

# SEEN AND UNSEEN

THE PUBLIC CONVERSATION  
ON PROSTITUTION





## INTRODUCTION

**Embedded in the popular imagination as “the world’s oldest profession,” prostitution continues to be very visible in popular culture. Yet there is little research into how the public actually thinks about this issue and what, if anything, they think we can or should do about it. The study we report on here provides a deep view of how Americans understand — and don’t understand — the sex trade, and the ways our society might address the issue.**

To capture authentic responses from people who often don’t participate in public opinion research, we talked to a diverse sample of 340 Americans in an array of settings — from workplaces to cafés, stores, parks, street corners and in the anonymous world of the internet. The result is an analysis that incorporates views from all walks of life, from seminarians to self-identified sex workers, from college students to retirees. Although some political and cultural conservatives were included in the study, we focused mostly on progressives who are more likely to be “forward-thinking” on the issue.

Prior to our interviews, most of our research participants had given little thought to the sex trade; it has not been on their radar. It was clear, however, that for most participants, discussing the issue brought to light an internal emotional conflict. Most are deeply troubled by the idea of prostitution even if they are unable to articulate why. On the other hand, they don't want to be closed-minded or be seen as judging another person's life choices; in fact, many apologized for views they felt might sound critical or moralistic.

What's more, despite self-professed low levels of knowledge about the issue, most of our research participants offered thoughtful, heartfelt and compassionate points of view. They firmly believe the status quo is not working, and show an honest desire to support steps that reduce the number of people harmed by this life. But, they are very uncertain about what steps might make a difference.

Within each encounter, we heard a mosaic of reflections on this issue, morphing from one topic to the next, with research participants slipping in and out of different ways of seeing the sex trade. Even so, consistency did emerge, and this research identifies three broad and often overlapping perspectives that dominate and organize most people's considerations:

**The PROTECTION FROM HARM perspective,** in which safety concerns are paramount,

**The HER CHOICE perspective,** which focuses on individual decision-making, and

**The SOLUTIONS perspective,** which seeks an improvement over the status quo.

Across these three perspectives, some aspects of the issue are very visible to most people, while other aspects are largely invisible. What is seen and unseen shapes people's understanding of the issue, their desire for collective action, and their support for specific solutions.



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## WHAT IS SEEN AND WHAT IS UNSEEN?

Broadly speaking, most people default to thinking about “the woman” selling sex, not the systems or conditions that lead to prostitution. Most see that it is a physically violent and dangerous life, but not the psychological and emotional trauma. Most see this life as a “choice” at some level, though many recognize it is often chosen reluctantly. What is largely unseen are the circumstances that complicate issues of choice and consent. Finally, as they consider steps to take, most see that criminalizing women makes little sense and that harm reduction, perhaps even legalization, should be on the agenda. What is largely unseen are the unintended consequences of legalization, a clear picture of a range of effective solutions, and a broad vision for change that ensures fewer are harmed by this life.

The analysis that follows describes the three default perspectives — how each one of these perspectives reflects what is visible to the public as well as what is not seen, or the gaps in the public's knowledge. Lastly, we reflect on the implications that follow given the gaps in the public's current understanding of the sex trade. Throughout, we rely on respondents' own words and field researchers' observations to provide richness and context to the findings.

*“It’s very interesting, because it’s like I’ve thought about it at a certain level. I didn’t think of, oh, what can I do or what can the society do? I kind of stopped...okay, it’s complicated, let me just stop thinking over here and let it go.”*

Asian-American woman,  
22, Detroit

*“It’s just things that you don’t have to deal with. We are college-educated, we work every day, and homeowners and all that stuff. We think it’s all about Lowe’s and Home Depot.”*

African-American woman,  
36, Atlanta



## FINDINGS

### THE META LENS: AN INDIVIDUAL, NOT SYSTEMIC, PERSPECTIVE

**For most people, the first mental image of prostitution is a woman selling sex, with children, men or non-binary people in the sex trade being much less likely to cross one's mind! The perception rarely includes thinking of the buyer, the 'johns' who purchase sex, nor does it generally include other agents such as pimps. Even less considered are the cultural and economic contexts in which the sex trade takes place.**

For example, with a person-centric focus, one readily thinks of someone like a 23-year-old woman, let's say her name is Mary. People rarely think of the pimp who is profiting from her or the men who are buying. Furthermore, the circumstances and systems that led to her situation, such as being born into extreme poverty, experiencing child abuse, being part of a broken foster care system, living in a culture that objectifies women, and so on, are very far out of the picture.

\*While our investigation included questions concerning child, male and non-binary actors, for the most part this report focuses on adult women with male buyers. This is by far the dominant image for most people. Furthermore, when prompted, research participants' patterns of thinking are generally the same when the person selling sex is male or non-binary. (Please note that we did not delve deeply into all situations.) Children are a different issue, however. Our research participants universally assert that prostitution of children is a heinous act that should continue to be illegal, with harsh penalties for pimps and buyers.

This limited view, focused narrowly on “the woman,” fundamentally shapes the public’s understanding. This lens reduces powerful economic and cultural forces that can lead to or keep someone in the sex trade as obstacles that a smart and able person ought to be able to overcome. And perhaps most importantly, a person-centric focus diverts attention away from discussions that consider how we as a society can collectively work together to address the issue, since people hardly ever hear about effective solutions that can comprehensively improve the lives of (mostly) women who are in the trade.

