Human Trafficking and Prostitution: Dispelling Myths

Like slavery, prostitution is a lucrative form of oppression. And both slavery and prostitution are rife with every imaginable type of physical and sexual violence.

Introduction

Prostitution has the reputation of being the “oldest profession.” The purpose of this report is to demonstrate that prostitution for most women in the U.S. is human trafficking and is not, contrary to common belief, a choice.

It is impossible to know how many prostituted women sell sex voluntarily. Pimps and customers often use physical, emotional and sexual violence to control women. Many of the women are forced to use drugs or end up using drugs on their own to cope with the rape, beatings, and continuous violation. As this report will illustrate, prostitution in this country has become a dangerous practice that capitalizes on the mental and physical weaknesses of some of the most vulnerable women, both domestically and from foreign countries.

Finally, this report is far from exhaustive and it serves merely as a tool to guide your advocacy for the plight that exploited women and children face. We should also note that while this report focuses on women and children, there are also men in the U.S. who are exploited in prostitution, often as the result of drug addiction, trauma from child sexual abuse, and poverty.

Prostitution in the United States

A 2001 study conducted by researchers from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the University of Rhode Island, looked at prostitution trends in five regions of the United States. The researchers interviewed 128 people involved with the sex industry, including prostituted women from different backgrounds, law enforcement, and social workers.

The study found that pimps, recruiters and traffickers preyed on women with: economic desperation, no sustainable income, oppressive conditions in home countries, lack of family support, and

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1 This report was prepared by Tyeesha Dixon, J.D., and Tyrell Dixon on August 2, 2010 on behalf of Agape International Missions.


3 Janice G. Raymond and Donna M. Hughes, SEX TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES: INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC TRENDS, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, March 2001, available at https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/187774.pdf. Although this study used a small sample size, it provides valuable insight into the lives of sex workers, as it was the first study to “research both international and domestic trafficking of women for sexual exploitation in the United States and to include primary research information from interviews with trafficked and prostituted women in the sex industry.” Id. at 5.
sometimes even family pressure or coercion. In fact, male relatives, including older brothers and uncles, sometimes facilitated the recruitments.4

Domestically, pimps tend to seek out young, vulnerable women at popular hangout spots such as malls and clubs, become friends with them, and create emotional or drug dependencies to trap them.5 Perhaps more surprising—many foreign military wives who are victims of domestic violence end up homeless or displaced, and eventually resort to prostituting around U.S. military bases.6

Data shows that practically all prostituted women suffered familial abuse or neglect as children.7 One prostituted woman reported being used in pornography as early as age three, up until age twelve, while fifty men at a time attended “pornofests” held in rural barns, basements and homes, and watched her molestation.8

The public health effects of prostitution can be staggering. According to one study, up to eighty-six percent of the sex workers in some communities are living with HIV.9

**Women Trafficked into the United States**

About seventy percent of foreign women who are trafficked into the United States end up in the sex trade.10 “There is growing evidence that women who are trafficked into prostitution do not differ greatly from domestic prostitutes who have not been trafficked: neither group has chosen the profession voluntarily.”11

Foreign women who have been illegally brought to the United States are particularly vulnerable for three reasons: (1) they are often afraid to seek help because of their undocumented statuses; (2) they often owe debt to the traffickers; (3) they are often afraid that they will destroy their families’ honor in their countries of origin if it is discovered that they are being exploited for sex.12

Many women who come from foreign countries and end up being prostituted often come to the United States under false impressions. One law enforcement official said that eighty percent of the prostituted women he knew were tricked into coming to the United States with hopes of legitimate work.13

One woman reported: “He kept me in an isolated area in rural Florida, with no car. I needed permission from him to do anything—to eat, to go out. He used to physically abuse me when we were driving, push me out of the car and drive off. Then [he would] drive back and get me, saying he’s only doing this for my own good.”14

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4 *Id.* at 8.
5 *Id.*
6 *Id.* at 7.
7 Farley, at 105, *supra* note 2.
8 Raymond and Hughes, at 55-56, *supra* note 3.
10 *Id.* at 2.
11 *Id.* at 18.
12 *Id.* at 13.
13 Raymond, at 89, *supra* note 3.
14 *Id.* at 57.
One study, which looked at women recruited from the Philippines, found that all the women interviewed had agreed to be taken to the countries of destination. Some paid their travel costs up-front. However, every one of those women ended up owing heavy debt, and fell victim to the sex trade.\(^{15}\)

**Prostitution’s Similarities to Slavery and Human Trafficking**

The Raymond and Hughes study, cited above, found that many of the women in prostitution interviewed endured “classic dynamics of battering that evolved into pimping.”\(^{16}\) Pimps used emotional and physical coercion to coax the women to enter prostitution.\(^{17}\) Half of the international women interviewed said that pornography was used as an “educational tool.”\(^{18}\) Some women started as strippers, and were then constantly pressured into prostituting.\(^{19}\)

The study found that many violent and manipulative methods were used to control women in the sex industry. These included denying the women freedom of movement, isolating them, controlling their money, threatening them, getting them hooked on drugs, and using physical and sexual violence.\(^{20}\) Most of the law enforcement, advocates, and researchers interviewed confirmed that many women were not free to leave the sex industry.\(^{21}\)

