

Media Action Toolkit:

Responding to Inaccurate and Harmful Portrayals of the Sex Industry

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Utilize the Media: Write Letters to the Editor and Opinion/Editorial Pieces

Introduction

A key element in helping end the demand for the sex trade is to educate the public on the realities of prostitution for many of those experiencing it. Stories often appear in mainstream media sources that glamorize the sex trade or trivialize the harm that individuals experience in prostitution. Below are several examples of these instances. When stories like these surface, it is an opportune moment to send a Letter to the Editor or to write an opinion/editorial piece.

Talking points are included below each example of a typical negative depiction that may appear in the news. Communities can use these talking points as a guide when writing a response. It is best to tailor your response to the situation the news source has referenced.*

*Make sure you specify at the beginning of your letter which article you are responding to, the date it was published, and the author, if that information is available.

Focusing Only on the Supply Side:

When stories about prostitution are written, articles frequently neglect to mention the demand side. Usually, it is only the women who serve as the focus, and the men who purchase sex remain invisible. Here is a common example: When a story surfaces regarding police breaking up a prostitution ring that involves 13- and 14-year old children, no one ever seems to focus on the bigger issue - Who is paying for sex with these children?

- Why does our society fail to ask the simple question: Who is purchasing sex? Perhaps it is because the answer scares us. There is no one “profile” of men who purchase sex. They are not necessarily a group of perverted individuals or people struggling with a sex addiction. Often, they are not easily distinguishable from other men. They can be anyone, from college students to business men to factory workers. Research has shown that even men who purchase sex from minors rarely meet the criteria for pedophilia.

These are men who have grown up in a culture that is highly sexualized and where “being a man” is often tied to the pressure to be sexually dominant. Men who exploit women and children are usually not a departure from the dominate culture, rather, they are an expression of it.

So the reason why we do not focus on the demand side may be a reflection of our hesitation to acknowledge how mainstream sexual dominance has become and how it effects the lives of those close to us.

- Historically, the focus on prostitution in this country has revolved around the individuals in the sex trade, though more recently there has been increased atten-

tion on pimps. Addressing only the supply side is a diversion, not a solution. This one-sided focus fails to address the root cause of prostitution: there is a demand to purchase sex. As long as this demand exists, and continues to grow, more vulnerable women and children will continue to be forced, coerced, and manipulated to meet that demand. The equation is simple: eliminate demand, eliminate supply.

- It is essential that individuals in the sex trade have access to resources and supportive services to rebuild their lives and avoid the traps of exploiters. Arresting them only perpetuates the cycle of crime and arrest if there are no true supports to help women exist and rebuild a life outside of the sex trade. Still, no matter how many resources we give these individuals, as long as there is a demand from men to buy the bodies of vulnerable women and children, the sex trade will continue to flourish.
- The one country that has experienced widespread success in reducing the number of individuals exploited by the sex trade has done so by focusing on demand. Sweden introduced a revolutionary and progressive approach to prostitution policy in 1999. The policy re-defines prostitution as a crime of gender-based violence perpetrated by the buyer against the individual involved in the sex trade. As such, purchasing sex is a crime and individuals involved in the sex trade are offered supportive services and the tools they need to exit a cycle of violence instead of arrest and incarceration. Sweden's efforts have been rewarded with success. During the first three years the law was in effect, the estimated total number of individuals in Sweden's sex trade dropped from 2,500 in 1999 to just 1,500 in 2002 and no more than 500 individuals are thought to be working in street-based prostitution. As a result of the law, demand for commercial sex acts in Sweden dropped by 80%.

Perhaps the most striking success of the Swedish law is its effectiveness in combating human trafficking. Swedish police believe there are 200-500 victims of sex trafficking living within their borders. Compare these figures to those of Sweden's neighbors, all of which have about half of Sweden's population. Norway and Denmark each have about 6,000 victims of sex trafficking annually, while Finland has somewhere between 12,000 and 15,000 sex trafficking victims. Recorded conversations between traffickers over wiretapped phones have revealed that they no longer believe it is profitable to do business in Sweden and now bring their victims elsewhere, to places where the demand is higher.

