

Putting the Sex Trade on Notice

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Around the world, about one million women and children are seduced into leaving their homelands every year and forced into prostitution or menial work in other countries. Most are duped with promises of good jobs in more prosperous nations. These cases are not confined to remote parts of the world. Of the 15 nations the State Department listed last year as having done little or nothing to stop this growing human rights abuse, five of the worst offenders were in the Western Hemisphere: Belize, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Suriname.

A study by the Inter-American Commission of Women at the Organization of American States in Washington shows that Latin American nations have mostly sat back as women and children were treated as chattel. Women from Colombia were smuggled as far away as Japan, and Dominican women ended up against their will in Switzerland. Young Mexicans were enslaved in several states, including Texas, Florida and New Jersey. Costa Rica and Belize became destinations for impoverished women from Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. Without passports or money, they were forced to supply sex to tourists, usually from the United States and Europe. At least 70 Internet sites promote sex tourism in Costa Rica.

Fortunately, all that is beginning to change, largely because of pressure from Washington. Since the United States first passed a law against human trafficking in 2000, an unusual alliance of religious groups, including conservative evangelicals, and liberal women's and human rights organizations has pressed for more action. Evangelical groups were partly responsible for President Bush's strong statement at the United Nations on human trafficking. They also won the appointment of John Miller, a former congressman from Washington State, as an adviser on human trafficking to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The Bush administration deserves credit for its tough stance. Its efforts in Eastern Europe and Asia in particular improved law enforcement and helped women freed from captors. But Washington has yet to give as much attention to Latin America. That needs to change if sex traders are to understand that their free ride in our backyard is over.