

On The Wrong Side of Development: Human Trafficking for the Sex Trade along the Thai-Burmese Border

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The increase of human trafficking worldwide is a growing problem. Much of the trade's success is due to the integration of economies and the social formations resulting from uneven development and institutionalized greed. This paper outlines the root causes of the extensive trade in Burmese girls and women into Thailand for sex slavery. The entrenchment of human trafficking, the intransigence of governments in eradicating the trade, and the ineffectual efforts at international pressure all relate to the sex trade's inextricable position in international economic growth. We must remember that while economic development creates new wealth and expanding markets, it creates great poverty and lost opportunities for those on the periphery. The paper concludes that in the haze of NGO involvement, international human rights efforts, recriminations between countries, and government complicity, larger issues often get obscured. Trafficking is just one horrific example of the way in which the world does business.

Introduction

Human trafficking is on the rise. Not only is the slave trade expanding, it has become more efficient. Slaves have never before been as cheap as they are today, and profits are extraordinary (Bales, 2001). Much of the trade's success is due to the integration of economies and the social formations resulting from uneven development and institutionalized greed. This paper outlines the root causes of the extensive trade in Burmese¹ girls and women into Thailand and the reasons for its escalation in the 1990s.

The following six sections of this essay will lead one through the fundamentals of a very specific market of the sex industry; human trafficking² for the purpose of the enslavement of women into sex work. First, this paper discusses the origins and sustaining causes for the demand for sex workers and the industry's growing importance in Thailand. Second, it briefly highlights trends in globalization that result in a growing supply of young women susceptible to employment in exploitative forms of prostitution. Third, the paper expands upon the discussion of economic globalization's role in creating "supply" by taking a closer look at Burma's approach to border development. Fourth, it briefly illustrates the conditions of the girls and women who enter the trade and the factors that make it difficult for them to leave the cycle of forced prostitution once they have been engaged. Fifth, the paper describes current initiatives by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to stem the trafficking in women for sexual slavery and provide for their immediate needs. Sixth, it includes a discussion on the attempts to use international treaties and law to pressure governments to find solutions to the exploitative traffic in women. Finally, it concludes that in the haze of NGO involvement, international human rights efforts, recriminations between countries, and government complicity, larger issues often get obscured. Trafficking is just one horrific example of the way in which the world does business. Though enforced sexual slavery preys on marginalized girls and women, poverty is not the origin

of the problem but a facet of the greater causal process of economic development. Therefore, the conviction that economic progress leads to universal empowerment is a dangerous and false assumption that requires us to take a step back and view trafficking in a more nuanced paradigm of development.

Trafficking in Women along the Thai-Burmese-Border: Demand

The incident that many regard as Thailand's entrance into the global political economy was the country's signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855 (Morris, 2002). Not only was this the origin of Thailand's integration with networks of international trade, it also marked the beginning of its role as a host country for international sex slaves. As a result of the treaty, migrant laborers poured in from China followed by women and children who were recruited, often against their will, into Thailand for both marriage and sex work (Seabrook, 1996). From then on sex tourism and the concurrent underground market for sex slaves and prostitutes were continually refueled by the stimulus of global trade.

In 1967, the U.S. government created Rest and Recreation Areas for soldiers. The ensuing economic boom established tourism as one of Thailand's primary sources of foreign capital. With the diminishing importance of Rest and Recreation Areas, and with strong encouragement from Western nations and the World Bank, which viewed tourism as a way for Thailand to finance its agricultural development loans, the Thai government enacted measures to ensure that this economic sector remained strong. Thus, a thriving sex tourism industry became entrenched in the economy. In the 1970s, sex tourism helped spur rapid industrialization and the foundation of a market economy (Seabrook, 1996). Along with the economic liberalization policies of the 1970s, this led to the formation of an upper class with more disposable wealth to spend on entertainment. Accordingly, the market for sex workers broadened.

As the Asian economic crisis still looms over the

region, Thailand has become even more reliant on sex tourism at the expense of other sustainable development initiatives (Bishop & Robinson cited in Hai-Jew, 1998). Today, the domestic industry is enormous. A study conducted by the Chulalongkorn University Political Economy Center found that from 1993-95 prostitution accounted for two-thirds of Thailand's illegal income, an amount that represents 10 to 14% of the country's Gross National Product (GNP) (D'Cunha, 2002). It has been estimated that in Thailand prostitution employs more than a million women, girls, and boys, making it an occupation that represents almost two percent of the entire population (Tarapasso, 2000). Further, the multinational sex-tour industry in Thailand earns about \$26.2 billion a year (Leuchtag, 2003) and "involves a network of cozy relations between banks, airlines, tour operators, hotels, and bar and brothel owners and agents" (Leuchtag, 1995, p. 12).

