'Sex Work.'

We say it’s not sex and it’s not work. Sex involves persons who want to engage in sexual relations, who clearly consent to engaging in sexual relations and who have a level of positive regard for one another. As to ‘work’ - there is no description of prostitution that meets the standard definition of work.

We encounter young women – and now many in mainstream media – who use the term, but it’s not accurate and lends a degree of acceptance to what is a brutal, dangerous, and dehumanizing activity – that primarily injures women. The term, ‘sex work’ was coined decades ago by pro-prostitution forces, attempting to make prostitution sound more acceptable.

It’s Not a ‘Choice.’

Women, youth, and LGBTQIA+ persons are trafficked, trapped, and enticed into the sex trade due to poverty, sexual abuse, domestic violence, family rejection, homelessness, difficulty in finding work, lack of education and the need for acceptance, financial help, and shelter. ‘Choice’ or ‘Consent,’ as the pro-prostitution forces would have us believe, almost never are the route by which people enter the sex trade.

The Pretty Woman Syndrome - In the 1990 movie, Pretty Woman, the central character, played by Julia Roberts, lives an independent life, free to choose whom she will date and have sexual relations with, but is currently down-on-her-luck. Her sex buyer is a handsome and wealthy playboy, portrayed by Richard Gere, on a business trip to L.A. who dresses her up as his beautiful escort for a week and ends up really caring about her.

Clearly a Hollywood fantasy. Not the everyday, gritty and dangerous real world of the sex trade. Forty-two million Americans saw that movie. It has influenced a generation of impressionable young women and men – who have come to believe that “choosing sex work” equates with women’s freedom and autonomy. A very small percentage of
women work as escorts or ‘call girls’ and may have a somewhat safer experience, but
they are not representative of the prostituted population, in general.

Contrary to the pervasive narrative about prostitution as a form of sexual liberation and
economic freedom, an alternative and correct narrative exposes prostitution as a form of
structural oppression in which race, gender, and class intersect.

**Prostitution Definition**

The commercial sexual exploitation of women is a form of gender-based violence. It is
the most extreme version of violent types of oppression of women, which include
widespread sexual harassment and high rates of domestic violence, sexual assault and
rape. These systemic patterns of abuse of women and girls are connected; they serve
to reinforce and perpetuate women's inequality.

The National Organization for Women and our allies are committed to ending men’s
demand for the sexual use and abuse of women’s bodies. We will be working to
promote removing criminal penalties imposed on prostituted persons, but will advocate
for the continuation of criminal prohibitions against buyers (johns), pimps, recruiters,
traffickers, and owners/operators of brothels or other businesses where prostitution is
facilitated. The commercial sex industry includes street prostitution, massage brothels,
brothels, escort services, outcall services, strip clubs, lap dancing, phone sex, adult and
child pornography, video and internet pornography, and prostitution tourism.

With the assistance of our newly established **End the Demand** national committee,
NOW will advocate for expunging the criminal records of persons who have been
prostituted and for the provision of social services such as housing, counseling, medical
care, detoxification, training and employment assistance. This approach is known as the
Swedish/Nordic Model or, as we are calling it, The Equality Model.

**Illegal Under United Nations, European Union Protocols**

Commercial sexual exploitation is a violation of women’s human rights, according to the
U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
(CEDAW), which specifies that “States parties shall take all measures, including
legislation to suppress all forms of traffic in women and the exploitation of prostitution in
women.” (Even though nearly all nations have agreed to CEDAW, the U.S. has not --but
states and localities can adhere to its provisions.)
The European Union adopted a resolution in 2014 urging all E.U. member nations to decriminalize persons who are prostituted and adopt Nordic Model-type programs to end demand. This resolution was adopted after a campaign by the European Women’s Lobby – which now has a secretariat at E.U headquarters and advocates for other gender equality measures at that high level.

Finally, all United Nations country members are parties to the Palermo Protocol which aims to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. The protocol went into effect in 2003; the U.S. signed on to the protocol in 2005.

**Extent of Prostitution, Trafficking**

There are only rough estimates of the number of persons who are prostituted in the U.S., understandably, figures are hard to come by for activities that are illegal. They range from the high hundreds of thousands to several million (all genders, all ages). One thing is fairly certain though: the number is growing – both in the U.S. and abroad, – as population pressures, mass migration and failing economies take their toll.

The value of commercial sexual exploitation was estimated by the International Labor Organization at $99 billion in a 2017 report; sexual exploitation produces 66 percent of the proceeds of global trafficking – so this is big business. When you add proceeds from ‘home-grown’ prostitution, the world-wide total likely reaches several hundreds of billions. A recent film on prostitution and trafficking in southern California, *Shattered Dreams – Sex Trafficking in America*, noted that those activities just in the San Diego area amount to $800 million annually.

**Influential Funding**

Trafficking and prostitution overlap and are frequently tied in with the illicit drug market and organized crime. The industry promotes full decriminalization and legalization around the world, including in the U.S., and is behind efforts in New York, New Hampshire, California, Rhode Island, and Washington, D.C. These forces fund small grassroots organizations, back political candidates, hire professional lobbyists to promote full decriminalization, write legislation, develop talking points, and fund friendly journalists.

