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OP-ED COLUMNIST

How Pimps Use the Web to Sell Girls

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
Published: January 25, 2012

In November, a terrified 13-year-old girl pounded on an apartment door in Brooklyn. When a surprised woman answered, the girl pleaded for a phone. She called her mother, and then dialed 911.



Damon Winter/The New York Times
Nicholas D. Kristof

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City Room: 4 in Brooklyn Charged With Sex Trafficking (November 21, 2011)

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The girl, whom I'll call Baby Face because of her looks, frantically told police that a violent pimp was selling her for sex. He had taken her to the building and ordered her to go to an apartment where a customer was waiting, she said, and now he was waiting downstairs to make sure she did not escape. She had followed the pimp's directions and gone upstairs, but then had pounded randomly on this door in hopes of getting help.

Baby Face said she hurt too much to endure yet another rape by a john. She told prosecutors later that she was bleeding vaginally and that her pimp had recently kicked her down a stairwell for trying to flee.

That 911 call set in motion [the arrest of Kendale Judge](#), then 21. Judge has pleaded not guilty to charges of sex trafficking, kidnapping, rape and compelling prostitution. He is in jail, and we haven't heard his side of the events yet.

The episode also shines a spotlight on how the girl was marketed — in ads on [Backpage.com](#), a major national Web site where people place ads to sell all kinds of things, including sex. It is a godsend to pimps, allowing customers to order a girl online as if she were a pizza.

Lauren Hersh, the ace prosecutor in Brooklyn who leads the sex-trafficking unit there, says that of the 32 people she and her team have prosecuted in the last year and a half — typically involving victims aged 12 to 25 — a vast majority of the cases included girls marketed through Backpage ads.

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How Pimps Use the Web to Sell Girls



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“Pimps are turning to the Internet,” said Hersh. “They’re not putting the girls on the street so much. Backpage is a great vehicle for pimps trying to sell girls.”

Craigslist backed out of this sector [after public protests](#). Pimps then moved to [Backpage.com](#), which is owned by Village Voice Media, owners of The Village Voice weekly newspaper.

Attorneys general from 48 states wrote a joint letter to Backpage, warning that it had become “a hub” for sex trafficking and calling on it to stop running adult services ads. The attorneys general said that they had identified cases in 22 different states in which pimps peddled underage girls through Backpage.

The attorneys general cited a 15-year-old girl who was being forced to have sex with men last year in Dorchester, Mass. The pimp marketed the girl through Backpage.

But Backpage isn’t budging. Indeed, it has fought back with personal attacks on those, [such as Ashton Kutcher](#), who have linked it to human trafficking.

Steve Suskin, legal counsel to Village Voice Media, [gave me a lengthy statement](#) in which he argued that the company is already cooperating closely with law-enforcement authorities. He cited a 16-year-old girl in Seattle who was rescued as a result of a tip the company had made.

“Censorship will not rid the world of exploitation,” Suskin asserted.

It’s true that there’s some risk that pimps will migrate to new Web sites, possibly based overseas, that are less cooperative. But, on balance, that’s a risk worth taking. The present system is failing. Pimps aren’t the shrewdest marketers, and eliminating a hub for trafficking should at least chip away at the problem.

Backpage suggests that it is battling censors and prudes. In fact, what drives it seems to be greed. In their letter, the attorneys general said that Backpage earns [more than \\$22 million annually](#) from prostitution advertising.

On Backpage, the pimps claim adult ages for the girls they market, but Hersh scoffs. “I see 19,” she said, “and I immediately think 13.”

“I’m not seeing a lot of cases where there’s not coercion,” she added. “The average age where a girl is forced into prostitution is 12 to 14. And most of these 16- or 17 year-olds are being run by pretty vicious pimps.”

While there are no reliable figures for human trafficking, the more we look, the more we find. The Brooklyn district attorney, [Charles J. Hynes](#), says that in the year before he set up a sex-trafficking unit in June 2010, his office prosecuted no trafficking cases. Since then, the office has become a national model, indicting 32 people, with 10 convictions and no acquittals so far.

Among those rescued was Baby Face, who had run away from home in September. Judge allegedly found her on the street, bought food for her and told her that she was beautiful. Within a few days, he had posted her photo on Backpage and was selling her five to nine times a day, prosecutors say. When she didn’t earn enough money, he beat her with a belt, they add.

When Baby Face ran away from her pimp and desperately knocked on that apartment door in Brooklyn, she was also in effect pounding on the door of the executive suites of Backpage and Village Voice Media. Those executives should listen to her pleas.

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A version of this op-ed appeared in print on January 26, 2012, on page A31 of the New York edition with the headline: How Pimps Use the Web To Sell Girls.




