
Of Human Bondage

A coalition against human trafficking worked well until a prostitution litmus test was imposed.

TARA MCKELVEY | *November 1, 2004*

On August 6, Christina Arnold found herself in Svay Pak, Cambodia, an area full of wooden shacks, bars, and brothels 11 kilometers from the capital city of Phnom Penh. Arnold, the 29-year-old director of Project Hope International, a nonprofit organization committed to assisting survivors of human trafficking, had traveled there to visit with social workers, health-care workers, and others who help prostitutes. It's exhausting and grim work; many of the prostitutes are children (as young as 6) servicing Western tourists who hang out at the Home Away from Home café and prowl the area for "small-small," as the young girls are known.

For years, the health-care educators and social workers had worked closely with the children, who are living "by hook or by crook, doing tricks," says Arnold. They tried to teach the girls how to care for themselves. "They would tell the children, 'You will get out of this. There's a way out,'" says Arnold. "In the meantime, here's how to use a condom."

But that was before University of Rhode Island professor Donna Hughes started accusing nongovernmental organizations of teaching children "how to be prostitutes." On April 3, 2003, she testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, saying, "It is unacceptable to provide medical services and condoms to enslaved people and ignore the slavery."

Her words had a chilling affect on health-care workers in Svay Pak. "We were standing on a muddy street, talking to a woman who works for one of these organizations," says Arnold. "We asked, 'So you're not able to deal with children?' 'No, not at all,' she said. 'Unless we want to get shut down.' She looked very upset, and she was holding her face in her hands. The children there are very confused. NGO workers told us pedophiles now know they can go and have unprotected sex with children because the health-education programs have stopped." Arnold paused, then added, "And when children come to the NGO workers and ask for help, they are being turned away."

The woman Arnold spoke with has already lost some funding, and her situation could become even more precarious. Three days before Arnold spoke with her, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Acquisition and Assistance issued new guidelines, which took effect immediately, for international organizations that receive federal funds to fight the trade in human trafficking, a problem that has exploded in the last 10 years. The organizations are not allowed "to promote, support, or advocate for the legalization or practice of prostitution."

On its face, this proposition does not sound as if it should be controversial. But the regulatory change has sparked an intense debate within the coalition of groups -- left, right, and nonpartisan -- that has been working together since 1998 to fight human trafficking. Some, like Arnold, believe the change prevents groups from doing any outreach at all that will help girls trapped in prostitution. Others see the change as a sop to the religious right, which has taken an undoubtedly sincere interest in the problems of trafficking and slavery, but which, to critics, is creating a rift in a coalition that was working smoothly by imposing its value system in a manner that's alienating groups that used to get along -- and that isn't necessarily helping the women it's designed to help.

How you feel about prostitution, say program officers, field workers, and human-rights advocates, has become a litmus test for the Bush administration. If you don't have the right views, you're not going to get any money. Or, as one person who works for an NGO describes the new policy, in a phrase that might have a familiar ring to students of the administration's anti-terrorism rhetoric, "You're either with us or you're against us."

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Sitting in a corner office at 18th and G streets in Washington, D.C., John R. Miller, 66, a dapper man in a crisp suit and navy suspenders who is director of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, waves his hand in the air and swoops in so close when he talks that you can feel his breath on your skin. His office is large and comfortable, filled with chairs upholstered in royal blue, an American flag, and a framed red-and-white Solidarnosc poster given to him by a Polish friend.

"There are plenty of Americans who still say, 'Slavery? Didn't that end with the American Civil War?'" says Miller, a former Republican representative from Washington state, explaining how he has worked hard to raise awareness of human trafficking since he joined the State Department in December 2002.

As he talks, he picks up a glossy edition of the "Trafficking in Persons Report," issued on June 14, and flips through the pages. As the report explains, 600,000 to 800,000 men, women, and children -- roughly half under the age of 18, according to estimates -- are trafficked each year across national

borders. They're forced to work for little or no pay in places like India's brick kilns, Colombia's army barracks, and Cambodia's bordellos.

The problem of human trafficking has existed since, well, forever. But it ballooned in the 1990s after the crumbling of the Soviet Union. At the time, borders became more porous in central Europe, and the trade in humans boomed. These days, human trafficking follows roughly the same routes as weapons and narcotics.

Left unchecked, human trafficking will become the most lucrative of the three criminal industries within 10 years, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said at a trafficking conference in February 2003. Profits flow to the people who smuggle women across borders and to those who press them into servitude. It can be more lucrative than narcotics: If you're a dealer, you can only sell a bag of cocaine once; if you're a pimp, you can peddle your wares over and over again.

The annual State Department report, which first appeared after the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, evaluates how effectively 140 different countries are fighting trafficking, prosecuting criminals, and supporting programs that protect victims. Cuba and North Korea are in "Tier 3," which means the United States may withhold nonhumanitarian assistance until they get their acts together. (The United States is not ranked in this report.)

