Prior to our interviews, most of our research participants had given little thought to the sex trade; it has not been on their radar. It was clear, however, that for most participants, discussing the issue brought to light an internal emotional conflict. Most are deeply troubled by the idea of prostitution even if they are unable to articulate why. On the other hand, they don’t want to be closed-minded or be seen as judging another person’s life choices; in fact many apologized for views they felt might sound critical or moralistic.

What’s more, despite self-professed low levels of knowledge about the issue, most of our research participants offered thoughtful, heartfelt and compassionate points of view. They firmly believe the status quo is not working, and show an honest desire to support steps that reduce the number of people harmed by this life. But, they are very uncertain about what steps might make a difference.

"It’s just things that you don’t have to deal with. We are college-educated, we work every day, and homeowners and all that stuff. We think it’s all about Lowe’s and Home Depot.”

African-American woman, 36, Atlanta
THE USUAL WAY ADVOCATES
MAKE THE CASE AGAINST
LEGALIZATION AND
FULL DECRIMINALIZATION
OF THE SEX TRADE
DOES NOT RESONATE WITH
THE “CULTURAL COMMON SENSE”—
EVEN AMONG PROGRESSIVES.

INTRODUCTION
The national conversation on the sex trade is increasingly one-sided, with considerable attention given to the perspective of a small segment — the “empowered sex worker.” This minority perspective is shaping progressives’ understanding of how the entire industry works, and what policy approaches are best to pursue. Often left out are the voices of the vast majority of those in the life: marginalized girls, women and transgender people — a disproportionate percentage of whom are people of color. Their stories lead to a critique of the sex trade, its impact on the rights and lives of those involved, and its role in our society.

WE WERE CURIOUS — WHY ARE THESE VOICES NOT BEING HEARD?
AND WHY ARE OVERT CRITIQUES LARGELY REJECTED BY PROGRESSIVES?

To answer these fundamental questions, we listened to ordinary Americans, to see how they heard, understood, and felt about the issue. We spoke with a range of people across the country — of all ages and ethnic backgrounds, including self-identified sex workers — putting an emphasis on people with a progressive political orientation.

While the movement’s messages may have been very effective at one time, our research clearly indicates that at this point, they are rejected by most non-experts, many experts, and are not picked up by the media.

Based on this research, we are suggesting a new approach that has the potential to rebalance the conversation on this issue.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE
In this report, we use “prostitution” to identify the issue. We recognize that advocates have different points of view on appropriate terminology to use. We rely on “prostitution” — as opposed to “sex work,” “sex industry,” “commercial sexual exploitation” and other words — because this project examines the specific terminology used by the public around this issue, and prostitution is the word most commonly used. We also do not want to further empower the problematic entailments of the “sex work” frame.
WHAT IT IS
The cultural common sense is made up of basic ideas that people have about an issue, and the natural implications that follow from these ideas. The cultural common sense adds up to "what everybody knows" about an issue. It is at this level—not expert-level debate—where battles are won and lost. We need to understand the cultural common sense if we hope to modify it.

Modifying the cultural common sense means introducing ideas that:

• tap into values and emotion (such as empathy, justice and honor),
• are easy to grasp (i.e., people don’t have to become experts to become effective messengers),
• give people the sense that they understand the issue,
• are hard to refute,
• lend themselves to being supported by evidence,
• can be adopted in popular culture and by media makers and influencers, and lead to support for solutions to address the issue.

HOW IT CAN SHIFT
A simple example illustrates why the cultural common sense is so important. Marriage equality was initially framed as being about the "right to marry." This idea never really entered the cultural common sense because it didn’t pass enough of the tests listed above. In particular, it was vulnerable to debates about legalities like the definition of marriage, civil unions and so on. In other words, this idea didn’t hold up well in ordinary conversation.

More recently, advocates began framing the issue as a question of love. The simple idea that "love is love" regardless of sexual orientation was easily adopted into the cultural common sense. It implies "who am I to tell someone who to love?" In addition to a comprehensive, multi-year legal strategy, this framing shift helped tilt the playing field in favor of marriage equality advocates.