- Prostitution will not end unless we address the demand. Addressing demand, however, must include more comprehensive tactics than simply imposing harsher legal penalties for the crime of purchasing sex. While legal penalties are necessary to address the impunity men currently feel when they purchase sex, successful demand elimination requires a proactive approach. Educating young men about this issue and shifting our cultural attitudes about not only the sex trade, but also the value of women is a vital prerequisite for the elimination of prostitution.

If men who purchase sex are a product of our culture, then we must work to change that culture. It is time to address all media and organizations that promote, glorify, idealize, sexualize, and glamorize violence, abuse, and degradation of women and children.

Advocating Legalization

Legalization is often touted as a progressive solution to issues surrounding prostitution. However, there is nothing progressive about legalizing prostitution. It merely institutionalizes and legitimizes the abuse of women and children.

- Legalization does not do a better job of protecting individuals involved in the sex trade because the vast majority of prostitution in a legalized system still occurs outside the realm of the law. It is estimated that in countries that have legalized prostitution, the illegal sector is roughly 3 times larger than the legal, regulated sector. Therefore, the vast majority of women in prostitution still face the same problems as those in prostitution where prostitution is illegal.
- Pimps, traffickers, and organized criminal elements do not turn into legitimate entrepreneurs simply because prostitution has been made legal. Rather than comply with regulations like workers rights, minimum wages, safety/health screenings and tax laws, it is more profitable to continue selling sex illegally. The only difference is that society is now more tolerant of their actions.
- Legalizing prostitution fuels human trafficking since it both erases criminal injunctions against buying sex and relays the message that sex trade involvement is not harmful. The result is almost always an increase in demand. This is why more men buy sex in places like Amsterdam or certain counties of Nevada: buying sex in these places is seen as a normal and encouraged activity.

To meet this demand (which is often informed by racist ideology which continues to fuel human trafficking), pimps and traffickers force and coerce more women and girls into prostitution to meet the growing demand and to prosper from the money to be made in illegally selling

sex. The countries that have legalized prostitution have seen dramatic increases in the number of sex trafficking victims, especially child victims.

- Legalized prostitution is not working well for most of the countries that have implemented the policy, such as the Netherlands. Recorded telephone conversations between traffickers have revealed that they think the legality of prostitution in the Netherlands makes it an ideal market in which to operate. One study estimated that up to 80% of women working in LEGAL brothels in the Netherlands are victims of human trafficking. The government of Amsterdam has decided to shut down nearly a third of the famed windows in the red-light district due to concern of organized crime and human trafficking.

These concerns also influenced the governmental decision to close the designated locations for street-level prostitution. In a study done of individuals in prostitution in the Netherlands, **only 3%** stated that they believed that legalization was a good thing.

- Legalizing prostitution in Nevada has not done a good job of protecting human rights. According to the FBI, Nevada is one of the biggest destinations for child trafficking in the country. The bus depot in Las Vegas is infamous for the pimps and traffickers who prowl it looking for homeless and runaway youth to recruit into prostitution.
- The violence that women experience in the sex trade does not disappear when prostitution becomes legal. Multiple studies have shown that women are regularly beaten and raped in Nevada's legal brothels. According to one study, 81% of women in Nevada's legal brothels desperately want to escape prostitution.
- The argument that legalization would allow individuals to unionize and thus gain better working conditions is flawed. It is predicated on false assumptions: that women in prostitution would be able to meet with each other to engage in the unionization process and that women would want to be part of a union. The prevalence of the ever watchful pimps and traffickers means that the women's movements are constantly watched and controlled. Membership in "Sex Worker's Unions" in places where prostitution is legal remains very low. In Germany it is around 4%.
- Arguments stating that most individuals involved in the sex trade would prefer to work in a regulated environment are negated by the fact that very few of the women in prostitution where it is legal actually want to register. Though the stigma of *buying* sex is erased when prostitution is legalized, the stigma of *selling* it is not. The evidence shows that women are not eager to self identify and tend to avoid official registrations, even when registering comes with substantial incentives such as retirement benefits. Large percentages of individuals involved in the sex trade have stated that they would prefer help leaving the sex trade rather than having their names on an official list of "whores."

