

Sex-Slave Trade Enters the U.S.

By Catherine Edwards and James Harder

Women and children from across the world are being taken captive and sold as sex slaves by international crime rings, but a new U.S. law seeks to stop the slave traders.

The profits from a growing global sex trade in women and children soon will be the world's most lucrative illegal activity if a new U.S. law doesn't change the situation. "Human trafficking is the third-highest illegal-income source in America today behind drug- and gunrunning," notes Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan. "The dark side of human trafficking is that, unlike drugs, [sexually enslaved] human beings can be resold and reused, thus making them a more profitable commodity."

The alarming growth of the sex trade prompted Brownback and Democratic colleague Paul Wellstone of Minnesota in the Senate and House members Chris Smith, R-N.J., and Sam Gejdenson, D-Conn., to sponsor legislation to monitor and combat

such trafficking worldwide. The measure, known as the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, overwhelmingly passed the House in May and the Senate in July. A bipartisan conference report was published in early October and the president signed it into law three weeks later.

In recent years most government agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have used the term "trafficking" to refer to all acts involved in the movement of women and children from one country to another or within national borders for sexual exploitation or forced labor. The new law prohibits both. According to a spokesman for Wellstone, profits from this trade top \$7 billion annually.

"These girls are not living the life

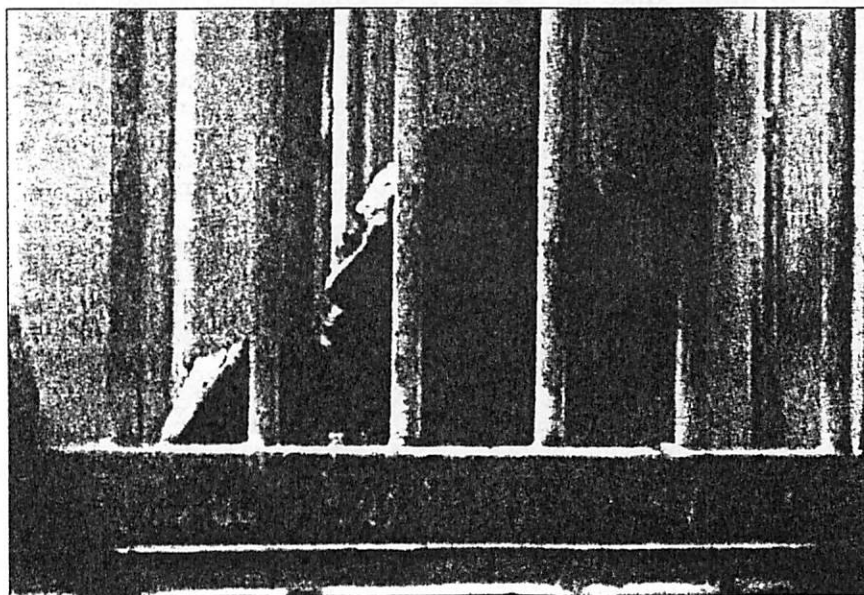


Bombay bordello: *The madam, below, keeps an eye on the girls, above, who wait to perform sexual acts.*

of Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman*," says Rachel Lloyd, the director of the New York-based Girls Education and Mentoring Service. "We work with kids who have really been abused. Not many have ever been given a chance to make something of themselves."

Smuggled into brothels in the United States with fake visas or hidden in packing cases, they often have been kidnapped, bought or lured by false employment opportunities. Beaten and raped, some do not survive even the initial brutality. Removed from even the hope of protection by family and friends, locked in airless, dark rooms, starved and beaten, they often are forced to engage in unspeakable sex acts with people whose language they don't understand.

While there is nothing new about what once was called white slavery, the last two decades have seen sex trafficking turned into a well-organized international criminal enterprise corrupting whole countries. Such traffic began to flourish in the



USED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE MISSION



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The Sex Trade and HIV/AIDS

International Justice Mission investigator Bob Mosier met the 17-year-old girl in Bombay. A virgin kidnapped from her village in West Bengal at age 14, she was drugged and woke up in a brothel where she was beaten and forced to have sex as many as 25 times a day. By age 17 she had undergone three abortions, which she had to pay for with tips from the long lines of clients she was made to service.

For three years the teen-ager repeatedly tried to escape. Now she has AIDS and will be allowed by the traffickers to go home to die, Mosier tells *Insight*.

