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NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

## If This Isn't Slavery, What Is?

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia

Barack Obama's presidency marks a triumph over the legacy of slavery, so it would be particularly meaningful if he led a new abolitionist movement against 21st-century slavery — like the trafficking of girls into brothels.

Anyone who thinks it is hyperbole to describe sex trafficking as slavery should look at the maimed face of a teenage girl, Long Pross.

Glance at Pross from her left, and she looks like a normal, fun-loving girl, with a pretty face and a joyous smile. Then move around, and you see where her brothel owner gouged out her right eye.

Yes, I know it's hard to read this. But it's infinitely more painful for Pross to recount the humiliations she suffered, yet she summoned the strength to do so — and to appear in a video posted online with this column — because she wants people to understand how brutal sex trafficking can be.

Pross was 13 and hadn't even had her first period when a young woman kidnapped her and sold her to a brothel in Phnom Penh. The brothel owner, a woman as is typical, beat Pross and tortured her with electric current until finally the girl acquiesced.

She was kept locked deep inside the brothel, her hands tied behind her back at all times except when with customers.

Brothel owners can charge large sums for sex with a virgin, and like many girls, Pross was painfully stitched up so she could be resold as a virgin. In all, the brothel owner sold her virginity four times.

Pross paid savagely each time she let a potential customer slip away after looking her over.

"I was beaten every day, sometimes two or three times a day," she said, adding that she was sometimes also subjected to electric shocks twice in the same day.

The business model of forced prostitution is remarkably similar from Pakistan to Vietnam — and, sometimes, in the United States as well. Pimps use violence, humiliation and narcotics to

shatter girls' self-esteem and terrorize them into unquestioning, instantaneous obedience.

One girl working with Pross was beaten to death after she tried to escape. The brothels figure that occasional losses to torture are more than made up by the increased productivity of the remaining inventory.

After my last column, I heard from skeptical readers doubting that conditions are truly so abusive. It's true that prostitutes work voluntarily in many brothels in Cambodia and elsewhere. But there are also many brothels where teenage girls are slave laborers.

Young girls and foreigners without legal papers are particularly vulnerable.

### Kidnapping, torture and confinement: the life of a young girl.

In Thailand's brothels, for example, Thai girls usually work voluntarily, while Burmese and Cambodian girls are regularly imprisoned. The career trajectory is often for a girl in her early teens to be trafficked into prostitution by force, but eventually to resign herself and stay in the brothel even when she is given the freedom to leave. In my blog, [www.nytimes.com/ontheground](http://www.nytimes.com/ontheground), I respond to the skeptics and offer some ideas for readers who want to help.

Pross herself was never paid, and she had no right to insist on condoms (she has not yet been tested for HIV, because the results might be too much for her fragile emotional state). Twice she became pregnant and was subjected to crude abortions.

The second abortion left Pross in great pain, and she pleaded with her owner for time to recuperate. "I was begging, hanging on to her feet, and asking for rest," Pross remembered. "She got mad."

That's when the woman gouged out Pross's right eye with a piece of metal. At that point in telling her story, Pross broke down and we had to suspend the interview.

Pross's eye grew infected and monstrous, spraying blood and pus on customers, she later recounted. The owner discarded her, and she is now recuperating with the help of Sina Vann, the young woman I wrote about in my last column.

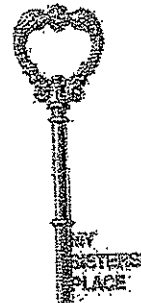
Sina was herself rescued by Somaly Mam, a trafficking survivor who started the Somaly Mam Foundation in Cambodia to fight sexual slavery. The foundation is working with Dr. Jim Gologly of the Children's Surgical Center in Cambodia to get Pross a glass eye.

"A year from now, she should look pretty good," said Dr. Gologly, who is providing her with free medical care.

So Somaly saved Sina, and now Sina is saving Pross. Someday, perhaps Pross will help another survivor, if the rest of us can help sustain them.

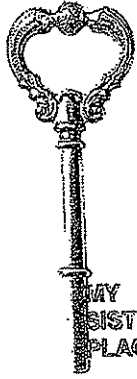
The Obama administration will have a new tool to fight traffickers: the Wilberforce Act, just passed by Congress, which strengthens sanctions on countries that wink at sex slavery. Much will depend on whether Mr. Obama and Hillary Clinton see trafficking as a priority.

There would be powerful symbolism in an African-American president reminding the world that the war on slavery isn't yet over, and helping lead the 21st-century abolitionist movement. □



MY SISTERS' PLACE

THE NEW YORK TIMES EDITORIALS/LETTERS SATURDAY, JANUARY 10, 2009



### Reality of Sex Trafficking

To the Editor:

Re "If This Isn't Slavery, What Is?"  
(column, Jan. 4):

Nicholas D. Kristof gruesomely illustrates the stark reality that is human sex trafficking and, in short, modern-day slavery.

This industry, among the top three most profitable criminal activities in the world, uses a woman's body as collateral, sold time and again.

The slavery of women and girls for the commodity of sex thrives underground and devastates the lives of invisible victims in cities and towns everywhere.

Tragic stories, like that of Long Pross, the teenage girl in Mr. Kristof's column, are all too real for the estimated 800,000 victims, mostly women and children, who are kidnapped and exploited each year.

If President-elect Barack Obama and his administration choose to be a leader, as Mr. Kristof suggests, of the 21st-century abolitionist movement, then the world's citizens must step out and fuel the movement with the outrage and resistance necessary to end the daily terror that enslaves women and girls abroad and here at home.

KAREN CHEEKS-LOMAX

White Plains, Jan. 6, 2009

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