

Stop Sex Trafficking of Filipino Women and Children!

A Primer on Sex Trafficking

INTRODUCTION

Sex trafficking is nothing new. It has been in existence since ancient civilization when women and children in great numbers were traded in marketplace. They did not only end up as plantation or domestic slaves, many also became sex-slaves to their masters.

Presently, the number of women and children who fall prey to the sex trade, within and outside the country, continues to rise through sex-trafficking. The current Philippine government under President Joseph Estrada has turned a blind eye to its existence. Sex trafficking is little known or understood by Filipinos, men and women alike. What is sex trafficking? Why does it persist? These are the questions this primer will try to answer.

What is sex trafficking?

Sex trafficking is the transport of people, often women and children, from one place to another within and across borders for sex trade and sexual exploitation. In most cases victims were forced into the sex trade by use of threat, intimidation and deception. The victims, wittingly or unwittingly, end up in prostitution.

Who usually become victims of sex-trafficking?

According to the research of Women Education Development Productivity Research Organization (WEDPRO), the victims of sex trafficking are usually women and children from poor families in rural and urban areas with little or no education and with limited skills and knowledge.

A study by Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CARW) revealed that a large number of women victims of sex-trafficking are single or single mothers, women who have experienced sexual abuse and exploitation or had been in unsuccessful marriages and /or abusive relationships.

Why does the problem of sex-trafficking exist and persist in the Philippines?

As poverty worsens and living conditions deteriorate, the number of women and children who become vulnerable to sex-trade increases. As the crisis intensifies, women's economic rights are incessantly infringed upon. Presently, women and children make up the largest section of the reserved labor force. According to government reports, the number of unemployed has reached 3.9 million and 40% of these are women. (Philippine Star, June 12, 1999)

Philippine society remains semi-feudal and semi-colonial. The economy remains "export-oriented and "import-dependent" – the reason for the country's continued widespread poverty. The implementation of the policies of privatization, liberalization and deregulation has meant greater exploitation of the Filipino masses. The Estrada administration warned that wage increase will result in the rise of prices and the devaluation of the currency, an increase in the

unemployment rate and will drive foreign investors out of the country. (Manila Times, April 30, 1999) The Estrada administration falls short in admitting that the country's economy depends so much on foreign investors whose interest is not the welfare of our people but their capital gains.

With the advent of imperialist globalization, underdeveloped countries like the Philippines are fast removing economic barriers in the name of "free trade". Particularly in the Philippines, this means unhindered entry of imported products and capital and the export of raw materials. It also means repatriation of profits in collaboration with big land owners and bureaucrat capitalists in the country. The implementation of these economic programs has also been accelerated under the dictate of the IMF-WB through the Structural Adjustment Policy (SAP) and the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade – World Trade Organization (GATT-WTO).

With the so-called "free-trade" among countries, legal barriers are gradually being eroded to make prostitution legitimate, especially in semi-colonial countries like the Philippines. Under these circumstances women become more vulnerable to exploitation in "sex-trade" and prostitution. The number of women and children in prostitution will rise even faster when and if prostitution is loosely defined as "work" or "sex-work". At present, there are approximately 600,000 prostitutes in the Philippines. 50,000 to 60,000 of this are children forced into prostitution.

Low regard for women persists as perpetuated by the church, home, school and mass media. Not only women's labor power but women's bodies has become a commodity. This is due to the fact that the feudal-patriarchal system is maintained together with the bourgeois thinking towards women. It is evident that under these circumstances women shall never become equal with men and will remain second class citizens.

The crisis experienced by Filipinos has put women and children in situations that make them vulnerable to exploitation. Amidst intense poverty and with imperialist globalization, more and more women will fall prey and or will be forced to prostitution.

Why does sex-trafficking happen?

Particular to the Philippines, policies such as the labor export policy, tourism program and the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) has clearly become a mode and a vehicle for sex-trafficking within and outside the country. Marriage bureaus where Filipino women leave the country as fiancée or wives of foreigners or "mail-order bride" is also a channel of trafficking in women.

