

Hard to Relate to, Easy to Ignore

First there's The Game, the pimp's universe: himself and other pimps, the buying and selling of flesh, the cars, clothes, bling, dope, police.

Then there's *game*. Talent. *Dude got serious game—stackin' up serious cash, four b's doin' whatever he says.*

The talent? One pimp described it as “manipulating the little hamsters.”

The little hamsters are vulnerable adolescent girls, formerly known as prostitutes.

Formerly, anyhow, to the anti-sex-trafficking movement, including advocates, law-enforcement, volunteers, legislators, and countless other attuned parties. “Prostitute,” “pimp,” etc., are rarely heard. The only prostitutes are the small minority of women, girls and minors who work for themselves, selling their bodies because they want to. The rest are *victims*.

Ones who find their way out of this ghastly world and stay out are *survivors*.

“Pimp” is obsolete, far too light a word for *sex trafficker*, a sociopath sniffing out and exploiting susceptible girls, many of them far underage.

What they do is *sex trafficking*, although what the term prompts for most Americans is people in faraway places nailed into crates for shipping, or a vast mysterious conspiracy—something other than the age-old, All-American “pimps & hos” model that likely accounts for the vast majority of what qualifies as sex trafficking. 18 U.S. Code Section 1591 is about persons selling sex due to “force, fraud or coercion.”

Customers, once known as “johns” or “tricks,” are *buyers*, *victimizers*.

Whatever the terminology—and anti-trafficking people are extremely particular—it's heinous business. What traffickers blithely call The Game, many victims call The Life, and they don't mean the good life. They're victims of constant intimidation, manipulation, violation, and degradation by their traffickers as well as buyers. Day after day, night after night, Christmas, Mother's Day (many accidental mothers in the life, many teens), they wake up facing hours of unwanted sex with one stranger after another, whoever answers the ad and knocks on the motel-room door (often intoxicated, unclean, abusive, all too often violent). A good shift is when she subjects herself to enough randos, without getting raped, beaten, stabbed, shot, or killed, to satisfy Daddy until next day, when she starts from scratch again.

It's vile and it's around you, Mayberry to Miami Beach, borne out by online advertising, websites, law-enforcement operations, Google's *daily* national sex-trafficking alerts—horrors everywhere.

Advocates wonder why this scourge, called “domestic violence on steroids” by some, has never garnered the attention (and eventually, resources) that belatedly came to its cousin, domestic violence, decades ago. But most citizens are disinclined to consider the reality of this old-fashioned trafficking, their notions of it based on TV and movie versions, gangsta-rap videos, familiar narratives: the mythical hookers with hearts of gold, middle-class girls simply paying their way through college, thrilled-to-be-here girls in Fifty Cent videos.

Distortions. Distractions. Frustrated advocates insist the pervasive, destructive business thrives due to the public not *grasping the damn problem*. A retired FBI agent who worked CSEC cases for six years (the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, aka pimping minors) says her civilian friends always loved her stories of taking down bank robbers, drug lords, cyber-crooks, but wanted to hear *nothing* about sex traffickers, not even their going to prison.

Too ugly to contemplate for long. And easy to ignore, more than ever in the electronic age, “dating” made easy and unobtrusive with online advertising and cell phones. Bodies still show up on perennial street-corner “tracks,” but most business happens out of sight.

Says a noted prosecutor of state and federal trafficking cases, “Most people have no idea how exploitative and violent this is. When people understand, they might get past simply saying yes, they’re against sex trafficking. We’ll recognize progress when it stops being acceptable for men to buy sex; when trafficking stops being a goal for criminals who call it pimping; when it’s no longer accepted and even glamorized in pop culture.”

We’ll know progress when people don’t need to ask *Why don’t these so-called victims just leave?* “Trauma bonding” is a very real phenomenon akin to Stockholm Syndrome (wartime captives bonding with their captors), in this case a toxic stew of love and fear, punishment and reward, all built on the desperate hope of attaining the riches and glamour the trafficker keeps promising.

