

ADDRESSING MISCONCEPTIONS: Prostitution

In Chicago alone, up to 25,000 women and children are involved in the sex industry every year. Far from choosing this life, most of these women are coerced into prostitution through force, emotional pressure, or financial desperation. When this happens, they enter an industry sustained through violence and exploitation.

Misconception:

Prostitution is a victimless crime.

REALITY:

Portraying prostitution as a victimless crime ignores the considerable amount of research that exposes the sex trade's many victims, from prostituted and exploited children to women trafficked across the country or even the world. 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,¹ and the U.S. State Department has stated that most victims of sex trafficking within the United States are women and children, particularly girls under the age of 18.² Studies of women in prostitution in the United States have agreed with this finding. In one study, 79% of women surveyed gave an indication that they were in prostitution due to some degree of force, such as kidnapping or violence by a pimp.³ Another study found that of the women and girls interviewed, 50% reported being kidnapped by pimps; 76% reported beatings by pimps; and 79% reported beatings by customers.⁴ Whether they have been brought from across the world or coerced into prostitution in their own city by a boyfriend-turned-pimp, the fact remains that a significant number of prostituted women and children are victims of a heinous crime. For the thousands of victims of human trafficking who are forced onto the streets or into strip clubs, escort services, massage parlors, calling prostitution a victimless crime is akin to calling rape and slavery harmless.

Misconception:

Women involved in prostitution make a lot of money.

REALITY:

A power imbalance exists in the act of prostitution. 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. To refuse these demands usually leads to physical and sexual violence against the woman who is being prostituted. As reported in one study in Chicago, women in prostitution cited "johns" as the most frequent perpetrators of violence, including rapes and beatings.⁵ The fact that money is exchanged does not negate this abuse and exploitation that many prostituted women and children experience.

Moreover, though some men do pay large amounts of money to purchase sex, it is rare that prostituted women are allowed to keep a significant amount of that money. Most of the money is taken by her pimp or "madam," the brothel or strip club owner, or others who have control over her earnings. One study of 222 women in the sex trade in Chicago found that 44-50% gave the money they make in prostitution to someone else, and 79% believe they would be harmed if they stopped.⁶ In another study involving former pimps, four of the five pimps surveyed said that the girls and women they controlled did not keep any of the money they made.⁷ In the organized industries, 40% went to the escort business and the girls earned 60%. However, the girls and women were required to give most, if not all, of their share to the pimp. Those who were allowed to keep some of the money retained as little as 10% for themselves. As one former pimp explained, "You can't control your stable if you allow your ho's [sic] to keep a dime of the money."⁸

¹ Polaris Project. (2009). *Common myths and misconceptions about human trafficking in the U.S.* Retrieved July 22, 2009, from <http://nhtrc.polarisproject.org/materials/Common-Myths-and-Misconceptions-about-Human-Trafficking-in-the-US.pdf>

² U.S. Department of State Human Smuggling and Trafficking Center (December 2008). *Domestic human trafficking: An internal issue* [Electronic version]. Retrieved July 22, 2009, from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/113612.pdf>

³ Hughes, D.M. (Spring 2003). Demand: The driving force of sex trafficking. *Coalition Commentary*. Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault.

⁴ Giobbe, E. (2002). *Statement of WHISPER action group members, 6 (1-2)*. WHISPER.

⁵ Raphael, J. & Shapiro, D.L. (2002). *Sister speak out: The lives and needs of prostituted women in Chicago*. Center for Impact Research.

⁶ Raphael, J. & Shapiro, D.L. (2002). *Sister speak out: The lives and needs of prostituted women in Chicago*. Center for Impact Research.

⁷ Raphael, J. & Myers-Powell, B. (April 2009). *Interviews with five ex-pimps in Chicago*. Research for DePaul University College of Law Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center. Retrieved March 22, 2010 from http://www.enddemandillinois.org/docs/Family_Law_Pimp_pilot_project.pdf

⁸ Raphael, J. & Myers-Powell, B. (April 2009). *Interviews with five ex-pimps in Chicago*. Research for DePaul University College of Law Schiller DuCanto & Fleck Family Law Center. Retrieved March 22, 2010 from http://www.enddemandillinois.org/docs/Family_Law_Pimp_pilot_project.pdf



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Misconception:

Prostitution is just another job.

REALITY:

Prostitution, when viewed in the context of employment, is fundamentally different from any other work setting because of the high levels of violence and 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).⁹ Moreover, no legitimate job lists its acceptable “occupational hazards” as rape, sexual assault, torture, and homicide. Even countries that have legalized prostitution recognize that it is unlike any other “job.” For instance, the Australian occupational safety guidelines recommend that women entering prostitution take classes in self defense and hostage negotiation skills.¹⁰ In other work situations, employees would never be expected to tolerate the physical, mental, and sexual violence and abuse endemic in prostitution.

