

This draft is written initially for a pro-sex worker audience via The Professional however I am hoping for a wider distribution: all comments are welcome

Trafficking sex slaves horror: time to challenge the anti-prostitution lobby

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Introduction

This article is a response to the increasingly strident statements of anti-trafficking groups, which are building up in advance of the UN Conference on Women to be held in Beijing in September 1995. One of the goals is a new UN Convention to replace the 1949 Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (which is already anti-prostitution). Many well-meaning people are being misled into thinking that trafficking, child prostitution and sex tourism are enormous problems for Australia and Southeast Asia ('The international sex trade is reaching gigantic proportions' - ECPAT Bulletin Sept 1994). Without saying that these things don't exist, the intention here is to give a more balanced, alternative view so that before people dig in their pockets for a donation, sign a petition, or even join an anti-trafficking group, they will try and consider the sex workers' perspective and the implications of this lobby for the workers in sex trades.

There was relatively little attention paid to 'trafficking' after the 1949 convention, until the 1980s surge of concern about 'sex tourism'. In April 1993 a conference was organised by the Coalition Against Traffic of Women 'to heighten awareness of the sex trade and to stem the sale of humans into bondage' (AsiaWatch p149). The latest intense phase of publicity began with two conferences on trafficking held at the end of 1994: The First International Conference on the Trafficking of Women in Chiang Mai in October 17-21 (which was attended by the Prostitutes Collective of Victoria and which established the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women), and the International Conference on Traffic in Persons in Utrecht in November 15-19, 1994 (which arrived at quite different conclusions, calling for decriminalisation of prostitution and exploring the use of occupational health and safety regulations).

I will try to illustrate the variety of sex work and the importance of the socio-economic environment in which it takes place, linking local conditions with the forces of economic globalisation, the AIDS discourse and legislation which creates the space for exploitation and violence by criminalising prostitutes. I will look particularly at the movement of sex trade workers into and out of Thailand, since this has been a major focus of lobbying. The recent AsiaWatch report, *A modern form of slavery: trafficking of Burmese women and girls into brothels in Thailand* (1993) was publicised with a tour of Australia by the researchers from 1-13 May 1995, followed by a fund-raising initiative from the International Women's Development Agency; IWDA is also involved in lobbying at the Beijing conference. I will argue that this lobby has an underlying agenda of abolishing prostitution, which is being carried through by linking all forms of the sex trade together beneath an emphasis on emotive words like trafficking, slavery and child prostitution.

Child prostitution

Clearly there are cases of pre-pubescent children forced to have sex against their will, not only in the sex industry - and there are laws to punish the perpetrators. Children cannot be considered able to make an informed choice to enter sex work and such work cannot be condoned by reference to poverty. A *Time* special report, 'Defiling the children', claims that an explosion in child prostitution is driven by client fear of AIDS, with a 'typical' story of a 14 year old Thai girl sold by her poor parents: 'When she reached Phuket, a center for sex tourism, she was forced into prostitution in conditions of virtual slavery until she was rescued last December by Thai police. But they arrived too late; Armine has tested HIV-positive and will die of AIDS' (21 June 1993 p28).

ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism) is the main international lobby group, formed in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 1990 after a meeting set up by the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism. Among their issues is the claim, in the ECPAT Conference statement of 1992, that many children have been driven to suicide, drug abuse and crime because they are victims of prostitution. ECPAT sends out regular leaflets with individual stories of abused children, reports of ever more places where child prostitution exists, and names of Westerners who have been arrested: the majority of cases involve boys, leading to suspicions that ECPAT is fuelled by homophobia (Priscilla Alexander, personal correspondence).

