

Slavery Appears and Europe is Silent

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ABSTRACT

Half a million women are annually brought into the borders of the European Union for the purpose of forced prostitution. Despite non-government organizations' (NGO) fighting for improved legislation to combat trafficking in women, Union governments have taken little action to combat this problem. This note outlines the problem and policy remedies.

RÉSUMÉ

Chaque année un demi - million de femmes sont amenées à traverser les frontières de l'union européenne pour être forcées à la prostitution. Malgré la lutte d'organismes non - gouvernementaux (ONG) pour l'amélioration de la loi pour combattre le trafic des femmes, les gouvernements de l'union n'ont pris que des actions mineures pour combattre le problème. Cette note donne les grandes lignes et des solutions apportées par les politiques.

They kept intimidating and bullying us. Another girl showed us a scar on her neck that she got when the owner of the club tried to kill her. They used different ways to try to force us to work. We were saved when the police raided the place. The German police sent us to some kind of center for the next ten days. Nobody notified our parents, even though the Polish police were already looking for us. Our legal counselor told us that even though our trafficker had been convicted, I was not allowed to cross the border because I had supposedly worked in Germany without a visa or a work permit. The ban issued by Germany covered all countries that had signed the Schengen Treaty. We were treated like criminals, even though we are the victims. Our traffickers were sentenced for three years. Our ban is for life.

(Sisters Paulina and Justyna H. who were kidnapped at age 16, Global Tribunal for Women, New York, 1998)

Statistical data proves that this criminal offence has established itself. In this process, structures of organized crime are becoming increasingly apparent, since large profits at a relatively low risk provide a strong incentive for perpetrators. The numbers of victims of this crime is on the increase. Only few perpetrators are convicted. The number of investigated

cases is on the decrease.

(Dr. Cornelia Sonntag-Wolgast - Parliamentary State Secretary of the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, EU Round Table on Trafficking in Human Beings, Brussels, 1999)

The European Union (EU) has a problem that it has been content in ignoring - the importation of women and girls into its borders to serve as sex slaves. Patty Sorsen, the European Parliament's Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings states that "the number of victims is continuing to rise, the number of minors involved is on the increase," and that "there has been a huge increase in the violence suffered by victims and between competing gangs." The International Organization on Migration reports that half a million women are annually brought into the European Union for the purpose of forced prostitution. The women who are trafficked come from less economically advantaged regions of the world. Two thirds of the women brought to the European Union come from Eastern Europe, while the remaining third arrive from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The majority of trafficked women, regardless of where they come from, have a similar story - a lack of economic/academic opportunities convince them to take a gamble and seek promised opportunities in the European Union. At times the promises concern becoming a model, a hostess, or an assistant in an embassy, other times it is clear that prostitution will be involved - but prostitution under the woman's control. All too often these promises are empty and years of debt bondage,

forced prostitution and sexual abuse await the women.

Trafficking for the purpose of forced prostitution occurs in other regions of the world, but the European Union is unique for a number of reasons. The number of women trafficked into the European Union dwarfs the estimates in the United States, which stand around fifty thousand women per year. Alternatively, unlike many countries in Asia, where prostitution is viewed as a valid form of economic growth, the governments of the European Union have made clear rhetorical and legal stances against trafficking in women. Indeed, the trade in enslaved women and girls, for purposes of sexual abuse, has been considered illegal in the Member States of the European Union for just under a century. Member States of the European Union have signed numerous international treaties that prohibit trafficking in women and imply that action will be taken against such.

Despite this legislation, the European Parliament's Rapporteur on the issue states that "there is no complete database containing an overview of information on victims, 'trade routes', legislation, implementing decisions or measures." More to the point, the European Union has not used its resources to collect this information. Indeed less than one percent of the current EU budget is focused on women's issues and only a paltry percentage of that on trafficking. While Europol - the European police agency created to focus on cross border crimes - has trafficking in women as one of its eight areas of focus, it was only in the past year that the agency was given this mandate. As Maj Britt Theorin, the President of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities, asserts "it is a crime that only two of Europol's two hundred plus staff are focused on the trafficking of women and girls."

