



PRETTY

**The truth about
prostitution**

WOMAN?

**By Marielena Zuniga
and Darlene Friedman**

The real life of a prostitute is a dark and dangerous web, woven from fear, violence and a lack of options.



Photo credit: Gettyimages.com

Toddlers and Tiaras, the TLC show that gives a behind-the-scenes look at the world of child beauty pageants, was already controversial for the way some believe it objectifies and sexualizes young girls. But the outcry was swift and sustained when Wendy Dickey recently dressed her 3-year-old daughter, Paisley, as Julia Roberts's prostitute character from the 1990 movie, "Pretty Woman."

"We have a serious problem when [The Learning Channel] features a toddler, who probably hasn't even learned to read, dressed as a prostitute showing off her sexy strut," said Melissa Henson, director of communications and public education for the Parents Television Council, a U.S. advocacy group.

Dickey, who said she was stunned by the firestorm, defended her decision. "My favorite Julia Roberts movie is 'Pretty Woman,' so I tried to figure out how I could do that tastefully, cute on a 3-year-old. ... I'm not sorry I put her in it, because it was harmless."

The appropriateness of this mother's decision continues to be debated. But, interestingly, the movie itself—a perennial favorite—is rarely criticized for the way it mythologizes and trivializes the realities for prostituted women. Their lives are not pretty, nor are these women transported to a better life by their handsome and wealthy johns.

This is "pretty ugly," says Norma Ramos, executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), New York, New York, <catwinternational.org>.

She wants the world to know this one fact, loud and clear: Prostitution may be called the world's oldest profession, but in reality, it's the world's oldest oppression. No matter the location—street, brothel or fancy hotel room—in prostitution, it is the women who pay.

"There is tremendous psychological and physical trauma that comes with sexual exploitation," she says. "It doesn't matter what the thread count of the sheets are or how nice the hotel room is, the nature of prostitution does not change the fact that a human being is reduced to a sexual commodity. What men are buying is sexual domination."

Lori Blair agrees. Prostitution is physical, sexual and emotional abuse inflicted on women by men, the johns who purchase sex, says Blair, senior director of program services for Soroptimist International of the Americas, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, <Soroptimist.org>. "Victor Malarek describes prostitution as the experience of being hunted, dominated, harassed, assaulted and battered ... it is sexual terrorism against women at the hands of men," she says.

An award-winning investigative journalist, Malarek spoke at Soroptimist's 2010 Biennial Convention in San Francisco about the sex trade, its victims, and the pimps and johns who exploit and terrorize women. Covering human rights causes for more than 40 years, he has won numerous awards as Canada's top broadcast journalist and is the author of six books, including "The Johns: Sex

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Prostitution law reform

Countries around the world have taken one of four approaches to prostitution laws: prohibition; regulation; decriminalization; and abolition.

The prohibitionist approach is characterized by criminalization of all prostitution-related activities, including soliciting, procuring, pimping and brothel keeping. All persons engaged in these activities are considered criminals. This is the prevailing attitude in almost all of the United States, with a few exceptions in rural Nevada counties.

The regulation stance is defined by the legalization and regulation of the sex industry. This approach redefines prostitution as “sex work” and regulations control when, where and how sexual services are offered. The Netherlands, Germany and some parts of Australia, as well as some counties in Nevada, regulate prostitution and as such, collect tax revenues.

With the decriminalization stance, all laws and regulations concerning prostitution are removed. In some countries, like New Zealand and Thailand, decriminalization was a means to regulation. In New Zealand, all offenses including prostitution, brothel-keeping and other related crimes were decriminalized by the national parliament, which then tasked local governments with promulgating regulations of the sex industry.

In Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela, prostitution is legal. “But even those countries have restrictions,” explains Lori Blair, Soroptimist’s senior director of program services, “such as prohibitions on brothels and pimping, requiring prostitutes to register or to be 18 or older, or prohibiting street solicitations.”

In other countries including Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and most of the United States—prostitution is illegal. In Japan, however, only vaginal intercourse is illegal and the sex industry works around this by advertising other “services.”—M.Z.

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for Sale and the Men Who Buy It” and “The Natashas: Inside the Global Sex Trade.”

“I’ve met so many of these young women who have been beaten within an inch of their lives and seen bodies raped by johns and pimps for not cooperating, or doing what was expected of them,” he says. “I got angry that these women couldn’t speak for themselves. ... And even more that the mass media kept trumpeting up this so-called industry, and everybody is having a good time, the pimps and traffickers are having a good time. But the vast majority of these women are slaves who are so terrified they can’t even move without getting instructions from the men who own them, their slave masters.”

