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## Sex Trafficking: The Abolitionist Fallacy

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Economic hardship, discrimination, and violence have driven millions of women to work in the sex sector around the world, and their numbers will increase as a result of the current global economic crisis. Unless the underlying factors pushing women to opt for selling sex to support themselves and their families are remedied, many women will continue to have few other options.

Yet the Bush administration, supported by the evangelical right-wing and some radical feminists, spent eight years promoting laws to criminalize prostitution and clients as the means to abolish prostitution and stop human trafficking into the sex sector. The ideology-driven approach is notable for the absence of any concrete evidence that it works. Proponents of such an approach have also failed to demonstrate that it avoids harming women or provides other livelihoods for those it aspires to help. It reduces all adults in the sex sector (even highly paid "call girls" and those working legally) to victim status and considers all prostitution to be a form of trafficking.

Unfortunately for many of the women who are objects of this policy, the ensuing crackdowns have meant prison, violence, forced "rehabilitation" and no means to earn an adequate livelihood. At the same time, the policy has not achieved its goal of reducing the incidence of trafficking, prostitution, commercial sexual exploitation of children or HIV/AIDs. The only responses to date from the new administration are President Barack Obama's [affirmation](#) at the Saddleback Presidential Forum that human trafficking "has to be a top priority" and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's [statement](#) at her confirmation hearing that she takes "very seriously the function of the State Department to lead our government through the Office on Human Trafficking to do all that we can to end this modern form of slavery."

### The Abolitionists

The most politically active abolitionists in the United States are Michael Horowitz (Hudson Institute), Janet Crouse (Concerned Women for America), Donna Hughes (University of Rhode Island), Equality Now, and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. They have worked successfully over the last eight years to bring about many of the anti-prostitution legal and policy changes regarding human trafficking and HIV/AIDs.

The latest entrant to this crowded field of abolitionists is Siddharth Kara, a former investment banker and business executive who has written the book [Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery](#) (2008). Kara traveled to India, Nepal, Albania, Moldova, and elsewhere to research his book. But like his fellow abolitionists, he too falls short of producing evidence that criminalizing demand will stop trafficking or abolish prostitution. He supports criminalizing clients, in part, based on a visit to The Netherlands where prostitution is legal (but not to Sweden, where it is illegal and clients are criminalized). He quotes Suzanne Hoff of La Strada, an anti-trafficking organization, as reporting that the majority of the women selling sex in Amsterdam are trafficked. But, as Hoff told me, she did not and could not make such a statement "for the simple reason that there are not – and have never been – reliable figures on the number or percent of women being exploited or forced into the sex industry."

"If I had to choose a policy today," he writes, "I would choose the stance of the U.S. and Swedish governments: the criminalization of prostitution, including the purchase of sex acts and the owning, operating, or financing of sex establishments" because this approach "has a better chance of curtailing demand for sex slaves." Wishing won't make it so; neither is it a basis for sound policymaking.

Like similar travelers, Kara is deeply touched by the victims' stories and wants to mount a campaign to bring justice, assistance, and hope to the women and girls. The centerpiece of his campaign is the destruction of the economic basis of the trafficking business. The economic model he erects is built on

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several unexamined assumptions and unattributed statements of fact and data. The most seriously flawed assumption he makes is to equate human beings – trafficked persons and sex workers – with commodities. His economic model treats women as passive objects that are pushed and pulled by exploiters using forced labor to lower costs to meet demand, and ignores the poverty, discrimination, and violence that compel women to make risky decisions. Adults who make rational choices from among limited options are actors who don't fit a neat supply/demand economic model, and so they are factored out of the equation in order to situate trafficking as a commodity business.

Some of Kara's proposed solutions are dangerous, unworkable or unrealistic. For example, he advocates for private citizen community vigilance committees to go into brothels undercover to locate trafficked women and girls. But he was unsuccessful in going undercover and even chased away from one brothel area. He recognizes, on the one hand, that up to a third of victims are rescued by clients, and opines on the other that clients are looking "for a way to act out violent, racist, pedophilic, or other antisocial traits."<sup>6</sup> Yet, by opting to prosecute all clients, he ignores the fact that women and youth like those he met will continue to migrate and sell sex, no matter how many men are imprisoned. At the personal level, Kara also equivocates: While he advocates for raids to rescue trafficked women and girls, he nonetheless leaves a woman he believes has been trafficked in the United States to her fate because she "needed the money for her family and there was a threat of violence against her parents."

All of his proposed solutions suffer from a lack of input from the people who will be primarily affected: trafficked persons and adult sex workers. To develop effective, evidence-based, do-no-harm policies, advocates and policy makers must work collaboratively with persons who may be helped or harmed by the proposed laws and policies.

### What Works

Effective change comes from the bottom up, within the affected community where the persons who are the most knowledgeable and motivated live and work. The only way to build sustainable movements for change is to empower and support a vibrant civil society. This is particularly important when the issues have social, cultural, and economic bases that are highly resistant to any attempt at regulation by criminal law. Sex worker organizations in the United States, India, Thailand, Cambodia, Mali, Brazil, South Africa, and elsewhere are the front-line actors, who have first-hand knowledge about how raids, anti-prostitution campaigns, "vigilance" committees, and law enforcement approaches impact their lives and undermine efforts to combat trafficking, child prostitution, and the spread of HIV/AIDs.

Instead of harassing and stigmatizing women in the sex sector, governments and civil society should recognize and value their accomplishments – such as removing children and trafficked women from brothels, creating adult literacy programs, organizing micro-enterprise programs so women can find other sources of income, setting up schools for their children, and raising awareness about HIV/AIDs and health issues.

The Obama administration should reject the ideology-driven policies, practices, and programs of the past eight years. Specifically, it should base all programs and policies on proven results and sound ideas derived from objective evidence. It should take into consideration the concerns and ideas of sex worker groups when developing new programs and policies. The administration should stop applying the anti-prostitution pledge in a way that prevents the funding of U.S. and foreign organizations that work with sex workers. Civil servants who have been trained to carry out the anti-prostitution agenda over the last eight years must abandon that agenda and operate under a new, more open and inclusive policy based on rights and evidence. And the government should remove all of its materials related to human trafficking, sex work, and/or HIV/AIDs that are inconsistent with the above recommendations from websites and distribution.

In this way, the new administration can create progressive, non-judgmental, rights- and evidence-based strategies in partnership with sex worker organizations and other experts to ensure that U.S. goals to stop human trafficking and the spread of HIV/AIDs are accomplished without causing further collateral harm.

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