

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 woman 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 abused verbally, physically, sexually, emotionally, and financially—just as domestic-violence victims are. 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 In most domestic-violence relationships, the abuser seeks complete power and control. This is the same dynamic experienced by many women and girls in prostitution; they are under the control of an abuser, their pimp. Pimps also often threaten to harm a prostituted woman’s children or other family members in order to establish control and ensure that the women will comply with their demands.²

Misconception:

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

REALITY:

Pimps will abuse the women they prostitute at almost any time and for just about any reason. The abuse begins almost immediately as pimps often physically and sexually abuse the new girls they have recruited in order to establish dominance and control. Women in prostitution have been seriously injured or murdered by their pimps for something as trivial as looking another pimp in the eye or not making enough money to fuel a pimp’s drug addiction.³ According to one study of 130 women in street prostitution in San Francisco, 82 percent had been physically assaulted, and 68 percent had been raped while in the sex trade.⁴ In a study by the Center for Impact Research in Chicago, which interviewed 222 women in prostitution, 21.4 percent of individuals in escort services, 20.8 percent in prostitution in their own residences, 21.8 percent in street prostitution, and 24.4 percent in prostitution in drug houses reported being raped more than 10 times. While not committing all of the violence, 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.

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) accessed 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>.

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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 at-risk women and girls such as runaways, the homeless, and victims of sexual abuse in order to more easily manipulate and control them. Pimps often target young girls by pretending to want to be the girls' boyfriend or father figure, which can give a young woman a false sense of protection. Often, the pimp will court the girl with gifts, new clothes, and personal attention to induce a dependence on him; once he has created that bond, he will demand that she enter the sex trade to repay him. This is when the women and girls are told they have to engage in prostitution to "pay down the debt" to their pimp—a form of financial abuse. This cycle of courting and abuse exactly parallels the pattern of domestic violence and is used in both contexts to create power and control.⁵ Usually, a pimp's verbal, financial, and emotional abuses are the precursors to more intense physical and sexual violence. The pimp uses these abusive tactics to control the girls, which makes leaving the "relationship" not only difficult but also very dangerous.

Misconception:

Victims of domestic violence find it difficult to leave their partners, but prostituted women can easily leave their pimps.

REALITY:

Leaving an abusive relationship is not easy.⁶ Whether the relationship is within a romantic partnership or involves a prostituted woman who is under the control of her pimp, the emotional bonds women often experience (coupled with a lack of social services to help women exit prostitution) make leaving extremely challenging and complicated. Moreover, prostituted women sometimes fear disclosing that they are being abused because of the shame and stigma associated with being in the sex trade.⁷ Additionally, attempting to leave an abusive situation can make a woman extremely vulnerable to further physical and sexual abuse from the abuser. Many abusers believe, "If I can't have you, no one else can," and vow to kill the women and girls they prostitute if they ever try to leave. Women who are undocumented are especially vulnerable due to the fear of deportation.⁸ Fear, intimidation, a lack of resources, and trauma bonds (emotionally bonding with an abuser) all make escaping both a domestic-violence situation and prostitution extremely difficult.

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>.