

Women's Rights

[Investigating the "Demand" Side of Prostitution](#)

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Recently, the idea of decriminalizing prostitution has come to the public's attention, especially with the recent discussion of [Proposition K in San Francisco](#). Some activists want to make the industry legal because they believe it will protect the women involved, but others believe a solution lies in addressing the "demand" side of prostitution.

Rachel Durchslag, founder and director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation ([CAASE](#)), is concerned that people don't pay enough attention to the men who buy women for sex. In the interview below, Rachel discusses her research and why she thinks it's crucial to the overall discussion of prostitution.

D: Why is the demand side of prostitution so important to look at?

R: In Chicago alone, 16,000-25,000 women and 6,500 youth are involved in prostitution each year. Studies have shown that substantial percentages of women in prostitution are homeless, survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault, and often start selling sex at a very young age.

Many of these women also experience mental health and substance abuse issues that go untreated. These individuals face endemic amounts of violence including rape, being threatened with a weapon and physical abuse. They also face a variety of health problems resulting from this violence including migraines, memory problems, sleeplessness, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and loss of appetite. These

problems add further complications to physical health problems associated with prostitution such as suffering from sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.

Research consistently concludes that the institution of prostitution is violent and detrimental to those involved. Yet men continue to prey on the vulnerabilities of individuals in the sex trade, often without knowledge of how their actions negatively impact the individuals they are viewing as commodities. It is precisely this mentality of looking at an individual in prostitution as an object for purchase, rather than a human being, that contributes to customers being the most frequently identified perpetrators of violence across all types of prostitution.

Women who reported being regularly involved in prostitution were twice as likely to be victims of sexual assault than women who were not involved in prostitution, and a survey conducted by the Center for Impact Research found a quarter of women involved in street prostitution had been raped more than ten times.

Despite the high number of individuals trapped in the sex trade who experience excessive levels of violence and physical and mental harm, there are almost no programs or initiatives in Chicago geared toward preventing men from purchasing sexual services. Prevention, education and intervention on the demand-side of the sex trade is desperately needed to fight the harms of commercial sexual exploitation.

D: What is wrong with a purely economic analysis of prostitution?

R: When we look at prostitution in purely economic terms, like the famous economist Steven Levitt has done in his research on prostitution, we miss the human element and the sex trade's inherent harms. Prostitution is not solely an economic transaction. It is a human being's body being purchased, or rented, for the pleasure of another. And this transaction occurs in a highly patriarchal society where men, who are the main purchasers of sex, are using their power and privilege to exploit the vulnerabilities of less powerful individuals.

Levitt's study focuses on the amount of money a woman in prostitution can make per hour. What he misses when discussing prostitution in solely monetary terms are the life circumstances that brought the woman to enter the sex trade, the violence and degradation she most likely experiences while selling sex, the pitiful lack of services available to help her exit safely, and the systems in place (lack of housing, lack of jobs that pay a living wage) that contribute to the sex trade's existence, and the fact that the majority of people who enter prostitution do so before their 18th birthdays. As long as we think of prostitution in purely economic terms, and call prostitution "sex work", we remain blind to the devastating aspects of the sex trade industry.

D: In your interviews with men, what are some of the most surprising things you learned?

R: I was surprised by how conflicted most of the men felt about purchasing sex. Within the same interview men would move from expressing feelings of entitlement and privilege about buying sex to feelings of deep regret about purchasing sex. As one man said “I don’t want to be part of someone’s downfall, their decay- mind decaying, body decaying, whatever. Or another man who said “Should I, or shouldn’t I be doing this? My morals tell me it’s not right, some people say it’s dehumanizing a person. That’s the battle that I face, because I have it in my head sometimes: is this humane or not?”

I was also surprised by how many men knew common life histories of women in prostitution, such as many women in the sex trade having experienced childhood sexual abuse. As one man said, “I would image that prostitutes have had some sort of psychological and/or physical trauma as a child. Women who are prove to that sort of lifestyle are trying to repeat the cycles they encounter. Women who have been sexually abused or molested.” Sadly, this awareness didn’t seem to deter men from purchasing sex. That was the saddest part of the research, realizing that awareness of the harms to these women wasn’t a reason to stop patronizing the sex trade.

D: Do you see any practical solutions to the problem of prostitution in a city like Chicago?

R: Yes! We are starting a campaign in Illinois to try to adopt the Swedish model of addressing the sex trade. In Sweden, prostitution is defined as an act of violence against women and only men face criminal penalties. Instead of arrest, women are offered services and supports to help them exist the sex trade. By focusing on the root source of why prostitution exists, the demand, Sweden has had the most success of any country in the world in substantially reducing the number of individuals in the sex trade. We would like to pass similar legislation in Illinois in the next three years.

D: What is next for you in terms of your advocacy?

R: CAASE is working with the Mayor’s Office on Domestic Violence to develop tool kits that empower communities to take tangible actions against the demand for sex trade in their neighborhoods. The tool kit provides both educational materials about why targeting demand is the most effective strategy to reduce prostitution, and offers a variety of tangible actions communities can take. We are incredibly excited about these kits- they are the first of their kind in the country.

We are also working on the first curriculum in the country that strives to teach high school aged men about the harms of the sex trade. We are hoping to pilot it next year.

D: What can we do?

R: If people would like information about volunteering with CAASE, or being part of our action alert list, they can e-mail me at rachel@caase.org. Additionally, below are 10 things everyone can do to make a difference on the issue of prostitution.

1. Work to help women gain supportive housing and jobs that pay a living wage.
2. Advocate for shelters and clinics equipped and staffed to offer medical and psychological treatment for women in prostitution.
3. Educate young girls and boys on the harms of prostitution and how to avoid becoming a victim of sexual exploitation.
4. Challenge society's sexist views of women. Fight against pornography and other forms of media that continue to objectify women.
5. Change language- stop using words such as "pimp", "ho" and "whore" and challenge your friends when they use similar language.
6. Support legislation aimed at stopping sexual exploitation and expanding options for prostituted individuals.
7. Make sure the needs of sexually exploited individuals are being addressed in the domestic violence community, the sexual assault community, among homeless rights advocates and among individuals working to fight substance addiction.
8. Pressure local CAPS and police enforcement to go after those purchasing sex instead of those selling it.
9. Hold media and financial institutions accountable in regards to the ads they run that promote prostitution.
10. Raise public awareness! Host book clubs, film screenings and art projects to raise awareness about the issue. Also join in local awareness raising initiatives such as the upcoming Rescue and Restore campaign.

For more information visit: www.caase.org.