

Trafficking argument

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IN THE STATES

Debate Roars Over Anti-Trafficking Funds

By Jennifer Friedlin - WeNews correspondent

(WOMENSENEWS)--Before Florrie Burke attends a conference on trafficking the head of the anti-trafficking initiative at Safe Horizon braces herself for a confrontation that is increasingly commonplace at these forums.

It's not a fight over whether trafficking is right or wrong. There is universal agreement among advocates, activists and politicians that smuggling people across borders for use as sex slaves or forced labor is criminal.

Instead, people working to end such trafficking are immersed in a bitter debate over prostitution. Some anti-trafficking activists say routing out prostitution will close the market for sex slaves, who make up the majority of trafficking victims worldwide. But others contend that efforts to end trafficking should focus on the economic, social and political reasons people around the world end up falling in the hands of traffickers.

Traffickers prey largely on people in poor countries, promising them decent jobs overseas and then enslaving them as sex workers, factory laborers or domestic help by stripping them of their passports and cutting off their contact with the outside world.

"People tend to conflate prostitution and trafficking as if they are one and the same," said Burke, whose New York-based organization provides services to victims of abuse and crime. "For me, it's about what drives someone to leave behind their country and take such a risk. We can't get to all of that if we get hung up on an argument about prostitution."

The debate has become especially heated now that the federal

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government has said that it will use the \$50 million it has earmarked for anti-trafficking efforts this year to enforce its anti-prostitution position.

## Feminist Groups Divided

The issue of trafficking became a hot button topic during the 1990s, but it was not until 2000 that United States passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the first major legislation intended to curb international trafficking. Since then, the U.S. government has begun rating other countries' records on human trafficking and can impose economic sanctions on any country that does not take steps to end the practice.

The State Department reports that, of the estimated 800,000 to 900,000 men, women and children who are trafficked around the world, most are trafficked for sexual exploitation. An estimated 18,000 to 20,000 people are trafficked into the United States yearly.

While most activists are glad the issue of trafficking has made it to the fore, feminist groups, long at odds over whether prostitution should be legalized, are divided over the way the Bush administration is approaching the issue.

Critics worry that directing government funding only to groups that oppose prostitution will hurt organizations that provide services to prostitutes, but have not taken an anti-prostitution position. They warn that by turning the war on trafficking into a battle against prostitution the government's anti-trafficking efforts will prove ineffective.

Ann Jordan, director of the Initiative Against Trafficking in Persons at the International Human Rights Law Group in Washington, D.C., says that, in poor countries, where organized crime is often in cahoots with the government, no amount of anti-prostitution legislation will end trafficking.

"A lot of this discussion is so ideological that it's not addressing the core issues that are really tough and need to be addressed such

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as the socio-economic status of women, particularly in countries where the economies are collapsed and governments support the migration of their people to support the domestic economy," said Jordan.

Yet, others say fighting prostitution by rounding up pimps and johns is the only way to combat the demand for trafficked women and children and to put an end to the practice.

"The existence of prostitution is the only reason sex trafficking exists," said Donna Hughes, a professor of women's studies at the University of Rhode Island. "Until you do something about the demand, trafficking will continue."

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Hughes said efforts to eradicate trafficking in women should be focused on providing assistance for the victims and imposing steep penalties on the perpetrators.

## Funds Directed to Anti-Prostitution Groups

As part of its efforts to fight trafficking, the government is now trying to ensure that federal funds go only to domestic and international groups that oppose prostitution.

Critics are concerned that the move is part of a trend to keep federal funds in the hands of groups which share a conservative ideology that is anti-choice and anti-prostitution.

In 2001, the Bush administration instituted a policy that known as the global gag rule, which prevents international nongovernmental agencies from receiving federal funding if they provide abortions, discuss abortions with their clients or advocate for changing their nation's abortion laws. Two years later, the administration's Global AIDS Bill prohibited international agencies working on HIV/AIDS from receiving money unless they explicitly state a policy against prostitution. When it came time to pass the Trafficking Victims

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Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003, Republicans in Congress pushed for a provision similar to the Global AIDS Bill.

"What the Bush policies amount to is a global gag rule on trafficking," said Jordan.

After much wrangling, the Republicans ultimately acquiesced on more flexible language. In a congressional colloquy, Congressmen Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Chris Smith (R-NJ) clarified that organizations that are neutral on the issue of prostitution are still eligible for funds.

"I wanted to make sure that nongovernmental organizations that have been doing great work on helping trafficking victims were not prevented from getting federal funds because they decided to stay out of the debate over the legalization of prostitution," Lantos said.

Despite Lantos' efforts, the administration has indicated it would favor organizations that oppose prostitution.

Kent Hill, the assistant administrator for United States Agency for International Development's bureau for Europe and Eurasia, said his agency would look more favorably on groups, such as faith-based ones that take a definite stand against prostitution.

"If a group is neutral on whether the legalization of prostitution would be advisable or not, interagency guidelines instruct us to give priority, all other factors being equal, to those organizations which support U.S. government policies on combating trafficking and prostitution, that is, to organizations which see trafficking and prostitution as both inextricably mixed and socially harmful," Hill said.

For fiscal year 2003, the government has earmarked about \$50 million to fight trafficking, \$15 million of which will go to USAID. Those figures are expected to be higher next year, Hill said.

## Fear of Government Stance

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Conservatives have applauded the government's tough stand in favor of organizations that oppose prostitution. They believe the United States should take a similar position with countries, such as Thailand, that generate hundreds of millions of dollars a year in revenue from prostitution and sex tourism.

"We've got to push them very hard. That's one of the great things about being a superpower," said Michael Horowitz, a fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C.

But some groups, even those that want to see prostitution abolished, fear the Bush administration's efforts to force countries and advocacy groups to take an anti-prostitution stance may be overzealous.

Taina Bien-Aime, executive director of Equality Now, a New York-based women's human rights organization, said the Bush administration's approach could sideline groups that are helping women.

Bien-Aime said she is concerned that the Bush administration will keep money from non-governmental organizations that help women who turn to prostitution out of desperation in much the same way as it has used what is known as the global gag rule to keep money from any NGO that discusses abortion.

"If people are trying to unionize women in prostitution, is that pro-prostitution?" Bien-Aime asked. "We don't want a situation like the global gag rule where people are punished because they address prostitution."

Jennifer Friedlin is a reporter based in New York.

For more information:

Safe Horizon: - <http://www.safehorizon.org>

Equality Now: - <http://www.equalitynow.org>