Is there really evidence for a booming trade in young flesh? Asian sex industries are mainly locally run for local clients, yet it is Western sex tourists who are the monsters: organisations like ECPAT play on the political weight of Western middle-class anxieties. As Maggie Black says, most of the accounts, 'begin with a gut-wrenching personal story... The image of a small girl or boy forced to deploy humanity's ultimate resource- the body- for the commercial purpose of sexual gratification is profoundly disturbing' (p11-12). Black tells the story of a 15 year old in Manila, who arrived at a club of her own volition, goes out with the Filipino clients and aspires to marry one of them:

'There's something wrong here, surely? Child prostitute stories are about innocence brutally deflowered, eight year olds chained to beds, sickening victimization. The manager is supposed to be a villain, not a protector... And what about the customers? They're supposed to be villains too, preferably Westerners on the sex circuit with vibrators in their pockets and deviant carnal lusts. Not dates seen as a profitable escape route from an unpleasant environment; certainly not potential marriage partners. And 15? You can hardly call Ofelia a child. In lots of Muslim societies a high proportion of girls are married by 15. It's hardly unusual in any society for a tall, pretty girl to have had her first fling by then....among the few things that can be stated with confidence is that the overwhelming majority of 'children' in prostitution are well past puberty, mostly in their mid-teens, and many are beyond both the legal age of marriage and of sexual consent' (Black p12).

We need to establish what is meant by 'child', as lobby groups frequently include all people under-18, whereas in popular usage children are children until they reach puberty. Different states also have different laws related to the age of consent to sexual intercourse: in Thailand 'minors' for the purposes of sexual intercourse are under 15, but this is clearly not the age being used by the NGOs. Some groups are arguing to push the age up to 20 due to the dangers of early pregnancy and the risk for HIV arising from damage to delicate tissues. The situation needs to be clarified since figures quoted for 'child prostitutes' are often largely made up of over-16 year olds, this is also often the case with 'child sex rings' exposed by ECPAT. ECPAT

does not provide support to these 'children', confining itself to exposing them and removing their source of income.

Defining trafficking

The word trafficking can be applied to any kind of commodities being traded or bartered, however it also has sinister and illicit implications, in this case being used with the implicit assumption that it is women and girls who are being transacted as non-consenting prostitutes fulfilling male sexual desires.

Rubin defines trafficking quite broadly in terms of the exchange of women in social systems to maintain the dominance of men, and suggests 'we look for the ultimate locus of women's oppression within the traffic in women.... women are given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favors, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold' (Rubin p175). This argument differs from that of the anti-trafficking lobby because the association of trafficking with females is not seen as an essential one, but it relates to the 'historical and moral element' (ibid p164) which applies to people as opposed other commodities, and which varies from place to place.

The Utrecht conference produced a definition emphasising force rather than the nature of work to be performed in its final statement: 'The traffic in persons is not only for purposes of prostitution, but for a range of other activities as well. ...it is important to emphasize that the element that defines traffic is force and not the nature of the labour to be performed... The trafficker cannot use as a defence the fact that the person is or was at any time, for example, a prostitute or a domestic worker...'

In contrast, after the Chiang Mai conference the Global Alliance defined trafficking as forced labour where people are lured or deceived into forms of contemporary slavery. The IWDA leaflet says that Burmese women and girls are 'trafficked - sold lured or tricked - into slavery in Thai brothels'. Meanwhile in journalistic usage, 'the traffic in flesh is a horror of exploitation that shames the world's conscience... Souls do not count, only bodies, debased over and over, unmindful of social cost or disease' (Hornblower p14).

On the subject of definitions it should be mentioned that the label prostitute or sex worker is one which can be manipulated for the purposes of social control and surveillance, and labelling a 'risk group', in HIV projects for instance, can reinforce stigma (cf Murray and Robinson 1995). Sex work is diverse in space and time, and the people working in sex trades usually do so for a limited period (often combined with other occupations), and incorporate this work as part of multiple identities: its economic basis means there is no necessary relationship with sexuality or sexual identity.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against women, makes a report on prostitution and trafficking (document E/CN.4/1995/42) which states, 'A discussion of prostitution must accept the premise that prostitution as a phenomenon is the aggregate of social and sexual relations which are historically, culturally and personally specific. The only common denominator shared by the international community of prostitutes is an economic one: prostitution is an income generating activity..' it goes on to make the point that sex workers are generally well paid compared to other workers. The section on trafficking appears to be largely based on the Asia Watch report, describing conditions in Thailand as 'appalling' and referring to an incident where 5 workers were burned to death when they were chained to the beds in a brothel and could not escape. In a personal communication,

Priscilla Alexander contrasts the case of more than 200 Thai women who burned to death in a Thai toy factory because the exit doors were locked.

