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SOYLENT GREEN IS PEOPLE: CANNIBALISM OF THE WORLD'S WOMEN AND CHILDREN THROUGH SEXUAL TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION

Lisa L. Thompson

Sexual trafficking of persons for purposes of commercial sexual exploitation (e.g. prostitution, pornography, live-sex shows, and stripping) is rampant throughout the world. Because most anti-trafficking efforts focus on supply-side or "push" factors primarily attributable to trafficking victims, but typically ignore demand or "pull" factors such as the demand for commercial sex created by the existence, tolerance, and fostering of sex markets, governments (with the exception of Sweden) and non-governmental organizations alike have been largely unsuccessful in stemming the flow of vulnerable women and children into the global sex industry. The roots of the resistance to linking sexual trafficking with prostitution, and to aggressively seeking the sex industry's extermination are deep, and often lie embedded in factors such as profit, corruption, myths about the "harmlessness" of prostitution, cultural attitudes about male sexual privilege, as well as gender inequality. To expose self-serving motives and the fallacy of "permission-giving" attitudes and beliefs, this article examines demand for commercial sex, specifically prostitution and trafficking for prostitution, metaphorically as cannibalism. The author has traveled to Bangladesh, the Netherlands, and Mexico, and reports some firsthand observations.

THE YEAR IS 2022. UNCONTROLLABLE INDUSTRIALIZATION, pollution, corruption, and greed have led to a catastrophic greenhouse effect that has destroyed virtually all plant and animal life on earth. The few remaining places where agriculture is possible are guarded like military compounds. Urban centers are brimming with people; economies are in shambles; masses are without work and thousands are homeless. Civil society is a foggy memory; in its place, authoritarian government rules with the requisite cruelty and callousness.

Predictably there are severe food shortages. Meat and vegetables have nearly become things of the past, except of course, for

the wealthy. For those unable to afford the exorbitant price of a wilted stalk of celery, much less a cut of beef, there's Soy lent—unpalatable chips of dehydrated nutrients.

To stay alive the underclass must spend considerable time and effort in obtaining their rations of water and this so-called food. Different varieties of Soy lent are distributed on different days of the week. Some days, people swamp the distribution centers for Soy lent Red, and on others, Soy lent Yellow. However, the rationing centers are most overwhelmed with people on Thursdays—Soy lent Green day. Riot police are necessary to control the crowds of people vying to get their share, since no one wants to miss out on their meager allotment of the new, more appetizing Soy lent Green, a derivative of seaweed.

This is a snapshot of the hopeless dystopia depicted in the 1973 American film classic *Soy lent Green*. As bleak as such a portrayal may seem, the plot continues to forecast an even darker future for the world. What the audience discovers is that Soy lent Green is not a byproduct of the sea at all. In truth, the government is conspiring to conceal that Soy lent Green is processed from the dead bodies of human beings!

The primary source for this flesh: euthanasia centers. Viewed as a further strain on an already overburdened society, the elderly are encouraged to admit themselves to the euthanasia centers for a quick (just 20 minutes) and pain free death. Once death is achieved, the bodies are unceremoniously packaged in white bags, and loaded on trucks headed for the Soy lent plant. At the plant the bodies are unloaded and placed on a conveyor belt that ultimately plunges them into a murky "broth" that is the stock from which Soy lent Green is prepared. After this climatic revelation, the movie dramatically closes with the now well-known line, "Soy lent Green is people!"

Such a story seems quite fantastic, and perhaps to most, completely unrealistic: a future in which humanity cannibalizes itself? However, from another perspective, *Soy lent Green* is much more modern reality than fiction.

Prostitution and Sexual Trafficking: Cannibalism on a Global Scale

"Cannibalism," used in the context of the sex industry is a shock word. People tend not to mind the word cannibalism so much if they happen to be having an anthropological discussion regarding remote tribal peoples who a century or two ago made

dinner from leg of man. And although occasional incidents of cannibalism still occur, generally speaking, the practice of humans eating the flesh of other humans is considered a thing of the past. This being the case, cannibalism is something we rarely have the occasion to think or talk about. As a result, startled reactions and quizzical expressions are among the typical reactions from people whenever I have equated the everyday occurrences of prostitution and sexual trafficking with the practice of eating human flesh.

Can these things really be similar? Are the buyers of sex killing and devouring women and children (girls and boys) in prostitution? Yes, quite.

