

Jo Thompson  
Journey to Abolition

My research project will cover the following:`

- **Abolition of Prostitution and why we need this legislation globally**
- **Language associated with the sex trade**
- **How the Mercy Sisters have directly impacted global abolition, including highlights of my interviews with Sister Lynda Dearlove and Sister Angela Reed.**

When embarking on the MELF program, I had a strong sense that the justice issue I wanted to highlight within the Mercy world was the abolition of prostitution.

Working alongside Sister Lynda Dearlove and her ministry – [women@thewell](#) has equipped me to clearly articulate my passion to advocate for the end of the sex trade globally.

Women@thewell is a frontline provider of support and exiting services for women whose lives are affected by prostitution. Based in London, working with women involved in or on street and off-street prostitution, including women who have been trafficked into the sex trade. It has 14 years of service delivery experience. Most of the women accessing support services have multiple and complex needs including problematic drug and alcohol abuse and/or mental health difficulties, or they may be rough sleeping or insecurely housed, or have been victims of trafficking and modern slavery. The organisation's aim is to offer trauma-responsive services in a creative and supportive environment. Working across services to enable women to develop sustainable exit strategies from involvement in prostitution and the cycles of abuse that are associated with the sex trade. Providing specialist training and consultancy to other agencies to assist them to improve and develop their practice in this area. Alongside services, the organisation is committed to advocacy, and work at local, national and international levels to inform, educate and lobby for change.

I am passionate about seeing the end of violence against women and girls and feel there is a real need to fund female only trauma informed support services. Services that respond to the need of women and girls with a knowledge and level of research supporting and advocating on their behalf to a place of safety and security. In order to achieve this, we must respond to changing landscapes and support women to live a life free from disadvantage, abuse and exploitation. Only when we listen to survivors can we create services, which are fit for purpose, current and relevant.

An example of this is research commissioned by [women@thewell](#) "Invisible: prostitution and the lives of women". The report was a result of listening to the voices of women whose lives have been affected by prostitution, as well as the voices of some of the professional staff who support them. The unusual feature of this report being that its concern was not primarily with the facts of the women's situations – the violence, frequent experiences of

homelessness and addiction— but with how the women made sense of their lives. In particular, the reflection on what freedom means in their own lives, and on issues such as safety, survival and solidarity. Through listening, it enables understanding of the damage of prostitution as a tolerated social structure. The women’s voices are full of anguish, courage, resilience and morality. The research had a double task; to listen to the women and amplify their insights and stories; and to bring these into dialogue with Catholic social teaching and theological and political ethics. Catholic social teaching focuses on human dignity and common good in society, whilst addressing oppression, the role of the state social justice and wealth distribution.

Through my MELF project I wanted to address the need for abolitionist legislation and highlight why this legislation will bring us closer to the global abolition of the sex trade.

I strongly believe that survivor voice is the area which we hold strength, the pro prostitution lobby hold many cards; great wealth being amongst their strongest. However, we have powerful voices of truth which highlight exploitation and abuse.

*As Fiona Broadfoot, a survivor of internal trafficking and prostitution says, “The UK needs to criminalise men who abuse women through prostitution because it is the demand creates the supply. Without demand from these men there would be no supply of vulnerable women and girls to be bought and sold.”*

In countries such as Sweden and most recently France abolitionist legislation has been adopted, with it being reported that France has the most successful model with a strong emphasis on government funded exiting support services – making exit a reality for many women.

In practical terms abolitionist legislation decriminalises the women/ person exploited within the sex trade and criminalises the buyer/ exploiter.

By adopting this legislation, demand is addressed and exiting from prostitution is more accessible.

The next part of my project covered language within the sex trade and how it can be used to sanitise exploitation.

In 2022 women@thewell commissioned a language resource to be written by Julie Bindel – journalist, author, broadcaster, and political activist, with an expertise on violence against women and girls.

It would be the first language resource of its kind, with its aim to inform and influence the narrative that opinion and policy on prostitution and the global sex trade are shaped by terminology.

Lynda Dearlove has for many years advocated for language which supports exiting prostitution and has fought against language such as “sex worker” which sanitises abuse and exploitation. Working alongside her gave me a deeper understanding of how use of language can change narratives and the nuance of one word can be so important.

It was Lynda's passion and commitment that the original idea for the resource was born, and initial conversations began with Bindel regarding the possibilities, opportunities and education and influencing scope that would result in the production of a resource such as "Mind your language." The resource published in 2022 covered many topics such as sanitation of language, Law and Policy, Health and Safety, the abolitionist model, academic language, consent, arguments used to justify prostitution, the debate, United Nations and the list goes on.

In this resource, the aim was to influence, lobby and campaign for the end of sanitisation of language and provide readers with the facts in their entirety based on available research and survivor voices.

