

Human Trafficking vs Prostitution – What’s the difference?

The definition of *human trafficking*, according to the United Nations, is *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by improper means (such as force, abduction, fraud, or coercion) for an improper purpose including forced labor or sexual exploitation.*

Prostitution is defined as *the practice or occupation of engaging in sexual activity with another for compensation.*

While the term *prostitute* generally refers to a person who enters the sex industry of their own choice, there are often many coercive factors that influence a person’s decision to prostitute themselves.

In fact, the word *prostitute* (or *prostitution*) is deceptive because those who “choose” to sell their bodies for sex most often do so very reluctantly or against their will. Here are 7 common reasons why people become prostitutes:

- (1) *Lack of other options.* Most prostitutes lack sufficient education or marketable skills to compete in areas where the economy is depressed or in already-saturated labor markets. In the Philippines, for example, the glut of job applicants allows owners of small convenience stores to require two-year college degrees for the positions of clerk or stock person.
- (2) *Coercion from society.* Women in many cultures are told they have little value, and from a young age are taught that “serving men is all I am good for.” This stigma is placed even more harshly upon rape victims, young widows, and those abandoned by their husbands.
- (3) *Familial obligations.* Many children with younger siblings live in cultures that emphasize caring for family members at any cost (especially those in poor rural villages). To make matters worse, many parents heap guilt upon older children who do not sacrifice themselves for the economic betterment of their families.
- (4) *Desperation.* Poverty is a powerful force that fuels human trafficking. Poor individuals living in desperate conditions sometimes feel they have nothing to lose by selling themselves. Many fall for a lottery-like pipe dream that says a foreign client will one day marry them, rewarding their sacrifice and making them and their families rich.
- (5) *Trusted relatives, friends or boyfriends.* Most victims of trafficking are tricked by someone they know and trust. Young male recruiting agents pretend to court young women for a period of time, then suddenly hand them off to middlemen who transport them to hidden locations where rape, beatings, drugs and/or deprivation are used to break their wills and make them compliant. Once accomplished, victims are sent to work the streets, in

brothels, at private parties, or wherever their pimps and handlers determine the most money can be made from clients paying to exploit their “merchandise.”

- (6) *A shame-filled past.* Childhood rape, molestation or other abuse often lowers a person’s barriers to dangerous activity because they have been made to feel “like trash.” This emotional state allows them to see their involvement in prostitution or the making of pornography as an unavoidable “fate” they deserve.
- (7) *Popular media.* The internet now reaches into all the world via cheaply available smart phones that provide constant barrages of advertisements, music, movies and other pop culture that glamorize the lifestyle of a prostitute (what to them appears to be expensive clothing, shoes, makeup and bling) and selling an artificial image of someone who has value and importance. This communicates to young women that a prostitute—because she cares for no one but herself—can control others through the use of their sexual wares and attain a level of economic affluence never dreamed of previously.

So, human trafficking and prostitution, although defined a bit differently, are both caused by many of the same factors. And although some well-meaning people rightly seeking to dignify sex workers by dignifying prostitution as a profession like any other, the reality for most individuals suggests it is simply another form of human trafficking.

Thankfully, growing public awareness is gradually changing the perception of the prostitute from *vixen* to *victim*. But “rescuing” a woman from the bondage of prostitution first requires the elimination or substantial reduction of the coercive pressures placed upon her, and then relocation to a safe environment where she can transition to a new life. This process helps protect those who have been prostituted for longer periods of time from the strong undertow of current that beckons them to return to the place she feels most secure, even if that means being exploited again (a psychological phenomenon related to what’s become known as Stockholm Syndrome).

What can I do to stop Human Trafficking?

Here are 5 things you can do to fight human trafficking:

- (1) *Support trustworthy human trafficking organizations that are effectively working to rescue victims and protect the most vulnerable, including at-risk children;*
- (2) *Become aware of how human traffickers work in your area, and be ready to call 911 or a human trafficking hotline such as 1-888-373-7888 if you see highly suspicious activity;*
- (3) *Educate yourself so that you can speak to friends and those you meet at community or school events, and warn children in your own family;*
- (4) *Take in a foster child or volunteer to help at-risk children at your church or other community center; and*



(5) Have compassion and pray for prostitutes you see on the streets—in an honest moment the vast majority would much rather choose another life for themselves.

The size of the human trafficking problem is overwhelming and difficult to grasp, and often discourages us from taking action. But as individuals become informed, communicate the problem, and support organizations in the fight, change can happen. It happens one person at a time. So please help that ONE today.

Each one of them is Jesus in disguise. –Mother Teresa