

The Pimps' Slaves

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Reading between the sheets, the world of “Kristen” and Eliot Spitzer may seem relatively benign. She may have been abused as a child, and tangled with drugs and homelessness, but she was also a consenting adult who apparently kept half the cash that customers paid for her.

That’s a dangerously unrepresentative glimpse of prostitution in America. Those who work with street prostitutes say that what they see daily is pimps who control teenage girls with violence and threats plus an emotional bond and then keep every penny the girl is paid.

“Sometimes I meet a girl who says, ‘I have a really good pimp he beats me only with an open hand,’ ” said Rachel Lloyd, a former prostitute who runs a [program for underage prostitutes](#) in New York City. “Many of the girls see the pimps as boyfriends, but violence is integral to everything that happens in the sex industry. That’s how you get punished for not bringing in your quota for that evening, or for looking your pimp in the eye.”

Bradley Myles, who works in Washington for an antitrafficking organization called Polaris Project, says it is astonishing how similar the business model is for pimping across the country. Pimps crush runaway girls with a mix of violence and affection, degradation and gifts, and then require absolute obedience to a rigid code: the girl cannot look the pimp in the eye, call him by his name, or keep any cash.

Every evening she must earn a quota of money before she can sleep. She may be required to tattoo the pimp’s name on her thigh. And in exchange he may make presents of clothing or jewelry.

It’s complicated: What keeps her isn’t just fear, but also often an emotional connection.

“When somebody wields power over you to kill you and doesn’t, you feel this bizarre thankfulness,” Mr. Myles said. “It’s trauma bonding.”

When a middle-class white girl ends up controlled like this think of Elizabeth Smart, the Utah girl who was kidnapped in 2002 and apparently did not try to escape then everybody is outraged at the way the kidnapper manipulated her. But when the girls are black, poor and prostituted, there is either indifference or an assumption that they are consenting to the abuse.

“It’s about race and class,” said Ms. Lloyd, who is bewildered when she sees Amber alerts for abducted children. Last year she worked with 250 teenage girls who had been prostituted, and not one of them ever merited an Amber alert.

“If we served 250 white girls from upstate middle-class homes, we’d be rolling in money,” she added, “and we’d be changing the law.”

Changing the law is on the agenda. The House of Representatives passed a landmark bill in December, by a vote of 405 to 2, that would make the federal authorities much more involved in cracking down on pimps and trafficking.

But the Justice Department is fighting the House bill, and Senator Joe Biden, who is chairman of a crucial subcommittee, has dawdled on it. A broad coalition of antitrafficking leaders from left and right sent the Justice Department a furious letter scolding it for being soft on pimps.

That may be the only letter in history signed by both Gary Bauer and Gloria Steinem, by executives of the National Organization for Women and the National Association of Evangelicals.

Of the 100,000 prostitution-related arrests each year, the great majority of them are of women and girls; pimps and johns are much less likely to be arrested.

All those girls will never get a tiny fraction of the attention of the Elizabeth Smarts or Natalee Holloways, who fill the cable television niche for a “missing blonde” story. So let’s not let “Kristen” displace the broader reality.

Sure, there are young women who voluntarily sell sex; some of them have posted lately on my blog, nytimes.com/ontheground. Reasonable people can disagree about whether the police should devote resources to such cases.

With prostitution as with narcotics, no legal model has worked perfectly. I’ve argued that the approach with the best record is the Swedish model decriminalizing the sale of sex, while making it an offense to pimp or to buy sex.

But whatever one thinks of legalizing prostitution, let’s face reality: The big problem out there is the teenage girls who are battered by their pimps, who will have to meet their quotas tonight and every night, who are locked in car trunks or in basements, who have guns shoved in their mouths if they hint of quitting. If the Spitzer affair causes us to lose sight of that, then the biggest loser will be those innumerable girls, far more typical than “Kristen,” for whom selling sex isn’t a choice but a nightmare.