

Guest Columnist: Carol Fenton

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I and others have often written about the origin of “sex trafficking” mythology in evangelical Christian theology, and many of the largest “anti-trafficking” NGOs have strong ties to anti-abortion and anti-gay groups. Shared Hope International is one of those organizations, and its founder Linda Smith has been involved in anti-sex causes for three decades. Since they are based in Washington state I asked Portland, Oregon-based activist Carol Fenton to give us a short introduction to Smith and Shared Hope...



Linda Smith

Linda Smith boldly proclaims that the same beliefs that guide her anti-abortion and anti-gay politics are the same values that pilot her domestic minor sex trafficking efforts. “I started as a pro-life activist,” she says; “The children I serve today are children of God, labeled, stripped of justice, denied life in many cases...[I use] many of the same arguments that I used fighting for the unborn for many years.” Smith gained notoriety for her staunchly conservative views from the very beginning of her political career in Washington State in 1983, and she landed in the House of Representatives with support from the Christian Coalition and “Linda’s Army”, a grassroots write-in campaign. While in office, she worked to advance a fundamentalist agenda, formed relationships with

Christian conservatives, and networked with a growing Evangelical base to promote her ideology. After two terms in Congress, Smith started Shared Hope International, which she considers her ministry. Smith revealed, “My titles and political connections have opened doors for me around the world that wouldn’t have opened otherwise.” In 2001, Smith kicked off the War Against Trafficking Alliance in conjunction with The Salvation Army, the International Justice Mission, and the Protection Project (founded by Laura Lederer, a Bush administration advisor and anti-pornography activist). Along with Smith, the alliance worked to brand and sell anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking training as a human rights cause.

As the trafficking crusade continued to gain traction, funding began to pour into known “rescue” organizations including WATA, for which Smith obtained \$1.8 million dollars for a global anti-trafficking conference in February of 2003. During the first four years of the Bush administration, \$300 million was awarded to anti-trafficking work, including Shared Hope International. With grants from the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, Smith and SHI first released the DEMAND report in 2007, followed in 2009 by the National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: America’s Prostituted Children, and in 2011 by the annual state report cards. With DOJ funding, Smith and her team have gone undercover to obtain and create their own brand of “research” on the commercial sex industry. The result is SHI’s Protected Innocence Challenge, a joint analysis done by SHI and the American Center for Law and Justice (founded by evangelical

minister Pat Robertson). In 2011, Smith promoted SHI's state report cards and legislative framework to attendees at the Values Voters Summit in a breakout session entitled "Saving America's Children From Pimps And Perverts: The Protected Innocence Initiative". The following year, while addressing a small crowd during one of the 2012 Value Voters breakout sessions, Smith said that efforts to stop the sale and trade of minors in the sex industry should be an extension of the "pro-life" cause. "Believers and conservatives should put this issue [domestic minor sex trafficking] in its proper position," and not treat it as tangential.

But Shared Hope International's authority and influence extends far beyond Smith's base. In 2009, with DOJ funding, SHI developed and released Intervene training for "identifying and responding to America's prostituted children". The curriculum is marketed as a tool that builds awareness in social agency workers and those who are in contact with children and youth who may be at risk. Whenever this training takes place, local reporters refer to anti-trafficking panelists as "experts", say that training will create a bridge between social services and law enforcement, and claim that people can learn how to identify human trafficking and strengthen their state laws.



sleazy Shared Hope billboard

To gain continued political support for this issue, an integral part of each report is sensationalistic storytelling and stereotyping. In Oregon, Shared Hope International advocates use fear-based stories and anecdotal evidence to implement new legislation that is focused solely on domestic minor girls. Joel Shapiro, a lobbyist with SHI, says "going after pimps and johns" is more difficult because the illicit business has gone from the streets to online. Yet, U.S. Attorney Amanda Marshall views the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) as a high priority, the Sexual Assault Resource Team has five full-time staff members that respond exclusively to CSEC cases, and the Multnomah

County DA formed a Human Trafficking Team and is using additional funds to pay for another CSEC prosecutor; with this team in place Oregon is already 5th in the nation for CSEC prosecutions. None of this is based in anything resembling sound research and data, a fact which the abolitionists themselves admit in statements buried deep with the hysteria:

"The exact number of child victims of sex trafficking in the United States is unknown because comprehensive research and scientific data are lacking."

"With regard to children affected by trafficking, there is a dramatic absence of harmonized and systematic data."

"There is little systematic and reliable data on the scale of the phenomenon."

The U.S. State Department Office of Accountability found gaps in data, numerical discrepancies, methodological weaknesses, and no coordinated strategy or way to gauge

results, yet funding and resources keep being thrown at these false claims. It's past time for officials who are truly concerned about exploitation to distance themselves from agenda-driven ideologues like Smith and start addressing the push factors, listening to key populations, and focusing on evidence-based harm reduction and anti-criminalization efforts which create healthy and safe communities for everyone.