

Trafficking for Prostitution: Making the Connections
Melissa Farley
American Psychological Association
115th Annual Convention August 17, 2007 San Francisco¹

I'm going to talk about false distinctions in the field of trafficking for prostitution, about denial, and about the issue of consent/and choice - which is one aspect of denial. I'll end by talking about some UN agreements that challenge these false distinctions between prostitution and trafficking.

Sex trafficking is coercing or selling or renting a person in a situation of sexual exploitation, such as prostitution or pornography. Trafficking happens whenever women, men, or children are recruited and then exploited in the sex industry. Prostitution is the destination point for sex trafficking.

The sex industry, like any other industry, has domestic and international sectors, marketing sectors, a range of physical locations out of which it operates in each community, is controlled by many different owners and managers, and is constantly expanding as technology, law, and public opinion permit. The false distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution puts both victims and law enforcement in an impossible bind.

Alesia Adams joked about the lack of services for prostituted teens in Atlanta. "What do I have to do to get some help here? Take these girls across the border in a bus, then bring them back into the U.S., and say, 'Here, I've got some trafficked girls, now can we get some funding for services?'" Adams was challenging the lack of funds for women and children who are domestically, but not internationally, trafficked into prostitution.

Things are not always what they seem.

Jody Williams, founder of Sex Workers Anonymous in Las Vegas, is coauthor of a chapter in the 2007 book, *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections* on subjugation of women in prostitution by pimp mind control, has devoted her life to helping women escape prostitution. She's been out of prostitution many years, and talks about the time she was on a talk show with a well known pimp and several women who prostituted in his legal Nevada brothel. The women spoke glowingly of how much fun prostitution was, how rich they were getting, how glamorous the life was to the talk show host. Jody spoke about the harms of prostitution, including legal prostitution. At the end of the show, as the pimp was talking to the host, one of the women whispered to Jody that she needed help, saying she was there under captivity, that he had a

gun, had threatened her life, and could she go with Jody in her car. Jody went out the door with the woman, who left her purse and jacket on the chair, running for her life.

Under duress from pimps or traffickers or cult leaders, women hide their coerced status in prostitution just as they do in religious cults, and just captives or children hide their abused status, blaming themselves, feeling invisible, mistrusting almost everyone even especially those that seem to offer help, since there have been so many betrayals.

Slavery in the United States had cover narratives much like those used today on the talk show that Jody participated in. The level of psychological and physical coercion against the women on the talk show, the psychological abuse, sexual abuse, familial and community neglect– were carefully concealed by a woman who was under the terrorist control of a pimp. How do we ignore what is in front of us? How can we look at people doing what we would never want to do – perform sex acts with 5-20 anonymous strangers a day – and conclude that a particular 20 year old just loves to do that because she has a smile and an attitude? It takes a village to create a prostitute and we're that village.

As Judith Herman said some years ago, most people refuse to believe how bad it really is for women. Actively refuse. Pimps and traffickers count on peoples' ignorance about prostitution/trafficking, their refusal to believe their senses, and their willingness to buy his program. This is accomplished by exploiting people's fears and vulnerabilities and by the deceptive use of language.

Victim/survivors struggle to protect themselves from further harm by dissociation and denial. Barb Strachan at DIGNITY House in Phoenix explained.

There's a protective denial. You have to convince yourself and everyone around you that it's great. You tell the lie – "I like it" – so much that you believe it yourself. You make it OK by saying, 'I haven't been beat up today. I haven't lost all my money today.' Women have to justify it: they can't tell themselves or anyone else the reality of it or else they'd die. Until you step out of prostitution, you don't realize what the emotional wreckage is.

Because we still know little about prostitution and trafficking, we are vulnerable to thinking inside the conceptual and legal boxes constructed for us by politicians, lawyers, and perpetrators. We can no longer afford to be limited by someone else's definition of what the problem is. As psychologists, we look for evidence-based phenomena. We must reject definitions and demographics foisted

on us by politically-driven government organizations or by the False Memory syndrome Foundation, or by biased scientists who tell us for example that global heating does not really exist.

Psychologists cannot let politicians decide what torture is or is not. We cannot let the False Memory syndrome Foundation define what incest is or is not. And we cannot let the pimp lobby tell us that prostitution is work and that the only people we should be focusing on are children who are trafficked with a gun to their head from Romania.

