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October 9, 2002, 9:15 a.m.

Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

No way to end sex-trafficking.

By Donna M. Hughes

There are some wolves in sheep's clothing among those who claim they are fighting the trafficking of women and children. In their disguise they speak loudly against trafficking as one of worst human-rights violations in the world — which it is — to conceal their goal of normalizing and legalizing prostitution and the transnational flow of women into sex industries.

The global trade in women and children is estimated to earn traffickers \$7 billion per year. It is the third leading money earner for organized-crime networks following the trade in drugs and arms. Normalizing the use of women — and even children — in prostitution will make even more money for the traffickers and pimps. So, efforts made within the anti-trafficking movement to undermine the work of those trying to stop the sex trade should not surprise us.

The upcoming conference in Honolulu "[The Human Rights Challenge of Globalization in Asia-Pacific-US: The Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children](#)," scheduled for November 13-15, offers an example of this phenomenon. The favorite tactics of the wolves are redefinition and obfuscation of the violence and abuse that women and children suffer. They claim that prostitution is really a form of labor, i.e. "sex work," and that it can be "empowering" for women to leave their homes, travel to other countries, and engage in prostitution with 10, 20, or 30 men per day. Except in the cases of the most egregious violence, the transnational movement of women for prostitution is no longer called trafficking. Instead, it is redefined as "migrant sex work," and the women become "migrant sex workers." Following in this trend, the Hawaii conference states that trafficking can be discussed in the context of "global movements of capital, labor and people," in which perpetrators become "clients" and victims become "providers of sexual services."

If the listed keynote speakers, which includes Hillary Clinton, remain true to past form, they will passionately denounce the trafficking of women as a modern form of slavery, but steadfastly avoid mentioning prostitution as the demand that drives the trafficking. As part of the normalization of prostitution, nothing negative is ever said about it. They carefully "delink" trafficking from prostitution, which is like disconnecting the 18th century transatlantic slave trade from chattel slavery in the U.S.

A few of the wolves at the conference will be:

- A presenter who recently completed a report on trafficking that concludes that trafficking in India is largely a myth. (The U.S. State Department's Human Rights Report on India states that organized crime networks control the sex industries involving 2.3 million prostitutes, of whom 575,000 are children.)
- An Albanian presenter who was detained by police in France last year for supplying counterfeit documents and falsifying asylum applications for trafficked women in prostitution from Albania.
- An American presenter who advocates the reform of labor laws in the U.S. to include prostitution as a form of work. She has recently suggested that the sex-trafficking provision of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 should not be used, and all cases handled as forced labor.
- An American presenter from a "sex worker project" in New York who calls for the reform of the U.S. justice system to accommodate prostitution. Her approach to child prostitution is to respect children's "choice" to stay in prostitution if they are not ready to leave. She advocates assisting them through "harm reduction" programs, (i.e. give them condoms).

- A British presenter who was involved in an adoption scheme that brought 28 pregnant Romanian women to Hungary to give birth and then sell the babies to the U.S. As a result, he was placed on an Interpol watch list as a suspected trafficker, and banned from entering Romania or the U.S. for five years. The next year he was detained by police in Croatia under the suspicion of coercing women to give up their children. More recently, he was investigated by the European commission for misappropriating funds for a sex-trafficking project in Hungary. Following this, Hungary initiated deportation procedures.

These presenters and their colleagues couch their arguments in terms of human rights and women's rights. But that is a smokescreen for their true agenda. They do not represent the interests of women and children. Normalizing prostitution and the transnational movement of women for prostitution does not advance women's status or rights in the world. Instead, it turns women and children into sexual commodities that are raped, beaten, and exploited for the profit of a few.

Certainly, not all of the presenters at this conference are advocates or sympathizers with legalization of prostitution. There are some courageous presenters who have been fighting the abuse and exploitation of women and children in trafficking and prostitution for years. But they are often outmaneuvered. In fact, that seems to be how the funding for this conference came about: Representative Frank Wolf, who is a strong opponent of the sex trade and responsible for helping to create the Trafficking in Persons Office in the State Department, funded the conference with a congressional earmark for the University of Hawaii's Globalization Research Center, run by Nancie Caraway, who is the wife of Representative Neil Abercrombie. All too often, the funds for anti-trafficking programs and events end up supporting people who are actually working against the protection of women and children.

To stop trafficking, there must be a zero-tolerance approach to the trade in women and children for sex. The trafficking of persons is clearly defined as criminal activity by international (United Nations) and U.S. legal standards. We need conferences, programs, and NGOs that clearly stand for the abolition of the sex trade. This means re-linking trafficking and prostitution, and combating the commercial sex trade as a whole. The energies generated by this approach will create the political will to combat trafficking and prostitution. We cannot expect to have a successful abolition movement if we do not expose the wolves.

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