

We Can End the Illegal Sex Trade

Fortunately for our society, Washington is waking up.

By Jimmy Carter and Swanee Hunt

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Too often, when we think of sex trafficking in America, we imagine women smuggled here from Asia or Latin America, when in fact we should be picturing everyday girls and women from our own neighborhoods, exploited by pimps and brothel owners in our own cities and towns.

We should think of women like one in Boston, who was abused by her addicted mother's boyfriend, ran away over and over from foster homes and was recruited when only 13 by her first pimp, who promised to care for her. It took her years to break free.

Fortunately for our society, Washington is waking up. The Senate's recent unanimous passage of the Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act is one expression of this promising turn. Alongside the Congressional action, the White House, Department of Defense, Department of State and Department of Justice are issuing strict rules. And more mayors and governors are recognizing that the best response to a problem afflicting every city and state is to close brothels and persuade buyers to stop.

Our home cities, Atlanta and Boston, are among 11 in a network launched in February, called Cities Empowered Against Sexual Exploitation (CEASE). These cities are committed to reducing the demand for illegal sex in their communities by 20 percent within two years.

Let's see this crisis for what it is: gender-based violence. That perspective is consistent with our commitment to end all forms of sexual abuse—at schools, in the home, on the streets.

This is also a matter of racial justice: most prostituted females are black and brown girls from impoverished backgrounds, while the great majority of high-frequency buyers are well-off, married and with children. Whether these men know it or not, behind the scenes, they are part of a violent, exploitative business, tied to gangs and organized crime, with billions of dollars a year driving the market.

In America's abusive sex industry, the number of women arrested is astoundingly higher than the number of men. The new approach we advocate moves away from hunting down and punishing those being exploited—the sellers—and focuses on the true perpetrators: those who profit and those who buy. By taking steps to reduce demand rather than supply, we can make this market less profitable.

In addition to directing far more resources to help survivors escape prostitution (which the huge majority say they want to do), the Senate bill makes brothel owners and sex buyers more accountable for their role in fueling this market. This strategy reflects an emerging philosophy first embraced in the Nordic countries and increasingly welcomed as the most effective path to protect trafficking victims' human rights.

Let's stop the profiteers and buyers —those with the power in this relationship, those with the money, those with a real choice.

In Atlanta this week, the Carter Center and Rotarians Against Child Slavery convened a national summit to carry forward this social movement. Survivors of prostitution, prosecutors, activists and policy makers worked with business leaders to develop integrated plans to generate not just legislative action but also broad public involvement and bi-partisan support.

For generations, people have dismissed attempts to end “the world’s oldest profession” as an impossible pipedream. But look at the progress we have achieved in changing the way society regards domestic violence, which we once shrugged off as just a family matter. Look at the change in mindset toward sexual assault on campus and in the military. Opinions can shift, and behavior can bend toward justice. A society can hold owners and buyers accountable while providing support to those exploited.

It’s against the law to buy someone’s body for sex, and we can stop it. In fact, 99 percent of the population hasn’t bought sex in the past year—but that still leaves more than a million guilty men.

Of the many proven interventions, arresting brothel owners, pimps and male customers is the most effective way to get them to stop. Still, law enforcement doesn’t have to be excessively punitive—there can be restorative justice. That harkens back to our religious faith.

We were both raised as Southern Baptists who believe in redemptive power. We are also Democrats; but this is not a movement of the right or left, religious or secular. Freedom from being trafficked for sex is a basic human right. It’s no surprise that Sweden and Norway—nations that rank high on gender equity—

have pioneered this progressive approach to ending sexual commercial exploitation. Canada is adopting similar policies. It's time for the United States to join the vanguard in this global movement.

Read more: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/05/we-can-end-the-worlds-oldest-profession-117922#ixzz4IHD2RICR>

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