

A Feminist Perspective

On Prostitution and Third World Women

In the latter part of 1991, a group of 15 women from Latin America, Asia and Africa met in Thailand to begin a period of exchange and intensive exposure to the realities of prostitution in these regions. The women who were part of the Isis-WICCE exchange program realized the need to articulate a feminist and Third World perspective on the issue as the prevailing analysis approaches groups, scholars or researchers and official institutions. One of the most misleading elements in their view is to reduce the issue of prostitution to one of violence against women. This view lacks an integrated framework which takes into consideration the global, social and economic realities and in particular the unequal North-South relations.

In Third World societies, there is an alarming increase in the magnitude of poverty and prostitution. Viewed within the context of North-South relations, this situation is the outgrowth of the colonial histories which brought capitalism which in turn has improved economic and social lifestyles. Today, in spite of all the modern development strategies, large numbers of Third World women are entering prostitution as a survival strategy.

The transnationalization of capital has been paralleled by the transnationalization of the sex industry where demand and supply for women in prostitution go beyond national boundaries. Demand largely comes from men of the North and middle men from both North and South, and this demand seems to form effective international criminal organiza-

tions. National governments, of both North and South, in not taking decisive actions against this situation, are contributing to reinforce the sex industry in society.

The internationalization of sex services is manifested in sex tourism, prostitution around military bases and international trafficking in women and children for prostitution. Although

women may knowingly enter prostitution for lack of viable economic alternatives, the recruitment of women for prostitution is often characterized by force, violence, trickery and deceit.

The institution and business of prostitution are maintained and perpetuated by patriarchal assumptions and myths such as: prostitution is the oldest profession; male sexuality is uncontrollable and should be given full rein; women's sexuality should be for the service of men, and therefore women's bodies are commodities to be bought and sold in prostitution.

The women who attended the meeting challenge the very basis of the institution of prostitution and denounce child prostitution, sex tourism, militarization and prostitution and trafficking of women and girls for prostitution. They make a distinction between the institution of prostitution and the individual women, and address their concerns to women in prostitution and stand for the decriminalization of prostitutes.

In light of this, and as a result of the exchange and exposure, the participants at the meeting have formulated action strategies in education and awareness raising, economic development, legal actions, creation of infrastructure, and networking, lobbying and political action.

The formulated action strategies will be implemented at the national, regional and international levels. ☐

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