While, they—Sexploitators as I will call them—may not roast their victims over an open fire and eat them for supper, those they partake of when they make sex a commercial exchange, are destroyed in spirit and quite literally used as items for consumption. These Sexploitators, when they are hungry for food, buy a meal. They eat it. The food disappears. They are energized by it, until once again the urge for food returns. In the same way, when Sexploitators are hungry for sex, they buy it. They devour it. The thing devoured disappears. They are energized by it, until once again the urge for sex returns. Thus other human beings are just morsels they consume to satiate one of their physical urges.

How is this any less barbarous than the flesh eating of former times? Are people really “things” to be consumed? If it is morally reprehensible to offer human flesh as an entree in a restaurant why should human flesh be fare in the sex industry? Isn’t it uncivilized that women and children are reduced to produce in the world’s brothels, massage parlors, and on street corners? It is as if they were not human beings at all, but merely things: things without being, dignity, identity, or any intrinsic value that would place them somewhere higher in the social order than a plate of meat and potatoes.

The sex industry most definitely looks like a manifestation of cannibalism to me, but this is evidently not a view shared by many others. Perhaps this explains why the world cares little, if any, for the woman or girl in prostitution, and why hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of women and children, are trafficked into prostitution each year¹ (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2003; United Nations Information Service, 2003).

¹ Figures of the estimated number of people trafficked annually vary widely. Additionally, the author cannot locate any disaggregated estimates of people trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation versus labor

Sexual Trafficking: Serving Up the World's Women and Children

Supplying the great demand for fresh human flesh in the world's sex markets is more of a challenge in some parts of the world than others. But sex-restauranteurs need not worry; sex traffickers are their able agents, on hand to provide global import-export solutions.

For sex traffickers, serving up the world's women and children begins with knowing where to get them, and this is really no challenge if one just knows where to look. The easiest to harvest are the most vulnerable. If you are a woman or child, lacking education, desperately poor, a victim of sexual violence, a widow, an abandoned wife, a runaway, an orphan, or perhaps a refugee, there is a trafficker just ready and waiting to whisk you away. (Community Customwire, 2004; Leighton & DePasquale, 1999; Raymond & Hughes, 2001; Sorajakool, 2003; United Nations Information Service, 2003).

Like any skilled hunter, the trafficker knows how to set the trap—use plenty of bait. Play on the quarry's hopes for a better life: offer them their dream job or any job; lure them with tantalizing tales of the life they will lead in a foreign country; promise them love; promise them money; promise them anything (Hotaling & Levitas-Martin, 2002; Hughes, 2000).

Occasionally, though, the standard traps do not work. Nevertheless, the resourceful trafficker will not be thwarted. In certain countries there is no difficulty in finding a lost child with whom to abscond. Drugging and kidnapping are also effective means of procuring a victim. There are still further options, such as negotiating with impoverished parents to indenture their children to "work" in another city (Trujillo, 2004; Hotaling & Levitas-Martin, 2002; Freed 1997).

The produce secured, there is the matter of getting it to the sex market. Here the sex trafficker performs a function similar to the trucks and conveyor belts used to move human bodies to the Soy lent Green plant—moving humans from their original location to either domestic or international sex markets. (Gunnell, 2004; Raymond & Hughes, 2001).

exploitation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, however, does assert that the majority of the world's trafficking victims are women and children who are destined for sexual exploitation.

The deft trafficker will employ any number of methods to get the goods to their final destination. In instances of domestic trafficking (trafficking of the victim within their country of origin), this can be as simple as luring a girl away from her family for a day, sending her by courier to a city only a few miles away, and selling her off at the local brothel. In many cultures, once she's been violated there is no going back to family and friends, no matter how close her relatives may be geographically. The sex trafficker turns cultural stigma to personal advantage, for once the girl has been "spoiled," in many societies' view she is unredeemable (Freed, 1997).

With international sex trafficking (trafficking of the victim across international borders), often it is necessary for the trafficker to obtain false travel documents for the victim. This is done with surprising ease, as there usually is a corrupt immigration or border official ready and willing to help the trafficker in exchange for cash. Sometimes though, the victim is able to obtain authentic documents (based on their false belief that a new job and better life is waiting for them in another country) and thus forgeries are not necessary (Hughes, forthcoming 2004). In the end, it matters little whether the documents are fake or genuine, since the trafficker confiscates them from the victim upon arrival in the country of final destination (Hughes, 2000).

The trafficker will leverage this to maximum effect by threatening to expose the victim to police or immigration officials, and further asserting that the victim will be arrested and/or deported for being in a foreign country without authorization (The Protection Project, 2001). To some people this may not seem like much of a threat (often because we have a better perception of police and justifiably so). But when one is from a country where police are little more than criminals themselves, the perspective and fear level changes dramatically. Add in the complicating factor of significant language barriers between the victim and the surrounding population and this gives the sex trafficker even greater leverage (The Protection Project, 2001).

