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Deconstructing Demand: The Driving Force of Sex Trafficking

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WORLDWIDE, A GROWING MOVEMENT is focusing on deterring purchasers of illegal commercial sex. That movement holds enormous promise in eradicating one of the most destructive yet hidden human rights abuses being perpetrated against women and girls, not only abroad but also rampantly in the United States. Too often, society puts the onus on the victims rather than the perpetrators of sex trafficking and other prostitution. But by far the most efficient approach in stopping this abuse is to focus on the sex buyers: When they stop buying, the entire system of degradation collapses.

This article explains how focusing on sex purchasers eradicates the problematic distinction between sex trafficking and prostitution. Further, it lays out ethical, social, legal, medical, relational, and personal reasons that the illegal sex industry is incompatible with basic values of human dignity, gender equality, and fundamental care for others.

Troubling questions have crippled efforts to halt gender-based sexual exploitation. For example: Is the buying or selling of human beings for sex acts legitimized if the purchase is legal? What is the link between prostitution and sex trafficking? If those being bought or sold consent to the transaction, is their consent valid given that the average age a girl enters into prostitution is 13? Considering that by the time they are “consenting adults,” they have been statutorily raped thousands of times and have known no other way of life, do they really have free choice? When is personal liberty of the minority more important than well-being of the majority?

Such questions are at the heart of the raging debate over commercial sexual exploitation in the United States and other countries. Granted, there are female traffickers, including recruiters and pimps. Those purchased may be male or female; in fact, among children, the sale of young boys is increasing. Still, the vast majority of those being purchased are women and girls, while virtually all those purchasing are men. Not to name the gendered nature of that abuse is complicity because the topic is gender-charged.¹

Without making the link with *trafficking*, societies traditionally frown upon but tolerate what they call *prostitution*, because they see it as a consensual transaction between adults. But that distinction is more fiction than fact. Defenders of the sex industry argue that those who choose to enter it should be allowed to operate like any other “business,” and that decriminalization will reduce the black market nature of the trade. Apologists further argue that individuals selling sex would be safer and face less social stigma if they were engaging in legal activity. For example, the transmission of disease among so-called “sex workers” might be caught earlier with mandated health checks, and violent abuse in licensed brothels could be lessened with bedside panic buttons.

The bottom line, however, is that prostitution is about the commodification of the human body and of human sexuality. To quote Vednita Carter of Breaking Free, a survivor-led organization that provides services to victims of commercial sexual exploitation, “whether the sale takes place in a hotel room or a back alley, if it hurts one, it hurts all. The very act violates human dignity.” Carter clearly prioritizes dignity over rights. She also draws a thought-provoking analogy between questions of voluntary participation in the sex trade and questions of the historic slave trade that once flourished as a legal enterprise in the United States: “There were house slaves and field slaves. The house slaves felt their lives were better and initially didn’t understand the demand for freedom by fellow slaves. But eventually, all the slaves were freed.”²

Along with illegal arms, human trafficking is the world’s most profitable criminal enterprise after drugs. Within that broader category, U.S. federal law defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.”³ The crime is not dependent on whether a border is crossed, or whether it occurs on the street, through the Internet, in a massage parlor, or in any other particular setting. Most public and private resources dedicated to trafficking in the past decade have been crisis-oriented. They have been understandably geared toward rescuing and rehabilitating victims, and to some extent, toward prosecuting perpetrators such as pimps and members of trafficking syndicates. However, policy makers, academics, and activists are increasingly recognizing that the endless supply of victims will never abate unless the demand for trafficking is combatted.

To put the situation in economic terms, trafficking implies a commodity traded in a supply-and-demand market. If no one demanded the purchase of female bodies for sex, pimps would not supply them. There are myriad strategies being employed worldwide to deter buyers. For example, Sweden’s groundbreaking Sex Purchase Act of 1999 made it a criminal offense to *buy* sex, but not to *sell* sex. In other words, Sweden prosecutes pimps and buyers, but does not prosecute individuals who sell sex. Despite some controversy and skepticism, this strategy has enabled Sweden to nearly eradicate street prostitution—a reduction of 80 percent in ten years. After watching their neighbor succeed with this strategy, Norway and Iceland recently adopted similar legislation. Promisingly, a growing number of countries and cities worldwide have designed policies and programs to end the demand for illegal commercial sex.

