

Prostitution: Causes and Solutions

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Prostitution and Trafficking of Women and Children: The Dynamics of Supply and Demand

Around the world today, there is a human rights crisis of sexual abuse of millions of women, children, and thousands of men in prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. There are regions of the world where prostitution has gone from being almost non-existent to a hundred million dollar moneymaking industry.

I am going to talk about prostitution and sex trafficking. I don't believe you can talk about one without the other. They are inextricably linked. Those who favor legalized prostitution have led a 15-year campaign to delink them – to convince us that trafficking has nothing to do with prostitution. That is false. As countries and activists who favor legalization have tried to separate prostitution and trafficking, most of the global attention has focused on trafficking. I am happy that the conference organizers in Santiago have had the courage to address prostitution. Still, we should be clear that we have to talk about both prostitution and trafficking together.

Sex trafficking is the process that delivers victims into prostitution. It includes the recruitment, harboring, movement, and methods by which victims are compelled to stay in prostitution, whether by violence, coercion, threat, debt, or cultural manipulation.

Prostitution and sex trafficking are based on a balance between the supply of available victims and the demand for victims to provide the sex acts. Victims are recruited from marginalized, poor, and vulnerable populations. These potential victims may be from the same city or country as the exploiters, or they may be trafficked from other countries or continents. They may be women and girls who are poor, uneducated, and naïve, and therefore easy to control, or they may be educated, middle-class girls who have been sexually abused until their bodily integrity and identities are destroyed and they no longer know how to resist abuse and exploitation.

Prostitution and trafficking begin with the demand for victims to be used in prostitution. It begins when men go in search of sex that can be purchased. In countries where prostitution is illegal, it begins when pimps place orders with their criminal networks for women and children. In

countries where prostitution is legal, it begins when brothels places job ads with government employment agencies. In places where buying sex acts is popular and profitable, pimps cannot recruit enough local women to fill up the brothels, so they have to bring in victims from other places.

Let me give you the example of the Czech Republic. Ten to fifteen years ago, prostitution was rare, certainly, there wasn't a sex industry. Now, according to a study by the Czech Ministry of Interior, there are over 860 brothels in the Czech Republic, of which 200 are in Prague. The Czech Republic is a destination country for Western European sex tourists. By one estimate, 65 percent of men who buy sex acts there are foreigners. The capital city has the reputation of being a "stag party" capital of Europe, meaning it is a favorite beer and sex party spot for men, mainly Great Britain and Germany. There are almost 200 web sites on the Internet for prostitution services in the Czech Republic, up from 45 in 1997, that enable sex tourists to book their travel and appointments to buy sex acts before they leave home. The Czech police estimate that there are 15,000 women and children in prostitution in the Czech Republic. Thousands of them stand along the roads or wait in roadhouses along the German and Austrian borders. Mafias control most of the victims. The Czech-German border has become a well-known site for child prostitution. German men, in particular, cross the border to buy children for sex acts. All this expansion of the sex industry has occurred in the last decade.

Over the past decade, the most popular proposed solutions to sex trafficking and "out of control" prostitution is legalization of prostitution. Prostitution has been legalized with the expectation that it would bring positive outcomes in Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, and recently, in New Zealand. Although legalization has resulted in big legal profits for a few, the other benefits have not materialized. Organized crime groups continue to traffic women and children and run illegal prostitution operations along side the legal businesses. In Victoria, Australia, legalization of brothels was supposed to eliminate street prostitution. It did not; in fact, there are many more women on the street than before legalization. Last year, there were calls for legalizing street prostitution in order to "control it."

Legalization does not reduce prostitution or trafficking; in fact, both activities increase because men can legally buy sex acts and pimps and brothel keepers can legally sell and profit from them. Cities develop reputations as sex tourist destinations. In the Netherlands, since legalization, there has been an increase in the use of children in prostitution.

