

Put Away Your Wallet: Money, Sex & the Demand for Prostitution

Typically when we're engaged in conversations about prostitution or the "sex trade industry" people often state that if women wouldn't sell themselves, prostitution wouldn't be a problem, relationships wouldn't be "wrecked", STI's wouldn't be spread, and the prostitutes themselves wouldn't be harassed, beaten, or murdered.

Rather than focusing on the prostitute, *Doin' It Well* thinks it's important to focus on the men who buy sex, why they do it, and what it would look like to "reduce the demand" for the purchase of sex. This week begins a two part series on reducing the demand for purchased sex. While we know that women, men, trans-persons and children are trafficked into the sex industry, we will be looking at men purchasing sex from women, as this dominates the trade.

The Oldest Profession?

It's easy to believe that the sex trade industry represents mutually satisfying sex between consensual adults that is simply available for trade. Unfortunately, we know that many women in the industry experience violence, whether that takes the form of harassment of strippers, sexual violence of porn "stars" or prostitutes being murdered. This violent underside of sex trade is certainly not what the industry markets to us, or wants us to see, but it does exist.

In addition to violence, trafficking women and purchasing them for sex affects the way that men and women view all women. It socializes us to believe that women are for sale for the sexual pleasure of men; we simply have to name the price.

Reducing the demand for paid sex would ultimately benefit us all. But it's a very complex subject. We can't ignore the factors that support the supply-demand of the sex trade industry.

The Trick Behind the Trick

Reducing the demand for prostitution is tricky; any criticism of the sex industry must also support the individuals within that industry who need the money to survive. We are not attempting to know what is good for women, or which decisions they should make. We are also not suggesting that all women are forced into the sex industry (although we know that many are, whether due to abuse, a substance addiction, homelessness, being sold by a family member or recruited by a pimp, or other economic conditions) and the decision to enter into sex work is no doubt complex. So, we have to support these women and their choices while also challenging the way the industry and the "johns" may harm them.

Just a John

The first part in reducing the demand for purchased sex is to focus on the demand, not the supply side of this complex economic trade. Targeting the men who buy sex is a way to examine why the demand exists in the first place.

Think of the way we describe men who buy women for sex. The term “john” describes an everyday sort of guy. It is average, nameless, and not derogatory. It describes a man you might know: your brother, father, friend. “Johns” are from all economic levels, communities, and backgrounds. On the other hand, we give very descriptive, often punitive, names to women who sell sex, from “sex trade worker” to “whore.” Although the industry is built upon “johns” and their money, they are both invisible and anonymous.

Many women in the sex trade industry experience violence perpetrated by Johns. The vast majority of the individuals who buy sex are men and - if we are to promote safe, healthy, mutual sex for everyone - we need to address the johns directly.

Taking Johns Seriously

Prostitution may say something about the prostitute, but it says even more about the men who buy sex. To reduce the demand, we have to take johns – and the industry – seriously.

This may mean also looking seriously at the “john culture” that encourages us to purchase and consume women’s bodies. Are we a john when we expect sex when we pay for a date? If we go to a strip club? If we purchase sexual images (porn)? By focusing on the demand – rather than the choices of the women in the industry – it opens up a larger discussion about *why* we feel that we can buy women, rather than blaming women in the sex industry for an industry that they didn’t create.

When we believe that we can buy *some* women for sex, it impacts how we see *all* women. Whether we’re expecting sex because we paid for a date, or buy women’s bodies through porn, thinking about the woman as a whole, real person is imperative. It changes the sexual experience; it forces us to recognize that the woman we have purchased is just as human as we are.

Next week will continue our two part series to address “johns” more in depth and how to further reduce the demand through increased empathy.

Sex 411: Addressing the Demand

Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation - www.caase.org
\$pread Magazine - www.spreadmagazine.org

But you put syrup on that!

Our thanks goes out to our faithful reader, BP, who let us know that people get struck in the crotch with a whiffle ball bat, not a “waffle” bat, as we mistyped in “All About Balls” (8/9/07). Our apologies to all of our confused readers.