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SUPPLY AND DEMAND

Since the 1990s, the classic scenario in Central and Eastern Europe has been that recruiters—both male and female—coerce women into the sex trade by advertising through newspapers or job fairs seemingly legitimate opportunities including modelling or waitressing. Especially seductive in the imploded economies of post-communist countries, such job offers promise financially desperate individuals employment, a possibility to build a new life in a foreign country, and a chance to provide for their families back home. This “employment,” of course, results in a life of sexual exploitation.

This archetypal pattern is also visible in conflict zones and in areas of extreme poverty. In South Asia it is common for *dalals* (pimps) to lure young girls and women to what they promise will be lucrative positions as domestic servants in big cities, often in other countries. A common trafficking route is to transport girls from Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh across the Indian border via land routes. Ultimately, the girls end up in Mumbai brothels or Karachi slums, from which they are sold upcountry or shipped off to the Gulf States. Sometimes the men who buy girls enter into fake marriages with them. In an extension of this abuse, hundreds of thousands of small children of both sexes are kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery, even by family members.

This exploitation is not limited to countries abroad. The U.S. Department of Justice has found girls as young as ten years old being recruited on the Metro in Washington D.C. and then being trafficked by a criminal ring while the girls still live with their parents. This is no aberration: as many as 100,000 to 300,000 children are bought for sex in America every year.⁴ To clarify, these are American children: more than 80 percent of the cases the Justice Department investigates identified the victims as U.S. citizens and not as immigrants.⁵

Sex trafficking, dubbed “America’s dirtiest secret” by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott, garners approximately \$9.5 billion a year. Much of this revenue is generated during classically machismo-driven events such as the Super Bowl, which Abbott describes as the “single-largest human-trafficking incident in the United States.”⁶ During the 2009 Super Bowl, the Florida Commission Against Human Trafficking estimates that “tens of thousands of women and minors” were brought into the Miami area and prostituted to meet increased demand. Although no exact figures are available, there is no apparent reason for these trafficking figures to have decreased at subsequent events.⁷

Using definitions of the United Nations and U.S. federal law, trafficking is, for practical purposes, often interchangeable with prostitution, since most pimps use “force, fraud or coercion,” and minors cannot legally consent. Filling out this picture, in a San Francisco study, 88 percent of prostitutes reported that they want a way out of the sex trade, but cannot find one or are terrified to leave given the threats of their traffickers.⁸ As laid out below in a discussion of legalization, establishing exactly who at any given time is in the minority of adults “willingly” selling their bodies is not a pragmatic or reliable exercise, and it is an insidious distraction from stopping the abuse of the great majority.

Through mainstream and social media, as well as through academia, aspects of this abuse are being exposed. With a rallying cry against sex trafficking, horror stories abound, detailing the fate of exploited individuals. Almost no attention, however, is paid to the purchasing side of the equation. Contrary to popular perception, most of those who buy sex are not lonely singles, deprived of female company. In fact, the majority are men in “committed relationships” and are often respected members of society—corporate employees, elected officials, religious leaders, military officers, and teachers.⁹ There is much more to understand about policies and practices that stop demand, but, as I show below, we already have a grasp on much information on which we are not acting.

EMERGING CHANGES IN U.S. CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS

A historic lack of law enforcement has contributed to a sense of impunity among buyers. Arrest ratio estimates of sellers to buyers in the U.S. range from ten times as many to twice as many. However, given that a prostituted person is often bought 10 times a day or night, the real disproportion of arrests is multiple times larger.¹⁰ So while 100 men made purchases on a given night, only one was arrested. Though policymakers are recognizing the need for stronger demand provisions in legislation, “even if our current miserable laws were enforced, that would make a huge difference,” says Ambassador John Miller, former head of the Trafficking in Persons office of the U.S. State Department.¹¹

Fortunately, the emphasis on criminalizing purchasers is growing. The person purchasing sex is just as culpable as a pimp or trafficker. A January 2013 decision in the U.S. Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals established the precedent for prosecutors to apply the federal statute of “obtaining” a person for a commercial sex act to those who buy sex as opposed to just the traffickers.¹² In other words, a buyer of sex can be charged with sex trafficking under federal law.

