

Children Are Not Prostitutes

Young boys and girls in every city on the globe today are forced to serve as sex slaves. Sex traffickers target twelve- to seventeen-year-old children as their choice candidates. The johns who pay regular visits to brothels prefer adolescents above any other age group. Looked at from the cold perspective of a slaveholder, adolescents also have a longer shelf life. Any older and they start to lose their youthful appeal. Any younger and they may draw the attention of law enforcement authorities.

Because sex trafficking masks itself as prostitution, the general public does not feel outraged. The children are perceived to be criminals or sexual deviants or at best victims of their environment: desperate for survival, the kids “choose” to sell their bodies for profit.

The real criminals hide in the shadows. An illicit network of traffickers, pimps, recruiters, brothel owners, and johns preys on vulnerable kids and forces them into a life of sexual commerce. Once the inner workings of that criminal network are exposed, common sense prevails. Of course a child would not volunteer for the repeated trauma of ten (or more) grown men penetrating their bodies every evening. We have a word for exploiting minors that way: rape.

It should be noted that the same mechanisms of financial bondage and violent intimidation that enslave children are practiced on females of all ages. Adult “prostitutes” too can recount shocking testimonies of pimps locking them in closets, flogging them with coat hangers, and forcing them to service a staggering number of clients. The pimps quite explicitly refer to these women as “my property” and will attack anyone who acts to compromise their control.

Donna Hughes, an influential activist in the campaign to stop the flow of sex trafficking, explained to the U.S. House Committee on International Relations that prostitution and sex trafficking are inextricably linked: “To not understand the relationship between prostitution and trafficking is like not understanding the relationship between slavery in the Old South and the kidnapping of victims in Africa and the transatlantic shipment of them to our shores.”

Without a doubt, we need a more nuanced understanding of prostitution. Katherine Chon, co-founder of the Polaris Project, points to a conversation she had with a Korean woman in her early twenties whom she suspected was a victim of sex trafficking. When Katherine asked the woman whether she had been coerced into coming to the United States to work in the sex trade, the woman adamantly denied that was the case.

Katherine decided to change her tack: “Well, on a scale of 0 to 100 percent, how much control do you feel you have over your decisions each day to continue selling your body to men?”

Given the flow of the conversation up to that point, Katherine expected the woman to give a response that might fall close to 90 percent. But after considering for a few seconds, the woman gave Katherine a surprising answer: “Oh, I’d say maybe 5 percent.”

Confused by her answer, Katherine started digging a bit deeper: “So why do you feel such loyalty for the owner of the brothel where you work?”

“The owner told me that if I got into trouble, she would bail me out of jail and pay for an attorney,” the Korean woman replied. “I am not from here [the United States]; the police can do bad things to you, so I need security.” The Korean woman went on to explain that the brothel owner also keeps possession of all her “savings.” If she were to leave the brothel, the owner would not give her the money back. Her pimp also provides her protection, though he threatens to beat her if she tries to leave him.

Is she a slave? It would not be much of a stretch to identify her as such, even though she technically does not live under lock and key. Tragically, the woman herself rejects the label. She has come to accept her destiny the coercion weaves so seamlessly into her surroundings that she no longer recognizes it as a chain.

Coercing children into the sex trade entails much less ambiguity. The actual process of enslavement varies from place to place; the most influential independent variable is the strength of law enforcement in a particular region. Research across five continents uncovers a disturbingly common pattern in child sex trafficking, regardless of whether international crime networks are involved or the operation runs on a regional level with ad hoc players. The process of enslavement involves five predictable elements:

Recruitment- Traffickers target children most commonly from communities that lack social power, at times with the consent of the victim’s parents.

Extraction- Traffickers remove recruits from their home community and shift them to a destination where they are unlikely to get support from law enforcement bodies or the general citizenry.

Control- Slaveholders seek control over every aspect of the child’s life so that escape becomes unthinkable.

Violence- Slaveholders exercise violence as a means to reinforce their control and ensure compliance.

Exploitation- Slaveholders show slight regard for the physical or emotional health of the child in their pursuit of financial gain.

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