German lawmakers thought they were going to get hundreds of millions of euros in tax revenue when they legalized prostitution and brothels. But keeping with criminal nature of prostitution, the newly redefined "business owners" and "freelance staff" in brothels will not pay their taxes. Germany is suffering a budget deficit, and the Federal Audit Office estimates that the government has lost over two billion euros a year in unpaid tax revenue from the sex industry. Recently, lawmakers started to look for ways to increase collection of taxes from prostitutes. This has put the government into the traditional role of pimp – coercing prostitutes to give them more money.

This predatory behavior of the government sharply contrasts to the promised benefits of legalization in Germany, such as government benefits and rights for women. Legalization was supposed to enable women to get health insurance and retirement benefits, and enable them to join unions.

The normalization of prostitution as work has not occurred in Germany, the Netherlands, or Australia. Following legalization, few women have signed up for benefits or for unions. The reason has to do with the basic nature of prostitution. It is not work; it is not a job like any other. It is abuse and exploitation that women only engage in if forced to or when they have no other options. Even where prostitution is legal, a significant proportion of women is trafficked. Women and children controlled by pimps and mafias cannot register with an authority or join a union. Women who are making a more or less free choice to be in prostitution do so out of immediate necessity – debt, unemployment, and poverty. They consider resorting to prostitution as a temporary means of making money, and assume as soon as a debt is paid or a certain sum of money is earned for poverty-stricken families, they will go home. They seldom tell friends or relatives what they are doing to earn money. They do not want to register with authorities and create a permanent record of being a prostitute. And unionization of “sex workers” is a fantasy; it is completely incompatible with the coercive and abusive nature of prostitution.

Stopping the Demand – Solution to Prostitution and Sex Trafficking

Instead of legalization, there is another solution to the problem of prostitution and sex trafficking: Confronting the demand for prostitution. Instead of only warning women against recruiters, stop the recruiters. Instead of accommodating the demand, stop it.

There are four components that make-up the demand: 1) the men who buy commercial sex acts, 2) the exploiters who make up the sex industry, 3) the states that are destination countries, and 4) the culture that tolerates or promotes sexual exploitation.

The Men

The men, the buyers of commercial sex acts, are the ultimate consumers of trafficked and prostituted women and children. They use them for entertainment, sexual gratification, and acts of violence. It is men who create the demand, and women and children who are the supply.

I recently completed a report for the TIP Office, U.S. Department of State on the demand side of sex trafficking that focuses on the men who purchase sex acts. Typically, when prostitution and sex trafficking are discussed, the focus is on the women. The men who purchase the sex acts are faceless and nameless. We need to shine more light on these men, their behavior, and their choice and decision making to purchase sex acts.

Research on men who purchase sex acts has found that many of the assumptions we make about them are myths. Seldom are the men lonely or have sexually unsatisfying relationships. In fact, men who purchase sex acts are more likely to have more sexual partners than those who do not purchase sex acts. They often report that they are satisfied with their wives or partners. They say that they are searching for more – sex acts that their wives will not do or excitement that comes with the hunt for a woman they can buy for a short time. They are seeking sex without relationship responsibilities. A significant number of men say that the sex and interaction with the prostitute were unrewarding and they did not get what they were seeking; yet they compulsively repeat the act of buying sex. Researchers conclude that men are purchasing sex acts to meet emotional needs, not physical needs.

Men who purchase sex acts do not respect women, nor do they want to respect women. They are seeking control and sex in contexts in which they are not required to be polite or nice, and where they can humiliate, degrade, and hurt the woman or child, if they want.

The Exploiters – The Second Component of the Demand

The exploiters, including traffickers, pimps, brothel owners, organized crime members, and corrupt officials make-up what is known as the sex industry. They make money from the sale of sex as a commodity. Traffickers and organized crime groups are the perpetrators that have received most of the attention in discussions about the sex trafficking. Corruption of government officials and police is necessary for trafficking and exploitation of large numbers of women and children. In transnational sex trafficking operations, the collaboration of officials is needed to obtain travel documents and facilitate the exit of women from the country.

Corruption is an enabler for prostitution and trafficking. Where prostitution is illegal, the operation of brothels requires the collaboration of officials and police, who must be willing to ignore or work with pimps and traffickers. Prostitution operations depend on attracting men. Pimps and brothel owners have to advertise to men that women and children are available for commercial sex acts. Officials have to ignore this blatant advertising.

