



Demand Reduction: Critical Next Step in the Fight Against Sex Trafficking

By Abigail L. Kuzma

Prosecutors as well as prominent nonprofits such as Polaris Project, Shared Hope International, and Demand Abolition agree that reducing demand for commercial sex is critical to reducing sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is a worldwide human rights violation perpetrated by traffickers who sexually exploit children and use vulnerable persons in commercial sex through force, fraud, or coercion. Contrary to popular belief, research indicates that commercial sex/prostitution is not a victimless crime. In fact, persons used in commercial sex are frequently subjected to appalling acts of violence such as physical abuse, beatings, and being threatened with a weapon. The average age of death for prostituted persons is 34; the practice has a “workplace” homicide rate nearly seven times higher than that experienced by male taxi drivers—the vulnerable workers of the next most-dangerous occupation. Research indicates that pimps typically take all or most of the money and, far from protecting or managing their “stable” of girls, they force women and children to earn nightly monetary quotas to avoid beatings. Pimps even “brand” those under their control with tattoos of their names or symbols such as bar codes to demonstrate ownership of the girls they control. These cases involve staggering amounts of violence: one girl was beaten, forced naked into a cold shower, covered with ice, and then made to stand in front of an air conditioner for 30 minutes; one survivor was dragged on the street by her hair from a moving vehicle; other victims were beaten repeatedly until they died. One pimp explained, “It’s impossible to protect all girls from guys [like us] We eat, drink and sleep thinking of ways to trick young girls into doing what we want.”

A Worldwide Epidemic

Human trafficking has become a worldwide epidemic. It is a \$32 billion per year criminal industry, making it the second largest and fastest-growing crime worldwide, just behind

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the drug trade. Worse, human traffickers typically target the most vulnerable people in society, such as children. The U.S. Department of State has indicated that over a million children worldwide are exploited by the commercial sex trade each year and that some 161 countries are affected by human trafficking. In the United States, 12–14 is the average age at which children are first used in commercial sex; in other countries, the average age may be even younger.

This epidemic impacts both developed and developing countries. In fact, the wealthiest countries, such as the United States, are identified as “destination” countries, those where trafficking victims are taken to be abused by others. According to BBC News, many international trafficking scenarios involve victims trafficked from countries plagued by poverty or political upheaval, such as Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova, Albania, and other Eastern European countries, as well as Thailand and Nigeria. This makes sense when one considers that developed countries have the money to purchase what they want—even human beings. But make no mistake: the United States and many other countries also abuse their own. For example, one summary of data in the U.S. Department of Justice Human Trafficking Reporting System indicated that U.S. citizens constituted 83 percent of sex trafficking victims.

Sex Trafficking Victims: Easily Hidden

How can this happen in countries like the United States, which has strong laws to prosecute perpetrators of human trafficking and a rule-of-law culture that supports enforcement of those laws? Part of the problem lies in the ease with which sex trafficking victims may be hidden. Like victims of domestic violence, sex trafficking victims are typically removed and isolated from any sources of protection such as their families or communities. Their movements are controlled; they are forced to sleep and eat where the trafficker dictates, away from prying eyes and controlled by physical violence and psychological manipulation. Victims do not run away from their captors because they fear retribution such as beatings or threats against their families or because



they have been manipulated to believe that the trafficker cares for them. While some trafficked victims are sold, kidnapped, or abducted, many underage victims are lured by false promises of love and support. They may be holding out hope that, if they can just do everything right, things will get better. Many have come from disadvantaged backgrounds and believe they have no place to escape to or they may be too ashamed to return to their families of origin. In fact, underage trafficked victims rarely identify themselves as victims. They are told that they are criminals and that law enforcement will jail or deport them rather than rescue and recover them. Unfortunately, an officer who has not been trained to identify trafficked victims may, in fact, treat the victim like a criminal, rather than a victim.

Certainly, children and adolescents are sought and used in commercial sex because they are beautiful, but they are also targeted because they are vulnerable and easy to manipulate. Developmentally, a preadolescent girl does not have the experience to distinguish between a boyfriend who loves her and a pimp who claims to be her “boyfriend” but who is trying to manipulate her into making money for him by allowing him to sell her body to strangers. This pattern is played out daily in American cities across the country. Further, children have difficulty accessing legal or physical protection outside of their families and communities. Therefore, when they run away or are not raised in a nurturing, protective environment, they are exceedingly vulnerable to being trafficked. In fact, children who have been abused sexually or physically in their home environments are particularly vulnerable to traffickers.

Trauma: A Critical Component

Dr. James Mercy of the Centers for Disease Control explained in a May 2013 presentation entitled “Public Health Implications of Child Sex Trafficking” how trauma contributes to the particular vulnerability of children. Speaking at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Mercy recounted how children involved in sex trafficking experience extremely high levels of adversity and stress. Such children typically come from backgrounds in which they have previously experienced harsh and inconsistent parenting. They are likely to have either experienced and/or witnessed emotional, sexual, and physical abuse and maltreatment at home. In addition, one or both parents are likely to be alcoholics or incarcerated. Later, as trafficked victims, they again experience and/or witness physical and sexual violence. Further, trafficked victims are isolated from support and frequently experience drug or alcohol abuse, either forced by the trafficker

as a means of control over the victim or as a way to self-medicate in response to the trauma they are experiencing.

