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The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking

U.S. Department of State

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THE LINK BETWEEN PROSTITUTION AND SEX TRAFFICKING

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



Moldovan and Romanian trafficking victims freed after a raid of a Bosnian brothel.

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.¹ 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.



Women and girls rescued from brothels in Indian cities line up to identify an alleged trafficker at a shelter in Nepal.

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 veterans² and victims of state-organized torture.³ 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.”⁴

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



A brothel where the borders of Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil meet, creating a hub for human trafficking.



Suspected leader of sex trafficking in Macedonia.

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.”⁵

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.⁶ In contrast, **where prostitution has been legalized or tolerated, there is an increase in the demand for sex slaves⁷ and the number of victimized foreign women**—many likely victims of human trafficking.⁸

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.

¹ Farley, Melissa et al. 2003. “Prostitution and Trafficking in Nine Countries: An Update on Violence and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.” *Journal of Trauma Practice*, Vol. 2, No. 3/4: 33-74; and Farley, Melissa. ed. 2003. *Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*. Haworth Press, New York.

² Farley, et al.

³ Ramsay, R. et al. 1993. “Psychiatric morbidity in survivors of organized state violence including torture.” *British Journal of Psychiatry*. 162:55-59.

⁴ Raymond, J. et al. 2002. *A Comparative Study of Women Trafficked in the Migration Process*. Ford Foundation, New York.

⁵ Swedish Ministry of Industry, Employment, and Communications. 2004. *Fact Sheet: Prostitution and Trafficking in Women*.

<http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/01/87/74/6bc6c972.pdf>

⁶ Ekberg, G.S. 2001. “Prostitution and Trafficking: The Legal Situation in Sweden”. Paper presented at Journées de formation sur la mondialisation de la prostitution et du trafic sexuel. Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale. Montréal, Quebec, Canada.

⁷ Malarek, Victor. *The Narshas: Inside the New Global Sex Trade*. Arcade Publishing, New York, 2004.

⁸ Hughes, Donna M. 2002. *Foreign Government Complicity in Human Trafficking: A Review of the State Department's 2002 Trafficking in Persons Report*. Testimony before the U.S. House Committee on International Relations. Washington, D.C., June 19, 2002.