The State – The Third Component of the Demand

By tolerating or legalizing prostitution, the state, at least passively, is contributing to the demand for victims. The more states regulate prostitution and derive tax revenue from it, the more actively they become part of the demand for victims.

If we consider that the demand is the driving force of trafficking, then it is important to analyze the destination countries' or cities' laws and policies. Officials in destination countries or cities do not want to admit responsibility for the problem of prostitution and sex trafficking or be held accountable for creating the demand.

At this point to a great extent, the wealthier destination countries control the debate on how trafficking and prostitution will be addressed. Sending countries or regions are usually poorer, less powerful, and more likely to be influenced by corrupt officials and/or organized crime groups. They lack the power and the political will to insist that destination countries and cities stop their demand for women for prostitution.

In destination places, strategies are devised to protect the sex industries that generate hundreds of millions of dollars per year for the state where prostitution is legal, or for organized crime groups and corrupt officials where the sex industry is illegal.

Exploiters exert pressure on the lawmakers and officials to create conditions that allow them to operate. They use power and influence to shape laws and polices that maintain the flow of women to their sex industries. They do this through the normalization of prostitution and the corruption of civil society.

There has been a global movement to normalize and legalize the flow of women into sex industries. It involves a shift from opposing the exploitation of women in prostitution to only opposing the worst violence and criminality. It involves redefining prostitution as “sex work,” a form of labor for poor and psychologically damaged women. It involves redefining the movement of women for prostitution as labor migration, called “migrant sex work.” It involves legalizing prostitution, and changing the migration laws to allow a flow of women for prostitution from sending regions to sex industry centers. The normalization of prostitution is often recommended as a way to solve the problem of trafficking.

States protect their sex industries by preventing resistance to the flow of women to their sex industry centers. They do this by silencing the voice of civil society. In many sending countries, civil society is weak and undeveloped. Governments of states with powerful sex industries fund non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to promote the permission and accommodating views of prostitution and the flow of women into sex industries. Authentic voices of citizens who do not want their daughters and sisters to become “sex workers” are replaced by the voice of the exploiters, which say that prostitution is good work for women. The result is a corruption of civil society. Many well-intentioned individual and groups start believing and promoting this supportive view of prostitution in the mistaken belief that they are helping women.

In a number of countries, the largest anti-trafficking organizations are funded by states that have legalized prostitution. These funded NGOs often support legalized prostitution. They only speak about “forced prostitution” and movement of women by force, fraud, or coercion. They remain silent as thousands of victims leave their communities for “sex work.” Effectively, these NGOs have abandoned the women and girls to the exploiters and men who purchase sex acts.

The Culture – The Fourth Component of the Demand

The culture, particular mass media, is playing a large role in normalizing prostitution by portraying prostitution as glamorous or a way to make a lot of money quickly and easily. Of course, within the commercial world of entertainment, there are many connections between the film and publishing industries and pornography production, between tourist entertainment and sex tourism. Generally, the media is invested in supporting the expansion of the sex industry.

Within academia, and to my great disappointment, the area of women’s studies, prostitution is presented as “sex work.” And “sex workers” are represented as being empowered, independent, liberated women. This is a false and destructive ideology that has invaded our courses in universities. We should be asking, “Who really benefits when we redefine prostitution as a legitimate form of work for women?” Do women and girls benefit? Where are these women and girls going to come from? Because as prostitution become legal and normal, more and more women and girls will be needed. Is this our solution to women’s poverty and unemployment? Certainly, it will benefit the exploiters, and the state will easily solve the poverty and unemployment problem for one sector of society. Turn them into sex workers.

Within the culture, churches are the voice of moral authority. Unfortunately, in the battle against prostitution, the voice of moral authority that condemns all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse is being lost. Some churches are compromising on their mission and their vision. In years past, they have been accused of being “moralistic,” so they have retreated into “non-judgmental”

positions and ways of addressing prostitution. They need to reexamine their retreat from this issue and reengage in the debate. There is an important role for churches to play in describing the harm of prostitution to women, children, families, and communities. Religious communities, from the grassroots to the leadership, need to use their voice of authority to combat the increasing sexual exploitation of victims and its normalization.

