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Trashy HBO Show Gets Heat from Public

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NEW YORK—Women's rights advocates and others are putting the heat on the HBO reality series "Cathouse," which follows the happenings in a legal brothel in Nevada. They say that the cable show is normalizing the demand for prostitution and fueling sex trafficking in the United States. A protest held outside HBO's corporate headquarters in Manhattan last Thursday drew attention to the show's negative social impact.

"In 'Cathouse' the reality of the sex industry is distorted. Pimps are transformed into businessmen. It also shows that the buying and selling of women is harmless and normal," said Norma Ramos, co-director of the advocacy group Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. "HBO cynically labels 'Cathouse' as a documentary when in fact it packages prostitution as entertainment."



Advocates protest at HBO's corporate headquarters in Manhattan.

An estimated 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States each year, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Justice. Roughly 80 percent of all trafficked victims are women and girls, 70 percent of whom end up in prostitution, according to statistics from Ramos' group.

Facing protests over "Cathouse," HBO has defended its reputation.

"If one looks at the long list of powerful, award-winning programming from HBO's documentaries that have championed urgent human rights issues women face, it is clear that an accusation of 'promoting prostitution and sex trafficking' is simply an unfair claim of the great work done here," reads a statement from HBO.

The statement goes on to list HBO documentaries covering rape in the Congo, sex slavery in India, and female genital mutilation in modern-day Kenya.

HBO, however, does not list any programs detailing "human rights issues women face" in America. Perhaps because, unlike America, most people in the Congo, India, and Kenya won't have easy access to HBO.

Because it is based in reality and in America, for those at Thursday's protest, "Cathouse" has crossed the line from simply being trashy television to being seriously disturbing.

"When you have Hollywood and media producing shows or movies such as 'Cathouse,' 'Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl,' or 'Love Ranch,' they perpetuate the degradation of women without giving the full picture of women who are being violated," said Taina Bien-Aime, director of the international women's rights group Equality Now.

Advertisements for "Cathouse"—which is officially billed as a documentary—depict the show as an almost pornographic experience with no indication of the downsides to the prostitution business and its effects on society. HBO's Web site reads, "Looking for the wildest parties, kinkiest girls and the best sex...ever? Just tell the girls of Cathouse what you want!"

Ramos called the show "a cynical reality show that is highly staged."

She implored HBO to do a real documentary on the topic. "The documentary should expose the true nature and human cost of commercial sexual exploitation," she said.

According to a *Time Magazine* poll, 58 percent of Americans think that there is too much cursing and sexual language in television and 50 percent think there is too much sexual content.

"It is about corporate responsibility and as a society we need to engage in a paradigm shift to end the exploitation of women and girls and not promote it," said Bien-Aime.

Women's advocate Sonia Ossorio of the National Organization for Women spoke of the emotional damage done to women who are forced to sell themselves.

"Unfortunately, there is demand for prostitution by men who think that there is no harm done in exploiting girls and women. They do not see the harm that is being done," said Ossorio.

Ossorio has spoken in the past about how illegal prostitution and trafficking of women is a problem in New York City.

"I've been to Roosevelt Avenue in Queens where men on corners in this prostitution district get paid to hand out fliers covered in naked women's bodies. They'll guide you to the brothels that line the side streets filled with trafficked women from Central and South America. Men pay \$30 for 15 minutes of sex," she wrote in a blog.