

## **Legalizing Prostitution = Legalizing Abuse**

The Star Tribune recently ran an editorial from The Economist contending that the internet offers the solution to the social ills associated with prostitution. The Economist's analysis purports to show that the internet allows prostituted women to "behave like freelancers in other labor markets." According to this reasoning, the unique nature of the digital marketplace is the answer to all of the arguments against legalizing prostitution, allowing "consenting adults who wish to buy and sell sex to do so online."

Despite the magic of the internet and the appeal of a classic free-market analysis, our work at The Advocates for Human Rights combatting sex trafficking has shown that prostitution is not and never will be a normal service industry.

The internet's promise of increased safety quickly vanishes once the "independent businesswoman" is alone in an apartment or hotel room with her "client." A year ago, *The New York Times* described the fate of one young woman who sold sex on the internet. She was her own boss, the money was easy and she did not have to share it with anyone. In 2010, her body was one of four discovered on Gilgo Beach, Long Island, all of them women who had been engaged in online prostitution. Remains of six more bodies were discovered in the area. Of the ten, six were prostituted women. The cases remain unsolved.

Instead of diminishing trafficking, legalizing prostitution in places like Germany and the Netherlands has led to its increase. A 2012 study found that countries with legalized prostitution report more human trafficking from other, usually lower income, countries. According to a German police official, about 80 percent of sex workers in Germany come from southeast Europe. "Ninety percent of these women have not freely chosen prostitution, they are subjected to various forms of pressure," he said. By contrast, criminalizing prostitution in Sweden has resulted in a shrinking prostitution market and a decrease in trafficking from other countries. Most buyers do not know or care whether they are purchasing sex from an independent businesswoman or someone who is being forced to sell her body. Women in prostitution have to pretend to be happy, whether to please the buyer so he will become a repeat customer or to please her pimp so he doesn't beat her.

Whatever the platform on which women's bodies are bought and sold, prostitution perpetuates an extreme form of violence against women. The "workplace homicide rate for prostitutes" is 50 times greater than for women who work in a liquor store," according to one study. It is a job where 60 to 80 percent of "workers" experience regular physical and sexual abuse; 68 percent suffer from PTSD. The rate of HIV infection is 14 times higher among prostituted women than other women.

The fact is that the vast majority of women who "choose" prostitution do so only because other economic avenues are closed to them. In a society where women continue to face discrimination, poverty, and violence, any opportunity to make money may look like a choice.

Any claimed benefits of moving prostitution off the street are offset by old and new ways of abusing women. The internet will do nothing to stop assault, robbery, and rape. In addition, the prostituted woman can't see who is approaching her like she can on the street. She can't use her intuition to avoid someone who gives her a bad vibe. She doesn't know who's on the other end of a phone call or who's

really soliciting her. The combined effects of the internet and legalization will not make prostitution a meaningful choice for women. It will only lead to greater harm. According to one survivor of prostitution, "Legalization will not end abuse; it will make abuse legal."

*Helen Rubenstein is a staff attorney with The Advocates for Human Rights.*