Another reason some women are apprehensive to register is that they do not want the state to take part of their earnings in taxes. Already these women are giving large cuts of their income to the brothel management. When governments tax prostitution it is the women who bear the brunt of this burden.

- Legalizing prostitution sends the message that it is acceptable to objectify women. A society that accepts that a woman can be reduced to a purchasable object to provide sexual gratification sends a very strong message to all women and young girls: your sexuality is for sale. Places that have legalized "zones" where sex is sold

have found that women not in prostitution who live in those areas experience frequent street harassment and solicitation since the men cruising there tend to view all women in that neighborhood as “for sale.”

- Being exposed to legalized prostitution also sends a strong message to children. One purchaser of sex in a study done by the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation said “Kids are impressionable. They see (women in prostitution) and it’s how they begin to look at all women.”

The existence of a legalized sex industry can negatively effect the development of young men by sending them strong messages about the worth of women and their entitlement to sex. Growing up in a country with legalized prostitution includes being bombarded with advertising for the sex industry, reinforcing these ideas.

It can also impact young women’s sense of self and sexual boundaries. Imagine being a 13-year old girl and trying to figure out your sexual boundaries, all the while knowing that the boys in your life can purchase any sex act that you refuse to perform. These types of pressures can have serious implications for youth living in countries with legalized prostitution.

- People cite legalization as a way to ensure health standards for those in the sex trade. But whose health is truly being protected? Though women are regularly screened for STDs and STIs, their customers never undergo similar checks. Since STDs can obviously be transmitted by either party, this claim of “better health” truly means better health for those purchasing, not selling.
- Also note that legalizing prostitution does not rid the sex trade of children. Countries that have legalized prostitution found that they became major destinations for child trafficking. It is not possible to create a situation that legalizes the demand for adults without increasing the demand for children. No one would advocate for the legalization of prostitution involving children, but you can not have a legal adult sex industry where children are not impacted.

Victimless Crime: Minimizing the Harms

The sex trade is an industry that produces many victims. Individuals who say that the sex trade is a victimless crime are ignoring the sizeable amount of research that show otherwise.

- The first issue with calling prostitution a “victimless crime” is that it ignores the high prevalence of children in prostitution. Regardless of the legal status of prostitution, children routinely become victims of sexual exploitation and severe sexual abuse. A study in Chicago found that the vast majority of women interviewed entered the sex trade before their 18th birthday.

- The link between human trafficking and prostitution is undeniable. Many individuals involved in the sex trade in the United States meet the federal definition of a victim of trafficking. Whether they have been smuggled in from across the world, or they were coerced into prostitution by a boyfriend-turned pimp, the fact remains that a significant portion of those in prostitution are victims of one of the world's most heinous crimes. For the literally thousands of victims of human trafficking who are forced to work in strip clubs, escort services, massage parlors or on the street, calling prostitution a victimless crime is akin to calling rape and slavery victimless crimes.
- Individuals in the sex trade face a wide array of abuse from pimps and "johns" or men who purchase sex. One study found that 82% of the prostituted individuals surveyed had been physically assaulted and 83 % had been threatened with a deadly weapon. In another study, 79 % reported being physically assaulted by their customers and 76% reported regular beatings by their pimps. Still another study found that 78% of the women in prostitution they interviewed were raped an average of 16 times a year by their pimps and another 33 times a year by their johns. People in the sex trade are perennial targets for serial killers who feel that they may prey on them with absolute impunity. All of these facts are underscored by the FBI estimate that after entering into prostitution, the average life expectancy drops to just 7 more years after the date of entry.
- Research has found that 80-90% of all prostitution is pimp controlled. Pimps use violent means in order to maintain this control.
- If prostitution is a victimless crime, then why do individuals involved in the sex trade suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in both higher frequency and severity than Vietnam veterans? The psychological wounds from the sex trade run deep.
- Even though there may be some women who feel empowered by their participation in the sex trade, their participation in it normalizes the existence of the industry and the idea that it is acceptable to purchase sex. As a result, the demand for prostitution increases and more individuals are exploited to meet that demand.
- Indoor prostitution is just as violent as prostitution that occurs outdoors. Studies have shown that the relative rates of physical violence in indoor prostitution are on par with street-based activity. Whether indoor or outdoor, the basic power imbalance intrinsic to prostitution allows for extreme amounts of abuse to occur. Some studies have actually found that those who engaged in indoor prostitution suffer from higher rates of mental health disorders from their trauma than those who engaged in outdoor prostitution. Interviews with women in prostitution found that some women actually feel safer selling sex outdoors since they have more control over the clients they choose.

