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[Break the Chains of Modern Slavery: End Demand](#)

December 2 is International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. Don't be deceived. This is no celebration commemorating the end of a slave trade. The UN designated this day to remind us that slavery remains part of our 21st Century lives.

Slavery is more prevalent today than at any point in history. Free the Slaves estimates that 27 million people are trapped in debt bondage, domestic servitude, hard labor, or the sex trade for little to no pay beyond subsistence.

Of the 800,000 people annually trafficked across international borders, roughly 70% are sold into the sex industry. Inside the US alone, at least 300,000 children and adolescents fall prey every year, and their average age is thirteen. They're lured from their homes by Internet, or as runaways they're picked up within a day by trawling pimps, with promises of jobs, security, and love. Instead, the victims are treated as commodities and forced into a life in which many experience battering, degradation, rape, captivity, and - no wonder - extreme depression.

The sex industry operates by standard supply and demand dynamics. But it's the distribution system, interstate trafficking, that has caught the attention of policy makers. In this case, instead of drugs, criminals are trading in "reusable" bodies - and they're raking in the profits.

Demand by johns. Distribution by traffickers and pimps.

Supply: human beings.

For all we may exalt in rescuing children from brothels, there's a growing recognition within the US and internationally that sex trafficking won't end until demand does. US-based organizations such as the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and the Coalition Against Trafficking of Women are raising public awareness and advocating for policies geared toward the purchasers. The fearless Mayor of Atlanta, Shirley Franklin,

has launched the "No Tolerance Campaign" sending the message that predators aren't welcome in her city. "Dear John, It's over." her billboards announce.

Yet despite these admirable efforts, compared to several European nations, the US is far behind the curve in fighting demand. We traveled to Stockholm and Oslo to meet with government officials, researchers, members of parliament, police, and even Queen Silvia to examine how Sweden has forged the way. After years of parliamentary debate, in 1999 Swedes passed the Sex Purchase Law, which criminalized buying and decriminalized selling sex. This placed the emphasis on the buyers, while allowing women to seek help without being fined or deported. In five years, the number of prostituted women in Sweden dropped 40%. Today, the government estimates that less than 400 women are trafficked into the country, while in neighboring Finland it's 17,000.

The law and its accompanying measures are credited with shifting the entire social mindset to one where buying another human being is simply unacceptable. Today, Swedes consider prostitution inherently violent and harmful to society: Even when it's seemingly consensual, they say, the act is built on and reinforces an oppressive power imbalance between the user and the used. Although there's a very small percentage of women who freely choose to sell their bodies, they are the well-publicized exceptions. Swedes don't build public policy around protecting them when the damage to the large majority is so great. We were told that when young men from around the world were asked in a survey whether they had or would be willing to buy sex, only 11 percent of the Swedes said "yes," compared to 60 percent of Dutch men.

Sweden has inspired a trend. Norway recently made it illegal for its citizens to purchase any sex acts anywhere in the world. And Britain's Home Office just introduced a new law making it an offence to pay for sex with somebody who is "controlled for another person's gain," including pimps, traffickers, and drug dealers who force addicts to "turn tricks" to repay them. (Interestingly, a plea of ignorance is no defense for men facing charges; that's powerful, since 70% of the 88,000 prostituted women in England and Wales are under the control of pimps and traffickers, and the buyer won't have a way to determine if his prospect is among them.) Laws based on the Swedish model are being considered in Israel, India, and even the Netherlands, where a third of the infamous red light district brothels were shut down this year due to the illicit trafficking lurking within the shadows of the legal sex industry.

The US needs to get up to speed with the global abolitionist movement's focus on demand. With the election of our first African-American president, many find themselves reflecting on how far we've come as a nation: from a time when men, women, and children were kidnapped, tethered, and shipped to this country for our use and abuse. We're infuriated over the action, or inaction, of those who came before us, who lived in denial of the suffering around them. In a hundred years, what will our children's children say about us?

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