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Helen Fisher

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## The Sex Slave Trade: Biological Imperatives, Cultural Trends, and the Coming Empowerment of Women

*The Hastings Women's Law Journal Symposium "Sexual Slavery: The Trafficking of Women and Girls into the United States for Sexual Exploitation," was held at Hastings College of the Law on February 9, 2001. Following is the Symposium keynote address. Dr. Fisher and Hastings Women's Law Journal staff edited for clarity, researched and added footnotes to the text of the address. The Journal wishes to thank Adriana Brava-Partain for her editorial work.*

*Dr. Helen Fisher\**

### I. INTRODUCTION

The sex slave trade has been in existence for at least two thousand years. In the sixth century A.D. the Roman emperor Justinian wrote of this phenomenon saying that profiteers throughout Europe were taking advantage of inexperienced girls – seducing them with fine clothes, money and promises of marriage, then placing them in brothels and forcing them to sign contracts to remain there for a period of time.

Unfortunately, this form of female exploitation has not changed since Justinian's day. The sex slave trade remained widespread in nineteenth century Europe; today it is a flourishing worldwide market.<sup>1</sup> Flesh peddlers based in Italy, Russia, Japan, China and many other parts of the world are currently trafficking women from southern Europe to the Middle East, from southeast Asia to the Middle East, central Europe, northern

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\* Research Professor and Member of the Center for Human Evolutionary Studies, Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University. Dr. Fisher is also a research fellow with the Gruter Institute for Law and Behavioral Research. Dr. Fisher is the author of numerous works including ANATOMY OF LOVE: THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MONOGAMY, ADULTERY, AND DIVORCE (1992) and THE FIRST SEX: THE NATURAL TALENTS OF WOMEN AND HOW THEY ARE CHANGING THE WORLD (1999), both selected as notable books by the N.Y. TIMES Book Review. Since 1983, she has served as an anthropological commentator and consultant for businesses and the media. Her contracts include those with *The Today Show*, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

1. ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION AND COMMERCIAL SEX: THE NEW SLAVE TRADE 145-70 (P. Williams ed., 1999).

Europe and the United States, from South America to North America, from Africa to Europe and from eastern to western Europe. These traffickers are well organized and ruthless. They continue the tradition of recruiting women with false promises of marriage or jobs, and add modern enticements such as student grants, political asylum, visas, and huge sums of money. Some even dispense with promises; they simply drug young women and kidnap them. These profiteers then install these victims in brothels and force them to cooperate.

These young captives regularly do cooperate, largely out of fear. The traffickers have obtained more than just their names and addresses; they have collected vital information about their parents too. The traffickers threaten to kill a girl's parents if she refuses to perform her duties. Because most of these women are illegal immigrants in a foreign land, they are afraid to run away or report their plight to the police; they fear deportation or jail. In short, these young women are duped and intimidated into jobs they do not want, do not like, but dare not leave. They remain sex slaves, with no freedom of movement and no freedom of speech.

This contemptible business is thriving. In December 2000, NEWSWEEK magazine reported that the international sex slave trade is currently the fastest growing criminal enterprise after the trades in guns and drugs.<sup>2</sup> In parts of Asia, for example, a million women are living in conditions of prostitution and slavery.

Why do traffickers enslave women as sexual objects? Why do men purchase the services of these sex slaves? Three primary factors are involved.

## II. UNDERLYING CULTURAL AND BIOLOGICAL REASONS FOR THE SEX SLAVE TRADE

Although the sex slave trade is associated with a complex web of biological and cultural forces, I think three forces are primary. First, many young women in developing countries are eager to emigrate to industrialized countries to build a better life for themselves and their anticipated children. Second, industrialized countries have restrictions on immigration, a situation that enables profiteers to trap women by offering illegal avenues of entry. Third, men around the world regularly frequent local brothels or travel to brothels in other countries as "sex tourists." This way male clients keep this trafficking system functioning and lucrative.

