



## Let's Stop Sex Trafficking Right Here at Home

By Samir Goswami and Anne Ream

WeNews commentators

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*Chicago is locking up prostituted women and girls, which Samir Goswami and Anne K. Ream say is the wrong response to sex trafficking. They call on Chicago and other cities to target the johns and pimps who fuel the exploitation.*

**Editor's Note:** The following is a commentary. The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the views of Women's eNews.

(WOMENSENEWS)--The recent publication of Nicholas D. Kristof's and Sheryl WuDunn's book, "Half the Sky: Turning Oppression Into Opportunity for Women Worldwide," brings much-needed attention to the sexual trafficking of women and girls in poor and developing countries.

Raising awareness of this damaging and deadly industry, as well as greater action on the behalf of these women and girls, is long overdue. International sex trade is financed by the pain of those who often come from difficult or desperate circumstances, women who are then thrust into unimaginably cruel conditions.



Samir Goswami

Credit: Joel Balasingham

Anne Ream

Credit: Cedric Podschun

But as we think and act globally on the issue of sexual trafficking and exploitation, we must also act locally.

Chicago, one of the major homes to sexual trafficking in the United States, is a good place to start.

### First-Tier Trafficking Hub

As many as 16,000 women and girls are prostituted in the greater Chicago area, making the "Second City" a first-tier hub for trafficking, according to Jody Raphael, a senior research fellow at the Schiller DuCanto and Fleck Family Law Center at DePaul College of Law in Chicago.

As is the case internationally, U.S.-based traffickers and pimps use force, coercion and fraud to recruit vulnerable young girls into prostitution. Often homeless and victims of previous sexual or physical abuse, these young women are transported from cities, suburbs and rural or small-town communities to work in conditions that are degrading and dangerous.

Chicago's response has been largely a failure--and an expensive one at that.

A review of data released by the City of Chicago Mayor's Office on Domestic Violence shows that the city's \$9 million-per-year strategy for fighting prostitution invests heavily in arresting women being prostituted, while often failing to hold the pimps who profit from their exploitation or the johns who demand their services accountable. Between 2003 and 2005, 65 percent of prostitution-related arrests were of the women being prostituted; less than 1 percent of arrests were of traffickers and pimps.

The lopsided nature of Chicago's strategy was made clear during a September 2009 meeting at the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation office. Half a dozen members of the Women of Power Alumni Association, a collective of formerly incarcerated women who provide peer support to and advocacy for those currently in the criminal justice system, came together here to share their stories.

"When the police busted me and the trick who hired me, I went to prison but he was sent home to his family," LaTaunya Frazier, who served a sentence for prostitution and was released from prison four years ago, told the group. "Why was that? I was there because I needed to make money to support myself and my baby. You know what? I had a baby I wanted to go home to, too."

## Not a Single Conviction

Such stories make it clear that if we wish to curtail prostitution by taking the women working in this industry "off the streets," our money would be better spent providing safe housing, education, job alternatives and social services.

Though Illinois passed a statewide anti-trafficking statute in 2006, not a single trafficker has since been convicted under that law.

It's time to change that.

The most effective way to diminish the business of prostitution is to end the demand for it. This means taking a market-driven approach that holds accountable the johns whose purchasing decisions fuel the billion-dollar sex trade industry and the pimps who profit from it.

With this goal in mind, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation and its partner organizations have launched "End Demand Illinois." This three-year, \$550,000 campaign challenges the way our city and state responds to prostitution.

Through an innovative partnership with the Cook County Sheriff's Office and an emerging collaboration with the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and the Chicago Police Department, "End Demand Illinois" will advocate for the creation of legal tools and the resources and training needed to facilitate the prosecution of traffickers and johns, implement programming to deter future buying and increase penalties for repeat offenders.

It's all too easy to call it "trafficking and sexual exploitation" when it occurs in distant regions, but to downplay it as "the world's oldest profession" when we encounter prostitution at home.

It's time to take on the business of prostitution, not the prostituted women who are most often its victims. We hope that other cities and states will agree, and follow our lead.

Samir Goswami is policy director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation, or CAASE. Anne Ream is a Chicago-based writer, CAASE board member and founder of Girl360.net, an empowerment project for tween girls.

## For more information:

Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation

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The Voices and Faces Project

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CounterQuo.org

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