Abolitionist Movement

There is a growing abolitionist movement around the world that seeks to provide assistance to victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

In Sweden, beginning in 1999, the purchasing of sexual services became a crime. The new law was passed as part of a new violence against women act that broadened the activities that qualified as criminal acts of violence. With this new approach, prostitution is considered to be one of the most serious expressions of the oppression of and discrimination against women.” The focus of the law is on “the demand” or the behavior of the purchasers of sex acts not the women.

The U.S. government has adopted an abolitionist approach at the federal level. In 2003, U.S. President George W. Bush issued a Presidential Directive. It was the first U.S. opinion on the link between prostitution and trafficking: “Prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and dehumanizing, contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons...” This policy statement is important because it connects trafficking to prostitution and states that prostitution is harmful. This policy goes against attempts to delink prostitution and trafficking and redefine prostitution as a form of work for women.

In a United Nations speech in October 2003, president Bush called attention to the demand side of prostitution and trafficking. He said, “Those who patronize [the sex industry] debase themselves and deepen the misery of others. And governments that tolerate the trade are tolerating a form of slavery.” This statement has led the departments of government, including the U.S. State Department to focus more attention and funding on the demand side of prostitution and sex trafficking.

Most recently, the abolitionist movement has focused their attention on the Czech Republic, which is proposing to legalize prostitution. This will be the first post-communist country in Europe to take this step, and would set a precedent for other central and eastern European countries. The decision by the Czech Republic will affect all of Europe. The redefinition of prostitution as a form of work for women deeply threatens the rights and status of women everywhere. In the European Union, the Netherlands and Germany have already legalized the sexual commodification and sale of women’s bodies, with none of the social and economic benefits it was supposed to bring. There is no reason to believe that legalization will be any more successful in the Czech Republic. Ominously, in order to legalize prostitution, the Czech Republic is proposing to withdraw from the United Nations 1949 Convention. To our knowledge, a state has never withdrawn from an international treaty against slavery or trafficking. The Czech Republic is being advised by the Netherlands and Germany.

Recently a broad spectrum of international human rights activists has come together to urge the Czech government to halt the legalization of prostitution. They represent an amazing breadth of political and philosophical positions, ranging from feminist to liberal to conservative, from

secular to faith-based, from U.S.-based policy organizations to anti-trafficking organizations in source countries for victims of trafficking, such as Russia, Georgia, and Tajikistan, and from such diverse corners of the world as India, Israel, France, Thailand, Canada, Ireland, and New Zealand. What they have in common is their knowledge that prostitution is harmful and their commitment to abolishing this form of sexual exploitation worldwide. They recommended that the Czech Republic would be wise to get tough against crime and corruption instead of selling out women and children.

As a result of this abolitionist approach, more attention is being focused on the demand side of sex trafficking. Destination countries and cities, particularly those that with legalized prostitution, are coming under new scrutiny.

Conclusion

I believe that only by going to the root cause of prostitution and trafficking, which are the factors that make up the demand, will we end the sexual exploitation and abuse of women and children through prostitution and trafficking.

We need to urge all governments, NGOs, and religious communities to focus on reducing the demand for victims of sex trafficking and prostitution. All the components of the demand need to be penalized – the men who purchase sex acts, the exploiters – the traffickers and pimps who profit from the sale of women and children for sex, the states that fund deceptive messages and act as pimp, and the culture that lies about the nature of prostitution.

We could greatly reduce the number of victims, if the demand for them was penalized. If there were no men seeking to buy sex acts, no women and children would be bought and sold. If there were no brothels waiting for victims, no victims would be recruited. If there were no states that profited from the sex trade, there would be no regulations that facilitated the flow of women from poor towns to wealthier sex industry centers. If there were no false messages about prostitution, no women or girls would be deceived into thinking prostitution is a glamorous or legitimate job.