WHY IT MATTERS
Successful movements are organized around common sense claims that allow us both to engage with our audience’s thinking, and to move the conversation away from our opponents’ terrain. To win, we need to be able to expand beyond the small circle of sympathetic thought leaders to include a very broad chorus of voices, potentially millions of laypeople, who will each play a part in promoting our cause.
A problematic conclusion flows from the existing cultural common sense, and we should not underestimate its power. The other side is able to say, in a way that sounds completely sensible to most Americans, that:

“We can fix prostitution by decriminalizing and/or regulating it so that the women involved are protected from harms such as disease, violence, abuse, and exploitation.”

This is an “organizing idea” that makes sense to people and that is actively promoted by opposition advocates, and to a surprising degree by the media. The other side has a basic argument that not only aligns with, but feels like the natural extension of the cultural common sense.

**THE OPPOSITION’S BASIC ARGUMENT**
- taps into values of women’s empowerment & agency and emotions of empathy and desire to protect from harm,
- is very easy to grasp, given existing mental models like alcohol, tobacco and marijuana legalization and regulation,
- gives people a sense that they “get” the problem and see a real solution,
- is hard to refute in everyday conversation, in part because it lends itself to being supported by evidence that physical harm can be reduced through legalization/regulation. Such evidence includes:
  - reductions of HIV and violence under legalized sex trade in Nevada, Germany or the Netherlands,
  - authoritative voices like Amnesty International, WHO, The Lancet, etc., all calling for legalization/full decriminalization, and
  - the voices of sex workers espousing the sex trade as their choice and a job that needs cleaning up.

It incorporates a solution (“we can improve this”) that resonates with progressives’ basic assumptions about how the world should be. Progressives:
- strongly support women’s empowerment,
- are passionate about protecting the vulnerable from harm,
- are committed to workers rights (which the “sex workers” frame taps into), and
- want to find solutions to social problems.

Our research makes clear that engaging in conversation with people about the sex trade results in some quick initial reactions: discomfort; low information, coupled with a willingness to learn more; and an intuitive sense that the status quo isn’t working, that “something is wrong with the current situation.”

Dig under the surface, and we find several common sense ideas that shape and direct people’s thinking:
- two types of people go into prostitution — the “empowered sex worker” and the “desperate victim”;
- “the world’s oldest profession” is inevitable;
- prostitution is a job, perhaps an awful job, but some find it preferable to other awful jobs;
- prostitution is violent and dangerous; and,
- we, as progressives, shouldn’t impose our own moral values on other people’s life choices, especially where sexuality is concerned.

These cultural common sense ideas prime progressives to support solutions that purport to protect women from harm, while protecting their freedom to choose.

**EXISTING CULTURAL COMMON SENSE**

**THE CURRENT COMMON SENSE ABOUT PROSTITUTION PRIMES PROGRESSIVES TO SUPPORT SOLUTIONS THAT PURPORT TO PROTECT WOMEN FROM HARM, WHILE PROTECTING THEIR FREEDOM TO CHOOSE.**
EXISTING MESSAGES WORK AGAINST US
The research makes clear that we shouldn’t underestimate the power of the cultural common sense to seize and convert much of the existing messaging so that it works against us when we argue, with individual portraits, emotion, or facts, that the sex trade is dangerous and ugly, we are in fact inadvertently reinforcing the other side’s position.

HOW CAN POINTING TO ALL THIS HARM NOT HELP OUR SIDE?
The cultural common sense defines the problem as the exploitation of the women involved, through trafficking, abusive pimps, violent Johns, and unprotected sex. All of this, the logic goes, can be eliminated by taking the sex trade out of the shadows through decriminalization. Like any other kind of dangerous or harmful work, factory work or coal mining, for example, it has to be cleaned up and made safe for workers. We didn’t abolish the textile industry because workers were being exploited, we introduced protections. And if it were decriminalized, we could do the same thing for sex workers, the thinking goes.

In other words...
the existing cultural common sense reinterprets and redirects the powerful claim that prostitution is dangerous and exploitative in exactly the wrong direction, causing our own messaging to work against us.

The other side’s organizing idea is gaining ground and is slowly but steadily overcoming people’s natural discomfort with the sex trade.

THE EXISTING CULTURAL COMMON SENSE REINTERPRETS AND REDIRECTS THE POWERFUL CLAIM THAT PROSTITUTION IS DANGEROUS AND EXPLOITATIVE IN EXACTLY THE WRONG DIRECTION.

A NEW APPROACH
The opposition framing rests on the assumption that prostitution can be fixed or made better. In an “improved” sex trade, women only participate of their own free will, and the abuse, exploitation and risks have been removed or at least dramatically reduced.