A person-centric view is a natural one; we are drawn to people’s stories. At the same time, the research makes it clear that there are gaps in this understanding that can easily lead the public to abdicate responsibility to create collective solutions that can make a difference in people’s lives.

This focus on the individual is essential to keep in mind as we explore public understandings of prostitution, because it influences the three perspectives discussed in the rest of this section.

## The PROTECTION FROM HARM perspective

Our research demonstrates that across varying cross-sections of the American public, across gender, age, ethnicity, and ideology, most people are driven by a desire to protect women in the sex trade from harm. This desire to protect provides a lens on the issue that makes physical harm the focus of attention, and harm reduction the desired end goal.

### WHAT IS SEEN

#### A physically violent, dangerous life

Universally, people recognize that this is frequently a violent, ugly life. When they think of harm, they think about violence, disease, trafficking, drug addiction, and so on. Physical harm dominates people’s thinking, and they overwhelmingly want to reduce that harm.

### WHAT IS UNSEEN

#### Psychological and emotional trauma

There is another kind of harm that is less obvious to the public. Survivors often discuss psychological and emotional trauma — for example, harm that manifests as a struggle to establish healthy relationships — as the kind of harm that impacts them long after they have left the life.

This internal and long-lasting trauma, which survivors consider inherent in the sex trade, is less visible, and therefore less apparent, to the American public, especially at the outset of conversations with research participants. Once mentioned, however, the idea that prostitution causes lasting psychological and emotional harm, even trauma, is readily accepted. It fits with most people’s common sense understanding of the dangers of this life. And it provides a more complete, accurate, and balanced view of the harms in the sex trade.



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*“Prostitution is harmful, yes it is, because if you’re looking at the news, 2016 alone, how many young females are turning up dead from prostitution?...I mean they’re finding young girls all the time, right here in this area around here, getting murdered for selling their self.”*

African-American woman, 30, Atlanta

*“I think there’s bigger issues, beatings and sex trafficking and other issues that go along with it...STDs, violence.”*

Hispanic woman, 25, Detroit

## WHAT IS UNSEEN

### Who causes harm

Just as trauma is missing from the public dialogue, so too are the perpetrators of harm. Research participants readily talk about the woman in prostitution, but they rarely mention the customers or pimps committing violence.

Our research participants rarely mentioned buyers unless we introduced the topic. Asked why men hire prostitutes or what they think of men who hire prostitutes, our research participants showed both pity and revulsion. Some simply conclude that men have needs, while others assume that these men are flawed in some kind of way and can't find satisfaction in personal relationships with women. In any case, when people think about addressing prostitution, the men who pay don't typically enter the conversation.

Research participants are even more harsh in their assessment of pimps, with most asserting that pimps are brutal and exploitive. Only on rare occasion would a research participant reflect on why a person would become a pimp, and the circumstances or conditions that could lead to life as a pimp. For most, exploiting another person in this way is inexcusable.



*"You can't detach. I'm sure there's a lot of PTSD going on afterwards. I'm sure there's all kinds of — I can't even imagine."*

*A very small percentage wouldn't. A very small percentage wouldn't."*  
Discussion between two White women, 20s, Atlanta

*"It just kills your self-esteem over time. It makes you jaded. Makes you feel used. And it's impossible to form a normal relationship with anybody if you're in that kind of business."*

White woman, 52, Iowa

*"...health risks, PTSD, emotional disorders, physical abuse..."*

Asian-American woman, 21, Atlanta

*"It can harm them psychologically. Both mentally and physically, you kind of become a different person once you get into that line of work. You're kind of letting somebody into your space as your job, and that can harm you."*

White woman, 27, Atlanta

*"It may seem like the right thing to do at the moment for whatever reason — no judgment — but in long term I think those scars are going to wear deep."*

African-American woman, 28, Atlanta

*"It turns into a business. People aren't businesses and they're not machines, so of course it's going to mentally do something eventually."*

White man, 57, Philadelphia

## WHAT IS UNSEEN

### The root causes of harm

Finally, although progressives generally want to protect people from harm, their thinking on the issue is generally "little picture," meaning focused on protecting an individual woman in the moment of violence. They are less likely to see the deeper causes that put a woman in the dangerous situation, like poverty, lack of community resources, limited access to mental health care, or the broken social systems (like a dysfunctional foster care system), systemic racism and sexism that affect whole communities. These systemic issues often prime girls and women to enter the sex trade and make it more difficult for them to exit the life.

And when research participants do connect prostitution to other issues, they can easily misperceive the realities of the sex trade. For example, research respondents often pointed to drug addiction as a cause of prostitution. This actually reverses the causal connection that many experts believe to be true: prostitution leads to drug addiction. There isn't strong resistance to the expert view, however: once the more accurate causal picture was suggested in conversation, research participants could see how drug abuse could result from trying to cope with a life in the sex trade.