It is difficult to estimate the scale of these issues. The Norwegian government has informed the Council of Europe that: 'Every year, one million children are either kidnapped, bought or in other ways forced to enter the sex market' (Black p12). Estimates of child workers in Thailand range up to 800,000 under-18, according to US Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck in the *Bangkok Post* (25 Dec 1994). The ECPAT brochure says, 'On a global scale millions of children have been forced into prostitution' and 'tourists create a demand for more than one million 'fresh' child prostitutes every year'. None of these figures are referenced, nor do they explain what research has been done. However, the effects have been powerful, for instance Australia's new law on child sex tourism was passed after the committee heard evidence from ECPAT 'that there were hundreds of thousands of child prostitutes in Thailand alone, and that Australian men are among the worst offenders (Alexander p10)

Other figures are thrown around by organisations like Christian Aid and World Vision; Thai NGOs supposedly estimate that there are 2 million sex workers in Thailand (AsiaWatch p16). The IWDA campaign says that over 10,000 women and girls are trafficked into Thailand each year (cf the AsiaWatch report, which also says that 50-70% are HIV positive).

'A modern form of slavery'

While it is not clear where the figures for 'trafficking' come from originally, it is books like *'A modern form of slavery'* which help them pass into accepted fact. This report from Asia Watch is written in a semi-academic style where tabloid journalism is footnoted, referenced, and hence legitimated (I have seen the book referred to in other academic papers, e.g. Porter 1995). The book and speaking tour has put the issue back in the news, although the expert researchers conveniently chose to remain anonymous.

The authors did not actually visit brothels, but interviewed 30 workers ('victims') who had been arrested and taken to shelters or detention centres. While ostensibly giving these workers a voice, their statements are reinterpreted by the experts: on the first hand, their statements that they didn't know the work they would do are emphasised, although since prostitution is illegal in Thailand it seems logical that they would say that to avoid prosecution.

On the other hand, it seems to be the norm for the women to find their own way out of Burma with prior knowledge of where to find brothel agents, even though they are supposedly tricked: if so they seem to be so stupid they can be duped twice, as they are 'taken for deportation to the Thai-Burmese border where they are often lured back into prostitution by brothel agents'. Where they have made it home and boasted of the money they made, this is described as lying to 'save face', even when they have gone on to recruit others for the brothels or returned to work themselves. 'Their return to prostitution was voluntary only in the sense that they saw their first experience as having rendered them unfit for anything else' (p74).

The women are described as fleeing the repressive regime and poverty in Burma, which contradicts the stated aim of 'rescuing' the women and returning them home. There is a fairly well-substantiated rumour that HIV+ Burmese women returned to Burma have been executed by the ruling SLORC authorities: even if this is not the case it seems inhumane to advocate returning these women when there is no care,

support or medicine available for HIV+ people in Burma. The women were described as having limited understanding of HIV or AIDS, in fact the demand for them in Thailand is said to be linked to the myth that Burmese women are free of AIDS. The rapid rise in HIV infections may be related to the growth of the heroin trade and injecting drugs in the border area, or to the sharing of needles for antibiotics and contraceptives by the workers, however there is little information available about this.

There is clearly evidence to support the claims of serious abuses by Thai police and immigration authorities. This abuse has been made possible by criminalising the industry- the 1960 Suppression of Prostitution Act is still in force- while there continues to be a high demand, as over 75% of Thai men see prostitutes regularly (p16, figures released by the Public Health Ministry): the large amounts of money at stake allow for the bribery and corruption of the Thai authorities, and unregulated, substandard working conditions (p67-8).

At a conference launching the book in a Thai translation, a Thai police officer Surasek disputed its findings: 'At present, most of these Burmese girls come here to work in brothels of their own free will. Very few of the women we meet in our day to day work say they were lured into the business' (*The Nation*, 5 April 1995), he also pointed out that 'police had great difficulty securing convictions against agents who recruit women for the flesh trade since very few prostitutes are willing to identify or testify against these agents in a court of law' (ibid).

