Pretty Woman: Twenty-five Years of Lies about Prostitution

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Prostitution thrives on lies. For the last 25 years, one of the biggest promoters of misinformation about it has been the movie "Pretty Woman," a romantic comedy about a poor, unsophisticated prostitute and a handsome, rich sex buyer who fall in love. Its portrayal of prostitution is far from reality.

Already, I can I hear people yelling: “It's a movie! You expect reality from Hollywood? Who's going to believe a Hollywood Cinderella story about a woman’s finding love and riches through prostitution?"

Well, thousands of women in Eastern Europe did.

About ten years after "Pretty Woman" was released, I was doing research on the trafficking of women from Russia and Ukraine. Tens of thousands of women had been trafficked into prostitution since the downfall of communist control in eastern and central Europe. "Pretty Woman" was a favorite movie of women throughout the region.

Women who had previously been denied the right to travel and had little accurate information about the world were eager to believe in a fantasy. And the traffickers promised them they could escape the dull poverty of home and step into the glamorous world of "Pretty Woman" if they just followed them to Western Europe, the United States and other countries.

Many of the women never returned home. Some of the victims did get home. Some of them were in mental institutions, too traumatized to function or speak. A leading anti-trafficking activist in Russia whom I worked with confirmed this to me. One weekend, at a retreat, she was secretly given a drug cocktail that caused her to have a psychotic reaction. She was sent to a mental institution in Moscow. Fortunately, she recovered. When she was released, she told us the wards were full of victims of prostitution and trafficking. The "Pretty Woman" ending hadn't been theirs.

We don't need to go far away to compare the fantasies with the reality of prostitution. In Rhode Island, the lies are in the online prostitution advertisements that offer “a good time.” And thanks to Amanda Milkovits's excellent reporting in The Providence Journal, almost every week we read the details of trafficking cases.

In the first case of sex trafficking prosecuted in Rhode Island, the traffickers promised the victims love -- and, instead, forced them into prostitution. One ad proclaimed that a 19-year-old woman was “available all day for upscale gentlemen looking to spend some time together.” The reality was that she and three other women were drugged and controlled by two pimps. In a recent interview, the 19-year-old said that she was “given so many drugs that she would drool on herself” (“Fighting for her soul: A sex-trafficking victim's story,” Nov. 15). Still, the sex buyers paid money and used her for sex.

One ad promised to “make your night wild.” In reality, the victim was an underage runaway from a group home in Newport.

Often, prostitution is really child sexual abuse and rape, as was revealed in a 2013 case, in which a 14-year-old Pawtucket girl was sold to 40 to 50 men in 30 to 45 days.

Sex buyers aren’t nice guys. They are often cruel men who don’t care if the women and girls they use are drugged, pimped or enslaved. In fact, most of the violence the victims are subjected to is perpetrated by the sex buyers.

The good news is that police and prosecutors are seeing through the lies and fantasies of prostitution and arresting the pimps and traffickers. In Rhode Island, sex buyers will be held accountable. Last fall, at the conference on “Children, Trauma and the Integration of Care,” hosted by the Rhode Island Family Court, U.S. Attorney Peter Neronha announced that sex buyers will be arrested in connection with sex trafficking cases. A few weeks ago, when police raided a residential brothel that used women from Mexico, two sex buyers were arrested.

I hope we see a lot more such arrests, because the sex buyers aren’t at all like the Richard Gere character in "Pretty Woman." Prostitution is not a romantic comedy any more than domestic violence or acquaintance rape are funny love stories.

The movie "Pretty Woman" is just one example of how the lies about prostitution are told. I’m happy to see that many people in Rhode Island are now seeing through the lies.

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