Trauma is a critical component of human trafficking. Dr. Mercy explains that key components of the brain remain plastic or modifiable into adulthood and the trauma experienced by a trafficked child results in excessive and repeated stress. This extreme stress causes the release of chemicals that impair cell growth and the formation of healthy neural circuits, ultimately disrupting brain architecture. Research indicates that these “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs), such as being subjected to physical/sexual abuse or an alcoholic parent, etc., are associated with significant health impacts such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as well as basic health risks such as diabetes, heart disease, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV. Ironically, children who have experienced multiple ACEs in their families of origin are more prone to being revictimized, rather than to becoming streetwise and acquiring the wisdom needed to protect themselves. Not only does a family background of abuse make a child more vulnerable to being trafficked, the continued abuse of the child while trafficked is also “inextricably linked” to a plethora of social and health problems later in life. Trafficked victims are likely to experience mental health issues such as PTSD/trauma bonding, health issues, poverty, and homelessness.

The Demand for Commercial Sex Fuels Trafficking

While vast profits, easily hidden victims, and victim trauma and vulnerability contribute to the increase in sex trafficking, it is the demand for commercial sex that truly fuels sex trafficking. Simply put, if there were no demand for commercial sex, it would not be the exceedingly profitable criminal enterprise it is today. In order to meet this lucrative demand, pimps obtain a great number of human beings—including children—whose bodies will be used in the commercial sex trade.

The Internet plays a significant part in the increase in demand and consequent proliferation of sex trafficking. Adult services sections on international sites such as backpage.com create “virtual brothels” where traffickers, pimps, and the site owner make millions of dollars selling human beings, including children, for sex. The anonymity of the Internet appeals to commercial sex buyers since they can avoid being seen walking into a known brothel. But these sites also facilitate the traffickers’ ability to hide their crimes. Pimps and traffickers make reservations in hotels where they bring their “stable” of victims to “service” users/buyers, who are instructed to come to a particular room at specified



short time increments. Traffickers advertise children in cities all over the United States and across the world, often following major sporting events such as the Super Bowl or conferences frequented by large numbers of men “looking for a party.” To date, more than 200 trafficked victims have been identified as being sold on Backpage.com in the United States alone.

The Internet is also used to recruit victims. Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites are used to contact potential victims and groom them with promises of love and support. Research indicates that Internet-facilitated sex trafficking cases involving juveniles were more likely to involve younger children than other child prostitution cases. Of the 204 minor victims identified as having been trafficked on Backpage.com, the average age is 15.7 and the youngest reported age is 12. In addition, far from being used as the “marketplace of ideas,” Internet chat rooms are used by commercial sex users or “johns” as closed communities to rate persons they have used and to receive reinforcement from other johns that this usage is “okay.”

The Most Significant Factors: Toleration and Myths

Perhaps the most significant factors impacting demand are the toleration by society and the proliferation of myths about prostitution. Modern culture emphasizes youth, partying, power, money, and sexuality. One need only view advertisements that sell anything from cars to lingerie, popular movies, and music to see this tolerance for commercial sex. Movies like *The Hangover* and *Pretty Woman* glamorize the lifestyle of strippers and prostitutes and minimize the reality of violence, drugs, and disease. Three 6 Mafia’s song *It’s Hard Out There for a Pimp* won an Oscar in 2006. Even the word “pimp” is now slang that means “to improve” or “to customize,” such as in the MTV program *Pimp My Ride*. Myths abound. “Prostitution is between two consenting adults and is a victimless crime” and “I am paying for her/him, so it’s a ‘win-win’ for both of us” are examples of myths that allow users to rationalize the violence and disease that those used must endure. Even absurd concepts like “prostitution reduces the likelihood of rape” are repeated in blogs by johns who reinforce each other’s views.

Another common myth is: “Girls and boys who prostitute do it because they like it; it is easy money for them, and no one is forcing them to do it—it is just business.” Actually, as outlined above, many victims are lured by false promises of love and support, and some are even abducted or kidnapped. Once they have been pulled into a life of commercial sex, they may be required to perform sex acts with

up to 15 different johns per night. Utilizing a conservative estimate, a victim would be raped by 6,000 johns during the course of her victimization. This is based on a formula of five johns per night, five nights per week, for five years.

How to Reduce Demand

How is reduction of demand achieved? One method is to educate the public regarding myths versus truth with respect to commercial sex and sex trafficking. Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller has developed an anti-demand initiative entitled “Don’t Buy the Lie,” which consists of a short video and a PowerPoint presentation directed toward public education. It also provides a pledge that may be signed and published and wallet-sized cards that read “NOT A JOHN” and contain a quick list of human trafficking facts. These materials are available for download on the Indiana OAG website at www.in.gov/attorneygeneral/humantrafficking.

