

In a Shift, Anti-Prostitution Effort Targets Pimps and Johns

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The john peeked into the massage parlor. "Hi, sweetie," said Kim, the manager of the Korean-run club in downtown Washington. The john, a tall man in his fifties, stepped inside, smiling anxiously. He wore a chaste white shirt and sharply parted hair, and he smelled as if he'd had a drink. "Look at his face -- very tired," Kim said as he went inside. "Sad people come. Stress people. This customer stays 30 minutes, then happy. Everybody happy."

Not everybody. A national campaign against prostitution has intensified in political, nonprofit and law enforcement circles, so much so that yesterday the House unanimously passed novel legislation, with the Senate expected to follow. In the past, police sweeps have focused on the women. The new federal law would grant state and local law enforcement agencies funds to investigate and prosecute the men -- brothel owners and pimps. It would also target for arrest customers like the one at Kim's parlor lurching toward a girl in a bikini.

"You're out of luck," said Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.), summing up the bill's message to the customers. "The johns use and abuse these young women," said Rep. Deborah Pryce (R-Ohio). "And pimps -- you can call them slaveholders, the masters out in the field."

The attitudes of Pryce, who introduced the legislation in the House, and Cornyn, a sponsor in the Senate, reflect a shift in how the government and the public respond to the sex industry. Traditionally, women have been blamed as the source of the problem. But Pryce calls prostitution "modern-day slavery" in which teenage girls are exploited and men fuel the crime.

Behind the scenes, an unlikely coalition of evangelicals, feminists, liberal activists and conservative human rights advocates are pushing the issue. They are trying to reframe the way people talk about prostitutes, calling them "survivors" and signing off e-mails with the slogan "Abolition!"

On a local level, in the past three years, 12 states have passed anti-sex-trafficking legislation, which says that women who are prostituted through coercion, and minors who are sold for sex, are victims. In 15 other states, similar bills have been introduced. Although prostitution is illegal nationwide except in certain Nevada counties, advocates for the legislation said that enforcement and penalties for pimps and johns have been weak, including a tolerance for brothels that advertise as massage parlors.

"We want to drive a stake through the heart of these venal criminals," said Michael J. Horowitz, a coalition leader and a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. "This is pure evil."

This is bad news for the john at Kim's parlor, who lumbered out the door 37 minutes after he entered. His smile had relaxed. He looked as though he had just won a long-odds bet. Squinting in the afternoon light, he got into his car to drive home to Virginia, as he does every month after having sex, he said. Then he heard about the legislation.

"Do I look like a criminal?" scowled the man, who gave his name as "John." "I'm a middle-class, law-abiding single white professional. Let me have my fun." "John" said that the women offer a service to the community, that it is a victimless crime and that lawmakers should concentrate on more important issues, such as the war in Iraq. "It's like going to a doctor. A love doctor," he said. He spread his fingers, as if to show his hands were clean: "Is this a problem?"

Focusing on Demand

Though far apart politically, Democratic Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney (N.Y.) and Republican Pryce were in Pryce's office, conferring on an issue they could agree upon.

"I don't think pimps care if a customer is a Republican or Democrat, do they?" quipped Maloney. On a recent afternoon that Pryce called "one of the worst politically partisan days I have ever spent on Capitol Hill in 13 years," Pryce smiled as she talked with Maloney about the measure they introduced in April. Commercial sex, said Maloney, is about supply and demand. Women are the supply; men create demand. "We want to crack down on the demand," she said.

While the approach enjoys political support, some in the Justice Department have objected to referring to women engaged in an illegal activity as "victims" and have resisted federalizing what has been a local issue, proponents said.

Also, some nongovernmental organizations that advocate for the rights of sex workers question the effectiveness of focusing on demand. "It's punitive rather than preventative," said Ann D. Jordan, who directs the Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons at Global Rights. She said the measure fails to address the causes of prostitution, such as poverty. Federal money would be better spent on job training, said Juhu Thukral of the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center in New York.

Penelope Saunders, director of Different Avenues, which works with marginalized communities, said that "according this bill, all the men who are buying commercial sex are monsters -- and that's simply not true." Some johns help sex workers by reporting violent pimps, she said. Scaring away regular customers would force prostitutes into riskier behavior. Saunders said that calling these women "victims of sexual slavery" is inaccurate, patronizing and a "thinly veiled effort" to promote a conservative moral agenda.

But to Barrett Duke, a coalition member and vice president at the Southern Baptist Convention, the comparison to slavery is apt. He draws inspiration

from 19th-century Christians. They fought the slave trade in England by working with "people of good will, who were not Christians, who understood that trade of human flesh was an abomination."

In Duke's coalition, the people of good will include Orthodox Jews, abortion-rights feminists and gay-rights liberals. At meetings, Duke said, they ease political tensions by joking: "One of us will say, 'Oh, you're out there working on that judges stuff!' We'll get a chuckle. Everyone sheathes their swords, but they're never very far from reach."

Donna M. Hughes, a professor of women's studies at the University of Rhode Island, said she was suspicious at first. She looked across the table at Duke and at a woman from the conservative Concerned Women for America: "I thought, 'Don't they eat feminists for breakfast?'"

Ultimately, they were able to march together by blinding themselves to everything but the women they hope to help.

On the Hill, Maloney said it was the reason she could team up with Pryce, chairman of the House Republican Conference. Maloney had met a woman named Tina Frundt at a hearing, who told her life story. Frundt said her foster mother's boyfriend had sold her for sex at the age of 10. "I kept interrupting her," Maloney said. As Frundt tried to talk, Maloney's stomach churned. "Psychologically, I could not stand to hear her."

