Sex Traffic Rises, Along With Scramble for Solutions

By Rich Daly
WeNews correspondent
Wednesday, June 16, 2010

New U.S. statistics on rising sex traffic came out this week ahead of a congressional vote on a related bill. The question of criminalizing prostitution continues to complicate matters for an apparent groundswell of activism.

WASHINGTON (WOMENSENEWS) - "Do not buy women or children for sex and don’t support those who do."

That’s the World Cup cheer of the South African chapter of the New York-based Coalition Against the Trafficking of Women, which is circulating a petition with that message addressed to South African President Jacob Zuma.

It’s the kind of message that in other years would have been lost in the media din of a major international sporting event.

But this year major media outlets such as ESPN News are devoting special coverage to the problem of sex trafficking at the big soccer match and Hollywood celebrities are lending their voices to the anti-trafficking cause.

The ongoing challenges of international trafficking were highlighted June 14 by the State Department’s annual release of trafficking figures, which estimated 12.3 million adults and children were trafficked in 2009, at a rate of 1.8 people per 1,000 worldwide. The Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 graded 175 nations on their efforts to combat all forms of human trafficking and found local officials were able to identify 49,105 victims of all types of trafficking, which is 59 percent more than in 2008. The report did not break out either the number of victims or rates of sex or labor trafficking.

These statistics come out as Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican and co-chair of the Congressional Human Trafficking Caucus, is co-sponsoring a bill to establish an international registry of known sex offenders to help foreign and U.S. law enforcement agencies crack down on underage sex tourism also linked to trafficking.

"This is modern day slavery and it’s a winnable war," Smith said in an interview with Women’s eNews.

The Smith bill, called the International Megan’s Law, was approved by the House Foreign Affairs Committee on April 28 and could come up for a House vote in the next few weeks, Smith said.

But while sex trafficking and awareness of it are both on the rise, the appropriate responses are still a matter of some debate and controversy, particularly concerning the criminal treatment of prostitution.

Film Stars Join Cause
When film star Demi Moore and her husband, the actor Ashton Kutcher, set up the Demi and Ashton Foundation to combat sex trafficking in January, they began urging stronger penalties for traffickers and more funding to help survivors of trafficking recover and attain an education.

They also identified prostitution as a foe.
"Demand for prostitution fuels sex trafficking," Moore said at an event in the U.S. Capitol building in May. "We need to focus on how we can make the Johns more accountable."

But the focus on curbing and limiting prostitution runs counter to the work of many advocates for sex workers, who emphasize safety.

Some sex workers are pushing to have their work recognized as a legitimate business and vigorously object to efforts to curb their livelihoods. They and their advocates argue that endeavors to abolish prostitution can drive an ineradicable practice further into hiding and leave women who participate more vulnerable to disease and violence.

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, an umbrella group of 90 nongovernmental organizations based in Bangkok, Thailand, a major sex-tourism destination, opposes trafficking. However, the group favors an economic empowerment model for prostitutes to improve conditions and give resources to trafficked women and girls.

The Bush administration, by contrast, favored criminalization of prostitution and required overseas aid groups to take an "anti-prostitution pledge" for all of their programming.

That position was controversial because it was seen as disrupting disease-prevention services for prostitutes, said Serra Sippel, president of the Center for Health and Gender Equity, a nonprofit advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.

The Obama administration has so far allowed the Bush-era prostitution pledge to stand for foreign groups, but implemented a slightly modified version of the pledge in May that would allow separate parts of groups receiving federal aid to operate unrestricted by the pledge.

Long-Term Approach

Sippel favors efforts to find alternative work opportunities that can keep girls and women out of prostitution, but noted that such efforts are very expensive and complex in many countries. Such "long-term" approaches, she said, should not preclude efforts to improve the health and financial standing of women who sell sex, including through unionization and the provision of financial services.

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, an umbrella group of organizations based in New York City and focused on curbing sexual exploitation and abolishing prostitution, meanwhile, has been encouraging men to discourage other men from seeking to use prostitutes domestically and worldwide.

One of those men is Victor Malarek, a Canadian journalist and author of the 2009 book "The Johns." After interviewing hundreds of prostitutes and buyers of sex around the world for his book, Malarek concluded that demand for commercial sex is growing and fuelling the trafficking of women and girls from poor countries and regions into wealthier places.

Malarek says the trend is supported by online access to information on finding prostitutes locally and internationally and booking flights and travel plans for so-called sex tourism vacations.

"The click of a mouse is the fuse that launched the explosion in prostitution," said Malarek, who views prostitutes as victims who need alternatives and sex buyers as the actual criminals.

Swedish Model

The push to focus punishment on the demand side of prostitution--as a way of curbing sex traffic--follows the so-called Swedish model.

In 1999 Sweden decriminalized the sale of sex but made it a crime to buy sex. At the same time, the government launched a nationwide awareness campaign about the damage women suffer under commercial sex.

As the country began arresting sex buyers, the number of people working as prostitutes, according to Swedish police estimates, dropped 40 percent between 1998 and 2003.

Several U.S. states have followed the Swedish approach of cracking down on the purchasers of prostitution.

In Illinois, starting in 2009, Cook County Sheriff Tom Dart began directing his officers to arrest sex buyers and redirect prostitutes to drug treatment or other services.

Around the same time, a Chicago-based coalition of nonprofits began a statewide effort to change the attitudes of potential buyers toward commercial sex. The "End Demand Illinois" initiative includes a high school program that organizers hope will become a national model. It teaches boys about the damage women in commercial sex suffer and encourages them to spread the message to friends and relatives. The approach is based in part on research by the initiative that found the average age of men when they first buy sex is between 18 and 25 years old.

The Netherlands provides a contrasting model to Sweden. In 1988 it legalized prostitution and critics say that has worsened sex trafficking.

Dutch police now estimate four illegal brothels exist for each one of the 142 licensed brothels. British police also say the Netherlands has become a leading pedophile destination country in Europe.

The Netherlands has seen the rise of a pedophile lobby since prostitution legalization that advocates for the "right of children to sexual self-determination." The nation now limits prosecution of sexual abuse of children older than 12 years to cases where a parent or child reports the crime, according to a report by the Children Rights Information Network, based in London.
Rich Daly is a writer in Washington D.C.

For more information:
Trafficking in Persons Report 2010:
http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rs/rls/tiprrt/2010/

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women:
http://www.catwinternational.org/

Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women:
http://www.gaatw.org/