

Sex, love and commerce: The debate over prostitution

by [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue



Amsterdam's red light district. [Some rights reserved](#) by [furanda](#).

I was alone when the bell rang at my internship site, a church in a gritty neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. I opened the door just a few inches, but the woman outside pushed her way in with ease. She introduced herself hastily as "Ms. Bliss" and asked for someone who wasn't there. As I talked to her she started to push on the front of my pants with her hand. I pushed her hand away. She said, "It's OK. It doesn't matter that you're a pastor." Taken wholly by surprise, I ushered her quickly to the door and back onto the street.

It was an unthinking response. I regretted it instantly. The experience of being solicited was new to me, and I had no faithful, mindful script at hand—only fear and a shadow of hostility. I was afraid of the situation we were in, offended by her forwardness, even embarrassed by the fact that I had literally no money on me and could not have given her any for either charity or lust. Her humanity really struck me only as she turned south on Sangamon Avenue, into a world where cold calling potential johns looked like dangerous and desperate work. Who was she? How had she come to do what she was doing? Why, after welcoming all of the odd tendrils of humanity that reached toward the church door for something, did I have no kindness or patience for her?

Prostitution in America is about to get its close-up. This summer, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Congress can't require groups that receive funding to combat HIV/AIDS to oppose prostitution. Canada's Supreme Court is about to decide whether to allow a commercial structure for prostitution, which is already legal in very narrow

terms. Some European countries are years or decades into regimes of regulated prostitution.

Meanwhile, arguments about the ethics of selling sex are taking place just off the main stage of American politics. These arguments pit young evangelicals—who are fleeing the old culture war battlefields for the cause of fighting sexual exploitation—against those who argue for treating sex work as legitimate, even liberating work. But the prostitution issue is not likely to simply reassemble the coalitions that have squared off over no-fault divorce, same-sex marriage and birth control. It may instead divide those coalitions, as Americans come to grips with our discordant views of sexuality, commerce and power.

Last spring, a stylish loft space in a trendy Chicago neighborhood played host to “Sex ReBranded,” a men-only event devoted to learning and conversation about human trafficking. People knowledgeable about law enforcement, faith-based antigang activism and grassroots education answered questions in an environment crafted for maximum openness and security (admission came with a drink). The panelists shared alarming statistics and heartbreaking anecdotes about young teens trafficked by family or suborned by strangers, ruthlessly isolated victims, thousands of humans for sale to countless johns throughout the region.

The crowd was young and largely evangelical, but the agenda didn’t include soul winning or even sexual purity. Traffick Free, the organization behind the event, describes itself as a faith-based organization aiming to “transform the lives of victims, perpetrators, and communities.” The modern anti-trafficking movement, which comes directly from churches, has embraced the language of abolitionism, dignity and human rights. It situates prostitution in the larger context of forced labor worldwide. According to Traffick Free, in the Chicago area alone there are 16,000 to 25,000 people who are effectively enslaved as prostitutes.

“I assumed [prostitution] was a profession that people go into by choice,” Sarah Amidon told me. “It didn’t cross my mind that people could be trapped or enslaved.” The Traffick Free communications director notes that this assumption has hobbled the ability of many Christians to understand the issue and respond to it sensitively.

Traffick Free avoids blaming prostitutes for their work. The movement sees these girls and women (and, less widely discussed, the boys and men) as universally victimized—by dishonest smugglers, by drug-addicted parents who sell them to

dealers, by manipulative “Romeo pimps” who lurk at the mall or online to ensnare vulnerable teens. I asked Amidon about the existence of apparent free-agent sex workers. “We can’t possibly know what’s going on in their minds,” she replied. “They’ve been brainwashed into thinking they’re loved.”

In Illinois, prostitution is no longer a felony—a change that Amidon celebrates. She explained that being convicted of a felony charge makes it exceedingly difficult for women who want to get out of the sex trade to find other work. Law enforcement likewise is moving away from arresting and prosecuting women for prostitution. Instead, the focus is increasingly on demand. Stings that once netted prostitutes are now aimed primarily at johns and pimps. This approach echoes the antitrafficking movement, which stresses the role that demand plays in driving sexual exploitation.