Although economic and social changes that accompany globalization, such as those resulting from structural adjustment programs, the breakdown of rural economies, and the "feminization of poverty" (to be described below) push women into a variety of stigmatized and exploitative professions, trends in economic globalization also ensure that Thai women are less likely to enter the domestic sex trade. From the 1970s, many Thai sex workers, whether out of choice, circumstance, or coercion, were trafficked to wealthier regions in Asia, Europe, and North America (Biemann, 2002) where demand for foreign sex workers was rising. Further, with the establishment of a democratic government in 1992, Thailand embarked on a far-reaching campaign to eliminate child prostitution by prioritizing women's education. This initiative did not decrease demand for prostitutes - many Thai girls moved to other markets and brothels were forced to conduct business in a more secretive fashion. It also allowed for the increasing exploitation of those who chose to be prostitutes, now bound by employers because of their illegality and concealment. The above features of Thai economic development, the trade's naturally high turnover (Leuchtag, 2003), and aggressive marketing campaigns for sex tourism explain why the persistent demand for sex workers could not be met through the domestic market alone. The result is that still today girls are imported from surrounding areas, particularly Burma (Matsui, 1999).

The Supply

Economic globalization has also created the supply needed to support this market. Since the late 1970s, there have been four major trends in globalization: markets are becoming more important in determining policy at the expense of the state; poorer nations are relying more heavily on export-oriented means of growth; multinational corporations (MNCs) are developing wide-reaching networks of subcontractors; and, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have become an important facet of national policy (Pyle, 2001). Though these trends tend to

affect the prospects of various individuals in numerous ways, they have a disproportionately negative effect on marginalized groups. Women are most vulnerable due to their unequal status, the discrimination they face, the gender-based violence they are subject to, and their heavier burdens in the 'private' sphere. This "feminization of poverty," a phenomenon the International Labor Organization (ILO) described as, "one of the most striking economic and social phenomena of recent times," is most starkly evident among Asian countries (cited in Kempadoo, 1998, p. 17).

"Less-developed" nations are forced to comply with the rules of export-oriented growth by participating in the "wage race to the bottom" while world trade policies are making agricultural lifestyles no longer feasible. The low-paying jobs now available involve a form of employment often considered more exploitative than working directly in MNCs. They are provided by subcontractors in an industry that has become flexible and deregulated, employing laborers on a more casual basis. At the same time, SAPs and other conditions on international loans require substantial reductions in social welfare expenditures and public-sector employment. Women tend to concentrate in public-sector jobs and are also most likely to be burdened by the loss of social welfare payments. Faced with these circumstances, women are increasingly reliant on obtaining employment. At the same time, they are the preferred workers in manufacturing and the new burgeoning service sectors due to their vulnerability, acceptance of lower wages, perceived submissiveness, and assumed manual dexterity. This leads to the "feminization of labor" not just because women are more apt to take such employment, but the vulnerability and subjection characteristic of such employment is viewed as inherently feminine and thus emasculating (Nagar, Lawson, McDowell & Hanson, 2002). This sentiment originates in the social construction of women's work in a global economy. As Pyle notes, "women working in these sectors may be relatively invisible because much of what they do (domestic or sex work) is either undervalued or not considered 'work' and therefore not accounted for" (Pyle, 2001, p. 57). This invisibility is perhaps crucial; if governments were to acknowledge the exploitative occupations many women are confined to, they would also be forced to confront how their policies require cheap labor to sustain families and communities. In this manner, "the gendered processes that devalue certain waged jobs and certain groups of workers...serve to underwrite and constitute globalization" (Nagar *et al.*, 2002, p. 263).

Often one's choices for employment domestically are either insufficient to make ends meet or less desirable than work elsewhere. Therefore, women choose to migrate for better opportunities, which are often limited to manufacturing, domestic service, or sex work. The increasing participation of women in international movements of labor has led to the "feminization of international migration". Currently, women compose

almost half of the 120 million estimated migrants worldwide. Further, unlike migratory movements prior to the 1980s, a growing number of women are choosing to migrate alone, without their families (ILO, 1998). This increases their vulnerability to violence and other forms of discrimination, partly because they are often socially constructed as individuals of the private sphere and thus looking for labor in the public sphere can be seen by some to “provoke” sexual assault (Pettman, 1996).

Concurrently, economic development schemes meant to thrust “developing nations” towards growth have prioritized large, expensive projects. The most popular among them include those for water supply, infrastructure, transportation, and energy, ventures which constitute some of the leading causes for development-induced displacement. The World Bank has estimated that every year since 1990, infrastructural projects alone have accounted for the involuntary displacement of 10 million people. Though informal policies exist within international lending institutions to minimize this trend and ensure the protection of those removed, development-induced displacement is expanding globally (Robinson, 2003). And, it is the impoverished and marginalized who are the most seriously affected, particularly women. Even for those who are resettled, prospects are slim and a great majority are forced to look for work elsewhere. In just three years, from 1997 to 2000, the UNHCR notes that the number of officially recognized Burmese refugees in Thailand rose from 140,000 to 216,000 (Hyndman, 2002). These trends coincide with infrastructure, water, and energy projects commenced in border areas during this period. Unfortunately, Burma’s growth model relies more and more heavily on development-induced displacement, constituting a major impetus for migration. In a similar, though less insidious manner, Thailand’s rural areas are also undergoing commercialization. As rural economies collapse, farmers are forced to relinquish their lands to the pressures of development and speculation. The lack of adequate compensation they receive in exchange compels them to move to the cities or international markets.

