Debra Boyer, PhD - Child Abuse and Prostitution: The Connection
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Summary of Remarks
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Child Abuse and Prostitution: The Connection

I would like to acknowledge the many leaders, mentors, and teachers in the room. You represent decades of work on public awareness, prevention, and treatment of child abuse and violence against women.

The dialogue on international victims of sex trafficking helped change the perspective on domestic victims. In recent years, more people have understood that prostitution and sex trafficking are part of systematic sexual violence against women and children, and that includes domestic victims of sex trafficking.

As a result, we are seeing strong cooperation and collaboration across agencies and systems to address the commercial sexual exploitation of minors and sex trafficking.

Now, I can walk into a room of legislators, service providers, juvenile justice, police, and prosecutors, and we are all talking the same language. They have all come to understand that we are talking about victims, not criminals.

This has not always been the case. We need to understand why this has been so we can take the next steps.

- Prostitution has not always been included in the movement to address sexual violence against women and children.
- This is due largely to people’s perceptions and beliefs that prostituted persons were not victims.
- The perception has been that they were making a choice to prostitute.

Beginning in the late 1970’s, I began several research studies at the University of Washington with my mentor, Jennifer James, PhD. We were studying female criminality, substance abuse, and prostitution. This was during the last wave of feminism, which included advocacy for awareness and policy change against all forms of violence against women, particularly domestic violence and rape.

In this context, and based on interview data from a pilot study, we decided to ask a series of questions in our interviews with women that had not been asked before in studies of prostitution.

Up until this time, “prostitutes” were considered the cause of prostitution. It was believed by many that if we could just get rid of prostitutes - arrest them all - we could get rid of prostitution. And in fact, historically 1 customer was arrested for every 100 prostituting women.
This view was backed by social scientists and criminologists of the day, illustrated by these quotes:

- *Prostitution is the safety valve for preventing adultery, rape, and child molestation.*
- *If you have to arrest someone, arrest the women, they have so little to lose.*
- *Punishing customers would disrupt and derange society.*
- *If ended, prostitution it would lead to rape.*

Well, guess what? Rape and prostitution are just flip sides of the same coin, sexual violence against women and children.

The question we asked in our studies was: What is your sexual history? Were you ever molested, were you ever raped? It had not been asked.

Many of you are aware of what we found, a very high prevalence of childhood sexual abuse prior to involvement in prostitution. It had happened early, repeatedly, often with multiple offenders and often with violence. It happened to the girls and boys in our studies of adolescent prostitution. These findings have been replicated many times.

We saw the pattern; the molested 4 year old became the raped 11 year old, and the prostituted 13 year old. Poor women, and women and girls of color had higher rates of victimization. There continues to be a disproportionate number of women of color arrested and incarcerated for prostitution. The complex trauma of child abuse, and for many, the additional factors of racism and poverty significantly increased the danger and vulnerability to sex trafficking.

So began the decade’s long march to reframe the prostituted child and woman, not as offenders but as victims, and survivors.

Then we asked another question: What do we do with this knowledge. We quickly focused on child abuse prevention and launched Committee for Children in the early 1980’s. We began with our first curriculum, *Talking About Touching*. Then we took the next step, the *Second Step Curriculum*, to focus on preventing victimizers by teaching social and emotional learning concepts including empathy.

Our Intention was to get to abused children early and tell them what they had never been told before we saw them on the streets:

- We knew this happened,
- It was wrong, it was not their fault
- There was someone they could tell
- They would be believed
- We would help it stop
- And this does not determine the kind of woman or man you will become

We have known for decades that prostituted children were victims of physical and sexual abuse, and parental neglect, extreme poverty, and racism prior to exploitation in prostitution. Why has it taken so long for the connection between child abuse and prostitution to be accepted and believed?

The belief persists that prostitution is a choice, even if the prostituted person is age 12, 13, or 14 years old. We still arrest and charge them as prostitutes. We must ask, who does this serve?
It is important to confront the perception of choice, and the false dichotomy often set up as a result. When prostitution is perceived as a choice, it serves to legitimize the violence women and children suffer in prostitution because they “chose” it. You are aware of beliefs that prostitutes cannot be raped. The perception of choice put the responsibility on the child, not on the men who buy them, and not on the cultural system of sexual violence that creates them.

It is still not fully understood that prostitution is not a choice:

- Money does not translate to consent,
- Money doesn’t turn humans into things/objects that can be raped and beaten,
- Prostitution starts with child abuse, which continues in the sexual violence of prostitution.

In recent years many local organizations working against sexual violence and sex trafficking have joined forces, and we have had great successes and collaboration:
- Washington State has an excellent protective legal framework and received a perfect score from the Polaris Institute for our comprehensive trafficking legislation.
- For example, we no longer use the phrase “patronizing a juvenile prostitute” in our statutes, but refer to the commercial sexual abuse of a minor.
- We have increased penalties as well.
- A group of philanthropists, Stolen Youth, have formed to focus fundraising efforts on prostituted youth, and their work includes funding projects focused on buyers.
- There is support for adult women survivors, and I would like to introduce the Organization for Prostitution Survivors, who are represented here.
- We are increasing treatment, and shifting from a criminal to a victim-centered approach. The Center for Children and Youth Justice is implementing a victim-centered protocol for CSEC in 5 pilot sites across the State of Washington.
- We see increased support and collaboration with police and prosecutors, who have been our strongest supporters.
- There is increased work and focus on the demand side of this problem including work on sex buyer interventions, trainings on male accountability, and increased law enforcement internet stings.

We are now seriously addressing the issue of demand and not just rolling our eyes.

But, we have more to do. The pipeline from child abuse to prostitution is still packed. We are not getting to them early enough. We have good systems of service for sexual assault victims, but children are not being seen and not getting the support they need.
- We need to take a good look at what we are doing for prevention
- What have we learned through our other collaborations on CSEC that we can now apply to vulnerable and abused children before they are involved in prostitution
- How can we collaborate and wraparound the 8 year old in foster care so they are protected
- What more can we do for the adolescent who is raped and not sure where she can go, and what kind of a woman she may become.
We need now to bring our knowledge, power, and organizations together and work on prevention at early stages and younger ages to interrupt the cycle of abuse to prostitution.

- CSEC should be subject to mandatory reporting to CPS
- A child should never be called a prostitute for any legal proceeding.
- A child should never be arrested and charged with prostitution.

But, we must get to primary prevention. We have developed collaborative models and wraparound protocols for adolescents. Let’s think about how this can be applied to younger children who are at risk.

And always, we must envision a world without prostitution, and a world in which there is absolutely no defense for the use of a child or woman’s body in prostitution.

Debra Boyer is a Cultural Anthropologist in private practice, an Affiliate Assistant Professor in the Department of Gender, Women and Sexualities Studies and the School of Social Work at the University of Washington, and is the Executive Director for the Organization for Prostitution Survivors in Seattle. She has over 25 years experience as the Principal Investigator of studies on runaway and homeless youth, urban street subcultures, sexually exploited adolescents, adult prostitution and criminal behavior, adolescent pregnancy, and women’s reproductive health. Dr. Boyer’s current work focuses on ethnographic methods to inform policy and practice. She recently completed two studies on Homeless Street Populations, and is the author of Who Pays the Price: An Assessment of Youth Involvement in Prostitution in Seattle. Dr. Boyer is an advocate for children’s causes. She is a co-founder of the Committee for Children, which develops and supports implementation of abuse prevention and social and emotional learning curricula. These curricula are implemented in 25,000 school districts in the United States and in twenty-six countries. Dr. Boyer is an emerita member of the Board of Directors of Committee for Children.