Billionaire philanthropist George Soros and his Open Society Foundation, which contributes to many progressive organizations, finances pro-full decriminalization and legalization efforts in many countries. His funding likely helped to push the full
decriminalization effort in the District of Columbia and, reportedly, his money is fueling efforts to stop implementation of the Nordic/Equality Model in the Republic of Ireland.

**Decrim Efforts Around the U.S.**

NOW helped to stop the D.C. council full decriminalization bill -- which was an important victory. In New Hampshire, Gov. Chris Sununu has vowed to veto any decrim bill. In Rhode Island, it’s doubtful that the legislature will allow a return of legal prostitution after having suffered through 29 years of legal indoor prostitution where massage parlors and organized crime flourished. California has passed a bill that would make it difficult to prosecute any buyers of sex.

The New York legislature – facing a decriminalization bill -- will consider the Equality Model to remove criminal prohibitions from prostituted persons and establish programs to help persons leave the sex trade. The legislation is modeled on the French Nordic or Equality Model which has strong exit support programs, according to Taina Bien Aime of the Coalition Against Trafficking of Women – Taina is also on NOW's End the Demand Committee.

NOW and our End the Demand Committee will be closely watching the New York experience in the hope that we can introduce similar legislation in other states.

**Harm to Women**

Many—and probably most -- persons engaged in selling sexual acts suffer tremendously: In a sample of 100 prostituted women working in D.C., 42% met the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); 61% reported being physically assaulted; 80% reported being threatened with a weapon; 44% had been raped in prostitution and 60% of these rapes were committed by sex buyers.

Survivors report being raped – sometimes repeatedly – by their pimps. Other studies of prostituted persons in various communities record even higher rates of physical assault, rape, and being threatened with a weapon. The risk that prostituted women face with being murdered is significant: In the U.S., we have seen many sickening examples of scores of prostituted women murdered by serial killers. Transwomen involved in prostitution are at a higher risk of violence as well.

Survivors report that their pimps threaten, beat and even rape them – in order to keep them under their control. We know from survivors’ stories that many women caught in prostitution become addicted. Often drugs are a form of payment to prostituted persons;
pimps keep all the money from the sexual acts. Those facts are ones that keep women and girls trapped in prostitution; most do not see an easy way out of the sex trade.

Most women have entered prostitution as teenagers – they may have been runaways, perhaps abused at home, experiencing serious poverty and were offered money and support by someone they initially trusted, someone who became their boyfriend, gave them a place to stay, bought them clothes and made them feel wanted. Then, they were forced to prostitute themselves to produce an income for their pimps. Pimps aim to keep a number of prostituted persons under control, demanding that they produce as much as $100,000 each year by meeting high quotas.

It is such a brutal and dehumanizing experience that prostituted persons find it very difficult to figure out how to safely exit the sex trade. They make repeated attempts to leave -- only to fall back into the trade. Exit programs that understand the reality of prostituted persons’ lives and offer services necessary to help them overcome the trauma and rebuild their lives are essential.

**Women of Color**

Racism and structural oppression trap a disproportionate number of women and girls of color into prostitution in the U.S. and elsewhere. Observers say that there is an epidemic in the U.S. of young women of color being trafficked into prostitution where they also meet high levels of violence. High rates of poverty in communities of color provide an impetus for youth to leave home, becoming susceptible to pimps and traffickers.

At the D.C. Council hearing, testimony was given that that pimps, recruiters and traffickers hang around middle and high schools in Wards 1, 7 and 8 to entice, coerce and even abduct young women – children, really – into prostitution. The number of teenage women of color who have gone missing in the District is alarming; thought to be runaways, many were actually trafficked. This is a pattern that is repeated in many cities around the country; young women are in particular demand, as buyers believe that the risk of contracting HIV is less.

**The Equality Model**

NOW believes that the best solution to this systemic violence and oppression of women is to end the demand by buyers of sex. The solution is definitely not full decriminalization or legalization. Those approaches have been shown in other countries to increase prostitution and trafficking, along with crime. The best solution is to remove
criminal prohibitions and penalties on prostituted persons, including prostituted transwomen, and expunge police records.

Most importantly, those who wish to escape the life of abuse, addiction and violence of the commercial sex trade, should be provided with access to health care services, substance abuse rehabilitation, counseling, housing, training and employment opportunities. This approach, first developed in Sweden 20 years ago, has been successful in motivating prostituted persons to leave the sex trade and in reducing the number of buyers.

The Equality Model solution offers a safer and healthier life and a future worth living to prostituted persons. It is by far the more rational and humane answer to end the systematic abuse of marginalized women, youth, and LGBTQIA+ persons. We know it won’t be easy and will take years to see the Equality Model adopted by states. But we know from experiences in Sweden, France, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Israel, Iceland, Norway and Canada that this is the path we must take.