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**Stop the Traffick:
Stiffening State Laws Helps Trapped Women**
by Sonia Ossorio

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I know a woman from South America who spent her first night in the Big Apple in a brothel overlooking Roosevelt Avenue in Queens. With a timer at her side she "serviced" 19 men – a veritable United Nations parade of taxi drivers to restaurant workers who literally queued up for a turn to have 15-minute sex sessions with the women at this brothel.



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If you never had a picture of what the low-budget, factory-style prostitution that makes up much of the local NYC sex industry, this is it – up close, uncomfortable and a mockery of sex and all it stands for – pleasure, sharing, sexual empowerment and women's liberation.

At the beginning of each shift, the women are given a produce box top with two rolls of paper towels, rubbing alcohol, a bottle of lube, and a baggie filled with unwrapped condoms. The condoms are prepped like diced vegetables at restaurants before the rush hits. There are tips that go to the men who stand on the corners as dusk sets in and pass out business cards for the brothels and give directions to the houses where sex can be bought \$30 for 15 minutes. The price went up this year from \$25.

It would be a year before "Carmen" could slip from the grasp of her trafficker. She endured long nights of anonymous men in the beginning, a method that is used the world over by pimps and traffickers (one and the same) to break down a woman's spirit, sense of self and fight. Serial rape will do that to you.

After that, the threat of violence kept her in place, coupled with a threatened smear campaign of her reputation back home.. Her traffickers told her if she didn't stick it out, they'd drop the news in her town that she'd become a whore in the U.S. The smartest move, they advised, was to suck it up, make some cash and get home soon. For a woman from a small town in South America, womanhood can be defined largely by being in the respectable camp or the whore house.



billboard in New York City

Traffickers Let Their Fingers Do the Walking

Flip past the electronics category of the Verizon Yellow Pages and you'll find dozens of pages of "escort services" many including startling images of girls that appear to be as young as 10 years old. It's a good business. Idearc, which owns Verizon Yellow Pages in the New York Metro area charges \$45,000 for a full-page color ad and apparently has no limits on what they'll accept.

At NOW-NYC we started a campaign called "Trafficking Free NYC!" asking publishers to use common sense, do some basic due diligence and stop taking ads that exploit women through the commercial sex industry. So far, we've convinced 15 publications to stop being the marketing arm of the commercial sex industry.

In 2007, New York became the 33rd state to create an [anti-trafficking law](#). Sex trafficking is now a B felony and labor trafficking is a D felony. [The new law](#) establishes a comprehensive definition of trafficking, services for victims, clearer laws on sex tourism operations, and increased penalties for patronizing prostitution from a B to an A misdemeanor.



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A disgraced governor:
Eliot Spitzer

But we still have a long way to go. The 2007-08 state budget allocated only \$450,000 to implement the law. It costs more to clear snow from New York City streets for one day. Cops need training in identifying trafficking and recognizing that prostitution is a crime that has many victims -- it's not just vice. Studies suggest that up to two-thirds of prostitutes have been sexually abused as children, a majority have drug dependence issues and many have mental illnesses, and almost half have attempted suicide.

Stop the Demand

We will never make progress until we address the men who create the demand. The recent story of [Tom Athans](#) is all too common. In April, Thomas Athans, husband of [U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow](#) (D-Mich), admitted paying a woman in Detroit \$150 for 15 minutes of oral sex. While the 20-year-old woman accused of prostitution was arrested and forced to pay \$100 bail to get out of jail until her day in court, Athans was stopped in a Cadillac Deville and let go – after giving information that helped police build their case against the women he paid to give him oral sex.

As it stands, the men who drive demand are barely held accountable.

In most cities, women are arrested for prostitution in far greater numbers than men who patronize them; there are 20 times more arrests of women in some areas. Yet, a Chicago study on men who buy sex revealed that 83 percent of those interviewed noted that jail time would deter them from purchasing sex, and 87 percent said that some form of exposure, such as having their name or photo in the news, would also deter them. The new anti-trafficking law in New York increases penalties for johns. By putting real money behind our strengthened laws and getting law enforcement agencies to prioritize quelling the demand, we can affect change.

Until johns face stiffer penalties and public shame instead of a free pass and bragging rights, women will continue to be imported against their will or duped to meet demand in the American market and American women, many of them teenagers – will continue revolving in and out of jail, with each fine paid for with a blow job. NOW-NYC and its Trafficking Action Network are committed to changing that dynamic.

Sonia Ossorio is the President of the [National Organization for Women in New York City](#), where she led a campaign to repeal the statute of limitations on rape and was a leading member of the New York State Anti-Trafficking Coalition, which drove the passage of New York's anti-trafficking law in 2007.