

Guest Comment

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November 18, 2003, 9:08 a.m.

Whose Side Are We On?

Moscow дума protests U.S.-funded programs.

By Donna M. Hughes

Seventeen members of the Moscow city дума are standing up for law, order, and morality in Russia. They have written a letter saying that their work to promote democracy and restore moral values to Russian society is being undermined by U.S.-funded nongovernmental organizations.

On October 8, the Moscow дума sent a letter of protest and appeal to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. The letter expresses concern over the way U.S.-funded HIV/AIDS-prevention programs are being conducted in Russia, primarily because they have not been effective in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and secondly because the materials they distribute have messages countering the values needed to "build a strong, healthy society." The letter says that some of the materials have the effect of "encouraging young women to choose prostitution as a career." In addition, the letter claims that NGOs supported by U.S. funding are opposing the much-needed pending anti-trafficking legislation, and are even lobbying for legalizing prostitution.

What are they talking about?

All world health organizations are warning that Russia is poised on the brink of an AIDS epidemic. One of the high-risk groups for contracting and spreading HIV is prostitutes. In the past decade, tens of thousands of women and children have been trafficked from Russia for prostitution purposes; many of them will contract HIV in their ultimate destinations. Less well known is the fact that Russian cities are magnets for women and children trafficked from former Soviet Republics, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, and the more rural regions of Russia. There are an estimated 70,000 to 100,000 women and children in prostitution in Moscow alone. They are controlled by organized crime groups and corrupt police and officials who make millions of dollars from them each year. Worse, Russia does not have a law against the trafficking of persons, leaving those who want to combat this modern slave trade without tools or resources to fight the pimps or provide services to victims.

I do not know what the deputies of the Moscow дума have seen or heard that has prompted them to write this letter, but there are a few things that might lead them to think U.S. NGOs or U.S.-funded projects aren't working in the best interests of Russian society.

Maybe they read the Washington-based [International Human Rights Law Group's \(IHLRG\)](#) critique of the 1999 first draft of Russia's anti-trafficking law. This early version is considered by legal scholars to be a model for legislation that strongly penalizes the traffickers and provides assistance to victims of the sex trade. Yet, the IHLRG writes: "This proposed legislation is highly problematic, violates numerous fundamental human rights and would result in the restriction, rather than the protection, of women's human rights." IHLRG was critical of this bill because it was "an anti-prostitution bill" whose "true purpose is to prevent everyone, even consenting adults, from working in the sex industry," and "it does not require the use of coercion, deception or debt bondage by the 'traffickers.'" Some senior staff members of the IHLRG are on record as supporting legalization of prostitution and the voluntary trafficking of women. (They call it migrant sex work.) Their position contends that criminalizing all trafficking and pimping is a violation of traffickers' rights to be travel agents,

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pimps' rights to be "managers," and women's rights to choose prostitution as a form of work. This group's criticism of the draft anti-trafficking law was sent to the Russian parliament in October 1999. No doubt, the opinion of one group did not sway the entire Russian Duma, but the 1999 bill never made it into law. It is sobering to contemplate how many victims might have been saved if the Russian Duma had passed a strong anti-trafficking law in 1999. Now in the fall of 2003, another strong anti-trafficking bill is awaiting a vote in the parliament. Again, the IHRLG has written an analysis used by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to criticize the draft law's wording as being "anti-prostitution."

Maybe it was the March 2000 Boston College analysis of Russian Federation laws that may affect "sex workers" and HIV prevention. According to this analysis, all such laws were considered to be obstacles to women accessing services and preventing the spread of HIV. Even the law against brothel keeping was said to be a problem because it "encourage[s] brothel managers to move frequently" and "discourage[s] pimps and brothel managers from providing health care." The pimps in Moscow are vicious members of organized-crime rings; they are not generous, socially conscious employers. Yet, the idea that criminal penalties against pimps, traffickers, and brothel keepers will interfere with effective HIV prevention is the common position among most HIV-prevention programs, which leads them to oppose strong anti-trafficking laws. Generally, HIV-prevention programs have not pushed for tough laws against trafficking and pimping meant to stop the trade in women and children as a means of stopping the spread of HIV. Nor do they provide shelter for victims of prostitution and trafficking.

Maybe they heard the interview that Robin Montgomery, then researcher for AIDS Infoshare, gave to Ted Koppel of *Nightline* in March 2000 about the increase in prostitution in Moscow. She said, "If you want to put food on the table, if you want to pay for your studies, if you want to buy nice clothes, it comes down to sex work is the most lucrative, it has a future and most romanticized job there is for women in Russia today. The market is sex." It is easy to imagine that this message might alarm some Duma deputies worried about society's youth.

