

## 'Pretty Woman' and the Ugly Truth About Prostitution

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**By Marian Hatcher**

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Twenty-five years ago today, one of the most successful romantic comedies in the history of film, *Pretty Woman*, debuted in the United States. To date the film has grossed almost half-a-billion dollars. Julia Roberts charmed audiences as the "happy hooker," and her chemistry with Richard Gere, playing a corporate raider on business in LA, was undeniable. The two lit up the screen like a house afire. The only problem is that prostitution as portrayed in the film is just about as far as you can get from the truth.

Prostitution is ugly. Most of it is sex trafficking. It's intriguing to read that the movie's script originally was written as a dark, cautionary tale. That, from my perspective as a survivor, gets at the sad reality. Very few of us chose to be "in the life," as we say. We're not happy, and we most certainly don't enjoy sex with johns. From so-called high-end escorts to girls bought online, prostituted women are actors.

The FBI defines sex trafficking as the use of "force, fraud and coercion." They say about 100,000 victims are lured into the business in the US each year. I know from my experience, personally and professionally, that the vast majority of girls and women in prostitution are exploited - that means they're being trafficked. Most come from communities that offer them little hope for the future. Most are pulled in by men who start as their "boyfriends," then hook them on drugs and start selling their bodies to an endless stream of men who don't fit the Richard Gere character profile at all.

Let's get the facts straight. Eighty-five percent of American men haven't bought someone's body. Yes, a few buyers are high-rollers. But most aren't. They're "the john next door" -- sitting in your classroom, or at your mother's Easter Sunday table, or the cubicle opposite you, now able to buy illegal sex online, more anonymously than ever. That movie star isn't going to sweep the woman he's paying for off her feet and deliver her into a life of romance, luxury and happiness.

Police, prosecutors, and judges are starting to recognize the truth about trafficking. After years -- decades, centuries -- they're beginning to understand that victims need treatment, not punishment, to keep from falling back into "the life." Some, like Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart, go as far as hiring survivors like me who can speak to the girls from experience and hopefully break through.

Still, some women keep returning to us at the sheriff's office again and again, each time with another bruise or missing another tooth from beatings -- not just from pimps but from johns as well. Like I said, the huge majority of men aren't into this. But lots of the guys buying sex are paying not just for a physical act, but for power over someone like me. Often they know, or just don't care, that we're underage girls. So the line

between prostitution and statutory rape is really a blur.

With trafficking, rape, and prostitution so intertwined and so far from the 'Pretty Woman' fantasy of two beautiful consenting adults, there are some bold leaders in the field who are turning to a new strategy: arresting not the sellers or the pimps, but the buyers. In interviews, men have said they would stop if they knew there would be consequences: if a family member or boss would find out, if meaningful fines were enforced, if their cars would be impounded.

Forty years ago people thought nothing could be done to prevent rape or domestic violence. Today, we think of these as terrible crimes. The same can happen with sex-trafficking. Men are starting to step up and tell other guys that buying someone's body for their pleasure isn't okay. Boys I'm around can grow up knowing that respecting girls means knowing they're not a commodity. They're not for sale.

This year, law enforcement agencies and other partners in 11 American cities established a network called CEASE (Cities Empowered Against Sexual Exploitation) to expand on what my colleagues and I in the Cook County Sheriff's Office are pushing for. There's a whole network of victims like me (we call ourselves "survivors") who are at the core of this network. We're all reaching across the country, and we're seeing a sea change.

This isn't for the faint of heart -- lots of the industry is fueled by organized crime. But stings are being set up to arrest and prosecute the buyers, not the victims, and the momentum is picking up. It's not all about punishment. Educational programs are being put in place so that johns can face the truth about the trauma they've been inflicting on the girls and women they buy online or on the streets.

Maybe someday Hollywood will produce that dark cautionary tale with the ugly story of prostitution, but with a different happy ending: a dramatic decrease in what's now a national scourge. No buyers means no business. Prostitution isn't the world's oldest profession. It's the world's oldest oppression. I should know.

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