- The overwhelming majority of individuals engaged in prostitution have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse. Estimates range from 65%-90% of individuals involved in prostitution have been victims of incest or childhood sexual abuse. Incest has long been considered a form of “boot camp” for prostitution. It teaches its victims to expect abuse and accept abuse even from the people who proclaim to love and care for them the most. It also teaches young people to disassociate their bodies from their minds, and as many women in the sex trade have expressed, being able to disassociate is a key element to be able to survive the harms of prostitution.

Suggesting that Buyers of Sex are the Ones Being Exploited

Often times when news stories break about high profile individuals paying large sums to engage in prostitution, it is suggested that the men who pay for sex who are being exploited by the individuals in the sex trade.

- Though it is true that there are men who pay large amounts of money to purchase sex, it is rare that the woman in the sex trade actually get to keep a significant percentage of that money. Most of the money is taken

by her pimp, the brothel or strip club owner, or others who have control over her earnings.
- There is a power imbalance inherent in the act of prostitution. The “john” may pay a specified amount of money to feel a sense of control over the interaction. Money is exchanged, yet the act of prostitution usually requires an individual involved in the sex trade to submit to the demands of the buyer. The fact that money is exchanged neither negates the abuse nor exploitation so many prostituted individuals experience.
- Statements that normalize the sex trade and erase men’s culpability in the exploitation of women. This apologist rhetoric is deeply offensive for the innumerable men, women, children, and transgendered individuals who have suffered deep physical and psychological harm as result of sexual exploitation.

Concept of Choice

The concept of choice is one of the more frequent arguments that mainstream media highlight: that people choose to enter prostitution.

- Consent revolves around the idea of free choice – the idea that a person has been presented with a wide variety of viable options and has picked the one they feel is best. Unfortunately, a wide variety of viable options are rarely available for those who end up in the sex trade. Studies that have addressed individuals’ decision to enter the sex trade have found that the most common reason given for entry had to do with meeting basic survival needs. Indeed, there is a high correla-

tion between homelessness and prostitution. Prostitution is rarely anyone's first choice of career, but if a person decides to engage in prostitution to meet their survival needs or those of their family, then the concept of "choice" becomes more complicated. In a cold Chicago winter, lack of shelter can kill just as surely as a gun held by a trafficker. Lack of economic opportunities can be just as coercive as methods used by traffickers. It is a mistake to assume that most individuals in prostitution are there because they choose to be. If it really were about choice, then why do 92% of individuals in the sex trade want to escape it immediately?

- The high prevalence of children in the sex trade is something that cannot be ignored when discussing the concept of consenting parties. These children are not legally old enough to consent to sex and therefore when men "purchase" sex from youth these men commit statutory rape and extreme sexual abuse. Legalizing the sex trade only increases the number of children involved in it, and hence the number of people who are not consenting.
- Sex trafficking is a reality of prostitution both in this country and in many others. Many individuals in the sex trade meet the federal definition of a trafficking victim. For these victims of modern day slavery, consent and choice are simply not apart of the world they inhabit.