There is an evolving public awareness about the human rights violations of sex trafficking in Nevada and elsewhere in the United States. This awareness and public outrage about trafficking, however, exists primarily for victims who have been transported across an international border. Although physical violence may or may not occur, in all cases of trafficking for prostitution there is psychosocial coercion that happens in contexts of sex and race inequality and under conditions of poverty or financial stress, and often a history of childhood abuse or neglect. Women may legally and seemingly voluntarily migrate from a poorer to a wealthier part of the world, for example with a work permit and the promise of a good job from a “friend” who turns out to be a trafficker. Once she has migrated, away from home and community support, she is dependent on traffickers and their networks. At that point the pimp/trafficker’s psychological and physical coercion expands while her options for escape rapidly shrink.

Domestic and international trafficking have similar adverse effects on the victim. The psychological harms of trafficking and the resulting traumatic stress are much the same as the psychological harm done to women who are in the legal brothels but who have not crossed an international border. Salgado described a trafficking syndrome resulting from repeated harm and humiliation against a person who is kept isolated and living in prisoner-of-war-like conditions. International trafficking, just like prostitution and domestic trafficking, is extremely likely to result in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Both domestically and internationally trafficked women experience terror, despair, guilt regarding behaviors that run counter to their cultural or religious beliefs, blame themselves for the abuse perpetrated on them by pimps and buyers, feel a sense of betrayal not only by family and pimps but also by governments that fail to help them.

Domestic trafficking - the sale of women in prostitution from poorer to more prosperous sex markets within a single country - can be as devastating for

the women as international trafficking. This is true in countries where there is assumed to be significant wealth such as New Zealand and the United States as well as countries where there is more visible poverty such as India and Zambia.

The apparently civilized transaction between elite prostitutes and their clients in luxury hotels is underpinned by the same logic that underpins the forcible sale of girls in a Bangladeshi brothel. This logic is premised on a value system that grades girls and women - and sometimes men and boys - according to their sexual value. (Louise Brown)

The economic and social forces that channel young, poor, and ethnically marginalized women into prostitution are evident in post-Katrina New Orleans. Survivors of prostitution and advocates for homeless teenagers in Las Vegas have reported that in the two years following the economic devastation of hurricane Katrina, many young women previously pimped in New Orleans were domestically trafficked to Las Vegas. New Orleans, an economically stressed area with a long history of race discrimination, was the source region for young and poor African American girls. Las Vegas, with its thriving sex businesses, was the domestic traffickers' destination market for the girls.

There is a pyramid-like hierarchy in prostitution. At the top are a very few women who service a few men for a lot of money in a short period of time in their lives - and then they get out, or are bought by one man who supports them. In the middle section of the pyramid are women who need the money, who have had the option of sexual exploitation as a survival mechanism made very real to them by a history of incest or childhood sexual abuse, and who may face an emergency situation such as escaping a violent partner, losing a job, or having children with special needs. The farther you descend in the hierarchy, the greater the numbers of women in prostitution, and the less meaningful any discussion of choice is for them. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the largest number of women in prostitution, those who are the poorest and who have enormously restricted life choices. Many of these women have been physically coerced into prostitution.

The theory that some women choose prostitution ignores the facts that women do not have equal rights with men and that people of color are discriminated against in the United States. Choice depends on the freedom to choose. The lowest earning workers in most cultures are single women who are

raising children. In 2005 a minimum wage full-time worker could not afford an average priced one-bedroom apartment anywhere in the United States.

As a woman in a Nevada brothel patiently told me, “no one likes to be sold for sex,” whether it’s legal or illegal, located indoors or outside, in a gentleman’s club or in a gentleman’s car. Yet wherever there’s prostitution, the pimps’ and johns’ debate flames up about whether women in prostitution really like it, whether they consent, whether it’s voluntary or not.

In spite of women’s longing to escape all types of prostitution, some observers have theorized a false distinction between voluntary and coerced prostitution. Pimps bait us with the myth that there is a vast gulf between what they call “freely chosen” prostitution and the physically coerced trafficking of women and children. But is there really such a grand difference, or are some forms of coercion simply more visible than others? How do you know what’s behind the mask of a smiling twenty-three year old who is stripping and turning tricks in the VIP lounge of the strip club? What was her life like before she started prostituting? How many people early on defined her as a little whore while she was sexually abused as a child by family members and neighbors? Did she recently escape a violent husband or partner? Does she have children to support and no job that pays enough? Was she unable to afford to go to college? Was she (for whatever reason) emotionally and economically vulnerable and then tricked and brainwashed by a pimp?