Generally, although many women who worked the streets try to leave, they often return and leave again.\(^{22}\) This cycle often stems from limited education and job skills, which makes finding legitimate jobs difficult.\(^{23}\)

The pimp defines and controls the relationship.\(^{24}\) The pattern of violence is similar to the patterns of domestic violence. Like domestic violence victims, prostituted women do not report most assaults because they fear the pimp, among other reasons.\(^{25}\) “Many pimps resemble the batterers in domestic violence situations, and women under their control often react similarly to domestic violence victims.”\(^{26}\)

A prostituted woman typically becomes financially dependent on her pimp because the pimp keeps all the money and gives the woman only non-negotiable goods.\(^{27}\) “Even when a woman receives costly gifts from her pimp (providing the illusion of prosperity), [he] will typically retain or destroy a woman’s property when she leaves him, impeding her from accumulating any wealth.”\(^{28}\)

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\(^{16}\) Raymond, at 8, *supra* note 3.

\(^{17}\) *Id.* at 8.

\(^{18}\) *Id.* at 8.

\(^{19}\) *Id.* at 8.

\(^{20}\) *Id.* at 9.

\(^{21}\) *Id.* at 9.

\(^{22}\) Newman, at 2, *supra* note 9. This report examined only street prostitution.


\(^{25}\) Scott, at 6, *supra* note 23.


\(^{27}\) *Id.* at 8.

\(^{28}\) Giobbe, at 45, *supra* note 24.
According to one report, pimps may take sixty to seventy percent of a prostituted woman’s earnings.\textsuperscript{29} These earnings are often meager. Typically, oral sex costs twenty to fifty dollars, and sexual intercourse costs fifty to one hundred dollars.\textsuperscript{30} For those prostituted women who are battling crack addictions, the price is even lower because they become desperate for their next fix. Market prices generally range from about ten to forty dollars and the price for sex “can be as low as the market price for a single rock of crack cocaine.”\textsuperscript{31}

Further, many of the customers become violent, some abusing women who insist on using condoms.\textsuperscript{32} One man, a john who buys sex in San Francisco, wrote: “I noticed what I have seen with almost all Asian women: scars on her back that had the look of healed knife marks. . . . It looked like the mark of whatever gang or mafia that was responsible for her being there.”\textsuperscript{33}

Other remnants of physical violence that women reported during the Raymond and Hughes study included strangulations, broken bones, and tooth loss.\textsuperscript{34} Acts of sexual violence included rape (both vaginally and anally), being urinated on, bestiality, fisting, and being forced to hold down other women as they were being raped.\textsuperscript{35} If they did not comply, the women were also beaten and raped.\textsuperscript{36} Most of the women used drugs or alcohol to cope with the pain of all the physical and emotional abuse.\textsuperscript{37}

\textbf{Society’s Mixed Messages}

Given the facts, why does society continue to view prostitution as an option for many of the women engaged in it? One scholar attempted to answer this question in an article that analyzed varied theories behind the relationship between a prostituted woman and her pimp.\textsuperscript{38} In the article, the author explains that many current theorists continue to battle the engrained Reitman theory which has permeated the psychological study of prostitution for decades. Essentially, “Reitman’s entire analysis of the pimp-prostitute relationship is built on the prostituted woman’s moral bankruptcy, biological predisposition, and/or mental deficiency.”\textsuperscript{39}

Since Ben Reitman first published his theory in 1931, others have blossomed, including some theories that argue that prostitution is a viable occupation.\textsuperscript{40} Others have posited that the pimp-prostitute relationship is mutually dependent, because neither party holds the ability to form intimate relationships.\textsuperscript{41} As this report shows, such theories are either untrue or highly oversimplified when it comes to most prostituted women.

Another scholar has opined that prostitution, though a form of sexual violence, has been ignored as such because of the extreme economic advantages for the people behind it.\textsuperscript{42} In addition, people may only believe that prostitution is harmful when they see the stereotypical violence associated with it.

\textsuperscript{29}Scott, at 8, \textit{supra} note 23.
\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Id}.
\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Id}.
\textsuperscript{32}Raymond, at 9, \textit{supra} note 3.
\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Id}. at 59.
\textsuperscript{34}\textit{Id}. at 60.
\textsuperscript{35}\textit{Id}. at 60-61.
\textsuperscript{36}\textit{Id}. at 61, 66.
\textsuperscript{37}\textit{Id}. at 10.
\textsuperscript{38}Globbe, \textit{supra} note 24.
\textsuperscript{39}\textit{Id}. at 36.
\textsuperscript{40}\textit{Id}. at 38.
\textsuperscript{41}\textit{Id}. at 40.
\textsuperscript{42}Farley, at 101-02, \textit{supra} note 2.
(e.g., a pimp dragging a woman at gunpoint). In Sweden, however, the government considers prostitution an official form of sexual violence against women, and prostituted women do not face legal penalties. The Swedish public approval rating for this policy is eighty percent.

**Conclusion**

A great number of prostituted women endure horrible abuse physically, sexually, and emotionally. Although not all adult prostituted women are being forced to work in the sex industry against their will, the lines are very blurry. It is vital that we do not ostracize the women who seek help, but instead we should seek to love and serve them.

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43 *Id.* at 102.
45 *Id.* at 2.