Therefore, I would like to address some of the social issues associated with the sex slave trade and some of the biological forces that contribute to this pernicious social ill. I will conclude that we are biologically equipped to conquer this form of criminality. Moreover, our global society is moving in a cultural direction that may help to curb the international sex

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2. D. France, *Slavery's New Face*, NEWSWEEK, Dec. 18, 2000, at 60.

slave trade.

#### A. WOMEN AS WILLING ACTORS IN THE SEX SLAVE TRADE

There are numerous economic factors that make women eager, indeed willing, to leave their family and friends, their hometowns, even their countries, sign up with dubious men, take risky jobs, and migrate to unknown cities. One does not need to draw on biological explanations to understand the economic plight of women in developing countries.

However, I do believe that there is a biological component to this high-risk female behavior. It is best illustrated by a study in which an international team of social scientists polled approximately ten thousand men and women in thirty-seven societies, asking each person to rank eighteen specific traits in their order of importance in selecting a spouse.<sup>3</sup> Men and women from these thirty-seven societies put many of these traits in the same order. Cross culturally, the first thing most people look for in a mate is love or mutual attraction. Second, both sexes want to marry an individual who has a dependable character, emotional stability, maturity, and a pleasing disposition. They also want a spouse who is kind, healthy, smart, educated, and interested in home and family. But, from Zululand to Poland, from Colombia to Taiwan, from the Arctic to Australia, women are more eager than men to find a mate with resources, a spouse with money, education, and status.

There is a biological explanation for this feminine appetite. For at least four million years, women have had the most difficult job of any creature on earth: raising extremely helpless babies in a very dangerous environment, the grasslands of Africa.<sup>4</sup> Across the millennia women needed the resources of men to help them raise their precious DNA. I have hypothesized elsewhere that this ecological dilemma selected for specific structures in the female brain, networks that endow them with an extraordinary drive to take risks to obtain the economic and financial security they need to rear their young.<sup>5</sup>

This feminine proclivity to acquire the resources necessary to rear their children is not likely to change. So as long as affluent industrialized nations have restrictive immigration policies, poor women from developing countries will be susceptible to the bogus promises of predators, the criminal traffickers engaged in the international sex slave trade.

#### B. THE IMPETUS OF TRAFFICKERS

It is not difficult to understand the biological motivations of the

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3. HELEN E. FISHER, *THE FIRST SEX: THE NATURAL TALENTS OF WOMEN AND HOW THEY ARE CHANGING THE WORLD* (1999).

4. *Id.* at 12.

5. HELEN E. FISHER, *ANATOMY OF LOVE: THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MONOGAMY, ADULTERY AND DIVORCE*, 91 (1992).

traffickers who take advantage of immigration restrictions and the disparity between the rich and poor to exploit women for the sex slave trade. Humans everywhere hunger for gain, an emotion that undoubtedly evolved over the eons by survival of the fittest.

But why are men in societies around the world willing, indeed eager, to frequent brothels? Some even keep women in their homes against the woman's will for the purpose of sex. Biology may play a relatively substantial role in this male behavior.

#### C. THE MALE CLIENT'S ROLE IN THE SEX SLAVE TRADE

Evolutionary psychologists currently propose that millennia ago, men evolved the biological propensity to be interested in sexual variety in order to spread their seed.<sup>6</sup> For millions of years on the grasslands of Africa most ancestral men pursued two basic reproductive strategies simultaneously. Men paired up with one woman to procreate and provide for their growing young. But many also engaged in "extra-pair copulations." Those males who sought these additional sexual liaisons bore more young. Their young tended to survive. Thus natural selection gradually favored the male appetite for sexual variety.

This is not to suggest that men who frequent brothels are interested in procreation. But it is this male biological propensity for sexual variety that fuels the international sex slave trade.

#### D. BRAIN CIRCUITRY ASSOCIATED WITH THE SEX SLAVE TRADE

There may be yet another biological force that contributes to the current tragic international trafficking in female sex slaves: the human tendency to feel sexual attraction to one individual while maintaining a long-term pair bond with another. My reasoning is as follows.

