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Review of Happy Endings

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Comment on “Happy Endings?”

Tara Hurley’s documentary on Asian spa-brothels in Rhode Island

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Several people have asked me for my opinion about the film “Happy Endings?” On Sunday, I had the opportunity to see the entire film. Here are my comments.

The film should not be viewed by underage children because it includes a sex act filmed in one of the spa-brothels. Some adults may be offended by this.

This is not a film that should be used for education on sex trafficking.

Tara Hurley, the filmmaker, has testified before the RI House Judiciary Committee and said on talk shows that based on observations making the film, there is no sex trafficking in Rhode Island. This is the view that is conveyed by “Happy Endings?”

There are serious omissions of information about the people in the film and political biases that the filmmaker does not acknowledge.

The filmmaker does not identify the three Korean women interviewed in the film as brothel owners or operators. They are not the women doing the sex acts. By definition, the women interviewed in the film are women pimps and possibly traffickers. The women-pimps have a vested interest in saying that the women are there voluntarily. (Letting the women-pimps speak for the women doing the sex acts is like letting the owners of a sweat shop speak for the people running the sewing machines. Of course, they say the workers are content.)

Much of the film was made at an Asian spa-brothel called Central Health (76 Derry Street Providence). This brothel was included in a federal investigation of Asian Organized Crime for sex trafficking and money laundering. It was one of 31 brothels in an organized crime network operating along the east coast from Boston to South Carolina. (U.S. District Court, Eastern

District of New York v. Tae Hoon Kim, Sung Chul Il, Fnu Lnu, Tae Jun Park, Kyong Polachek, Byong Il Son, Jin Sook Kim Lee, and Miae Choi-son, August 14, 2006.) During this investigation victims of trafficking were identified. They were controlled with threats to their families in South Korea.

One woman-pimp who is interviewed in the film tried to open a spa-brothel in Fox Point (and was defeated by community organizing against it). She was the operator of Asian Fantasies spa-brothel in Warwick (1550 B Post Road), which was raided last month (April 11, 2009).

The third woman says at the end of the film that she is going to open her own spa-brothel.

We never hear the voices of the women at the bottom, the ones who are sexually exploited and often abused, and sometimes trafficked. We only hear the voices of the women-pimps and two male pimps.

Filmmaker Hurley does not identify close relationship to the sex industry. According to her own blog she has been asked by the Erotic Service Providers Union to be their representative in Rhode Island. A convicted madam from this organization visited her in February. They discussed strategies to decriminalize prostitution.

Hurley has been showing her film in sex industry venues (not human rights film festivals). The film "Happy Endings?" premiered at an erotic film festival (Cinekink) in New York City in January. Next it will be shown as part of a Sex Workers Film Festival in San Francisco in June. (The hostess of the festival is Carol Leigh, also known as "The Scarlet Harlot," who recently published a book entitled *The Unrepentant Whore*.)

The film has a grotesque quality to it. All the faces are blurred out, the voices are disguised. The camera often focuses only on the mouth or body of the speaker. There is grainy black and white footage from surveillance cameras inside the spa-brothel. For a number of scenes of men coming to the brothel, Hurley filmed from an upstairs window of the brothel.

If you already know something about sex trafficking in Rhode Island, you can pick-up a few interesting details from the film, but overall, most viewers will leave confused, or worse, they will believe what the women-pimps that say about women choosing to work in the brothels. It is not fair to the exploited and abused women to pretend that this film represents their lives.