*"The whole idea of prostitution is dehumanization... The men who do that are not looking for a person, they're looking for an object."*

White woman, 60s, Detroit

*"I would question his social skills and, you know...I mean, can you not find a date?"*

White man, 64, Philadelphia

*"It's dominating or controlling somebody else for the sake of money, which is, I think completely wrong."*

White man, 57, Philadelphia

*"If stuff happened in their childhood, i.e. rape, molestation, growing up in poverty... not having any education, not knowing that it's something past all this...drugs would maybe make it easier for you to do."*

African-American man, 32, Atlanta

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

*A pair of White women, Detroit natives, co-workers rather than friends — hatless, but bundled up against the January cold. Both are reluctant to condemn the women involved and the choices they make, but are profoundly uncomfortable with prostitution. As the conversation intensifies around the idea of inherent harm, the women interpret the damage of prostitution through their own traumatic experiences — one having escaped an abusive relationship, and the other*

*having been raped at age 14. "It's unreal what that does to you as a person...These women — on the surface they're okay with it, but regardless...I don't want to say there's not a happy ending. I think that people can obviously always overcome a circumstance...but that takes strength, and that takes willpower and that takes a lot of things that — if you're in that bad of a situation — you might not be able to get yourself to."*

# The HER CHOICE perspective

Choice is a top-of-mind consideration for our research participants. After qualifying they're not talking about sex trafficking (see sidebar), all participants describe choice as a dominant reason that women are in the sex trade. For some, the image that comes to mind is an empowered woman who wants this life. Others believe that many women are driven by economic necessity, but choose this path for earning money rather than other options available to them.

THE PUBLIC IS VERY AWARE OF TRAFFICKING, BUT VIEWS DIRECT COERCION, WHEN PEOPLE ARE FORCED INTO PROSTITUTION OR WHEN CHILDREN ARE PROSTITUTED, AS A SEPARATE ISSUE. IN THEIR VIEW, THOSE ARE HEINOUS CRIMES, ALREADY ILLEGAL AND SHOULD BE PROSECUTED, END OF STORY.



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## WHAT IS SEEN

**A choice, whether free will or forced by circumstance**

Many of our research participants described choice in purely libertarian terms. It is her body, she should have the choice of what to do with it. The government, or others, should not have a say in what she does with her body.

Another group of research participants saw choice in a more nuanced way, viewing choices about prostitution as decisions among a range of bad options. For them, economic desperation is a far more common driver than personal desire to embark on this path. However, they still view participation in the sex trade as a choice, where women weigh prostitution as less bad than other options.

These two views of choice tend to coincide with two images of the women in the sex trade: the empowered woman acting of her own free will, and the vulnerable woman acting out of economic desperation. Interestingly, even though these two images seem opposed to each other, participants in our study toggled back and forth between them throughout the conversations.

As will become clear in the discussion that follows, the idea that prostitution is a job is deeply intertwined with the Choice Perspective, and may be part of the reason people believe some level of choice applies, even when a woman is economically desperate.

*"I don't think the government should have any say in what a woman decides to do with her body. I just don't...I mean we're not talking about a rape victim, we're talking about somebody who's choosing — choosing, and willingly engaging in sexual acts with men or women for money."*

White woman, 34, San Francisco

*"I think it's more of a question of liberty than anything else, like letting people choose what they want to do, if it's not harming anyone else."*

South Asian-American woman, 20, Detroit

## WHAT IS SEEN

### One image: The empowered woman

One default image is that of an empowered woman who has many options but who chooses this life because she enjoys it, or enjoys the money she can make.

When thinking of an empowered woman who chooses “sex work,” people tend to equate prostitution with sex, and ideas about trauma are largely suppressed. Therefore, they readily conclude that what two consenting adults choose to do is up to them.

This image coincides with public understanding of the arc of history. For most of our research participants, the arc of history is understood to be bending toward more empowerment for women, especially when it comes to economic independence, sexual liberation and higher status. As a result, for most people it is easy to see de-stigmatizing the exchange of sex for money as a natural part of this story. Young women, in particular, have been raised to believe there are no limits on what they can do or achieve; they control their destiny — including if they choose to earn money

through selling sex. It should be expected, then, that the moral condemnation of the past has been displaced by the libertarian choice stance — “her body, her choice” — even when concerns linger about the nature of the life women find themselves in.

Notably, not all progressives view the sex trade through this model of economic and sexual empowerment. Some of our research participants view the issue through a different feminist lens, as an ongoing exploitation and objectification of women, where men control women for profit and power.

Even so, they often find it awkward to dispute or contradict the voices of the “empowered sex worker” which are prevalent in the public conversation and popular culture. This leads some progressives to conclude that the scenario of exploitation should be changed, so that women become more empowered — for example, by removing the pimps from the equation.

## WHAT IS SEEN

### Another image: The vulnerable, desperate woman

While the picture of the empowered woman has a strong influence on public perception, most research participants note that economic desperation, rather than empowered entrepreneurship, is a far more common reason to end up in the sex trade. Middle-aged and older women respondents, in particular, agonize over the desperation a woman must feel to sell sexual access to her body.

Notably, in contrast with the empowered woman, when thinking of the economically desperate woman, people are more likely to consider the violence and danger in this life as well. They may believe that a woman is weighing physical danger as part of her consideration or is underestimating the danger, but they certainly see it as a risky choice.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

*Two women in their late 40s — old friends who reunited for a lunch on Germantown Ave. in Philadelphia. One is an educator and one has a college-age daughter. They struggle to reconcile — sometimes with laughter and sometimes with real concern — their feminism with the fact that they don't approve of younger women's attitudes about prostitution and hook-up culture. They don't want to sound like scolds, but when sexual liberation means girls have to feel like they want sex — or be OK with sex work — then that doesn't feel like progress. One wonders aloud whether she sounds like her own mother.*