Criminal justice professionals cannot eradicate sex trafficking on their own. They have joined forces with activists, survivors, academics, and policymakers worldwide, and this union has led to more innovative methods of countering the demand for purchased sex. As an example, the Cook County Sheriff’s Office in Illinois employs those victimized by commercial sexual exploitation to accompany its vice squads to pick up buyers and to mentor sellers. Several districts have followed Cook County’s example of targeting sex buyers, sometimes colloquially known as “johns,” using billboards that warn them they “will get caught,” that prostitution “will cost you,” or—most memorably—“Dear John, It’s over.” Led by Cook County, five “National Day of Johns Arrests” have been organized so far, with the most recent sweep coinciding with the 2013 Super Bowl. Over 20 law enforcement agencies, including the FBI, worked together in 13 states, simultaneously conducting stings on the street, in hotels, in brothels, via the Internet, and elsewhere. In total, the operations resulted in the arrests of 1,147 potential sex buyers charged with more than \$1 million in possible fines.¹³

THE RATIONAL CASE AGAINST PURCHASING SEX

Why is purchasing sex damaging in the first place? Far from being an ivory tower consideration, some of the most salient reasons we know intuitively. Some are driven by quantitative data; some are based on social norms. Each contributes to a thickly textured, consistent case.

PURCHASING SEX VIOLATES BASIC HUMAN DIGNITY AND RESPECT

There is a qualitative difference between having one’s ideas plagiarized, being punched in the stomach, having a full wallet stolen, and being dragged into a dark alley and raped. Sexuality is intrinsic to personal identity in a way that other parts of a person are not. Putting another human being’s sexuality on the market violates the standard of respect on which our society is built. That standard is embodied in societal norms and increasingly in laws that prohibit scores of actions: murder and stealing, bullying children, spitting on people, harassing employees, and so forth.

Disregard for human decency is reflected in the degrading words—“whore,” “slut”—used when speaking about women whose bodies are being bought. A buyer’s attitude frequently is “I paid for you, so I own you. I can do whatever I want with you, or to you.” Financially and psychologically the ability to buy implies a sense of entitlement. A common belief is that by definition a prostitute cannot be raped. By selling her body, she is considered to have sold her basic human rights.

SEX PURCHASING PITS INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM AGAINST SOCIAL INTEREST

No act exists in isolation or apart from a communal context. Each person’s actions contribute to a future social pattern. Everyone shapes culture and bears that responsibility. Thus, every decision must be weighed in terms of the overall effect on the community, even at the cost of impingement on personal freedom.

Solid public policy is not built around a small number of exceptions, given the great harm to the majority.

An individual who purchases the body of another for sexual gratification is participating in, and fueling, an industry that is overwhelmingly destructive not only to hundreds of thousands of sellers, but also to society as a whole. The industry attracts profit-motivated traffickers, incentivizes organized crime, feeds an appetite for illicit sex, and perpetuates an unjust gender-imbalanced society.

While some say they are freely choosing to be “sex workers” and their right to sell should be protected, solid public policy is not built around a small number of exceptions, given the great harm to the majority. And, as shown below, that harm, much of which is psychological, cannot be significantly assuaged by legalization, which actually increases the number of women and girls exploited. Echoing Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (“The right to swing my fist ends where the other man’s nose begins”), the buying and selling of bodies constitutes a situation of “exception,” says esteemed sociologist Orlando Patterson, whose key work is on historical slavery.¹⁴ One person’s pursuit of happiness must not be at the expense of another’s life and liberty.

PURCHASING SEX OBJECTIFIES SEXUALITY

In most modern societies, sex is ubiquitously commoditized. Advertisements—whether for vodka or a cell phone—link sex to consumption. The question is not whether we continue to let sexual excitement influence our lives but rather a question of to what extent. Every person draws his or her own line, but a continuum does not obviate responsibility for where that line is drawn. Buying a body for sexual pleasure is far down the continuum. Stepping back, assigning a dollar value to another’s body is an extreme act, with a profound effect on the person whose body is bought and on the buyer. In the balance of human dignity, both are devalued by the transaction.