"A virgin like her can cost a customer more than \$10,000," he says. "Some mistakenly assume that sex with a virgin can purify them of AIDS. Other customers with AIDS do not like to use condoms and spread the disease that way. Governments need to be concerned about this trade from a humanitarian point of view but also from a public-health point of view — and I don't see that happening."

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Philippines and Thailand after the Vietnam War — first catering to soldiers and then to sexual holidays for Japanese, American, Canadian and European men frequenting brothels in Southeast Asia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian women were targeted by these criminal enterprises.

Prior to the 1990s, many of the women trafficked into the United States came from Asia. While the nationality and character of victims now varies greatly, researchers cite a common socioeconomic profile of the women caught up in this trade. Often they are desperate young people in search of opportunity, livelihood and sometimes even a means to survive. The breakup of the Eastern bloc, for instance, created economic dislocation and destitution for many young women that made them vulnerable to the ploys and schemes of brothel owners and traffickers. Porous borders, globalization and cooperation among criminal syndicates also contributed to the explosive growth during the last decade, say leading experts.

Marie Jose Ragab sees the fall of the Berlin Wall and the ensuing growth of organized crime in Eastern

Europe as landmark events in the proliferation of sex trafficking. As the international director for a dissident chapter of the National Organization for Women, she has spent years looking at issues related to sex trafficking. "Before, it was through mail-order brides and making trips to Thailand and Asia," Ragab says of the international sex trade. "Once the Soviet Union collapsed, organized crime took over and there was a new market. Suddenly there were all of these Western-looking girls on the market."

Ian Vasquez, director of the Project on Global Economic Liberty at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, acknowledges that globalization may have played a role in facilitating sex traffic, but he is quick to point out that the development of the global economy is not the issue. Vasquez says Communist policies in Eastern Europe largely were responsible because "past policies have impoverished people and taken away many or all the benefits" of their industry and savings, creating the desperation and criminality from which this traffic springs. As a result the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Hungary have been producing a flood

of desperate victims for the sex traffickers.

Laura Lederer of the Protection Project, a program affiliated with Johns Hopkins University, has been organizing international police records and tracking the main routes of the sex trade for the last three-and-a-half years. When charted, the maps look like flight routes for a major airline, covering much of Africa, Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and South America. But shutting down those routes has been extremely difficult, says Lederer, because of hesitancy by many countries even to acknowledge the problem. "We mainly track through police and journalistic reports, and if the police don't ask the right questions during the investigation it's that much more difficult to know what's going on," says Lederer.

A report being prepared by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), which is due out early next year, may help shed light on how trafficking in children as sex slaves has been added to this international trade. Christine Dolan, a Washington-based freelance journalist, recently was commissioned by NCMEC to spend nine

weeks investigating the trafficking of children in Europe, especially in the Balkans. "I hung out with pimps, whores, kids, transvestites and police. I walked the streets and I saw this stuff firsthand. It's a huge, huge problem," Dolan tells *Insight*.

After a close look at the situation, Dolan is adamant that government bureaucracies and research institutions have a long way to go before they even have a remote grasp of the magnitude and volume of the problem. But it is the age of the children being trafficked and forced into prostitution that she finds most shocking. "What's nearly impossible for people to understand," she says, is that even "toddlers and infants are being kidnapped and sexually molested" — as a business.

Ernie Allen, president of NCMEC, tells *Insight* that kids increasingly are being used for sexual activity and trafficking because even perverts fear HIV/AIDS. "The profile that we have developed on this," he says, "is that we have seen kids exploited and in the stream of child trafficking as young as 3 and 4 years old. This is not just a by-product of pedophilia or some sort of sexual attraction to younger kids. Part of this is that because of the AIDS epidemic there is a demand for younger and younger kids because of the thought that they would be less likely to be HIV-positive." Allen likens the magnitude of sex trafficking to the Holocaust, not-

ing that it has spread throughout the world.

The new U.S. law proposes to address part of this problem. It will require the State Department to expand the annual human-rights reports to cover severe forms of trafficking in persons, and an interagency task force chaired by the secretary of state will coordinate antitrafficking efforts nationally and internationally. The law also provides for allied public-awareness campaigns at home and abroad through NGOs.

"The biggest thing this law does is say to the world that the United States sees this as a serious human-rights issue. It raises public awareness about the dangers of trafficking and the protections available for victims," Brownback tells *Insight*.