Victimless Crime 'a Lie'

Frundt was 14 when a man in his twenties persuaded her to run away. She thought it was about love. He brought his friends over to gang-rape her. Soon he was selling her body to support them: \$75 for oral sex, \$100 to \$125 for "basic sex," \$200 for anal sex or for an additional person. A pimp who controls four women, said Derek Ellerman, co-executive director of the Polaris Project, an anti-sex-trafficking group, makes more than \$600,000 a year in cash. When Frundt disobeyed her pimp, she said, he broke her arm with a bat.

"I was 14. I looked 14. I was sleeping with men who were 65 years old," said Frundt, 31, who joined the left-right coalition. She said her customers, bald and wrinkled, had sex while complaining about their wives; she closed her eyes. One fat client reeked of Bengay ointment. Afterward, she threw up. "They're sexual molesters and child abusers. I have to remember that abuse for the rest of my life. So why shouldn't they?"

Frundt, now a counselor at the Polaris Project, said that the average age of girls who enter the sex trade is 13. Like victims of domestic violence, she said, the girls are afraid to leave their pimps. They call their pimps "Daddy." If they report a pimp -- "He's going to beat your butt."

It was stories such as Frundt's, said Cornyn, that convinced him he should fight for the legislation. "A victimless crime?" he said. "Yeah, right, that's a lie."

And yet for Frundt and for others in the coalition, it is hard to believe that anyone would care. Norma Hotaling, founder of the SAGE Project Inc., a drug

and mental health program for women in San Francisco, has a metal plate in her head with wires and screws from a pimp who delivered a "bitch slap" when she refused to work.

As the director of SAGE (Standing Against Global Exploitation), Hotaling attended a reception in Congress for the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which passed in 2000. The act assists foreign women who are sold for sex. At the reception, Hotaling met Horowitz, whose coalition had worked on a variety of human rights issues including religious persecution abroad and global sex trafficking.

"I said, 'What about me? What about my sisters?' " Hotaling said. Horowitz told her he was mired in anti-prison-rape legislation but when he was done he would address domestic sex trafficking. "I thought I was hallucinating," she said. "I was talking to someone who was very right-wing -- and he was concerned."

In their work together, Hotaling encouraged Horowitz to include a provision about educating and sensitizing law enforcement. She recalled the night the pimp broke her eye socket. The police let him go. They said it was her fault. Her cheekbone and jaw were crushed, so all she could do was wince -- mute - - when one of the men shrugged and said, "She's just a whore."

Photos on the Web, Decoys

About 50 detectives were watching a training video on human and sexual trafficking at the Washington Fraternal Order of Police Lodge. Men with shaved heads who were chewing on toothpicks, burly men in leather jackets -- recoiled, appalled.

A 14-year-old girl, the narrator said, had been locked in a room and was forced to have sex with 30 men a day.

"Oh, my God," a detective said, rapping the table with his wedding band. A prosecutor from the Washington U.S. attorney's office noted that this was the program's first year in the District. "We need your help, you're the ones on the streets," said Sharon Marcus-Kurn, coordinator of the District's Human Trafficking Task Force. "This is a national effort."

In cities around the country, U.S. attorney's offices, the FBI, local prosecutors and nongovernmental organizations are developing similar task forces. The new legislation would assist them because, in addition to funding shelters for ex-prostitutes and sponsoring a statistical survey of prostitution, it would authorize \$25 million a year to law enforcement to reduce demand. Techniques would include using female decoys, posting pictures of johns on the Internet and establishing "john schools" to reeducate sex clients.

Hughes said that 90 percent of prostitution arrests are of women: "There's been a conspiracy of silence of men not wanting to hold other men accountable."

That pattern is changing, if slowly, law enforcement officials said. In New York

City, said Tony Communiello, from the Queens district attorney's office, they have instituted the "Losing Proposition," where undercover policewomen try to seize the john's car. In St. Louis, said Len Tracy, chief investigator at the St. Charles County prosecutor's office, they are applying drug-trafficking techniques to pimps, charging them with financial crimes. In Las Vegas, said Victor Vigna, a sergeant on the metropolitan police force, they administer HIV tests for arrested johns and show them photos of genitals covered with disease-related lesions.

And yet, despite these efforts, the pimp in the '05 black DeVille idling his engine after midnight, greeted the news with a shake of his braids and a snort. "They can't stop it," said Steve, who would not give his last name. He sat at the corner of 15th and L streets NW, watching a girl in a miniskirt flitting in the cold. The shadow of the steering wheel cut across his face. "People can be bought. It's gone back to cave days."

Steve dismissed the measure as a political stunt, noting that lawmakers have been clients, too. He said that "some women like being exploited" and suggested that abolishing prostitution would trigger a rise in rapes and killings: "You got a lot of sick-minded people out here."

But at least one massage-parlor manager is worried. Kay slouched into a white satin couch at one of eight massage parlors within a 10-block radius of the White House. A girl in a white bikini slipped across the red lights, into a massage room that has a clock with a second hand. Kay used to be a massage therapist, too, she said, but at 55 she's too old.

The legislation, Kay said, "makes me a headache." The parlor will lose clients and she'll lose her job. A frown gathered at the edge of her lips, but then she smoothed her long red hair and smiled. "I'll have to find a nice man, and settle down."