One point on the exploitation continuum may lead to another. Today’s boys watch a tremendous amount of porn (often hardcore) growing up.¹⁵ This repetitive viewing makes it seem natural to buy the porn “objects” themselves. As sixth-grade students become accustomed to salacious videos on cell phones in place of respect-based intimacy, who is actively countering this distorted sense of dominant masculinity and submissive femininity? According to Farley, the large majority of sex buyers also use pornography to masturbate; for many users, buying sex from prostitutes is only one step further, as they feel compelled to act out their fantasy. A 2010 study analyzing pornographic scenes found that “88.2% contained physical aggression, principally spanking, gagging, and slapping, while 48.7% of scenes contained verbal aggression, primarily name calling. Perpetrators were usually male, whereas targets of aggression were overwhelmingly female.”¹⁶ Several other sources estimate that pornography in the United States is an industry worth at least \$13 billion.¹⁷ Intimate acts ought not be marketable.

PURCHASING SEX FURTHERS DESTRUCTIVE GENDER DYNAMICS

Given that most buyers are male and most of those bought are female, the dynamic of gender imbalance is undeniable. Even when a woman chooses to offer herself as high-priced “escort,” the power discrepancy still exists, since the man has the disposable wherewithal to buy her.

The image of a psychologically healthy woman self-employed in prostitution with a six-figure income is the tiny exception: Since the crushing number of women and girls being bought were raped and otherwise sexually traumatized when they were younger, those who “choose” a life of prostitution generally do so against a backdrop of severe inequality.

Worldwide, gender differences are undeniable, if not immutable. For example, in the present day, women as a group are excelling in educational and many other pursuits. Men as a group are committing the

overwhelming majority of violent crimes women suffer. Sex buyers commit significantly more sexually coercive acts than non-sex buyers. A large national sample examined by Monto and McRee show that those who use prostitutes have more frequently committed rape.¹⁸ As a group, these individuals are much more likely than non-buyers to commit many other crimes.

The advantage the average man has over most women and children in terms of physical strength, financial means, and social status is a factor in how voluntary the seller's "choice" really is. Males and females are not starting out on an even playing field: in the United States, women earn 77 cents to a man's dollar, and sexual assault of a woman, by a man, is committed every two minutes.¹⁹

Swedish and Norwegian Parliamentarians, leaders in progressive social policies, contend that the trade of women and girls' bodies must be viewed from the perspective of the pervasive and blatant male privilege described above. Prostitution, they say, is part of an extended social construct of male dominance and violence over females.

PURCHASING SEX IS AGAINST THE LAW

All states in the United States have enacted laws that criminalize human trafficking and, with the exception of twelve counties in Nevada, prostitution is illegal throughout the country for both the buyer and seller.²⁰ However, 42 states lack "safe harbor" laws that would protect trafficked minors from being prosecuted for prostitution.

Responding to concern over the damage caused by prostitution, many states are following the lead of Massachusetts, Colorado, and New York and including specific demand provisions in new legislation.

Of course, this important point is often lost to a public that watches policymakers break the very laws they pass. Individuals in U.S. Congress "outed" for sexual misconduct are almost always male. The *New York Times* article quoted above asserts, "When it comes to scandal, girls won't be boys."²¹

PURCHASING SEX UNDERLINES THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF LEGALIZATION

Legalizing the selling and buying of bodies does not have the dignifying and regulating effect for which proponents may hope. Instead, it gives license to a practice overwhelmingly destructive to those caught up in the system. Legalizing behavior normalizes it. Stockholm Police Inspector Simon Häggström tells how in the Netherlands, the number of men who say they would or do buy sex is multiple times higher than in Sweden, where buying is illegal and enforced through arrests.²²

With increase in demand, the supply—whether legal or not—also increases.

The drive to legalize prostitution is a misplaced effort spearheaded, in part, by a small group of feminists worried about the unjust stigma heaped on those being bought. They make a valid point that laws and law enforcement should be transformed so that individual prostitutes receive care, not punishment. But rather than aiding prostituted women with regulations such as health check-ups, legal prostitution attracts illegal prostitution (such as with children) because traffickers and buyers recognize an environment where buying is acceptable and in which they likely will not face criminal consequences. With that increase in demand, the supply—whether legal or not—also increases.

Twelve years after the Netherlands legalized prostitution, the country is being forced to admit that the experiment has not worked. "The direction of travel is clear: legalization will be repealed. Legalization has not been emancipation. It has instead resulted in the appalling, inhuman, degrading treatment of women,

because it declares the buying and selling of human flesh acceptable,” comments the British social scientist Julie Blindel.²³ That is why the famous red light districts in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Heerlen are being shut down.

