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A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON SEX SCANDALS

BY MARIA HINOJOSA

How can somebody who is so smart be so stupid? It is a question that applies not just to shirtless and overexposed New York Rep. Anthony Weiner, but to a number of high-profile men in the public eye during the past several months.

And while many men are upset about their fellow brethren, women are disgusted and dismayed.

Yet as the media coverage of the sex scandals continues, a relatively new movement is afoot that is confronting the issue of men and sex from a different perspective. While Weiner says he never paid for sex (but why should anyone believe him now?), this new movement targets the “user.” It is called Demand Abolition, and it focuses not on the supplier of sex, but rather on the demand side of the equation, the men who pay for sex.

Among the leaders of this movement is former U.S. Ambassador to Austria Swanee Hunt. The same day that Weiner held his crying news conference in New York, Hunt had gathered more than two dozen activists, business leaders, intellectuals, academics, one nun and one Boston police officer in Cambridge, Mass., to talk about targeting demand. In a way, they were trying to address the “stupid” question, focusing on what makes these men so stupid that they are prepared to lose everything for a moment’s thrill.

Trying to change the demand side is likely to take a while, but Hunt is nonplussed. She points to the suffragettes or civil-rights leaders who died and never saw the changes we now live with. She also carries a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt: “You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

Hunt approaches the issue not by hating the users, the “demanders,” but by trying to understand them deeply. “Who knows what urges many men have to live with that most women don’t? But it’s not enough to say ‘boys will be boys,’” says Hunt.

The ambassador, who also teaches at Harvard and runs a peace institute and her own philanthropic foundation, wants these users (and our entire society) to see the women who sell sex as real human beings. (One has to wonder just how a 46-year-old congressman who wanted to be New York City’s next mayor could actually see the young women he was sexting as real human beings and not just sexual toys.) Look at these women as if they were your mother, your daughter, your sister, she says, then ask if you would you want them treated this way.

In certain cities, there are new “john” schools, where men arrested for buying sex have to go through counseling. Hunt says that in San Francisco, “when johns were arrested and had to listen to women recounting life stories of unimaginable abuse, recidivism dropped by more than 40 percent.”

From those stories, the great challenge for sex-obsessed men emerges: Stop being a user, stop being an objectifier of women and stop being so damned stupid.

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