Government Complicity in Trafficking

Although capital is encouraged to move freely across borders in globalizing regions, and the resulting technologies and economic circumstances increase the incentives and means to migrate, restrictions on immigration are becoming more stringent. This creates a number of problems. First, laws concerning migration neglect to take into account the way in which the transborder economy restructures regional identity. Minority groups on both sides of international boundaries have strong ties that negate the presence of borders. This is compounded by the fact that they live a peripheral existence (Matsui, 1999). Second, immigration laws that purport to combat trafficking end up deepening it as organized crime becomes one of the only options for crossing borders. Without stemming the stimulus for migration, governments have merely made one’s journey

more dangerous and their prospects on arrival more precarious. Those that migrate become disempowered; as their movements and labor are rendered illegal, they lose their options for recourse in the case of abuse. Additionally, they are no longer offered the protection of their home countries as embassies’, “responsibility to safeguard their citizen’s interest is compromised by a concern to maintain the wider trade and aid from these richer states” (Pettman, 1996, p.191). The lack of legitimate means to cross borders is exacerbated by poverty; without the funds to migrate, many become debt-bound upon reaching their destinations. Women are particularly disadvantaged. They are barred from many official avenues for migration due to cultural, legal, and policy norms that privilege the legal migration of males and because of their lack of education and information about safer channels. As a result, women today are more likely than men to utilize trafficking networks (ILO, 1998).

The reasons that many migrants are considered illegal, without recognition of the unique physical and sociopolitical placement of borders or the circumstances from which they fled, is entirely political and economic. Many of the sending governments have come to depend on remittances. They also have a security interest in ensuring that large, disenfranchised and impoverished populations find other sources of livelihood. Thailand in fact has a bureau specifically tasked with promoting the exportation of labor (ILO, 1998). Further, the cross-border economic collaboration between nations frequently requires movements of labor. Burma is reluctant to address the issue of out-migration because many of its development projects entail development-induced displacement. Similarly, Thailand does not want to admit that Burmese refugees and migrants are a problem as this would jeopardize their trade agreements in the areas where displacement occurs. If Thailand and Burma were to decriminalize migrants they would endow them with a status that confers fundamental human rights. This endangers cross-border development, for in order to exploit the border regions it is necessary to acquire homelands, seize control over local resources, and enslave labor. In other words, “there is a transnational trade (off) in which human rights and asylum are exchanged for lucrative access to natural gas and other national resources” (Hyndman, 2002, p. 39).

There is also considerable resistance to combating the specific trade in sex trafficking. According to one Thai official, a crackdown is unlikely because it would threaten all border investment (Asia Watch, 1993). The natural gas pipelines on the Thai-Burmese border, involving investment from the UNOCAL Corporation and Total Inc., along with the trade in other natural resources, are integral to Thai-Burmese border development schemes. The criminal syndicates operating the trade in border resources are also those that traffic women into sex work, and their economic relationships to the governments of Burma and Thailand are apparent at all levels. The

integrated nature of these activities makes it impossible to regulate one without hindering the others. Another significant reason for the ease with which women are trafficked, the intransigence to eradicate sexual slavery, and the abuse with which it is carried out is the complicity of local police and government officers. These officials are well positioned to assist in the transport, capture, or arrest of sex slaves while avoiding implicating brothel owners or pimps. Their wages are overwhelmingly low and the money they can earn from collecting bribes or even by being the brokers or traffickers of women themselves is a strong inducement to facilitate this exploitation.

More on Supply: The Case of Burma

The issues described above are central to understanding the incredible push factors in Burma that create supply for the trade in women and girls. First, like Thailand, Burma's initiation of economic liberalization policies, particularly since 1991, has created uneven economic growth that has resulted in the marginalization of those already on the periphery, particularly women. Second, Burma's development model relies upon flexible and casual labor that is employed not merely on low wages, but on no wages at all. Third, the development of infrastructure provides the means for people to seek more promising opportunities in Thailand. Fourth, the avenues chosen for development often involve displacement. Fifth, the overwhelmingly illicit nature of border trade increases the importance of criminal networks. Finally, the lack of rights accorded to minority communities on Burma's borders, whether they are regarded as citizens, migrants, or even refugees, leaves them with few choices and little security. This is especially true for women.