Studies indicate that well over half of prostituted persons suffered incest or sexual abuse while still living at home. Concerned parties want us to consider that for a full minute.

The average age of entry into the life is believed to be fourteen, and trending down in the electronic age as kids get phones earlier, get on social media earlier. Traffickers troll the Internet for unhappy girls, potential moneymakers.

Life expectancy for early-entry victims: seven years.

According to various studies, some 70-80% of sex workers have been raped on the job, assaulted, threatened with weapons.

In a *Psychiatric Times* study, 68% rated a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis.

Not the kind of work many people choose. If it's a choice, as one researcher put it, it's like someone in a burning skyscraper deciding whether to jump or roast. Some 90% of trafficked persons want out of the life but believe they have no better options.

No surprise, a vast majority abuse alcohol and/or illicit drugs.

No surprise that in a large sample, 23% had attempted suicide, compared to 3% of the general population.

The reality is that thousands of kids who should be learning multiplication tables and state capitals are instead being educated by Daddy's "bottom bitch" (top woman, often top earner) on sex tricks; on the preferences of White buyers, Black, Hispanic, Asian; on "trick-rolling," aka robbing a buyer; on self-protection, including Mace, brass knuckles, knives, strategic kicks and bites, even guns. (The *American Journal of Epidemiology* reported homicide to be the leading cause of death for prostituted women. The workplace homicide rate is 51 times higher than the next-most dangerous occupations, taxi driver and female liquor-store employee. Prostituted persons, according to researchers, are murdered so often because they're considered less than human.)

Minimizing the damage, all agree, starts with educating the public. Educate parents first of all, so they can protect their children—and *educate* their children, let them know how victims are recruited, what traffickers can look like. But too many tell themselves nah, none of this happens here in my little slice of the world, my kids' slice, and why should kids live scared of something that probably won't ever happen? *And if they don't need to know about it, I don't need to know either.*

Advocates believe it's something everyone should know something about, like CPR. (How many of us could perform CPR in a pinch?) Certainly everyone who deals with adolescents needs training: teachers, coaches, counselors, law enforcement, hospital staff, hotel staff. Some, but not nearly all, have started getting some in recent years.

Meanwhile, outside the public's range of interest, impassioned advocates bang the drums for their respective causes:

*Legalization (buying sex, selling it, running brothels all legal, with regulation);

*Decriminalization (no punishment, no regulation; favored by most sex workers advocates, the ACLU, Amnesty International and many others);

*Equality Model, “partial de-crim,” based on Sweden’s Nordic Model (arrest traffickers and buyers, not victims; favored by many in the anti-trafficking movement);

*or our long-standing status quo, criminalization (it’s all illegal, everywhere but ten rural counties in Nevada featuring “bunny ranches,” brothels, since 1971). Selling sex remains a crime, even though enforcement is practically nonexistent.

Bills have been pushed occasionally for the Equality Model, and last year Maine became the first state to break through, passing a bill to remove punishments for selling sex and increase penalties for buying it.

Momentous in its way, a hopeful sign for the movement, but advocates aren’t counting on any mass consciousness-raising. And there’s considerable opposition, from law-enforcement in particular. Police in progressive areas rarely make arrests for prostitution nowadays—but they always *can*, and they’re not keen on losing that tool. (A debate for another day.)

Bills are pushed to ensure that juveniles taken into custody be screened for sex trafficking.

Bills are pushed for legislation requiring age-appropriate sex-trafficking awareness in school curriculums, K-12—because high school is too late. Thousands of girls are swallowed into this netherworld every year, many never seen or heard from again by anyone they knew before.

A hapless victim told the FBI agent, “I started when I was 17 and probably made a million and a half dollars. What do I have to show for it? A little dog and some ho clothes my daddy bought me.” Typical lament from a little hamster.

Anyone care, outside Maine and a smidge of Nevada?