*Across the street from the high school, interviewing two young Black women, both 16 years old, on their way to Atlanta's M L King Day celebrations with flowers woven in their hair. As feminists, they are very much about empowering women, but reject the idea that prostitution offers any such prospect. The women shouldn't be treated as criminals but that doesn't mean prostitution should be accepted. They talk animatedly about prostitution as a chain of male power — men breaking women down with abuse, getting them involved in prostitution, buying them, and then victimizing them with arrest and stigma. The one with braces on her teeth says, “I've read places where it says, ‘oh, it's just a job, we should be treated just like anybody else.’ But if you have to resort to prostitution and stuff like that, it should be taken more as a caution to go help those people, instead of just like, ‘oh, that's normal.’”*

*[Describing her view of a college student in prostitution:] “Well, she's probably fortunate in the sense that she doesn't have to do this, she's choosing to do it. She's probably young enough and pretty enough and conventionally attractive enough to be able to charge higher rates and to be able to have more control and more autonomy over it, as opposed to having a pimp. And she can count on having a higher class of guys who pay better and who tend to be safer.”*

White woman,  
56, Kuna, ID

*“I think that there are some people in the industry who enjoy what they do...I've had friends that it's a part of their identity. It's like, this is who I am and I love doing this, and give me my money.”*

African-American, genderqueer,  
40s, Berkeley

*“I can see prostitution making women feel really good about themselves...They're making money and they're doing what they want to do. If anything, I would say they're maybe being empowered.”*

African-American man,  
19, Atlanta

*“I think that all resorts to patriarchy. Like I'm a feminist, myself, so I don't deal with that sexist type stuff...it all resorts back to the fact that everything has been male-dominated since biblical times. Like they have this sense of dominance that they can take control of whatever it is they want...they've been so rooted in this source of patriarchy for like centuries. It's just like, okay, they think they can do whatever they want.”*

African-American woman,  
16, Atlanta

*“I don't think anybody starts out saying, ‘Oh boy, I can't wait till I can grow up and be a prostitute!’ People are prostitutes because all they have left to sell is themselves...”*

White woman,  
56, Idaho

*“I do hope that there's a point in history where women won't have to do this, because...I don't think women generally actually want to be prostitutes.”*

African-American woman,  
26, Philadelphia

*“Ultimately it's always a choice. But sometimes the choices really aren't that great, and that might be the better choice of a lot of poor choices. But I know a lot of people in poverty who aren't in prostitution, so I know it's not the only choice.”*

White woman,  
54, Atlanta

*“I started my own photography company, and I have gotten to work getting things like that. So I think there's always an outlet that's not taking off your clothes, but I think for some people that is just easier for them to do that, and they're lazy. They don't necessarily want to look for another outlet or option.”*

White man, 24,  
West Hollywood, CA



## WHAT IS SEEN

### A matter of consent

In today's national dialogue there is an ongoing public conversation about consent and sexuality. The main demarcation between appropriate and inappropriate sexuality these days is focused very explicitly around "consent." Consent is understood as implying active agreement — "yes means yes." In contrast, rape is understood as non-consensual sex, including sex with someone who is incapable of consenting. For most people, if a person has sex in exchange for money then this fits with the common sense understanding of consent — she said yes by accepting payment.

People do not go as far as saying accepting payment means women are consenting to violence when it occurs. They believe women should be protected from violence or should be able to report violence without negative personal consequences. However, most also insist that women understand, or should understand, what the risks are.

## WHAT IS SEEN

### Morality and judgement

The Her Choice perspective, for progressives, brings morality into the picture. Sexual mores and choices are moving generally toward acceptance over stigma, especially among progressives. The empowered woman image reinforces the notion that some women enjoy sex for pay, and even the desperate woman image (since it also assumes choice) suggests that some are deciding this is an acceptable way to earn money. Therefore, for both the empowered and desperate woman, people readily apply a "no judgment" lens to their thinking.

For some progressives, this reluctance to interfere in another person's life is parallel with their views on reproductive health in which women have demanded and (in most cases) won a right to control their bodies. In both prostitution and reproductive rights, the focus is on the woman (not the man), and people generally want to support health, safety and autonomy rather than condemning women to harassment, fines and jail cells.

### Prostitution is work, a job

Importantly, many of our research participants view prostitution as a job — as "sex work." That idea shapes people's view of both the empowered woman and the vulnerable, economically desperate woman. If prostitution is simply a job, the thinking goes, then women are weighing their career options and some are choosing sex work as a better alternative than working a minimum wage job in fast food or retail. Millennials, in particular, note the exploitative practices in corporate America, and often conclude that sex work is hardly more exploitative. So whether they are imagining an empowered woman who "likes" sex work or a vulnerable woman who reluctantly decides sex work is the best among bad economic options, according to many members of the public, both are "choosing" this job.

Importantly, in addition to reinforcing the idea that it's a job, the label "sex work" also brings to mind activities outside of prostitution that seem less physically violent or invasive, such as stripping, camming, and so on. In this way, the term "sex work" diverts public thinking away from the types of commercial sex with which people are most uncomfortable — like grooming young girls to enter the sex industry, coercion through economic desperation, or violence and trauma.