Besides publishing an expanded edition of the report, Miller has overseen an increase in the percentage of "faith-based" organizations that receive funding (from 7 percent in 2002, according to Caroline Tetschner, a State Department spokeswoman, to 22 percent in 2003); made sure funding is denied to international organizations that do not follow strict guidelines in opposing prostitution; and encouraged changes in the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which will soon forbid military personnel from patronizing prostitutes.

Overall, the Bush administration has devoted more than \$295 million in anti-trafficking program assistance in more than 120 countries, according to the State Department. More than 2,800 people around the world have been convicted of trafficking-related crimes in the past three years, and 24 countries have enacted new anti-trafficking legislation. One of George W. Bush's favorite U.S. programs is the International Justice Mission (IJM), which is run by Gary Haugen, 41, author of *Good News About Injustice*, and Sharon Cohn, 34, the organization's vice president of interventions, who has overseen brothel raids in Cambodia.

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It's impressive stuff. But human-rights activists, program officers, and health-care educators who work to help trafficking victims describe a dark side to the "abolitionist" movement. The movement's most prominent figures include right-wing policy-makers, a Jewish "moral entrepreneur," and evangelical leaders, whom critics call overzealous and moralistic. Together, the "abolitionists" have formed a potent political force ("It's the most powerful coalition for human rights in America today -- perhaps in the world -- all under the radar screen of the press," says one of its adherents) known for steamrolling opponents and stifling dissenting voices. Some say they're even snuffing out organizations that don't adhere to a party line regarding prostitution.

Organizations are denied funds if they refuse to sign a "loyalty oath," as one senior officer with an NGO describes a new clause on federal-aid contracts that require grant recipients to say they oppose prostitution.

In addition, Bush's most celebrated programs, including the IJM, are scorned by anti-trafficking activists in places where they operate. A brothel raid led by the IJM last May in Thailand resulted in the freeing of 29 women. But the women were arrested, and to some, it didn't feel much like freedom. "The women became very annoyed when told they had been 'rescued,'" say the authors of a Shan Women's Action Network report. "They said, 'How can you say this is a rescue when we were arrested?'"

And though the particular fates of these 29 women are unclear, experts say it's often the case that when prostitutes -- many of whom come from the notorious Shan State in Burma (now officially called Myanmar), where systematic rape and human-rights abuses are common -- are "freed" from Thai brothels, they end up in a worse situation. Legally, these women cannot claim refugee status in Thailand. "After 'rescue,' their situation will be made known to Burmese authorities, local village officials and family members," according to the report. "Under these circumstances, a safe and beneficial return home is impossible."

For Cohn, the important thing is freeing women and children from bondage. She speaks convincingly about the horrors of being "serially raped," especially if you're a 6-year-old child. And she's proud of the fact that, so far in 2004, the IJM has saved 152 victims of child sexual exploitation and trafficking. IJM officers try to follow up with the women and children they've saved and make sure they're OK, she says.

Regarding the Thailand episode, Cohn says: "It's probably safe to say we have a different perspective of the raid. Seven underage girls were rescued. If there's even one girl, she'd still have the right not to be raped day and night."

Miller has run into opposition not just from the usual suspects among on-the-ground advocates from NGOs. People within the State, Justice, and other departments have become incensed. Recently, Miller has expanded his reach to the Department of Defense, which will change its military code so soldiers can be court-martialed for visiting a prostitute.

And there have been minor diplomatic dustups. The "Trafficking in Persons Report" contained a case study of a 15-year-old Thai girl taken to Tokyo and raped in a karaoke bar. The report concealed the girl's real name and called her "Sirikit." As it turns out, Sirikit is the name of a venerated Thai queen, and it wasn't pleasant when news of this goof reached the Thai press. "Oh, my gosh, it was terrible," says Miller, nearly climbing out of his chair. "It's embarrassing. We had to send them an apology."

On a more serious level, people who've met Miller and worked with his staff say he's created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation. Some people have

suffered recriminations, been “blacklisted,” or lost their funds. Yet according to several sources, none of whom was at all willing to speak on the record, Miller isn't even the kingpin.

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The muscle guy in the “abolitionist” movement is Michael Horowitz, 66. A Jewish kid from the Bronx who went to City College and then to Yale Law School, Horowitz served as general counsel for the Office of Management and Budget under Ronald Reagan, and is now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington. Referred to by author Allen Hertzke as a “moral entrepreneur” in Hertzke's newly published book, *Freeing God's Children*, Horowitz is the one, activists and program officers say, who calls the shots.

The other leading figures are Charles Colson, a former Nixon counsel and an influential evangelical leader; Donna Hughes, the University of Rhode Island professor whose congressional testimony helped lay the groundwork for the August 2004 change in federal contracts and who writes articles on the subject for the *National Review*; Laura Lederer, a former anti-pornography crusader; and Lisa Thompson, a trafficking specialist with the Salvation Army. “Horowitz is the Charlie to their Angels,” says an administration official.