Having the produce procured and safely transported, there remains only to "package" and sell the goods. The packaging process often begins when victims are presented with certain clothes they are commanded to wear: clothes that recede, plunge, and squeeze—the general principle being to reveal and tantalize (The Protection Project, 2001). A bit of seasoning might also be required, since some future clients will expect expert sexual performance. Given that the victims have likely had little, if any, sex-

ual experience some traffickers show the girls pornography as a form of preparatory instruction for their future premier on the sex-market. Other traffickers will take it upon themselves to personally "initiate" them. However, those traffickers looking for the highest profits will restrain themselves, since virgin flesh fetches the highest sale price (Tyler, 2003).

By this point the victims have realized that instead of getting a decent job as a waitress, au pair, housekeeper, nurse, model, or even factory worker, that the true fate awaiting them is a slot on a brothel menu. Vigorous protests ensue, but to plead and beg is useless. Their entreaties are only met with intimidation, threats of violence (including the threat of death to themselves or their family members), horrible brute force, confinement, and starvation (Long, 2004; Farley, 2003; Raymond & Hughes, 2001). Their destiny is to be just one more course on the bill of fare: an appetizer, entrée, or dessert for a ravenous Sexploitator.

The Sex Market: Human Flesh for the World

Procuring, transporting, and packaging complete, the sex trafficker must now sell his goods. Like any farmer who to sell his crops takes them to market, so too, the sex trafficker must take his crop to market—the sex market. Fortunately for the sex trafficker, sex markets exist with great ubiquity in nearly every part of the world (Economist, 2002, Zouev, 1999).

Here are a just few sex market highlights: There is the famed red-light district of Amsterdam where women are on display in windows for passersby on the street. That women are on exhibit in much the same way as zoo animals, and that they can be bought and sold for sex, seems to have little impact on the tourists that stream through the area for their personal viewing, and perhaps, sampling pleasure (Bindel, 2004). There is Tijuana's notorious "Zona Norte" where on any given evening, scores of young women and girls are sexual fare for sale on the city street corners (Larson, 2003). In India, more than 2.3 million girls and women are believed to be commodities in the country's sex markets (U.S. Department of State, 2004). The International Organization for Migration (2003) reports that South Africa may be Africa's sex capital, since it is the main destination for victims of sexual trafficking in southern Africa. In Australia, prostitution is such a booming business that shares of brothel stock are publicly traded on the country's stock exchange. Business has been good, and accordingly The Daily Planet Ltd., the first such traded stock, has

plans to launch a "sex Disneyland" in Sydney, and intends expansion to the U.S. In fact, they hope to build a little city called Metropolis in Las Vegas, Nevada, which would feature a 50-room brothel, hotel, nightclub, strip club, pool, and airstrip. The Metropolis would be an addition to Nevada's 28 existing licensed brothels, at which the state health division estimates 365,000 sex acts are performed each year (Canadian Press, 2003). If this does not seem like enterprise enough, consider all the other "businesses" that can serve as fronts for prostitution: massage parlors, strip clubs, escort services, health clinics, chiropractic and aromatherapy clinics, even auto repair shops (Associated Press, 2002; Oliver, 2003; Ugarte, Zarate, & Farley, 2003; Wahid, 2003). In other words, even the most unskilled sex traffickers will have little difficulty in selling their produce in light of such overwhelming global demand for human flesh and so many venues for its sale.

All that is left to the sex trafficking process is for the produce to be inspected and payment made. Inspection can consist of a general assessment, or a fully unclothed viewing (Ahmetasevic, 2003; Ahmetasevic & Harbin, 2002). Purchase prices for human flesh vary widely. Women and children can be bought and sold for prices ranging from about \$50 U.S., the equivalent price of a Smoothie Maker from the average retail chain, to prices as high as \$15,000, more than enough to buy a new car (Associated Press, 2000; UNICEF UK, 2003). The value depends on factors like freshness (i.e. age) and physical beauty. Country of origin can also be an element for costing, as some sex markets pay more for what is considered exotic cuisine in their part of the world. It all depends on what the Sexploitators at the local sex market are demanding.