In 1988, in response to the seizure of power by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), Western investors pulled out of Burma while foreign aid was halted entirely. A previously isolationist society now pushed itself deeper into trade relations with ASEAN members focusing on non-renewable resource extraction (a relationship that lasted until 1997) (South, 2003). This included policies of economic liberalization and the ambitious development of shared border regions with Thailand, which continue unabated today. From this period on, disadvantaged populations have been subject to forms of exploitation linked to a growth model that, similar to Thailand's, yields to the pressures of economic globalization, favoring urban over rural and industry over agriculture. In addition, rural people have been coerced into accommodating largely arbitrary tax increases while Burma's spending on social services such as health and education continues to fall (Mills, 2000). Concurrently, more specific policies targeted at border populations have compounded the economic marginalization of the minority populations that live in these communities. The border trade in natural resources had been strong for decades, but was controlled by insurgents. The government intends to control the trade themselves in order to gain foreign exchange while padding the

salaries of soldiers and civil servants (Smith, 1999), weakening insurgent bases and fueling their military regime. Investment from Thailand, as well as from select multinational corporations, has enabled them to secure this trade.

As history has shown us elsewhere, there is a clear correlation between systems of transnational economic integration and the dislocation of affected populations (Hyndman, 1998). On the Thai-Burmese border, human trafficking fits neatly into this pattern. Five main characteristics of regional development initiatives illustrate how the escalation of migration, and thus sexual slavery, has direct roots in Burma's post-1988 economic border development programs. The first characteristic facilitates trans-border movements, the next two illustrate the strong inducements for migration, and the fourth and fifth factors relate to the importance of the illegality of regional trade to Burma.

First, border development spurred the construction of important transborder infrastructure, specifically roads and bridges, which account for 61% of the expenditures on border area development (Lambrecht, 2000). These are of substantial logistical importance to the trafficking of goods and migrants. Second, this infrastructure is still built by populations that are not only subjected to abuse, reaching genocidal proportions at times, but are also mobilized as slave labor for Burma's economic endeavors. Residents are "taxed" for development projects initiated in their communities, which rarely provide local resources. To avoid payment, workers are forced into unpaid labor under brutal conditions. They are often denied food rations and at the same time cannot tend to subsistence farming. The U.S. State Department determined that between 1996 and 1998, more than five million unpaid laborers have worked on infrastructural projects in Burma; such practices still continue to this day and are notably worse in the border regions (Lambrecht, 2000).

Third, with economic liberalization and resultant restrictions on options in the formal economy and in agriculture, many border communities rely on opportunities in the informal sector, namely resource extraction. The government is also reliant on resource extraction and seeks to initiate projects for hydro-electric power, oil extraction, mining, and timber. To procure these assets, Burma conducts massive relocation schemes, often without adequate opportunities for resettlement, launched in the name of border development. Subsequent to an order to vacate, abandoned communities become "free fire zones" where soldiers treat those who remain as "enemies of the state" (Lambrecht, 2000). Additionally, Burma is continuing its ruthless crusade to subdue the minority populations on the border, especially those conducting insurgencies. Many find Thailand's lack of pressure to end this subjugation as evidence of collusion between both governments for mutual economic benefit (Menon, 1997; Sae-Tang & Meena Sancho, 2000). In fact, it is widely believed that Thai business and military elites struck deals with Burmese officials allowing the latter

to conduct night-time raids against insurgents hiding in Thailand (Smith, 1999).

Fourth, with the stabilization of the area and the decimation of insurgents, cease-fire agreements were arranged to give Burma and Thailand more control over trade in the region (Smith, 1999), allowing for the expansion of illicit trafficking (Mills, 2000). For example, U.S. and British intelligence reports estimate that since the 1988 coup and subsequent cease-fires, Burma's production of opium has doubled (South, 2003). This has implications for the human trafficking industry as the organizations that traffic drugs are the same as those that traffic humans, and both "commodities" are transported along the same routes.

Fifth, border development in Burma and Thailand relies upon the illegal nature of its goods and the illegitimate practices of its merchants to prosper. In 1998, the value of Burma's informal economy was equal to the combined value of all legal exports (South, 2003), and the extra-legal economy is growing, both in cease-fire and conflict areas (Lanjouw & Bamforth, 2000). Even if the Burmese government mustered considerable will to end sex slavery, the task would not be easy, as human trafficking fits neatly into and is integrated with the pattern of regional trade.

Thus success of these policies is clear. Human Rights Watch notes that prior to these "development projects" and border campaigns, minority groups fleeing the region often returned during the rainy season, when hostilities died down. Now, the movements are more permanent, and involve far greater numbers. It is estimated that between 1988 and 2000 more than 500,000 ethnic minorities have migrated to neighboring countries (Lambrecht, 2000). The opportunities provided by a booming sex tourism industry next door, compounded by the poverty and abuse of being at the wrong end of development, and influenced by the logistical ease at which one can cross borders, all served to thrust marginalized populations into the supply stream of migrants.

