

The man across the table is wearing blue scrubs, indicating he is a medical professional of some kind and came directly from work for this interview. His face reflects a smug smile as he answers questions from the survey, suggesting a sense of entitlement or perhaps disdain for the questions I ask him. “What are the top reasons that you purchase sex?” I ask. The john looks me square in the eye and without pausing replies, “Because I can.”

I’ve interviewed many men in Chicago who buy sex. Some do it because they’re sad and lonely and desperately seeking human contact. Some are simply angry and frustrated and require a visceral outlet they can’t obtain at home, whose rationale consists of statements like, “When you’re upset you can’t hit your wife, you can’t hit your kids, and so you go out and get a prostitute.” Some keep lead pipes and other weapons in their cars when they purchase sex “just in case.” Still others are attracted to the power dynamic, indulging a philosophy of “she gave up her rights when she took my money” as a way to justify their exploitation.

Prostitution, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking are driven by men like these who purchase sex, and by the pimps and traffickers who stand to make a profit. There are a variety of factors that usually precede someone ending up in prostitution, including limited economic opportunities, early sexual abuse, running away from home, homelessness, and drug and alcohol addiction, and though these factors facilitate one entering the sex trade, they are not the source of its existence. The sex trade exists

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because there is a constant demand to purchase sex, which generates significant income for the pimps and traffickers who benefit from prostituting women and girls.

We do not know how many individuals are impacted by prostitution in the United States. The best research estimates that at least 100,000—300,000 children are sexually exploited every year or are at risk of being exploited¹. Research also tells us that life in the sex trade is filled with daily psychological, physical, and sexual trauma. Prostituted individuals experience post-traumatic stress disorder at the same rate and significance as returning war veterans. They are raped an average of 40 plus times a year². Johns and pimps regularly use extreme physical and sexual violence to keep control of their victims, and the FBI

1 Estes, R. & Weiner, N.A. (2001). *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children In The U.S., Canada and Mexico*. University of Pennsylvania.

2 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>

estimates that once entered into the sex trade, a prostituted individual’s life expectancy drops to just 7 additional years³.

If society perceived prostitution as not a victimless crime but as a violent injustice where women and children’s lives are being destroyed, then perhaps we would stop arresting and incarcerating victims. Instead, we would demand that prostituted individuals receive the services that they need to exit the sex trade safely along with the tools to start reassembling their lives. But this is not our understanding of the issue. Instead, we lock up prostituted individuals, give them felonies for their actions, and let the pimps and johns go free with almost complete impunity.

That is why the medical interviewee’s statement resonated with me so deeply. He buys sex because society enables him to commit this crime by not arresting him and not holding him accountable. Change must happen on this front. That is why the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) has launched End Demand, Illinois (EDI), a multi-year organizing and advocacy campaign that aims to transform Illinois’ response to prostitution and sex trafficking. EDI reflects the philosophy that sexual exploitation of women, girls and children in prostitution will never end until our community focuses its resources on

3 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>

providing specialized services to those harmed while holding those accountable who create and accommodate the demand.

To find out more about the campaign or ways to get involved, please visit www.enddemandillinois.org.

Text by: Rachel Durchslag