The Philippine Government's Labor Export Policy

Before the 1970's working abroad was an individual solution to poverty. Labor export has become widespread when the Marcos administration adopted it as an official policy.

Today, labor export has become an instrument to lure women into prostitution and turn the sex trade into big business. The labor export policy entices Filipino women out of the country through registered "recruitment agencies". There are an estimated 7-8 million Filipino workers abroad.

The Philippines remains as one of the primary labor exporters of women as domestic helpers, entertainers and factory workers. About 60 to 80 percent or six to eight out of every ten Filipino overseas workers are women who work as domestic helpers or entertainers. They are found in 168 countries in seven continents. In the first ten months of 1998, 640,054 Filipinos left the country to work abroad. In 1998, an increase of 3.5 percent was noted in the number of domestic helpers who left for abroad compared to the previous year.

The illegal transport of people have been commonly used. Potential workers leave the country with fake documents. Illegal recruiters and syndicates also try to bring women out of the country through the backdoor – in Western Mindanao and Palawan – heading towards Malaysia and Indonesia aboard small motor boats or pumpboats. In some cases potential workers are smuggled out of the country aboard international sea vessels, private airplanes and even commercial planes.

Hence, the number of undocumented workers abroad continues to grow. There is an estimated 80,000 undocumented workers in South Korea aside from the 130,000 documented workers. In Japan, where Filipino women often end up as entertainers, 35,200 are illegal in addition to the documented 220,000.

It was reported that 22 entertainers have disappeared in Japan. This year, five women brought to Japan as entertainers were forced to undress and have sex with Japanese clients in front of other customers. (Abante, July 9, 1999)

Some Filipino women working abroad are forced to sell their bodies because of difficult situations encountered while working in foreign lands. According to a research done by the Center for Women's Resources (CWR) on the societal effects of migration, many undocumented Filipino women in Saudi Arabia and those who overstay in Hongkong sell their bodies in order to survive.

The Tourism Program

Tourism is always one of the top dollar earners for the Philippines. In five years the dollar earning of the government from tourism increased by 256%, from US\$ 842 million in 1992 to US\$ 3 billion in 1997. The number of tourists entering the country in 1997 reached 2.2 million, up from just 1.151 million in 1992. (Term-Ender, CWR, 1998)

While the Tourism program gives income to the government, on the other hand, it creates and expands permanent structures which makes prostitution an enticing option for women despaired by extreme poverty.

The use of women's bodies as commodity for profit, for pleasure and sexual satisfaction happens in brothels and sex dens. Beerhouses, clubs, massage parlors and karaoke bars which flourish in places intended for tourism can become and have become fronts for prostitution.

Many women fall prey to sex-trade in the course of finding a decent job abroad. In the Philippines, a newspaper reported the story of girl children aged 13 to 16 who ended up working as bar girls in Nueva Ecija. They were recruited to work as salesgirls in a mall in

Cabanatuan City in Central Luzon.

The Visiting Forces Agreement

The rise in prostitution is expected with the ratification of the Visiting force Agreement (VFA). Twenty-two ports all over the Philippines will be sites for U.S. military exercises. Expectedly, peripheral areas will also be rest and recreation sanctuaries of the American forces. In the midst of extreme poverty, women from the poor and far-flung provinces will be lured and will engage in prostitution as a means of survival.

In 1991, a few months before the U.S. bases pulled out of the Philippines, there were around 55,000 Filipino women and children working as "women entertainers" in Olongapo and Angeles City alone, the site of the two biggest US military bases.

In the 1970's at the height of the Vietnam War, 9,000 U.S. military personnel arrive daily in Olongapo for the rest and recreation.

The presence of women has become a necessity to the American soldier to temporarily get their mind off the atrocities of the war. (CWR Term-Ender, 1998)

With the VFA, women and children are expected to arrive in droves in places near the US military stations where brothels, clubs, karaoke bars, beerhouses and massage parlors will sprout like mushrooms.

