

# A New Form of Abolitionism: Women organize to fight 'sexual slavery' around world

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AP Photo

**SOLIDARITY.** Feminists rally at convocation in Nairobi that ends today. From left, Ranjana Kumari of India, Betty Friedan, Mary Nagila of Kenya and Nawal el Saddawi of Egypt. / **Page 4**

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# A New Form of Abolitionism

## Women organize to fight 'sexual slavery' around world

**By Brooke W. Kroeger**  
Newsday Staff Correspondent

Nairobi — Sex tourism, international traffic in women and children, pimp-controlled prostitution, forced and arranged marriages and sexual mutilation: this is what the women's rights groups mean when they talk about "sexual slavery."

Frustrated by the resistance of international agencies to confront the problems, feminists — many gathered in Nairobi for "Forum '85" — began their own effort two years ago to organize an international network against these practices.

Women active in the campaign offered a workshop today to explain the problem and work on solutions. It is one of 1,000 such meetings on women's and political issues held over the past 10 days at the convocation here of 11,000 women from all over the world. The unofficial forum, marking the last year of the UN-declared Decade for Women, ends today.

"The issue is women who are trapped into sexual servitude," said Charlotte Bunch, a New York feminist who is here for the forum and also is an observer to the official UN Conference on the Decade for Women being held downtown. That meeting ends July 26.

Bunch has been a prime mover in organizing an international network to combat the abuses.

"Sexual slavery involves any situation a woman is in, in which she cannot get away, and in that situation is physically abused or sexually

exploited," wrote Kathleen Barry, who teaches at Brandeis University, in a report on a Rotterdam meeting of 40 women from various countries two years ago. The network was formed there.

Even in defining the issue, there are problems, Barry explained.

"Severing child from adult female prostitution has been part of the tradition of silence which has cloaked female sexual slavery in invisibility," she wrote. "It confuses the issue."

For one thing, some countries have simply lowered the age of consent, thus making more and more younger females available to customers.

"In the United States today," Barry said, "the scandals which are periodically raised exposing child prostitution and pornography have to do only with very small children, because 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds are socially considered to be adults."

In a report on the Rotterdam meeting, Awa Thiam of Senegal, referred to female circumcision, which is practiced on about 65 million women and girls in Africa and the Mideast. She called it "an explicit denial to woman of her sexuality. The beliefs which accompany this practice make it clear that a woman's sexuality is her husband's property and for his use. This is but one more of the examples of how the practices which define sexuality in prostitution are spread to women in all classes and categories." Thiam is director of the Commission for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilations.

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### Bella Steals Show, Part II

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As with many of the issues taken up by forum participants, the problem derives not only from the perceptions of women in general or from male lechery, but from the way those perceptions are encased in long-held religious and cultural traditions. Added to that, and probably more significant, are the enormous profits available to the perpetrators and the harsher economic realities of life for the world's poor. Depending on the culture, the problem takes different forms.

In Asia, for example, there are the "sex tours" — vacation packages centered on sexual activity — from Japan and Europe, the impact of the U.S. military presence in the Philippines and the residual nature of Bangkok's "biggest brothel in Asia" which accommodated American servicemen on rest and recreation tours during the Vietnam War.

By unofficial estimates, there were 700,000 women involved in prostitution in Thailand in 1982 compared with 20,000 before 1950, reported Siripornkrobanek, a Thai woman involved in the fight against sex tourism in her country through a group called Friends of Women.

"What they've done is turn a wartime industry into a peacetime industry," Bunch said. "Last year, after a fire in a Bangkok brothel, two-thirds of the women died because they were chained to their beds."

The sex tours are packaged vacation plans offered sometimes by businesses as a work incentive. They include airfares, hotel rooms and some tourist attractions, but primarily are designed to provide women for unlimited sexual use.

Yayori Matsui, a Japanese journalist with the Asian Women's Association, explained in a report distributed at the forum how the issue of sex tourism first came to her attention — through a newspaper report of the Japan-Korea National Council of Christian Newspapers in 1973.

Koreans at the session accused their Japanese colleagues: "We wish to call your attention to the shameful fact that many Japanese tourists, whose numbers have been ceaselessly swelling, are making Korean women into sexual slaves."

She said the number of Japanese tourists going to Korea had doubled since 1965 and, in 1971, Japanese outnumbered American tourists. Two years later, Japanese represented 80 percent of the 500,000 foreign tourists visiting Korea.

"Since the great majority of them were and continue to be men, it is like a giant parade of lechers," said Matsui, who was to address today's panel.

The U.S. Seventh Fleet, Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Base saturate the Philippines with servicemen who constitute the highest percentage of customers seeking prostitution in the country, Barry said.

Sister Mary Soledad Perpinan of the Third World Movement Against

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the Exploitation of Women reported on interviews she conducted with 614 Filipina prostitutes and found that most of them became prostitutes to "earn money to send home."

The study also showed that "the families' sense of shame and inevitable rejection make prostitutes keep their trade a secret."

Suzuyo Takazato, a Japanese social welfare consultant, reported that some Japanese men defend the tours as a form of economic aid to Thailand and better than sending charity. The situation is validated not only by the poor families who need money at home but also by gov-

ernments and their new economic policies encouraging tourism.

Traffic in "au pair" girls has been recognized by the United Nations and the international human rights community as "pre-prostitutional."

In many cases, these household workers end up in involuntary servitude and sometimes the job agencies that import her are merely fronts for channeling women into prostitution, Barry said.

There is also a "mail-order bride" industry that involves Latin American and Asian women who are lured into leaving their countries on promise of marriage but end up as prostitutes. The children of war, of-

ten orphaned and hard to trace, are similarly victimized.

In India, there is the *deva-dasi* tradition, a practice of paying fees to families for girls who are then dedicated to a god or goddess to serve in temples. Opponents contend this is only prostitution with religious sanction — and contrary to law.

In the United States, Bunch said, the major issue is trafficking in teen-aged runaways who have no economic options and find themselves in situations where they cannot return to their families because they are often escaping sexual violence at home.

"They are easy prey," she said.

"Many times they endure sexual abuse at home and accept being befriended and taken care of by a pimp and then, in a few months, turned into prostitutes. They often become addicted to drugs and find it hard to escape. They can't go back to their families and anyway, they're watched."

"There are no significant programs for these girls," Bunch said.

Bunch said the network now consists mostly of a communications system.

"It moves slowly," she said. "There has been consciousness-raising about the issue. That's the first stage and, at some level, the easiest."