Maybe they saw the SANAM brochure "How to Safely Have Sex and Do Sex Work." On the cover is a photograph of a lovely young woman in a long white dress, standing in a field of wild flowers, a bouquet of them in her arms. Maybe the Duma deputies thought that was a romanticized image of prostitution that might influence young women to think it was a nice job. SANAM is a World Health Organization Collaborating Center that receives funding from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and USAID. It also receives funding from the Soros Open Society Institute. The brochure assures readers that "the risks [of sex work] can be controlled." The nonjudgmental introduction tells readers: "Each of us has his or her own reasons why we do the things we do, and how we do them. Maybe you sell sex as a source of income, maybe as a side-job, or maybe it is only a short episode of your life...Our goal is to help you practice safe sex and offer sex services without danger...Prostitutes are sometimes regarded as victims. We don't agree with this exact view...With regard to work, it is very important that you maintain your professionalism, in order that this work will be safe...This booklet contains recommendations that will help you reduce the risks of venereal disease, protect yourself from other dangerous physical conditions, and guarantee your psychological well-being."

Maybe they heard about the seven-year (1997-2003) project on working with pimps run by AIDS Infoshare (Russia), an NGO which receives funding from the Global AIDS Program of the WHO and USAID. According to a published conference summary of a presentation entitled "To Pimp or Not to Pimp — That is the Question," a Moscow aid worker describes working with pimps from Ukraine, Moldova, and other regions of Russia. The pimps are described as men with criminal pasts who "own" a certain territory in Moscow, and "own a group of sex workers, and normally get all the money." The AIDS Infoshare worker reports that these pimps are "usually involved in trafficking women" and "often travel to other regions to recruit new girls for the sex industry." In other words, they are modern-day slave traders. The aid workers motivate the pimps to work with them to distribute condoms by enlisting the pimps' interests in "providing a good service and getting more clientele," and "ensuring their products, 'the girls,' have good personal hygiene and are in good condition health wise." The aid worker said the advantage of collaborating with pimps is that it gives them "easier access to sex workers and others involved in the industry for research purposes." The aid worker does acknowledge that they have a serious ethical dilemma and conflict of interest by working with pimps: "A

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question of loyalty! 'Who are we working for?' 'How is the organization perceived by sex workers if pimps are also becoming our clients?'" The aid worker also ponders whether "pimps are perhaps our gatekeepers."

Maybe it was [Population Services International's Russian mascot](#), Mr. Condom Man, the six-foot-high, walking condom-covered penis that makes appearances at youth events to promote the use of condoms among 14-24 year olds. Those of us in the sexually liberal U.S. may be comfortable with this kind of giant walking object, but it probably offends the sensibilities of more conservative Russians.

Most organizations receive funding from additional sources other than the U.S. government. And even though they receive U.S. funding for project X, it may be project Y, which the U.S. does not fund, that is the problematic one. Also, a U.S. funding agency may not directly bankroll an organization, but instead supply an intermediary, which then funnels the money to different projects. But most observers do not stop to parse responsibility among different funders. They just get the message the organization sends, and do not ask which funder's hat the person is wearing when he delivers it.

The organizer of the Moscow дума letter is Ludmilla Stebankova, chairman of the дума's special commission on health and public health care. I met her last June when I made a presentation on child prostitution to the commission. She is a lovely, dynamic, passionate defender of children, and a warrior against the moral rot that has invaded Moscow. Her letter to Senator Frist and Speaker Hastert says:

I am writing an appeal to you good, moral, American people who believe like I and many of my colleagues, fellow parents and fellow legislators believe: That the future of the world is in the hands and hearts of our youth and that it is up to all of us, no matter what our nationality, to see that young people everywhere grow up with good moral values, strong spiritual values, and a sense of responsibility towards the health and well-being of all the world's people. As responsible adults and those in power, we must protect those vulnerable youth from exploitation and moral degradation by preventing all forms of criminal exploitation including trafficking, prostitution and drug use and that none of these activities should be encouraged in our land.

Every city and country should be so lucky as to have such a spokeswoman, one who is willing to lead colleagues to speak out against programs that fail to achieve their objectives and undermine the values needed to build a strong society.

— *Donna M. Hughes is professor and Carlson Endowed Chair in women's studies at the University of Rhode Island.*

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