

Closed for business: The fight against human trafficking

by [Melisa Goss](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue



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A man steps into a small convenience store on a side street in Poipet, Cambodia, and buys a lottery ticket. He probably has no idea that in that same shop, only ten years ago, he could have bought a human being.

In a 2011 *New York Times* op-ed, Nicholas Kristof tells the story of the shop's transition from house of slavery to convenience store. During a 2004 trip to Cambodia, Kristof visited the brothel and freed two girls by "purchasing" them for \$350. "What staggers me," he said in an interview, "is that I got receipts for both of them." Over the last decade, Kristof has been one of many voices illuminating the dark world of sex trafficking. This attention to the issue, along with the dogged work of many NGOs, led to a crackdown in Poipet. While the police technically allowed the brothel to remain open, they began demanding higher and higher bribes from the brothel owners. When the owners saw their profits dwindling drastically, they closed up shop voluntarily.

The progress seen in Poipet is being echoed worldwide. In 2000, the U.S. Congress enacted the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which seeks "to combat trafficking in persons, especially into the sex trade, slavery and involuntary servitude; to reauthorize certain federal programs to prevent violence against women; and for other purposes." Out of the VTVPA grew the Trafficking in Persons report, which ranks nations according to their compliance in tackling human

trafficking. Nations that rank in tier one of a three-tier system are fully compliant with the minimal requirements, while those in tier three are virtually noncompliant and are subject to sanction by the U.S. government. When the report was first issued in 2001, 83 countries were represented, and only 12 met the first-tier requirements; in the June 2011 report, 180 nations were represented, with 32 nations in tier one and 22 in tier three.

Kristof praises the pressure that the U.S. has put on some of the worst offenders. "It doesn't solve the problem," he says, "but it sure diminishes it." The United States is not the only nation leading the fight against human trafficking. In 1999, Sweden enacted what has become known as the Nordic model, a law that permits the selling of sex but prohibits the buying of it. By taking the emphasis off of prostitutes and focusing instead on those who purchase sex, Sweden cut street prostitution in half. Before the ban went into effect, levels of prostitution in Stockholm and its Scandinavian counterparts, Oslo and Copenhagen, were about the same. After the ban was put in place, however, the Swedish rates were cut in half, while rates in Oslo and Copenhagen tripled.

While it's possible that increased prostitution in Oslo and Copenhagen is due to new business coming from Sweden, other countries are impressed by Sweden's success and have followed its lead. Both Norway and Ireland have adopted the Nordic model, while Finland, Denmark and other European nations have enacted portions of it. New York City is considering implementation of the same model.

Kristof is hopeful. "Will it work?" he asks. "We won't really know until we try it, but it seems to me it's more promising than other approaches."

Meanwhile, nongovernment organizations are accelerating efforts to fight the sex trade. These organizations, which are found in both large and small cities, focus on trafficking at the global, national and local levels. Many take a more grassroots and person-to-person approach to community problems. International Justice Mission, based in Washington, D.C., raises global awareness of human trafficking and other forms of oppression by working with law enforcement, lawyers and other professionals in Africa, Asia and South America. Organizations such as Apne Aap in India and Somaly Mam in Cambodia focus on domestic awareness by advocating for victims and those at risk of becoming victims.

Other agencies focus on human trafficking at the local level. Be Free, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, works in coordination with Nightlight, a Christian NGO in Bangkok, but its work is primarily with victims of sex trafficking in the communities of South Dakota.

Be Free pastors Dennis and Glennis Klumper are eager to open Philip's House (named for the home where the apostle Paul lived in Caesarea). As a faith-based community, Philip's House will reach out to vulnerable women and bring them into the community.

"What we've discovered," Dennis Klumper says, "is that if you fill the house with women who are severely traumatized, they don't get better. They feed each other's dysfunctions, issues and brokenness." By bringing victims of trafficking into a broader community, Be Free can have a greater impact on their lives. Glennis Klumper says that "many of the women have never known real love," and believes that they can learn to be loved in a covenant community.

While no single type of intervention will end the scourge of human trafficking and prostitution, the current combination of global and local attention has proven effective in countries around the world. The innovative efforts of governments and nonprofit organizations are gradually shaking loose the grip of human trafficking on women, families and communities.