

Humanitarian Sexploitation

The world's sex slaves need liberation, not condoms.

by Donna M. Hughes

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EACH YEAR, hundreds of thousands of women and children are trafficked into prostitution around the world, and join the millions of women and children already entrapped in prostitution by pimps and organized crime groups. Thankfully, this humanitarian catastrophe is finally attracting high-level attention in Washington.

At the end of 2002, former congressman John Miller--who is determined to defeat the traffickers--was appointed as director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Later this month, the State Department, in partnership with the nongovernmental War Against Trafficking Alliance, will host an international conference, "Pathbreaking Strategies in the Global Fight Against Sex Trafficking." It will be an opportunity for hundreds of activists, service providers, law enforcement personnel, and governmental officials to meet and share their experiences fighting trafficking.

U.S. leadership in this fight is needed because many of the world's humanitarian organizations have been willing to overlook and excuse the trade in women and children. The reason is as simple as it is tragic: The sex slaves are a high-risk group for HIV infection. Unfortunately, efforts to curb the global HIV/AIDS crisis have led to "nonjudgmental" condom distribution campaigns that ignore some of the world's worst crimes and human rights violations. Indeed, the HIV/AIDS prevention educators often make deals with perpetrators.

For instance, in Kerala State in India, where organized crime groups and corrupt political officials control the red light districts, a former police commissioner tells me that social workers must get permission from the pimps to give condoms to the women. In return, the social workers agree to ignore the presence of children and never to tell the women how to get out of prostitution. It should be obvious that if health educators can't gain access to women and children in brothels without making deals with pimps, the women and children are not free to leave, and are, in the truest sense of the word, enslaved.

Imagine what it's like: You're in a hellhole. You've been tricked, lied to, threatened. You're being raped multiple times a day--you can't say "no," and you can't get out. Then, one day, someone from the outside comes; she says she's there to help. She hands you some condoms, tells you to use them, and leaves--smiling and thanking the pimp as she goes.

Such dealings with some of the world's most despicable criminals now increasingly take place as a matter of policy, both by governmental and nongovernmental aid workers. An astonishingly named "practical guide," *Hustling for Health*, a pamphlet produced by the European Network for HIV/STD Prevention in Prostitution and funded by the European Commission, offers the following advice to health educators: "Contact with a prostitute may only be possible through her pimp, and so [it] is advisable to establish (friendly) relations."

The attitude that condoms are more important than girls' freedom and safety can be found in the pages of the New York Times. In a recent editorial on funding international reproductive health services, the writer acknowledged that "teenage girls get AIDS largely because they are pressured into sex by older men," but insisted that girls need "condoms and counseling about how to negotiate sex." *Being pressured into sex by an older man is rape*. Girls should be taught to negotiate with rapists?

In January, the Mexican paper *El Universal* published a three-part series on the trafficking of Mexican girls to brothels--rape camps, really--near San Diego. Over a 10-year period, hundreds of girls, 12 to 18 years old, from southern Mexico were either kidnapped or tricked by three brothers into coming to the United States. The girls were sold to farm workers--

between 100 and 300 at a time--in small "caves" made of reeds in the fields. Many of the girls had babies, who were used as hostages with death threats against them, so their mothers would not try to escape.

An anonymous American doctor who worked for a community health clinic that provided health care to migrant workers said, "The first time I went to the camps I didn't vomit only because I had nothing in my stomach. It was truly grotesque and unimaginable." Over time, the girls got younger; a number were 9 and 10 years old. One time, the doctor counted 35 men using a girl in one hour. When the police raided the brothels, they found dozens of empty boxes of condoms, each box having held a thousand condoms. Calculate how many rapes that represents.

Yet for five years, under instruction from her supervisor, the doctor worked with the pimps "to prevent HIV/AIDS and other venereal diseases in the exploited minor girls." When she reported the horrific activities, she was told prostitution was not a migrant health concern. She said, "I fought a lot with the U.S. government and they told me that I shouldn't do anything, that I had signed a federal agreement of confidentiality." She said, "If I wanted to help these girls I had to develop a relationship with the pimps. . . . I had to convert myself into someone who doesn't judge, who doesn't express opinions."

Being nonjudgmental about sexual slavery means ignoring some of the most violent crimes and human rights violations being committed against women and children. In Cambodia, in Svay Pak, a squalid brothel village internationally known to sex tourists and pedophiles, *Mdecins Sans Frontiers* in collaboration with the Population Council conducted projects with "trafficked debt-bonded sex workers . . . and with girls engaged in commercial sex." The NGOs provided these enslaved women and girls with free medical treatment and centered their efforts on teaching them how to negotiate condom use with foreign men. In late January of this year, following determined criticism by U.S. activists, the Cambodian government demonstrated an alternative solution that many NGOs and European governments thought unachievable: The government closed the brothels, freed the women and girls, and provided services to those in need.

The time has come for the U.S. government, through tough-minded grant administration policies and focused diplomacy, to assert the necessary political will to end the worldwide enslavement of vulnerable women and children, and to confront the corruption that enables it. This can be achieved through vigorous enforcement of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, a broadly endorsed reform sponsored by Republicans Sam Brownback and Chris Smith and the late Democrat Paul Wellstone. The measure would withhold nonhumanitarian aid from countries that fail to prosecute traffickers or protect their victims.

In the end, as the Bush administration gives increasing signs of recognizing, more women and children's lives will be saved and more women and children liberated from sexual slavery by closing brothels and arresting pimps and traffickers than by passing out condoms.

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