



Oral Remarks

of

Sharon B. Cohn

Director of Anti-Trafficking Operations, International Justice Mission

Before

**The Subcommittee on Wellness and Human Rights
Committee on Government Reform
United States House of Representatives**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman for convening this important hearing on the Ongoing Tragedy of International Slavery and Human Trafficking. My name is Sharon Cohn and I serve as Senior Counsel and Director of Anti-Trafficking Operations for International Justice Mission. We believe that modern day slavery is fatally vulnerable to the vigilant efforts of the U.S. Government and the international community to crush this trade.

I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to share a little of what IJM has learned through its field experience around the world. IJM deploys criminal investigators around the world to infiltrate the brothels, use surveillance technology to document where the victims are being held, and then identify secure police contacts who will conduct raids with us to release the victims and arrest the perpetrators. We then coordinate the referral of these victims to appropriate aftercare, and support and monitor the prosecutions. IJM investigators also infiltrate industries that bond children into slavery to work with local authorities in Asia to break those bonds and prosecute the offenders.

IJM investigators have spent literally thousands of hours infiltrating the sex trafficking industry and working with government authorities around the world to bring effective rescue to the victims and accountability to the perpetrators. Through this, I think we have gained some valuable insight as to the nature of the crime and its weakness. Due to time constraints I will limit my remarks to sex trafficking.

You have the heard the statistics that testify to the magnitude of the tragedy. Research has shown that trafficking is the third largest source of profits for organized crime after guns and drugs, generating billions of dollars annually. How does it thrive so unhindered? Our experience has taught us this: sex trafficking thrives because it is tolerated by local law enforcement in countries around the world. In cities throughout the world, millions of women and girls are trafficked and offered to customers in brothels. Every day millions of customers are able to find these girls. It does no good at all for the brothel keepers and pimps to hide their victims. In fact, to make money on their investment, the pimps and brothel keepers must make their victims openly available to the customer public – and not just once, but continuously, and over a long period of time. Obviously, therefore, if the customers can find the victims of sex trafficking whenever they want, so can the police. How, therefore, do you possibly get away with running a sex trafficking enterprise? You do so only if permitted by local law enforcement. Generally, this is facilitated by bringing the police into the business and sharing the profits with them in exchange for protection against the enforcement of the laws that are openly and continuously violated every single day the business is in operation.

This truth is most tragically demonstrated through the lives of the little ones we are privileged to assist in rescuing. A friend of mine, Simla, was raised in a village off a main road to a small city in Asia. When she was 14, a woman in her village sold her to a trafficker. Simla was told she would be working in a noodle shop. When the trafficker brought her to the city, she was sold to a brothel and told that she would have to have sex with customers in order to pay off her debt – a debt that she acquired against her will when the brothel keeper paid the trafficker.

For two and a half years, Simla was subjected to sexual assaults, multiple times a day. She was beaten when she cried, beaten when she was sleepy, beaten when she said she wanted to go home. But the

worst beating Simla received, the one that made it difficult for her to walk, was the beating she received the day after a police officer complained that Simla didn't smile after he finished raping her. He would come to the brothel regularly to receive his payment for providing protection for the brothel and sometimes he would rape the girls instead of receiving a cash payment. Simla's friends in the brothel, also children, confirmed that other officers regularly visited the brothel and abused the girls.

IJM investigators identified Simla and others in the brothel as minors and brought our evidence to the attention of the local police. On the night of the raid, a member of the police called the brothel to warn her. The brothel was empty of children by the time it was raided. As the children told us later, they were loaded onto the back of a flat bed truck, covered with a blanket and taken across town. Ultimately, senior police officials communicated down the chain of command that the children must be found and released. Simla and her friends were rescued by the authorities several days later.

And just two weeks ago, I interviewed a victim who escaped a brothel where 100 girls, including 30 minors were held captive by their brothel keepers. She told me that a couple of months ago two girls escaped. The brothel keeper phoned the police and two hours later the two girls were returned in a police car by two uniformed officers, bound by rope and beaten. They were subsequently shot and killed by the brothel keeper as a warning to the girls who remained in slavery.

Stories like Simla's are repeated throughout the world where local law enforcement does the bidding of the traffickers and brothel keepers. Without police protection, the brothel keeper could not succeed, and with it, he cannot fail. Once the police switch sides, the brothel is fatally vulnerable and effective law enforcement can provide rescue and secure arrests. Until they do, it is the girls that are fatally vulnerable.

In the end, traffickers only care about two government actions: Is the government seriously threatening to actually send me to jail for doing this? And is the government seriously threatening to remove the police protection that I have paid for?

And this vulnerability is exceptionally good news. Because, it means that sex trafficking is a disaster that can be prevented and that can be stopped. We saw just a glimpse of that in Cambodia where over the last three years we have heard about and investigated the sale of tiny children to sexual exploitation by pedophiles. Our investigation confirmed the open sale of minors as young as five years old. A man need only to walk into the brothel community for within five minutes in the middle of the day a pimp would offer him “small small” and take him into a brothel where a dozen pre-pubescent children would be auctioned for sale. Web sites touted this place as a haven for sex tourists. With the leadership of the U.S. Embassy under Ambassador Charles Ray in Cambodia, we were able to work with Cambodian authorities to rescue 37 victims, about 10 of whom were under 10 and secure the arrest of several of the individuals who trafficked and profited from the torture of these children.

IJM had the privilege of providing testimony and videotaped evidence at the trial. (I would be happy to show the subcommittee the video evidence but was unable to show it publicly to protect the privacy of the victims.) Half the brothel community came to the trial to see whether someone was really going to get in trouble for selling the little ones. And on October 15, a Cambodian judge sentenced 6 defendants to sentences of imprisonment ranging from 5 to 15 years for violations of Cambodia’s law against trafficking. The brothel community watched their colleagues get sentenced and the English, French and Khmer newspaper displayed on the their front pages that there was in fact accountability for the sexual exploitation of children. And this means, most importantly, that not only were the 37 rescued, but that others who would have fallen prey to these traffickers or to others of like-mind will be

spared the torture because word will spread through Cambodia that you go to jail for buying and selling children.

The State Department's TIP office plays a vital role in conveying the seriousness with which the U.S. Government views human trafficking and the expectation that foreign governments will relentlessly combat this trade. This is transmitted under Cong Miller's courageous leadership not only through objective assessing countries' anti-trafficking activities in the TIP Report but in providing the necessary resources to government and non-government agencies to combat this trade.

We believe that it is vital that U.S. embassies be on the front lines of communicating the priorities of the U.S. Government to generate political will and to provide the resources necessary to effectively crush the trade. The rescue of the children in Cambodia and the subsequent prosecution and conviction of the traffickers would not have been possible without the encouragement, participation and monitoring of the U.S. Embassy through Ambassador Ray. Such active participation by U.S. embassies around the globe would save literally thousands of children from victimization.

Thank you again for calling this hearing and inviting us to participate.