Education is key to reducing demand. Many believe that society’s view of commercial sex today is similar to the view of domestic violence some 20 years ago. At that time, it was common for a person to be aware that a neighbor or family member was beating his wife or children and to adopt an attitude of “see no evil, hear no evil” or willful ignorance. Rarely was the abuse reported or even acknowledged. Thus, domestic violence was generally tolerated and rarely prosecuted, perpetrators were not brought to account for their actions, and their violence had little consequence for their own lives, while at the same time it devastated the lives of their victims. Similarly, until society understands the violent, demeaning, and abusive treatment of those used in the commercial sex market, demand will continue to thrive.

Another critical response to the need to reduce demand is to focus on the johns—those who are purchasing human beings to satisfy their sexual lusts and, not uncommonly, their violent fantasies. Studies that have focused on johns have determined a number of useful facts. On average, users of commercial sex first bought sex at age 21 but first-time users may be as young as 11. Peer pressure is a primary reason users first buy sex, many beginning with lawful practices such as lap dancing or stripping. Businesses providing these services are known to be “feeders” for commercial sex because of the frequent use of underage girls and boys. Surprisingly, frequent johns are more likely to be married or older. As noted above, much of the violence perpetrated against those used in commercial sex is committed by these users, many of whom are seeking to engage in activity they have seen in Internet pornography but are uncomfortable asking their wives or significant others to submit to



or perform. Some johns admit to attitudes such as: “The prostitute has to do what I want because I paid for it;” “A prostitute cannot be raped;” or “Certain clothes worn by women signal their desire to be sexually assaulted.” A significant percentage of these buyers admitted that they would rape a woman if they knew they would not get caught.

Shame is known to be a powerful deterrent to these users/buyers. Recidivism is greatly reduced by the threat of public exposure via billboards or websites that post names and pictures of those arrested for soliciting a prostitute. Another effective deterrent is a financial one. Some U.S. states have enacted laws that impose high fines for those caught soliciting commercial sex, and particularly for those caught with underage victims. Revenue from these fines is often used to fund trafficked victim services or enhance law enforcement efforts. In addition, states like Illinois have a forfeiture provision whereby users caught soliciting while driving a car may lose their cars as part of their penalty. Such forfeiture provisions would have the dual effect of providing a financial disincentive as well as shame, as it would be difficult for a user to explain to his wife why the car was forfeited. Finally, education of users/buyers can be effective. “John schools” required upon arrest for solicitation seek to educate the john regarding the use of children in commercial sex; the negative impact of prostitution on individuals, as well as on communities; and also the health risks to both the john and the person used in commercial sex.

Both victims and johns are at significant risk of contracting one or more STDs; some 19 million are transmitted annually in the United States alone. Many of these STDs, such as the human papillomavirus, are not prevented by condoms. Others, such as gonorrhea, may have female carriers who are asymptomatic. A john may unwittingly pass on to his wife a lethal or an embarrassing disease that could lead to liver or cervical cancer or infertility. Few commercial sex workers seek regular treatment for STDs because of control by the trafficker, fear of legal consequences, discrimination, or loss of confidentiality.

Some have suggested that sex trafficking would be eliminated if commercial sex were legalized. In fact, studies of countries where prostitution has been legalized have documented the opposite. A 2012 study by Cho, Dreher, and Newmayer, corroborated by three case studies of Sweden,

Denmark, and Germany, and published in volume 41 of *World Development*, concluded that “on average countries where prostitution is legal, experience larger reported human trafficking inflows.” Legalizing prostitution increases the demand for prostitution and a consequent expansion of the prostitution market. With legalization, those users who would otherwise be deterred due to fear of prosecution are no longer deterred. Unfortunately, with increased demand, trafficked victims will still be used by traffickers because of a limited supply of sex workers generally, the demand for “exotic” prostitutes, and the vulnerability of the trafficked victim and consequent ability of the trafficker to keep all or most of the money.

These conclusions are supported by other studies. D. Hughes, in a 2000 study in the *Journal of International Affairs*, stated that “evidence seems to show that legalized sex industries actually result in increased trafficking to meet the demand for women to be used in the legal sex industries.” Similarly, a 2009 study by M. Farley in the *Women’s Studies International Forum* concluded that “wherever prostitution is legalized, trafficking to sex industry marketplaces in that region increases.” Finally, a 2004 article by Janice Raymond published in volume 10 of *Violence Against Women*, available at www.sagepub.com/walshstudy/articles/section12/Raymond.pdf, argues that the consequence of legalizing prostitution is the expansion of the sex industry, as evidenced in the Australian state of Victoria and in New Zealand, where brothels increased in number and expanded in size after the passage of the legislation. Raymond further states that “[c]laims that legalization of prostitution would control and reduce child prostitution have not proved true, with police suspecting that child prostitute abusers choose the Netherlands because of its prostitution-promoting environment.”

Conclusion

In the end, while the fight against sex trafficking must include strong laws, effective prosecution, and comprehensive victim services, any response that fails to reduce demand will prove ineffective. Society must recognize and educate regarding the violence, human rights violations, health risks, and degradation of the commercial sex industry. Willful ignorance and glamorization of the facts permits commercial sex to thrive and to continue to fuel sex trafficking. ♦