

What must we *not know* in order to keep the business of sexual exploitation running smoothly?

Melissa Farley <mfarley@prostitutionresearch.com>  
University of North Carolina, Raleigh  
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There is immense social denial today about the harms of prostitution, just as in the past there was denial about the harms of slavery. This denial is so pervasive that it can accurately be described as cultural amnesia.<sup>1</sup> As was the case with slavery in the southern US, there are people today who think that certain kinds of prostitution in certain locations is much less harmful than other kinds of prostitution. Well, yes, house slaves obtained better food than field slaves, so being inside prevented some slaves' hunger. But, in the large scale of things, what is the point of that argument? The women slaves that were inside, although dressed and fed better, were undoubtedly raped more often by their masters. What is the point of arguing that indoor prostitution is safer than outdoor prostitution because inside, women are *only* sexually assaulted at a rate of 48% while outside, prostituting women were sexually assaulted at a rate of 80%?<sup>2</sup> Who would find that rate of sexual assault acceptable in any other 'job'?

In order to view prostitution as a job, and in order to keep the business of sexual exploitation running smoothly, people avoid looking closely at prostitution's intrinsic violence, the same way that some people avoid looking closely at people who are homeless. People avoid knowing that there is profound emotional damage resulting from prostitution – it's painful to know that when you perform sex acts with strangers day after day, you get very badly hurt. Even if it's called stripping, dancing or escorting.

Just the way that torture is called enhanced interrogation and just the way that logging of old-growth forests is called the Healthy Forest Initiative, prostitution is sometimes called sex

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<sup>1</sup> See an article on which this talk is based. Melissa Farley (2006) *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Cultural Amnesia: What We Must Not Know in Order to Keep the Business of Sexual Exploitation Running Smoothly*. Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 18, 101-136.

<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Church et al., *Violence by Clients Toward Female Prostitutes in Different Work Settings* (2001) British Medical Journal, 322, 524–25. Church found that women prostituting in the street more frequently report being slapped, punched, or kicked, while those women who prostituted indoors more frequently reported attempted rape.

work. Survivors have described prostitution as ‘volunteer slavery’ and as ‘the choice that is not a choice,’ while sex industry apologists insist that prostitution is ‘sex work,’ unpleasant labor but much like factory work. Do women consent to prostitution? Do they say to themselves, hm, what job should I choose: computer technician, lawyer, restaurant manager—no, what I really want to be when I grow up is to be a prostitute? Women who ‘choose’ prostitution were sexually abused as kids at much higher rates than other women. So they get defined as whores when they are little. That’s one way women end up “choosing” prostitution: they’re paid for the abuse they grew up with, believing that’s all they are good for. Forces that “choose” them for prostitution include poor or no education and no job that pays a living wage. Prostitution exploits women’s lack of survival options. Sex discrimination, poverty, racism and abandonment are the forces that drive girls into prostitution.

*What is the point of a women’s movement against rape and against battering that only applies to some women? What is the point of fighting violence against women when men can buy the right to perpetrate violent acts against prostituted or trafficked women? What men buy in strip clubs or in escort prostitution is the very same verbal and physical violence that is called sexual harassment in any other occupation.*

Racism and class prejudice, like sexism, are intrinsic to prostitution. The issue of racism is integral to the harms of prostitution and is especially relevant for those attending this conference in April 2006 in North Carolina. Many people cannot see the brutal sexist and racist dynamics that clearly are at work when white European American members of the lacrosse team at Duke University purchase a young African American mother and honor role student to perform for them as an exotic dancer (stripping, dancing, and escorting are activities that engage in prostitution in this community). One of the men, after participating in the gang-rape of the woman yelled at her, as other members of the team sat complicit: “Thank your grandpa for my nice cotton shirt.” Only the existence of a plantation mentality would give rise to such a vicious taunt aimed at an African American woman.

