

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Human Trafficking and Prostitution

Melissa Farley, Ph.D.

According to U.N. estimates, approximately 2.5 million people are being trafficked around the world at any given time, 80% of them women and children. Conservative estimates suggest that the sex industry generates some \$32 billion annually. However, estimates of income generated from prostitution in one city, Las Vegas, are as high as \$5 billion. Today, sex trafficking is a high-tech, globalized, electronic market, and predators are involved at all levels, using the same methods to control prostituted women that batterers use against their victims: minimization and denial of physical violence, economic exploitation, social isolation, verbal abuse, threats and intimidation, physical violence, sexual assault, and captivity. Despite the illogical attempt of some to distinguish prostitution from trafficking, trafficking is simply the global form of prostitution. Sex trafficking may occur within or across international borders, thus women may be either domestically or internationally trafficked or both. Young women are trafficked for sexual use from the countryside to the city, from one part of town to another, and across international borders to wherever there are men who will buy them.

Prostitution is widely socially tolerated, with the buyers socially invisible. Even today, many mistakenly assume that prostitution is sex, rather than sexual violence, and a vocational choice, rather than a human rights abuse. Although clinicians are beginning to recognize the overwhelming physical violence in prostitution, its internal ravages are still not well understood. There has been far more clinical attention paid to sexually transmitted diseases among those prostituted than to their depressions, lethal suicidality, mood disorders, anxiety disorders (including post-traumatic stress disorder) dissociative disorders, substance abuse, and traumatic brain injury. Regardless of its legal status or its physical location, prostitution is extremely dangerous for women. Homicide is a frequent cause of death.

Prostitution is an institution akin to slavery, one so intrinsically discriminatory and abusive that it cannot be fixed--only abolished. At the same time, its root causes must be eradicated as well: sex inequality, racism and colonialism, poverty, prostitution tourism, and economic development that destroys traditional ways of living. The conditions that make genuine consent possible are absent from prostitution: physical safety, equal power with johns and pimps, and real alternatives. It is a cruel lie to suggest that decriminalization or legalization will protect anyone in prostitution. Until it is understood that prostitution and trafficking can appear voluntary but are not in reality free choices made from a range of options, it will be difficult to garner adequate support to assist those who wish to escape but have no other choices. Enforcement of international agreements challenging trafficking and prostitution can aid in this effort as can laws challenging men's purchase of sex.

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It is important to address men's demand for prostitution. Acceptance of prostitution is one of a cluster of harmful attitudes that encourage and justify violence against women. Violent behaviors against women have been associated with attitudes that promote men's beliefs that they are entitled to sexual access to women, that they are superior to women and that they are licensed as sexual aggressors. Those concerned with human rights must address the social invisibility of prostitution, the massive denial regarding its harms, its normalization as an inevitable social evil, and the failure to educate students in the mental health and public health professions. Trafficking and prostitution can only exist in an atmosphere of public, professional and academic indifference.

Psychologists for Social Responsibility seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and public awareness to the issues highlighted in this brief overview. For more information, please contact us at info@psysr.org. We encourage new PsySR members to join in these efforts. Media inquiries are also welcome.

PsySR member Melissa Farley, Ph.D., a research and clinical psychologist, directs Prostitution Research and Education (<http://www.prostitutionresearch.com>). She can be reached directly at mfarley@prostitutionresearch.com.

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