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Obama, Please Ignore Kristof For Now

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Nicholas Kristof has been issuing ad-hoc Presidential guidance on the sex trade for years now. The archive of his editorial column in the [New York Times](#) serves as a record of his proposals. In 2004, he "bought the freedom" of two women working in brothels in Poipet, Cambodia with the intention of returning them to their villages. Kristof wasn't prosecuted under US law for the purchase of sex slaves -- he wrote of this sale as an "emancipation," and in 2005, he was back in Poipet to check up on the women. One had returned to prostitution, prompting Kristof to offer [another round of recommendations to President Bush, pleading with him to commit the United States to a New Abolitionism](#).

Now he's back with his [2009 agenda](#), delivered like the others, as a kicker to his column. In it, he asks that the Obama administration pressure the Cambodian government to bust more brothels, on the premise that the risk of going to jail for selling sex will hurt brothel owners' profits and will protect more women from abuse and violence. Yet such stings and raids are already the centerpiece of a disastrous crackdown on Cambodian prostitution. The Bush administration has supported the raids of Cambodian brothels for at least as long as Kristof has been demanding they step up a fight they are already in -- and losing.

It was under threat of sanctions from the United States that [prostitution was outlawed in Cambodia](#). The resulting government-sponsored raids on brothels did not lead to a great improvement in the lives of women and girls. Instead, the same police tasked with "liberating" women from Cambodia's brothels have been accused by human rights groups of abusing these same women.

In a [video](#) made by members of the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW), one survivor of what was called a "rehabilitation center" relates the story of being gang raped by six members of the police force: "They raped me from one after the other... the last one didn't use condom because I got only five condoms. I told him that I have HIV but he was not believe me. He said if I had HIV, would have scar on body, not so smooth." Another woman survivor describes her time in the Koh Kor rehabilitation center. It sits on the same island that was once home to a Khmer Rouge prison and execution camp. She explains that when she asked questions about why she had been taken in against her will, and what was wrong with what she was doing,

she was repeatedly beaten by her captors -- the police. These are the people -- the police, and the government officials who have operated brothels in a network of corruption -- that Kristof would like us to trust to combat violence.

Setting a human rights agenda for the United States will be an enormous challenge for Barack Obama and his incoming administration, with a host of failed Bush campaigns to contend with. His handling of so-called "sex slavery" will be but one. When considering how he ought to proceed, to undo damage done, and to improve human rights around the globe, Obama should look not to Kristof and his urgent cries, but to those women who are currently imprisoned and violated by the people who were supposed to "save" them. To endorse brutal, violent raids and "rehabilitation" as a solution to the brutality and violence of coerced prostitution ignores the evidence that raids do nothing to discourage abusive conditions -- they perpetuate them.

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