 'open-air brothel' due to the proliferation of sexual acts, assaults, and used condoms and syringes in people's gardens, lanes, streets, and parks, and the associated presence of 'sex tourists' (Cauchi 2001;

Chessell 2001). However, some space was also given to local residents who defended the rights of street workers (Munro 2001a; Chessell 2001).

Further reports consistently emphasized resident concerns that street work be relocated away from residential and retail areas (Elder & Guerrero 2001; Munro 2001b; Baker 2001). Later when the proposed tolerance zones were announced, considerable space was given to the vocal opposition of residents and traders (Tomazin 2002a; Tomazin 2002b; Tomazin 2002c; Kissane 2002). *Such reports focused public concern around the adverse impact of street sex work on local residents.*

To be sure, the paper did not ignore the needs of street workers. A number of references were made to the AGSPAG recommendations as potentially providing a safer environment for sex workers. And space was also given to the views of workers and their representatives. For example, Karen Sait from RHED was cited on a number of occasions discussing the health and safety needs of workers (Cauchi 2001; Munro 2002). Some street sex workers were interviewed expressing support for the AGSPAG recommendations (Milburn 2002). And later a number of workers were cited as feeling 'abandoned and betrayed' by the shelving of the AGSPAG plan (Choahan 2002).

In addition, some reference was made to structural factors associated with street prostitution such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, illicit drug use, and mental illness (Munro 2001a). One Editorial suggested that the government concentrate on addressing the structural causes of street prostitution such as poverty, unemployment, and drug abuse (*Sunday Age*, 6 February 2001). However, no detailed consideration was given to discussing potential structural solutions to street prostitution.

The Age editorials were consistently supportive of a harm minimisation position, and specifically the recommendations of the AGSPAG report. A *value-neutral approach was adopted regarding street prostitution which was accepted as a normal part of modern society. However, the principal emphasis tended to be on reducing harm to St Kilda residents, rather than addressing the particular needs of street sex workers.*

For example, an early statement argued that ‘attempted suppression of prostitution through zero tolerance and harsh sanctions is likely to be seen as too oppressive, costly and – as has been found with other forms of prohibition – ultimately futile. Containment to minimize the nuisance factors is perhaps the most that can be expected from the criminal justice system’

(*The Age*, 25/2/01). A further contribution explicitly supported a designated red-light district, arguing that ‘prohibition does not work. The best society can do is try to minimize the harm’. Attention was drawn to the Kings Cross example which had reportedly ‘succeeded in reducing the complaints of local residents’ (*The Age*, 30/7/01).

A later statement congratulated the government for ‘accepting that street prostitution is here to stay’, and for ‘seeking to accommodate the competing needs of traders, residents and prostitutes’ (*The Age*, 21/6/02). Similarly, the City of Port Phillip was praised for ‘listening to a wide range of opinions and making a decision in the best interests of the whole community’ that would ‘regulate and control a situation that has become intolerable for many locals’ (*The Age*, 31/7/02). *The Age* regretted the government’s decision not to proceed with the AGSPAG reforms, and restated its belief ‘that an appropriate process of discussion had been undertaken in the formulation of the tolerance zones’ (15/8/02).

The only opinion piece to appear in *The Age* was written by Heather Benbow, a phd student at the University of Melbourne. Using structural

feminist language, Benbow attacked the ‘femocrats’ of the ALP for permitting the sexual exploitation of women. Drawing attention to structural issues such as sexual abuse, drug use, mental illness and homelessness associated with street prostitution, she argued for the decriminalization of soliciting, and a greater focus on supports for those wanting to leave street sex work (Benbow 2002).

Benbow’s argument seems to reflect the views of many radical feminists who argue for greater legal and industrial empowerment of existing street sex workers whilst continuing to view prostitution per se as exploitative and degrading (Jackson & Otto 1984; Sullivan 1992; Sullivan 1994; Jeffreys 1997; Gorjanicyn 1998). However, this arguably significant viewpoint received no further consideration in *The Age*.

