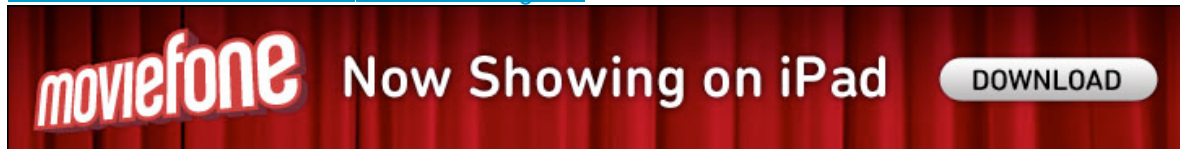


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# One Child Is Too Many

Posted: 10/25/11 03:11 PM ET

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*By Valarie Kaur and Jessica Jenkins*

It is a basic fact of the moral universe that children should not be sold for sexual exploitation. However, every day in America, thousands of girls and boys are regularly manipulated, coerced, and forced in sex for money in the United States. Most are trafficked from within the United States, not far off foreign lands. Many are as young as eleven or twelve. And many are sold on prominent Web sites such as Backpage.com, owned by Village Voice Media.

This morning, an unexpected coalition of faith and moral leaders -- Mainline Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Humanists, and Evangelical Christians -- published a full-page [ad in the New York Times](#) calling upon Village Voice Media to shut down their adult services section. They amplify the opinion of fifty-one State Attorneys General that Village Voice Media should follow Craigslist's example and [take down the adult services section](#) of Backpage.com because it is used as a prominent commercial platform for sex trafficking of girls and boys.

Today, we have an opportunity to [join the groundswell](#) and ask Village Voice Media to do the right thing. As parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, and caretakers, we share a moral imperative to protect children from exploitation. But there are many children who we fail to protect. They are neglected, abused, abandoned. They grow up in tumultuous, unstable homes, bounce around in the foster care system, and run away from home. Many of them are abused or cast out because they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Many wind up on the street and seek temporary respite through alcohol and drugs. They become easy prey for greed-seeking adults who lure them into the sex industry with big promises of love, protection, and security, only to endure physical and sexual violence, disease, and isolation. They are robbed of their childhoods.

In nearly any other context, our legal system considers children under eighteen too young to consent to sex -- they are treated as victims. But minors forced into sex work are routinely arrested, jailed and convicted by local law enforcement officials, while their pimps and adult customers are rarely punished.

Incarceration and prosecution re-traumatizes them. Those who do eventually leave "the life" find themselves stymied by their long rap sheets.

Child sex trafficking is rooted in many other social injustices -- poverty, homelessness, homophobia, racism, and violence against girls. The systemic forces perpetuating the exploitation of children are complex, so we need multiple approaches to stop it. We must insist that local, state and federal law enforcement collaborate to better identify victims of trafficking and to offer them safety and support, rather than criminalization, incarceration and further abuse. We must work harder to stop the cycles of abuse, violence and community disintegration that make children vulnerable to exploitation in the first place. And we must support organizations like Girls Educational and Mentoring Service (GEMS), who are already doing amazing work to empower and protect young victims of sex trafficking.

But that is not all we need to do. Websites like Backpage.com legitimize the sex trafficking of minors by giving a prominent commercial platform to their pimps and adult customers. We need a groundswell to end this practice -- a groundswell of people who share moral outrage that this violence is happening in our own backyards. This is not a conservative issue, or a liberal issue. This is about ending an unconscionable practice. As moral outrage at economic injustice inspires mass protests, people are hungry for direct concrete solutions. In a country where the top one percent have as much income as the bottom 60 percent - a level of inequality not seen since before the Great Depression -- children are the ones who suffer most from gross inequality and social instability. We know we must do much more to end the structural inequalities and abuse at the root of the sex trafficking of minors, and even more to build a moral economy that honors the dignity of all. But through persuading a company that their profit margin is not worth maintaining a prominent platform for trafficking, we can take one significant step toward that goal. Today, [Groundswell](#) is calling on Village Voice Media to follow the example Craigslist.com set last year by shutting down its adult section, in order to prevent the exploitation and abuse of one more girl or boy via its Web site. [Join us](#). Together, we can send a clear message that putting kids at risk for profit is always immoral. One is too many. *Jessica Jenkins blogs regularly for [Groundswell](#). She graduated from Fordham University in 2010 with joint degrees in law and social work and is pursuing a career as an immigration lawyer.*

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