It is tempting to wonder why these white Americans want to expose the 'horrors' in Thailand as opposed to, say, the conditions and HIV prevalence among sex workers in the black housing projects in Oakland, or the way the US treats immigrants, even legal ones, in places like Orange County. Perhaps because the white women would not get very far in the projects without being beaten up, whereas they know that as guests in Thailand, which depends on tourism income, they will enjoy a level of protection.

Conditions in Thailand and the Burmese border

Why has Thailand become focus of trafficking, sex tourism and sex in general? Some suggestions are that the country avoided the prudery of the colonists from Europe who made their mark on countries like India, that Buddhism as the major religion is less sexually repressive than others like Islam in Malaysia, and that the tourist industry which is so important to the country's economy has sold an exotic, seductive image of the country and its women. As Morris sums up, 'Few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as has Thailand. Famed for its exquisite women and the pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of tourist propoganda and travelogues is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary' (p15).

Morris describes the fetishization of bodies in Thailand as a 'representational sex trade of desire' (p16), in a highly gendered system where women are disempowered compared with men; Odzer found that she had more affinity with the assertive, flamboyant sex workers of Patpong than with the passive 'proper' Thai women (1994, see also Truong pp131-157 on gender and prostitution in Thailand). According to Foucault, sexual relations are abstracted and reified through the logic of commodity exchange. The analysis of sex/gender systems is also an analysis of changes in the politico-economic order: thus the Burmese border area has rapidly transformed with increased trade, Thailand's booming economy and income

inequalities, spectacular consumption and materialist expectations, and disjunctures of western and local cultures.

The historical and moral element' includes the way women are socialised and their expectations, and how they are prepared psychologically to live with oppression - compare the manipulation of Buddhist ideas about rebirth in Burma and Thailand, with Western psychoanalysis which describes the components of the feminine personality as masochism, self-hatred and passivity (Rubin p202). Thai and Burmese girls are still socialised to fulfil expectations of supporting their family through a strong sense of gratitude, and to accept their parents decision if that is to send them to a brothel. Muecke argues that sex work actually has a functional role in preserving the traditional cultural functions of daughters through remittances and merit making, thus conserving the institutions of family and Buddhism (1992).

A well publicised report of the 15 year old hill tribe girl who escaped from a brothel in Hat Yai and committed suicide by drinking poison in front of police, resulted in a crackdown by police, so that other workers complained of lack of business: 'I have bought them [my parents] a television, a stereo and a refrigerator, but their biggest dream is to own a plot of land and a house' (*The Nation* 28 Oct 1994), the same report quotes a police chief as saying that 90% of workers 'sacrifice' themselves to support their families financially. Many Westerners find this hard to understand, preferring to blame wicked agents and monstrous clients (especially sex tourists).

'If women are working as go-go-girls or as prostitutes then they have reached the bottom of the social hierarchy. They have lost any rights to be human. And men of western countries or indigenous societies do not have any respect for them. They are seen to be whores' (ECPAT 1990 p97).

The range of cultural and moral factors makes it difficult to talk about choice in the context of sex work, and important not to import moral views of sex workers as victims. According to Porter, in a rare recent study of the border area, the allegations of force and trickery in the Thai sex industry are a myth, and there is little real evidence for widespread forced prostitution, he also quotes Hantrakul on the strong determination of women entering sex work (Porter p12). Poverty is not the crucial factor since 'most travellers, and especially those who cross the Thai border, do not come from the poorest ethnic groups but from Shan, lowland villages' (ibid p13). Most of the border crossers are men: 'the reality of any bus, pick-up truck or motorcycle load is that men occupy most seats' (ibid p10), and while 'some women' do do sex work, they are highly mobile:

'The difficulty is that forms of commercial sex are far less structured than the singularity conveyed by the category 'CSW' [commercial sex worker]. In Shan State, as in Thailand, commercial sex is a camouflaged world of homes, hostels, parlours, on trucks, in clubs, bars, restaurants, in euphemistic laundry services, truck stops, or hair salons... perhaps a majority of women engaged in commercial sex could also be known as traders, labourers, entrepreneurs, truck attendants, entertainers... Sexual servicing does not necessarily distinguish a 'free woman' from a wife, a trader or a market stall operator, at different times of the year, at different times of life' (ibid p11)