Canadian journalist Victor Malarek calls legalization “harm reduction” rather than “harm elimination.” “Legalizing prostitution is a gift to johns. It is an invitation to rape and will only exacerbate demand. It will not empower women, as the message that it will convey is ‘It is okay to buy and sell the bodies of women.’” Prostitution according to Malarek “is not a job opportunity or an occupation but a lifelong jail sentence.”²⁴

PURCHASING SEX VIOLATES ETHICAL STANDARDS

Most secular and religious ethical systems have at their base some version of Abraham Lincoln’s words: “As I would not be a slave, so would I not be a slave owner.” In Christianity, that precept is called The Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”²⁵ For Jews, the Talmud enjoins, “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man.”²⁶ The first Imam in Shia Islam and fourth Caliph in Sunni, Ali ibin Abi Talib said, “You should desire for others what you desire for yourself, and hate for others what you hate for yourself.”²⁷ Similarly, Hindu practice of yoga ends with a prayerful “Namaste”: “I salute the god within you.”

This common strand among religions interprets care for the neighbor as nothing less than our knowing and loving God in the world. Each person is made in the image of God, or even is the incarnation of God. The question becomes how aware we are of the presence of God all around us and in each of us.

At the core of their system, the same care for others is called for by many renowned ethicists. Immanuel Kant said any action must be evaluated against the prospect of every person committing that action. In 1966, bioethicist, Episcopal priest, and later humanist Joseph Fletcher published *Situation Ethics*, offering some relief from Kant’s strict measure. But Fletcher did not abandon a kind of reverence for the other. He insisted that digression from Kant’s norm must be in the service of *agape*—love of one’s neighbor. “We ought to love people and use things; the essence of immorality is to love things and use people.”

Within these many faith and ethical traditions, commoditizing a human being distorts the natural order in creation. Few sex buyers think it would be acceptable for their wives, daughters, sons—or themselves—to have their bodies bought for the sexual gratification of others. It is no surprise that they think of their purchasing sex as dirty, as wrong, since buying another person’s body ignores the wisdom of Francis of Assisi that “It is in giving that we receive.” Buying a person does not meet the fundamental test of respectful, honoring, and compassionate love. Instead, it is inherently narcissistic and self-absorbed “naked hubris.”²⁸

PURCHASING SEX HARMS THE YOUNG

Even if the desire is to have sex only with adults, a buyer has no way of knowing whether the person solicited is a minor. As mentioned above, the average age in which a girl in the United States enters prostitution is 13. When she has been sold a common ten times a night, six nights a week, by her eighteenth birthday she will have been statutorily raped 15,600 times. Adherents to basic child psychology, with its insight into how one life experience builds on another, would regard the notion of her sudden adult “consent” farcical.

In most prostitution encounters, the buyer takes advantage of the fact that someone else’s life has gone desperately wrong. But not all purchasers are so innocent. Thrill seeking builds on itself: most individuals filling planes headed for Thailand for sex with young children (by definition, rape) did not start their purchasing as pedophiles. Their desire for new experiences, including younger victims, grew over time.²⁹

Those who seek sex with children are plentiful in the United States. According to research, 47 percent of “shoppers” proceeded with their efforts to buy sex even when given three cues that the seller was under eighteen.³⁰ Rachel Lloyd, founder and executive director of Girls Educational & Mentoring Services, and herself a survivor of trafficking, describes her work with hundreds of adolescents in the United States. She used the example of a girl named Aisha: “One day she rolls up a leg of her sweat pants to show me the crude tattoo of her pimp’s name that he’d hand-carved into her inner thigh as he sat between her legs holding a gun to her head.”³¹

Whether the person bought is “of age” or not, the buyer is participating in a trade in which children are being harvested for their bodies.