Our reframe has to defeat the idea that it is possible to “fix” prostitution.

The research identified a simple argument that has the attributes necessary to become part of the cultural common sense: it is easy to get, hard to object to, organizes the conversation, and helps the public open up to the deeper truths that we want them to see.

Putting it as a simple story:

Prostitution cannot be “fixed” because in most cases it causes psychological and emotional trauma to the women involved—no matter what the “protections.” The solution is to shrink this harmful industry, and yet legalizing does the opposite: It grows the sex trade by unleashing market forces and opening it up to big corporations.
LEADING TO NEW THINKING
This approach leads thinking in a very different direction: regardless of whether women choose to be involved in the sex trade, inevitable emotional or psychological harm is something no one should experience because of their “job.”

This approach offers a concrete solution of its own, based on shrinking the industry, not growing the industry through legalization. (“Shrinking” is compatible with the long-term goal of abolishing prostitution, both from a policy perspective, and from the perspective of what ordinary people take it to mean.)

The approach taps into the existing discomfort with the sex trade that is voiced by many ordinary people, and that a number of advocates have been encouraging. This public discomfort is real and provides a strong asset for our side. It amounts to a deep emotional basis for redirecting the conversation in more productive directions, shifting attention to better solutions and real, lasting improvements.

Put simply, the idea that prostitution cannot be ameliorated or “fixed” (because the regulations won’t prevent psychological harm) helps people put into words the inherent discomfort they feel with the sex trade, without having to discount that discomfort as a “moral hangup” or “being behind the times.”

This consistent finding was shocking given that our existing messaging is rich with deep emotional truths. Our analysis suggests that existing messaging works well when the audience invests considerable attention, time and goodwill, and when the message is carried by exceptional messengers.

What existing messaging doesn’t do is connect with the cultural common sense:
• it can be difficult to grasp,
• doesn’t give the audience a sense that they “get” the issue,
• is easy to refute, and
• is tough for a layperson to articulate and remember.

In fact, our current approach all but guarantees that we won’t be able to create very many new messengers among regular folks.

CURRENT MESSAGING CHALLENGES

MUCH OF OUR CURRENT MESSAGING IS ACTIVELY REJECTED IN EVERYDAY CONVERSATION BY ORDINARY MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC.

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BENEFITS
Testing with hundreds of ordinary people demonstrates that by incorporating psychological and emotional harm, this approach has a number of powerful effects, including:
• redefining “harm reduction” to mean fewer women in harm’s way
• tapping into progressives’ suspicion of big business and free market forces that will grow, not shrink, the sex trade
• allowing survivors to share their stories with strength, courage and authenticity, and without having to defend against questions about choice, culpability, personal weakness, and so on
• bypassing unproductive discussions about what counts as choice — one of the biggest traps in the public’s thinking about prostitution

This approach allows advocates to not just be against legalization, but to be for the lasting policy and program solutions.

• The metaphor of “entry and exit ramps” or “on and off ramps” quickly brings our solutions into focus
• This solutions-oriented direction is one that vocal opponents would find difficult to challenge, considering “free choice” is core to their argument
• It has a strong potential to build a true battleground coalition of laypeople (not simply a coalition of unlikely allies), provided we consistently frame conversations around this core idea, because the story is:
  • easily defended by ordinary people in ordinary conversation
  • provides a very solid place from which to answer the opposition’s big idea
  • is inclusive up and down the ladder of expertise. For example, it provides an entry point for policy makers by introducing a macroeconomic perspective

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When we say...

“ALL PROSTITUTION IS RAPE, COERCION OR UNWANTED SEX…”

It is difficult for our audience to grasp what we mean, because it contradicts people’s common sense understanding that when a woman accepts payment, she is consenting. It leaves the conversation stuck in the very complicated place of “what is choice?”

As a result, people find it natural to refute the statement in casual conversation.

People tend to agree with this, but don’t see it as a necessarily bad thing because they assume that legalization will change the profile of pimps and johns for the good:

• If legal, sex workers will have legitimate, less shady customers.
• Pimps will start to become more like managers or agents — respectable workers themselves.
• Or, empowered sex workers — aided by social media technology — will be able to manage their own business and have less need of pimps in the first place.

