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Filling the Sex Trade Swamp: Robert Kraft and His Predecessors

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Robert Kraft, Eliot Spitzer, Donald Trump, prostitution, sex trafficking, China, Chinese, women, sex trade, victims, sex buyer, massage parlor, escort, decriminalization

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EDITORIAL

FILLING THE SEX TRADE SWAMP: ROBERT KRAFT AND HIS PREDECESSORS

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The Mar el Largo neighborhood in Florida has accommodated several of the state's most notorious sexual abusers including alleged abuser-in-chief, Donald Trump, Jeffrey Epstein—a serial rapist of hundreds of young girls—and more recently, the septuagenarian sex buyer, Robert Kraft.

Robert Kraft, the super-rich owner of the New England Patriots, faces first-degree misdemeanor charges of solicitation of prostitution, after he was filmed in the Orchids of Asia Day Spa receiving more than a regular massage. Cameras caught him enjoying a genital “rub ‘n tug” and featured a scene that suggested an oral sex act.

As Kraft was exploiting poor Asian women in prostitution, he contributed money to organizations working against violence against women. One of his donations of \$100,000 went to My Life, My Choice, a Boston based non-profit dedicated to ending the sexual exploitation of children through survivor mentorship and empowerment (Roth, 2019).

Kraft's hypocrisy is a tale of Eliot Spitzer redux. Spitzer, then Governor of New York, was arrested for purchasing women for sex at a high-priced “service” called the Emperor's Club. Spitzer also facilitated prostitution across state lines (Hays & Goldman, 2008)) when he paid for transporting his favored “escorts” from New York to Washington for his purposes of prostitution.

As a former Attorney General of New York, Spitzer had worked with women's groups (Bernstein, 2008) to toughen the legal penalties for “patronizing a person in prostitution.” Like Kraft, Spitzer appears to have enjoyed a different standard for himself than the one he set for other sex buyers who faced penalties attached to the very law he had helped pass. Both the feds and the state absolved Spitzer of all criminal charges alleging “he had been punished enough.”

The investigation of Kraft has expanded into a full-scale scrutiny of a network of traffickers whose reach crossed many state lines. It was a perspicacious woman

health inspector who first suspected that something was amiss and reported her concerns to the police.

The Asian women who “staffed” the spa brothel were confined for 24 hours a day, sleeping at night on the massage tables, and forced to serve eight to 15 men a day. They were transported to and from locations in different states, most of the time not knowing where they were. Authorities confirmed that the Florida investigation was just the “tip of the iceberg,” at this point having arrested 300 sex buyers and seized \$2 million in assets.

The Martin County Florida Sheriff, William Snyder, made clear the ravages of prostitution and its toll on victims. Refusing to call the women prostitutes and not using the euphemism of “sex worker,” he affirmed that the Asian women were victims. “The coercion is not that they’re at gunpoint. The coercion is more subtle, nuanced and more difficult to discern” (McLaughlin, 2018).

Sheriff Snyder placed the blame squarely on the johns—the sex buyers. “I would contend today that it’s the men in the shadows that are the monsters in this equation...none of this would happen if those men were not availing themselves and participating in this human misery” (McLaughlin, 2019).

Florida State Attorney Dave Aronberg also got it right when he stated, “Human trafficking is evil in our midst. It is fueled on the demand side (Belson, 2019).”

So why is Kraft not subject to anti-trafficking laws, which carry far greater penalties than state prostitution charges? One reason is the U.S. legal system drives a wedge between sex trafficking and prostitution, a disconnect promoted by pro-prostitution groups whose message is that trafficking is forced and prostitution is voluntary. Legally this translates into trafficking being a felony crime and prostitution being a misdemeanor crime.

Evidence collected from many victims and survivors of prostitution and trafficking, as well as from service providers and law enforcement authorities, verifies that women who have been trafficked internationally and also women who are exploited in local prostitution industries endure the same kinds of violence and health consequences of being sexually abused (Raymond & Hughes, 2001).