A more controversial provision addresses the immigration status of trafficked victims. As many as 5,000 aliens trafficked into the United States by organized-crime syndicates will be permitted to remain on a new non-immigrant visa provided they assist in the investigation of their perpetrators, are younger than age 15 or can demonstrate that they would suffer severe harm if returned to their country of origin. The president also can impose nontrade, nonhumanitarian sanctions against countries that do not comply with minimum standards to eliminate trafficking. The countries that currently have no laws against

forced labor and prostitution will have four years to enact such laws before application of sanctions, but all sanctions can be waived by the president at any time.

Finally, the new law provides for stiff punishment of traffickers who in the past have received light sentences. As Wellstone put it on the Senate floor: "In Los Angeles, traffickers kidnapped a Chinese woman, raped her and forced her into prostitution, posted guards to control her movements and burned her with cigarettes. Nevertheless, the lead defendant received only four years and the other defendants received only two to three years."

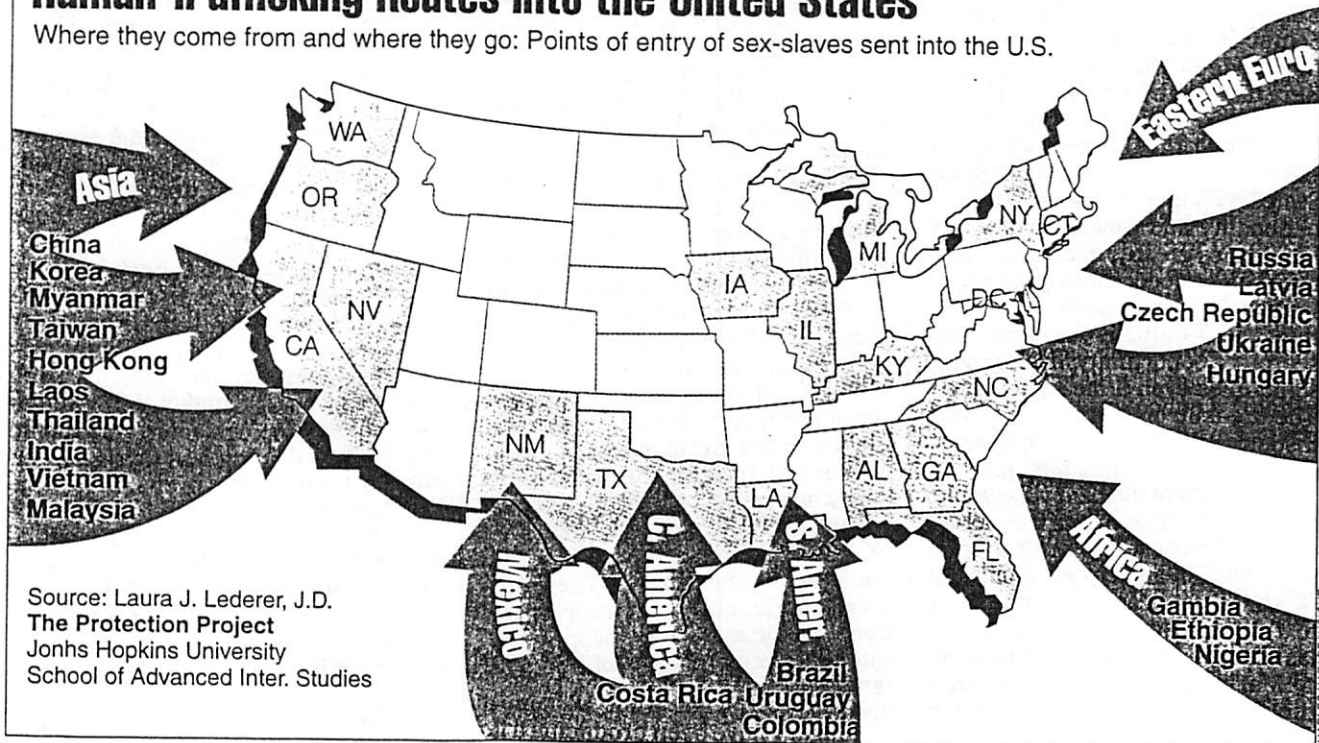
The maximum sentence for dealing in small quantities of the drug LSD is life in prison. Under the new law, the penalty for trafficking kids younger than age 14 is life; if caught trafficking a person ages 14 to 18, the perpetrator faces at least 20 years behind bars. The penalty for traffickers who kill or attempt to kill a victim is life in prison.

Rep. Smith was adamant that the law be given the teeth to bite the big players who are facilitating this international shame. "We have to put these mafioso types away for life. Get some high-level convictions ... and throw away the key. They're facilitating the rape of these young girls, sometimes 10, 15 times a day," he tells *Insight*.

