

# The Naked Anthropologist · What's Wrong with the Trafficking Crusade? TIP Report Revisited | The Naked Anthropologist

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The new Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) has once again been issued by the US government. I went back to a piece I wrote about this annual shameful phenomenon in 2007, when the *Philadelphia Inquirer* rang to solicit a piece on the subject. The only thing different now concerns the perceptions of US citizens outside the US: abysmal and worsening then, slightly better now with the election of Obama. It remains to be seen whether this new administration will be able to see and grapple with the imperialism inherent in the TIP, however. Everything else I said two years ago I stand by today. The paper didn't change my text but did *change the title* badly (my original appears first below).

## What's Wrong With the 'Trafficking' Crusade? *Well-meaning interference?*

*The Philadelphia Inquirer* Sunday 1 July 2007

Op-Ed page

Laura Agustín

It's the season when the United States issues its annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP). Having named sexual slavery as a particular evil to be eradicated, the United States grades other countries on how they are doing.

On the one hand, it sounds like an obvious way to do good: Describe the ghastly conditions you as a rich outsider observe in poor countries. Focus on places where sex is sold. Say all women found were kidnapped virgins and are now enslaved; announce to the world that you will liberate them. Organize raids. Denounce anyone who objects – even if their objection is that you are intervening in their country's internal affairs. Ignore victims who resist rescue. Use lurid language and talk continuously about the most sensational and terrible cases. Justify your actions as a manifestation of faith, as though it exists only for you. Mutter about “organized crime.”

This is also the season when tourists leave the United States en masse to visit the rest of the world, where their country is more disliked all the time. People who used to say: “It's just the president [or the government], ordinary Americans are all right,” now say it less often. Ignorant, destructive interventions into other countries' business have been going on too long.

Grading everyone else on moral grounds is highly offensive, particularly when such grades are accompanied by threats of punishment if the line isn't toed. It's distressing to witness the deterioration of what good will is left toward this country since the post-2001 wars were initiated and campaigns intensified that presume the United States Always Knows Best.

For crusading politicians and religious leaders, a rhetoric of moral indignation is effective in uniting constituents and diverting the collective gaze away from familiar problems at home. So the culprits, those who get bad grades in the TIP, live far away from U.S. culture, which is assumed to be better. Intransigent local troubles – prisons overflowing with African Americans, millions of children malnourished – are swept aside in the call to clean up other people's countries.

This moral indignation emanates from people who live comfortably, who are not wondering where their next meal will come from or how to pay doctors' bills. These moral entrepreneurs do not have to choose between being a live-in maid, with no privacy or free time and unable to save money because the pay is so bad, and selling sex, which pays so well that you have time to spend with your children or read a book, money to buy education or a phone.

It is easy to haul out sensationalistic language (sex slavery, child prostitution), but it is much harder to sort out the real victims from the more routinely disadvantaged and trying-to-get-ahead. Those who know intimately the problems of the poor in their own cultures rarely deny that they can decide to leave home and pay others to help them travel and find work, in sex or in any other trade.

“But sex for money is disgusting and degrading; no one should have to do it.” And should anyone have to clean toilets all day? Risk being maimed in unsafe fireworks factories? Should children have to spend their lives in lightless tunnels of mines, or women have to remain married to men who are cruel to them? The world is full of things we wish we could eradicate – but isn't starvation the first of them? Why is there no equivalent moral furor over hideous poverty? Are we meant to believe that sex without love is worse than military violence? All over the world, selling sex pays better than most jobs readily available to women, and many do not believe it is the worst possible experience they can have.

What's questionable about the TIP is not the defense of children or anyone else against true violence – it's one government's assumption that it has the right to judge everyone else and apply a draconian definition of exploitation that does not ask people whether and how they would like to change their lives. Questionable is the focus on the photogenic, cowboy moment of rushing in to rescue slaves, with no interest in what will follow.

Victims are “protected” rather than granted autonomy. At the Empower Center in Chiang Mai, Thailand, signs written by migrant women “rescued from” selling sex include: “We lose our savings and belongings”; “We are locked up”; “We are held till deportation”; “We are interrogated by many people”; “Our family must borrow money to survive while we wait.”