Misconception:

We need prostitution to prevent rape.

REALITY:

No evidence exists to support the claim that women not involved in the sex trade would somehow be more protected from rape and sexual violence if prostitution were more tolerated. In fact, a study conducted by the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation of 113 men who purchase sex in Chicago showed that men who buy sex are often also perpetrators of violence. In this study, 27% of these men acknowledged that they had committed sexually coercive acts against women. An additional 19% admitted to committing rape. 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.¹¹

Additionally, the frequency in which prostituted women and children themselves suffer rape and sexual assault quickly negates the notion that acceptance of prostitution would prevent rape. For example, 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 (usually to assert their control over these women) and an additional 33 times a year by “johns.”¹²

Misconception:

Prostitution is usually glamorous, like high-class escorts at expensive hotels.

REALITY:

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. A 2002 study of prostituted women in Chicago found that, regardless of whether their prostitution occurred on the streets, in drug houses, or in hotels, most of the women had experienced physical violence, with customers being most frequently identified as the perpetrators of this violence.¹³ This study found that 82% of the women surveyed had been physically assaulted and 83% had been threatened with a deadly weapon, and 21% of women in escort services, which are often portrayed as more “glamorous,” reported being raped more than ten times.¹⁴

In another study, 79% of the prostituted women reported being physically assaulted by their customers, and 76% reported regular beatings by their pimps.¹⁵ Still another study, in San Francisco, found that 70% of the 200 women and girls surveyed reported being sexually assaulted an average of 31 times by “johns,” and 65% of them reported being physically abused or beaten at least four times.¹⁶ Moreover, women and children involved in prostitution, whether the prostitution takes place indoors or on the street, suffer from high rates of mental and physical health problems, including exhaustion, frequent viral illness, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), vaginal infections, backaches, depression, eating disorders, cervical cancer, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).¹⁷ All of these facts are underscored by the FBI’s estimate that a woman’s average life expectancy is only seven years after the date of entry into prostitution, with HIV/AIDS and homicide being the main causes of death.¹⁸

⁹ Potterat, J.J., Brewer, D.D., Muth, S.Q., Rothenburg, R.B., Woodhouse, D.E., Muth, J.B., Stites, H.K., and Brody, S. (2004). Mortality in a long-term open cohort of prostitute women. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 159(8), 778–85 (homicide rate of 204 per 100,000 for women in prostitution). Compare to Castillo, D.R., and Jenkins, E.L. (1994). Industries and occupations at high risk for work-related homicide. *Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 36(2), 125–32.

¹⁰ Farley, M. (2004). “Bad for the body, bad for the heart”: Prostitution harms women even if legalized or decriminalized. *Violence Against Women*, 10(10), 1087–1125.

¹¹ Durchslag, R. & Goswami, S. (2008). *Deconstructing the demand for prostitution: Preliminary insights from interviews with Chicago men who purchase sex*. Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation.

¹² Hunter, S.K. (1991). *Council for Prostitution Alternatives annual report*. Quoted in Farley, M. (2000). *Prostitution: Factsheet on human rights violations*. Prostitution Research & Education. Retrieved June 28, 2010, from <http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/factsheet.html>

¹³ Raphael, J. & Shapiro, D.L. (2002). *Sister speak out: The lives and needs of prostituted women in Chicago*. Center for Impact Research.

¹⁴ Raphael, J. & Shapiro, D.L. (2002). *Sister speak out: The lives and needs of prostituted women in Chicago*. Center for Impact Research.

¹⁵ Giobbe, E. (2002). *Statement of WHISPER action group members*, 6 (1-2). WHISPER.

¹⁶ Silbert, M.H. & Pines, A.M. (1981). Sexual child abuse as an antecedent to prostitution. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 5, 407–411.

¹⁷ Farley, M. (2004). “Bad for the body, bad for the heart”: Prostitution harms women even if legalized or decriminalized. *Violence Against Women*, 10(10), 1087–1125. See also Farley, M., Baral, I., Kiremire, M. & Sezgin, U. (1998). Prostitution in five countries: Violence and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Feminism & Psychology*, 8(4), 405–426.

¹⁸ Fang, B. (2005, October 16). Young lives for sale: Why more kids are getting into the sex trade—and how the feds are fighting back [Electronic version]. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved on July 15, 2009, at <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/051024/24sextraffickers.htm>