Adults: Ignoring the Presence of Children in the Sex Trade

The media generally talks about prostitution in terms of adults being the main individuals involved. However, the reality is that a high percentage of prostitution in this country includes the pervasive exploitation of children.

- Most estimates place the average age of entry into prostitution in the United States between the ages of 11-13.
- It is estimated that there are between 100,000 and 300,000 children currently involved in the sex trade within the United States.
- The overwhelming majority of those involved in the sex trade are either children or teens, or adults who entered before they turned 18.
- If you are purchasing sex in this country, the probability is high that you are purchasing it from a minor and committing statutory rape. The fact that their sexual abuse is labeled as "prostitution" does not mean they legally consent to it.

"Sex Work"

When the term "sex work" is used instead of "prostitution" several things happen. First, the term "sex work" equates the sexually exploitive process of prostitution with normal labor. Second, calling someone in prostitution a "sex worker" hides the likelihood that

the person is experiencing harm within the trade. Finally, using the term “sex work” has the effect of normalizing the sex trade.

- There is power in words. The associations people have with different words have immense weight and can shape their opinions of an issue. The term “sex work” sanitizes the exploitation of individuals in prostitution, strips it of its negative context, and legitimizes prostitution as a form of work.
- Prostitution, when viewed as work on employment, is fundamentally different from an integrated work setting. In other work situations, the worker would not be expected to tolerate violence, psychological abuse, or have their money taken from them. There is also no occupation where a person’s body is physically penetrated or the person is considered an object for sale besides work associated with the sex trade.
- Prostitution differs from normal work in the amount and type of danger involved. People in prostitution face a “workplace” homicide rate 51 times higher than the next most dangerous job for women (working in a liquor store). There is no other job in the country where rape, sexual assault, torture, and homicide are considered acceptable “occupational hazards.” The Australian occupational safety guidelines for women in prostitution recommend that women entering prostitution take classes in hostage negotiation skills.
- Using the term “sex work” serves to legitimize the demand by making sexual exploitation seem like an equal business transaction. Calling prostitution “sex work” excuses men (purchasers? Is it only men?) for the abuses they perpetrate on individuals involved in the sex trade and eliminates the role they play in the abuse and sexual exploitation of women and children (and men or transgendered?).

Suggesting that Pimps Provide a Valuable Service

- Pimps are disproportionately a source of violence rather than a shield from it. As pimps typically do not accompany the individuals they exploit on “dates,” they are not in a position to protect against rape, beatings, or murders by “johns.” Pimps make money by forcing women into situations that are often very dangerous. Furthermore, a pimp is often a direct source of physical, psychological, and sexual violence. Any value of protection a pimp may provide is negated by the violence that the pimp him or herself inflicts or causes.

Suggesting that Prostitution Prevents Rape

- There is absolutely NO evidence that supports this claim.
- The frequency in which women in the sex trade are raped negates this notion. One study of women in the sex trade found that 78% of them were raped an

AVERAGE of 16 times a year by their pimps and an additional 33 times a year by “johns.”

- In a recent study conducted by the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, of the 13 men who purchase sex in Chicago, 27% of the men acknowledged that they had committed sexually coercive acts against women. An additional 19% admitted to having raped a woman. The study also found that men who use women in prostitution frequently justify the rape of women both in AND outside of the sex industry.

Suggesting that Prostitution is Natural or Fulfills a Need

- Justifying prostitution by saying it is natural or fulfils a need is no more rational than justifying rape as being natural or fulfilling a need. We do not accept that rationalization for rape because people *can* control their sex drives. There is no inherent *need* within humanity to exchange sex for money. If there were, we would probably see equal numbers of men and women paying for sex.
- Saying that something is natural is not a justification for it. Pedophilia and rape both occur within nature, but that does not mean we condone or tolerate them in civilized human society.
- Sex can be a wonderful thing for people to explore and enjoy and for many people, it is an enhancement to their lives and relationships. However, sex is not an entitlement like food and housing. We need sustenance and shelter to survive, but sex is not necessary for survival.