The legal minimizing of perpetrators of prostitution is proven again and again by the outrageously low penalties they receive, as in the case of Jeffrey Epstein. Accused of raping and sexually abusing hundreds of young girls, Epstein received a cushy plea deal that included a paltry punishment of two counts of solicitation of prostitution, effectively casting his victims as child prostitutes when there is no such creature as a child prostitute. As Yasmin Vava, director of the organization Rights4Girls has written, “Federal law defines these children as victims of human trafficking... In any other instance what happens to these youths would be considered statutory rape or sexual assault of a minor, landing their abusers behind bars” (Vafa, n.d.).

Kraft has learned from Epstein’s case that high-powered lawyers make all the difference. Since money is no object, Kraft has hired Jack Goldberger, the Florida lawyer who helped secure Epstein’s reprehensible legal plea deal.

Kraft is also benefiting from the support of pro-prostitution groups who use his situation as a teachable moment to promote decriminalization of prostitution—which is actually decriminalization of the sex industry. In a press release that appears to be taken down from its website, The Erotic Service Providers Legal,

Education and Research Project (ESPLERP) wrote: “We really hope Robert Kraft fights these charges...He has the legal resources to expose police entrapment and argue that private sex between consenting adults is protected...Sex work should be decriminalized.”

I asked Cherie Jimenez, survivor of prostitution and longtime director of the EVA Center, an exit program for prostituted women and girls in Boston Massachusetts, to respond to ESPLERP’s press release. She said:

I have met hundreds and hundreds of young women caught in systems of prostitution, fueled by demand of mostly white, very wealthy, men of privilege and entitlement like Robert Kraft. These organizations like ESPLERP are using the age-old narrative that Kraft is the real victim here as a billionaire celebrity who has been wronged, and they end up protecting the powerful. They use the same old argument that it’s all consensual with no regard to the actual realities of what it is to sell parts of your body and all the situational factors such as poverty, racism, gender violence and a growing economic disparity that has rendered so many vulnerable women into systems of prostitution.

Many well-intentioned people support decriminalization of prostitution because they think this means decriminalizing the women in prostitution. But decriminalization means making the criminals legal by transforming pimps into third party managers, brothel owners into sexual entrepreneurs, and sex buyers into cordial clients or customers.

In contrast, groups campaigning against decriminalization of prostitution fight for prostituted women to be decriminalized, but not sex buyers, pimps or brothels.

State Attorney Aronberg in his public statement described the wider ramifications of Robert Kraft’s crime: “This is not about lonely old men or victimless crime. This is about enabling a network of criminals to traffic women into our country for forced labor and sex” (Belson et al, 2019).

More recently, media revelations have surfaced about a Chinese-American massage-parlor owner who doubled as an advisor who frequented Trump fundraising events and introduced Chinese investors to President Trump and his associates. Li Cindy Yang is the proprietor of a string of south Florida day spas from which allegations of prostitution have been reported to at least two police departments. Yang is a person of interest because she once owned the Orchids of Asia day spa where Robert Kraft was apprehended and charged (Nehamas et al, 2019). This information raises yet more questions about the company Trump keeps — many of the same persons known also to Robert Kraft — and how a portion of Trump’s wealth may come from the sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Sex buyers prop up pimps, traffickers, and organized crime by contributing the funds that keep sexual slavery alive and well. They are the men whose continuous pursuit of easy and abusive sex forges the grooves in women’s continuous disintegration in prostitution.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Janice G. Raymond is a longtime feminist scholar-activist on violence against women and sexual exploitation. She is the former co-director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW). She is the author of many books and articles, most recently the book *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade* (Potomac Press, US; Spinifex Press, Australia). Dr. Raymond is professor emerita of women's studies and medical ethics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (USA) where she taught for 28 years. In 2007, Dr. Raymond was awarded the International Woman Award from the Zero Tolerance Trust in Scotland.

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