In a study of prostitution-related online forums, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation found widespread notions of sexual entitlement among men who purchase sex—and a willingness to engage in or countenance violence toward the women from whom they purchase it. These johns are mostly partnered or married, and their attitudes are shaped by gender stereotypes and pornography. They are increasingly targeted by the antitrafficking movement and its allies in law enforcement. And they’re increasingly visible in public service advertisements employed to shame them. “Real men don’t buy girls,” an Ashton Kutcher-fronted campaign recently told America’s johns, suggesting they need lessons both in compassion and in masculinity.

According to Melissa Gira Grant, however, the antitrafficking movement is “missing the mark and in some cases putting people at harm.” The journalist and former sex worker is the author of the forthcoming book *Playing the Whore* and a prominent voice in the loose but growing network of sex-work advocates.

These advocates challenge the focus on coerced prostitutes. There is, Gira Grant pointed out to me, no one kind of person who buys or sells sex. “The sex industry contains a lot of different stories,” she said. “When we label it, we flatten it.”

From this perspective, the antitrafficking movement is not an apolitical attempt to abolish exploitation. It’s a suspicious alliance of middle-class feminists and conservative evangelicals that harms the interests of the women and men who sell sex for a living. The much-touted successful effort to close down Craigslist’s “erotic services” section was not a victory for women’s rights but merely an increase in the

cost of doing business, with the unintended effect of making the sex trade harder to monitor for safety. While lawmakers and advocates spread the alarm about enslaved people and pour resources into interdicting them and their traffickers, arrests have been notably sparse—and, despite rhetoric to the contrary, have continued to fall largely on prostitutes themselves.

According to Gira Grant, our culture mistakenly sees prostitution as fundamentally a social problem. “We don’t regard sex work as legitimate work,” she said. Not all sex workers fell into that industry for lack of other options or through force, coercion or fraud. Treating sex work as work—and hearing from sex workers themselves about how it may be made safer—is a more humane and respectful approach to their welfare than painting the whole phenomenon with the brush of trafficking. (I contacted Chicago’s Sex Worker Organizing Project for this story but was not granted an interview.)

As in any other line of work, Gira Grant told me, some days you love it and other days you hate it. She writes that sex work is driven by “the demands of child care, loan officers, debt collectors, landlords and dependent family members.” We don’t make other kinds of workers prove to us that they’re always perfectly willing to do what they do, she notes.

The sex-work movement is mostly scattered across the libertarian right and the radical left. It hardly matches the firepower of the antitrafficking movement, with its evangelical support and celebrity-led PSAs.

But it makes legitimate points. Abuse and fraud exist in other industries. The illusions and intimacies central to prostitution are present in other services, too; your hairstylist doesn’t really care about your weekend plans, and it isn’t love that motivates your home health aide to care for your bodily needs. The antitrafficking movement tends to speak in terms of protecting innocent girls from wily predators, rather than empowering them to express their sexuality confidently and securely.

And the antitrafficking movement really does avoid the question of whether someone should be able, freely and of their own accord, to make use of their sexuality for monetary benefit. “Real people buy sex and real people sell sex,” writes Gira Grant. It seems clear that they always will, whether or not other people admire or respect their reasons for doing so.

“It’s hard to overstate the danger imposed on sex workers by criminalization,” said Gira Grant. If “abolition” is the catchword of the antitrafficking movement, “decriminalization” and “harm reduction” crop up most frequently on the other side. The sex-work movement sees prostitution as an inevitable, even legitimate, exchange of money for services. Thus public policy ought to strive primarily to make the sex trade safer for workers and consumers, while remaining neutral on the ethics of the sale itself.

Such an approach, familiar elsewhere in the world, would not be as new in the United States as it might seem. While prostitution has never been a generally respectable form of labor in Christian cultures, it was widely tolerated until relatively recently. At the turn of the 20th century, the City of Chicago published maps of the Levee, a famed red-light district, for tourists. Prostitution was a large and fairly open trade in Chicago, New Orleans and New York, as well as in railhead and river towns like Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The movement to fully prohibit prostitution took place, not coincidentally, in the age of women’s suffrage, booming social organizations (including churches) and dramatic development in public institutions generally. One prohibition movement coincided with another—the Mann Act, which criminalized moving a person across state lines to engage in prostitution, was enacted four years before the Volstead Act, which prohibited the production and sale of alcoholic beverages.

Like alcohol, prostitution never really went away. Unlike alcohol, it never really came back, either. A business that once anchored whole city neighborhoods retreated into the obscurity of massage parlors, truck stop parking lots and street corners. This arrangement could be tragic and hypocritical; it also dramatically shaped the modern world. It is hard to imagine American women making the advances in social capital they made in the 20th century if Levee-scale prostitution districts continued to offer the most lucrative use of their labor.

