

Unequal
Melissa Farley

This article responds to Debbie Nathan's 'Oversexed' (Nation, August 29, 2005). Nathan sympathizes with those on the Left who consider prostitution a form of labor rather than violence against women. Nathan criticizes abolitionist feminists who think that women in prostitution deserve more in life than a condom and a cup of coffee. We feminists think that women deserve the right NOT to prostitute. That's what almost all women in prostitution tell us they want: to get out. We also think that HIV prevention funds should not be used to promote legalized prostitution.

In 1993 in *The Nation*, Lillian S. Robinson's coresearcher Ryan Bishop says to her, "You have to [visit the Thai sex industry]. . . You have to go there the way you have to visit Dachau."

In 1996, Robert I. Friedman's *India's Shame: Sexual Slavery and Political Corruption are Creating an AIDS Catastrophe* in *The Nation* described the business of sexual exploitation in India that is paradigmatic of the sex industry worldwide, including the United States. He documents criminal gangs' control of prostitution in India and describes a "medical holocaust," referring to the AIDS crisis among prostituted women, primarily caused by johns' and pimps' raping them and johns' refusal to use condoms.

These two articles articulated prostitution and trafficking as slavery and as sexual annihilation. Prostitution was understood as a dominating transformation of a woman into a special commodity in which the man who buys her shapes her into his own physical and psychological masturbatory entity.

I understand prostitution this way as well, after a decade of research that includes the accounts of more than 850 prostituted women, men, transgendered people, and children in 9 countries. HIV infection is not the only physical consequence of prostitution. No other "employment" other than war combat has comparable rates of physical assault, rape, and homicide. One woman explained, "What rape is to others, is normal to us." The symptoms of profound emotional distress that result from prostitution and trafficking are off the charts: depression, suicidality, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, dissociation, substance abuse.

Today the sex industry is as global as any other industry. Sex trafficking is about marketing. It's globalized prostitution. The industry advertises young, AIDS-free organs for rent. Whether a woman has been trafficked or not, and whether prostitution is legal or not, researchers have found that the poorer she is, and the longer she's been in prostitution, the more likely she is to experience violence.

When a john buys a prostitute in the US, he usually can't tell if she's from across town, from across the country, or from another country. One Korean-American survivor of

prostitution grew up in the US but was forced by pimps to fake poor English because johns liked that: the image of the exotic as well as the vulnerability of nowhere to run. Johns can't tell where she's from, they simply ask for "something different."

Prostitution, described by Friedman in 1993 as sexual slavery, has been redefined by the Left, including the Greens, as sex work. In that one word – work – the sexism and the physical and psychological violence of prostitution are made invisible. A battle is being waged by those who promote prostitution as a good-enough job for poor women against those of us who consider prostitution an institution that is so intrinsically unjust, discriminatory, and abusive that it can't be fixed, only abolished.

Survivors have described prostitution as 'volunteer slavery' and as 'the choice that is not a choice,' while sex industry apologists on the Left insist that prostitution is 'sex work,' unpleasant labor but much like factory work. Do women consent to prostitution? Do they say to themselves, hm, what job should I choose: computer technician, lawyer, restaurant manager - no, I really want to be a prostitute? Women who 'choose' prostitution were sexually abused as kids at much higher rates than other women. So they get defined as whores when they are little. That's one way women end up 'choosing' prostitution: getting paid for the abuse they have grown up with and believing that's all they are good for. Other forces that 'choose' *them* for prostitution include poor or no education and no job that pays a living wage. Prostitution exploits women's lack of survival options. Sex discrimination, poverty, racism and abandonment are the forces that drive girls into prostitution. A Left analysis doesn't often address those structural issues in tandem where prostitution and trafficking are concerned. All they see is HIV.

According to sex industry advocates: if you provide prostitutes with condoms and a union, their problems will be solved. Everyone should have unlimited access to condoms. That's a harm reduction no-brainer. But women in 9 countries want more than condoms and unions. They want to get out of prostitution. In order to do that, they need housing, job training, jobs, and medical care, including substance abuse treatment.

