The notion that prostitution is work--"sex work" is the dangerously misleading term--ignores both these powerful social forces of poverty, violence, and inequality that propel women and children into sexual exploitation and the harm that women and children sustain as a direct consequence of sexual exploitation. For some, the "sex work" model is a misguided attempt to bestow dignity on a stigmatized and marginalized population; what in fact it does, however, is to confer legitimacy on the systems of sexual exploitation that devastate the lives of prostituted women and children. It is not an accident that the organized commercial sex industry is one of the biggest promoters of the notion that prostitution is "sex work"--"a job like any other job." The notion that commercial sexual exploitation is viable work has been embraced by some governments, with catastrophic implications for poor women and girls. For example, one government in Central America proudly asserted in a report to a United Nations conference following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing: "Recognized prostitution in [our country] is a gender-specific form of migrant labor that serves the same economic function for women as agriculture work offers to men and often for better pay." It should be noted that this country is a sex tourism center, with the second highest rate of HIV/AIDS in Central America.

The appropriate model for understanding and addressing commercial sexual exploitation is not the labor model but the violence against women model. Like domestic violence, exploitation in the sex industry is carried out by men intent on wielding domination over comparatively powerless women and children. All of the dynamics and tactics of power and control employed by abusive husbands are employed by pimps, procurers, and traffickers. Both battered women and prostituted women have been known to enter abusive situations voluntarily, to choose to stay in or return to abusive situations, to deny that they are being subjected to abuse, and to defend their abusers. Battered women's advocates understand that extricating oneself from an abusive relationship is a process that often requires much social and material support and that the psychological effects of trauma can impede women from leaving abusive situations. Just as poverty is a powerful force propelling women into situations of sexual exploitation, it is a significant factor in inducing women to stay in situations of domestic violence. In the case of domestic violence, however, no one argues that voluntarily entering or staying in an abusive domestic relationship for economic reasons makes that situation work. Why then do some people argue that the fact that some women voluntarily enter into or stay in conditions of sexual exploitation proves that prostitution is "sex work"? Using the same logic, we could call domestic violence "housework."

The pro-prostitution lobby, made up of organizations that promote prostitution as "sex work" and lobbyists from the sex industry, argues that what matters, from a human rights perspective, is whether the prostituted woman consented to be prostituted or trafficked. If there is consent or voluntariness, according to this constituency, there is no human rights violation. I think we need to inquire if the act of consenting to certain treatment is an event that extinguishes a human rights claim. When we do so it becomes clear that under conditions of inequality the fact of consent may not only be irrelevant to the human rights inquiry--it may be the product of a human rights violation. A stark example of such a situation was recently exposed by an investigative reporter for the New York Times. He revealed that desperately poor mothers in rural Mexico were selling their young children to trafficking rings run by lawyers who sold the children to middle and upper-class American couples. Is there any question as to whether these traffickers were violating the human rights of the mothers and their children alike, even though the former entered the transaction completely voluntarily and consented to the sale of their children for financial gain.

The reality is that women and girls do sometimes enter prostitution voluntarily, but whether that voluntariness has any significance is dubious, given the powerful social forces of poverty, violence, and
inequality that constrain this choice. For many women in prostitution, consent is preceded by and conditioned on traumatic abuse. One of the speakers at this conference, a spokesperson from the Global Alliance, testified that she was kidnapped and trafficked into prostitution as a child; subsequently she became a sex worker and a sex industry professional. Another speaker, who argued that prostitution is violence against prostituted women, described herself as a prostitution survivor, but did not recount her story. I asked her if I might relay it to this audience, and she gave me permission to do so. Sexually abused as a child, she ran away from home. She was picked up by a pimp and “seasoned” into prostitution through beatings and rapes. From ages fourteen to nineteen, she was a child prostitute. She became a heroin addict and finally entered a drug rehabilitation program, which saved her life. At twenty-three however, after escaping a violent marriage, she entered prostitution again, this time voluntarily. One doesn't have to be a psychologist to see how her voluntary entry into the sex industry was predicated on her earlier abuse and exploitation. Sexual trauma—its hallmarks of denial and repetition compulsion—is the training ground of many subsequent prostitution "volunteers."