Sex tourism

Men away from home have generally made up many of the clients of sex workers: rural migrants working in the city, sailors and soldiers etc. Tourists are a more recent category, but paedophile tourism is probably vastly over-rated. Along with the women's NGOs, the Thai government is happy to blame foreigners, Western

decadence and incomprehensible behaviour, since sex tourists are very visible, and perhaps no society wants to confess to all of its sexual tastes. Under the heading, 'Foreigners chief prostitution culprits' the *Bangkok Post* (15 May 1995) quotes the Crime Suppression Division commander as saying that 'Foreigners from developed countries who suffer from mental illness relating to peculiar sexual urges and desires are one of the major causes of the child prostitution problem'.

The phenomenon of 'blaming others' has been particularly obvious during the HIV epidemic, which has had a severe effect on Thailand and on the tourist dollar. Wilson and Henley criticise the Thais for hypocrisy in their demonstrations against the Longman dictionary ('Bangkok.. a place where there are a lot of prostitutes'), and the *Time* 'Sex for Sale' issue (21 June 1993) given the long history of prostitution in Thailand: Patpong and Pattaya are 'just the tip of the iceberg' (*Bangkok Post* 25 Dec 94).

As mentioned above, ECPAT's evidence helped convince the Australian government that Australians are internationally renowned for their 'cowardly crimes against children' (Alexander 1994 p10), and Australia has introduced a law against 'sexual conduct' with children under 16 anywhere in the world (a law more stringent than any used within Australia). The Crimes (Child sex tourism) Amendment Act #05 of 1994, followed the Report of the Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs: 'With the wide variation in the statistics it is nonsensical to estimate the numbers of children involved. It is sufficient to note that even the smallest guesstimate is appalling and unacceptably large'.

These sentiments might appease the Western conscience, and the lobbyists, but it is doubtful what such feel-good laws can actually achieve, as even their proponents admit they can do nothing about endemic poverty and corruption. These laws will be almost impossible to enforce: in a showpiece case against a Swedish man who had sex with a 13 year old Thai boy, the boy refused to testify because he liked the man who was paying for his schooling. The man was apparently known to ECPAT, who arranged for him to be followed and entrapped when he arrived in Thailand (Priscilla Alexander, personal correspondence).

Thai women in Sydney and negative effects of the anti-trafficking lobby

The IWDA campaign over Burmese women has tried to link the situation with Thai women arriving in Sydney. By equating Australian conditions with Thailand, they conjure up dens of iniquity full of juveniles held against their will, which are periodically sensationalised in the media (Hinch in 1993, a recent ABC 7.30 report in April 95). Matheson starts an article with a typical gut-wrenching story:

'One of thousands of women from Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and China trafficked to Australia and other First World countries by crime syndicates each year, Susie is the face of contemporary poverty. That her job as a debt bonded sex worker is the best economic option available to her is a metaphor for most of the world's women, whose grinding impoverishment in the Third World is accelerating' (Matheson 1994)

The exaggerations of the anti-trafficking groups only make things worse for the workers, such that representatives of PROS, SWOP, qewu (these three are sex worker organisations in Sydney) the Sydney Sexual Health Centre multicultural health promotion project, and Asian sex workers, have met to develop a policy statement on the alleged trafficking of Asian sex workers in Australia.

Our research shows that Thai workers in Australia are variously involved in a complex arrangement of big and small operators, such as agents in Bangkok, passport forgers in Kuala Lumpur, travel agents in Singapore, so that they arrive with debts of up to \$30,000 (cf Robinson 1995), however methods of entry and conditions vary greatly. We have found that most of these women enter their contracts willingly, and if they can pay off their debt, they may become recruiters or brothel managers themselves (Brockett and Murray 1994).