For many reasons, people may “choose” what is deeply harmful to themselves, sometimes because they’ve grown up seeing themselves in a limited or damaged way. Because they had no alternatives, battered women for many years were assumed to be freely choosing to return to violent partners when in fact they were terrorized into returning under conditions of restricted economic resources. Our culture itself – as the APA’s recent report on the sexualization of girls indicates - limits women’s ability to reject the consent that is taken for granted.

A woman in Lusaka, Zambia said, “Yes, I made the choice to prostitute, my children are hungry and I have to feed them.” A woman in West Bengal, India said that she prostituted because it was “better pay for what was expected of her in her last job, anyway.” Echoing the Indian woman’s sentiment, lap dancers in U.S. strip clubs felt the same way about the futility of avoiding workplace sexual harassment. In 2003, Juliana Beasley interviewed and photographed U.S. lap

dancers. “Many dancers I interviewed spoke of harassment working in so-called straight jobs, she commented, Their attitude was, ‘If I’m going to be sexually objectified, I might as well get paid for it.’”

We live in a world where women are increasingly channeled into prostitution as their opportunities for work in other sectors of the economy shrink. Women in U.S. prostitution joke about the “welfare-to-prostitution” trend that has occurred subsequent to the removal of government-assisted educational programs, job training, housing, and childcare. Women are coerced into prostitution by the actions of politicians who remove public supports by shutting down essential social services, who de-fund housing programs and educational opportunities for the poor, and who vote to eliminate food subsidies for vulnerable women and children.

Most discussions of choice and consent erase the fact that prostitution is intrinsically sexually exploitive. Whether or not an individual woman is able to decrease prostitution’s physical damage, whether she has relatively more or less money in the bank as backup protection, whether or not she is slightly more protected in prostitution by class and race privilege, and whether or not she is protected from sexually transmitted disease by the john’s use of a condom - prostitution nonetheless remains harmful. Consent is not a meaningful concept when a woman acquiesces to prostitution out of fear, despair, and a lack of alternatives. In prostitution, the conditions which make genuine consent possible are absent: physical safety, equal power with customers, and real alternatives.

The pimp’s defense is usually that she consented to prostitution. Traffickers offer us the lie that women consent to trafficking. While women may initially consent to prostitution, they rarely know how bad it is going to be, and they never know the prison-like or slave-like circumstances in which they will often be prostituted. A trafficker who operated illegal brothels in 13 states including Nevada was arrested for transporting women from Latin America into prostitution. After his arrest, he argued in court that he gave the women cell phones, let them keep “some of their earnings,” and that they had “some periods of freedom.” He claimed the women consented but what exactly did they consent to? To being coerced to turn a dozen tricks a day in exchange for having a cell phone, a few dollars, and some pimp-specified amount of freedom?

Two international agreements confront the flawed notion that women “freely consent” to prostitution, and make clear statements opposing prostitution

and trafficking. The first is the United Nations 1949 Convention which declares that trafficking and prostitution are incompatible with individual dignity and worth. The 1949 UN Convention addresses the harms of prostitution to *consenting adult women whether or not they were transported across national boundaries*. A second United Nations document views trafficked women as victims, not criminals. The 2000 Palermo Protocol like the 1949 Convention declares that consent is irrelevant to whether or not trafficking has occurred. It encourages states to develop legislative responses to men's demand for prostitution and establishes a method of international judicial cooperation that would permit prosecution of traffickers and organized criminals. The Palermo Protocol also addresses a range of other forms of sexual exploitation including pornography.

The U.S. federal legal requirement that coercion to trafficking be visible as force, fraud, or deception - reflects a failure to understand the psychological control, the invisible mental coercion, and the terrorist control exercised by johns and pimp/traffickers over women who are vulnerable because of sex, race, and poverty. It's time for a change, so that we can simultaneously provide services for victims and work toward an end to the institution of prostitution, as the Swedish government did in 2000. The Swedes decriminalized prostitution for the victims, while at the same time levying felony-level penalties against johns, pimps, and traffickers. It works.

Much of this talk is based on excerpts from Melissa Farley (2007) *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections*. Prostitution Research & Education: San Francisco.