Violence against women is established as a primary risk factor for HIV. In 2005 Osotimehin recognized that for Nigerian adolescent girls, AIDS is fueled by sexual violence, by children being married off to adult men, and by the social unacceptability of using condoms. This social climate, harmful to all women, makes the vastly unequal prostitution transaction even more dangerous. Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control found in 1998 that most women enter prostitution as a result of rape, poverty, or abandonment. They urged public health programs to address human rights issues in conjunction with campaigns against HIV. Yet most have utterly failed to confront the poverty, racism, incest, rape, battering, sex discrimination in employment, and chronic sexual harassment that drive women into prostitution.

From 1982 when HIV was recognized as epidemic, HIV education programs focused on safer sex negotiation. They assumed that an assertive prostituted woman could persuade the john to use a condom. Health organizations can be lethally complicit with pimps and johns when they promote safer sex negotiation while failing to see that when she asks a

john to use a condom *she can get killed*. A group of Nicaraguan women in prostitution urged that johns, not prostitutes, be compelled to use condoms. You don't often hear that recommendation from pimps and johns and HIV educators.

One mafia don who controlled prostitution in Mumbai told Friedman that AIDS was bad for business. Johns want clean meat. How have sex industry capitalists turned that around and used the HIV epidemic to its advantage? By funneling millions of dollars into AIDS prevention programs that not only distribute condoms but also promote prostitution as a reasonable job for the world's poor women.

Whether they know it or not, government and non-governmental funders have supported efforts to legalize or decriminalize the sex industry. Deals are made with pimps. For example, the California Prostitutes' Education Project (Cal-PEP) received state and federal grants to work on AIDS prevention among prostitutes. Its founder promoted decriminalization of prostitution while Cal-PEP was directed by her former pimp, a felon convicted for interstate prostitution (can we call it domestic trafficking?). Even when that fact was made public, Cal-PEP continued to receive federal HIV prevention funds.

The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) receives millions of dollars a year for AIDS prevention from Bill Gates. This group of mostly women pimps promotes legal prostitution while controlling a multibrothel prostitution/trafficking complex that houses 60,000 women and girls in Kolkata. Pimping other women is one way to get out of prostitution. Yet the DMSC is under the control of the same gangs that Friedman wrote about in 1996.

Over the years, Debbie Nathan has hung out with the sexual-violence-denying faction of the Left --apologists for pornographers, pedophiles, incest perpetrators who claim their kids have false memories, and nice johns who only use prostitutes indoors. Protesting too-stringent prosecution of child pornographers and pedophiles along with her nudist lawyer friend Lawrence Stanley (publisher of *Uncommon Desires*, "the voice of the politically conscious girl-love underground" who in 2002 was arrested and charged with violating Brazil's child exploitation laws), Nathan rails against those of us who state unequivocally that children are profoundly damaged by sexual relations with adults. Nathan questions - no, not the *existence*, just the *scientific prevalence* - of sexual violence against women and children in this man's world.

According to Nathan, rejecting pedophilia and ritual abuse (highly organized groups of pedophiles who make a religion out of sexually torturing children; yes they do exist) is "sex abuse panic." Public outcry against having sex with kids and taking pictures of that is "kiddy porn panic." Opposing trafficking is "sex-slave panic." Nathan uses our empathy against us. If we're uncomfortable at witnessing sexual violence, at renting or buying people for sex, we are sneered at, said to be in a "panic." It's an effective strategy that colludes with peoples' fear of confronting the cruelty of sexual violence. Most people are relieved to avoid the pain of knowing about this suffering. Violence against women and children is left hidden in plain sight.

In another article, claiming that Lourdes Portillo's accounts of the murders of hundreds of women on the Juarez-El Paso border are exaggerated, Debbie Nathan worried that her analysis might sound "like the nasty arithmetic of Holocaust deniers." She has a point. Nathan questions the accuracy of numbers as a way of denying the roots of the problem. She notes that accounts of the actual numbers of victims in trafficking vary. Trafficking victims are under extreme duress; they hide because they're terrified of pimps, johns, families, police, and governments, all of whom might once again betray them. Accurate counts are difficult, but are revised when new information makes that possible.