Later, the same night of the gang rape, Duke lacrosse team member Ryan McFadyen wrote an email to his brothers, ...”ive decided to have some strippers over all are welcome. ...I plan on killing the bitches as they walk in and proceeding to cut their skin off while cumming in my duke spandex.” Now here is another thing I’m very

concerned about: a woman friend of this man, Ryan McFadyen, said that he attended a Take Back the Night march recently and that he actually spoke out against rape. Are some women to be protected in his opinion, but others are expendable? Do some women, marginalized on the basis of their race, ethnicity, or their poverty—do they not count as human? Posturing as a feminist, this man protests some (white?) women's rapes, while he proudly imagines that he has the right to ejaculation while describing the raping, killing and skinning certain specific women. Prostituted women certainly don't count as human in his mind: they're "strippers" or "bitches." And what color is the woman's skin he's talking about?

~~The problem is not a "partying" atmosphere at Duke as some have suggested.~~ The oppression is not solely an issue of race, although she is African American and they are white European-American. The oppression is not solely economic, although she has two kids she's supporting while going to school, while their school (Duke University) costs \$42,000 a year, more than most people who live near her school (North Carolina Central University) earn in a year. The men charged with raping the woman thus far are economically privileged young white men. The oppression is not solely an issue of sex inequality, although women are the people who are overwhelmingly raped in prostitution. It's all three together: sexism, racism, and poverty. And you can't understand the nightmarish situation that she is in without understanding the interlocking nature of sexism, racism, and poverty and how they combined to create the vulnerability targeted by the predators who ruthlessly hurt this one particular woman. She was considered worthless because she is female, African American, poor, and because she was labeled a "bitch" and a "ho" by the men on the white European American class-privileged lacrosse team. This is not just feminist theory, this is real life, and it's the way the world works against certain women and children. Apparently the victim of the lacrosse team rapists has had such serious death threats against her that she is in hiding outside the state of North Carolina as of May 2006.

Sexist and racist economic policy in the United States, such as a lack of educational opportunity for poor families and a lack of sustainable income from many jobs, contribute to women's and girls' entry into prostitution. The economic and legal vulnerability of undocumented immigrant women in the United States is exploited in

prostitution/pornography. For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> Street Latinas website advertises, “See hot, brown and young Latinas that will do absolutely anything to get their citizenship!”<sup>3</sup> When a john buys a prostitute in the US, he can’t tell if she’s from across town, from across the country, or from another country. He simply demands “something different,” which often means a woman whose race/ethnicity is different from his. One Korean-American survivor of prostitution grew up in the US, but was forced by pimps to fake poor English because, she was told, johns were turned on to the idea of the submissive and exotic Asian, **the perception of** her vulnerability intensified by poor English and having nowhere to run.

It’s a mystery to me how people ignore the obvious similarity between torture and prostitution/pornography/trafficking.<sup>4</sup> In fact, prostitution, pornography and trafficking meet or exceed legal definitions of torture. Many viewed torture by the United States soldiers of prisoners at Abu Ghraib with shock and horror, yet at the same time consider the identical acts perpetrated (and photographed) against prostituted women to be sexual entertainment. Condemning the Bush administration’s tolerance for torture in the war on terror, one analyst noted the “banal and gleeful sadism” of guards at Abu Ghraib. Yet he and other political pundits maintain silence with respect to the same banal and gleeful sadism of men toward prostituted women at bachelor parties or strip clubs.

Despite its obvious similarity to state-sponsored torture, there is a great silence regarding the torture of women in prostitution during the making of pornography. Pornography is a documentary of specific women’s abuses in prostitution. Clarke described pornography as a “document of humiliation.”<sup>5</sup>

Online pornography today welds ejaculation to women’s degradation. A popular genre is “bukake,” in which a group of men ejaculate on young women’s faces. The woman is usually extremely upset or crying, an emotional state that seems to sexually arouse both the men who are sexually abusing the woman, and the men who are purchasing those images of

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<sup>3</sup> 8th Street Latinas, <http://www.8thstreetlatinass.com/main.htm?id=faxxaff>

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Dworkin addressed pornography as torture in many of her writings. See for example, *Letters from a War Zone* (1988), p 199.

<sup>5</sup> De A. Clarke, *Prostitution for Everyone: Feminism, Globalization, and the 'Sex' Industry* (2004) in Rebecca Whisnant and Chris Stark (editors) *Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*, p 199.

torture. This spectacle of women's torture and humiliation serves as a bonding ritual for the perpetrators—in the same way that the “carnavalesque rites” of the Abu Ghraib pornographic torture created bonds among the US soldiers who committed those cruelties.