I have maintained for several years that human beings have evolved three distinctly different emotion circuits in the brain for mating, reproducing, and parenting.<sup>7</sup> The sex drive, or the craving for sexual gratification, is one distinct brain circuit. The second distinct emotion circuit is romantic attraction. This brain network is associated with feelings of elation, sleeplessness, the loss of appetite, and obsessive thinking about a new romantic partner. (Some think about a new partner as much as ninety percent of the day and night.) The third emotion circuit is the feeling of attachment associated with sensations of calm, peace, and security one often feels for a long-term partner.

Each of these emotion circuits – lust, romantic attraction, and attachment – is associated with different behavioral repertoires. Each evolved to direct a different aspect of human reproduction. The sex drive

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6. *Id.* at 68-69.

7. Helen E. Fisher, *Lust, Attractions, and Attachment in Mammalian Reproduction*, 9 *HUM. NATURE* 23 (1998).

evolved to enable men and women to seek copulation, usually with any appropriate member of the opposite sex. Attraction evolved to enable men and women to focus their mating energy on just one individual at a time, thereby conserving and directing their mating energy at least until insemination has been completed.<sup>8</sup> Attachment evolved to enable individuals to tolerate this mating partner at least long enough to rear a single child through infancy as a team.<sup>9</sup>

Each emotion system varies from one species to another. For example, a seasonal breeder such as the rabbit expresses attraction and the sex drive only seasonally. The brain circuitry for attachment also varies from one species to another, depending on whether the species forms monogamous pair bonds or mates promiscuously. Indeed, there is now some evidence for these cross-species brain variations. Among monogamous prairie voles the limbic system receptor sites for oxytocin (a primary chemical associated with attachment) has been found to vary from those of the asocial montane vole.<sup>10</sup>

These brain systems – lust, romantic attraction, and attachment – also vary from one individual to the next. Humans are good examples. Men and women inherit different levels of testosterone and individuals vary in the degree and duration of their sex drive. Humans also vary in the intensity, frequency and duration of romantic attraction. Some people fall in love many times while others fall in love infrequently. Moreover, people vary in their ability to attach to a long-term partner. Approximately fifty percent of Americans marry for life. Many divorce. Many others marry more than once; they are serial monogamists.

These brain circuits also vary across the life course of each human being. For example, young men generally have a high sex drive. But levels of testosterone, and often the sex drive, decline with age. In humans, attachment appears to increase with age.<sup>11</sup> Divorce data on sixty-two societies, taken from the demographic data of the United Nations, illustrate that the longer one is married, the less likely one is to divorce.<sup>12</sup>

So these three emotion systems are flexible, indeed malleable. They vary among species. They vary among individuals and they vary across the life course of a single individual.

These brain systems also operate in concert with another. For example, as levels of testosterone increase, one's sex drive increases; then with orgasm, levels of oxytocin (a chemical associated with attachment) rise.<sup>13</sup> Hence the sex drive often contributes to subsequent feelings of attachment.

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8. FISHER, *supra* note 3, at 256.

9. FISHER, *supra* note 5, at 164.

10. Fisher, *supra* note 7.

11. FISHER, *supra* note 5, at 57.

12. *Id.* at 109-10.

13. FISHER, *supra* note 3, at 257.

Moreover, you can fall madly in love with someone and then suddenly find them very sexually attractive. Similarly, you can begin a purely sexual relationship with someone, then fall in love with them or become deeply attached to them as well.