DON'T WANT  
TO JUDGE

*"It's a dangerous job. But of course there are other dangerous jobs."*

African-American woman, 20s, Detroit

*"Right, who's being exploited? If I'm making in 10 hours what the lady down the block is making in 40 and is bored to tears... there's a toll in low-wage work, which seems to be the tradeoff for sex work."*

African-American woman, 24, Philadelphia

*"It's like any job like that, if you find yourself in a bad economic situation and don't have the necessary education to do other things, then obviously you are going to find yourself in that kind of a position."*

White woman, 75, Philadelphia

*"It's like when I think of sex worker, yeah, I think of street walkers for like a split second, and then I think of someone online on an escort service, or seeking arrangements or something like that."*

White man, 24, West Hollywood, CA

*"I have had friends who have worked in the adult industry, and I'm not saying that's prostitution, but it's sex work, yeah."*

White man, 44, San Francisco



THE PROBLEM  
OF WORK

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## WHAT IS UNSEEN

### The survivors

The prominence of choice and the idea that prostitution is a job result in several misperceptions of the issue. Most notably, these perspectives feature the “empowered sex worker” as the authority on this topic, including brothel owners portrayed as sex workers and/or business owners. Other voices have little authority, and even survivors, women who have rejected and exited the life, are rarely visible in media coverage or prominent in people’s thinking.

Clearly, people see those in the life as a knowledgeable authority, and hearing from them directly has weight on their thinking. Some assert that authentic voices will help other women and young girls make more informed decisions.

### The circumstances that complicate choice and consent

While most people believe that child neglect and sex abuse play a role in bringing girls and women into the sex trade, circumstances are rarely top-of-mind when people are looking at this issue through the Her Choice perspective. The research makes clear that few people understand or consider the implications of indirect coercion, like the need for belonging that a pimp can provide to a young woman who feels unloved, or the deliberate abuse and manipulation of underage girls that can act as on-ramps to the life. People rarely consider systems failures, like school expulsion or lack of housing, that especially put girls and women of color at risk. In conversation after conversation we found that it is easier and more comfortable for the public to think about the 20-year-old woman in prostitution as an adult with choices. It is much more difficult to confront the idea that she was introduced into this life at the age of 12 or through foster care, for example. That knowledge would require that they, as a responsible and caring member of society, think about whether or not that 20-year-old ever “chose” this life, and if not, the public actions and interventions that are needed to address the situation.

*“Folks can tell the truth about what the work is or what the risks are, or what is not great about it at all, then maybe young women can hear a different narrative. It’s not so secretive and it doesn’t seem quite so enticing or whatever. So I think the more vocal people can be and the more the true tales can be told, and young women can assess for themselves a little better.”*

African-American woman,  
25, Philadelphia



## The SOLUTIONS perspective

**Of the three, the Solutions Perspective is the least common view of prostitution, rarely noted until the researchers prompted it. Solutions for the issue were rarely top-of-mind and few had heard much about effective solutions prior to our discussions with them. Once triggered, nearly all believe the status quo is unacceptable and most are enthusiastic about effective alternatives.**

### WHAT IS SEEN

#### It seems inevitable, so criminalizing women makes little sense

The idea that prostitution is inevitable, that it has always been with us and always will be, is firmly entrenched in public thinking.

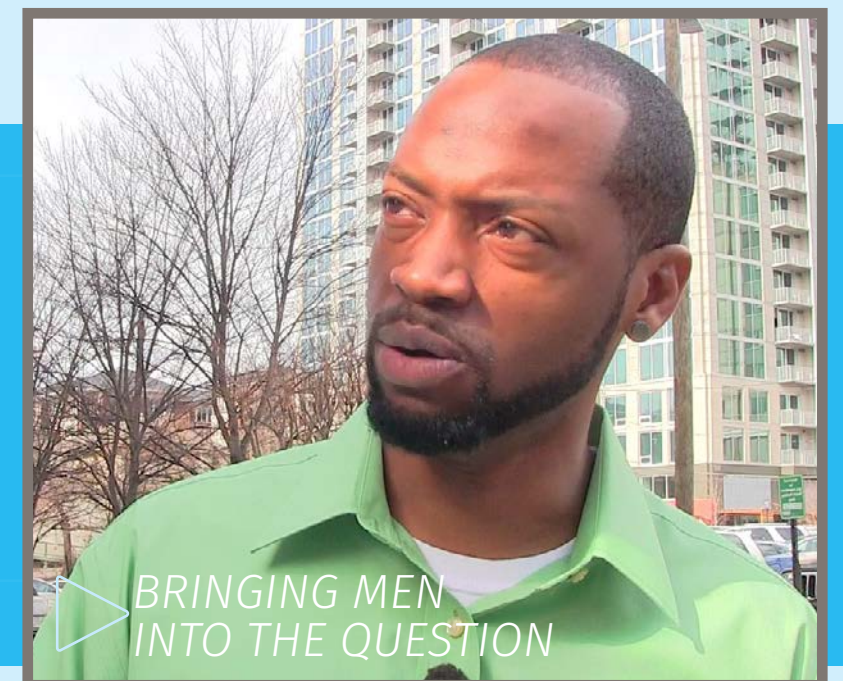
Interestingly, at the same time, participants also articulate near universal frustration that the status quo - violence within the sex trade and arrest as a deterrent for prostitution — is unacceptable. Most are very concerned about the harm that comes with this life, and from the consequences of responding to the issue through the criminal justice system.

There is an emerging consensus that throwing women in jail doesn’t make sense. Whether they think of women in the life as victims or as empowered entrepreneurs, jailing and fining them seems like a nonsensical policy response.

This desire to stop jailing women leads many to suggest legalization as a solution. While they know little about the details and even less about the consequences of legalization, for many progressives, legalizing the sex trade seems to be part of the same progressive trends that have led to marriage equality and legal marijuana. Even for those who do not subscribe to a “her body, her choice” view, at a minimum, it seems that legalization could be a form of harm reduction. Much in the way needle exchange reduces the spread of disease, legalizing the sex trade could reduce physical harm.

