ten things everyone needs to know about “rescues” of youth in the sex trade
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1. Most “rescued” youth are 16-17 year old. While media and politicians often sensationalize very young victims who are 13 year old or younger, they are outliers. The misperception of unrealistically low average age is harmful because it misdirects necessary policy responses.

2. “Rescue” actually means arrest and involuntary detainment of minor “victims” by the police in many cases. Some jurisdictions have passed “safe harbor” laws that abolished prostitution charges against minors, but young people are still being arrested under some other criminal charge, and are then sent to detention, child welfare system, or back to home. They are returned to these institutions, many run away again, and some are forced to return to the streets.

3. Many “rescued” youth have experienced child welfare system before starting to trade sex. Many have ran away from foster family or group home, and do not feel that going back to the system that have failed them already is a solution to problems in their lives. When young people are forcefully returned to these institutions, many run away again. Even if they are not physically returned to these institutions, many run away again as soon as they are released. They can return to the streets, and cannot be returned to life in the shelter.

4. “Push” and “pull” factors contribute to the presence of youth sex trade. “Push” factors are things that make young people vulnerable, such as poverty, family violence, fear of child welfare system, and the breakdown of families due to incarceration and deportation; “pull” factors are things that make young people engaged in this trade, such as the existence of the underground economy, and the perception of criminal activities.

5. Without policies that truly address the “push” factors, any reduction in the “pull” side, such as lower demand for commercial sex due to stricter laws, will not be enough to improve the lives of youth in the sex trade. The underground economy is still very much alive, and young people are not being provided with resources and opportunities that would improve their long-term well-being. Many youth are left to fend for themselves, without access to education, healthcare, and other basic needs.

6. Street youth are routinely harassed and mistreated by the police, and do not view the police as their protector. Social service agencies that work closely with the police to “rescue” youth lose the trust of the people who need to access the services. Any public response to youth sex trade must start from the premise that young people who need to access the services are not criminals.

7. Youth in the sex trade eventually become adults. Because the society focuses on the “pull” side of the equation while neglecting to address the “push” side, youth are further isolated, putting them at greater risks.

8. “Rescue” operations result in the mass arrest and criminalization of adult women in the sex trade, many of whom would have been identified as underage “victims” several years earlier but are now treated as criminals. Many adult women (as well as teen girls) arrested during “rescue” operations are mothers, and their children may be taken away and placed in the child welfare system as a consequence of their arrest.

9. Individuals arrested as “pimps” during “rescue” operations are not necessarily abusers, traffickers, or exploiters; in fact, many are friends, family members, partners, etc. who happen to provide room, transportation, mentoring, security, and other assistance to people in the sex trade, or are financially supported by them, even though they are not abusing, coercing, exploiting, or otherwise hurting that person. Sometimes, women are arrested as “pimps” for working in pairs to increase their safety. Indiscriminate arrests of friends and others as “pimps” when they are not abusers, traffickers, or exploiters lead to further isolation of people who trade sex, putting them at greater risks.

10. Street youth need housing, jobs, education, healthcare, and other resources and opportunities. Being thrown in jail or detention does not provide them, nor does being sent back to families or institutions that they had run away from in the first place. They need support, and must be given a voice in determining how the society can best support them!
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4. There are "push" and "pull" factors that contribute to the presence of youth sex trade. "Push" factors are things that make young people vulnerable, such as poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia/transphobia, family violence, failure of child welfare system, and the breakdown of families due to incarceration and deportation; "pull" factors are things that lure youth into the sex trade, such as the existence of the commercial sex market itself and its facilitators (buyers, online classified sites, etc.). Anti-trafficking policies such as "rescues" place exclusive focus on the "pull" side of the equation while neglecting to address the vulnerabilities created by the "push" side.

5. Without policies that truly address the "push" factors, any reduction in the "pull" side, such as lower demand for commercial sex due to more policing, or closure of online classified sites, only functions to impoverish youth further, making them more vulnerable overall rather than less. Street youth still need to survive, and thus still have to find different ways to do so, most likely doing things that are also criminalized.

6. Street youth are routinely harassed and mistreated by the law enforcement, and do not view the police as their protector. Social service agencies that work closely with the law enforcement's campaign to "rescue" youth lose the trust of the people who need to access the services. Any public response to youth sex trade must start from the acknowledgment that the law enforcement is one of the primary sources of violence in the lives of street youth, and cannot be relied upon to provide the solution.

7. Youth in the sex trade eventually become adults. Because the society focuses on "rescues" instead of providing resources and opportunities that would improve their long-term well-being, many youth are left unable to pursue economic opportunities outside of the underground economy, and will be treated simply as criminals once they are 18.

Please send your feedback to emi@eminism.org.