Implying that a Few “High-Class Call Girls” are Typical of all Prostitution

We often hear breaking stories about women involved in “high-class prostitution.” The whirlwind of publicity surrounding one of these events often obscures the realities of the sex trade.

- The life histories of these “high class call girls” are often unknown. Seldom do we know what lead her to enter into prostitution. The famous woman involved in the Elliot Spitzer case, Ashely Dupree, was touted as an example of someone gaining large amounts of money and fame from the sex trade. But if the media had looked into Dupree’s history, they would have found that she escaped from an abusive home, was a runaway when she entered prostitution, and most of her assets were controlled by a third party. As this story illustrates, even “high-class call girls” often have a history of physical and/or sexual trauma. The truth is we do not know the circumstances under which an individual enters into the sex trade. Was there abuse in her past? Was she fleeing one abusive situation only to end up in another? Did pimps and madams manipulate or coerce her? Although the answers to these questions are often yes, these are not the stories we hear in the media.

- By focusing so much on the case of one individual, the news media is obscuring the reality of prostitution in this country. The truth is that prostitution is rarely glitzy and glamorous. For the vast majority of individuals involved in the sex trade, prostitution is defined by violence, abuse, and trauma. Individuals in the sex trade are often subjected to some of the most extreme forms of exploitation and harm. While one particular story may portray prostitution as a way of “living the good life,” the truth is that prostitution is only a “get-rich-quick” scheme for pimps and exploiters, who seldom allow the women and children they control to keep any of the money they make.

Focusing Solely on the Purchaser and not the Exploiter

When public figures are caught purchasing sex, such as New York Governor Elliot Spitzer, the media usually focuses on the man’s hypocrisy and the betrayal to his family. The sexual exploitation of the individual in prostitution tends to be lost in the media hubbub.

Here is an example of a complete “Letter to the Editor” that CAASE wrote after the Elliot Spitzer scandal broke:

There are major words and concepts missing from the discussion about Spitzer’s recent crime. The most glaring one is patriarchy. If the sex trade was an equal opportunity employer (exploiter?), then it would make sense that there would be equal numbers of men and women selling sex. But the truth is much different. It is overwhelmingly women who end up selling their bodies, predominantly to men. As a society, we have constructed this dangerous idea of masculinity as being entitled to sex. And that is why so many are excusing Spitzer’s behavior- it’s really just “boys being boys.”

But is just a “male thing” to purchase the bodies of others? If so, why do so many men not buy sex? And why do so many of those who do have incredibly conflicted feelings about it? As one ‘john’ I interviewed said, “I don’t like to see women subjugate themselves to anything. But I use rationalization to justify my use of prostitutes.”

Another concept missing from the debate is an expanded understanding of why Spitzer’s actions were wrong. Yes, he crusaded against corruption and helped bring down organized crime so his actions illuminate his hypocrisy. Yes, he has a wife and family and has brought major pain into their lives. But what about the injustice surrounding Spitzer’s feelings that not only is it his right to purchase a human being’s body but that he can use the bodies he has purchased to live out sex acts which accounts have implied were sometimes physically harmful to the women?

We can get lost in debates about legalization or the difference between those who “choose” to be in the sex trade and those who end up selling sex out of survival needs. But this is dangerous for the following reasons:

1. It sets up a false dichotomy between “safe” prostitution, or prostitution that occurs behind closed doors, and “dangerous” prostitution, or prostitution that occurs on the street. Research nation-wide has consistently found that there is no such thing as safe work in the sex trade. Physical and psychological harm occur at similar rates irrespective of where the sex act is being sold.