Congress has appropriated almost \$100 million to various government

Human Trafficking Routes Into the United States

Where they come from and where they go: Points of entry of sex-slaves sent into the U.S.





Queuing up: Prostitutes in Bangkok try to catch the eye of potential clients.

agencies to implement the new law. And Janis Gordon, assistant U.S. attorney for the Organized Crime Strike Force in Atlanta, tells *Insight* that this indeed will help her prosecute the traffickers more effectively.

Last summer Gordon's office busted an Asian smuggling and prostitution ring. Women and girls as young as age 13 had been trafficked as sex slaves to Atlanta from China, Thailand, Korea, Malaysia and Vietnam. Before she had time to question the girls about their detention, however, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had deported them to their countries of origin. "Because all my witnesses were gone, I was not able to prove coercion," Gordon tells *Insight*. "The INS wouldn't let me hold them here, so the maximum sentence any of the traffickers got was 33 months." Gordon says the new immigration provisions in the trafficking legislation allow witnesses to remain in the United States to assist with investigations.

"This is big business for the traffickers who don't get caught," says Gordon. "After examining one brothel's records, I was able to show that it grossed \$1.5 million over a two-year period. The girls were shuttled around the country to other brothels, forced to work in dire conditions, only allowed to run errands if accompanied by armed guards until they paid off their contracts to their captors, which could be as much as \$30,000 in value."

As more women are trafficked into the United States every year, they not only violate U.S. immigration, labor and prostitution laws, but also can become a national-security threat by strengthening corrosive elements abroad, says former CIA director

James Woolsey. "Trafficking is a lucrative source of income for organized crime, often less risky than drug smuggling," Woolsey tells *Insight*. "If countries do not effectively prosecute [slave] traffickers, organized crime assumes a stronger role which in turn corrupts law enforcement and the rule of law — which is not good for the overall economic stability of these countries, thus creating a national-security threat to the United States."

One human-rights group that is working to help free trafficked women and children from brothels abroad and to put their traffickers behind bars is the International Justice Mission (IJM), which works with police, NGOs and faith-based groups at the local level to document abuses and assist in conducting the raids. IJM investigator Bob Mosier is a former police officer and served with the international police task force in Bosnia. He and his team have participated in more than 12 raids since January 1999 and assisted in 25 raids on brothels in Asia. Women trafficked against their will from Nepal to India or from Burma to Thailand were found by Mosier's team locked by their captors in dark rooms.

"Some of these women had been sold into prostitution by their own families and were afraid to return home," Mosier tells *Insight*. The problems we face when freeing some of these girls is that, unless there is a church or NGO willing to take them in, there is nowhere for them to go. They don't speak the language in order to find work, and often they are poor, uneducated and lack skills. Out of fear some return to the brothel simply because they have food and shelter there."

Mosier says he sees a great deal of government corruption at the national and local levels concerning sex trafficking. "But most international governments are concerned that children are being sexually exploited and want to do something to stop it. Even so, most of the in-country laws still do not treat human traffickers as harshly as drug smugglers," he says. Mosier, who recently returned from the Philippines, opens a file and points to a Filipino immigration card. Written on it in red letters are the words: "Drug Trafficking in the Philippines is punishable by death." Not so for traffickers in human beings.

Meanwhile, in October, a U.N. Crime Commission finished negotiations on a new international treaty to combat trafficking in slaves. Delegates wrangled for months over language and the definition of treaty terms. The outcome changed little of the existing 1949 U.N. treaty that condemns trafficking with or without individual consent for sexual purposes, and national laws regarding prostitution will not be affected. Countries may sign the new document starting in December.

Meanwhile, the independent action taken in the United States is likely to have more effect. Smith says the new law marks a historic day in the struggle to protect women from violence. The 10-term Republican says he saw the problem of sex trafficking begin exploding in the 1980s, but it wasn't until he attended a Commission for Cooperation and Security in Europe, held in St. Petersburg, Russia, two years ago that he realized the severity of the problem. "Just looking in the eyes of those girls..." says Smith, breaking off his thought in mid-sentence. Momentarily flustered, he pauses before launching back into the opportunities for prosecution afforded under the new law he helped write.

Lederer is similarly touched by the great outrage. She says that the number of women and children who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation during the last 10 years already is on a par with estimates of the number of Africans who were enslaved for sale in the United States during the 16th and 17th centuries. "The minimum number of African slaves transported here was between 5 million and 6 million," says Lederer. "There is no doubt that world trafficking [in sex slaves] now is around that number."