

Sex Slavery as a National Threat: A Response to Louise Brown's *Sex Slavery: The Trafficking of Women in Asia*

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[Aye Mon Htut, a native of Burma and a recent Social Work graduate of Mary Baldwin College, spent Summer 2006 doing an internship in Bangkok, Thailand working with Burmese "sex slaves" brought to a center in Bangkok. She wrote this brief essay as a response to reading anthropologist Louise Brown's controversial book, *Sex Slavery: The Trafficking of Women in Asia*, reviewed in the 2006 edition of this journal. *Ed.*]

Sandar, from Burma, promised that she would not come back to Thailand again, if she was sent back home safely. But the social worker of Foundation for Women knew that she would. That was during an information session on immigration law, sex slavery and human rights at a Thai immigration detention centre. Everyday, hundreds of illegal sex workers are arrested and sent there, where social workers interview them, counsel them, let them know the consequences if they ever commit illegal migration again, and send them home. More than half of them would try again to cross the border, hoping that they would get a better job than prostitutes. Having known the risk of being jailed or fallen prey by human traffickers, who will turn them into sex workers again, they will make the second or third attempts simply because they have far worse lives back home.

In all Asian countries, we must fight against sex slavery much more aggressively than now. Simply put, Sex Slavery is national threat to all of us in Asian countries. Sex slavery is far more complicated than one can imagine. As much as this business is humongous and threatening, the attention and concern it gets to rectify it is very minimal. We have to look into many underlying causes in order correct or even reduce it. Poverty, lack of education, not knowing even basic human rights, lack of options are just a few causes that activists, NGOs and concerned citizens alone cannot address. Everyone should respond to this problem just as we respond to war, terrorism, corrupted government, economic crisis and deadly epidemics. Sex slavery in Asia is not any less important nor creates less tragedy than these issues.

In Thailand alone, two million women and young children from Burma have become sex slaves (Brown, 2001) in recent years. More than 50% of them will die between the age of 20 and 30 by HIV. This figure is higher than the number of people killed in 1988 massacre in Burma, the 9/11 tragedy in U.S, and the Tsunami tidal wave incident in Thailand combined. Sex slavery definitely needs more attention and action. We all have to treat it as a genuine national threat!

One of the ways to fight against Sex Slavery is that Asian countries should be to be more open to help and force the public to face the reality of what is going on. . It is

just not understandable how we so blithely ignore such a catastrophe. While I can understand the fact that solving this problem involves big financial commitment and other responsibilities, it is totally unacceptable that many Asian governments do not have much vision and long term plans, at the very least. The most hopeless and disappointing part of it is that, authorities are involved in the sex industry according to Brown. Not so surprisingly, the law punishes the prostitutes, but not the brothel owners, traffickers and agents as much. It is completely depressing that the governments are killing their own citizens although indirectly and slowly. It is a totally inhumane crime. No matter how other sectors of a country flourish, it is neither acceptable nor negotiable to kill its own citizens.

As soon as the governments accept and admit these issues officially, I believe there are many ways to reduce sex slavery. I have no doubt that it is extremely challenging to resolve the problem that has been damaging many lives over a century. Nevertheless, we can start taking small steps, one at a time. We could implement workshops and information sessions about deadly danger of sex slavery at community level. We could provide potential victims with some basic human rights and survival information such as no one has the right to sell them. As they have not much better choices, we cannot entirely stop them from going to other countries. However, one feasible and realistic step is that we can educate them, for example, by telling them about women's shelters, social services, and help-lines if they ever want to escape from the abusive slavery in foreign countries. We can prepare for them information sheets such as "Things you need to know before leaving your town", which will include hotline numbers of NGOs in neighboring countries, how to get help, how to get hint from possible tricks and etc.

Obviously, Asian governments should create more options for potential victims. One major approach is to look into poverty more seriously, then constructing new buildings, bridges, shopping centers and roads. It's time for us to realize that stability and welfare of civilians are the most important and basic need of a nation. Once they face the bitter truth and develop an attitude to seriously address it, I believe we can definitely reduce it bit by bit.

It is not only Asian governments that have to change their mindset to save their citizens; the whole world should get involved in making this happen. I remember how we, in Burma, obtained financial help, technical supports and medical assistance during the Diarrhea epidemic in 1987 (UNICEF data sheet, 1988). U.S, Europe and many powerful countries around the globe can exert considerable pressure to hurry assistance to suffering nations. Everyone has great concern and involvement about these issues, which is absolutely wonderful; however, the contribution and the commitment on sex slavery problem are comparably low. Is it because the victims are the poorest and the least important citizens of the country? Is it because no one can gain political and economical benefit from it, as much as by involving in the political situations? Or is it because the awareness for sex slavery is not very wide yet compared to other issues? Or is it because these are the hidden problems the government does not want to admit the existence of?

Or is it because these issues are considered less worthy compared to other political, health and economic related issues? It is time now that we all have to ask these questions to ourselves, and not only analyze but also take actions as a global issue.

Now we are aware that sex slavery kills. Massively! We know that it kills more effectively than bombs and machine guns. It is time that we take it as a serious national threat, and save million lives of civilians. It is time that Asian governments should be more open-minded and work to build safer and better nations for their people. It is time that countries around the world should show great concerns and provide necessary assistance. It is time that every one of us is aware of the impact of sex slavery and contributes as much as we can to make our nations slave free.

Together, we can fight against sex slavery!

References

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