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Sonia Ossorio

Posted: March 25, 2008 05:30 PM



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When Sex Is a Business, You Can't Forget About Demand

Whether it's a \$30 sex act in a brothel in Flushing, Queens that markets to dishwashers and day laborers, or a \$4,000 sex act sold through a glossy website, the demand by men for commercial sex in the United States today is overwhelming. It's time to take a hard look at the culture and laws in our society that make it so easy for television commentators to say it is a "victimless crime." 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.

Our image of the jet-set call girl is an illusion. Rare news about the workings of the upper-end of the prostitution industry is now before us and the undeniable truth is they aren't the empowered women characterized in movies, music and the American psyche. Behind the polished pictures and polite language of the now-shuttered Emperor's Club VIP is the woman Governor Eliot Spitzer summoned to Washington D. C. for paid sex: a 22-year-old from a broken home, who's abused drugs, been abused and wasn't sure how she was going to pay the next month's rent.

There's a clear link between the proliferation of prostitution and a flourishing sex-trafficking industry. Our country and the State of New York have made great strides in passing laws that are aimed at stemming the tide of prostitution and trafficking. In 2000, the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed and gave the Justice Department further tools to fight the proliferation of organized prostitution. Led by Governor Spitzer himself, New York State passed a tough anti-trafficking law in 2007 which gives local prosecutors the new crime of trafficking to indict traffickers and pimps. But we still have a long way to go. The bill, while important, lacks the funding or the teeth to enact real change. (As I wrote in the [Albany Times-Union](#) today, New York state is currently allocating only \$450,000 in this year's budget to combat sex trafficking. It takes more money than that to clear snow from New York City streets for one day.)

All the while, the prostitution industry has boomed. JFK Airport is one of the main hubs used by traffickers, according to the Justice Department. Flip past the electronics category of the Yellow Pages and you'll find dozens of pages of escort service listings. Manhattan's Verizon Yellow Pages has startling images of girls that appear to be as young as 10 years old. And it's clear that these are big operations: it costs \$45,000 upfront for a full-page ad in the escort category.

We will never make progress until we address demand, until johns face stiffer penalties and public shame instead of a free pass and bragging rights. As it stands, the men who drive the demand are barely held accountable. In most cities, women are arrested for prostitution in far greater numbers than men. There are 20 times more arrests of women in some cities. The johns get off easy, while women receive arrest records and also suffer from drug abuse and violence. In one study, 82 percent of women had been assaulted since entering the prostitution business. Even in "high-class" prostitution, women are warned not to wear thick necklaces, shoulder strap handbags or scarves that can be used to choke them.

It's time we take notice of the harsh reality of the world of prostitution. At this moment, what is right for New York and for our country is to take a hard look at the value we place on the lives of women and girls, what we expect from the men in our lives, and to get serious about ending the practices and cultural norms that allow prostitution, trafficking, and violence to flourish in our communities.