

“The thing I would want them to say to me would be...do you feel in danger?”

– QUINTECIA, SURVIVOR

Today, most women in the sex trade can't turn to law enforcement for help. This needs to change.

Are they victims? Or are they criminals?

Criminal justice systems across the US fail to have a clear and consistent approach towards girls and women in the Life. From individual police officers and legal frameworks to juvenile probation officers and judges, this confusion can permeate every woman's encounter with law enforcement. The impact is enormous.

In some cases, women are at risk of being abused by the very people who have sworn to serve and protect them.

The power differential between an officer and a woman leaves her with little recourse. A study in Chicago found that 24% of women in prostitution who said they were raped stated that a police officer was the perpetrator.¹

Arrest, incarceration and a criminal record keep women from starting new lives.

As a result, the things she needs to successfully exit the sex trade become even harder to obtain. These are basic needs like housing, a job and custody of her kids.

Prostitution is beginning to be understood as a crime of sexual violence, not vice.

There is a growing awareness that victims of sexual exploitation need support and services, not judgment and punishment. This systemic shift can change the way girls and women are perceived and treated by law enforcement even when laws that criminalize them remain in place.

“

We used to arrest about 80% women and 20% men. Now, it's the other way around. About 80% of our prostitution-related arrests are the buyers and sellers of women.

– MIKE, POLICE OFFICER SEX TRAFFICKING UNIT

”

70%

Women made up 70% of prostitution-related arrests in Massachusetts.²

The Life Story

MOMENTS OF CHANGE.

Sharing the voices of survivors of sexual exploitation. Revealing the opportunities we all have to create a better world for girls and women.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

STEPS TOWARD CHANGE

It can start small scale with a trusting relationship between a police officer and a woman in the Life and build until a new safety net is in place with new collaborations, policies and laws.

Build trust.

Putting exploited women in jail intensifies their trauma and can drive them back to traffickers. When officers are patient, reliable supporters, however, they create an opportunity for an exploited woman to see her situation differently. She may not be able to accept help immediately, but with time and trust she will know where to turn when she's ready.

Create a new safety net.

Sex trafficking task forces can bring systems and providers together to protect and support victims in a trauma-informed way. Law enforcement can't do it alone.

Decriminalize those sold for sex.

Safe Harbor and vacatur laws are a start. However, women say their greatest need is shifting the laws to connect exploited girls and women to services rather than arrest, prosecution and incarceration.

Reduce harm by reducing demand.

Across the US, counties and cities are seeking to reduce the harm of the sex trade by deterring those who buy sex and punishing those who sell others for sex. The criminal justice system can do its part by arresting buyers while increasing their awareness about the inherent psychological and emotional damage caused by prostitution.

WHO CAN SHIFT THE SYSTEM?

While the criminal and juvenile justice systems are flawed, there are people within these systems that can make a meaningful difference for girls and women by providing support and services instead of criminalization.

DISTRICT ATTORNEYS

VICTIM ADVOCATES

SEX TRAFFICKING TASK FORCE
MEMBERS

JUDGE

SURVIVOR LEADERS

DEFENSE ATTORNEYS

MULTI-DISCIPLINARY TEAMS



Law enforcement needs to focus on demand and recognize that buyers are paying to engage in acts of violence and abuse.

— MAHEEN, HUMAN RIGHTS ATTORNEY AND
FOUNDATION PROGRAM OFFICER



1. Raphael, J., & Shapiro, D., (2002). Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago, A Research Study. The Center for Impact Research.

2. McKim, J., & Bottari, M. (2014). Massachusetts State Police data: Far more women than men arrested for prostitution-related offenses. The Republican.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The Life Story: Moments of Change shines a light on the realities of women in the sex trade, elevates their voices and experiences and highlights opportunity for change. This material is meant to inform and inspire those who work across the intersections of education, housing, public health, mental health and addiction services, economic and racial justice, and many other areas. **Learn more at:**