2. *Prostitution is not simply an interaction between two people. It is a system or an institution that is based on making money. It is a system that recruits young girls and people with limited resources and often histories of sexual abuse. In the United States the average age of entry into the sex trade is 12. Can we really say prostitution is a victimless crime when the majority of those in it start as children, experienced childhood sexual abuse, suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and experience physical harm at the hands of customers? If prostitution is such a victimless crime then why are women in the sex trade ten times more likely to be murdered?*

There are two paths of activism that might emerge from the Spitzer case. The first is a push towards legalization, something that has not worked in other countries and has actually served to increase the number of women and children trafficked illegally into the sex trade. The second is moving towards the acknowledgement of how the sex trade harms those in it, those buying, and us as a society as a whole. By using this opportunity as a starting off point to have these important conversations we can transform a very unfortunate situation into an opportunity to work towards a culture that does not accept, and is free from, commercial sexual exploitation.

Using Phrases Like “Living a Dangerous Lifestyle” When Describing the Victim of a Crime

When a crime of violence is perpetrated against a woman in prostitution, the media often highlights that the woman was involved in the sex trade, implying that her participation in prostitution or her “dangerous lifestyle” was to blame for the crime committed against her.

- This type of language is blaming the victim at its worst. First, using the term “lifestyle” implies that individuals in the sex trade are there because they choose to be. Second, it excuses the crime by placing the blame on the victim. Very few individuals in the sex trade are there because it is their preferred “lifestyle” choice.
- No one deserves to be the victim of a crime. Ever. But this language blames the victim for the crime perpetrated against them. No one has the right to threaten, injure, maim, rape, rob, or kill any one else, regardless of who the victim is. To imply that individuals in the sex trade are somehow devoid of the right to safety is to say that they are somehow less than human. Implying in anyway that the victim brought a crime upon themselves exculpates some of the most violent criminals.
- Using this type of language is a large part of the problem. Crimes are perpetrated against individuals in prostitution because men know they can do it with impunity. Framing the issue by focusing on the woman’s “lifestyle” helps to promote the very apathy that allows violent criminals to attack individuals already exploited in prostitution without fear of reproach or redress. As one of the most prolific serial killers in US history, Gary Ridgeway, said, “I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.” And arrest statistics in Chicago reinforce the phenomenon of women being disproportionately blamed. On average, 2/3 of all prostitution-related arrests in Chicago are women, 1/3 are men and only 1% are pimps.

Glamorizing Prostitution: Television Shows and Films that Normalize the Sex Trade

Prostitution is often depicted in film and media in either a glamorous way (think: “Pretty Woman”) or in a humorous way where the women in the sex trade are viewed as something to make fun of.

- The sex trade is not glamorous - it is a world filled with violence, exploitation and abuse. When institutions or media glamorize the sex trade, a false picture is painted that legitimizes prostitution and hides its inherent harms. Furthermore, glamorizing prostitution makes it easier for pimps to lure vulnerable individuals who may believe, due to what they have been exposed to in the media, that prostitution is glamorous and a way to make money while feeling empowered. It is easy for pimps to use glamorized portrayals of prostitution as part of a powerful manipulative trap to recruit young girls and women.
- Glamorizing prostitution sends the wrong message to the general public about what prostitution is truly like. It is this glamorized version of prostitution that becomes the public’s point of reference in debates about prostitution policy. It is hard to get support for programs that help individuals in prostitution exit the sex trade when the public believes the sex trade is glamorous and people are there by choice. It is hard to get support for policies that target the men who purchase and exploit individuals in the sex trade while the public is sent the message that individuals in the sex trade are not harmed.

Local Events that Glorify the Sex Trade: Pimp and Ho Parties and Strip Tease Workout Classes

When local activities are planned that glorify the sex trade it is time to organize! In addition to writing letters to the editors of local newspapers or submitting op-ed pieces, events such as these are a great opportunity for action. Organizing a protest can be an effective way to draw media attention to the issue of sexual exploitation and provide a counterpoint to any media that already plans to cover the event. If the event happens without a well organized response, then the message is sent to possible future pimps, “johns,” and even vulnerable youth that the sex industry is acceptable. Help ensure, at the very least, a message is portrayed that the sex industry is harmful to nearly all that are involved.