The final sale price also depends on what the local sex market is able to pay per sex act. In countries with higher currency values, the Sexploitator's payment for sex has more value than that of the Sexploitator buying sex in a country with a weak currency. Thus a brothel owner's rate of profit per sex act will vary according to currency values in their country of operation. But in the final analysis, the brothel owner's pay out for human flesh is not a cost to the owner at all. The brothel owner simply confers responsibility for paying the purchase price to the victim (Freed, 1997). In addition, the debt is further inflated with the victim's cost of living expenses such as housing (such as it may be), food (which may or may not be provided), and clothing. The total debt that some victims are expected to pay off through prostitution can be as high as \$40,000. (International Organization for Migration, 2003). For many victims paying off "their debt" is impossible, because

brothel owners continue adding to their balance with daily cost of living expenses. (Raymond & Hughes, 2001; Freed, 1997). And in cases where with time the debt is significantly reduced, the brothel keeper can simply sell the victim to another sex-restuaranteur and the debt-payment process begins anew. When ultimately, a victim's shelf-life expires, it is little bother to the brothel owner. The victim has yielded high profits, and after all, there is a world of fresh, ripe victims and a sex trafficker ready to reap the harvest (Pearson, 2001; Mcallister, 2000).

For Sexploitators around the world, it all adds up to a meat eaters delight—a veritable cornucopia of choices. It is a global banquet on human flesh, and human misery.

The Salvation Army Bangladesh: Storing Up “Treasure” in Heaven

The Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna Rivers and their tributaries criss-cross the flat, wet land of Bangladesh, where 90 percent of the land is less than 15 feet above sea level. Rice is the major food grain crop. Other crops include jute, wheat, tea, and vegetables. The capital city is Dhaka (E. Flintoff, personal communication, February 8, 2004).

With about 140 million people, Bangladesh has the seventh largest population of any country in the world. The congested old city of Dhaka, with 80,000 people per sq. km. is said to have the highest population density in the world. More than 80 percent of its people are Muslim, with a sizeable Hindu minority, as well as small groups of Buddhists, Tribals, and Christians. The major ethnic group is Bengali, and Bangla (Bengali) is also the dominant language, though English is widely used in government, commerce, and education (E. Flintoff, personal communication, February 8, 2004).

In some respects the country's condition, in particular that of Dhaka, is similar to the state of affairs in the fictional movie *Soylent Green* described earlier. The pollution is especially bad, a perpetual fog seeming to hang over Dhaka. And as just mentioned, the population is staggering. Poverty, too, like a plague, is ravaging millions. The poor are everywhere, living on the streets or in meager shacks loosely and haphazardly assembled from boards, poles, twine, and bits of corrugated metal. How they survive off the proceeds of their begging and scavenging is a mystery. For those blessed with work, a fair daily wage is about 120 Taka—roughly two U.S. dollars. Many earn less.

There is one “economic sector,” however, that does not appear to be lagging—the flesh trade. Bangladesh is a source country for women and children trafficked for international sex markets (as well as forms of labor exploitation), and additionally supports a substantial domestic sex trafficking industry (Hughes, Sporcic, Mendelsohn, & Chirgwin, 1999). It is in addressing Bangladesh’s domestic sex market that The Salvation Army Command has dedicated substantial time, energy and resources.

In Old Dhaka, women meet in a Salvation Army center. Some are old, some middle-aged, others quite young, but all are facing the same challenge: how to escape from the sex market.

The stories of how they each came to be in prostitution are all unique, yet share many commonalities. Some were orphaned and subsequently sold to a brothel by a family “friend” or relative; others were lost at train stations as children where a “kind” stranger sold them to the “care and shelter” of a brothel; others were victims of rape afraid to return to, or rejected by their families; and still more were lured with promises of work, but were instead taken to a sex market. For all, their suffering is greatly compounded by the contempt of society, their concern for the welfare of children they have borne, and the daily onslaught of sexual abuse that their bodies have endured in the brothel.

For a year they are able to meet in the respite of the Salvation Army center. During this time they are given counseling and encouragement, receive skills training in handicraft making, form friendships among themselves, and are refreshed by the love and caring of the program staff. Here they will hear that not only does God know of their suffering, but that He has suffered with them through his Son. The love and compassion offered in that room – only a few floors above the dusty and hectic street, and just a short distance from the red-light district – goes an incredible distance in transforming their lives. Most who have gone through the program have been able to find jobs and to leave prostitution behind for good.

The handicrafts they make are sold at The Salvation Army’s “Sally Ann” shop in Dhaka, as well as its sister shop in Norway. Decorative ornaments, napkin rings, and hand-made cards are among the goods for sale in the Dhaka store, which is frequented principally by expatriates living in Bangladesh. (The Westerner hungry for a taste of home can also enjoy a treat of waffles and coffee in the Sally Ann Coffee Shop.)

