

Addressing Misconceptions: Domestic Violence and Prostitution

Most people do not think of prostitution as domestic violence, but in fact the dynamics between a pimp and a prostituted [person] are very similar to those between a batterer and a domestic-violence survivor.

Misconception:

Survivors of domestic violence are abused by their batterers, but prostitutes get paid, so their abuse cannot be considered domestic violence.

Reality:

Women and girls in prostitution are frequently verbally, physically, sexually, emotionally, and financially abused. The National Network to End Domestic Violence defines domestic violence as “a pattern of behavior in which one intimate partner uses physical violence, coercion, threats, intimidation, isolation and emotional, sexual or economic abuse to control and change the behavior of the other partner.”¹ This is the same dynamic experienced by many children and youth in prostitution; they are under the control of an abuser, their trafficker. Traffickers also often threaten to harm their family members in order to establish control and ensure that the exploited child or youth will obey with their demands.²

Misconception:

Pimps are only violent when a prostituted person does not comply with demands.

Reality:

Pimps will abuse the person they traffic at almost any time and for just about any reason to establish fear and control. The abuse may at first be emotional – traffickers often lure victims with false promises of love, security and material items, and then capitalize on the victim’s emotions through manipulation and coercion. The emotional abuse almost always leads to physical and sexual abuse. While not being the only perpetrators of violence against the exploited, pimps are a major source of it; for example, women in escort services and hotel prostitution identified pimps as perpetrating up to half of the violence against them.³

Misconception:

Victims of domestic violence are manipulated and controlled by their abuser, but prostitutes willingly choose to stay with their pimps.

Reality:

Pimps frequently prey on vulnerable women, LGBTQ+ youth, and children such as runaways, the homeless, youth in foster care, and victims of sexual abuse in order to more easily manipulate and control them. Traffickers often target youth by pretending to want to be a boyfriend or father figure,

which can give a false sense of protection. Often, the trafficker will court the young person with gifts, new clothes, and personal attention to induce a dependence, and then once a bond has been created, will demand that the youth enter the sex trade to repay the debt—a form of financial abuse. This cycle parallels patterns of domestic violence and is used in both contexts to create power and control.⁵ Usually, a trafficker’s verbal, financial, and emotional abuses are the precursors to more intense physical and sexual violence. These abusive tactics to control the young person, which makes leaving the “relationship” not only difficult but also dangerous.

Misconception:

Sexually trafficked people can easily leave their traffickers unlike victims of domestic violence who often find it difficult to leave their partners.

Reality:

Leaving an abusive relationship is not easy.⁶ Whether the relationship is within a romantic partnership or involves a trafficked person who is under the control of a pimp, the emotional bonds someone who is trafficked often experiences (coupled with an unfamiliarity with social services to help with exiting prostitution) make leaving extremely challenging and complicated. Moreover, youth who are commercially sexually exploited sometimes fear disclosing that they are being abused because of the shame and stigma associated with the sex trade.⁷ Additionally, attempting to leave an abusive situation can make a youth extremely vulnerable to further physical and sexual abuse, or even death at the hands of the trafficker. Fear, intimidation, a lack of resources, and trauma bonds all make escaping both a domestic violence situation and prostitution extremely difficult.

Information provided by StolenYouth in conjunction with Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation (CAASE).

Sources:

1 National Institute to End Domestic Violence (2011), accessed October 14, 2011 at <http://nnedv.org/resources/stats/faqaboutdv.html>.

2 J. Raphael & D.L. Shapiro, “Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago,” Center for Impact Research (2002) assessed October 14, 2011.

3 C. Stark & C. Hodgson, “Sister Oppressions: A Comparison of Wife Battering and Prostitution,” in M. Farley, ed., *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress* (Binghamton, New York: Haworth, 2003), 17-32.

4 M. Farley & H. Barkan, “Prostitution, Violence Against Women, and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” Colorado Bar Association, accessed October 14, 2011 at <http://www.cobar.org/index.cfm/ID/21090>.

5 “Domestic Violence,” WomensLaw.org, accessed October 14, 2011 at http://www.womenslaw.org/simple.php?sitemap_id=39#1.

6 R. Lloyd, *Girls Like Us: Fighting for a World Where Girls are Not for Sale*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011).

7 “Domestic Violence,” WomensLaw.org.

8 “The Challenges and Effects of Leaving an Abusive Situation,” Colorado Bar Association, accessed October 14, 2011 at <http://www.cobar.org/index.cfm/ID/21090>.