The Herald Sun

The tabloid *Herald Sun* is owned by Rupert Murdoch, and has an average daily circulation of 555,000 readers. The paper has long been overtly sympathetic to the conservative Liberal Party, and is generally regarded as

appealing to populist blue-collar or socially conservative views on social issues (Schultz 1998, pp.91-92).

In contrast to *The Age*, the *Herald Sun* has consistently advocated prohibitionist/zero tolerance solutions over alternative harm minimization measures. For example, the *Herald Sun* played a prominent role in opposing the Kennett Government's proposed decriminalization of marijuana, and was also influential in the 2000 campaign against supervised injecting facilities (Rowe 1999, pp.278-282; Penington 2002, pp.5-6 & 11-12; Rowe 2002a). The paper also mounted a major campaign against the alleged supervision of young people engaged in volatile substance abuse (chroming) by a Victorian non-government welfare agency (Mendes 2002c; Bessant 2002a).

The *Herald Sun's* campaigns on social policy issues seem to have a number of major characteristics in common. Firstly, they advocate simplistic law and order solutions to social problems. As we shall see, the tabloid consistently argued for greater policing of both sex workers and their clients. Secondly, they are furiously critical of the welfare state and welfare professionals.

In addition, they explicitly reject potentially structural explanations of social problems. For example, they are not interested in investigating the complex reasons why people turn to street prostitution. Rather, the emphasis is on simplistic definitions which lead comfortably to the legalistic solutions discussed above. Similarly, there is little attempt to attain the views of welfare consumers on their understanding of, and, preferred solutions to social problems. For example, the *Herald Sun* has rarely spoken to representative consumer groups such as the Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry group. Rather, there is a consistent paternalistic emphasis on imposing solutions on socially excluded groups.

Finally, much of the *Herald Sun*'s reporting appears to fit the pattern of what has been called 'moral panic'. This term refers to the stereotyping of certain social events or groups as posing a disproportionate threat to traditional social values and interests. This threat is then managed by isolating and censoring those individuals or groups (e.g street sex workers and their clients) judged to have transgressed (Rowe 2002b).

The Herald Sun's Reporting of the Street Prostitution Debate

The *Herald Sun* published a total of 40 articles during the monitored period. They consisted of 20 news reports, 4 editorials, and 16 opinion pieces.

The news reports utilized a wide range of sources including the Port Phillip Action Group (6 occasions), other local residents (7 occasions), local traders (3 occasions), the Liberal Party Opposition (7 occasions), the State ALP Government (8 occasions), the City of Port Phillip (9 occasions), RHED (1 occasion), street workers (1 occasion), local welfare agencies (1 occasion), police (2 occasions), legal brothel owners (4 occasions), the Australian Family Association (1 occasion), Independent State MPs (1 occasion), the anti-child prostitution group Child Wise (1 occasion), and Herald Sun readers (1 occasion).

Throughout the debate, the *Herald Sun* strongly opposed any liberalization of street prostitution laws, and favoured a narrow law and order solution. *Street prostitution was defined as an immoral and illegal activity which should be eradicated, and the complex social and structural factors underlying street sex work were ignored.*

This zero tolerance position was presented via the following themes: 1) The state has no right to use taxpayer's money (allegedly \$600,000 a year) to fund brothels. Prostitution is an immoral activity which undermines traditional family values, and should not be sanctioned by government (Burstin 2002a; Gray 2002a); 2) There are no suitable areas for street sex in St Kilda. Tolerance zones will only lower property values, threaten the safety of children, and undermine local businesses (Burstin 2002c); 3) Tolerance zones are based on the same misplaced harm minimisation philosophy advocated by naïve welfare workers and bureaucrats that has led to the endorsement of supervised injecting facilities for drug users, and supervised chroming for young people in care (Morrell 2002; Editorial, *Sunday Herald Sun*, 11 August 2002);

4) Tolerance zones and street worker centres mean the legalisation of street prostitution which will not help existing street workers, but only lead to an increase in the number of prostitutes (Bolt 2001; Gray 2001b); 5) The policy solution is tougher policing. Street workers should be prosecuted, and male gutter crawlers publicly named and shamed (Gray 2001a; Bolt 2002).

