

In These Times

March 14, 2005

Trafficking in Politics: Bush's strong rhetoric on sex slavery masks policy failures.

By Eartha Melzer

George W. Bush seems to take one human rights campaign seriously – he decries human trafficking as “modern slavery” and a “special evil.” Indeed, he used sex slavery to mobilize his evangelical base during the 2004 campaign.

The evangelicals are not alone. In 2000, they formed an uncommon coalition with feminist groups to lobby for a new law combating human trafficking. The resulting Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) set up minimum standards for all countries to meet in combating trafficking, and created the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons within the State Department.

But four years into the anti-trafficking program, both evangelicals and feminists are disappointed with the results. Commercial sexual exploitation of women is on the rise globally, and in many cases the United States is driving, not stopping, the trend. Countries with the most severe trafficking problems have been ignored, while others appear to have been targeted for political reasons. And the economic plight of women who sell sex for money has been overshadowed by a sensationalized rhetoric of sin and redemption.

A simplistic take on a complex problem

Regulating the global sex trade is no easy proposition. Prostitution is legal, with various caveats, in several countries, and international legal experts have developed elaborate definitions to distinguish between victims of coercion and adults who willingly exchange sex for money. The International Labour Organization, discussing the booming sex trade in Asia, recognizes, “In many cases, sex work is often the only viable alternative for women in communities coping with poverty, unemployment, failed marriages and family obligations in nearly complete absence of social welfare programs.”

Bush, however, has eschewed the notion that sex workers have needs or agency, instead lumping together trafficking, prostitution and commercial sex as offenses against the “moral law that stands above nations.” With the 2003 National Security Directive 22, Bush announced a “zero tolerance” policy for trafficking, including involvement in trafficking by U.S. service members. The directive also required that anti-trafficking funds be kept from groups that do not take an abolitionist approach to prostitution.

As with the administration's policies on illegal drugs, family planning and AIDS, the U.S. policy against trafficking does not focus on harm reduction. Funding preference is given to groups that forcibly remove women from prostitution. That means leaving out some of the organizations best situated to address problems faced by sex workers, like the Sonagachi project in India. This health project, for and by sex workers, has been recognized by the United Nations as a model program for stopping the spread of HIV and protecting the rights of people involved in the sex trade.

The Bush administration's absolutist approach bears strong similarities to American moral crusades of days past. In the early 20th century, industrialization and immigration fueled sensational stories of "defiled virgins," and a crusade against prostitution resulted in the 1910 passage of the White Slavery Traffic Act, which banned transporting women across state lines for "immoral purposes."

Nearly a century later, the media is rife with accounts that similarly depend on public prurience and stereotypes of women as victims. On January 25, 2004, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a cover story by Peter Landesman titled "Sex Slaves on Main Street: the Girls Next Door." While this tale of large-scale trafficking of women and girls into the United States was quickly discredited, that didn't stop director Roland Emmerich, the man who brought us *Independence Day*, from optioning the film rights.

Double standards

Under TVPA, the Department of Justice (DOJ) has set up Human Trafficking Task Forces in cities around the country. A November 2004 DOJ press release, announcing a \$450,000 anti-trafficking grant to the D.C. Metro Police Department's "highly experienced" prostitution unit, stated that the money would be used to arrest prostitutes and "work up the chain to apprehend traffickers."

Such an approach not only conflates human trafficking and prostitution, but could further persecute people working in the sex industry. Taina Bien-Aime, executive director of the New York-based feminist group Equality Now, explains that while TVPA provides for visas for trafficked women, in order to avoid prosecution and deportation any undocumented immigrant must cooperate in the prosecution of her trafficker. Obtaining this cooperation may prove difficult because the trafficked women are often from the same village as the trafficker and many fear repercussions to their families.

American prosecution of these crimes abroad seems decidedly less aggressive. The State Department has a mandate from Congress to issue annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) reports grading countries on their progress on stopping trafficking. "Tier 3" countries – those judged by the United States not to be making progress – face sanctions.

According to a source at the State Department, most Tier 3 countries are the ones that have poor relations with the U.S. government, such as North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. Venezuela's ranking, for example, seems based more on its refusal to recognize the U.S. program than with the scope of trafficking there.

The selective attention to the seriousness of some countries' trafficking has angered conservatives. Gary Haugen is the director of International Justice Mission (IJM), a Christian group that has received millions of dollars in federal funds to work on trafficking. IJM infiltrates the sex trade in India and Thailand and conducts brothel raids, placing sex workers in homes for rescue and re-education.

In June 2002, Haugen told the Congressional Human Rights Caucus that "the State Department has rendered the standards of the act virtually meaningless," by placing India and Thailand in Tier 2. Although the sex trade is huge in these countries, Haugen said, virtually no one has been prosecuted for trafficking.

Adding injury to insult

Even worse, U.S. interventions around the world are contributing to the trafficking and exploitation of women. The State Department TIP report for 2003 noted that trafficking activities have increased in Afghanistan and Iraq as a consequence of instability brought on by armed conflict.

"As we have seen elsewhere," the report stated, "the demand for prostitution often increases with the presence of military troops, expatriates and international personnel who have access to disposable income."

On April 24, 2002, Ben Johnston, a helicopter mechanic for DynCorp in Bosnia, testified to Congress about DynCorp employees who were allegedly buying women and girls to keep in their homes as sex slaves. Yet, despite the president's "zero tolerance" directive and the development of laws that would hold contractors responsible for involvement in sex trafficking, DynCorp remains in good standing as a U.S. contractor, and in 2003 was awarded a no-bid contract to "re-establish police, justice and prison functions in post-conflict Iraq."

In 2002, media reports detailed how "courtesy patrol" units around U.S. bases in Korea were directing soldiers and tourists to locations where they could engage the services of sex workers, mainly women from Russia and the Philippines who were held captive and forced to have sex with soldiers. South Korean authorities estimated that their country's sex industry was worth \$22 billion a year and involved 330,000 women.

Congress called for an investigation and on September 21, 2004, the House Armed Services Committee and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe held a forum titled "Enforcing U.S. Policies Against Trafficking in Persons: How is the U.S. Military Doing?"

The inspector general of the Defense Department, Joseph E. Schmitz, a Bush appointee charged with being the "eyes, ears and conscience of the Defense Department" on trafficking issues, failed to give specific information about his investigation. Instead, he delivered a paper at the hearing called "Examining Sex Slavery Through the Fog of Moral Relativism," which read in part:

Whatever else one might say about sex slavery in the 21st century, these recent proactive measures taken by U.S. and Western leaders reaffirm the “moral truth” that prostitution and human trafficking fall within those “dissolute and immoral practices” envisioned by our Continental Congress when it prescribed a duty to “guard against and suppress” such practices through, *inter alia*, vigilance by leaders in “inspecting the conduct of all persons who are placed under their command.”

At the same hearing, the duty of substantive analysis fell to lawyer Martina Vanderberg, a former researcher with Human Rights Watch. In contrast to Schmitz’s – and Bush’s – bombastic pronouncements, she testified that the loopholes for contractors have not been closed, that education programs have not yet yielded the participation of soldiers in identifying traffickers and that it is unclear how the zero tolerance policy is being implemented.

Copyright © 2005 In These Times.