3 Generations is a non-profit organization dedicated to telling the stories of people who have experienced crimes against humanity. The website at <www.3generations.org> features short films of several women who have been prostituted and trafficked, including one young woman named Rain.* She was 11—an age when most girls are experimenting with make-up and obsessing over the latest teen idol—when she was lured into the brutal world of prostitution and trafficking in Los Angeles, California. When this vulnerable girl was approached by a “cute” young man who lavished her with attention, Rain fell for the trap and became ensnared in a dark and dangerous world.

Rain’s pimp bought her a diamond necklace and other presents. “I felt like royalty,” she says. “Like a queen. No one else had ever done anything like that for me before.”

“I thought I was his girlfriend. He named me Rain and said I was his pot of gold.”

Rain’s “boyfriend,” who turned out to be a 28 year-old-man, raped her and began hiring her out—on the streets and through the Internet. “I was petite and had the look the child abusers—I won’t

even label them johns—wanted,” she says.” Rain brought in about \$1,500 a day, less the older she got.

No choices for prostituted women

In its most basic definition, prostitution is engaging in sexual acts in exchange for money. The ongoing debate about that definition, however, centers on this question: Is prostitution a valid means of income that a woman can and should freely choose for herself, or is it sexual slavery that results from structural inequality between women and men on a global scale?

That question continues to draw fire from all sides, with debates dividing abolitionists on one side and pro-sex worker advocates on the other. The latter camp views sex workers to be autonomous agents with the “agency” argument supporting sex work as a choice that offers income and freedom. Some organizations, such as the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center in New York City, use a “harm reduction” model that aims to protect the rights and safety of sex workers who by choice, circumstance or coercion remain in the industry. (It should be noted that this argument does not apply to minor children. However, the reality is that many prostitutes were minor girls like Rain when they initially entered the world of prostitution.)

For abolitionists—who focus on “elimination of all harm” to prostituted women—prostitution arises from negative social factors that leave them with no other alternatives than to sell their bodies through sexual exploitation. They believe underlying gender inequality and socio-economic conditions drive the decision that lead many women into the sex trade.

“We see prostitution as a function of lack of choice,” CATW’s Ramos says. “For the purposes of argument only, we may concede that a small percentage of those who are prostituted may have cho-

The movie, "Pretty Woman," mythologized the life of its main character, a prostitute played by Julia Roberts. The realities are much harsher, and the majority of prostituted women would leave if they could. Read more in Soroptimist's whitepaper "Prostitution is Not a Choice" at <Soroptimist.org/whitepapers/wp_prostitution.html>.



sen this. But we don't make policy from that 1 percent but from what the reality is—that 99 percent of prostitution is clearly a function of negative social conditions."

Ramos ticks off a list of those conditions, including gender inequality that still defines the planet; poverty that is a primary exacerbating factor; as well as racism, with women of color in developing countries in disproportionate numbers in prostitution. All give rise to commercial sexual exploitation that ensnares women and girls like Rain.

"The agency argument ignores the power imbalance involved in prostitution," she says. "The one who is actually exercising agency is the one buying the other human being for sexual use and abuse—so to package inequality as 'agency' is hugely ill-conceived."

The choice/agency debate seems to bring together strange coalitions and oppositions, admits Blair. Some feminists believe that you can never tell a woman what to do with her body, she says, and the argument would have merit if the statistics did not clearly prove that women do not want to be prostituted.

"Studies vary but it's always from 89 to 96 percent of prostituted women would get out immediately if they could," Blair says, "if they weren't forced by their pimp, poverty, their children's hunger, drug addiction, etc., to stay in the most dangerous profession in the world."

Indeed, prostitution is a dangerous and scary world, Blair adds. In the United States, the average age a girl enters prostitution is 12 to 14. "Is there anyone out there willing to argue that a 12-year-old girl is choosing to be prostituted and abused?" she asks. "It's outrageous. Those who argue this is a choice are those who are making money off the bodies of innocent women and girls."

World's most dangerous 'profession'

A woman's entry into the world of prostitution is shaped by many factors. For Rain, it was low self-esteem resulting from an unstable family life. Her mother died when she was a baby and her father was in and out of her life. So, she says, "I just ran off to the streets because I thought it was cool."

"I needed a dad to teach me right from wrong, to rescue me," she says. "But I never had that. My pimp became my daddy."

Rain's life in that world was horrific. Yet, she is fortunate because she survived, which a lot of prostituted women and girls

do not. Many are murdered. And raped. They also suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and commit suicide in high numbers.

"They are branded and tattooed by their pimps," Blair says. "If you look at the studies of prostitution, prostituted women and girls, and the purchasers of sex, you learn that this is the most dangerous 'profession' in the world."

A study of prostituted women in Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, the United States and Zambia found that:

- 71 percent had been physically assaulted
- 63 percent reported being raped
- 89 percent wanted to escape prostitution but had no other options for survival
- 75 percent had been homeless at some point in their lives
- 68 percent met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder.

