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COMMENTARY

Aiding and Abetting The Slave Trade

By **DONNA M. HUGHES**

Despite the best intentions, sometimes foreign aid can be cruel and immoral. Take this example from Cambodia. When aid workers funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, discovered women and girls enslaved in brothels, they did nothing to free them. Instead, they overlooked the crime and blithely went on with research on the enslaved victims.

Traffickers and pimps -- today's slave traders -- operate with impunity in Cambodia. Orphan girls, widows and women betrayed by their boyfriends are literally sold to brothels. Over the last decade, Cambodia has acquired an international reputation as a place where sex tourists and pedophiles can buy whatever they want. There is even a specialized market in virgins.

Wendy Freed, author of a report on sexual slavery in Cambodia, documents the violence suffered by the victims. In one case, she found that even after savage beatings one girl refused to let men have sex with her -- until finally the pimp threatened her with electric shocks.

Ms. Freed writes, "Young women sold into the commercial sex industry lose all their rights. They have no control over their bodies, and their bodily integrity is constantly violated. . . . The atmosphere of coercion and threat is omnipresent. . . . Their very physical and psychological survival is a risk."

It gets worse. Arriving at these sexual gulags, the nongovernmental organization Medecins sans Frontieres in 1995 started HIV/AIDS prevention projects based on the view that the women and girls need to be "empowered in their work." Their goal was to get the women "to assume more responsibility in their own lives." Not to get the women or girls out of slavery, only to provide HIV/AIDS-prevention education. In 1999, MSF started intervention projects with USAID-funded NGOs.

As the number of foreign sex offenders arriving in these brothel villages increased, the aid workers "witnessed an ever growing amount of very young girls from the village engaging in sex work in response to the newly created demand. . . . Japanese clients were buying oral sex from girls as young as five for \$30. Penetration started with girls as young as 10 or 11."

Medicins sans Frontieres' response was to implement "assertiveness and self esteem" training, which included teaching the girls to say, "Please wear a condom." Their response to the foreign rapists was to produce a brochure for the "male clients" in English, Japanese and Khmer: "We used a friendly approach, giving the clients tips on how to treat the sex workers more fairly."

You might think that once grant administrators found out about this abetting of rape they'd have immediately closed down the project. Instead, the project was named a UNAids-Cambodia Best-Practice Project for 2001.

The callousness of people involved in these supposedly humanitarian projects rose to another level of cruelty when workers from the Population Council's Horizons Project, the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health and the Cambodian Researchers for Development, initiated research on the enslaved women and girls. Funded by USAID, they conducted research on 753 "debt-bonded Vietnamese sex workers" from 22 brothels in one area of Cambodia. They wanted to know if they could "build solidarity among sex workers" and "reduce competition and mistrust

between Vietnamese debt-bonded sex workers . . . and their brothel owners." That's right: They wanted to see if they could create better relations between the slaves and their masters.

You might assume these researchers were just naive and didn't realize that the women and girls who were the subjects of their research were actually slaves. But their report betrays their understanding. They write: "Brothel managers retain strict control over sex workers. Each sex worker is considered to 'belong' to her brothel . . . with severe limitations on her mobility."

But even after understanding this, the researchers were most worried about their research, not ending this situation. "Gaining permission for sex workers to attend our workshops remained a paramount concern. We had evidence that owners sometimes denied sex workers the chance to participate and at other times forced them to attend."

Researchers were also aware that many of the victims were children: "Although the women told us they were 18 and over we knew that many of them, nearly half or more, were under 18." In addition, to ensure they had access to the victims for their projects, aid workers established "open and co-operative relations with brothel management."

One of the cruelest research projects USAID funded was one to try to determine if the enslaved women and girls knew the meaning of consent. What could be crueler than to engage slaves in an exercise intended to teach them the nuances of consent? In their findings, the researchers report that their interventions had no significant impact on a "sex worker's freedom of movement" or "the ability of sex workers to refuse clients who did not want to use condoms." In the end, they discovered that being owned by a brothel really did mean being a slave. Worse, the aid workers blamed the women and girls for their failure to build "solidarity" and "mobilize." The women and girls were criticized for being "unwilling to spend time building a community."

Again, you'd have hoped that grant makers would see the tragic folly of such research. On the contrary, such work was prominently and admiringly featured by USAID at the AIDS 2002 conference in Barcelona.

It's a sad reality that many seemingly well intentioned NGOs aren't really about helping the victims of abuse. They have a project to complete, and once they're done they go home, leaving the women and girls behind in slavery. This abandonment seems even more heartless when you consider the amount owed to brothel owners. On average, the difference between slavery and freedom is \$300.

These projects in Cambodia were initiated by USAID under the Clinton administration. But the Bush administration needs to immediately undertake a review of similar projects at USAID and to shut down unethical "interventions" with women and girls in brothels. Those who lack the moral capacity to know that slaves need freedom should never get funding again.

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