

Prostitution and Coercion



Guest post by Russell Hasan.

I was recently thinking about why prostitution is illegal. As a libertarian I think that it should be legal, as an extension of people's absolute right to own their own bodies. But many Americans disagree. If there is a rational, persuasive argument against the legalization of prostitutes (or "sex workers," as they should be called) it is that a need for money would coerce poor women into becoming sex workers and selling their bodies. Poor women who need money to buy food and pay bills would feel economic pressure to become sex workers, this argument goes, so we need to protect them from coercion by denying them the opportunity to sell their bodies.

Some version of the coercion argument underscores a great deal of anti-libertarian sentiment: poor people will be coerced into selling their organs and body parts, which justifies denying them the right to do so. Poor people are coerced into accepting dangerous, low-paying jobs such as coal mining, or are coerced into working long hours for wages that are lower than what they want. They are coerced into buying cheap high-fat fast food, or are coerced into buying cheap meat, packed at rat-infested plants, and so on. The coercion argument is a thorn in the side of laissez-faire politics, because socialists argue that poor people aren't really free in a capitalist system where they face economic coercion.

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