These statistics beg a question that prostituted women are often asked—why not just leave? For the same reasons that domestic violence victims remain in their situations: lack of viable alternatives and psychological allegiance to their abusers.

"He raped me and took my virginity," says Rain of her pimp. "He was my first love. He was my first everything. That was my temple [my virginity] and he took it from me. How could I ever leave?"

In fact, Rain did try to leave, and that's when the beatings began. Her pimp hit her with a bat, and forced her into freezing cold baths and scalding showers. "It was torture, but I thought I deserved it," she says. She found sanctuary in jail, but only temporarily.

Drugs also play a huge part in keeping girls in prostitution. Many times pimps make sure their "girls" become addicted as another means to control them. A woman or girl with a drug habit is much easier to manipulate.

Demand side fed by many factors

At the crux of the sexual exploitation of women is the demand side—the millions of johns around the world who set out in search of paid sex. With the attitude of entitlement, power and control—and a greater society that tacitly condones such behavior—these men cling to the Pretty Woman myth that all prostituted women whom they rent, use and abuse are in the sex trade by

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Soroptimist aids prostituted girls/women

Janneke Lewis, a human rights lawyer and past governor of Soroptimist's Western Canada Region, is passionate about giving a voice to women who are prostituted. She spearheaded and drafted a petition sent to the Canadian government to change the laws of prostitution in that country to decriminalize the selling of sex and criminalize the purchasing of sex.

Both Soroptimist's Eastern and Western Canada regions are behind that petition, which was sent to Joy Smith, member of Parliament, of Kildonan-St. Paul, a strong voice against trafficking, who has presented the petition to Parliament.

"I believe that by changing the focus to the demand side, we will make it legally unacceptable and socially unacceptable for men to use women as prolifically as they do," Lewis says. "It's getting worse with the Internet and we really need to do something. We need to get women help and this is the only way to get that done."

The Columbus and Franklin County, Ohio, Soroptimist club also became involved in the issue of prostitution and sex trafficking after hearing Theresa Flores speak at a club meeting. Theresa, who was trafficked as a teenager despite her upper middle class status and stable family life, was a 2010 Soroptimist finalist Ruby Award nominee. Today she is a spokesperson for Gracehaven House in Ohio, a non-profit providing shelter and rehabilitation to girls under age 18 who have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Club members spent 112 hours painting and shopping for contents of the bedrooms and considerable time seeking donations for the shelter.

See page 11 for more information about Soroptimist clubs and regions working on this issue.

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choice, Malarek says, that they are making money the "easy way," on their backs. But again, he points to how women and girls have been made vulnerable growing up with the violence in their surroundings.

"What most men refuse to hear are the tragic stories of the vast majority of girls who are gang pressed into this pathetic existence," he says. "They don't want to hear the stories of the 5- and 6-year-old girls sold by desperately poor parents to brothel owners in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand. The johns don't want to hear that prostituted women are recruited into the flesh trade through the Western world, Canada and the European Union as young as 12 or 13 and sometimes younger."

But the johns aren't the only players in the demand side of the sex trade. Pimps, traffickers, brothel owners, organized crime—and society and culture—contribute to the sexual exploitation of women and girls on a global scale.

Demand is the biggest issue that needs to be confronted to end this slavery, Blair explains. "As we have learned from the decades-long drug wars, you can never stop the supply as long as there is a demand. And as long as a demand exists for purchasing the bodies of women and girls, there will be criminals in the world who will ensure there is a supply."

Today, that demand is being fed in part by pornography, mostly via the Internet, and the mass media. "One study showed that the average boy is exposed to pornography by age 11," Ramos says. "We have now reached a point where boys' sexuality is being socialized by organized crime that owns the porn industry. It's becoming nearly impossible to keep the socialization of boys away from the porn that views women as commodities and reduces them

to a collection of body parts." This attitude is perpetuated in the mass media as well. Whether it's "Toddlers and Tiaras," the recent movie "The Hangover" or Charlie Sheen's character on the TV show "Two and a Half Men"—the idea of prostitution is a "normal" part of culture, and the realities are rarely portrayed in a truthful way.

Soroptimist adopts abolitionist model

As an organization, Soroptimist adopted a resolution in 2010 toward abolition of prostitution, viewing it as a form of violence against women and not a victimless crime. SIA and other abolitionists view prostitution as a harmful activity, and a distinction is made between victims and perpetrators. Persons who are abused and used in prostitution or sex trafficking are victims and offered services. Johns, pimps, brothel keepers and traffickers are the perpetrators and criminalized.

"Those of us on the abolitionist side want to eliminate harm, not reduce it," Blair says. "We also believe that as long as the bodies of women and girls can be bought and sold as a commodity, we will never have true gender equality. Frequently, those who seek to legalize prostitution falsely state that making it illegal will result in the arrest and punishment of innocent women and girls. This is not our stand at Soroptimist. We seek to help women and girls while punishing those who buy sex."

