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The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking

U.S. Department of State

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The U.S. Government adopted a strong position against legalized prostitution in a December 2002 National Security Presidential Directive based on evidence that prostitution is inherently harmful and dehumanizing, and fuels trafficking in persons, a form of modern-day slavery.

Prostitution and related activities—including pimping and patronizing or maintaining brothels—fuel the growth of modern-day slavery by providing a façade behind which traffickers for sexual exploitation operate.

Where prostitution is legalized or tolerated, there is a greater demand for human trafficking victims and nearly always an increase in the number of women and children trafficked into commercial sex slavery.

Of the estimated 600,000 to 800,000 people trafficked across international borders annually, 80 percent of victims are female, and up to 50 percent are minors. Hundreds of thousands of these women and children are used in prostitution each year.

Women and children want to escape prostitution
The vast majority of women in prostitution don’t want to be there. Few seek it out or choose it, and most are desperate to leave it. A 2003 study first published in the scientific Journal of Trauma Practice found that 89 percent of women in prostitution want to escape. And children are also trapped in prostitution—despite the fact that international covenants and protocols impose upon state parties an obligation to criminalize the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Prostitution is inherently harmful
Few activities are as brutal and damaging to people as prostitution. Field research in nine countries concluded that 60-75 percent of women in prostitution were raped, 70-95 percent were physically assaulted, and 68 percent met the criteria for post traumatic stress disorder in the same range as treatment-seeking combat veterans and victims of state-organized torture. Beyond this
shocking abuse, the public health implications of prostitution are devastating and include a myriad of serious and fatal diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

A path-breaking, five-country academic study concluded that research on prostitution has overlooked “[t]he burden of physical injuries and illnesses that women in the sex industry sustain from the violence inflicted on them, or from their significantly higher rates of hepatitis B, higher risks of cervical cancer, fertility complications, and psychological trauma.”

State attempts to regulate prostitution by introducing medical check-ups or licenses don’t address the core problem: the routine abuse and violence that form the prostitution experience and brutally victimize those caught in its netherworld. Prostitution leaves women and children physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually devastated. Recovery takes years, even decades—often, the damage can never be undone.

**Prostitution creates a safe haven for criminals**

Legalization of prostitution expands the market for commercial sex, opening markets for criminal enterprises and creating a safe haven for criminals who traffic people into prostitution. Organized crime networks do not register with the government, do not pay taxes, and do not protect prostitutes. Legalization simply makes it easier for them to blend in with a purportedly regulated sex sector and makes it

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2 Farley, et al.


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For more information, please log on to the Web site of the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at [www.state.gov/g/tip](http://www.state.gov/g/tip).