

## Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress

By Melissa Farley, PhD, Editor

Review by Stephen Stolzberg, MD

The opening chapter of this multiple-author book is titled, “Hidden in Plain Sight”—a title that would have been suitable for the book itself.

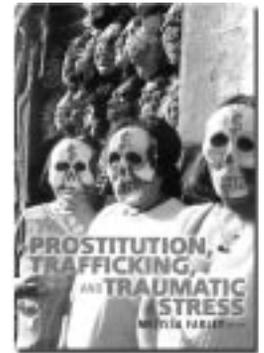
While gay marriage has inspired polemics and even consideration of a possible constitutional amendment, the plight of prostitutes and other so-called “sex workers” is not the stuff of front pages. For instance, the following three articles appeared inside three September issues of the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*: “Tokyo’s red light district faces a ritual cleansing,”<sup>1</sup> “Determining the future of a girl with a past: is the answer to child prostitution forced counseling or incarceration?”<sup>2</sup> and “Bid to decriminalize prostitution in Berkeley.”<sup>3</sup> The first article manages to avoid using the word prostitution and concludes with a quote from an author who has written about the Kabuchiko district: “People here work hard for their living and they love this area .... If we sweep all this clean, what will happen to all these wonderful people?”<sup>1</sup> The second article talks about a 12-year-old girl who was arrested and charged with prostitution and the year of “wringing ... [involving] Family Court, ... prosecutors, judges, dueling therapists, court appointed lawyers, child welfare authorities, a representative of the state’s juvenile jails, and a [charity] that provides housing for troubled adolescents.”<sup>2</sup> The third article depicts the conflict of opinions provoked by Robyn Few, a former prostitute who put an initiative on the ballot in Berkeley, California, to make prosecution of prostitution a low priority for the city’s police. The editor of this book, Melissa Farley, is a San Francisco psychologist now retired after many years with The Permanente Medical Group and active with an organization called Prostitution Research and Education. She opposes Ms Few. Dr Farley says, “This is an ordinance that reflects the interests of johns and pimps ....”<sup>3</sup> Dr Farley evidently disagrees with Dr Barbara Brents, a University of Nevada sociology professor, who believes that, “In a perfect world, there is no reason women can’t set up shop [as prostitutes] and run their own businesses the same way a therapist would.”<sup>3</sup>

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The 17-chapter, 33-author book edited by Dr Farley (and edited and published as a volume of the *Journal of Trauma Practice*<sup>4</sup>) opens with a dedication to the executed prostitute-turned-mass-murderer, Aileen Carol Wuornos but does not explain for the uninitiated who she was. Most of the chapters consist of case studies or surveys of “sex workers” (a term the authors condemn) in many different countries on six continents. Few surprises are to be found: The authors conclude that these women entered prostitution in their teens; were neglected and abused as children; work under conditions that are dangerous, disgusting, and demeaning; lack the economic, educational, or emotional resources to leave their virtual enslavement; are threatened by the law, whether as illegal immigrants or as criminals; use drugs to lessen their emotional pain; and become dependent on these drugs. The book also indicates that society is more interested in protecting the health and welfare of clients than of these “sex workers” and that pornography and prostitution are different aspects of what was described by Yutaka Takehana (the deputy

ordered by Tokyo’s governor to clean up the city’s “red light” district) as “ugly things related to sex .... [a] kind of perverted culture.”<sup>1</sup> The book reports that men as well as women can be prostituted, that a global marketplace exists for sex, and that governments are as likely to identify with the needs of the sex industry as with its victims. One of the authors refers to prostitution as “a system of gender-based totalitarianism,”<sup>4:p172</sup> but most view it from a free-market perspective: Some people are willing and able to pay to satisfy their sexual appetites, and others hire, kidnap, or enslave people to provide this satisfaction.

The book includes four chapters that focus on measures designed to help women leave prostitution. The needs of these women are daunting: The prostitution survivor needs “a wholesale re-creation of her entire life. She must find shelter, protect herself from both intimates and strangers, manage legal vulnerabilities, face loneliness, and obtain adequate financial resources.”<sup>4:p304</sup> The chapter about Social Security dis-



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ability points to a paradox: A woman may be denied benefits because her prostitution is considered to be gainful employment! Two successful small programs described—one in Victoria, British Columbia, and one in San Francisco—have managed to help a few women to recreate their lives.

The final chapter argues in favor of a Swedish law that targets “male demand for prostitution”<sup>4:p327</sup> instead of either legalizing or decriminalizing it. As a final step, the book recommends that governments “seize assets of sex businesses and then use these funds to provide real alternatives for women in prostitution .... [and provide] economic resources that enable women to improve their lives.”<sup>4:p329</sup>

Dr Farley’s preface to the book says that “[t]he internal ravages of prostitution have not been well understood or analyzed in psychology,”<sup>4:pxi</sup> but no evidence is given for this statement. This book does not attempt to compare the psychology of prostitutes to that of other mistreated persons, eg, war orphans, incest victims, illegal immigrants working in sweatshops, or prison inmates. A possibility more likely than not is that all these groups share much the same psychopathology.

The book’s title is printed on the cover in bold red print superimposed on a glossy picture of three women wearing death’s headmasks. This cover design is more suitable for a sensational tabloid than for an academic

publication, yet the text is no more titillating than the average social psychology publication. Thus, prospective readers cannot tell this book by its cover. *Prostitution, Trafficking and Traumatic Stress* is neither exploitative-sensational nor scientific-clinical; it is a political tract.

The book supports the idea that the only worthwhile public policy regarding prostitution is criminal prosecution of customers and owners. The authors argue that the policy of decriminalizing prostitution plays into the hands of the oppressors. The Swedish governmental experiment targeting customers may be effective, but the book provides no critical analysis of this issue. The descriptions and tabulations of the physical, mental, economic, and legal sides of prostitution could be a primer for college students who have no prior information about the issues. Every chapter is bolstered by references. ❖

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#### References

1. Pilling D. Tokyo’s red light district faces a ritual cleansing. *Financ Times* 2004 Sep 3;Sect. 1:18.
2. Kaufman L. Determining the future of a girl with a past: is the answer to child prostitution counseling, or incarceration? *NY Times (Print)* 2004 Sep 15;Sect. B:1.
3. Marshall C. Bid to decriminalize prostitution in Berkeley. *NY Times (Print)* 2004 Sep 14;Sect. A:16.
4. Prostitution, trafficking, and traumatic stress. *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2004;2(3/4):[entire issue].

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## Pain and Understanding

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

— Kahlil Gibran, 1883-1931, mystic, poet, and artist