

**SEMI-ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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The Last Girl: Ending the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Girls and Women

Wednesday July 18, 2012
10:45 am – 12:15 pm

Session Organizers:

- Pamela Shifman, Director, Initiatives for Girls and Women, NoVo Foundation
- Puja Dhawan, Senior Manager, Initiatives for Girls and Women, NoVo Foundation

Panelists:

- Ruchira Gupta, Executive Director, Apne Aap (India)
- Rachel Lloyd, Executive Director, GEMS: Girls Educational and Mentoring Services

Sponsor:

- NoVo Foundation
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This session represents the counterargument to a debate presented in a conference session IHRFG mounted in July 2011, "Protecting the Rights of Sex Workers: Asking the Tough Questions," organized by the Open Society Foundations. Notes from that session can be found on [IHRFG's Resource Archive](#).

Ruchira Gupta opened the session by sharing her experiences working with girls who have been trafficked into sexual exploitation in India. *"No change is possible unless you start from the last."*

Three factors intersect to increase the vulnerability of girls in trafficking:

1. Caste
2. Poverty
3. Being a woman

The majority of girls trafficked into prostitution are from lower castes and face marginalization at multiple levels. One example is a group that used to be primarily nomadic. They were labeled as criminals by the British and then classified as "de-notified" by the Indian government. However they are still viewed as criminals by society. This prevents them from accessing housing outside of the red light areas and obtaining other employment. This has led to most boys in this community being groomed to be pimps and the girls to be prostitutes.

Four stages of prostitution:

1. Debt bondage: girl is trafficked into a brothel and is told that she must work to pay off the debt incurred from her "purchase" and her ongoing room and board
2. Seasoning: girl is denied freedom of movement, is physically, emotionally and sexually abused, is starved, and is encouraged to consume drugs and alcohol. She is told that being a prostitute is

her destiny and is forced to sleep with 8-10 customers per day. Once she begins menstruating, the owners ensure that she has a baby so that she will feel even more tied to the brothel. This abuse is intended to quell any resistance she may have to engaging in prostitution.

3. Streets: after five years she is told she can keep half of what she earns and is pushed into the streets to solicit. The brothel owners then charge for her room and board so that she gets more into debt. They insist that she either replace herself with her daughter or be thrown out into the streets. This is when she may encounter an organization that can provide support; otherwise, she is pushed out onto the streets and faces violence.
4. Death

Average age of girl going into prostitution in Sonagachi, the red light district in Calcutta, is between 9 and 13 years old.

Ms. Gupta has found that another reason that girls don't know how to get out of their exploitative situation is the collusion between police and brothel owners. Police collect weekly bribes on each girl in the brothel or own brothels themselves.

Apne Aap is an Indian organization that challenges this system around four rights:

- 1) Right to education
- 2) Right to safe and independent housing
- 3) Right to sustainable and dignified work
- 4) Right to legal protection

Ms. Gupta acknowledged the divide within the women's rights community about issues related to trafficking, prostitution, and sex work. She suggested that women need whatever agency they can get (i.e. access to condoms, etc) but at the same time, their most basic human rights have to be struggled for. This means dismantling the system of prostitution that is driven by supply and demand.

Rachel Lloyd opened by sharing that she is a survivor of commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking in Germany. Through her work with survivors of sex trafficking in New York City she has seen that the survivors are primarily girls of color who have interacted with the juvenile justice system, have run away, or grew up within the child welfare system. In addition, 70-90% of girls and adult women in the commercial sex industry are survivors of prior sexual abuse.

When the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed in the United States, the girls she works with were not supported. It continues to be a battle to get people to recognize that what happens to girls being trafficked into the U.S. are the same things that happen to American girls based here.

- The average age of girls entering prostitution is 12-15.
- Within New York City, Hunt's Point in the Bronx is an area with high levels of prostitution
- The bond between pimps and girls can be incredibly strong. "You don't need to be chained to the wall to think you can't leave."