- Here is a letter that CAASE sent to a nightclub in Chicago who hosted a “Pimp N’ Ho” Party:

I was incredibly disappointed and offended to learn that Crobar Nightclub is hosting a “Pimp and Ho” party. “Pimp and Ho” parties are not only incredibly racist (since the majority of individuals who attend are white and dress up as African-American stereotypes of pimps and prostitutes) but these parties also celebrate a culture of violence against women.

“Pimp And Ho” parties are just an additional way that the harms of prostitution are normalized in mainstream culture. Celebrating men who abuse and rape vulnerable women is completely unacceptable.

Pimping is a form of slavery. Pimps use violence and intimidation to control women and girls and to coerce them into prostitution. The statistics are frightening. Eighty-six percent of pimps’ victims are physically abused, with fifty percent being assaulted frequently or daily. Eighty percent are sexually assaulted, seventy-one percent are controlled by drugs, sixty-nine percent are confined, sixty-one percent have weapons used against them and thirty-four percent have death threats to them or their families.

Pimps are perpetrators of unimaginable amounts of violence towards women in prostitution. And yet your club is continuing the glorification of this culture by hosting a party dedicated to batterers.

I really hope your club decides to change the theme of its Halloween party. By hosting this party, you are contributing to trivializing the harm experiences by 25,000 women each year in Chicago.

When Sex Trafficking is Portrayed as Something that only Happens Abroad or to only Foreign-Born Victims

Special reports in newspapers, on shows like Dateline, or even fictional books and movies often have the effect of making sex trafficking and the commercial exploitation of children look like something that happens in other places. It is important to send a reminder that those things happen in the United States as well.

- It is truly horrific to hear stories of men purchasing sex acts from 14 year-old girls in other countries. Though sexual exploitation abroad is a travesty, it is not something that only happens in other countries. The reality is that sexual exploitation of children happens on a large scale in the United States as well. According to federal law, any child under the age of 18 who has been induced to perform a commercial sex act is a victim of a severe form of trafficking. Given that the average age of entry into prostitution in this country is 11, the number of American-born child sex trafficking victims is truly astounding. Between 100,000 and 300,000 children are involved in the sex trade annually here in the United States. Clearly, the prostituting of children and child sex trafficking is not solely a problem facing other countries: it is a problem plaguing our own country as well.
- The United States also has a significant problem with adult sex trafficking. Anyone who is induced through force, fraud, or coercion to perform a commercial sex act is a victim of a severe form of trafficking. A person does not need to be transported between states or brought in from another country to be a victim of sex trafficking. And while some victims are trafficked in from abroad, many trafficking victims are U.S. citizens who face harsh means of control and exploitation from pimps and madams. The woman working in prostitution on your local street corner may well be a victim of human trafficking. If not, it is likely that she is experiencing the same types of hardships faced by an internationally trafficked victim.

- The images we see of human trafficking victims abroad, or foreign born victims in our midst, often engender deep feelings of sympathy. Yet we often fail to make the connection that women and children in prostitution in the United States are suffering through the same experiences as internationally trafficked victims. Instead of identifying the similar experiences faced by both domestic women in prostitution and internationally trafficked victims, such as the violence used as a means of control and the manipulation and abuse used by both pimps and traffickers, we label them “hookers” or “fallen women” with “loose morals” who do not deserve our help, sympathy, or compassion.

Arguing that Going after Demand Puts Women at Risk

Some articles stress the idea that if we go after the demand side of prostitution we will put women at greater risk since they will have to move their prostitution-related activities further underground and to less visible areas.

- This argument assumes that prostitution, as it currently exists, is somewhat safe. Prostitution is not legal, and focusing more on demand instead of those selling does not change that dynamic. It only alters where police attention is placed. Suggesting that women will have to go underground into less safe does not make sense when prostitution already occurs in illegal venues, in hidden places and is violent regardless of the place it takes place. Focusing on demand helps identify perpetrators and reduce violence, not increase it.
- Going after demand is one of the only strategies shown to reduce the number of intervals involved in the sex trade. Reducing the number of individuals in the sex trade is the surest way to reduce the number of women at risk for abuse and exploitation as a result.