Options for employment in Thailand are not always entirely unpleasant. Although working conditions are most often exploitative, in light of conditions described above, they can be more bearable than one's options domestically. The promise of jobs leads not only to the exploitation of labor, but to the exploitation of hope as well. Illicit "prostitution" brokers manipulate the situation by offering girls various jobs when in fact they intend to enslave them. Even when they are told that they will be prostitutes, many do not fully understand what this means or are not aware of the conditions of employment and the near impossibility of returning home or remitting salary (an important aspect of decisions to migrate) (Asia Watch, 1993).

Conditions for Women

It is estimated that there are 35,000 brothel slaves in Thailand alone (Leuchtag, 2003). Another source

approximates that 40,000 Burmese women and girls are forced into sex slavery in Thai brothels (Sae-Tang & Meena Sancho, 2000). It is also estimated that the numbers of Thai women being trafficked are increasing by 10,000 a year (Feingold cited in Lawrence, 2001). Even more disturbing, UNICEF estimates that 30-35% of sex workers in the Mekong region are between 12 and 17 years old and therefore in this region there are approximately 1 million children who have been victimized by the sex trade (Frankel, 2001).

There are five ways in which someone can find themselves in the trafficking ring for sex slavery. First, a woman, girl, or a parent is approached by a broker who offers her a job as a housekeeper, restaurant worker, factory worker, or sex worker. The broker will then pay the parents or a local recruiter an amount between \$200-\$1000 US. The girl or woman is then taken across the border and sold to a brothel owner. In a second case, the girl or woman is looking for work as a prostitute, and a broker ensures help in finding it, but lies about the conditions of employment. Third, a broker abducts her. Fourth, in traveling to look for labor, a girl or woman is offered a job usually in the occupations noted previously. Finally, one sees the use of traffickers as her only option for migration and thus willingly utilizes the networks. In all of these cases she is taken to a brothel where she is enslaved, earning the broker a sizeable profit. Considering the danger, expense, and illegality of migrating, these women are often willing to take the risk; navigating the borders alone is not safe as one can be stolen, raped, abused, and arrested along the way (Belak, 2000).

Once these girls and women arrive at the brothel, they find themselves bound by debt. One's debt includes any money paid to parents or an authority figure, the amount given to the broker for her or his services, the fees in crossing the border, bribes paid, funds for clothes and make-up, and food and other living expenses. The debt incurred is multiplied many times over as "interest", bringing profits to the brothels of up to 800% (Bales, 2001). Girls and women are told that they will be free to leave the brothel when their debt has been paid off. Still, most do not know what their debt is and cannot calculate when they are free to go.

They are bound by more than just debt. Trafficked girls and women from Burma occupy the lowest tier of sex workers because of their presence in more down-market establishments, their perceived lack of free will, their minority status (Anderson & Davidson, 2003), and their vulnerability. Such a status not only ensures that they are more likely to be exploited, but that they are more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as well. It is estimated that 50 to 70% of Burmese girls who are trafficked into sex workers have HIV/AIDS (deDios, 1999). They are also exposed to other forms of physical and emotional abuse. In Ranon, a popular destination for Burmese girls, many brothels are actually surrounded by barbed and live wire (Matsui, 1999). Some girls are also subject to physical violence on a regular basis and are

frightened of the repercussions if caught trying to leave. If they do escape, they can be resold to other brothels where their debt bondage begins anew. If caught by the police a number of equally negative scenarios might transpire. The officers might recognize the girl and send her back to her brothel where she will be punished. Even worse, they might arrest her as an immigrant. In jail or designated housing centers there is the chance that she will face rape and other forms of abuse before being sent home.

If deported these girls and women confront far more serious challenges. UNHCR strongly notes the, “well-founded fear of persecution,” awaiting them on return (cited in South, 2003, p. 235). In addition to the legal implications of their criminal status, trafficked women face social stigma, especially those who have contracted HIV/AIDS. Therefore, brokers are oftentimes tipped off to deportations and are waiting at the border when they arrive. For both women who have paid their debts and for those that are about to be repatriated, the lack of economic opportunities at home, the insecurity of the region, the fear of rejection at home, the likelihood of being of being abducted and resold, the conditions of forced labor, rape, abuse, and other forms of persecution that await them in Burma frequently convince them to reenter the trade.

In the Interim: NGO Intervention

In order to prevent trafficking, the United Nations Platform of Action lists four necessary initiatives: increasing international and NGO cooperation to care for victims, disseminating educational programs, punishing perpetrators (both customers and suppliers), and dismantling the trafficking network (Matsui, 1999). Although in many cases international cooperation is coalescing far too slowly, NGOs have taken strides in addressing each of these four needs.