The language resource concluded with the following statement "Language matters. It helps us understand concepts and theories and make sense of complicated and contested issues. We hope the resource helps you to navigate your way around the contradictory and often misleading terminology relating to what is undoubtedly the world's oldest oppression and most certainly not a profession by any reasonable and true definition.

Please find the link to "[Mind your language](#)"

An important part of my project was to highlight the work of the mercy sisters in the abolition of prostitution. I approached Sister Lynda Dearlove and Sister Angela Reed and asked if they would let me conduct interviews and both graciously accepted the following are my notes from both interviews:

Interview with Sister Lynda Dearlove:

How did the Mercy world first react to your work around abolition?

Lynda told me that her congregation embraced abolition – and a collective call to this work, providing services that improve the quality of women's lives, enabling exit to be a possibility.

Her congregation recognised that abolitionist legislation was needed to tackle a system which is oppressive as well as the sex trade being oppressive.

Through Lynda's work with the Holy Sea, in the UN – she was able to highlight issues around prostitution and her congregation supported her by signing letters and consultation responses and was widely regarded as an expert on the sex trade and abolition.

Lynda's expertise was recognised on a church level in the UK and endorsed by the Vatican as she would be asked as an expert to speak. It was recognised that what she said was in line with Catholic Social Teaching.

I asked Lynda how she made her vision of women@thewell a reality.

Lynda was managing a day centre for homeless people, when it became very apparent to her that the women accessing the service needed a different type of support, which was women only, trauma informed and meeting their needs in a way which a mixed service never could.

A service which made it possible for women to verbalise their needs, Lynda could see this was the only way exit could be possible.

Lynda then wrote and presented a business plan to her congregation, with the message that this was a collective call for a new ministry.

The building that would become women@thewell, was in an area of Kings cross, London which had historically been a “red light district” the building, a former hotel was a place where many women had been exploited within the sex trade.

Lynda reflected on this and told me that it seemed fitting to buy a building in this area and turn it into a place of safety and hope for the future.

I asked Lynda how Catherine McAully had influenced her advocacy.

She told me that her call to women@thewell was rooted in the work of Catherine McAuley and that she was influenced by and with her at all stages.

I asked Lynda what inspires her to keep going with her global activism around abolition of prostitution:

Lynda explained that her passion was to engage conversation at local, national and international around legislation and that this was our only chance to bring around real change which in turn changes the rhetoric.

She told me that she truly believes that change is possible and without this oppression would continue.

Lynda is passionate about survivor voice and working with survivor leaders, she is a trustee of SPACE International and has worked closely with this survivor lead organisation for many years.

During our conversation Lynda talked about the recent report published by Reem Alsalem – Titled; [Prostitution and Violence against Women and Girls](#). Stating that this is one of the most important UN reports on prostitution to date. She urged the abolitionist movement to reference the report and share widely.

I would like to thank Lynda for her time talking to me and answering questions. I would also more widely like to thank her for being a mentor and friend. The years we worked together at women@thewell are some of the happiest in my career and I have learnt so much from her strong Mercy and justice values.

#### Interview with Sister Angela Reid

How did the mercy world first react to your work around human trafficking?

Angela told me that the Mercy world embraced her research, that her congregation had decided that there should be expertise around anti human trafficking and that that her research was the result of this.

Angela also told me that she was fortunate enough to publish a resource of women's voices who has experienced trafficking and that this was very well received across the Mercy world.

Next, I asked Angela about Catholic Social Teaching and how this has influenced her advocacy.

Angela told me at the core of CST is human dignity – and that she feels the Mercy world really understands this and holds it at its core.

Angela told me that through her research she discovered that there are many preconceptions around trafficking and that it can be a big leap for people to reframe their thinking and the prostituted women and look at the dignity of people.

An area which Angela is passionate about is prevention, she told me that through her research she wanted to address “supply and demand” she told me that she identified a whole system of oppression of women and girls and by taking away supply there can be no demand. Angela spoke of prevention as a vast area which needs– education, skills, guidance, empathy and compassion.

Angela talked to me about the importance of women's voices and the need to keep these voices close to policy makers, and how she is passionate about ensuring those voices are heard at all levels. An example of this was a woman who Angela advocated for to speak in the UN – the woman was a victim of trafficking; however, ten years had passed and she felt able to share her experiences and her powerful survivor voice to inform and educate regarding human trafficking.

Finally, I asked Angela how Catherine McAully has had influenced her global activism, she told me at the heart of Catherine's story was a lot of loss and a recognition of “the poor”.

Angela's own call to Mercy is to recognise each person has human dignity and to address the fundamental reasons for marginalisation -whilst putting pressure on systems.

I would like to thank Angela for taking the time for this conversation.

During my time on the MELF program, Angela has been a friend and mentor and a woman I respect deeply. Her research “[I have a voice](#)” is an incredibly tool for advocacy around human trafficking. I look up to her as a leader in Mercy and justice.