The work of GEMS is not about "rescue;" it is a survivor-led organization that empowers young girls to create economic opportunities to fight systems of sexism, racism, and classicism:

- Youth leadership: They discuss what happens globally and the girls see their experiences within a broader context and feel solidarity with other survivors knowing that there are other girls who are not defined by their pasts and who are using their experiences in an empowering way.
- Ms. Lloyd sees the same patterns of vulnerability and contributing factors to sexual exploitation across the globe
- Some of the girls GEMS works with prepare care packages for girls in other parts of the world with the stipends they receive

Gara LaMarche shared some of his thoughts on the various debates surrounding trafficking, prostitution, and sex work, framing the issues in terms of human rights principles: [LINK TO GARA'S SPEECH]

- Think about the kind of world we want to live in and how do we get there. In our aspirational world, do we want to promote the sexual labor of women?
- Rights are not static and we re-think their scope and application over time.
- We are all against coercion, violence and the sexual exploitation of girls.
- No one supports a top down rescue approach or the criminalization of women.
- On a moral basis, is the morality of domination and control something to applaud? He is unsure as to what the right policy response is.
- He has heard that some "end-demand" approaches can drive the sex trade further underground. Some women in the sex industry don't want to be told that they are being exploited. Will recognition of sex work enhance sex workers' safety?
- Are some sex worker unions managing oppression and domination? Is the best that we can do accepting the status quo of sex industry?

Question & Answer

Q: What are your thoughts on the Nordic model, which punishes those who purchase sex?

A: Ms. Lloyd: We don't believe in the criminalization of those who sell sex. But men who buy sex need to be held accountable. Studies say if some type of penalty were in place, many would purchase sex less or not at all. We need more research into this and the model needs to be about creating employment and housing opportunities for those within the commercial sex industry. We need to enable choice based on real options.

Ms Gupta: She has asked the women she organizes about their ideal law and they all chose the Nordic model. This is because it:

- Creates a system of accountability for perpetrators and
- Acts as a deterrent.

At present soliciting is illegal, which punishes those in prostitution.

The data available in Sweden shows that while initially prostitution did shift to neighboring countries, it ultimately has been reduced by half.

Q: I see all labor choices constrained by capitalism and supply and demand. I am concerned with the conflation of issues here. How might we be served by better understanding the nuances of these issues?

A: Ms. Lloyd: I have rarely, if ever, seen a young person for whom this has legitimately been about choice in light of other options. I don't see this as labor for youth; I see this system as inherently damaging. When someone comes to GEMS, we don't focus on getting her out of prostitution, we focus on access to health care, to identification, etc. We have some members who are still part of the sex industry. Most of you in this room have worked so that your children don't have to make this choice. This idea that this is a choice for "some kinds" of young people is challenging for me.

Ms. Gupta: How can women define choice when they are stuck within this system? Labor movements aspire to four things:

1. Minimum wage - which doesn't exist within the in sex industry
2. Old age pension - no one could guarantee this within the sex industry
3. Working conditions - this could be partially legislated, but violence and body penetration cannot be legislated away. Men are buying dominance, not sex
4. Dignity of the human being - cannot be legislated if we accept this as work

Q: How do we think about rights-based approaches? We've seen promotion of empowerment work and approaches as hindering the rights of survivors (locked shelters, prevention of migration, the use of faces of survivors as educational tools). How do we balance raising awareness and empowerment?

A: Ms. Lloyd: We need to promote safe-harbor legislation that ensures that even if a survivor doesn't want to testify she cannot be sent to jail. We need to build strong community bases that support the creation of healthy choices.

Ms. Gupta: Within our work it is up to the girl or woman if she wants to speak up or not. But some women do want opportunities to share their stories. There are differences between support services and protections. Protections are different for 12 year olds and 21 year olds; services and protections need to be developmentally appropriate.

Comment: Child trafficking should be addressed differently from women in sex work. Issues from East Africa have not been raised within this discussion.

Many rehabilitation centers for survivors only offer employment training on a few skills, such as candle or soap making or dressing hair. But after the woman leaves, she doesn't have a job or capital to invest into her own business, so she goes back into sex work to survive. We need to go beyond personalizing the issue. If we keep the issue behind a curtain, women's needs may remain hidden, but if they have platforms to discuss and options, perhaps change will happen. Another problem is that anti-trafficking groups have attacked sex workers who are organizing.

Comment: Much of the world we live in is defined by patriarchy. Sex is not about pleasure; it is about control and dominance. We need to deconstruct this and debunk the assumption that sex is free and available to men whenever they want it. We can't ignore sex workers. Our aspirational world should be one in which sex is equal and pleasurable and this will end exploitation. Sex workers say "I have a right to do what I want with my body."

The Swedish model is practiced within a welfare state where resources are available. What about utilizing the Swedish model in Burundi or Uganda? This would give more power to police within in those countries. Who will suffer then? It will be the women we are trying to protect. When we think of policy, let's look at the end result. As one example, if condoms with DNA can be used to arrest a perpetrator, he just won't use a condom and then the woman will be more vulnerable to HIV.

The session closed with the speakers sharing that they would like to continue a balanced discussion about these issues and think together about what it is that women and girls really want in today's world, prioritizing the human rights of the most marginalized.