Globalized Female Slavery

Onnie Wilson

April 2000 Said It: feminist news, culture, politics http://www.saidit.org

What a world we live in, a male-framed world, where global economics sets in concrete a system of winners and losers--with poverty, disadvantage, and minimal choices for many as the consequence. The climate is ripe for men's sexual exploitation of women without bounds, abuse of the worst kind. Women are set up to lose in this system, and like buzzards circling around an ailing member of the herd, businessmen prey upon the globe's most disadvantaged women, entrapping them within their web of despicable sex slavery enterprises, trading women far and wide as sex chattels.

In this globalized economy, impoverished countries have been increasingly forced to accommodate multinational large-scale farming and short-lived manufacturing enterprises. This has resulted in social dislocation, escalated unemployment, and increasing poverty, impacting hardest on women. Lower statused, less educated, with limited work options, women are the most vulnerable to the systems of exploitation. They earn only a portion of the maleï¿½s meager wage, are last hired and first fired and when, as is not uncommon, menï¿½s warring is added as a demon overlay, the cumulative effect of widowhood is devastating. Partnerless, poor women, often with dependent children, are socially abandoned. Men, quick to see an advantage, wave a carrot of economic "opportunity" in front of women's noses: male money for women's flesh, traded around the globe.

Today, this trade in womenï¿½s bodies is a global business grossing over six billion dollars annually for the traffickers, and growing fast. The UN estimates that about four million women are being trafficked as sex slaves. Some 50,000 women are brought into the US every year, predominantly from the Ukraine, Albania, the Philippines, Thailand, Mexico and Nigeria. Women from China, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, Colombia and Vietnam are used in Australian brothels, legal and illegal. Traffickers sell the women into the prostitution network for $4000 - 5000 for short-term contracted work. The women are then forced to pay off the fee for their "owners" by free "servicing" of up to 500 men, in 12-plus hour shifts, seven days a week, before earning a low fee for sexual services.

This male sexual violation of women is receiving the highest sanction. The United Nations, in a 1998 report by its official labor agency, the International Labor Organization (ILO), blatantly legitimated sexual exploitation as an appropriate, key component of gross national product, calling upon governments of poorer countries to take economic advantage of "The Sex Sector": regulated, expanded, and taxed. The cost for women was conspicuously missing from the economic equation: no mention of the rapes, beatings, imprisonments, sexual abuse, servitude, illness, and the permanent destruction of millions of women's souls.

One wonders how such an insidious "meat trade," a unique feature of "first world" male

ingenuity, could be tolerated in "developed," "civilized" societies. If one looks below the surface, just a tissue thickness deep, it is not difficult to see the neat male sleight of hand that keeps women in their sexually violated place. While the dirty little male business of sex trafficking is sliming the globe, the practice of males prostituting women (and children, and less frequently, other men) is presented as clean: a legitimate career choice for "sex workers." But it is obvious who benefits here, who maintains the upper hand in the power system, and in whose favor the unsavory practice of legitimized sexual abuse is weighted. Men set the parameters. Men establish the power relations. Men demand and obtain exploitative sexual "services" from women: men only have to negotiate the price.

The lack of outrage against sex slavery and the global system of prostitution is deafening. Laws are inadequate, few traffickers are investigated, and a pitiful number of convictions ensue. A mild slap on the wrist is often the harshest penalty, sending very encouraging messages to those men poised to enter the lucrative market. Traffickers are linked to sophisticated, professionally organized criminal networks worldwide, involving immigration and government officials where kickbacks are many: sexual favors, money or, at the very least, a simple strengthening of the system of male sexual exploitation of women. As lawmakers and law enforcers themselves are predominantly male, sexual exploitation practices go unrecognized as human rights violations. The problem is dismissed as harmless male business.

In a recent Australian case, Gary Glasner was charged with prostituting and falsely imprisoning 40 Thai women. Despite extensive evidence of sexual slavery, the charge of false imprisonment was dropped "on a technicality." All but two of the women were deported. The two who were left to give evidence had little knowledge of Australian legal procedure. Isolated, threatened, easily intimidated, they were no match for hard punching, legal professionals.

Meanwhile, for "Mr. Big" of the operation, the reported link to international traders boasting government and immigration connections, it is business as usual. The public yawned over newspaper reports of excessive male behavior and the deportation of anonymous, Asian prostitutes. The issue of prostitution per se also remains unchallenged: the Immigration Department filed another folder, stamped "closed." Melbourne hardly missed a beat.

But what of these women? For the millions of women, predominantly poor, often sold off by a male family member to work off a family debt, or chosen to be the family expatriate breadwinner, the experience of sex slavery is physically and psychologically debilitating. Women often lured from their home country with promises of legitimate work are sold like cattle, imprisoned, sexually violated and returned home shamed and poor, many suffering from AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. Many go back home to die.

In foreign lands, ignorant of the law, often having little grasp of the local language, women are hardly positioned to demand their human rights. They are easily held captive under lock and key, in overcrowded rooms, denied access to passports, and forced to perform unprotected, debasing and life threatening sexual acts. When the time is right for their "owners," when short-term work visas expire or the women are judged to be past

their use by date, the appropriate authorities are informed and the women are deported, often at taxpayers' expense. Lives are permanently shattered.

Let outrage roar! When will men take a good look at themselves in the mirror and act on what they see? Men have to name men as the perpetrators of this system of sexual abuse and it is men who have to stop this practice. The silence and collusion must end now.