In order to alleviate the immediate circumstances of trafficked women, many international and local NGOs are being requested to provide humanitarian assistance, such as shelters, health care, and basic subsistence. Although Burma is adamantly against such proposals, Thailand allows for limited intervention. However, it is reluctant to condone international refugee assistance, since doing so would jeopardize trade relations with Burma. Therefore, since 1997 Thailand has denied the entrance of asylum seekers and since 1999 has been actively deporting Burmese migrants, even those with asylum claims (Hyndman, 2002). Although this does not bode well for the rights of migrants, progress is slowly being made with the effort of NGOs.

Educational initiatives are also expanding throughout the region. Although some of these programs provide general training or small, microeconomic projects, they are insufficient to have a great impact. Much more prevalent are organizations that focus on the problem of HIV/AIDS contraction among sex workers. Despite the severity of risk in the region, there are difficulties in

launching extensive programs. To retain its aggressive sex-tourism industry, the Thai government has gone so far as to discourage overt forms of AIDS education aimed at tourists (Morris, 2002), and has declined to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic for similar reasons (Leuchtag, 2003). Fortunately, NGOs in Thailand are relatively free to conduct HIV/AIDS programs, and although still inadequate, the growth of such programs in a climate of urgency is making some headway. In Burma, options are considerably more limited. Historically, NGOs have not been able to reach the Burmese to any significant extent because of language and literacy barriers as well as government refusal. In fact, until recently Burma prohibited HIV/AIDS education (Belak, 2000; Sivaraman, 1997). Radio programs such as those run by UNESCO are breaking these barriers by broadcasting on radio waves that can be reached in Burmese minority areas. Broadcasts are run in minority languages and target young girls who are in danger of being trafficked into sex work. Medecins Du Monde, Save the Children, the Myanmar Red Cross, and the Myanmar Maternal and Child Health Association also operate HIV/AIDS and trafficking education programs. They have all shown success in filling a dire need but gaining access to Burmese women remains a problem.

One of the biggest difficulties faced by those wanting to provide assistance to trafficked sex workers is the latter's categorization as illegal migrants. Under the Burmese Immigration and Manpower Act, all Burmese that have illegally migrated out of the country are subject to arrest. Furthermore, prostitution is illegal in Burma, regardless of the conditions of employment or the country in which it occurred. Former prostitutes can avoid prosecution only upon paying bribes that are almost always cost prohibitive (Arnold & Bertone, 2002). Although the Thai government has worked with various advocacy groups to ensure that trafficked migrant women in Thailand are treated as victims rather than criminals, this is only slowing being incorporated into practice (Arnold & Bertone, 2002; Dairiam, 2002). Thailand has also signed an agreement with Burma stipulating that women reentering Burma will be free from prosecution but this accord has not been fully respected either. Therefore, some NGOs are working closely with the judicial and policing systems in order to provide legal security and physical safety while ensuring that the perpetrators and not the victims are punished. This is a daunting task since, as noted above, trafficking flourishes through government complicity.

TRAFCORD is a network of NGOs in Thailand that strives to protect women from all forms of physical abuse, including trafficking. As they have been largely unsuccessful at tackling the corrupt police force, they decided to take on some policing duties themselves. Previously, during raids, police officers arrested women and either resold them to the brothels or deported them. After the decriminalization of prostitution in Thailand in 1996-97, TRAFCORD began to train police officers

to work with them in enacting a step-by-step procedure to protect trafficked women upon their “rescue”. This organization then offers assistance to victims who wish to press charges (Arnold & Bertone, 2002). Similarly, the Fight against Child Prostitution (FACE) works directly with Thai police officers to increase their awareness of laws that protect these girls and to guarantee that they are followed. By becoming involved in raids on brothels, and continuing the process by following subsequent court proceedings, they are also able to use their presence as a shaming mechanism if abuse occurs. Such NGOs can also help officials determine whether women in custody are prostitutes or slaves, and if they would like to be helped. Although these techniques are highly promising, there are few concrete indicators available to measure results (Arnold & Bertone, 2002). Certainly, because of new partnerships between NGOs and law enforcement officials, and the increased visibility of the latter’s practices, detention is less harsh than it once was (Montlake, 2003).

There are still other organizations working to ensure that the proper individuals face prosecution. However, programs such as FACE that track and prosecute foreigners who engage in sex with underage girls show potential but still face government apathy (Arnold & Bertone, 2002). More importantly, arrests of tourists who visit brothels and rape underage girls has ameliorated the abuse of Thai girls but has not hindered the importation of other girls from Burma (Brooke, 2001). Inhibiting new avenues for demand, for example in the internet sale of brides, is a first step but is not sufficient. In trying to target the source by dismantling trafficking networks, one faces far greater difficulties as, “human trafficking syndicates are closely linked to crime networks involving drugs and gun trafficking, car thefts, and immigration crime, smuggling of migrants, visa and passport counterfeiting and money laundering” (Raymond, 2002, p. 57). Although the international community has begun to more aggressively target crime rings, additional problems have arisen. In focusing too heavily on criminal prosecution, without recognizing the rights of those who testify, trafficked women become exposed to unjustifiable vulnerability. The act of testifying is risky for a woman and her family, and the incentives to do so are often transitory and insufficient. Removing the means to migrate does little to ameliorate the circumstances of those who depend on the option.

