PROSTITUTION

END DEMAND FOR

By Suzanne Hanney
Editor-in-Chief

When "Jessica"[* not her real name] was Sweet 16, she complained to friends that she needed money after her mother told her they couldn't afford a birthday party.

"At least I thought they were my friends," she said in an interview at StreetWise.

They responded by taking her on a 20-minute drive, to an abandoned building divided into small cells, each containing just a bed and a nightstand.

"They introduced me to a pimp. That night I was a virgin. He raped me. That was the last time I saw the sky outside for three years."

Forced to perform sex with eight to 10 customers — "johns" — a day, Jessica was never allowed outside the room but forced to urinate in a coffee can.

"We were fed whenever he felt like it, and drugged," she added. "I was drugged a lot because I fought a lot. To this day I don't know with what. I only know it was in a syringe."

Eventually, Jessica reasoned to herself that she would better off if she stopped resisting. "I gained his trust to go out on the street. I did whatever he asked me to do."

Trying to get out of the life

As soon as the pimp dropped Jessica off on a corner and disappeared, she started running, zigzagging down alleys and hiding under a porch for an afternoon. She walked and took two buses, after convincing both drivers she had lost her pass.

When she finally reached home, her mother's reaction was partly predictable.

"She was crying, she wouldn't let go. But she saw the track marks on my arm and gave me $50, told me to come back when I was sober."

After staying at a shelter for a week, Jessica returned home. A very religious woman, her mother couldn't believe her daughter had been involved in slavery; Jessica didn't even tell her the full extent of her experience.

"I didn't want her to do anything stupid," Jessica said. "I just wanted to get away from it."

Focus on ending commercial sex trade

Discussions around prostitution have for too long centered on criticizing the motivations of women for supplying sex, says Lynne Johnson, advocacy director of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE).

Instead, the concern should center on ending demand for commercial sex, on "why people are standing outside an abandoned building waiting to have sex with children," Johnson said in an interview at StreetWise.

Groundbreaking legislation signed in August by Gov. Pat Quinn has started the policy shift. Illinois ended the criminal prosecution of all minors under the age of 18 for prostitution—the most comprehensive law of its kind in the United States.

Simultaneously, HB 6462, the Illinois Safe Children Act, raises criminal penalties for johns, in most cases from misdemeanor to felony. Solicitation of a child under 18 is a new classification, separate from overall solicitation for sex.

The "I didn't know she was under 18" defense is also eliminated for pimps, although not necessarily for johns, according to prepared material from End Demand Illinois, a statewide campaign working with law enforcement to hold perpetrators accountable. CAASE is the lead agency among six partners in the campaign, which also seeks supportive services for victims of prostitution and increased community awareness.

"We believe that sexual exploitation will end if we hold pimps, johns and traffickers accountable for their actions," Johnson said. "They are rarely punished for their crimes, so the new bill enhances penalties against those people, because there's such an enormous demand for the sex trade industry. The only way they can meet that demand is to recruit more girls. Without that demand, there would be no sex trade industry."

The legislation also creates a new jurisdiction for the child welfare system. Law enforcement who encounter prostituted minors may take them into temporary protective custody and notify the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Convicted pimps and johns will also pay $1,000 (up from $200) to recover their impounded vehicles; half the money goes to the Illinois Dept. of Human Services, for grants to organizations that treat survivors.

Better social outreach to victims

Illinois needs to do better in providing emergency shelter for prostitution victims, Johnson said. Long-term supportive housing with "trauma-informed" mental health services is their first need.

"It can only be successful if it is led by survivors of prostitution," she added. "Their presence gives credibility."

On the other hand, mainstream service providers can
Protecting the most vulnerable

Pimps must be held accountable because they often seek out vulnerable girls in foster care or dysfunctional families, girls who need attention and love, Johnson says. In Chicago, the average age of entry into the sex trades is 16, sometimes as young as 12.

“They groom the girls gradually for the trade,” she said. “Then it becomes, ‘I want to be your boyfriend, care for you, but by the way, I am short on money tonight. Could you do just this one trick?’”

Predators go after impressionable girls they can control, added Brenda Myers Powell, co-founder of the Dreamcatcher Foundation. “If I can get control of a young mind I have a profitable commodity for a long time. It’s not just a physical thing for a woman, but also mental. Almost like a brain wash. Being told what to do, how to do it.”

Predators spot girls with little family support. If the girl has been molested she may not put a lot of value on her body and if her basic needs are not being met, she may be more open to suggestions of easy money from men on the street.

The legislation is important because the young girls are victims of adults, Myers Powell said. “Why should she be penalized for something she probably would never have done if she had the opportunity to grow and make a clear decision?”

Myers Powell co-founded the Dreamcatcher Foundation to mentor at-risk girls as well as sex trade survivors. She was herself molested from age 4 and turned to prostitution at 14 to take care of her kids. She escaped when her pimp turned attention to a new girl.

Recession creates desperation

There were 16,000 women in the sex trades in Chicago in 2005 but Myers Powell said the number could have doubled or tripled by now because of the internet and the economy. End Demand Illinois cited 400 ads for prostitution daily on Craigslist in the Chicago area, when Craigslist was still posting adult services ads.

“It’s getting worse,” she added. “There’s signs all over the city for amateur night at strip clubs. And there’s a radio announcement: ‘bills not getting paid, not getting child support, come to this club as a way to get paid.’”

Popular culture is also to blame, Myers Powell said, movies like Pretty Woman and the HBO series about Bunny Ranch, whose website showed a new girl “barely legal, never worked before and wants to earn her college money.”

“They show girls making money, they don’t show how it really is,” Myers Powell continued. “It’s always women in prostitution being happy. They don’t show the violence, how women are treated, the wear and tear on women’s bodies.”

Hugh Hefner’s Girls Next Door is not prostitution, but still exploitative.

“The reality shows are all about tits and ass, that women are like toys, just there for pleasure and that a woman can make it with her body. Now he’s [Hefner] working a new set. A bag of bones running around in pajamas and he’s the hero of many men.”

The real truth is that sex trade survivors need help to rebuild their lives — and the End Demand Illinois legislation offers services to help them do so, from mental health to housing and education, Myers Powell said.

“It took a village to raise me,” she said. “Health services, anger management services, trauma services, survivor molestation therapy. I was finally able to get back what was taken from me at a very young age.”

Similarly, Myers Powell has mentored Jessica from broken person through denial, self-pity and anger to her current “I can do it” stage.

“That came with a lot of help. Dreamcatcher had to support her when she couldn’t support herself. She was able to call us 24 hours a day, anytime she needed to. We helped Jessica help herself by believing in her. No one had ever told her she was capable. When you are beaten down like that, you start to believe it.”

Jessica is just getting started on her GED. She speaks brightly about street outreach, a future as a pharmacy technician or nurse — and even bigger plans.

“I am working with End Demand to stop prostitution, get rid of Johns and pimps. After we get this done, I want to feed the world, make food for everyone.”

Now he’s [Hefner] working a new set. A bag of bones running around in pajamas and he’s the hero of many men.

— Brenda Myers Powell