

How Buying Sex Evolved Into Helping Prostitutes: Ann Woolner

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Commentary by Ann Woolner

March 4 (Bloomberg) -- One morning this week, two Georgia lawmakers did a remarkable thing. These Republican men from affluent, conservative districts stood before the state House of Representatives to speak up for teenage prostitutes.

Girls are manipulated and violated, held captive through violence, isolation, threats, economic dependence and emotional abuse, said Majority Whip Edward Lindsey, whose district covers the wealthiest neighborhoods of Atlanta.

“Right now there are hundreds of girls all across Atlanta and this region who are waiting in hotel rooms to be purchased by men on the Internet,” said Representative Buzz Brockway, from the suburbs northeast of the city.

My, how times have changed. In the 1950s, when Georgia lawmakers came to the state’s biggest city for their annual legislative sessions, they held their own “whore auctions,” says historian Clifford Kuhn, who teaches at Georgia State University.

The legislator with the winning bid didn’t always keep the prize for himself. Sometimes he’d give her to a key constituent in exchange for continued support at election time, says Kuhn.

As for the woman, traditional views of the prostitute justified whatever came her way. Whether considered a good-time girl, a fallen woman, a call girl leading a life of glamour, she

had chosen her lot. And though she was a lawbreaker, hers was a victimless crime.

Maybe there are some happy hookers out there, but they are a comparative few within a sea of misery that their outsized myth helps create. If you meet such a person, ask her how she started out in the business and how old she was.

Victim Status

Increasingly, the prostitute is now understood to be a trafficked object, a slave to a pimp, a victim trapped in demeaning, dangerous servitude.

What if she's too young to legally consent to sex? State laws say she is a victim of rape even if she willingly engaged in sex. But if money's involved, she can be jailed as a prostitute in most states, even if a pimp forced her into it.

With so many conflicting views, it can be difficult to write laws to help people brutalized by those who buy and sell them. If she's a victim, she should be protected. If she's a criminal, she should be prosecuted.

In grappling with such conflicts, states across the country have been rewriting laws to make it tougher on traffickers, pimps and johns and easier on those they prostitute.

Twenty-Five Years

New York, Illinois and Washington state, for example, have so-called safe harbor laws that “insure that children, from the moment they are discovered in prostitution, are assisted with services rather than placed in the juvenile justice system,” says Mary Ellison, policy director for the Polaris Project in Washington, D.C.

At the same time, beefed-up sentences meant a 25-year stint for an Iowa man who prostituted two runaway teens. In Louisiana, a man who kept a 15-year-old in a motel room while pimping her got 18 years.

This week, the Georgia House passed some of the most progressive legislation in the country on the subject. The vote was 168-1, and when it passed the lawmakers broke into applause.

For traffickers, pimps and johns, the bill imposes higher fines and longer sentences, which get even longer if their victims are young. There would be a 25-year minimum prison sentence for using coercion to traffic someone under 18. Buying sex with a 16-year-old would bring a sentence of at least 5 years. Younger than that and it’s a 10-year minimum.

Jail Pass

At least as important, the bill would make it harder for the sellers and buyers of sex to defend themselves. Didn’t know her age? Wouldn’t matter. Was she previously involved in selling sex? It would be harder for pimps to raise that as a defense.

As for the prostituted child or adult (regardless of gender), the Georgia bill would offer a get-out-of-jail-free card to those who can show they were coerced into it. Physical abuse, threats, confinement, destruction of immigration documents, drugging, financial control -- all would be considered coercion and could be used as a defense against a prostitution charge.

It's not everything advocates had wanted. Children can still be prosecuted, and it doesn't set up services to help them get out of prostitution.

But it's a giant step forward. And it applies to those trafficked for labor servitude, not just for sexual purposes.

Bipartisan

The legislation is headed for likely passage in the Senate, an assembly that caters to the Christian Coalition on issues like the Sunday sale of alcohol.

But on this one, people usually on opposite sides of social issues came together: religious groups and feminists, Republicans and Democrats.

The new Republican attorney general, Sam Olens, contributed ideas he picked up from the National Association of Attorneys General. Prosecutors worked on the bill with a group called A Future Not a Past, which aims at ending the prostitution of girls. Georgia Women for a Change suggested approaches from

national anti-trafficking organizations. A Baptist group that last year opposed a bill that would have banned prosecuting underage prostitutes supported this one.

Atlanta's public radio and television stations ran special reports on the topic. A conservative columnist for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Kyle Wingfield, lauded the bill.

A state commission and a private study opened lawmakers' eyes to the deeply troubling scope of the problem and its consequences.

"We created a cultural shift," says Stephanie Davis, executive director of Georgia Women for a Change.

A cultural shift is exactly what it took.