Today, online markets supplement or replace the tedious and costly effort of finding work on the street. In Nevada, America’s last legal brothel operation has reportedly been battered by online competition, and a number of houses have closed. Regulated prostitution in many European countries is still riddled with health problems, violence and trafficking. The time in which localized, regulated prostitution could have existed in America appears to have come and gone.

Most of the women who come to the Magdalene community in Nashville haven't been living under the thumb of a pimp or a ring of human traffickers. According to Magdalene founder Becca Stevens, they've been working for themselves. But Stevens, an Episcopal priest, maintains that prostitution is "not a fair game, not a commodity exchanged between equal buying and selling parties."

One thing Magdalene's residents have in common are early experiences of sexual violence. "I have never met a woman [among them] who has not been raped," said Stevens. "If prostitution is the oldest profession, then rape is one generation older." Women stay at Magdalene for two years, during which they have the opportunity to recover from abuse, addiction and the effects of prostitution. The community houses 30 women at a time. (See "[Magdalene, Inc.](#)," by Amy Frykholm.)

A Magdalene graduate named Jennifer spoke to me about her own journey. She was sexually abused by an uncle when she was eight or nine; she started using marijuana when she was 12. Jennifer's experience of abuse left her worried about how "dirty" she was, and in her early teens she fled a dysfunctional home with dreams of starting a new life in Los Angeles.

On the highway, the truckers who picked her up gave her Quaaludes and alcohol and "did things to me that made what my uncle did look like a picnic." After a few years on the road, a brief marriage, a child, a miscarriage and an abortion, Jennifer was applying for a job at Wendy's when two women invited her to check out a modeling agency that doubled as a brothel. After some time working there and for escort services and strip clubs, she ended up on the street.

"You said you'd never walk the street," Jennifer told me, "but I reasoned it away." She was on heroin, using every day. "I didn't have anything to offer the world but my body," she said. Her first arrest was in 1991. Her last was in 2009. "I don't know how I made it out alive," she told me. "Strangers' cars. Knives. Guns. Beatings." She entered Magdalene in 2010.

When I asked her about the idea of legalizing prostitution, Jennifer was aghast. Life in prostitution is "an intense, spiritual pain," she said, "a spiritual death." She believes that other women she knew in the sex trade felt the same way, though "the stories are different, the circumstances are different." Magdalene, by contrast, was a place driven by love. "I didn't think I could receive love," said Jennifer, "and I definitely didn't think I could give it. I always thought, 'If I don't get them before

they get me, then I'm going to get got.'" But at Magdalene, "they were lovin' on me."

Stevens is less adamant about whether the sale of sex ought to be illegal. The first residents of Magdalene had been arrested some 100 times; what good was one more arrest? At the same time, "legalizing prostitution won't change the work I do for one minute," she said. "Not unless we're going to legalize sexual abuse, selling crack or stealing cars, too."

Stevens is very adamant, however, about the centrality of love. "Love is the most powerful force for social change in the world," she said with persuasive conviction. No woman goes to the street by herself, Stevens insists; each is accompanied by failed communities—schools, families, foster care, law enforcement. And it takes a whole community to help them get out. In 2001, Magdalene began Thistle Farms, a social enterprise that makes natural body-care products, to extend the community's mission beyond recovery toward economic independence—a daunting goal for women with short résumés and long rap sheets.

Stevens, a self-identified feminist, has words of praise for both the antitrafficking and the sex-work movements. The two movements "share the hope that women can live free of violence and addiction," she said. "Everyone should be able to express their sexuality, but they should be able to do it unaddicted and unafraid."

In the book *Lost Girls: An Unsolved American Mystery*, journalist Robert Kolker delves into the lives of five women who worked as escorts. Shannan Gilbert, Megan Waterman, Melissa Barthelemy, Amber Lynn Costello and Maureen Brainard-Barnes all advertised on Craigslist, and they all disappeared. Their bodies were found on a Long Island beach.