These three neural emotion systems – lust, romantic attraction, and attachment – interact in many ways. But most important to an understanding of the international sex slave trade, *these emotion systems can also operate independently*. A good example is evident in middle-aged men and women who inject, ingest, or apply testosterone to increase the sex drive. These individuals characteristically report more sexual thoughts, more sexual activity, and more orgasms, but they do not fall in love. Nor do they feel increased attachment to their long-term partner. Moreover, people can feel deep attachment for a long-term partner, *while* they feel romantic attraction to another individual, *while* they feel sexually drawn to still another. In fact, you can lie in bed at night and feel deep attachment for one individual, then swing to feelings of ecstatic attraction for somebody else, then feel the sex drive rise while conjuring up an image in your head. It is like a committee meeting in progress in your mind. This could not happen if these were not distinct emotion systems in the brain.

The independence of these brain systems most likely evolved millions of years ago for an adaptive reason: to enable our ancestors to form a pair bond with one individual *while* taking advantage of clandestine mating opportunities with others. The relative independence of these three emotion systems also enables men to feel profound attachment to a long-term partner *while* they frequent brothels and subsidize the sex slave trade.

### III. DISMANTLING THE SEX SLAVE TRADE

Although men and women are capable of engaging in clandestine mating, this does *not* mean that the sex slave trade is either “good” or “inevitable.” Laymen unfamiliar with the basic tenets of the evolutionary sciences often commit what academics call the “naturalistic fallacy,” the tendency to believe that what is “natural” is also “good.” However, the naturalistic fallacy is just that: a fallacy. For example, just because most mammals are territorial and warlike, it does not follow that war is “good.” Using the same logic: despite the fact that many women are genetically predisposed to risk illegal immigration, despite the fact that sex slave traffickers are predisposed to take advantage of strict immigration policies, and despite the fact that men have a natural taste for sexual variety, it does not follow that society should condone the sex slave trade.

Nor does brain architecture suggest that the sex slave trade is inevitable. On the contrary, this social ill can be cured. I propose several reasons for an optimistic future.

Foremost, humans have evolved a sophisticated brain mechanism to direct, even overcome, basic drives, what I call “mind,” what others call the

“self,” the “ego,” or the “psyche.” Mind, I hypothesize, resides, in part, in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. This region lies directly behind the forehead; it more than tripled in size during the course of human evolution. Neuroscientists call the prefrontal cortex the “central executive” or the “crossroads of the mind” because it is connected to almost every other part of the brain and body and it is devoted to processing information. With this part of the brain, we collect myriad bits of data.<sup>14</sup> We order and weigh them as they accumulate. We put them into patterns. We reason hypothetically. We analyze contingencies. We consider options. We plan for the future. We make decisions. Philosopher John Dewey once said, “mind is a verb.” I agree. The mind does something. We think. We act in *sui generis* ways.

Neuroscientists believe that other regions of the brain are also involved in mind. Among them may be the “Orientation Association Area” which resides in the parietal lobe of the cortex. These and other neural regions enable humans to watch and assess the multimedia “movie in the brain.” So with the evolution of the human prefrontal cortex, the Orientation Association Area (and undoubtedly many other linked brain regions) our hominid ancestors acquired a brain mechanism that enabled them to make decisions, even override the potent brain circuits for lust, romantic attraction, and long-term attachment.

In short, biology predisposes women to take risks to gain resources for their future offspring. Biology predisposes some men and women to take advantage of strict immigration laws to prey on vulnerable young women. Biology predisposes men to seek sexual variety, thereby supporting the sex slave trade. But with their uniquely human minds, women can find alternatives to gain economic stability for their families, and men can find alternative means to assuage their libidos. We need to provide both sexes with alternative solutions to satisfy their needs.

One solution is to liberalize immigration rules and enable more young women from poor countries to migrate legally and cheaply.

Another solution is to provide women with greater economic and educational opportunities in their own countries. In fact, this is beginning to happen. Data from a 1995 report by the United Nations on 130 societies indicates that in almost all of these societies, the gap between men and women in terms of health, education, and economic resources is decreasing, albeit slowly.<sup>15</sup>

A third solution is to support organizations that educate prostitutes about their rights.

A fourth solution is to break the sex slave networks by severely punishing traffickers and their customers.

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14. *Id.* at 9.

