

Sex Workers/Sex Slaves

While July 18th's Straight Dope column presented an informative history of prostitution policies within the United States, I was concerned by some of the assumptions and conclusions that Mr. Adams drew.

Mr. Adams concluded, without citing any evidence, that prostitution is generally a business transaction conducted between two consenting adults. Unfortunately, the issues accompanying prostitution in the United States reveal a much more complex reality.

Most experts estimate the average age of entry into prostitution in the U.S. is somewhere between 11-13 years old. For comparison, the age of consent in Illinois is 17. If you are purchasing sex in this country, the probability is high that you are purchasing it from a minor.

The next problem is the assumption that both parties are consenting. Consent revolves around the concept of choice—that a person is presented with a variety of viable options and makes an informed decision about which is best. But how does this "choice" play out for the estimated 100,000 to 300,000 youth in the sex trade in the United States? Or for a woman who is being pimped by her boyfriend or husband? Or for someone surviving homelessness or limited economic options? Or a woman feeding some type of addiction? Or with the untold numbers of women who are trafficked from foreign countries or forced into prostitution in the United States? If prostitution is truly a choice, then why did a study find that 92% of women in prostitution want to leave it?

The proposal Mr. Adams makes, that prostitution should be legal, is based on the common assumption that prostitution is a victimless crime. This too is far from the truth. Individuals in the sex trade face a wide array of abuse from pimps and johns. One study of found that 82% of the prostituted individuals surveyed had been physically assaulted and 83% had been threatened with a deadly weapon. Another study of women in prostitution found that 78% of those interviewed were raped an average of 16 times a year by their pimps and another 33 times a year by their johns. All of these facts are underscored by the FBI estimate that after entering into prostitution, the average life expectancy drops to just 7 years.

Every country that has legalized prostitution has seen its international sex trafficking rates, especially for children, skyrocket. Even Amsterdam is closing down 1/3 of its brothel windows due to organized crime and concerns about human trafficking. Instead of advocating for legalization, Adams should look to the only country that has successfully reduced the number of sexually exploited individuals: Sweden. Sweden has labeled prostitution a violent crime against women and instead of arresting and criminalizing those selling sex they offer women supportive services and target the demand through higher criminal fines. I can only hope that Mr. Adams will put as much effort into researching his assumptions as he does his history next time.

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