Kolker's account does not validate the antitrafficking ideology, in which virtually all prostitution is an effect of some kind of fraud or coercion. But neither does it support the pro-sex-work ideology, in which prostitution is a legitimate and potentially liberating vocational choice. The five women shared the experience of family instability, low-wage work and foreshortened horizons. For each of them, the sale of sex seemed to bridge an otherwise unbridgeable gap between the life they knew and the life they aspired to. They were not loners or outcasts; they were not enslaved to pimps; they were not even exploited in the usual sense. "They each made the decision to have sex for money for intensely personal reasons:

acceptance, adventure, success, love, power,” Kolker writes. “They kept working, often, for reasons even they didn’t comprehend.”

As each of Kolker’s detailed and deeply humane portraits moves toward its inevitable, terrible conclusion, the vulnerability of the women’s lives grows clearer. A long-standing rule of safety is ignored; a strung-out companion fails to make note of the john; a security tape is not kept; law enforcement won’t take a disappearance seriously. Kolker’s book is a moving argument that, while the killer took these women’s lives, the culture took their humanity by diminishing the importance of their deaths. But it also suggests, by a gut-wrenching accumulation of detail, that sex work is inherently vulnerable—that any system of harm-reducing regulation will create a potentially deadly black market by virtue of endless, particular and well-heeled demand.

This seems to be the stubborn dilemma of bringing humane concerns into sex work. As Melissa Gira Grant writes, there is such a thing as feminist, ethically produced pornography; it just doesn’t pay as well.

As in Jennifer’s story, the specter of love haunts these women’s journeys. “I wanted her to learn to love herself a little bit,” a boyfriend said of Amber Costello. “Maybe if she felt loved,” said Shannan Gilbert’s sister, she would have cherished her body, but “she never felt like that.” It may be true that much prostitution takes place as an exchange between consenting adults. But an industry barnacled with self-loathing, drug abuse and youthful trauma merits more concern than an ordinary exchange between consenting adults would.

The gathering debate over prostitution makes one thing clear: the culture wars over sexuality won’t end with the inevitable advance of same-sex marriage, contraception coverage and the acceptance of sex before marriage. The sexual revolution once aimed to re-center sexual ethics on love rather than heterosexual marriage. But revolutions are loathe to end where their early enthusiasts planned. More and more, the sexual revolution seems apt to turn on love itself as a norm. Hanna Rosin and others have described the preference among many young adults for casual sexual liaisons over courtship and commitment as a way to focus on a lucrative career rather than on relationships. Emily Witt, writing for *n+1*, delved into San Francisco’s extreme pornography industry—finding in it a way people escape from the shackling of sex to love or even to pleasure and personal autonomy. Enthusiasts for polyamory speak of “primary” and “secondary” sexual partners,



much as one would speak of insurers. Prostitution may still be illegal. But the language of commerce is already commonplace when people talk about sex.

How you feel about the selling of sex is likely to depend on how you feel about selling and how you feel about sex. This accounts for the divisions the sex industry creates on both the left and the right. Some small-government enthusiasts are eager to interfere with business when that business is sex; some liberals and feminists are eager to interfere with sexual autonomy when it takes the form of business. The debate over how much prostitution is somehow coerced is in large measure a stalking horse for the deeper ethical question: Should selling sex be acceptable? There are strong intuitive and emotional reasons to say no, to keep the logic of lawful commerce out of this most intimate, vulnerable interaction. The traumatic stories and dead bodies may persuade us that sex work—that sexuality itself—can never be truly safe.

On the other hand, everything else in our world is for sale, and sex is already the responsibility of consenting adults. Perhaps we prohibit prostitution because a last cobweb of mystification clings to the plain truth that sex is not special—and that confining its expression within the bounds of love or even lust only serves to protect some outdated ideology. Perhaps the trauma and the danger persuade us only that the sexual revolution is not yet complete.

This is a compelling view but a withering one. Consider the vaguely Christian ring that the once-radical slogan of “free love” has gained in the age of almost fully merchandized sexuality. It suggests something idealistic, self-giving and even gracious in human relationships. It was not, I imagine, a useful concept to the woman who propositioned me at the church in Chicago. And it might not be a useful concept in a society of unstable families, stagnating wages and cavernous inequalities—a society in which sex work will be an emergency release not for restrictive morals but for diminished opportunities. Accepting these diminished opportunities and increasing inequalities means accepting the reality of sex work, nominally legal or not.

Justice seems to demand that we stop treating people who sell sex as criminals; on this point the different sides tend to converge. But there is more than this at stake in the debate over prostitution. Can any sphere of life be governed by the generous, self-giving, mutually embracing ideal we call love? If we want sex to be governed by love, we need to discover how love can influence the rest of our economic lives, too.