*“The answer is not putting people in jail, the answer is trying to create support for those people to get them out of those situations. And it’s a shame our country spends more time putting people in jail than actually being there to support and to get that person out of that environment.”*

White man,  
57, Philadelphia



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*"We've learned from other countries that sometimes when it's legalized, there's more of a protection around the women themselves and the way that they're treated."*

White woman,  
55, San Francisco

*"...the same protections offered to people who choose to do sex work just as the same people who choose to flip burgers or go into medicine or any other service that somebody can provide, professional or otherwise."*

White, transgender,  
35, Portland, OR

*"I guess just like in the places where it is legal, I guess there's regulations and certain standards as to what the people have to abide by and the different things that are and aren't allowed, so I think as long as it's kind of regulated in a way so that they are protected from their clients, which most of the time they won't know, so there is some form of accountability in the event that there is something that does happen."*

Hispanic man,  
22, Berkeley

*"The idea of Germany and how sex work has caused more increase in violence [is] something to think about, because I know people who are for sex work being decriminalized need to understand that it's not going to be as easy. There's definitely caveats that we need to talk about, explain, work through. So I don't think it's a question of, oh, it should just be decriminalized and there it is. I think that proves the point that we should be very careful in decriminalizing sex work."*

Asian-American woman,  
20, Detroit

*"[I]f it increases corporate pimps. It's kind of like I would think of paying people to donate their organs. You're going to pull people who are in need, in desperation, and put them in a situation where they become even more vulnerable instead of like you were saying before addressing their real needs; especially when money gets involved, where unfortunately it's easily made. There isn't very much integrity in that kind of field, and how would you even regulate something like that to make sure the prostitutes participating in it are not detrimental to their mental health?"*

African-American woman,  
31, Philadelphia

## WHAT IS UNSEEN

### The results of legalization

As noted earlier, when people think of "solving" prostitution, they primarily think about addressing the physical harm to the women involved. Our research participants suggest legalization in part because it is the only solution they have heard anything about. However, "legalization" is a confusing term with a range of interpretations. In our conversations, most people assume that legalization includes some form of regulation, for example licensing and/or a range of protections for people in the sex trade.

While people have heard of legalization efforts around the world, there is virtually no awareness of the impact of legalization. Our research participants were unaware that in many contexts, legalization has meant limited or unenforceable regulation that does not adequately protect women from harm, or even reduce the psychological and emotional trauma of the sex trade.<sup>2</sup> When learning about the ongoing harm under legalization, people begin to rethink the solutions.

Further, most participants were unaware that legalization has actually expanded and entrenched prostitution.<sup>3</sup> For example, many people have a surface understanding of legalization in Germany, without knowing how legalization has expanded the scale of the sex trade and even human trafficking.

They assume instead that an entrepreneurial model — perhaps even a cottage industry — has emerged. But, when prompted on how corporations could get involved and control the market, they pause.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, research on legalization in The Netherlands: Huisman, Wim and Kleemans, E.R, "The challenges of fighting sex trafficking in the legalized prostitution market of the Netherlands" (July 2014). *Crime Law and Social Change*: 50 61(2):215-228. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260493897\\_The\\_challenges\\_of\\_fighting\\_sex\\_trafficking\\_in\\_the\\_legalized\\_prostitution\\_market\\_of\\_the\\_Netherlands](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260493897_The_challenges_of_fighting_sex_trafficking_in_the_legalized_prostitution_market_of_the_Netherlands)

<sup>3</sup>The following study demonstrates that legalization generally leads to growth in human trafficking. Cho, Seo-Young and Dreher, Axel and Neumayer, Eric, "Does Legalized Prostitution Increase Human Trafficking?" (January 16, 2012). *World Development*, 41 (1), 2013, pp. 67-82. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/website-archive/GeographyAndEnvironment/neumayer/pdf/Article-for-World-Development--prostitution-anonymous-REVISED.pdf>

## WHAT IS UNSEEN

### A clear picture of a range of solutions

The public tends to focus on legalization because it is the only solution they have heard of. The flip side of this limited perspective is there is little awareness of effective prevention and reduction efforts. There have been a number of small, yet promising efforts to prevent people from ending up in the sex trade, and to help people leave the life, but these solutions have not entered public consciousness. The lack of visibility for these successes leads people to assume that there are no solutions apart from legalization.

Effective solutions that prevent people from entering the life, that shrink demand, including decriminalization of selling but not buying sex, and strategies that provide exit ramps out of the life, are widely supported when our research participants hear about them. The research convincingly shows that the public is hungry for solutions to this issue, and increased discussion of effective and comprehensive solutions can lead to more complete public understanding and dialogue.

Finally, while people do not want to criminalize women, they are open to the idea that focusing on the buyers is a necessary strategy to shrink the industry. As noted earlier, the lens on this issue is dominated by the image of a woman in the sex trade. Bringing attention to the buyer's complicity brings men into the picture and makes a case for keeping buyers accountable.