With this approach, we mean that domestic violence used to be considered largely beyond the reach of the law, or even public judgment. We would like people to conclude that we shouldn’t stand for prostitution just like we don’t stand for domestic violence. The cultural common sense, however, leads people to the conclusion that prostitution, like marriage, needs to be reformed rather than abolished. After all, we didn’t abolish marriage based on the fact that traditional marriage was abusive — instead, we changed the laws and the cultural norms governing marriage.

According to the cultural common sense, the fact that women were abused as children does not lead to the conclusion that they should be disallowed from making choices for themselves as adults. If a person entered the life as a child (i.e. escaped an abusive home, became homeless, needed a way to sustain themselves, etc.), their situation is compelling and more likely lead to the conclusion that the child, now adult woman, “never had a choice.”

Still, the conversation can quickly get stuck in the conceptual swamp of choice — questioning the right of adult women to choose what they do with their own bodies seems like oppression, not protection.

Starting with the goal of shrinking the industry until it disappears and emphasizing prevention by “addressing the on ramps to this life like child abuse, a broken foster care system” and so on, is a more effective bridge to demonstrating the influence of child abuse on the sex trade than starting with child abuse as the core of the message.

“LEGALIZATION OF PROSTITUTION MEANS LEGALIZATION FOR PIMPS & JOHNS…”

“In conclusion, the existing messaging can be problematic. However, our research demonstrates that this identified new approach isn’t simply “one more messaging point.” Instead, it is unique in its ability to stand up on its own in ordinary conversation.”

“PROSTITUTION IS ABOUT RACISM…”

While deeply troubling to many people, this argument also runs up against the cultural common sense.

First, many people are confused by the statement. Disturbingly, our research consistently finds that discussions of racism cause most Americans to think about interpersonal racism, not systemic or structural racism. That means when they consider racism in the sex trade, they tend to think about the individuals involved. They know about black pimps (who exploit women of all races), and are aware that there are women of all races and ethnicities in the sex trade — whose johns are men of all races. These images do not fit their interpersonal image of racism — white men exploiting black women.

Advocates’ point about the intersection of race and class leading to higher levels of exploitation of black women and girls requires a bigger picture view of systems and conditions, and most messages about racism struggle to get people to see that bigger picture view.

Again, the recommended strategy, in particular pointing to the systemic solutions, will serve as a better starting point for conversations about race and class.

“MOST WOMEN IN PROSTITUTION WERE ABUSED AS CHILDREN…”

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A BETTER FOUNDATION FOR OTHER MESSAGES

Once the cultural common sense has shifted to the frame of trauma that can’t be regulated away, and solutions to shrink, not grow the industry, the existing messaging ideas can begin to make sense to people in a way they currently don’t because the new direction fills a gap in current public understanding that illustrates:

• Unwanted sex — even when it is compensated and “chosen” — usually causes harm, the same kind of psychological/emotional harm as rape.
• It doesn’t make moral sense to allow pimps and johns to be legally sanctioned to inflict this trauma that is inherent in the trade.
• The sex trade’s inherent harms are multiplied by the fact that so many girls and women involved were abused as children. Repeated trauma — especially when the original injury occurred in childhood — is especially harmful.
• The inherent harm in the sex trade is not unlike domestic violence, where the trauma can be difficult to see and harder to escape from. The disparities in community investment and in how society addresses the conditions and flawed systems that lead to harm, exposes the racism implicit to the sex trade, and is completely incompatible with progressive values.
• Once ordinary men know that even “nice guys” are inflicting trauma by participating in the sex trade, they have a special responsibility to speak up and to refrain from participating.

In short, this approach has potential to transform critical ideas that are currently being rejected by the public and the media into ideas that resonate.

To apply this new approach, we find it useful to keep five points in mind:

• Elevate the idea that trauma can’t be eliminated through policy regulations,
• Undermine the idea that legalization works,
• Define success and failure as the number of people involved,
• Include solutions aimed at shrinking the number involved, and
• Stop feeding the opposition’s frame; this isn’t “sex work,” it’s real lives at stake.
HERE ARE TWO EXAMPLES FOR HOW WE CAN ADAPT THE APPROACH TO A VARIETY OF ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLES, VOICES AND PLATFORMS.

SAMPLE ORGANIZING STATEMENT

Studies and survivors’ experiences show what most of us intuitively know — that most women in prostitution are psychologically or emotionally harmed by it. They suffer very high rates of PTSD, depression, and a struggle to maintain healthy intimate relationships. As a society, we should do all we can to shrink prostitution in order to reduce this exposure to trauma.