In contrast to *The Age*, many of the *Herald Sun*'s news reports were not balanced, and clearly favoured the zero tolerance view. *Selective reports and interviews were used to focus public attention on street sex work as the problem to be addressed.* For example, whilst some reports fairly presented both sides of the debate (Jamieson 2001; Hodgson 2002b), others highlighted the opposition of local residents and conservative family groups such as the Australian Family Association to the AGSPAG recommendations (Burstin & Jones 2002; Ferguson et al 2002; Jones 2002a; Kelly 2002; Kelly & Burstin 2002). The paper also highlighted the specific objections of local traders including the manager of the popular children's facility, Luna Park (Burstin 2002c; Jones 2002b; Tinkler 2002).

Only one report noted the support of streetworkers for the AGSPAG recommendations (Hodgson 2002a), whilst another report cited sex workers on the alleged presence of under-age prostitutes (Tinkler & Hodgson 2002). In addition, only one brief reference was made to the views of RHED.

In contrast, the paper gave considerable space to the views of brothel owners organized in the Australian Adult Entertainment Industry Incorporated. Firstly, they were given the opportunity to argue (no doubt

strongly influenced by their own vested commercial interests) that the proposed street worker centres would undermine the legal brothel industry, and its protection of the health and safety needs of both workers and clients (Kelly 2001; Tinkler & Hodgson 2002). The paper seemed to endorse these claims by arguing that licensed brothels were morally acceptable to the community, but that street worker centres designed to protect sex workers unable to work in legal brothels were not (Editorial, *Herald Sun*, 21 September 2001 & 11 August 2002). However, this argument seemed to ignore the reality that numerous prostitutes were already operating on the street without any health or safety protection.

Secondly, brothel owners were used as expert sources to doubt the validity of government costings for the proposed streetworker centres. According to brothel proprietors (no doubt influenced again by commercial imperatives), a center would cost taxpayers at least one million dollars a year rather than the \$600,000 estimated by the State Government (Burstin 2002b).

Nevertheless, it was the editorials and opinion pieces that really drove the policy debate. To be sure, the *Herald Sun* featured a wide range of contributors including the ALP Attorney-General Rob Hulls, the then State

Liberal Party leader Denis Napthine, City of Port Phillip Mayor Darren Ray, prominent youth worker Les Twentyman, and balanced journalists Sarah Wilson and Mischa Merz. However, the majority of the opinion articles (10 out of 16) were contributed by hardline conservative columnists Andrew Bolt, Paul Gray, Sally Morrell, and Michael Barnard. In addition, the editorials were uniformly in favor of zero tolerance solutions.

The language used by the *Herald Sun* was frequently sensationalist, and intended to shape rather than merely present the policy debate. *In short, the proposal for tolerance zones was presented morally outrageous.* For example, one report referred to ‘public money’ being used to run ‘taxpayer-funded brothels’ (Kelly & Burstin 2002), whilst an Editorial suggested that a ‘state-sponsored brothel’ would make Melbourne ‘one of the sleaziest’ cities in the world (*Herald Sun*, 30/7/02).

Columnists Sally Morrell and Michael Barnard referred respectively to ‘government pimps’ running ‘state-supervised brothels’, and ‘governments living off the immoral earnings of the flesh trade’ (Morrell 2002; Barnard 2002), whilst Paul Gray argued that the Bracks Government were ‘on record as favouring an even easier ride for men who abuse prostitute’s bodies’

(Gray 2002b). Another columnist Andrew Bolt complained rather sardonically that not only would the government impose a ‘state-run brothel set up with our cash’, but that this brothel was unlikely to make a profit (Bolt 2002).