*"Considering it's going to be here, it's not going to go away and it's always going to be around, it's just the way humans are, we can at least allow it."*

White man,  
31, San Francisco

*"I'd like it to be completely legal and protected. Prostitution has been around. It's not like hiding it is going to make it go away. It's been around for like thousands of years."*

Asian-American woman,  
34, San Francisco



*"If you're just legalizing it and then pumping money and lobbying with corporations to increase those profits, that's not really fixing the social or health problems... The exit bridge should be more so the focus."*

African-American man,  
27, Philadelphia

*"Whenever you spend money on something, it supports that product... and you're part of creating the demand and justifying the supply... you're going to be financially supporting an industry that is doing a lot of very bad things, and probably more bad things than you could really come up with."*

White man,  
23, Massachusetts

*"I don't think sometimes people — especially in America — thinks about once they're buying a product — where does it come from? Who had to work for this? Just like diamonds! You got blood diamonds."*

African-American man, 32

*"I think it really goes back to men, right? Because if men didn't want prostitution you wouldn't have prostitutes."*

White man,  
23, Atlanta



## IMPLICATIONS: WHEN THE UNSEEN IS SEEN

**We heard consistently throughout our research that American progressives care deeply about protecting women from harm, about affirming the legitimacy of women's choices, about creating solutions to the violence within the sex trade and about the need to stop throwing women in jail.**

Yet, people's narrow lens for prostitution limits the types of solutions they imagine and support. All of these undercurrents in progressives' understanding bias them toward legalization as a solution, even though most are uneasy with that policy objective.

However, this research also finds that much of what is currently unseen, once made visible, leads them to a different set of solutions. As people grapple with what is initially hidden from view, their lens expands and they can recognize the systemic factors that may lead to a life in the sex trade, the deeper traumas that accompany that life, and the need to reduce the number of women and girls affected by the life. They become aware of and support a broader range of solutions to accomplish what they care most about while making progress on the problem.

This shift in perspective as people consider the issue suggests several implications for how public discourse and understanding can evolve.

## A PERSON-CENTRIC VIEW LIMITS, WHILE A SYSTEMS-CENTERED VIEW EXPANDS UNDERSTANDING.

As noted earlier, a “person-centric” view is prevalent on this issue, and the result is that people:

- Can easily get trapped in an internal conflict over “defining choice and consent” rather than focus on how to improve lives.
- View prostitution as a job like any other, with a need for labor rights with protections, regulations, and so on, rather than see that prostitution for most women can’t be compartmentalized in the way a job can; it affects multiple aspects of a person’s life, even after that person leaves the sex trade.
- Focus on addressing physical violence in the moment, rather than addressing the conditions that lead to prostitution in the first place.

While it is often not top-of-mind, progressives readily see how systems and conditions can exacerbate prostitution once it comes up in conversation. Connecting the dots to flawed systems (such as the sex-abuse-to-prison pipeline for girls of color, or the role of foster care as an on-ramp to the sex trade), to conditions (like poverty and lack of opportunity), and to effective interventions (like crisis centers, counseling) causes people to conclude that prostitution is not inevitable and leads them to support a wide range of policy and program solutions — prevention and intervention — which create a more comprehensive approach to improve lives.



*“It’s a dangerous line of work and most people wouldn’t do it voluntarily. Or if they had better choices, other choices, they probably would go for those choices. And for the people who do choose to do it, yeah, they should have proper protection I think.”*

Asian-American woman, 34, San Francisco

*“It’s a dangerous game. If they were to legalize it, I think it would be a little bit safer.”*

African-American man, 26, San Francisco

## A CLEARER VIEW OF TRAUMA LEADS TO DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS.

Physical violence currently dominates people’s thinking. Because physical harm is something that is associated with illegal or underground contexts, many people intuitively conclude that the sex trade can be cleaned up, or made safer for those involved (even if some physical risk may always remain). Their desire to protect people from harm leads some to conclude that legalization makes sense — as a means to mitigate harm. If it’s legal and out of the shadows, they believe, then the violence will largely disappear. If it is regulated, they assume, then STDs can be cleaned up.

In our research, participants readily deepened their view of the harms of the sex trade. When prompted to explore the idea of non-physical violence, they could quickly shift to thinking through the multiple types of harm that often occur, including psychological and emotional trauma that cannot be regulated away.

Further, when people understand the mental and emotional trauma that often occurs in addition to physical harm, and see that this kind of harm is inherent in this life, they are then more likely to conclude that the act of prostitution can’t simply be improved or made safe. They begin to believe that it isn’t possible to regulate away the trauma.



*“In the back of my mind I’ve always thought about some of the countries who have legalized prostitution, and I think maybe they’re more progressive than we are in...STD testing, keeping underage children out of the situation, those kinds of things. But now having this conversation further, I’m thinking more about the*

*long-term harm that it can do, and it makes me weigh on not legalizing...I see the long-term harm that it could be to our families, our culture, everything. I’m kind of moving away from my first thought of being more progressive about it, to maybe we don’t need to be so progressive about this.”*

White woman, 56, Atlanta

**A CLEARER DEFINITION OF SUCCESS LEADS TO SUPPORT FOR COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTIONS.**

Initially, our research subjects narrowly defined success as improving the health and safety of those in the life. That definition causes some to conclude that legalization makes sense by bringing prostitution out of the shadows. Health and safety statistics are important, of course, but they cause people to focus on those currently in the life and end up obscuring how we can ensure fewer people in harm's way in the first place.

The number of people involved became the primary measure of success for many research participants when they learned that legalization actually grows the sex trade, as it has in countries like Germany. This is a new idea for most, and the result is that many become concerned and conclude that legalization would be a mistake.



