The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking

U.S. Department of State
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 more difficult for prosecutors to identify and punish those who are trafficking people.

The Swedish government has found that much of the vast profit generated by the global prostitution industry goes into the pockets of human traffickers. The Swedish government said, “International trafficking in human beings could not flourish but for the existence of local prostitution markets where men are willing and able to buy and sell women and children for sexual exploitation.”

To fight human trafficking and promote equality for women, Sweden has aggressively prosecuted customers, pimps, and brothel owners since 1999. As a result, two years after the new policy, there was a 50 percent decrease in women prostituting and a 75 percent decrease in men buying sex. Trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation decreased as well. In contrast, where prostitution has been legalized or tolerated, there is an increase in the demand for sex slaves and the number of victimized foreign women—many likely victims of human trafficking.

Grant-making implications of the U.S. government policy

As a result of the prostitution-trafficking link, the U.S. government concluded that no U.S. grant funds should be awarded to foreign non-governmental organizations that support legal state-regulated prostitution. Prostitution is not the oldest profession, but the oldest form of oppression.

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.