In a blatant attempt to shock readers, the *Herald Sun* also claimed without any verifiable evidence that children as young as 12 were working as prostitutes in St Kilda, and that proposed tolerance zones and sex worker centres would sanction child prostitution (Tinkler & Hodgson 2002). This report was made despite a specific reference in the AGSPAG report banning the presence of under-age sex workers in either facility (AGSPAG 2002, pp.74-75).

The sensationalist language described above was intended to promote a ‘moral panic’ around the issue, and clearly influenced the stand of the Liberal Party Opposition. For example, former Opposition Leader Denis Napthine picked up many of the *Herald Sun*’s principal themes. He regularly referred to ‘taxpayer-funded brothels’ (Hodgson 2002a), to the alleged linkage between harm minimization policies on injecting facilities, chroming and street prostitution, and to the ready solution of ‘stricter policing’

(Naphthine 2002). The new Opposition Leader, Robert Doyle, has similarly accused the ALP of pursuing a ‘radical social engineering agenda’ focused on injecting facilities, legalized street prostitution, and supervised chroming (Doyle 2002, pp.59-60).

The link between the political rhetoric of the *Herald Sun* and the Liberal Party did not appear to be accidental. The paper seemed to view the use of ‘wedge politics’ (Wilson & Turnbull 2001) around divisive social issues such as illicit drugs and prostitution as an effective and subtle means of aiding the conservative forces in Victoria. And the *Herald Sun* was not backward in encouraging the Liberal Party to ‘exploit these fears’ in the forthcoming state election campaign (Editorial, *Herald Sun*, 14/8/02).

Policy Implications and Conclusion

A comparison of *The Age* and *Herald Sun* found significant differences in their reporting of the Victorian street prostitution debate.

In its editorial statements, *The Age* expressed support for the harm minimisation perspective of the ALP Government, and the specific

recommendations for tolerance zones and street sex work centres. However, *The Age* did not actively campaign for these outcomes, and its news reports presented a balanced perspective utilizing a range of perspectives. Whilst *The Age* made some reference to structural factors underlying street prostitution, it failed to develop any structural remedies beyond the limited recommendations of the AGSPAG report.

In contrast, the *Herald Sun* actively sought to shape the policy debate in favour of zero tolerance outcomes by promoting a ‘moral panic’ around the AGSPAG recommendations. In contrast to *The Age*, its news reports lacked balance, and favoured sources critical of the AGSPAG recommendations such as brothel owners. In addition, very little attention was paid to the views of street workers and their consumer group.

In conjunction, the reporting of the two daily newspapers arguably served to limit the construction of the street prostitution issue. As with earlier debates around injecting facilities for illicit drug users, policy proposals were restricted to conventional harm minimisation or zero tolerance measures. Neither newspaper gave consideration to potential radical alternatives based on decriminalization and/or structural reform.

This limited construction of policy options arguably has significant implications for governments and policy makers seeking to introduce different and innovative policies and programs. In particular, the moral panics promoted by the Herald Sun around street prostitution and related social problems such as illicit drug use do not produce rational debate, and are not likely to facilitate good practice or policy outcomes. Rather, they tend to encourage the introduction of simplistic and generally ineffective solutions that ignore the broader social and structural factors contributing to the problem. This is particularly the case when governments fail to provide clear political leadership, and instead cave in to populist media pressure.

Equally, the Age's presentation of harm minimization as an essentially conservative or 'damage control' policy meant that potential structural constructions of the street prostitution issue received little or no hearing. There was no serious discussion of arguments for and against decriminalization of street prostitution, and little discussion of policies and programs to empower street sex workers. Hence those issues that were of most concern to street workers – such as the full details of proposed exit

programs for workers – were virtually excluded from the mainstream press debate.

The poor outcomes of this policy debate suggest the importance of supporters of structural reforms in areas such as street prostitution and Illicit drug use running their own media campaigns in order to reframe definitions of these problems (Bessant 2002b, p.21). . This would potentially involve introducing sex workers and/or drug users, their families, and other key supporters of policy reform into the public debate into a more organized way in order to counter the simplistic discourse propagated by the tabloid media.

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