

Guest Comment

On NRO

[E-mail Author](#)
[Send to a Friend](#)
[Print Version](#)

May 1, 2003, 9:00 a.m.

Accommodation or Abolition?

Solutions to the problem of sexual trafficking and slavery.

By Donna M. Hughes

Most everyone agrees that the sex-trafficking networks that enslave millions of women and children each year are among the most egregious systems of human-rights violations in the world. The proposed solutions, however, are distinctly different in their approaches and outcomes. They range from regulating prostitution, to providing services that attempt to reduce the harm done, to liberating the victims and abolishing the systems of sexual slavery entirely.

Some groups believe that the greatest harm to women and children in prostitution results from the stigma attached to it. Therefore, if prostitution is legalized and redefined as "sex work" — a job like any other — the stigma and harm will simply disappear. These groups believe that if "sex workers" feel better about themselves they will be more "empowered," and consequently able to resist violent pimps, traffickers, and men who force them to have sex without condoms.

This is the approach taken by the [Network of Sex Work Projects \(NSWP\)](#), an international organization working for the "rights of sex workers." They reject the label "victim," even for women and children who have been raped and tortured, on the grounds that talking about "victimization works against empowerment." NSWP's "rights"-based approach means the abandoning of all responsibility for the health, safety, and freedom of women and children ensnared in prostitution. For example, they call for services — even for children — to be administered without judgment for the "work" they do. And at the 2002 AIDS conference in Barcelona, NSWP organized a demonstration to protest "100 percent condom use programs," claiming that requiring prostitutes to use condoms was "misogynist" and a violation of their human rights. The group also opposes the anti-trafficking movement that is trying to liberate women and children from sexual slavery, claiming that it is "repressive" because it will limit women's ability to "migrate for sex work" — their euphemism for sex trafficking.

Another proposed solution is the public-health approach that advocates only for providing medical services and condoms to trafficked women and children. Proponents believe that prostitution and sexual slavery are inevitable, and promote "harm-reduction" programs that treat and attempt to prevent more disease. In the belief there is nothing they can do — or possibly should do — about sexual slavery, they ignore the violence and enslavement. This is the stance of the International Center for Research on Women, one of the members of a consortium that recently received \$50 million dollars from USAID as part of their faith-based response to HIV/AIDS. The center's president, Geeta Rao Gupta, said at the U.N. General Assembly 26th Special Session on HIV/AIDS that "sex work" is a reality in every country. But Gupta ignores the fact that most "sex workers" are — or originally started out as — trafficked women and girls. She also puts a higher priority on the public good than on the rights of women and children to be free: "We cannot and must not allow our misguided morality, or for that matter our politics, to stand in the way of public health imperatives."

Indeed, any groups that engage only in harm-reduction must abandon whatever moral sense they have, in order to build friendly relationships with the brothel owners and pimps, gain access to the women and children, and give them condoms and medical services.

To decide which solution is best, we above all need to listen to the voices of the victims entrapped in sexual slavery. In Bombay, India, on International Women's Day this March, a

fair was held by 1,200 women from an organization called Victims of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking. A delegation of women spoke to the Joint Commissioner of Police, and told him what they wanted: "Protect us from the exploitation and torture by the pimps and brothel keepers... We wish to get out of this hell... Cooperate with us at every step so that we can find our way out."

Fortunately, there is another solution to sexual slavery — "report and rescue." Advocated by Laura Lederer, a political appointee at the U.S. State Department and executive director of the Senior Operating Group on Trafficking in Persons, report and rescue puts the safety and freedom of women and children first. This approach does not accommodate traffickers, pimps, or exploiters. Instead, it builds responsibility into aid work by requiring personnel to report the abuse and enslavement of women and children to the appropriate authorities. Admittedly, in some parts of the world that can be a challenge — police and officials are sometimes complicit in the trafficking of women and children. Nonetheless, aid workers should have an obligation to report, not ignore, slavery. Moreover, under this approach aid workers have a duty to catalyze a rescue. They can do so through the official report, or by notifying a nongovernmental or faith-based group that specializes in rescuing enslaved women and girls.

This bold, new approach represents a break with the accommodationist schemes that normalize prostitution and merely try to distribute a few condoms. Already some are predicting that the new approach will not work and are trying to block it — but the paradigm shift has already begun. In February, President Bush issued a National Security Presidential Directive to advance the fight against trafficking. In it, prostitution and related activities are characterized as "inherently harmful and dehumanizing." USAID immediately updated their anti-trafficking policy to reflect this new approach. Their policy now reads: "Organizations advocating prostitution as an employment choice or which advocate or support the legalization of prostitution are not appropriate partners for USAID anti-trafficking grants or contracts."

Now, these policy pronouncements need to be backed up with a shift in the flow of money — from the old, accommodationist groups to organizations willing to fully engage in the report and rescue of victims of trafficking and sexual slavery.

Women and children are waiting.

— *Donna M. Hughes is the Carlson Endowed Chair in Women's Studies at the University of Rhode Island.*

<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-hughes050103.asp>