

Moving men beyond 'Pretty Woman'

The iconic movie hit the big screen 25 years ago, and it was just as disturbing then as it is now, our writer says

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Twenty-five years ago this week a new romantic comedy billed as an upbeat Cinderella story starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere was released to theaters. I want to tell you why, having heard about the premise of the film, I was not among the throngs flocking to see *Pretty Woman*.

I was working at the time to combat domestic violence and sexual assault. Through that work, I had begun to talk with women who had been prostituted and I was disgusted by the film's portrayal of prostitution as normal, casual, romantic, and something to laugh about. At the time, prostitution was commonly considered a victimless crime, but what those in it told me put to rest any idea I had that these were consenting adults. Their stories still haunt me today. I had begun to see prostitution as not pretty, but ugly.

Five years later I started one of the first court-mandated programs in the nation to educate men on what it really means to buy sex, and I have been educating men on this subject ever since. I often ask men in my classes, "What was your first memory of a cultural representation of prostitution?" For so many the answer is *Pretty Woman*. Whether viewed onscreen in its original format, or later via television or video, the film has contributed significantly to a glossy, facile image of what is a difficult and gritty reality.

Many of the survivors of prostitution I have worked with tell much the same story: abuse as children in the home, leaving home to escape that harm, and then falling prey to pimps who use the same techniques—emotional, physical and sexual abuse—to trap them in a life that is even more difficult to escape. They are disproportionately young, poor, female, and people of color. For the vast majority, this is not a choice, but a desperate lack of options.

With these realities coming to light over time, more and more arrests are being made not of those who are clearly exploited but rather of the buyers, whom society has tolerated from time immemorial, even though in most jurisdictions they are breaking the law. In Seattle and King County, we are recognizing that one means of stopping the exploitation that prostitution represents is to direct our efforts toward educating those buyers, the “johns” whose very name connotes anonymity and denial.

As a teacher I have also learned the story of the buyer. He has grown up with a toxic, hegemonic model of masculinity, one that emphasizes control and entitlement. He has learned to see women as sexual objects from an early age. He has learned to desire “non-relational sex” from an early age. He has learned that in order to fit in with his male peers, he must prove his masculinity by scoring with girls. Not to do so can mean not just ostracism by male peers, but sometimes even acts of violence. So the idea of non-relational sex takes hold early and easily transfers to the realm of prostitution, with porn (another form of non-relational sex) a strong influence and enabler.

These ingrained behaviors keep buyers unconscious about the truth of what they’re doing. A girl who’s 15 will tell a buyer she’s 18, and he’s buying it. If he asks if she has a pimp and she says no, he’s buying it. After all, the transaction is called a “trick” for a reason.

But changing men’s attitudes toward prostitution is possible, just as it was with domestic violence, sexual assault and sexual harassment. Seattle is one of 11 cities across the nation that is part of an alliance called CEASE (Cities Empowered Against Sexual Exploitation). In these cities, strategies are being put in place to reduce commercial sexual exploitation by reducing demand for prostitution. In Seattle and King County, these efforts include educating buyers and would-be buyers, as well as teaching men who do not buy sex to speak out

against exploitation.

Learning the truth about the harms of prostitution is key; so is redefining masculinity. I often invite the men in my 10-week program to step into their true humanity and learn about relational sex. This, of course, is not a dominance- and performance-based approach, but an attitude that emphasizes empathy and mutuality. The men in my program often begin applying a new kind of peer pressure with each other, one that begins to move them away from the old model and into a healthy new one—an approach to relationships with others that turns away from dominance and shame and moves toward true partnership in which men can be their authentic and truest selves.

A quarter-century is a long time. I like to think—in fact, I believe—that if a film like *Pretty Woman* were released today, it would be controversial. We’ve made great strides toward understanding gender-based violence such as rape and domestic violence and providing protective legislation to liberate women, children, and men from these abuses. I’m confident we can do the same with prostitution. I hope it won’t take another 25 years.

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