When Humans Become Commodities:

Minimizing Costs, Maximizing Profit, and the Exploitation Inherent to the Sex Industry

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Choosing Exploitation

A most frequent and damaging misconception about prostitution is that men, women, or children always enter the sex trade freely. In a word, it is viewed as a choice. While the notion of choice is ethically, academically, socio-culturally, and in other ways problematic, most people enter the sex trade due to a lack of choices and are exploited because of their need to sell sex to survive.

In order to understand the force behind the potential wide profit margin for pimps, one must understand prostitution or trafficking as the probable result of coercion, fraud, force, or extraordinarily limiting life circumstances—and that exploitation is frequently a life defined by the inability to choose. In order to comprehend the economic realities of exploitation, one need understand that to be exploited can never be a choice.

Priming Victims, Manufacturing the Commodity

To be free to choose presupposes a comprehensive understanding of the terms into which one is entering. It also presupposes the freedom to choose differently—if the “choice” to engage in prostitution constitutes a woman’s only possible or known avenue for maintaining survival, this choice is none but the one to continue to live. Choice also assumes the ability to continue to choose—the notion that one would choose to have her freedom appropriated indicates both an unthinkably grim set of options and, more critically for our purposes, that another person will appropriate that control over her, making all later decisions for her. This is the nature of exploitation—the very epitome of anti-choice.

Surveys of former and present individuals in prostitution corroborate this claim. Many trade sex for shelter, food, proposed security, or other means of survival (Raphael & Shapiro, 2002, p. 5). Many do not realize upon entering the trade that they will end up controlled,
trapped, or enslaved: “I tried to leave, and he said, ‘you can’t go; you’re mine,’” [a victim] recall[s]. [The pimp] told her . . . that she was now his property” (Kristof, 2012). In a study of 222 women prostituted in Chicago conducted by Jody Raphael and Deborah L. Shapiro at the Center for Impact Research, it was found that approximately 70% of respondents risked harm if they did not give a “cut” of their profit to someone else (2002, p. 5).

Many prostituted women are controlled by a pimp who has made a living out of identifying her particular vulnerabilities and taking advantage of these in order to hold her under a pimp’s control (Kennedy, Klein, Bristowe, Cooper, & Yuille, 2007). The means for control include—but certainly are not limited to—forced drug addiction, alcohol dependency, threat of physical harm, physical harm, threats to her family members or loved ones, emotional abuse, coercive frameworks, physical restraint, or dependence upon the pimp for any other means of survival or avoidance of harm. This should not sound at all like freedom.

People who are said to enter the sex trade “voluntarily” frequently enter only when they have very limited life choices left: “Several factors have contributed to the supply of potential slave labor throughout history, including poverty, bias against gender or other ethnicity, lawlessness, military conflict, social instability and economic breakdown” (Kara, 2009, p. 23). She is forced to choose between rocks and hard places. The notion that one can “choose” to have one’s freedom restricted is conceptually problematic at best and criminal at worst—it is this fallacious notion that condones the sex trade and, consequently, the oppression, sexism, and violence inherent to it.

**Marginalization, Recruitment, Demand, and Supply**

This most common misapprehension concerning prostitution rests on the supposition that victims are actively choosing their circumstances. Ignoring the culpability of traffickers and
johns (men who purchase sex) and blaming the trade on victims, the people and the institutions who espouse this manner of combatting (or, as the case may be, actively neglecting to combat) the sex trade further propagate it.

This mindset also supports the damaging and uninformed conception that the supply side is both to blame for and can be the end of the industry. Combatting supply is not enough to end exploitation, because wherever there is a demand for sexual services, people in need will either sell their own bodies or someone else will exploit a person’s vulnerability in order to turn a profit. If there is no demand—no one willing to exchange money for sex—then no one will sell it.

To be clear, it is not as if demand is the only motivator of the industry—knowledge of supply will also stimulate demand, as Donna Hughes’s research indicates. Supply and demand are interrelated in such a way that either will prompt the other. However, if there is no demand—if men and women alike will not pay to utilize and perpetuate an industry that is commonly violent, denigrating, sexist, and exploitative, there will be no supply. There will be no industry. No exploitation.

Some women are particularly vulnerable to being lured into the sex trade. Academic expert on human trafficking, prostitution, and pornography Donna Hughes notes the following as an introduction to the understanding of the common life circumstances that make people vulnerable to being recruited into the sex trade industry (2004):

Victims are recruited from marginalized, poor, and vulnerable populations. These potential victims may be from the same city or country as the exploiters, or they may be trafficked from other countries or continents. They may be women and girls who are poor, uneducated, and naïve, and therefore easy to control, or they may be educated,
middle-class girls who have been sexually abused until their bodily integrity and identities are destroyed and they no longer know how to resist abuse and exploitation. (p. 1)

Traffickers are smart—they know what types of girls and women to look for that will result in the lowest cost to the trafficker. As these girls are endowed with fewer allies, less education, less trust in the law enforcement, and lower self-esteem, traffickers know to target the young and the marginalized. They, like experts, know that as her life options decrease, the prospect of ease of recruiting a woman to enter the sex industry increases.

**Minimizing Costs, Maximizing Profit, and Exploitation**

A powerful incentive for this abuse is an importantly economic one—in order for traffickers to maximize their profits, they frequently treat the people they sell as inhumanely as possible.

Spending little money on food, any form of medical care or any other necessities, allowing the woman to keep very little to none of her earnings, the trafficker increases his overall profits by minimizing his costs. According to Kara, “The acquisition, movement, and exploitation of sex slaves form an industry that generates billions of dollars in profits each year, at a profit margin greater than almost any industry in the world, illicit or otherwise” (2009, p. 16). Increased quantity demanded of commercial sex yields the opportunity to sell sex at increasingly lower prices, which increases the number of men who can afford to purchase sex. The industry is thus perpetuated.

With each decrease in price for a sex act, there is a greater increase in the number of abused women who suffer at the hand of a largely male demand. Kara has found that “sex services are highly elastic” (2009, p. 35). Elasticity refers to circumstances under which “the
quantity demanded is very responsive to price: if you increase the price by 1 percent, the quantity demanded decreases by more than 1 percent . . . think of elasticity as the responsiveness of the quantity demanded to price” (Varian, 2010, p. 276).

What this means for exploitation is that any decrease in the price for a sex act increases not only the number of men who can afford to pay for it but also results in an even larger increase in the number of women exploited or the number of times per unit of time that they are exploited. By its economic nature, exploitation is explosive. High elasticity of demand in the sex industry translates to catastrophically high potential for increased numbers of victims, increased abuse for existing victims, decreased chance of escape, and an altogether devastating prognosis for the commodities of this highly elastic industry (Kara, 2009).

**Ending with Demand**

In an industry proven to be inherently exploitative, and severely so, the outlook for the human commodities of this industry is a grim one. Marked by high rates of life-limiting factors, low likelihood of exit, and the undeniable reality of the exploitative nature of the sex industry, the only sure-fire way to stamp out the issue of sexual exploitation is by stifling a hot demand. The only voluntary act in the sex industry is the preeminently male decision to purchase sex. End this—refuse to accept this—and we can watch the supply curve erase itself.
References