Prostitution typically has various “entry ramps” into the life, including poverty, child abuse, and broken foster care. When countries legalize prostitution, they build additional entry ramps with companies pushing for bigger markets, and pushing young women and men into it. What we should be doing instead is shrinking prostitution by addressing and closing the entry ramps and improving and increasing the exit ramps which include counseling, crisis centers, clearing prostitution charges off people’s records, education and job opportunities and improved child welfare systems.

“CAUGHT IN THE LIFE: THE BUSINESS OF PROSTITUTION”
CBS News, May 7, 2017

It was like any Monday evening in Seattle. The Emerald city sparkled, Mt. Rainier hovered in the distance, and along Aurora Avenue, business was booming.

Every city has its underbelly, where sex is bought and sold. Arrests are being made, but what might surprise you is just who’s being arrested. It’s not those selling sex — women and young girls, although to be clear, men are prostitutes, too.

Instead, Seattle has shifted its focus to arresting their customers — those buying the sex.

“We’re not trying to harass women who are caught up in the trade,” said Seattle City Attorney Pete Holmes. “We’re not trying to add to their burdens. We’re actually trying to help.”

Six years ago Holmes adopted what’s called the Nordic Model (a strategy pioneered in Sweden) that successfully reduces aims to reduce sex trafficking by cutting off demand.

“What we have been doing historically, and what most of the country still continues to do, is to further victimize women that are caught up in the life,” said Holmes. “Instead, we’re working on shrinking prostitution by tackling demand and by providing women with support so they can leave when they’re ready. It’s a proven strategy that will improve lives.”

According to the International Labor Organization, human trafficking is a $32 billion a year industry, and many who are trafficked for sex are under the age of 18.

That’s how old Marin Stewart was when she entered the trade.

“There was always something that kept me in the life,” she told Cowan. “There were always reasons that I needed to stay longer. I should have been murdered many, many, many, many times. ‘You can’t imagine how prostitution takes over all aspects of your life,’ she told Cowan. ‘People know about the physical danger, but they don’t understand how this life eats away at your sense of who you are.’

“How did you survive it?”

“I don’t know, three years later and I still have flashbacks and struggle with depression,” she replied.

Stewart considers herself a survivor, saying she carries the scars of prostitution deep within her, and it drives her to fight for change. “An abolitionist, calling prostitution nothing short of modern-day slavery. And Seattle’s focus on the buyers and not the sellers, she says, is an enlightened, modern approach. “The women are not being treated like they’re bad, and that they’re dirty, and that is just who they are,” she said. “They are given respect and options.”

BEFORE AND AFTER

We can’t control what journalists ultimately choose to write, but we can control what we say. In the article that follows, there are missed opportunities for spokespeople to make the key strategic points that we know are compelling. Suggested improvements are highlighted.
RAISING THE MOST IMPORTANT VOICES

We opened this investigation with the question:

Why aren’t a broader variety of voices being heard in the dialogue about the sex trade?

After listening to our participants, we feel the research not only produced strong answers to that question, but revealed a path forward. Providing progressive Americans with a frame that enables them to give voice, with confidence and without judgment, to their intuitive misgivings about the sex trade could significantly influence our national conversation.

Raising many voices ensures that the stories of survivor leaders don’t have to shoulder the entire burden for shifting the dialogue. A clear and coherent position on the issue will empower almost anyone to pick up the message. At the same time, those with lived experience remain the most powerful and authentic messengers. Centering their experiences of lasting emotional and psychological trauma in our messaging will ground this frame of unavoidable trauma in the powerful life stories of survivors.

It follows that this approach will elevate the critical ongoing need to support survivors with trauma-informed resources and services. Asking a survivor to speak to these very painful and private aspects of her life is a serious request that carries risk for her own continued well-being. As a movement, we can ensure that when a survivor raises her voice and tells her story, it is both powerful and supported through training and trauma stewardship.

The research strongly suggests that the approach identified here is the best starting point for a more balanced and constructive conversation. That said, it’s a tool, not a silver bullet, and in many contexts — especially public debates with exceptional messengers on the other side — challenges will remain. An empowered sex worker who accuses an advocate on our side of being part of the “rescue industry” remains a formidable opponent. A policy expert who talks knowledgeably about survival sex in the developing world presents a similar challenge.