Last year, Horowitz, Colson, and others decided to oust Miller's predecessor, Nancy Ely-Raphael. She was an “apparatchik,” says Horowitz. “She was just a nice Ferragamo-wearing lady,” counters a former Republican staffer on the Hill.

Regardless of Ely-Raphael's taste in shoes, Horowitz, Colson, and other evangelical leaders told the White House to dump her. They wanted to install Miller -- even though Karl Rove didn't like him, according to a private e-mail footnoted in the Hertzke book. Rove objected to Miller because he'd supported John McCain in 2000.

In a show of strength, Horowitz and Colson prevailed over Rove, who allowed them to anoint Miller as director of what would soon become the “abolitionist” outpost in the State Department. These days, Miller is in close contact with speechwriter Michael Gerson and others in the White House. “They've told me how concerned he [Bush] is about this issue, and they call me up a lot,” says Miller.

And, apparently, they take notes. In Bush's September 23, 2003, speech at the United Nations, says Miller, “he spent 20 percent of his speech” on trafficking. Bush talked about trafficking on the campaign trail on July 16 in Tampa, Florida, and again at the UN on September 21. Bush's focus on trafficking is a victory for Horowitz and evangelical leaders in their efforts to influence U.S. foreign policy.

“It's the second act in what is a seven- or eight-act play,” says Horowitz.

The dramatic arc of the play, at least according to Horowitz, includes the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998; the Sudan Peace Act of 2002; the North Korea Human Rights Act of 2004, which has been passed by Congress; and an upcoming bill that will alter foreign policy so its main objective will be “the collapse of dictatorship through peaceful means and the promotion of democracy,” he explains.

In terms of scope, financial resources, and the president's attention, though, the anti-trafficking initiative may be the “abolitionists” crowning achievement. The campaign took off in January 1998, when Horowitz began to forge bonds with evangelical leaders like Colson and feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Jessica Neuwirth of Equality Now. They all worked together on a global campaign to fight trafficking and, along with it, prostitution.

“The ‘abolitionists’ truly believe all prostitution is trafficking, and if a woman says she did enter it voluntarily, she's mistaken. It's the conflating of trafficking and prostitution,” says Martina Vandenberg, an attorney with the Washington law firm Jenner & Block and a former Human Rights Watch researcher.

Many people -- not only evangelicals and Equality Now feminists -- think prostitution should be eradicated. Selling your body is a lousy job. And no amount of “ergonomic mattresses” and “minimum-wage standards,” as Horowitz says, are going to make it better. For them, AIDS is an occupational hazard. Eighty percent “suffer violence-related injuries,” according to a 2002 study cited in *Violence Against Women*. And in a recent mortality study of 1,600 women in the United States, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*, murder accounts for 50 percent of prostitute deaths.

Partly because of the efforts of the “abolitionists,” the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003 stipulates that international organizations receiving funds cannot support prostitution in any way. It's a refined version of the previous bill. The new one includes specific language about prostitution and federal funds. As with most bureaucratic moves, though, the changes took awhile to kick in. This past summer, the official requirements of the act -- and the realities of what the Bush administration is trying to achieve -- started to appear in contracts required for international organizations that receive federal funds.

Even NGO officials who stop short of complaining about a “loyalty oath” argue that the act hinders their ability to do their work. “Right now, the administration policy is to require foreign organizations to have an explicit policy opposing prostitution,” says Cara Thanassi, senior legislative adviser of CARE USA. “We're concerned it limits our ability to carry out HIV/AIDS and other programs with prostitutes.”

Some groups have lost funding. “We fell victim to it,” says Layli Miller-Muro, executive director of the Tahirih Justice Center, a Virginia-based organization that, among other activities, provides legal services to trafficking victims. “We were denied a grant to help women in India on that basis. They told us that flat out. I happen to be a religious person. I hold moral views. But it's not relevant to helping victims. The policy against prostitution is a distraction.”

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The Bush administration has done some good work, raising awareness of the issue and passing new laws, including one -- the PROTECT Act -- that allows U.S. law-enforcement officers to prosecute Americans who've traveled abroad to sexually abuse children. Newly funded programs like the IJM have, literally, saved women and children from hell. But emphasizing victim rescues -- and vilifying those who try to work with prostitutes -- have unintended consequences. Some of the "liberated" women have suffered in the aftermath. And many anti-trafficking leaders have been shunned because they've refused to sign a contract that supports the Bush administration's position.

"We would like to discourage the U.S. government from using its foreign policy to undermine and curtail freedom of expression," says LaShawn Jefferson, an executive director at Human Rights Watch. "This is being used as a tool of silencing people."

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