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Building empathy, decreasing entitlement

We continue this week with the second part of our series on reducing the demand for prostitution and other forms of purchasing sex.

What Johns Think

Doin' It Well interviewed Rachel Durchslag, the Executive Director of Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE), an organization focused on reducing the demand for prostitution. CAASE recently interviewed over 100 men who had purchased sex about their experiences and feelings about buying sex, their general sentiments towards women, their acceptance of prostitution and rape and what they think it would take to deter men from purchasing sex.

These “johns” presented a range of reasons for buying sex, from feeling lonely to desiring to sexually dominate another person. A few of the men were survivors of sexual violence, and felt as though buying sex helped them feel more in control sexually. Also, they had a range of feelings about themselves before and after buying sex. Afterwards, most of the men talked about feeling disgusting or ashamed.

Empathy: the 2nd step

Last week we suggested that the first step to reduce the demand is to focus on the johns. This week, we want to explore empathy. Somehow, it's hard for people, including johns, to see the injustice in the treatment of women who are trafficked for sex. Sometimes people are unaware of the violence these women experience. Other times they simply believe that the women somehow ask for it, because of the profession they chose. In order to promote mutually satisfying, great sex for everyone, we all need to consider the people with whom we are sexual and their humanity.

When the johns interviewed by CAASE were asked how the prostitutes they bought sex from felt, many wanted to believe that these women were attracted to them, that they really desired the sexual experience. Others couldn't produce “feeling” words (what are feeling words?) for the woman in prostitution, such as happy or sad, since they disassociate the woman as a person and instead reduced her to an object. Many johns were very unsettled by this question. They wanted her to be a fantasy that they could act out, not a real person who they were paying for sex.

This lack of empathy for the prostitute was at the core of the men's justifications for their behavior. By being in touch with the experience of these women (or man or trans person), the ways that johns buy sex have to change; they must see this person for who they are, another human being who deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, just as they do. This may make them less likely to believe they have a right to harm or humiliate prostitutes, because the woman they have purchased is no longer an anonymous fantasy, but a real person.

Empathy Exercise

In a workshop Ross has facilitated, men from an audience are asked to imitate poses from pornographic images. The group slowly realizes that getting into and maintaining these positions is more difficult than they had expected. They become very aware of the vulnerability and degradation of the job when men in the audience say things to coach them into the poses, like “pout more,” “look drunk,” and “spread your legs wider.” Everyone begins to realize that the alluring smile in the photograph doesn’t seem to fit with the contortionism the men are performing to imitate the pose.

The group will initially claim “she wants this” or “she likes it.” But when they see men posing, they have a different take on what these images are selling. They also gain an understanding that porn is made in deliberate ways to sell the fantasy of a woman’s availability.

Shifting the demand

There’s a power differential that is being exploited whenever sex is bought from a prostitute. Eliminating the demand for paid sex work will ultimately create communities in which everyone is having the type of sex that they deserve; sex based on physical, emotional, spiritual and relational needs and desires and not on economics.

In the short term, we need to work for safer conditions, better healthcare and harm-reduction strategies for those working in the sex trade industry. But in a much larger way we need to address the conditions that allow the demand to continue.

Money talks and we have choices about how we choose to spend ours. We can begin to challenge ourselves to think about the sex we purchase and consume, whether at a strip club, porn shop or on the street. We can at that point be more informed consumers deciding for ourselves what we want to “buy.”

We can also begin to think more deeply about purchasing others for our sexual enjoyment and satisfaction. We can shift the focus from “but she’s selling it” to “why would I buy it?” and examine what this means for ourselves and our community. This will allow us all to keep *Doin’ It Well*.

Sex 411: Illinois Resources (please use brief phrases to explain what each of these links is)

Young Women’s Empowerment Project – safe spaces for young women impacted by the sex trade (www.youarepriceless.org)

Christian Community Health Fellowship Footprints – resource for adults in the sex trade (www.cchf.org)

Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation – organization focused on reducing the demand for prostitution (www.caase.org)

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