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<div><div></div><div>Jeff Santa Barbara, CA</div></div> <p>It is time to legalize consensual sex between adults, regardless of any money involved. Make pimping, brothels and trafficking illegal, but bring ordinary prostitution into the light. This would allow the authorities to focus on the real problems instead of fighting an un-winnable war. I don't know where Kristof gets his statistics, but from my reading the number of trafficked underage girls is tiny compared to the total amount of prostitution...now don't get me wrong, ANY forced trafficking is TOO MUCH, but if we stop worrying about the non-problems and get to the real issues we will achieve a lot more, and shutting off Backpage isn't going to help one bit except to drive things further into the underworld.</p> <p>I happen to know a woman who is an "escort". (no, I'm not a client, just a friend) She started in college and has been doing it for 20 years. There are days when she doesn't like her job, but she does like the money and that is why she keeps doing it. At this point she sees the same men repeatedly and I suppose gives them something they're not getting at home. Is it the best career for her? I'm not the one to judge that. But I can say that she has never been forced or pimped and so I think it should be her choice to use her body as she chooses. But she'd be better off with the safety net that legalization would provide.</p> <div>Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. You recommended this 35</div>				
<div><div></div><div>Boadie MacLeod Los Angeles, CA</div></div> <p>But I would also like to add that legalizing prostitution is not a panacea, because women in the Nevada brothels are still being treated as slaves and even raped. See the article "It's Like You Sign a Contract to be Raped" by Julie Bindel in The Guardian. That quote was taken from a woman in a Nevada brothel.</p> <div>Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 12</div>				
<div><div></div><div>PhysicianMom Boston</div></div> <p>How about this irony- After reading this jaw dropping article, the article at the bottom of my screen drools over the way, "photographer Greg Kessler captures the transformations of the Spring 2012 Couture collections in Paris. Here, the model Lindsey Wixson before (left) and after (right) transforms, with makeup by Stephan Marais and hair by Odile Gilbert. (Push the blue button below the image to reveal the full transformation".</p>				

The modeling industry pimps young women, tarding them up with makeup, stillettos and we watch. The difference is that they can walk away. But they are called models because they set a standard.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 12



Tom Matlack Boston

Homeland Security is actively engaged in pursuing sex trafficking as it has been deemed slavery under the constitution. Here's a good story about just how and why:

<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/sex-slavery-in-america/>

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 4



Boadie MacLeod Los Angeles, CA

If the police were serious about catching pimps, they would USE Backpage to do that. But they're not serious about doing that. It's easier for them to put up a good front by the public by shutting down Backpage, which mostly hurts independent women who are using it and depend on it, because the pimps will ultimately be just as happy to use the street corner.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 10



J. Ohio

This is such a tragic, disturbing article. I would like to see Mr. Kristof write a follow-up piece with specific information and suggestions as to what ordinary citizens may do to help save these children and young people from forced prostitution and trafficking. Apart from writing my local and state representatives to significantly enhance penalties for pimps and johns, I am not sure what we can do.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 7



Michelle Cambridge, MA

I am torn about shutting down Backpage. A law requiring such sites to cooperate with the police, with aggressive penalties for failure to cooperate, might be better. On the other hand, given they are profiting from prostitution, maybe they deserve to be prosecuted. Would the RICO act apply?

Legal or illegal, there is very little that is voluntary when it comes to so-called "sex work." Experiments in legalized prostitution in Western countries have not eliminated the human rights problems accompanying prostitution and have generally led to an increase in sex-trafficking and illegal sex-trade operations.

The answer is not legalization. It's a combination of more money for law enforcement, more social services for girls and women trying to escape the trade, intensified criminalization of the consumers who pay to "consensually" rape these women, and a louder societal outcry against all of those who profit from the sexual exploitation of others.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 7



Jon Davis NM

Dear Mr. Kristof,

I also have heard that thanks to the internet and digital cameras, it is now possible to photograph and distribute child pornography around the globe. Do you know if this is true?

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:49 a.m. RECOMMEND 2



MJL Charleston, SC

As a professor in Classics with a research interest in women and children in antiquity, I can speak to a historical perspective on legalization. In the Roman Empire prostitution and slavery were both legalized and inextricably related,

and this lead to widespread institutionalized exploitation of young girls and women. The majority of these sex workers were kidnapped or sold to their pimp, used until their health or appearance failed, and then left with nothing. Because it was legal, it was also condoned and open, leaving victims with even fewer options for escaping the control of their pimps. This is not to say that all legalization is necessarily the sort used in the Roman Empire, but there is a common thread: if it's legal to profit off of another person's body, it's harder to escape exploitation. If the law doesn't have strong protections and paths for victims to seek justice, and if paths are not provided for those who engage in prostitution willingly to seek protection, the law becomes an instrument of exploitation itself. I would be interested to see if any society has managed to protect sex workers from predatory management while keeping prostitution legal.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:35 a.m. RECOMMEND 27



Mack Peterson Brooklyn, NY

The vast majority of the ads on these websites are taken out by women and men in the sex industry who offer consensual sex for pay. I personally would rather have sex workers plying their trade online from the relative safety of their homes then hooking on my street corner. It is a tragedy that people are forced into prostitution against their will, but it is not the fault of the marketplace.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:27 a.m. You recommended this 12



Nicky Alberta

While I'm generally a big fan of yours, Mr. Kristof, I was extremely taken aback by your decision to nickname the girl in the first place, and then I was even more disappointed by your decision to nickname her "Baby Face". In this particular context, that name is incredibly demeaning and disrespectful; not least because I can imagine her pimp calling her by the same name. Why not call her Sarah or Kate or Tina or some other such name? She is a survivor of extraordinarily bad circumstances and does not deserve to be marginalized yet again based on her looks or youth or femininity -- why perpetuate her victimization?