PURCHASING SEX EXPLOITS A LACK OF CHOICE

Those who sell their bodies rarely do so of their own free will. Children never do. The vast majority of those who sell themselves are financially or emotionally deprived—many desperately so. They feel trapped. In his book *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, Robert Jensen discusses the deadly cycle of submission: “When acts of obedience and compliance become necessary for survival, members of oppressed groups learn to anticipate the orders and desires of those who have power over them, and their power compliance is then used by the dominant group to justify its dominance.”³²

“Romeo pimps” tell girls they pick up at shopping malls or on street corners to call them “Daddy.” For a runaway girl, being asked to call a man “Daddy” awakens her dream of having a loving father. After a “honeymoon week,” however, he reveals himself to be like the abuser from whom she escaped or was removed. Minors find it almost impossible to leave Romeo pimps, because they feel trapped not only physically but also emotionally. In addition to returning to the pimps after being “rescued,” they make unreliable witnesses; to get them to testify against “the only daddy they’ve ever known” is very hard, says Mary Lou Leary, Acting Assistant Attorney General, Department of Justice.³³

Frequently the sellers have been manipulated or deceived. In many situations, they have been assaulted and threatened with more violence if they do not bring in cash for their pimps. According to legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon, “Most if not *all* prostitution is ringed with force in the most conventional sense, from incest to kidnapping to forced drugging to assault to criminal law.”³⁴

Those who buy sex are almost all aware at some level—even if they are in denial— that prostitutes would not be selling their bodies if they were not subject to coercion.³⁵

PURCHASING SEX CAUSES SELF-DAMAGE

There are other dangers to the buyer that are less obvious than sexually transmitted diseases or abuse at the hands of violent pimps and traffickers. In some cases, the buyer is putting his job and professional reputation at risk and may also become the target of extortion. Some psychiatrists believe that fear of society’s judgment is a key deterrent to buyers who hold themselves in high regard. In fact, a study conducted by Melissa Farley in the city of Boston shows 82 percent of buyers said they would be deterred if they knew their photo or name would be posted in a local newspaper.³⁶

Consistent with the sense of shame, even as the buyer tries to build ego with “conquests,” the effect of sex purchasing on self-esteem is highly negative. Boston research reports that purchasers used 54 percent negative words (“dirty,” “depressed”) to describe how they felt after purchasing sex, compared with 36 percent before. Counterintuitively, buyers’ self-esteem decreases as they indulge in self-gratification.³⁷

PURCHASING SEX UNDERMINES CARE FOR OTHERS

As inherently social creatures, human beings create standards for concern about the well-being of others. We label as “sick” those who are not bothered by the effect of their actions on others (“psychopath”) or on society (“sociopath”). Those terms we easily apply to traffickers but rarely to those sex buyers who feel no compunction about the harm they are perpetrating. Yet purchasing a prostitute virtually always damages her.

Non-governmental organizations working with prostitutes report that before they were pulled into “the life,” virtually all were sexually abused.³⁸ Later, these individuals suffer from disease, addiction, destitution, rape, and trauma at a rate many times higher than the general population.³⁹ In many cases, prostitution is life-threatening. The Dallas Police Department takes DNA samples from females selling their bodies to truckers, given that they are 18 times more likely to be murdered and have a mortality rate 200 times higher than their peers.⁴⁰ “You were born with a name and you should die with a name,” one officer tells his recruits, adding that identifying victims’ bodies through the DNA samples gives their families more closure.⁴¹

Some survivors who have an opportunity to tell their stories to buyers report that when sex buyers learn about the consequences they inflict on prostitutes, they stop buying.⁴² Increasingly, first offender prostitution programs (FOPP), known in the field as “john schools,” are being set up in different countries to confront buyers with the harmful consequences of prostitution. Such programs can be found in the United States. Indeed, more than fifty American communities have first-time offender prostitution programs—either as a diversion program, as part of sentencing, or both—and the “curriculum” includes testimonials by survivors.

While some buyers are further stimulated by the thought of inflicting harm, humanizing victims goes a long way in deterring others. Buyers may begin to realize that buying sex encourages a lifestyle that creates permanent physical damage and emotional scarring. The purchase of sex and genuine empathy are incompatible. Buying a body for sex is callous at best and violent at worst.

PURCHASING SEX COARSENS CONSCIENCE

Men understand that prostituted women and girls live in shame. They are afraid to tell their families about their lives and fearful of being shunned. In response to this shame, victims must create an inner defense. They often try to escape their troubles through drugs and alcohol, or psychological “dissociation,” in order to live with their trauma.

Toward those bought, the perpetrator must repress his empathy, that fundamental and natural compassion vital to community, friendship, family, and identity. Since the majority of those buying are “functioning members of society,” they are living with a secret inconsistency and a divided sense of self. When others show admiration or love, the buyer knows they are admiring or loving the person presented openly, and only that. The buyer is not a psychologically whole, integrated, and congruent person.

