

Opinion

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF
On the Ground



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Sex Trafficking in India

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

After my last visit to India, I wrote in this blog that the approach of some Western philanthropists to work with the brothels in Calcutta seemed to me to have failed. The hope had been that by cooperating with DMSC, nominally a union of prostitutes, it would be possible to reduce forced prostitution and the spread of AIDS by encouraging harm reduction strategies such as condom usage.

But in reality, I wrote, it didn't seem to have helped much in Calcutta. In Bombay, on the other hand, a tougher approach had dramatically reduced the number of brothels there. The posting attracted a number of indignant responses (including from some people whose judgments I respect). Here's an interesting comment from Anup Patel, a Yale med student who conducted research in Sonagachi, a main brothel area in Calcutta. It's an excerpt from an article he has written for a health journal:

Our first stop was the DMSC headquarters, where we received a brief introduction to the NGO's achievements: a low HIV prevalence, a high rate of condom usage, the small number of minors in prostitution, and a reduced rate of trafficking in Sonagachi.... In the first brothel we entered, the madam escorted us into a room where two prostitutes were sitting on adjacent beds...

Almost all of the women, the madam told us, come to Sonagachi on their own to enter the "noble profession of sex work," realizing the quick money and the rights that the DMSC will afford them. The prostitutes nodded in agreement, but did not say anything.... While

the madam spoke with others in the room, gushing about the group's success, the three of us on the bed asked the prostitute in Hindi to tell us if those things were true. Afraid and timid, the prostitute remained silent until we assured her that we wouldn't get her in trouble....Yes, she said, condoms were everywhere in Sonagachi, but prostitutes would not use them if a customer paid a higher rate, scared of costing the brother business and of dealing with the violent repercussions. Fearful of punishment, she and the other prostitutes stay silent during these tours, agreeing with the madam in front of the foreigners.

We continued to the next brothel on the tour, passing hundreds of prostitutes along the way. A person in our group asked if we could visit Neel Kamal, the brothel that was rumored to still prostitute minors....Five pimps guarded the locked gate that marked the entrance to the multi-story brothel. While one pimp unlocked the gate, the four others ran inside with a clarion call: "Visitors are here!" Our group rushed in, climbing the staircase to the first floor, but stopped dead in our tracks: dozens of girls, no older than sixteen, with bright red lipstick, began running down the dingy hallways, disappearing into hidden rooms.

The pimps kept shouting as the DMSC official told us to remain still. Everywhere I looked, girls were fleeing. In the meantime, I had managed to block a doorway where two teenage girls, no more than 14 years old, were sprawled on the bed with their legs wide open, their genitals visible through denim mini-skirts....