Mail-Order Bride

The rise in the number of Filipina mail-order brides (MOB) who leave the country as fiancée of foreigners is also notable. The system of mail-order bride is another instrument to traffick women. According to the Commission on Overseas Filipinos 148,074 Filipinas left the country from 1989 to 1998 either as fiancée or wife of foreign nationals.

Cross-cultural marriages is not the problem The problem is that there are syndicates who use these to recruit women into prostitution. These women end up being the sex-slaves of their supposed-husband and/or are pimped to other men. These syndicates capitalize on the internet and the e-mail to advertise Filipinas as "penpals" to circumvent the law banning the system of mail-order-bride.

An alarming number of women and children have been lured into the sex trade in their quest for a decent life abroad, becoming sex-slaves in bars, night clubs, brothels and sex-farms instead.

Who is behind the sex trafficking? Who profits from it?

According to Aurora de Dios, Executive Director of CATW, the international sex-trade is worth \$17B. Strip clubs alone earn a total of \$2 B every year (Manila Times, May 28, 1999). A sex trafficker earns big money because a Filipina sells from US\$3,000.00 to US\$5000 in the international sex trade.

In Angeles City, sex tours have become a fad. A sex tour which includes a roundtrip fare, 12 nights in the country and the choice of women escort for the night costs US\$2,195. The woman is paid a measly amount of P600.00 for the whole night. (IMA Newsletter, 1997)

A prostitute in Cebu testified that a tourist guide and a bar-owner pimps her to Japanese men for P10,000.00. The bar owner P8,000.00 and the tourist guide P1,500.00 while she only get P500.

This is the reason why prostitution will remain a big business. The problem of prostitution and sex-trafficking will continue to befall women because big syndicates and individuals in sex trafficking earn big and easy money through this system. Not only that, sex trade continues to boom with police protection. Bar operators accordingly spend P5 M for police protection (PDI, 21 April 1999)

Even government agencies earn in the sex trade through tariffs and taxes. According to an ILO report, sex trade contributes 2 to 14 percent of the gross domestic product of the countries Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines. In fact, there is a de facto legalization of prostitution in the Philippines with the local government units giving licenses to the so-called "commercial sex workers" (CSW) and Guest Relations Officer (GRO) and to the establishments employing these women. These women are considered as workers and the establishment-owners as employers.

Through tax and tariff from the sex-trade, governments of capitalists countries or the receiving countries also get their share.

How does the government perpetuate and aggravate the problem of sex-trafficking?

Particularly in the Philippines, the rise in sex-trafficking is brought about by the policies of the government that is under the control of the International Monetary Fund-World Bank (IMF-WB) and totally subordinate to the imperialist powers especially the United States.

The programs and policies of the Estrada government have spawned extreme and rampant poverty which affect women.

Its labor export policy, tourism program and the Visiting Forces Agreement are indisputable channels or instruments for the trafficking in Filipino women in and out of the country. The government has allowed the spread of facilities, services and businesses which have become fronts of prostitution, contributing significantly to the income of the government through the tourism program.

No remedies or solution can be expected from a government which has shown no regard for women issues. The Estrada government has not hidden its macho-fascist character. If the Aquino and Ramos governments have made a "show" of addressing women's issues, the Estrada government has not even made any pretext of interest in Filipino women's concerns. We can only expect the current government to dismiss the gravity of sex-trafficking of Filipino women and children.

But as citizens concerned for our women and children, what can we do?

- a) Read this primer and [other related stories](#) and pass it on to friends, relatives and neighbors;
- b) Coordinate with GABRIELA on cases that you know of;
- c) Sign the [purple rose campaign on the web](#), sign the pledge card, and wear the purple rose pin as a symbol of the sex-trafficked women and the fight against sex-trafficking;
- d) Support/Join the campaign GABRIELA in its activities and actions against sex trafficking

Ref.: http://members.tripod.com/~gabriela_p/8-articles/990601_prose.html