From the standpoint of social science, the TIP is gravely faulty. It never explains how data were gathered and compared across so many languages and cultures, or who did it exactly under what circumstances. A raft of other research shows enormous diversity among people who sell sex, and a wide variety of experiences in the sex industry among both migrants and people who stay at home. Studies show that the worst kind of trafficking can happen to people doing other kinds of

jobs – and to men. Women all over the world, including the poorest, repudiate being characterized as above all sexually vulnerable.

In assuming its creators' moral values are or should be universal, the TIP ignores local cultures and the complexities of human desires and functions – yet another reason tourists from the United States will be less welcome everywhere this summer.

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1. on

But shouldn't WE need worry about the position of prostitution? You are an activist who defends prostitutes. I am a client of prostitutes. I think there is a lot that needs to be improved in the sex industry. What you are essentially saying in this article is that we should have to turn our backs to the problems of prostitutes, the problems of the children in the mines are worse anyway, so lets turn to them.

For instance, I looked into a forum run by prostitutes in the Netherlands, prostitutes complain that some brothels demand that the women who work in there should kiss their clients and have oral sex without condoms, these are the more wellknown brothels. Obviously these activities are far less dangerous than working in a dangerous fireworks factory. But shouldn't we as activists and clients be concerned?

BTW: Have you read the book 'Slave Girl' by Sarah Forsyth? In the period ~1995-1996 she was forced to work behind the windows of Amsterdam. Her book paints a really grave picture about prostitution. She is also very negative about the clients.

Reply

2. on

Kris,

The article isn't saying anything remotely akin to turning our backs to problems of

prostitutes.

Kris, I find your position odd. If you are that concerned about women in prostitution being slaves and being forced to work against their will, exactly what, as a client, are you doing to improve their conditions?

Reply

3. on

The article makes that impression. Especially this part:"

*"But sex for money is disgusting and degrading; no one should have to do it." And should anyone have to clean toilets all day? Risk being maimed in unsafe fireworks factories? Should children have to spend their lives in lightless tunnels of mines, or women have to remain married to men who are cruel to them? The world is full of things we wish we could eradicate – but isn't starvation the first of them? Why is there no equivalent moral furor over hideous poverty? Are we meant to believe that sex without love is worse than military violence? All over the world, selling sex pays better than most jobs readily available to women, and many do not believe it is the worst possible experience they can have.*

You can go on like that forever. For almost all jobs in the world except one there are jobs which are worse. It is obviously better to be a prostitute forced by a pimp servicing 20 clients a day, compared to working in a Chinese mine. Many thousands die in the Chinese mines each year. At least you don't die as a prostitute (at least the probability is a lot smaller). So obviously it is better to be a sex slave than a Chinese miner. So obviously being a sex slave isn't the worst situation.

What clients could do to improve the condition of coerced prostitutes? Stop visiting these prostitutes and only visit the voluntary ones. That means no more money for those who exploit them, and no more incentive to force women in prostitution.

That is very difficult indeed, and I am really pessimistic. I am very aware that prostitutes are extremely good at hiding their situation. Pimps are not always visible. The pimp could sit at home watching TV while the prostitute goes to the brothel on her own and make the impression that she works voluntarily. Coercion could happen outside the view of others.

I have actually experienced such a situation. I visited a prostitute and her husband (who runs an escort agency) at their home (not to have sex by the way) to discuss these issues of how a client should see the difference. We had a very open discussion. The husband's opinion was that you couldn't make the distinction between forced and voluntary. The woman's opinion was that coercion and voluntariness lie very close to each other. She herself liked sex and liked her job. 3 years later she said that her husband forced her into prostitution for 9 years!!!! You understand the strange situation?

I follow the news in the Netherlands closely and it is so striking that pimps (who use coercion and/or manipulation) still continue to place prostitutes in legal brothels. There are no signs that the problem is decreasing. The situation is really hopeless.

Reply

1. OK, so coercion is really hard to see, correct?

Why, then, do you seem to think it's restricted to prostitution?

How many maids who clean your hotel rooms are coerced? How many people working behind McDonalds counters?

I mean, if we're going to expand the definition of "coerced" to include not what people actually say but what they MIGHT REALLY say, and presume that prostitutes are never telling the truth about their work, why shouldn't we expand this to all professions?

Or, hell, why not expand it to marriage? Now THERE'S an institution that is easily as coercive and manipulative as prostitution, according to every domestic violence study ever conducted.

What is it about prostitution that makes it so special in this regard, Kris?

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