

Review: Yen, Iris “Of vice and men: A new approach to eradicating sex trafficking by reducing male demand through educational programs and abolitionist legislation.” *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 2008. Vol. 98:653-686.

Laura Johnson

Iris Yen (2008) highlights the factors that promote global sex trafficking, a “thriving modern-day slave trade” (654), in this insightful article that calls attention to the evasion of male recognition and responsibility as the perpetrators of the industry’s demand and growth. Yen provides a clear breakdown of the problem; discusses the identities and psychologies of male buyers and related legislation, programs and case studies; and concludes with a concrete plan for social change rather than with abstract theories. Yen’s article, however, falls short as it glosses over the fundamental underlying forces that must be targeted in order to truly facilitate change: patriarchal structures of male dominance, female subordination and biases of class, race and space.

According to Yen, more than 700,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year; of these trafficked victims, 80 percent are women and nearly 50 percent are minors. Poor women and girls from developing countries are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, most commonly sex trafficking. A practice of “shocking magnitude and brutality” (654) fueled by the international demand for purchased sex acts, sex trafficking affects two million women and girls who are bought and sold into “sexual slavery” (656) each year. Yen estimates that global profits are between \$7 and \$12 billion annually, numbers that are growing rapidly. Trafficked women develop severe and permanent physical, emotional, mental and psychological trauma. Many of them contract HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. They face anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, social exclusion and even death.

Fueling this brutal industry is the male demand for commercial sex services, yet it has “largely evaded the scrutiny of scholars, anti-trafficking activists, and law enforcement alike” (655). Yen outlines legislation and protocols that have attempted to address male demand but fallen short, including the United Nation’s 2000 “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children.” This protocol called for measures to

“discourage” demand fostering sex trafficking and exploitation, a term that Yen deems too weak and abstract to be effective. Sweden, on the other hand, tangibly criminalizes the purchasers of commercial sex with fines and jail sentences while simultaneously leading a nationwide anti-sex trafficking public awareness campaign through legislation passed in 1998. However, the law has had the unintended consequence of increasing sex trafficking in neighboring countries rather than deterring traffickers altogether.

Yen goes on to highlight the heterogeneous groups of men from every country in the world that fuel the problem as well as common rationales and myths that perpetuate the industry, including “she does it because she likes it,” “she chooses to do it” and “prostitutes make a lot of money” (671). Finally, she provides two case studies that have effectively curbed male demand through education: a series of educational workshops in the Philippines and a San Francisco-based program, the First Offender Prostitution Program (FOPP), which couples law enforcement and fines for first-time offenders with an educational and rehabilitative program. She concludes with a multi-stage plan for action that follows Sweden’s legislative model, focuses on re-education and the reshaping of male perspectives and calls for a U.S.-led global effort to fight sex trafficking through demand-oriented measures with international cooperation.

Despite the strengths of Yen’s analysis and critique, she assumes that “sex trafficking is fundamentally an economic problem” (655). But while poverty and economic pressures are undeniably large contributors, they alone cannot explain the existence and growth of the industry. Yen identifies the most common factors promoting sex trafficking as: “an increase in poverty and unemployment in developing countries, the lack of educational and economic opportunities for women and the consequent feminization of poverty, the rise of globalization and increased mobility, the expansion of transnational organized crime, the widening economic gap between developing and developed countries, and gender-based social inequalities” (657). This final factor, gender-based social inequalities, is included as something of an afterthought, yet inequalities of gender as well as class, race and space (i.e. urban-rural biases) are at the fundamental core of male demand and thus the industry’s continuity. When Yen does mention gender roles, she focuses on societal notions of masculinity but fails to address equally important notions of femininity. Finally, she briefly refers to eliminating gender inequalities as “critical, but very long-term, solutions” (685).

While these solutions are indeed long term, they are nevertheless vitally important. In order to decrease the demand for sex trafficking, it is necessary to address the underlying structural factors that justify and perpetuate the industry. While the male re-education and legislation Yen advocates are indeed effective tools in this respect, her argument is strengthened when coupled with the empowerment of women and the deterioration of gendered inequalities and mindsets. Desensitization to the sexual objectification of women must be achieved by breaking down ingrained notions of male dominance, female subordination, racism and spatial biases in both men and women in developed and developing countries alike.