*"Definitely, what you said about how in Germany legalizing prostitution actually has made things worse, that's something I had never heard of before and I would like to learn more about. Because you think that having something be legislated would make it better, but maybe it doesn't always, so that's something that I'll be thinking about."*  
 White woman, 40, Detroit

*"It's never going to be a quote-unquote — normal business — and I could see how legalization could grow it...I wouldn't like that."*  
 Hispanic woman, 26, Atlanta

*"I don't think it should be decriminalized then, just because it can... like you said, the statistics, it would go up. It would go up, and there's more people that's getting into it and it would be more looked at as okay in society."*  
 African-American man, 32, Detroit

*"If the case is, as you said, that legalizing prostitution makes the industry of sex trafficking, human trafficking, a much bigger issue, then that could be a big concern."*  
 Asian-American woman, 34, San Francisco

*"It's just like weed. If they legalize marijuana, more people will smoke it, and if they legalize prostitution more people will sell their vaj."*  
 African-American woman, 27, Atlanta



▶ TO GROW OR TO SHRINK

View this interview at [seenunseen.topospartnership.com](http://seenunseen.topospartnership.com)



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In today's public dialogue, Americans often see prostitution only through the lens of the individual woman. As a result, the conversation quickly becomes a debate about individual women's lives and choices, including how they may avoid, invite, or rise above victimization and violence. This person-centric focus forefronts some solutions and leaves many others out of the picture.

However, we found that as Americans consider this seemingly intractable social issue, they sincerely want to find effective solutions to improve lives. While the currently popular narrative of the empowered sex worker has traction, most of our research respondents believe that is an atypical situation. More common, they believe, is the economically vulnerable person who turns to the sex trade out of desperation or lack of better options. In either scenario, however, many are drawn to legalization and even regulation as a solution. Legalization is appealing both because they haven't heard of alternatives, and critically, because they falsely believe that the harms associated with the sex trade can be removed by taking prostitution "out of the shadows" through legalization.

At its core, American public policy is shaped by perception. Despite best intentions to protect women from harm and find solutions to the sex trade, we found that what is unseen by the American public when it comes to this issue has led to a national dialogue that is imbalanced. That national dialogue focuses on a narrow set of solutions that place the onus on the individual to improve her life and gets the rest of society off the hook. Most importantly, this research suggests that when those gaps are filled and misperceptions corrected, the American public is very supportive of a wider set of solutions — prevention and intervention — which will lead to a more comprehensive approach to improve lives of women, men, girls and boys across our society.

We, as a society, will have a more balanced understanding when, revisiting our hypothetical 23-year-old Mary, people see not just the physical bruises, but also the psychological and emotional trauma that lasts; understand that Mary's seeming "choice" in the present was really chosen for her long ago by conditions and systemic failures; are aware of the range of effective solutions that enable more girls and women to avoid the life altogether; and, determine that full decriminalization, or legalization, grows the problem by exposing more people to this life. When the public begins to see all these complex dynamics, we will make broader gains on this seemingly intractable issue.



#### ABOUT TOPOS

Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately *transform the landscape of public understanding* where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, *real change* depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support. For more information: [www.topospartnership.com](http://www.topospartnership.com). Or email us: [team@topospartnership.com](mailto:team@topospartnership.com)

# METHODS

## The Topos Approach

The goal of a Topos project is to identify the existing cultural common sense — the hidden patterns of understanding that shape citizen engagement. Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals — a cognitive linguist, a public opinion expert, and a cultural anthropologist — the Topos approach is designed to give advocates a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting. Importantly, the research is not intended to drill down into the specifics of how Americans regard *particular events*, policies, proposals, or individuals. Instead, it aims to assess the most fundamental aspects of the current cultural and cognitive landscape.

The research for this project consisted of cognitive elicitations, a Virtual Community Forum (VCF), and ethnography. The methods are designed to yield complementary findings as the researchers move between one and another. At every stage of the research, a particularly diverse set of subjects was recruited in order to account for patterns of age, class, race and gender.

## Cognitive Elicitations

In October 2016, Topos researchers conducted a set of 20 in-depth phone interviews with a diverse group of Americans recruited from around the country. The goal of these semi-structured interviews is to approximate a natural conversation and to encourage subjects to think aloud about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or heard before. The conversations ranged from 30-40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The subjects of the elicitations included 11 women and 9 men of various ages, all of whom identified themselves as liberal on social issues. 70% of participants identify as White and 30% identify as a person of color.

## Ethnography

The strength of the anthropological approach is to provide a deeper view into people's experience of the world. The primary tool of anthropology is ethnography — the observation and description of people in their natural environments, and the effort to engage with people on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed by the researcher.

Between October 2016 and January 2017, Topos researchers conducted ethnography in four US cities: Atlanta, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Detroit. Ethnographers spoke with 293 individuals, 56% of whom were White, 29% African-American and 16% other people of color including Hispanics and Asian-Americans. 180 identified as female, 110 as male and 3 as non-binary.

## Virtual Community Forum (VCF)

A VCF is an online interaction over several days among a diverse set of two dozen or so individuals who respond to questions, to materials, and to each other, on their own schedule. The VCF process allows us to observe how thinking evolves over time, as well as how dynamics play out in interactive settings including both single-gender and mixed-gender conversations. It enables us to introduce ideas and frames over the course of several days and determine what aspects seem to stick with people and which fall away.

In December of 2016, a Virtual Community Forum brought together a diverse group of 27 adults from around the country who participated over five days in online discussions. The subjects of the VCF included 14 women and 13 men of various ages, all of whom identified themselves as liberal on social issues. 56% of the sample was White, and 44% people of color.



