



HUMAN TRAFFICKING & SEX WORK


Human trafficking is an extreme form of exploitation and violation of human rights and is a growing multi-billion dollar industry with profits that rival the illegal drug and arms trade.¹ However, profit estimates and precise numbers of persons trafficked are difficult to ascertain due to the underground nature of trafficking. There are inconsistent estimates of human trafficking among different governments and non-governmental organizations that make it difficult to identify the predominant types of trafficking.

For example, the U.S. State Department estimates that approximately 600,000 – 800,000 persons are trafficked across international borders annually.² However, the International Labour Organization^a (ILO) estimates that there are 2.45 million people who are trafficked into forced labor every year.³ These variances are due to the different definitions of trafficking adopted by each entity, poor and inconsistent research methodologies, and unreliable data.^c The need for better data collection and reporting also underscores that it is difficult to identify forced sex work as the predominant type of trafficking.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SEX WORK

The United Nations Trafficking Protocol recognizes that not all forms of prostitution constitute human trafficking.⁴ However, the mainstream discourse on human trafficking often leads people to believe that forced sex work is the predominant type of trafficking even though many studies show that diverse forms of forced labor are also common, including domestic servitude, agricultural labor and sweatshop work. For

example, the International Labour Organization estimates that 43% of the cross-border and internal trafficking that occurred globally between 1995-2004 involved commercial sex acts, while the majority of forced labor involved domestic servitude, agricultural labor, sweatshop work, etc.⁵ Despite these statistics, a narrow perspective of human trafficking dominates newspaper articles, television news broadcasts, speeches by government officials and movies, leaving the general public to falsely believe that forced sex work is the predominant type of trafficking. In reality, a combined 47% of trafficked persons in the U.S. are forced into domestic servitude, agriculture labor, sweatshop factories, hotel work and servile marriages, and 46% of persons trafficked into the United States are forced into sex work.⁶ While it is important to address forced sex work, ignoring other types of trafficking erroneously prioritizes one type of exploitation over another.

NAPAWF recognizes that women and girls enter sex work because of their limited options, therefore we also believe in working towards the social and political empowerment of women and girls so they can seek opportunities other than sex work. If women's realities were different, women would 

a The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency that works to improve labor conditions throughout the world.

b NAPAWF adheres to the definition of human trafficking adopted in a United Nations convention commonly referred to as the Trafficking Protocol of 2000. A condensed U.N. definition of trafficking in persons is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of exploitation, such as enslavement, debt bondage, forced labor or the removal of organs. The U.S. government definition of human trafficking is listed in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. The term "severe forms of trafficking in persons" means - (A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery."

c In fact, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that only one staff member derived the U.S. State Department estimate, but did not document his process; therefore, it is uncertain whether this number can be replicated. (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 13 *Human Trafficking: Better Data, Strategy, and Reporting Needed to Enhance U.S. Antitrafficking Efforts Abroad*, July 2006.)

likely not be compelled to enter the sex industry. Accordingly, NAPAWF advocates for structural and systemic changes that advance and expand opportunities for women and girls. These changes cannot happen overnight; therefore, it is important to support the women currently in the commercial sex trade while the movement makes progress. Regardless of the legality of sex work, NAPAWF understands the importance of supporting sex workers as they confront issues affecting them currently, such as violence from clients and law enforcement and barriers to health care.

The reasons for entering sex work are complex and varied. They may include the traumatization of physical, sexual and substance abuse and oppressions inflicted by patriarchal social, economic and political systems, such as limited economic and educational opportunities. NAPAWF also recognizes that women and girls may be forced, deceived or coerced into commercial sex acts. However, we support women and girls in forced sex work to be liberated of their exploitative and abusive situation only if their liberation is safe, appropriate and implemented in a way that maintains their integrity and dignity. It is critical that these liberation models do not adopt a ‘savior’ mentality, but is centered on the needs of the survivor.

NAPAWF’S POSITION ON HUMAN TRAFFICKING & SEX WORK

The National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (NAPAWF) is committed to the advancement of social justice and human rights for all Asian and Pacific Islander women and girls. A critical component of social justice and human rights is an individual’s human right to make decisions that, given her circumstances, best meet her needs. NAPAWF supports a woman’s decision to enter sex work as a means of sustaining herself and her family. We are opposed to the exploitation of women, and recognize that ‘prostitution’ is grounded in patriarchal and sexist beliefs. However, we recognize sex work as a form of women’s labor within the context of her social, cultural, economic and political realities. We believe that if women and girls lived free from poverty and had access to broad economic

and educational opportunities, then they would likely not be involved in the sex trade. Therefore, NAPAWF places emphasis on changing social, cultural, economic and political systems and challenging socialization patterns to broaden a woman’s range of economic opportunities.

NAPAWF firmly believes that human trafficking and sex work are not inherently connected, even though some cases of human trafficking involve forced sex work. Indeed, both trafficking and sex work are rooted in poverty, sexism, racism, heterosexism, violence, militarism, civil unrest and limited educational and economic opportunities.

Because of the U.S. government’s promotion of anti-prostitution policies, its tendency to conflate human trafficking and sex work, and the deep-seated influence of the conservative religious lobby, NAPAWF is compelled to take a position against what we believe are ineffective, harmful and polarizing government policies. We realize that many organizations support our position, but cannot speak against these policies because of the risk of losing government funding. Instead, NAPAWF seeks to redirect advocacy efforts towards broader discussions that attempt to address the multiple and complex factors that have led to the proliferation of human trafficking.

We seek partnerships with organizations that share our philosophy around decision-making and dignity and understand the social, cultural, economic and political realities of women who are engaged in the commercial sex trade. We make a conscientious effort to avoid collaborations with organizations that disagree with our core ideology around human trafficking.

NAPAWF stands in solidarity with women who identify sex work as their labor, and works towards creating a society where women and girls are free from social, economic, and political oppression. ♀

For more information, or a more in-depth analysis of human trafficking in the U.S., please read “Rights to Mobility & Survival,” NAPAWF’s anti-trafficking action agenda.

- 1 Jyoti Sanghera, “Unpacking the Trafficking Discourse.” (Ed) Kamala Kempadoo, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*. 2005, Paradigm Publishers. Boulder, CO.
- 2 U.S. Department of State, 6 *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2006).
- 3 International Labour Office, 4 *ILO Minimum Estimate of Forced Labour in the World* (April 2005).
- 4 Civil Society Response to the Press Release by the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Ms. Sigma Huda, on the occasion of the International Day on the Elimination of Violence against Women issued November 24, 2006
- 5 United States Government Accountability Office, 12 “Human Trafficking: Better Data, Strategy, and Reporting Needed to Enhance U.S. Antitrafficking Efforts Abroad,” (2006).
- 6 Free the Slaves and Human Rights Center, University of California Berkeley, 14 *Hidden Slaves: Forced Labor in the United States* (Sept 2004).