Because the sex industry is not fully decriminalised and sex workers cannot obtain work visas freely some of the terms and conditions of contracts are exploitative, and working conditions may be poor. Through their Operation Paper Tiger, the authorities have deported 80 illegal Thai workers in 2 years: as the crackdown continues, the cost of the bonds goes up. Workers who are persecuted, arrested and deported before they pay off their debts are left with nothing for their hard work. The increase in police and immigration activity affects business by scaring clients away, this means women are under more pressure to work in substandard conditions because work is slow. It also results in workers having to hide their activities, which makes it harder for them to be contacted by support organisations providing information, condoms and HIV/AIDS information.

Asian workers who seek employment in the sex industry in Australia do so for the money, as do Australian workers: 'It comes down to how much money you have in your hand at the end of the night... A good night in Sydney I make \$400. A good night in Bangkok I make \$20. It's simple.' (Mary quoted in Brockett and Murray p194). Workers should be free to move to seek better pay and conditions just as many Australian workers go to work in Japan and Singapore. Our experience is that workers are aware of the kind of work they will do when they enter the contract; in the very rare cases when workers have been trapped by false promises, of course this is unacceptable. The Prostitutes Collective of Victoria has argued for working visas to be made available, 'thereby publicly diffusing the mythology of the "coerced innocent"' (PCV 1995).

The anti-trafficking campaigns actually have a detrimental effect on workers and increase discrimination as they perpetuate the stereotype of Asian workers as passive and diseased. This stereotype also encourages clients to think of Asian workers as helpless victims and encourages them to violate the rights of these workers (most of the clients are also Asian). The victimisation of Asian workers has consequences for all workers, because it enforces the moral condemnation of prostitution and calls for its abolition. The campaigns also encourage racism towards Asian workers within the industry (where Australian workers accuse them of undercutting and not using condoms, cf Robinson 1995) and in the general community.

Inequality and migration

The movement of sex workers around the region reflects economic differentials and a trans-national division of labour: Thai workers head for Australia, Europe and Japan, while Burmese, Chinese and Indo-Chinese enter Thailand, as Wilson and Henley argue, 'Thailand, in attending NIC [Newly Industrialised Country] status, has also become a net importer of sexually exploitable women' (1994 p16). But sex work is not the only job where the prospects vary so much from place to place that people are prepared to take on debts and forged paperwork. There has been a general rapid increase in migration from Asia to the west, and a dramatic reversal of the gender balance so that there are now many more women in what is being described as the

largest scale of mass migration in human history (see, eg, Heyzer et al 1994, Connell 1994, Murray 1994).

The majority are employed on a contractual basis as foreign domestic workers (the 'maid trade') in situations which often involve debts, exploitation and sexual abuse-conditions exposed in the recent case of Filipina worker Flor Contemplacion in Singapore. Similarly in Indonesia where domestic workers 'bring in significant foreign revenue and make rich men and women of those in the body business'- (IRIP 1995 p27), there are frequent reports of exploitation and abuse and yet increasing numbers of migrants. Expectations are raised by the consumer images beamed in by television, and any life is seen as better relative to a poor existence in the village.

The anti-trafficking lobby

There are now a number of anti-trafficking groups. I want to focus on the groups which use the emotive discourse of trafficking to push an abolitionist, fundamentalist agenda, based on the ideology set out by Kathleen Barry, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin in the US, and Sheila Jeffries in Australia. The feminist abolitionist position dates back to 1875, with Josephine Butler and International Abolitionist Association (for a critique, see eg Bell, Truong)

'Prostitution is important to feminism because the prostitute body is a terrain on which feminists contest sexuality, desire and the writing of the female body' (Bell p73). MacKinnon's thesis is that in the patriarchy we live in, all sex is prostitution as female sexuality is entirely constructed as an object of male desire. Prostitution per se is a fundamental violation of women's human rights. This discourse does not include the prostitute as a speaking subject, however the debates over sexuality since the 1980s have allowed for a multiplicity of sexualities and sexual identities, and 'deviant' females such as prostitutes have been able to win some ground in the anti-pornography/prostitution argument.