Pimps and traffickers use the methodology of political torturers—debilitation, dread, and dependency. They use many non-sexual techniques of humiliation, domination, and control. The psychological consequences of state-sponsored torture and those of prostitution are the same: depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), dissociative symptoms, somatic symptoms, suicide attempts, cognitive symptoms resulting from violence-related traumatic brain injury, and the existential despair that persists for years after prostitution or after torture. How can women possibly heal from such awful abuse by men?

Because time is limited, I would like to mention one other topic that I think is important: harm reduction. Harm reduction models of intervention have encouraged people to understand that something can be done to help women and children in prostitution, but they fail to address the roots of the problem. And sometimes they lead to treatment approaches that seem insane to me. For example: the public health physician in San Diego California who was instructed by her superiors to treat prostituted, trafficked children for HIV alone, rather than seeing them as violently abused children in need of escape.<sup>6</sup> The only harm of prostitution and trafficking addressed by most public health models of harm reduction is HIV. That's not enough.

According to sex industry pimps: if you provide prostitutes with condoms and a union, their problems will be solved. Everyone should have unlimited access to condoms. That's a harm reduction no-brainer. But women that I've interviewed in 9 countries want more than condoms and unions. They want to get out of prostitution. In order to do that, they need housing, job training, jobs, and medical care, including substance abuse treatment.

Traditionally, harm reduction strategy for drug addiction includes three components. First, *reducing the harm*—for example, by providing clean needles, which decreases the numbers of abscesses and decreases the likelihood of contracting HIV. The second component of most harm reduction models is *reducing the demand*—for example, by

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this case, see Marisa Ugarte, Laura Zarate and Melissa Farley's chapter, *Trafficking of Women and Children from Mexico to the United States in Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress* (2004) M. Farley (editor), pg 147-165. See especially pg 150.

providing accessible treatment to addicts. Finally, the third element of harm reduction is *reducing the supply*—for example, by arresting drug traffickers who promote drug addiction. Together, these three components of a harm reduction model for the addictions are a formidable strategy to address the immense harm caused by addictions.

When people apply the harm reduction model from the addictions to prostitution/trafficking however, only the first component is addressed. This dramatically weakens the effectiveness of solving the problems encountered by women in prostitution because it simply does not address the roots of the problem. Most agree that women in prostitution must be protected as much as possible from HIV, and that they need condoms. Everyone agrees that women and men in prostitution should be treated respectfully by those in public health. These are not revolutionary ideas, treating everyone with respect.

The dilemma is that harm reduction advocates only see the woman in prostitution from *inside* the institution of prostitution, thus their harm reduction strategies are limited to band-aid solutions. Most harm reduction advocates make the faulty assumption that women will inevitably remain in prostitution. But this is not what women tell us they want. Instead, they tell us that harm reduction is necessary, but not sufficient. In fact almost everybody who is in prostitution wants to escape it, and they have told us what they need in order to get out: housing, job training, and medical and psychological treatment.<sup>7</sup>

Harm reduction for women in prostitution/sex trafficking should include the same three components as harm reduction for the addictions. First, *reducing the harm of prostitution/sex trafficking*—for example, by measures to reduce the incidence of cervical cancer, such as universal distribution of female as well as male condoms. It is as medically and psychologically important to protect female genitals as it is to protect male genitals.

A second component of a harm reduction model for prostitution/trafficking is *reducing men's demand for women in prostitution*—for example, by instituting felony-level arrests of customers/johns. Finally, *reducing the supply of women and children in prostitution* would involve measures to reduce the numbers of people entering prostitution—for example, by

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<sup>7</sup> Farley, M., Cotton, A., Lynne, J., Zumbek, S., Spiwak, F., Reyes, M.E., Alvarez, D., Sezgin, U. (2004) Prostitution and Trafficking in 9 Countries: Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. In Melissa Farley (editor) Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress. Binghamton: Haworth. pg 33-74

providing them with stable housing, educational opportunities, as well as arrests of corrupt immigration officials in the case of trafficking.

It's obvious that the second and third components of a harm reduction model are really about harm *elimination*, not just harm reduction. And that is what needs to happen now: we need to abolish the institution of prostitution. When models of harm reduction include the explicit goal of harm elimination, we will be on the path to ending the harm, not just reducing it a little bit.

Thank you.