The responsibility of the Member States of the European Union, however, does not stop at limited spending or backward policy priorities. Governments in many ways collude with international criminals, primarily through the enforcement of inappropriate laws and an unwillingness to create effective legislation.

In particular, governments must make prostitution illegal and enforce the law where red light districts are prohibited. Many proponents of viewing the sale of sex as a valid occupation suggest

that legalization will reduce the dangers of prostitution, as well as the demand for trafficked women. This is not the case; legalization fails to eradicate illegal prostitution, and would have even less effect on trafficking in women. In Germany there are three times as many non-registered women involved in prostitution than registered women. In Greece the ratio is more than ten to one.

In addition, legalization that did not create incentives for illegal prostitution, and thereby a market for trafficking, would require private medical coverage, unions to demand fair profit sharing, and some form of prostitute-controlled security system, all funded by taxpayers. Even then, the demand for illegal prostitutes in the form of minors or foreigners would continue to be strong, as purchasers of sex often desire the "exotic." Concurrently, if governments maintained their current immigration policy of placing a cap on the number of economic migrants allowed to enter a nation each year, there would continue to be a supply of women seeking to enter the European Union illegally - prime targets for traffickers.

In short, the best imagined version of legalized prostitution has all of the current problems of international trafficking in addition to increased taxes. Legalization is not the cure; instead governments must address trafficking in the following areas:

1) The Customers

Through not enforcing existing laws, or creating legislation that targets the consumers of sex services, governments allow this demand-driven trade to grow, indeed as Rapporteur Sorsen states "some Member States and candidate countries have no legislation on trafficking in women, or existing legislation is not enforced." This absence of legislation is nowhere more obvious than in regards to male clients.

2) Deportation Laws

Requiring women, who are illegally in a nation, to return to their country of origin creates a disincentive for women to come forward to authorities, particularly if shame and violence from families and "exporters" can be expected upon their return. Yet, as EU Women's Committee Chairperson Theorin, points out, "all but two Member States deport victims of trafficking even if their lives may be at stake." Member States of the European Union should provide permanent

residency status to women who take part in the prosecution of pimps and others involved in the trafficking.

3) Harsh Penalties for Inhumane Crimes

Where countries have actually followed up on their international commitments, and established laws against sexual slavery, the penalties are often lax. Theorin emphasizes, "in all EU countries guilty verdicts for drug smuggling carry much higher sentences than for trafficking in women - ten to fifteen years for drugs, versus a miniscule one to two years for trafficking in human beings."

4) The Suppliers

The European Union has failed to state clearly to countries aspiring to join the Union that they will not be allowed to become members unless decisive steps are taken to curb trafficking in humans. Nor has the European Union demanded that percentages of development aid be focused on trafficking prevention in developing countries.

Finally, law enforcement agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations that offer services to victims of trafficking, need to be provided with the funding and directive to tackle this problem. Indeed numerous NGOs have already begun the task that European Union governments had long since committed themselves to. The Soros Foundation, for example, has produced a lengthy

study concerning traffickers in Russia - if an NGO can detail names of pimps and such, why can't the police forces of Europe?

Patty Sorsen, the Rapporteur on trafficking for the European Parliament, has founded an NGO organized to help women escape from trafficking and gain alternate economic opportunities to prostitution. The efforts of numerous anti-trafficking-prostitution NGOs in Sweden convinced the government to create new laws focusing on the arrest and prosecution of men who pay for sex, as opposed to the women engaged in prostitution. Similar organizations exist throughout Europe, and provide politicians with the stories and data they need to propose legislation to fight trafficking. Maj Britt Theorin, Chairperson of the EU Committee on Women's Rights, has used the information provided by these organizations to push the European Union toward establishing equality and anti-trafficking targets, as exist for economic and environmental goals, for countries seeking membership in the European Union.

It is clear that with financial and political support, great gains can be made toward eradicating international sex slavery. It remains to be seen, however, whether the European Union is willing to match its rhetoric with money and action.

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