Western sex workers have developed their own structures of support and advocacy, partly through funding for HIV education, which has allowed them to challenge some of the middle-class feminists who claim to represent them (cf Murray and Robinson 1995). This may be one reason that abolitionists have turned their attention to the 'other': Burmese workers in Thailand, sex tourists in Asia, Thai workers in Australia, and finally the issue of child prostitution which arouses sympathy in most well-meaning people, but which I argue has been hugely distorted and exaggerated. The lack of accurate information has so far limited the ability of Western prostitutes to respond, however I believe that some response is urgently needed as the anti-trafficking lobby has broad implications for all sex trade workers, for freedom of sexual expression and for HIV/AIDS prevention.

The campaigns claim to be supported by women's NGOs in Thailand, this is true because in Southeast Asia, middle-class feminist groups still claim to represent sex workers. These women are happy to direct attention onto trafficking and sex tourism, and away from the largest part of the local industry which involves local clients and owners, including their own husbands and politicians.

ECPAT has rapidly expanded and received government funding through AIDAB in 1994. As mentioned, the Global Alliance Against the Traffic in Women was launched at the international workshop in Chiang Mai in October 1994, and is supported by ECPAT, PCV (despite criticism from other sex worker groups) and IWDA among others: it claims not to be abolitionist, but is currently playing into the hands of those who are, particularly the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women based in the US.

This group and a number of other NGOs have formed a network, supported by UNESCO: the NGO Coalition Against Exploitation of Women, which is taking a petition to Beijing.

Beijing, the UN Convention and sex workers' voices

The Coalition's petition is for a new 'Convention Against Sexual Exploitation' to replace the 1949 UN Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. The 1949 Convention originated with the 'exposure' of the White Slave Trade (which was later shown to be negligible) by Jewish feminists and the social purity movement in Europe (see Truong pp82-86, and Goldman 1917). It 'rests mainly at the conceptual level, i.e. that prostitution is a form of promiscuity which offends public morality, the family and the community' (Truong p86), it considers the prostitute as a uniform category, as a source of evil separate from the socio-economic environment, and ignores the client.

The new Convention Against Sexual Exploitation was previously proposed by Kathleen Barry at the UN Human Rights Conference in Vienna, 1993. The proposed change will ban prostitution completely, not just forced prostitution: 'Legalized prostitution... "is an open door for traffickers" claims Janice Raymond, an activist with the US-based Coalition Against Traffic in Women' (Hornblower p24). Their petition states,

'It is a fundamental human right to be free of sexual exploitation in all its forms, from prostitution, sex tourism, trafficking in women, mail-order bride selling and pornography to incest, wife abuse, sexual harassment and rape... Sexual exploitation abrogates a person's human right to dignity, equality, autonomy and physical and mental well-being; it preys on women and children made vulnerable by poverty and economic development policies and practices, on refugees and displaced persons, and on women in the migrating process; and serves as a vehicle for racism and Northern domination.' (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, 1 March 1995).

Sexual Exploitation has taken on a life of its own, and everything is conveniently muddled by putting prostitution and pornography in the same sentence as rape and incest so that people's obvious anathema to non-consensual sex is extended by implication to all forms of commercial transactions involving sex. To equate professional prostitution with domestic violence is to diminish the horror of the helpless; to equate choiceful sex work with the violence of criminal greed is to deny the value and dignity of the work some women choose to do... it is the criminalising of sex work that is partly responsible for society's negative attitudes to ALL women's sexuality' (Helen Vicqua, open letter, 19 May 1995).

If a petition like this were passed at the Beijing conference it would be an apparent endorsement by representatives of all women of reinforced measures against prostitution. And since in an increasingly commodified and materialist world the marketing of bodies in all forms is only likely to increase, then reinforcing sanctions will only have the effect of increasing criminal control, corruption and exploitation of the workers themselves.

The Network of Sex Work Projects is currently updating the International Charter for Prostitutes Rights (see Phetersen), and is co-ordinating a sex worker presence at Beijing to counter the anti-trafficking lobby. Unfortunately most sex worker groups do not currently have resources such as e-mail access, whereas the anti-trafficking lobby is very professional, well organised and au fait with the UN system. Sex workers must struggle to have a voice at Beijing, since the Chinese government does

not allow visas for sex workers, and sex workers groups have not been given accreditation at the main conference at present. Sex workers were similarly excluded from the 1994 International AIDS Conference in Yokohama, however workers did manage to get there and to achieve changes to the program which originally had only non-sex workers speaking at sex work forums. An Asia-Pacific Network of Sex work projects was also established at Yokohama.