Other Salvation Army programs also manufacture goods that are sold in the two shops, and thus provide desperately needed

jobs for poor women at risk for sex trafficking and prostitution, as well as for women, who tragically, have already experienced commercial sexual exploitation. For example, The Salvation Army Savar Compound in Bangladesh is host to a knitting factory. In addition to producing blankets, sweaters, and scarves for export to the Norway Sally Ann Shop, the factory functions as a training center where women are taught the skills necessary to work industrial knitting machinery. A Salvation Army sewing center in Jessore provides training and work to rural women. Their hand-embroidered table linens are among the items sold by Sally Ann.

Development of the Sally Ann shop and its product line has been a long process and a learning experience. Interestingly, what today exists as a high-end retail shop had its beginning in potato chip manufacturing! While the chips were tasty and popular, in the end the enterprise was too labor intensive. Another abandoned venture was cookie production. Eight years later though, with constant care and attention, Sally Ann is blossoming. The Dhaka store is beautifully laid-out and stocked, and exports to Norway continue. Even so, running a business enterprise this complex is no simple undertaking, and "profit" remains elusive.

How does one measure profit in a project like this? Is it by financial statements and bottom lines or by the number of lives restored to their original dignity and grace? If we measure by the latter, today we can already see the glowing hope in the faces of women once ravaged by commercial sexual exploitation. But ultimately only when we stand on the other side of Jordan will we really be able to count all the treasure that has been stored up in heaven – the precious souls of these women and girls redeemed.

Closing the Sexual Steakhouse

Much like the steak dinners served in restaurants around the world, women and children are the main courses in the global sex market. In the selling of their bodies for sex there is a manifestation of cannibalism—humans consuming other humans. If the problem is daunting because the scale of the global appetite, it is even more overwhelming in light of the blindness and callousness of society-at-large, as well as much of the church, to the existence of this fiendish feast.

The Salvation Army, in times past, responded passionately to this same crisis. In a letter published on July 11, 1885, in *The War* on the very topic of sexual trafficking, William Booth himself wrote: "Now something must be done, and somebody must do it.

Thank God, The Salvation Army never sees an evil without asking the question, 'Can anything be done to remove it?'" (Booth, 1885). More than a century later, once again The Salvation Army has begun to ask itself this question, and answers are on the horizon.

Specifically, General John Larrison has approved the formation of an International Anti-Trafficking Task Force within The Salvation Army and already steps have been taken towards its creation. Lt. Colonel Dawn Sewell, a veteran Salvation Army officer who has earned her stripes serving in appointments to some of the world's most difficult and afflicted areas, will facilitate the work of the 15 member group which is to have representation from each Zone. (Colonel Sewell also energetically manages International Headquarters' anti-trafficking desk, a position created only one year ago.) The formation of the task force will facilitate concerted and strategic efforts to combat sexual trafficking. And, too, there are Salvation Army Commands like Bangladesh that are fighting the problem at the grassroots, winning the battle one life at a time.

These are important steps toward closing the sexual steakhouse and ending the cannibalization of the world's women and children through sexual trafficking and prostitution. But it absolutely, unequivocally is not enough.

Babes in Brothel-land

In a town in Bangladesh: The entrance to the brothel is a narrow passage way winding its way back from the street. It opens into a courtyard around which are clustered a tattered, dilapidated assortment of shacks. The structures are partitioned to make small rooms each with doors that face the courtyard. Women mill about and carry-out their usual morning routine: washing of clothes and bodies, tidying of rooms, eating of breakfast.

And there among them are at least three little girls. They are lovely and to the outward eye appear the same as other children: like ones that go to school or that play childhood games with their friends. But, like the women they live with, their bodies are sold daily in acts of prostitution. We saw them, we spoke with them, we hugged them, and then we left them. Yes, for a variety of reasons, none of which seem good enough, we walked back through the winding alley and left them behind. There is every reason to believe they are still there—in the brothel—still being raped (but when there is money involved most people just call it prostitution).

Unless something miraculous happens they will stay there and grow up in the brothel. Once their breasts begin to develop

they will become less sympathetic to the eyes of the world. Christian compassion will wane. As they mature, people will assume they are women who chose this "profession" instead of it choosing them (Leidholdt, 1999). They will be dubbed "commercial sex workers" or more pejoratively as "prostitutes." These labels will be their brand-name. It will advertise to the world that like Jimmy Dean's sausage or Tyson's chicken, that they are human meat for sale. ❖

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