

Sex trafficking in Jamaica - a modern form of slavery

01 October 2007

By Deborah Gabriel



Developing countries are too often over-dependent on tourism to bring in foreign revenue - but foreign currency is not all that tourists bring with them, as last week's report on sex trafficking in Jamaica demonstrates. Jamaica is a victim of its own natural beauty and to a degree, its aggressive marketing and over-portrayal as the European holidaymakers dream island; perfect for sun, sea and sand. But there is one other holiday attraction to add to that list - 'sex.'

It is ironic that tour operators, especially those who run all-inclusive resorts which ensure that foreign visitors rarely spend their money in locally run shops, are the first to warn tourists of the dangers of straying outside their resorts. This is because it is predominantly middle-aged, over-weight European women who are keen to explore the local talent, mostly young, poor Jamaican men, often teenagers who are willing to trade their bodies for money. These young men, not only exchange sex for cash with middle-aged European women - but middle-aged European men, too.

Adult- only sex resorts in Jamaica have helped to conjure up the image of the country as a free and easy island where anything goes. But last week's report by Shared Hope International, a non-profit organization that focuses on helping victims of sex trafficking, is a grim reminder that in countries like Jamaica, the tourist industry often masks an organized sex trade industry where individuals are coerced into prostitution and the operators are making millions of dollars a year.

The report and documentary 'Demand' followed a year-long investigation on commercial sexual exploitation which suggests that countries are often "compliant" in sex trafficking through a culture of tolerance, which allows the sex industries to flourish. Whilst women and children are trafficked from rural to urban areas to facilitate the sex trade, the report observes that boys are increasingly in demand.

Jamaica is both a source and destination country for children who are trafficked internally for sexual exploitation. Although the Jamaican government passed the Child Care and Protection Act in 2004, no action has been taken against traffickers who sexually exploit children. But it is time for the Jamaican government to stop turning the other cheek. When the under-developed bodies of young people - the hope for a nation's future are being used to generate millions of dollars, predominantly for Europeans whose motive is purely economic - does this not draw a parallel with the chattel enslavement of the ancestors of these children a few hundred years ago?

Lest there be any confusion as to just how denigrated these women and children are and how they are viewed by those who exploit them; below is an advertisement by Jamaican Singles Vacations Ltd; which appears in the Demand report:-

"The Ultimate sex tour, beautiful, black teens as your personal escorts. Jamaican girls are known for firm bodies in every, chocolate shade, just made for loving...Jamaica remains a popular destination among those seeking to satisfy sexual appetites."

Is this any different to the opinion held by colonial administrators on the enslaved African women whom they raped and maintained as concubines? Edward Long, the colonial historian, wrote in Volume II of the *The History of Jamaica* published in 1774:

"He who should presume to shew any displeasure against such a thing as simple fornication, would for his pains be accounted a simple blockhead; since not one in twenty can be persuaded, that there is either sin; nor shame in cohabiting with his slave." [1]

[1] Taken from Ch 3; p.38 of 'Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora' by Deborah Gabriel.

Article published by Colourful Network