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:26 a.m. RECOMMEND 17



Logan Stevens Point, WI

So.....backpage is aware these events are happening and that their service is facilitating it. And they're making a bunch of money doing it.

I say dangle a RICO indictment in front of the company's execs and see how quickly they jump and dance.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:26 a.m. RECOMMEND 10



Carlos K Street, DC

Legalize it, regulate it, and tax it. This be far more beneficial than censorship. The internet is design to go around censorship, there will always be a way around restrictions. Driving it underground only makes it harder to police and creates more negatives

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:26 a.m. RECOMMEND 9



Carol Smolenski New York

Great article by Nicholas Kristof about the problem of American children who are bought and sold in prostitution in the United States. Most American think this is something that happens only in other countries and is fed by intractable poverty. In fact, its right here, where poverty is not so extreme. Children from vulnerable backgrounds such as abused children, runaway and throwaway children can be coerced and recruited by pimps because there is a large demand. If we had a strong social safety net to protect all kids, and a public awareness campaign aimed at buyers, we could make great strides. As many of us who work in this field know (I'm with ECPAT-USA), it's not rocket science, it's not complicated. What we lack is the collective political will and a clear-eye

focus on creating child-protective policies to end it.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:26 a.m. RECOMMEND 9



gene schulman geneva, switzerland

See: "The Soft Side of Imperialism" www.counterpunch.org January 25, 2012

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:25 a.m. RECOMMEND 1



S H

It's not a Choice, it's a Child. It takes a village.

There are so many reasons NOT to engage in this activity.

Sex education does not confront boys with the problem. It should. No religious crud should get in the way of showing them how Good, strong men DO NOT RESPECT 'johns' who pay for sex.

Good, strong men who are respected in the community are likely to convey good, strong lessons about respecting others. The unwanted promiscuity/pregnancy issue will benefit as well.

Plant the seed early, or mission creep will take it's toll during puberty. From their it's a matter of socioeconomics, and the denser the abject despair, the greater the reign of the Lord of the Flies.

We're very close to legalized vigilanteism as a society.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 3



eli kyle texas, new york

How hard is it for those trying to bust these people to enlist the help of techies able to track backwards to users and providers? Privacy issues???????

"We" use black ops, with implicit consent, for matters beyond what "we" are allowed to do, in larger or extra-border matters.

We have open records, wiki-leaks, anonymous moralistic hackers, etc.; how about the angels of the subway a few years back.

Put on a mask and get them. Seriously.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 2



Jon Davis NM

Personally, I doubt that legalizing prostitution will solve any problem, just as outlawing prostitution has solved no problem.

However, in a free society it is often quite useful to have these sorts of discussions, even if they are risky (after all, we might actually solve a problem and create a bigger problem).

And it is noteworthy how so many Americans approach this discussion...in much the same way the Ayatollah Khomeini or Mullah Omar of the Taliban would have.

And while so many people so gung ho for prosecuting crime...almost no one wants to pay the taxes to fund a police force large enough to do it.

In fact, most people don't want to have such a large police force because these moralizing law-abiders...fear the police as well.

Life's a female dog sometimes, isn't it?

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 3



wim NY

Couldn't you have called her "Mary"? "Baby Face" sounds so prurient, like we're all in on the scam.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. You recommended this 8

**Andrew** NYC

Sorry, but you lost me when you decided to call the 13-year-old prostitute "Baby Face." That sounds like what her pimp might call her.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. You recommended this 7

**Ich** connecticut

Mr. Kristof, would you explain in another column how these girls get snared by the pimps in the first place? Are they just kidnapped? Are they homeless?

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 1

**v.m.** endwell, ny

How dead inside are these people who can have sex with a hurting human being? Just piling on their little bit of hurt .

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 9

**L. Jensen** Tokyo

From comments, there are three answers even the feverish moralists might like. (1) Make prostitution legal! I don't read about these horror stories from Nevada. And (2), Sex with a minor is RAPE. Slam the pimp, the john and the landlord into criminal indictment with vigorous jail time when convicted. And (3) Another penalty, the underage girl can sue those same three above for everything they have for taking advantage of her inability to reason and resist!! Let me tell you, there would quickly be some vigorous ID checking!

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 10

**Noel** New York

Here's a good place for Anonymous to implement a DoS attack.

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND 7

**Yah** ME

I'm afraid you are giving direction to the devil where and how to prey!

Jan. 26, 2012 at 11:24 a.m. RECOMMEND

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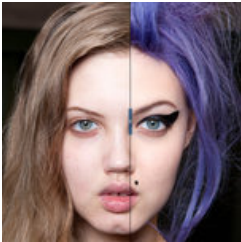
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