

9 Myths of Prostitution

Myth 1: Involvement in prostitution is a choice.

Reality: involvement in prostitution is survival behavior. Involvement in prostitution very often results from lack of choices. The majority of women become involved in prostitution as a result of child abuse, physical and sexual violence, poverty, homelessness, drug dependency, and mental health problems.

Case histories suggest that a number of juveniles engaged in prostitution grew up in an abusive and/or neglectful homes. The majority have been sexually abused as children -- usually by fathers, stepfathers, or other trusted adults. Many also suffered physical abuse and neglect. For most of these young women the only way to stop the violence was to run away from home. Young, frightened, with limited skills, and unable to find shelter, teenagers are easy prey for pimps who promise them friendship, romance, and riches. Once involved in prostitution both pimps and customers replicate the abuse these teenagers endured in their families.

Myth 2: Prostitution is the oldest profession in the world.

Reality: referring to women involved in prostitution as “working girls” or involvement in prostitution as “working on the streets” negates the real trauma that women experience through their involvement in prostitution. Viewing prostitution as “work” accepts the long term emotional, physical, and mental health problems associated with involvement. It accepts the rape, assault, and murder of women. These atrocities against women have often been described as “hazards of the job” and as such include no compensation or accountability from either “purchasers” or from the law. Prostitution is neither a profession nor a career. Prostitution is the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable women. [It's is in fact the oldest oppression of women!]

Myth 3: Women involved in prostitution are promiscuous.

Reality: Prostitution is not about women wanting or seeking sex. Prostitution for women is not sexual behavior, it is survival behavior. Most women describe separating their minds from their bodies, dissociating from the experience in order to cope with what they have to do. Women involved in prostitution are bought by men and are used as objects for fulfilling men's sexual desires, fantasies, and deviances. Women's involvement in prostitution is passive, often as the result of the threat of, or actual, violence.

Myth 4: Prostitution services a natural need for sex. Men who use women involved in prostitution are lonely and can't get romantic relationships.

Reality: Men who buy women for sex come from all walks of life; they are married; they have partners; they are fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, husbands, and nephews. They include teachers, judges, lawyers, accountants, policemen, laborers, and businessmen. They are all ages and races. The above myth presupposes that men have uncontrollable sexual urges that must be fulfilled; herein lies the justification for prostitution. A woman is viewed as an object for sexual gratification. The woman becomes a commodity of the person with the money and the powers. Many women have described being appalled by what is demanded of them and experience deep trauma as a result.

Myth 5: Woman involved in prostitution make lots of money.

Reality: the overwhelming majority of women involved in street prostitution live in abject poverty. The economics of prostitution are complex. If a woman or girl is controlled by a pimp or madam most, if not all, of her earnings are turned over to the pimp or madam. If working independently for a house of prostitution a large percentage of her earnings are turned back to the house. Their lives are strictly controlled, and their ability to set up independent funds is carefully guarded. Part of the strategy for control over their activities is for pimps and madams to keep them economically dependent upon the system of prostitution itself. Any profit is often spent as

rapidly as it is obtained, reinforcing the efforts that go into prostitution. A rapid turnover of “feel good or look good” money into immediately expendable, positively reinforcing products perpetuates the need for continued participation in prostitution.

Myth 6: Prostitution is glamorous.

Reality: cultural mythology about prostitution is built on misinformation and fantasies of sexuality that are circulated through movies, television, videotapes, and printed material including pornography. These may entice naive young women into prostitution with false promises of glamour and riches. In reality women and girls working in prostitution suffer pain, humiliation, and degradation at the hands of their pimps and customers. They are susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

Myth 7: Legalizing prostitution will protect the women involved.

Reality: legalizing prostitution benefits pimps and traffickers. It also benefits johns.

In the Netherlands, legalization amounts to socially and legally sanctioning all aspects of the sex industry: the women themselves, the buyers, and the pimps who are transformed into third party businessmen and legitimate sexual exploitation businessmen. Legalization of the sex industry converts brothels, sex clubs, massage parlors and other sites of prostitution into legitimate venues where commercial sex acts flourish, and take place with few legal restraints. Some people believe that legalizing prostitution would offer dignity and professionalism to women in prostitution. But legitimizing prostitution by legalizing it does not change the actual experience of prostitution nor does it dignify prostituted women who still experience stigma and other harms in legal prostitution. Once prostitution is legalized, pimps become legitimate businessmen, and the predatory purchase of another person for sex is now a legitimate business transaction. Women in prostitution should not be punished for their own exploitation. The seller of sex should be decriminalized, as in the Swedish law on prostitution. But governments should not decriminalize pimps, buyers, procurers, brothels or other sex businesses.

Myth 8: Prostitution is a victimless crime.

Reality: Most women involved in prostitution recount experiences of routine physical and emotional abuse, violent assaults, thefts, and sexual abuse. Some women are abducted and subjected to horrendous torture and violence; some women are murdered. Most women involved in prostitution live in fear of crime and do not believe they have equal rights to legal recourse, therefore, often do not report the crimes against them. Many women believe that they are responsible for the consequences of their involvement in prostitution, a pattern often seen in victims of abuse.

Myth 9: Most prostitution does not involve pimps.

Reality: Most prostitution involves pimps. Health service providers, shelter staff, survivors of prostitution, and law enforcement sources estimate that 65%-85% of all prostitution is pimp dominated. Pimps are the people that johns pay to outsource the violence necessary to keep women in prostitution obedient. While it is difficult to obtain accurate percentages of women who have pimps, consider that pimps are not named “pimps” by women in prostitution. They are named boyfriends, husbands, friends, sometimes girlfriends. Pimps are also taxi drivers, casino hosts, strip club owners, valets, massage parlor managers, bartenders, and many others who earn money by selling or helping to sell women in prostitution. Legal pimps own brothels, and legal pimps control legal prostitution the same way illegal pimps run their businesses.

Source: R.E.S.T. Training Materials, Seattle, January 2013.