We maintain that even in these instances the approach is effective for a simple reason: it is fact — both undeniable and intuitive — that prostitution causes psychological trauma to most women who participate in it, willingly or not. The example of the empowered worker is the exception, not the rule, and her personal experience doesn’t give her special authority to speak for the vast majority of women in the sex trade who experience some form of trauma. Similarly, the case of the economically desperate woman in the U.S. or abroad who makes a desperate choice for the sake of her children does not erase the truth that prostitution is inherently traumatic.

In other words, while the day-to-day struggle over the public conversation about the sex trade involves being on defense as much as on offense, the approach identified involves permanent gains in the conversation. As part of a larger coordinated effort, it has the potential to modify the cultural common sense on this issue.
THE TOPOS APPROACH

The goal of a Topos project is to identify the existing cultural common sense—the hidden patterns of understanding that shape citizen engagement. Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion expert, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to give advocates a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting. Importantly, the research is not intended to drill down into the specifics of how Americans regard particular events, policies, proposals, or individuals. Instead, it aims to assess the most fundamental aspects of the current cultural and cognitive landscape.

The research for this project consisted of a media audit, cognitive elicitations, a Virtual Community Forum (VCF), and ethnography. The methods are designed to yield complementary findings as the researchers move between one and another. At every stage of the research, a particularly diverse set of subjects was recruited in order to account for patterns of age, class, race and gender.

COGNITIVE ELICITATIONS

In October 2016, Topos researchers conducted a set of 20 in-depth phone interviews with a diverse group of Americans recruited from around the country. The goal of these semi-structured interviews is to approximate a natural conversation and to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or heard before. The conversations ranged from 30-40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The subjects of the elicitations included 11 women and 9 men of various ages, all of whom identified themselves as liberal on social issues. Seventy percent of participants identify as White and 30% identify as a person of color.

ETHNOGRAPHY

The strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people’s experience of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography—the observation and description of people in their natural environments, and the effort to engage with people on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher.

Between October 2016 and January 2017, Topos researchers conducted ethnography in four US cities: Atlanta, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Detroit. Ethnographers spoke with 293 individuals, 56% of whom were White, 29% African American and 16% other people of color including Hispanics and Asian Americans. 180 identified as female, 110 as male and 3 as non-binary.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITY FORUM (VCF)

A VCF is an online interaction over several days among a diverse set of two dozen or so individuals who respond to questions, to materials, and to each other, on their own schedule. The VCF process allows us to observe how thinking evolves over time, as well as how dynamics play out in interactive settings including both single-gender and mixed-gender conversations. It enables us to introduce ideas and frames over the course of several days and determine what aspects seem to stick with people and which fall away.

In December of 2016, a Virtual Community Forum brought together a diverse group of 27 adults from around the country who participated over five days in online discussions. The subjects of the VCF included 14 women and 13 men of various ages, all of whom identified themselves as liberal on social issues. 56% of the sample was White, and 44% people of color.
As a movement, we can ensure that when a survivor raises her voice and tells her powerful story, it is supported by a chorus.

This research was conducted by the Topos Partnership, with support from the NoVo Foundation and in collaboration with brew advisors. At every step, our thinking was guided by the invaluable input of a collaborative group of advisors consisting of survivors, service providers, and advocates.

Anne K. Ream, The Voices & Faces Project
Brook Bello, More Too Life, Inc.
Carmen O’Leary, Native Women’s Society of the Great Plains
Monique Morris, National Black Women’s Justice Institute
Rachel Moran, SPACE International
Yasmeen Hassan, Equality Now
Yasmin Vafa, Rights4Girls

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information: www.topospartnership.com
Or email us: team@topospartnership.com
Prior to our interviews, most of our research participants had given little thought to the sex trade; it has not been on their radar. It was clear, however, that for most participants, discussing the issue brought to light an internal emotional conflict. Most are deeply troubled by the idea of prostitution even if they are unable to articulate why. On the other hand, they don't want to be closed-minded or be seen as judging another person's life choices; in fact many apologized for views they felt might sound critical or moralistic.

What's more, despite self-professed low levels of knowledge about the issue, most of our research participants offered thoughtful, heartfelt and compassionate points of view. They firmly believe the status quo is not working, and show an honest desire to support steps that reduce the number of people harmed by this life. But, they are very uncertain about what steps might make a difference.

"It's just things that you don't have to deal with. We are college-educated, we work every day, and homeowners and all that stuff. We think it's all about Lowe's and Home Depot."

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