It is no wonder then that buyers are ashamed to tell their spouses, children, or parents that they are buying others’ bodies. Living with this secret coarsens the conscience and weakens its influence over behavior. However, the same self-inflicted disgrace propels others into buying sex, as they act out feelings of inadequacy.⁴³ The sense of shame and fear of discovery is borne out in the list of deterrents buyers report. For those living with humiliation, denial is a likely defense, as they compartmentalize their actions. Yet they confess they know that few prostitutes would want their children to live a similar life.

PURCHASING SEX DAMAGES OTHER RELATIONSHIPS

Treating sex as an impersonal transaction decreases the ability of an individual to use sexuality as a language of love. Memories of experiences with prostitution become associated with sex and cannot simply be left outside the door when one is with a devoted partner. For single individuals, purchasing sex seriously limits future intimacy.

For those in committed relationships, the complications are even greater. With most monogamous couples, fidelity includes not only abstaining from sex with another person, but also honesty and transparency. Buying sex, however, is largely a secret affair that requires a web of deception involving one's location, time, and money. Often buyers try to convince themselves and others that they are unfaithful because their partners do not fulfill their needs, shifting the blame. Even so, guilt stands between the two and further damages or destroys their relationship. When the truth comes out, partners may break up. Children's lives are strained and they may well become disillusioned with their fathers.

Even if the couple stays together, regaining enough trust to reestablish a healthy relationship may be a Herculean feat. The mental and/or physical health of the betrayed suffers. The betrayer's irresponsibility and impulsivity may deeply damage a complex web of those closest to him, including children, siblings, and parents.

PURCHASING SEX IS NOT INEVITABLE

In the same way that we have come to reject the truism that "boys will be boys" when it comes to domestic violence, we can require men not treat women and girls however they want based on their sexual impulses. For buyers, purchasing sex is self-medicating; when they are depressed, they turn to the apparent affection, the stimulation, or the distraction of purchased sex. For others, the appeal is having control over someone else: "I bought her, so she must do whatever I say." For others it seems to be more of an adolescent "acting out."⁴⁴

In these and other situations, multiple interventions are possible. An astounding 88 percent of buyers in Boston say they would be deterred if they knew a letter would be sent to a family member if they were arrested.⁴⁵ In trail-blazing Sweden, a letter ordering the buyer to appear in court is sent to the man at his home address. Other deterrents approximately as effective are adding the person to a sex offender registry, putting his photo or name in the local newspaper or on a billboard or the internet (although these public measures are disastrous to innocent wives and children), suspending his driver's license, impounding his car, imposing a higher fine, or requiring community service.

For those who frequently and regularly purchase other's bodies, individual therapy and 12-step programs for sex addicts can help buyers retrain their minds and restrain their actions. Members of Sex Addicts Anonymous poignantly explain: "When we started attending SAA meetings... we heard stories similar to ours and realized that recovery from our malady was possible. We learned through the SAA Fellowship that we were not hopelessly defective."⁴⁶ In keeping with the idea of buyers as treatable patients, Denver, Colorado requires first-time offenders to attend mandatory psychotherapy sessions—which they pay for themselves—to enable self-awareness and a realization about the harmful effects of their behavior. In other words, the powerful urge to buy sex is in some cases a sickness that can be healed.

Given data, and experience to which we now have access, there is no dominant justification for buying another human being's body for sex. Research, moral reason, and practicality combine to a firm conclusion: In the tradition of great American social movements, we must demand the abolition of such degradation for the good of humankind.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Although a great deal of the discussion applies to pedophilia—the compulsive buying of sex from children—and to male prostitution, I do not explicitly address those topics here.
- ² Demand Abolition is a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund that the author founded.
- ³ Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, §103, 22 U.S.C § 7102 (2000).
- ⁴ *National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America's Prostituted Children*, Shared Hope International, 2009.
- ⁵ Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner, *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico* (University of Pennsylvania, 2002).
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- ⁷ John W. Whitehead, “Sex Trafficking: There’s More to the Super Bowl Than Sports,” *Huffington Post*, February 6, 2011.
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To learn more about Ambassador Hunt’s work to eliminate sex trafficking visit www.demandabolition.org. Demand Abolition, a program of Hunt Alternatives Fund, is committed to eradicating the illegal commercial sex industry in the U.S.—and, by extension, the world—by combating the demand for purchased sex.