

Really Worth It?

No. Prostitution exploits many women's deep pain

BY BRENDA MYERS-POWELL

I'm a survivor. And I can say with authority that NO, sex is not worth buying. In the process of selling my body, I was shot five times, stabbed more than 13 times, beaten unconscious several times, had my arm and nose broken, had two teeth knocked out, lost a child that I will never see again, was verbally abused, and spent countless days in jail.

Like other women who became prostitutes, I had no esteem and no self-worth, and as a child, I began to seek others who could fill my emotional emptiness. I got molested at a very young age. When I was 9 and saw the beautiful ladies in the shiny dresses working the corners, I decided that I wanted to be shiny too, because I sure didn't feel shiny inside.

I started prostituting at age 15 and wasn't able to escape the lifestyle until I was 40 years old. During that time, I lost my real name and became whatever the men wanted me to be. For many, I became "Breezy." I worked the West Side of Chicago. I started downtown on Rush Street, with all the rich men. I worked upscale prostitution for most of my career. I didn't

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always work the streets.

I was a "thick" young thing and men—especially older men—paid attention to my caramel skin and curvy thighs. I felt this gave me value, and I exploited my body and gave myself to any man who wanted a piece.

It was a vicious lifestyle.

What these men don't know—or maybe what they DO know—is that many prostitutes or streetwalkers or "happy hookers" are women with a deep sense of pain. Most have been abused in unimaginable ways. And though many argue that it's the women who chose their own lifestyles and it is their choice if they want to sell their bodies, is that really true? Is it that young girl's choice to be put on display in a brothel like she's part of a herd of cattle? Is it her choice to be a young girl manipulated by "family" to sell her body for the promise of money, attention and a new pair of shoes or a warm coat?

Statistics show that 70 percent of the women who enter prostitution get into it by the age of 12. And despite what pimps and regular Joes say about the institution, it doesn't always sit well with them either. Consider that a study done by Prostitution

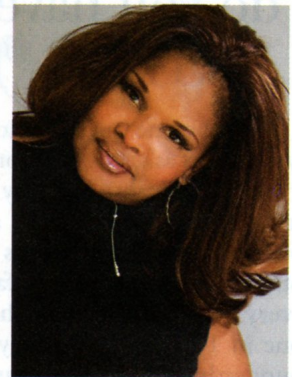
Research and Education and the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, some of the men interviewed expressed feelings of guilt and shame after purchasing sex. Everybody talks about the women. This is the first time where they have addressed the man's side and the issues of why men buy sex.

A significant number of these men consistently made statements that compare women in the sex trade to objects or food. These are not men who see women in the sex trade as people who deserve respect; they see them as items for consumption. These men have a whacked sense of entitlement. They feel, "It's not my problem, she was a prostitute before I got there." The men feel like they bought her, they purchased her and now they're entitled to do what they want.

When I worked in prostitution, the entitlement was very deep. When they beat you, they paid you. It was OK, they thought, because they gave you extra money. And then there was the "secret" sex, like the scandal that involved former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer. Except the secrets get exposed. As for me, once I made \$10,000 from a Nigerian politician and his aide for having a party in New York City. A friend who worked for Pan-Am airlines hooked us up. I stayed at the Waldorf-Astoria. We called it secret because you get paid not to say anything.

Spitzer is reported to have spent thousands in a scenario that gets glorified in the movies and media... *Pretty Woman*, anyone? Yet no one is talking about the girls and why they're in that terrible situation. So the question is this: Is our collective apathy worth it? How many women do we have to sacrifice before we reach the tipping point? How many women's lives are too much?

There are many players in this field, including the prostitutes, the pimps who sell the women, the traffickers, owners of escort agencies, strip clubs and the sex ranches. I am sure many of these individuals would argue that the sex trade is very profitable. But let's not pretend that prostitution is something glamorous or beneficial to society. It is harmful to everyone—to the women, men and communities. Let's move beyond the debate of whether sex is worth buying and instead start working toward a society free from commercial and sexual exploitation. □



Chicagoan Brenda Myers-Powell is co-founder of Dream Catcher, designed to divert at-risk teens before they become prostitutes. Myers-Powell is also a motivational speaker and daytime TV expert on teen issues. She is a founding board member of the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE) and is the star subject of *Turning the Corner*, an award-winning documentary about women who have successfully exited the life of prostitution.

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