15. *Id.* at 153-56, 288.

A final solution is to educate the men who frequent sex slaves, perhaps even providing these clients with substitutes by legalizing prostitution.

Most of these solutions are highly controversial; all are exceedingly difficult to achieve. However, one dramatic worldwide trend does augur a decline in the sex slave trade.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: A CURRENT TREND TOWARD WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

From studying the lives of women in extant hunting and gathering societies, anthropologists have ascertained that for millions of years, women in similar societies enjoyed considerable economic, sexual, and social power. On the grasslands of primordial Africa, women commuted to work to gather fruits and vegetables. They returned to camp with sixty to eighty percent of the evening meal. The double-income family was standard. For millions of years, men and women were economic, social, and sexual equals. No sex slave trade existed. As farming culture took hold in much of the world, the economic landscape shifted; in almost all agrarian societies women lost their economic independence, as well as much of their social and sexual status.<sup>16</sup> Today, women almost everywhere are becoming educated and moving back into the job market in societies around the world.<sup>17</sup> Women are slowly reacquiring some of the economic power and social status they enjoyed in pre-agricultural times, twenty thousand, even a million years ago.

Several worldwide economic trends may further accelerate this rise of women's economic status. First of all, demographers predict a decline in the world's population over the next century. All of the western European countries are currently below the level of population replacement. This is advantageous for "the girl child." In former decades, when women bore several children, families devoted their resources to the education of their boys. Now, as spouses bear only one or two babies, they are directing more of their resources to educating their female children as well. The decreasing world population may help future generations of women achieve economic resources without recourse to illegal immigration and potential prostitution.

Furthermore, the world population is aging. Some demographers believe that "middle-age" should be extended to age eighty-five because some forty percent of Americans in the age category seventy-six to eighty-five have nothing seriously wrong with them.<sup>18</sup> Because women live longer than men do, most of these American senior citizens are women. Political scientist Francis Fukiyama believes these older women will soon

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16. FISHER, *supra* note 5, at 279-81.

17. FISHER, *supra* note 3.

18. *Id.*

emerge as a powerful voting block.<sup>19</sup> In fact, older women are already beginning to vote in great numbers for programs that support women's health, women's education, and women's economic opportunity.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the worldwide business community is evolving in ways that are vastly increasing the *need* for women's natural skills.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the changing economic environment is drawing more and more women into the modern work force. For example, the communications industries are proliferating. This favors women. On average, women are more skilled than men with language, a feminine attribute that is associated with the predominantly female hormone, estrogen.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, studies show that women's ability to find the right word rapidly increases during the middle of the menstrual cycle when estrogen levels peak. According to polls conducted by the United Nations, with women's exquisite linguistic abilities, women are rapidly filling many jobs in the communications industries.<sup>23</sup>

The world is also witnessing a rise in the service professions. Women are gifted with the "people skills" required in many of these careers.<sup>24</sup> Women, for example, excel at reading facial emotions; they are better at picking up the nuances of posture, gesture and tone of voice; and women excel at "multi-tasking," doing several things at once. These natural female talents will enable many to move into the emerging job market and acquire the resources they need to bear and rear their young.

Currently the fastest growing industry in the world is the medical industry. Women are natural nurturers. With their language acuity and people skills, many women are becoming doctors and nurses; many others are filling other lucrative niches of this industry as well.

Many other global economic forces are beginning to draw women into the legitimate paid job market.<sup>25</sup> As women rise in economic power, they will rise in social and sexual power too – trends that should gradually curtail the international sex slave trade. This does not mean that we can or should ignore this tragic situation. Nevertheless, I do think that during the course of this century, the worldwide economic trend toward economically powerful women will inevitably contribute to a decline in this inexcusable social ill.

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19. *Id.* at 187.

20. *Id.* at 188.

21. *Id.* at 166-69.

22. *Id.* at 61.

23. FISHER, *supra* note 3.

24. *Id.* at 84.

25. *Id.* at 54-83.

