



DANA WITTMER & VANESSA BOUCHÉ

Toward A Citizen-Consumer Movement to End Demand for Commercial Sexual Exploitation

There have been several movements over the past few decades characterized as “citizenconsumer” movements, wherein individuals change their consumptive behavior at some “cost” to themselves in order to engage as good citizens. A few prominent examples are buying local, going green, and fair trade. As our case studies illustrate, underlying these movements is the idea that two seemingly contradictory identities, that of the citizen and that of the consumer, may be reconciled when individuals use their *citizen-oriented values* to make *consumptive*

decisions. Importantly, this type of engagement can increase or decrease demand for public policy *and* for goods and services. The purpose of the present project is to examine whether and under what conditions a citizen-consumer framework can change consumption of commercial sex, and what the implications of this are for both public policy and the commercial sexual exploitation, particularly as it relates to human trafficking.

Human trafficking is estimated to be a \$32 billion per year industry enslaving an estimated 12 to 27 million people globally. Over the past decade, as the horror of this enterprise has come to light, an abolitionist movement has arisen; when individ-

uals hear the atrocity that slavery in the 21st century exists in larger numbers than ever before, they are compelled to action. However, trafficking in persons would not exist in the absence of an insatiable demand for inexpensive goods—goods ranging from carpets and cigarettes to women and children. With eighty percent of trafficked victims being women and children for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation, clearly the demand for sex slaves is high.

What is the source of this demand? We argue that sex trafficking is the logical end game in a culture that normalizes human objectification. The sources of objectification range from mass media and marketing to Internet pornography, which provides the requisite anonymity, affordability, and access to objectify humans anywhere and anytime. Thus, we argue that the only condition under which commercial sexual exploitation will be minimized is to define what constitutes commercial sex very broadly by examining and including the cultural antecedents that allow it to thrive. In this way, citizens will be empowered as consumers to examine how their seemingly disconnect-

ed economic behavior may be contributing to a culture of objectification, and consumers of commercial sex will be empowered as citizens simply by exiting the commercial sex market