Nathan even suggests that some women consent to being trafficked: "I've never met a Thai woman smuggled in for sex work who didn't know that's what she'd be coming here to do." That's pimp-speak. As in "hey girl this is a dog-eat-dog world and you got gold between your legs. You already been fucked so why not get paid for it?" Is Nathan saying that if a woman knows she will be prostituted, she deserves whatever she gets? Is she suggesting that we stand by and watch as women and kids 'consent' to give up their human rights?

Apparently. To Nathan, it's not sex trafficking, it's 'migration for sex work.' She dismisses the overwhelming damage from sucking 10 strangers' dicks a day, from getting raped weekly, and from getting brutally battered if you don't do whatever pimps or johns want. Nathan considers "imprisonment in a sweatshop" just as severe as trafficking for prostitution. Sweatshops are vicious but they don't involve invasion of all your body's orifices on a daily basis for years into the future – or having to smile and say you like it when some foul-smelling man your grandfather's age comes on your face. Ironically, in her dogmatic refusal to notice sexual abuse anywhere, Nathan also fails to mention that women and girls imprisoned in gender-stratified sweatshops are often sexually exploited as well.

Nathan would taint feminists with guilt by association. If someone on the Right opposes any form of abuse that feminists oppose, we are "in bed with them." Object to child pornography? Oops, so does the Christian Right, gotcha. Favor strong laws against prostitution and trafficking? So does George Bush, gotcha. This adolescent logic trumps feminists' careful analysis rooted in decades of evidence obtained about actual harms.

Prostitution, trafficking, and pornography are booming internet businesses. Pornographers are indistinguishable from pimps. Maybe the one is taking a picture of prostitution, the other is creating a fantasy, or is it the other way around – pornography is a real picture but prostitution is a fantasy performance. Or is pornography actually prostitution with a camera? Or maybe it's the way one john explained, "I know porn stars. They enjoy sex on film more than other prostitutes." Gosh it's confusing. Pornographers, johns and pimps are given aid and comfort by the likes of Nathan.

Pornographers don't like laws against prostitution and they don't like policies that require antitrafficking organizations to sign statements that prostitution should not be considered a job option for someone who's been trafficked. In 2005, pornographer Phil Harvey sued the United States for its antiprostitution policy. Pornographers and pimps are in bed

together, tucked in by First Amendment nannies.

The TVPA (Trafficking Victims Protection Act, 2000) is inadequate to protect women victimized by sex traffickers. And law enforcement officers probably do interrogate women about illegal migration, as Nathan suggests. We need a law that both protects victims while it also effectively targets predators, both domestic and international. Pimps and sex traffickers are not the only sex predators: johns are predators too.

Wherever prostitution thrives, so does sex trafficking. If you were a pimp, where would you market your 'product?' Someplace like Sweden where there's a law against buying or selling people for sex? Or would you pimp women in countries that lay out a legal welcome mat: the Netherlands, Germany, Australia and wherever prostitution is legally tolerated? Sweden has a genuinely progressive prostitution law in which buyers and sellers of women are criminalized but prostituted people are not. Trafficking has plummeted in Sweden since the law was passed.

Will we permit a pimp's, trafficker's or a john's money to camouflage the sexual harassment, rape, and battering in prostitution? Former Swedish Minister of Gender Equality Margareta Winberg asked: "Shall we accept the fact that certain women and children, primarily girls, often those who are most economically and ethnically marginalized, are treated as a lower class, whose purpose is to serve men sexually?" The answer is no.

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Melissa Farley is at **Prostitution Research & Education**, a nonprofit organization. We are seeking ongoing funding for public education about prostitution/trafficking, for the website www.prostitutionresearch.com and for multi-country research on johns, ultimately aimed at preventing prostitution. Mail tax-deductible contributions to Prostitution Research & Education, Box 16254, San Francisco CA 94116-0254.