Ramos agrees. Abolitionists do not support making prostitution more tolerable—either by providing rights or organizing unions—to women who are involved in prostitution, she explains.

"We are not about making the cages more tolerable, but about eliminating the

cages entirely,” she says. “We don’t spend any of our time organizing the slaves. This is about eliminating slavery.”

Abolitionists point to the Swedish model, sometimes termed the Nordic Model, as the most viable approach to prostitution. Enacted in 1999, Sweden’s Sex Purchase Law views women and girls as human beings who should not be sold. So, selling sex is not illegal in Sweden, but paying for sex is—with current fines up to six months in prison, plus the humiliation of public exposure.

The women are offered programs, health care, education and job training to get off the streets. Within four years of passage of the law, the number of women involved in the sex trade in Sweden was cut in half. After long political debates, similar laws were adopted in 2009 by Norway and Iceland, creating pressure on other Nordic countries, such as Denmark. To follow suit, South Korea, Mexico and Israel are also moving in the direction of the Swedish or Nordic Model. (See sidebar for laws in other countries.)

“Sweden decided to become the architect of the world’s first human rights/women’s rights-based legal model and has become the bright, shining light in the world,” Ramos says. “They reached an understanding that prostitution was at odds with creating gender equality and not something they wanted to support or encourage through legalization. So they criminalize the demand and give women an exit strategy.”

A different life for Rain

Most women who are prostituted don’t have happy endings to their stories like the Julia Roberts character in “Pretty Woman.” Thankfully, Rain’s story ends differently. Today, her life of slavery, horror and struggle, is behind her. After being in the “system,” Rain eventually received help from Crittenton Services for Children and Families, a social services agency that helps to heal the wounds of abuse and neglect, and supports adolescents like Rain in reaching their full potential. Although initially apprehensive about reconnecting with her family for fear of being judged, Rain reports having forged a new relationship with them. “I told my sister about my past,” she says. “They used to dwell on everything but I hope now they understand.”

Rain earned her high school diploma and is now enrolled in college. She firmly believes prostituted women and girls are victims, and the child abusers/johns are the criminals. Rain isn’t sure what she wants to be when she grows up but states, “I want to work with the ‘big people’—the big people that can make changes and can change the laws. That’s what I want to do.” 🌍

**Thanks to Rain (not her real name) for sharing her story, and to 3 Generations for granting permission to use it.*

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In the next issue: Women in the military. Please email Editor Jessica Puterbaugh <jessica@soroptimist.org> with relevant information.

Taking Action

Soroptimist believes the best way to help victims of prostitution and women and girls who are vulnerable to it is by providing them with access to education and/or skills training they need to achieve financial empowerment and independence. Toward that goal, Soroptimist clubs can support these women by participating in the following programs:

Soroptimist Women’s Opportunity Awards—For almost 40 years, this program has been transforming the lives of women and their families by providing the financial and emotional support they need to succeed with their educational and employment goals. By helping in this way, Soroptimist provides real alternatives and hopes of a better future to women and girls who have been prostituted or trafficked.

Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls—Clubs can apply for a Soroptimist Club Grant for projects that specifically target trafficked or prostituted women. This can include providing skills and livelihood training, or helping to fund shelters and transitional living facilities.

Soroptimists STOP Trafficking—Club members can participate in this project and raise awareness about prostitution and sex trafficking in their local communities. They can also pursue initiatives addressing prevention, advocacy for better laws, and victim services. Many clubs and regions are active around this issue (see the article on page 11). Visit <Soroptimist.org/StopTrafficking.html> and the program section at <Soroptimist.org/members.html> to learn more.

Soroptimist Ruby Award: For Women Helping Women—This award honors women who work to improve the lives of women and girls through their professional and/or volunteer work. Clubs can help to end prostitution and trafficking by rewarding women who are working on this complex issue.

Soroptimist Disaster Grants for Women and Girls—This program provides financial support for projects targeting the special needs of women and girls prior to, during and after disasters. Existing gender inequalities are magnified during and following disasters. Poor women and single mothers, who lack access to support services and aid after disasters, are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of prostitution and sex trafficking. Clubs can make a donation to the Disaster Grants fund at any time by visiting <Soroptimist.org/donate/donate.html>.

Support Soroptimist Programs—SIA programs present women with opportunities to enhance their economic status. Clubs can make a donation through the Club Giving program, or individually members can donate through the Laurel Society. To make a contribution, visit <Soroptimist.org/donate/donate.html>.



Visit the program section at <Soroptimist.org/members.html> for exclusive Soroptimist whitepapers on prostitution and sex trafficking, model program kits and more.