

“Reducing the Demand Side” Harms Women. Here’s Why.

Some Portlanders concerned about prostitution on our streets are pushing for the strategy of "reducing the demand side" of prostitution. It means that, instead of going after people engaging in prostitution to make ends meet, criminal justice system would be instructed to pursue johns (clients) who purchase sexual services from them.

The appeal of this approach is obvious: many people understand that women who trade sex for money do so **under dire economic and personal circumstances**, and feel that it would be **unfair to punish them for their predicament**. On the other hand, few people feel any sympathy toward johns: in fact, some may find it deeply satisfying emotionally to have them punished severely.

However, we must seriously consider the full implication of such policy if we are truly concerned about the women who would have to compete for declining demand for their services. We believe, that while the approach to "reduce the demand side" is far preferable to punishing the women for their poverty and lack of options, **it is nonetheless harmful to the safety and health of the women** who work on our streets.

The first obvious consequence of suppressing the "demand side" is that women will have to compete for a smaller pool of johns, **forcing them to do more for less money**. The decline of the demand would give remaining johns greater bargaining power, because it would become easier for them to "take the business elsewhere" (i.e. go find another worker willing to do more for less) if their demands are not completely satisfied. For example, a woman who had always insisted on using a condom might be forced to engage in less safe practices simply to stay competitive.

* <http://82ndCARES.blogspot.com> *

Second, an increased pressure on johns displaces prostitution onto less populated or traveled areas, where they are less likely to be reported to the authorities or caught in a sting. The same environment **makes it more dangerous for the women**, both because it would be less familiar to them, and also because nobody would be around when they call for help.

And finally, the profile of a typical john would change as we make it riskier to buy sex, since not all potential johns respond to the increased risks equally. "Reducing the demand side" approach would **drive out those men who are relatively rational and sensitive to risks, while the reckless and/or impulsive types remain undeterred**. These johns are precisely the ones likely to demand sex without condoms, haggle mercilessly over price or specific acts, or use threats or violence to get what they want.

In short "reducing the demand side" is harmful to women because **it diminishes their bargaining power, forcing them to do more for less money, with more dangerous johns, under less safe environment**. We cannot criminalize our way out of the current situation—we must address this social and economic concern with **solutions that achieve social and economic justice**. We can begin by funding affordable housing, childcare, treatment programs on-demand (instead of many months' wait list), and education and job training programs, instead of more jail beds or police cars.

We at **82ndCARES Coalition** believe that the situation on the 82nd Avenue area is **not a law enforcement problem, but that of economic and social justice**. Find more information on our blog, and let us know what you think.



82ndCARES Coalition
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