The Network of Sex Work Projects has distributed a statement saying:

The dominant ideology about prostitution within the United Nations is that prostitution is a form of sexual exploitation which should be abolished. This view has been legitimised and passed into resolutions and laws at conferences such as Beijing with no input at all from sex workers themselves. Many sex workers feel that it is time to demand that we are heard in such a significant international forum. More than being simply heard it is essential to form some resolutions which reflect our demands for human rights, and have those passed rather than the resolutions which lead to repressive measures to abolish prostitution. To do this sex workers and their supporters need to work to prepare resolutions and to lobby delegates for support at the conference.

It is difficult and frustrating to try and argue against the anti-traffickers' single-minded determination, but the sex workers' point of view needs to be heard. These women need to hear that most sex workers do the job willingly and do very well out of it relative to other occupations, including male and transgender sex workers, including men who work with female clients. They need to hear that clients of sex workers come from all walks of life (and include women), they are not monsters, and sex workers as a rule do not hate them- it happens quite frequently that workers and clients develop a personal relationship. Some books describe the client's view of Asian sex industries, which is mostly all fun and high jinks (eg, Brazil and Dawson).

What can we conclude about these women and their obsession with patriarchy and monstrous clients? Is there an element of titillation in these women's focus on sex workers, when similar problems are faced by migrant domestic workers and others? Is there an element of self-flagellation due to middle-class white guilt when faced with the rape of Asia by white capitalists? 'Where there is an overlay of North-South exploitation - the Western tourist ruining innocent paradise with his credit card and unleashed libido - this version plays easily in certain, well-meaning ears' (Black p12).

Conclusions

Migration of female labour is increasing due to processes of economic globalisation and removal of political boundaries, and clearly this process is accompanied by an increasing degree of coercion and exploitation of women due to prevailing systems of sex and gender in sending and receiving countries such as Thailand. The Utrecht conference statement made a valid point that force and not the type of work should be the issue in 'trafficking', and goes on,

'However, the individual right to self-determination includes the ability and the right of the individual to decide to work as a prostitute. In order to reduce the vulnerability of prostitutes and others to trafficking in this context, prostitution and other activities in the informal sphere should be recognised as a form of work. Consequently, prostitutes and other sex workers have the right to safe working conditions through the use of occupational health and safety and other labour ordinances'

Child prostitution is supposedly increasing due to client fear of AIDS (eg, Unicef speaker in Reuters; 8 June 1995), and prostitution in general is supposedly expanding as an industry: Truong argues that the industrial production of sexual services requires a continuous supply of sexual labour. 'The effect of this process has been an increase in the use of violence to locate and control sexual labour' (p201). Therefore, boundaries on underage sexual labour and the use of force continue to be necessary. Existing laws and Conventions cover the issues of slavery and similar practices, non-consensual sex and the exploitation of children, and there is already a Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography: therefore all states need to ratify and apply (if they have not done so) these conventions; laws should be introduced to control the sale of children by their parents.

All states need to consider decriminalising prostitution, applying occupational health and safety standards to workplaces (including provisions for street workers), and working towards eradicating discrimination. Restrictive immigration policies contribute to the exploitation of migrants and should be reviewed: sex workers should have the right to travel freely and obtain working visas. Governments like Australia should continue to fund organisations which provide support and information to Asian workers, and these workers should be supported to form their own groups to achieve more autonomy. International networks of sex work projects should aim to inform workers about working conditions and choices. Finally, where sex workers have been forced to work against their will they should be offered every support and free transport to their place of origin if they so wish (see also PROS et al 1995).

It is important to distinguish different types of sex trade work using clearly documented participatory research that involves the workers. Blanket statements about prostitution and the exploitation of women are part of a political agenda which seeks to control the way people think and behave. The situations which the anti-traffickers rail against, insofar as they do exist, are a result of economic, political and gender inequalities, and it is those inequalities which should be our central cause for concern.

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