The real issue is not whether prostituted women and girls consent to sexual exploitation. It is how are they treated in conditions of sexual exploitation. Most women and girls, after having been recruited or procured, are either under the control of a pimp or in a system of self-obliterating domination and control. Such a system is evident in the Philippines outside of what was formerly Clark Air Base, where military prostitution has given way to sex tourism. Young women, recently recruited from poor rural areas, display new names, new clothing, new appearances and work under the surveillance of the mama sans, who carry out the dictates of the brothel owners. Across the Pacific Ocean, in Nevada's legal brothels, often held up by regulationists as model prostitution environments, prostituted women lead a concentration-camp-like existence, with every aspect of their lives monitored and circumscribed by "rules"—from the number of wash clothes they are allotted to the number of customers they must serve each day. Overt coercion is unnecessary because the domination is complete.

What about the prostitution customer? Is he the rescuer of sex industry victims described in Panel A? Is he Richard Gere in "Pretty Woman," the movie, shown widely in Eastern Europe, that encouraged so many women and girls there to see prostitution as a glamorous career alternative. The reality is that "johns" are among the primary batterers and rapists of sexually exploited women and children. Not only do they callously view and treat prostituted women as sexual servants who must cater to their every misogynistic fantasy and demand, they then mete out this treatment on the non-prostituted women and girls in their lives. Not surprising, prostitution customers are increasingly turning to underage girls as protection from AIDS or a special thrill. When females are viewed as objects, it's easy to move from adult women to young girls and form prostituted native-born women to trafficked women and girls.

The reasons behind the legitimization of sexual exploitation as "sex work" are obvious. Unlike domestic abuse, sexual exploitation makes billions of dollars that lines the pockets of pimps, traffickers, brothel owners, legitimate businessmen, and, sometimes, government officials. Conservatively estimated, the legal sex industry reaps an estimated 52 billion dollars a year annually, according to Forbes. Viewing sexual exploitation as work rather than abuse shields the industry from a powerful critique that could lead to legislative and policy changes that would impinge on the industry’s profits.

Many have a sexual stake in the perpetuation of the sex industry. Millions of men all over the world, in every strata of society, are sex industry consumers who get physical and psychological gratification from buying the bodies of women and children. Last year, for example, a contingent of Latin American heads of state of paid a recreational visit to a notorious strip club in Venezuela. United Nations peacekeeping forces were prominent prostitution customers while stationed in Mozambique, Cambodia, and former Yugoslavia. It is uncomfortable for men who patronize prostitutes to face the reality of what they are inflicting on the women and children whose bodies they purchase. Viewing sexually exploited women and children as "sex workers"—free agents who are responsible for what is done to them in the sex industry—helps absolve prostitution customers of any feelings of responsibility.
There are those who romanticize the sex industry as a glamorous "outlaw" profession and believe that but for acts of coercion or deceit it is beneficial to women. These supporters of prostitution contend that organizing "sex workers" to fight for the "right to prostitute" and to improve "working conditions" in the sex industry is the solution. Any problems faced by prostituted women, they argue, are the result of social stigma and criminalization. What is curious about this position is not only the gross denial of the magnitude of harm suffered by sexually exploited women and children and of the overwhelming misogyny that pervades the sex industry, but the obvious fact that even when assessed as a labor practice "sex work" is destructive to "sex workers." What other form of labor requires that the worker be physically invaded by those who view him or her with contempt, subjects the worker to tremendous risk of fatal disease, destroys the worker's reproductive health, systematically subjects the worker to "on the job" violence, leaves the worker psychologically traumatized, renders the worker employable for only a short period of his/her life span, and offers the worker no job skills with which to survive after s/he is no longer employable in the trade. When evaluated this way, it becomes clear that "sex work" is akin to other forms of gross exploitation never dignified by the term "work"—exploitation as a "mule" in drug trafficking; exploitation by organ traffickers; and, for women, reproductive exploitation for the benefit of traffickers in infants. The term "sex worker" is false advertising that deceives the women and children recruited by the sex industry about its brutal reality. It suggests that not only are those who promote it apologists for the sex industry; they are complicit with it.

Is there any hope of addressing this deeply rooted and escalating human rights crisis? Is there any way to begin to halt the massive devastation wreaked by the global sex industry? The answer lies not in the labor model but in the strategies and approaches developed by advocates fighting violence against women. Like responses to other practices of racial and sexual domination and abuse, strategies against sexual exploitation must include the expansion of human rights norms, the development and implementation of legislative and policy reforms, and programs at the grassroots level.

(continues in PART THREE)