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Is Human Sex Trafficking Synonymous with Voluntary Sex Work?

What is Human Sex Trafficking? What is prostitution? Are these two roles in the sex industry different or they the same? These are only a few of the questions that are important to understanding the sex industry on a global scale. Human Sex trafficking is a very real social issue that spans the length of the globe, occurring in countries on every continent. Often times, when the public thinks about human sex trafficking, it is assumed that it does not take place in the same continent, same state, same city, even the same town. The reality is that the trafficking of males and females into the sex industry occurs much more frequently and much closer to home than one might think. This brings me to distinguishing the difference between human sex trafficking and voluntary sex work. Definitions of human trafficking and prostitution vary from country to country, where definitions range from being very broad to others being limited. For example, I will compare the United States of America to Thailand. The United States has a very broad definition of human trafficking that does not differentiate human trafficking from voluntary sex work and prostitution. Yet, Thailand considers prostitution a legitimate job choice; the sex industry is even well regulated and seen as a way to bring merit to one’s family.

 When evaluating the sex industry and creating definitions of human sex trafficking and prostitution, it is necessary to take into consideration the differing cultures around the globe. The United States Department of State publishes an annual *Trafficking in Persons Report (TIPS Report)*, which rates countries by their “efforts to combat human trafficking” (Peach 2011:66). This anti-sex trafficking policy promotes “that prostitution and other forms of sex work must be eliminated as ‘inherently harmful and dehumanizing’” (Peach 2011:66). This is problematic when imposing a Western policy on non-western countries, for they have differing cultural attitudes towards sex work and human trafficking. Similarly, Shelley (2011:38) states that the United Nations’ convention and protocols also fail to differentiate “between women who are trafficked and women who engage in voluntary sex work.” Therefore, both of these authors warn against the use of an umbrella definition when defining human sex trafficking and imposing anti-sex trafficking policy, for a one-size-fits-all policy is not adequate.

 Another problematic aspect of the United States anti-sex trafficking policy is the rescue raids into other countries to save women who work in brothels and other places of sex business. The intention is to save anyone who is being forced to work in the sex trade against their will, but these raids also affect women who voluntarily chose this career. There are countless incidences where rescue missions are orchestrated where undercover officers visit bars, brothels, and places of sex business. In one instance a raid in Thailand rescued “forty-three women and girls… [but in one month’s time] a total of twenty-four girls and women had run away from their ‘rescuers’” (Peach 2011:74). From the example of the sex trade in Thailand, we see that there are important traditions and complex attitudes towards prostitution that need to be taken into consideration before having an Western-influenced policy imposed on foreign countries. To move forward, towards making a better policy, policy makers should learn more about the sex industry in different cultures so that they can see how being culturally sensitive to social issues can benefit everyone.