Despite educational programs that offer a greater understanding of the consequences and dangers of becoming a sex worker, women will continue seeking employment in exploitative labor and demand will accommodate them. Legal protection and humanitarian assistance for victims and the official regulation of the trade can control its worst abuses, but are unable to hinder recruitment (Douglas, 1999). Dismantling trafficking networks by targeting organized crime offers a potentially greater solution but only tackles the issue of migration, and not the impetus for migration. It is

only when factors such as gender-based violence, the devaluation of women and their labor, the circumstances of women in globalizing economies, and development-induced displacement are taken into account that one has begun to stop the trade. Looking to eradicate these impulses will require a far more concerted effort on the part of the international community.

Recourse in International Pressure

Using diplomatic means to solve fundamental problems in supply and demand for human trafficking is frustrating. The 1950 UN Convention on the Suppression in Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution of Others appears too outdated for appropriate application. More recently, in the 2000 Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, members adopted the Revised draft Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. Although the latter appears to make organized crime more difficult to carry out, its full results remain unknown. Further, the signing of this document might actually impede human rights. Nations could apply the Protocol as a substitute for other international documentation concerning migrants, like those of the International Labour Organization (ILO), that explicitly uphold human rights. This would enable those that ratify the Protocol to tighten immigration restrictions while failing to protect migrants (Taran, 2000). This illustrates that even though international laws to combat trafficking exist there is still a lack of resolve to tackle more fundamental issues.

International organizations that generate humanitarian laws find that their suggestions are superficially heeded, but in practice routinely ignored. Burma’s military regime is remarkably insensitive to the basic needs of its population and, as demonstrated above, is highly reliant on the exploitation of border populations and resources. Threats by countries that are pressured to pull investment out of Burma are either disregarded, or simply humored. Further, the extraction of Western businesses serves only to deepen the illicit nature of border trade. It seems that Burma is becoming more audacious by signing documents they do not intend to uphold. For example, Burma’s State Peace and Development Council signed the Convention against All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997. Along with other relevant stipulations, article 6 specifically requires States to take measures to suppress trafficking in women and the exploitation of prostitution. When Burma presented their initial CEDAW report in 2000, it was evident that no progress had been made (Belak, 2000). Discrimination against women might have actually been aggravated by the intensification of repressive economic policies that disproportionately affect women. Calling for labor regulation is equally futile. According to the ILO, by 1999 Burma still utilized 800,000 forced laborers. Subsequently, Burma put an official ban on forced labor but did not eradicate the practice (South, 2003).

With less impunity than Burma, Thailand also

neglects to fully enforce international laws meant to dampen trafficking. Thailand's endorsement of the 1928 Anti-Trafficking laws, CEDAW in 1985, and the Measures in Prevention and Suppression of Trafficking in Women and Children Act in 1997 has, in theory, made it illegal to prosecute women for being trafficked. However, these measures were not enforced until 1997 and still do not apply to migrants because of current immigration laws. To try to reverse this policy, NGOs in the region signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Thai police force. Essentially it states that Thai women and children who are trafficked are to be considered "victims" and repatriated in a humane manner, with the assistance of NGOs. Unfortunately, as noted above, local police forces have resisted this agreement (Arnold & Bertone, 2002). Thailand also enacted laws to enforce the prosecution of brothel owners and the customers of child prostitutes, as well as the government officials and police officers involved. In June 2002, the U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report stated that, "there have been no recorded arrests of police or military officials," for violating the Trafficking protocol (cited in Haugen, 2002, p. A23). There have been some token arrests of brothel owners and customers since then, but this is not evidence of real change, merely evidence of propaganda.

Part of the reason that international demands do not oblige concerted action is that economic partners are willing to support delinquents. For example, in 2000 the U.S. Government began to draft their TIP report, as cited above, to determine how well governments had done in meeting U.S. standards on eradicating trafficking. Unfortunately, the report has been used as a political exercise; important U.S. economic partners have received favorable status regardless of their records. When drafting international law, wealthy nations tend to portray themselves as leaders while ignoring their own involvement in the sex trade as, for example, in the direct connection between global centers of prostitution and their origins in servicing U.S. military bases (Leuchtag, 1995). Such claims to leadership also cloud the United States' lack of domestic efforts against illicit sex work. Although evidence is scarce, some believe that the United States is becoming a popular destination for trafficked women because of enhanced communications networks, specifically the internet. The International Matchmaking Organization estimated that mail-order bride companies alone sell between 2,000 and 6,000 women into marriages in the United States a year (cited in Raymond, 2002). Furthermore, in the United States the average age of entering prostitution is between 13 and 14 years old (Douglas, 1999), a clear indicator of the coercive nature of sex work there. In fact, UNICEF reports that there are 300,000 prostitutes under the age of 18 in the United States, a figure which accounts for more than the United States' estimates of the numbers of young girls working in prostitution throughout Asia (Murray, 1998).

Additionally, international laws, regulations, and humanitarian norms do not always address the crucial

problems in appropriate ways. Measures to eradicate trafficking in humans, particularly the trafficking of women into sexual slavery, will require an effort on the part of the international community to review its laws and policies on migration, and erase the stigma and illegality attached to migrants and refugees. States tend to be reluctant to sign onto international treaties that protect the human rights of migrants. Though there is significant cooperation on migration policies, the focus remains on, "migrant control measures...monitoring migration, strengthening border controls, combating organized crime and returning migrants" (Taran, 2000, p. 12). Clearly, strict immigration laws and the lack of protections afforded migrants empower traffickers and increase the risk of exploitation during the journey and in the country of destination (Anderson & Davidson, 2003; Kempadoo, 1998; Murray, 1998; Taran, 2000). Moreover, none of the above policies on migration take a strong stance towards alleviating the circumstances of migrants, who would most often prefer to stay within their original borders if economic opportunities and safety were secured.

Finally, when discussing international laws against trafficking, the role of socioeconomic factors in pushing women into these networks often remains a peripheral issue. Inroads in combating the trafficking of women into coercive prostitution and sex slavery must deal with the consequences of economic globalization as well as the societal constructions of women which incorporate their labor in increasingly marginalized ways. Although most states recognize the rights of refugees, they do not recognize the rights of migrants (Taran, 2000). Perhaps this is because in making an issue of those whose social and economic rights have been revoked through the process of globalization, nations will be forced to turn the discussion to the way in which their own economic practices foster uneven development. Despite the ratification of CEDAW by 177 countries, the immediate and very material consequences of discrimination against women are often seen as an issue apart from trafficking, migration, and the downside of development. Solutions that call for the increased incorporation of women into development are misguided. Development as presently conceived, "is already dependent on women's work as cheap labor, in informal and subsistence sectors, in household work and community care" (Pettman, 1996, p. 176). Efforts to combat trafficking must take into account how the social construction of women devalues their labor, places them in subordinate social roles, disadvantages them economically, and thus restricts their options in a global economy that has failed them and their families. Accordingly, real change will require the international community to review their own paradigms of development.

This does not imply that the drafting of international laws as a method of pressuring governments should be discontinued. Some even believe that "the very process of signing itself has served an educational function and

provides support for women's rights activism" (Edwards & Roces, 2000, p. 7). These tactics can also function as a shaming mechanism for countries wishing to be perceived as modern. In time, they might also hold more and more weight in international governance. This discussion only suggests that international agreements have limitations, require a long time frame, and require activists and lobbyists to direct attention to the most appropriate issues.

Conclusion

Sex trafficking flourishes in international spaces that are steeped in illegal trade, whose borders have become porous, and whose people are conditioned by their marginality and displacement. The simplistic assumption that poverty is the root of the problem can cloud the role of government in choosing to direct economic strategies that stimulate the trade while failing to reverse social patterns that disenfranchise and subordinate women. Development initiatives employing structural adjustment policies, a favoring of the urban over the rural, export-oriented growth, and the abuse and neglect of the population disproportionately disadvantage women and restrict their choices for survival. Policies that inhibit the movements of migrants, deeming them criminal, only serve to deepen the importance of illegal networks and the vulnerability of those reliant upon them. Obviously, this trend is heightened by growth policies that encourage sex tourism. We cannot discount the formal practice of cultivating legal and illegal sex industries in the name of economic growth. Not only is such development often initiated through the exploitation of others, but also the concentrated wealth created drives a cycle that causes further exploitation through demand.

When formulating solutions to this complex problem, relying solely upon international law, the legitimacy of UN Declarations, and the good faith of governments that are ostensibly compliant to humanitarian imperatives, detracts from our fundamental challenge. What must eventually be dealt with is how the market for sex is met. "The sex trade is exactly that: supply and demand: a perfect paradigm for the market economy" (Seabrook, 1996, p. 129). The development policies that find themselves enacted on the Thai-Burmese border are one view into a process of globalization in which too often the wealthy few sustain themselves on the impoverishment of many others. Although small steps are necessary and sweeping international laws and regulations important for focus, the true root of this tragedy stems from the consequence of perverted greed in a global economy.

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End Notes

¹ In 1989, the military regime officially renamed the country the Union of Myanmar. Many chose to refer to the country under its previous name, Burma, as I do throughout this paper.

² The definition of trafficking used here is that of the November 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, or fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation (in particular, labor and sexual exploitation

Therefore, trafficking differs from other practices, such as smuggling, in that the latter term merely refers to a practice of assisting illegal migration. Though it might also lead to the abuse of migrants, it does not connote the kind of exploitation that results by definition from trafficking.