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August 02, 2004, 8:50 a.m.

Traffic Lights

Glimmers of hope in the fight against human sex trafficking.

By Donna M. Hughes

Traffickers and pimps should consider finding honest work, because their days of exploiting and enslaving women and children are numbered.

As a result of the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, bringing foreign victims into the United States and coercing them into performing commercial sex acts is a felony. In 2002, Attorney General John Ashcroft made investigating and prosecuting trafficking cases a priority for U.S. Attorneys. Since 2001, the Justice Department has charged 149 human traffickers and secured convictions of 94 perpetrators. That is just the tip of the slavery problem in the U.S., over whose borders the Justice Department estimates 14,500 to 17,500 new foreign victims are brought each year.

Recently, the Department of Justice held its first [National Conference on Human Trafficking](#) in Tampa, Florida. The goal was to train local, state, and federal law-enforcement officials on how to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases in the U.S.

I was impressed by how much investigators, prosecutors, and witness advocates had learned in the last few years through discovering trafficking cases and bringing the perpetrators to justice. A couple of the presenters had not known what trafficking was, until they found a girl who was the victim of horrible crimes and had to figure out how to help her (and how to charge the criminals who'd harmed her).

Anna Rodriguez, a domestic-violence witness advocate in Florida, saw something that "didn't fit" when she did a home visit: a 14-year-old girl sitting silently in the corner with her eyes turned away. Rodriguez knew that something was wrong, and she returned to the house five times on the same day trying to find the answer. Her intuition and persistence paid off when she got the girl alone, and the girl was able to tell her that she was a slave for a batterer who forced her to pick tomatoes during the day, and raped her at night.

Rick Castro, a deputy sheriff from California, discovered a trafficking case involving a 14-year-old girl who was being used for prostitution. He did not know what trafficking was either, but he knew that what was being done to this girl was criminal. With the help of a nongovernmental organization that provided services for the girl, he was able to arrest the perpetrator and reunite the girl with her baby, who the trafficker's family held in Mexico.

Most of the presenters described how they discovered cases and what they learned about how perpetrators control their victims. Frequently there was overt violence, but often there was sophisticated psychological control and complicated schemes that made victims feel trapped. These nonviolent coercion tactics included instilling fear of banishment, starvation, or even bankruptcy of victims' families.

As investigators and prosecutors' awareness grew, they found themselves reviewing past cases for victims they had missed. Rick Castro said that he had raided 25 brothels before he came to understand trafficking. Now, he goes over those raids in his mind, thinks about the women, and wonders what he missed.

Lou de Baca, counsel for the criminal section of the civil-rights division of the Department of Justice, where federal trafficking cases are prosecuted, pointed out that culturally we got away from the idea that prostitution is slavery, thinking instead that it is a victimless crime. He said, "We were trapped in a paradigm and not thinking; as a result we missed a lot of victims. It haunts us."

Views of the sex-trade influence whether or not victims are identified. The Clinton-administration approach was based on differentiating between "free" and "forced" prostitution. Their anti-trafficking policies contended that trafficking was not connected to prostitution, and that, consequently, a flourishing sex industry accompanied by an increase in prostitution did not result in an increase in trafficking of victims. They were politically aligned with the Europeans, such as the Dutch and Germans, who have legalized prostitution and consider it a legitimate form of work for women. Following from this, when investigators come upon a potential case, the first question they should ask is: "Is this forced prostitution or are the women working freely?"

The Bush administration took a different approach, one that valued the dignity of each person and her right to be free from abuse and exploitation. President Bush said that prostitution was inherently harmful and linked to trafficking of victims. Robert Flores, administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, pointed out that President Bush and Attorney General Ashcroft set the bar high and called for the total eradication of trafficking and sexual exploitation, because anything less allows for some level of abuse to be acceptable.

The Bush-administration policies have resulted in identifying more victims of trafficking. During the conference, presenters emphasized that traffickers and pimps schooled victims on what they were to say to police. When questioned, victims never admitted they were under duress until they learned to trust the investigators or service providers, which often took days, even weeks, and multiple interviews.

Because the crimes against victims are so heinous, successful prosecution of cases was tremendously rewarding for prosecutors. Stanley Strauss, a supervisor of trafficking cases at the FBI described a case in which Honduran girls, some as young as 14, were brought to the U.S. for prostitution. Within three hours of crossing the border into Texas, the girls were in bars. Upon putting the perpetrators in prison he said: "I've never worked a case that was more meaningful." A seasoned professional from Queens, New York, who was involved in the arrest and conviction of ten pimps, said that was the "capstone of 22 years in prosecuting offenders in the criminal-justice system."

For all the good reports at the conference, there remains room for improvement. Sex trafficking victims age 18 or over were ignored. All of the sex-trafficking and pimping cases described involved underage victims. Speakers frequently talked only about the sex trafficking of girls. In describing which cases to pursue, one presenter went so far as to say that they separated pimping cases by whether there were adult or child victims. He said, "If they were adults, we took our time. There was no hurry." The criminal-justice system still has a long way to go in understanding the victimization of women in prostitution if they can say that the rape, exploitation, and enslavement of those age 18 or over requires no haste in ending it. Our laws are meant to protect adult victims as well.

The conference also ignored a major component that must be addressed in order to eradicate trafficking and sexual exploitation: the demand for victims. Last September, in a speech before the United Nations, President Bush issued a challenge to world leaders to combat the global sex trade, and specifically condemned perpetrators who are often referred to euphemistically as "clients" and "customers." He said, "Those who patronize this industry debase themselves and deepen the misery of others." And in his speech at the Department of Justice conference, President Bush said, "We cannot put [the criminal gangs] out of business until and unless we deal with the problem of demand." The conference fell short of meeting this challenge.

Yet overall, I was left with more hope than I have had since I started working against trafficking and sexual exploitation over 15 years ago. Usually at conferences I sit tensely,

listening to speakers who do not yet understand the nature of the problem or are missing clues because they do not look beneath the surface. At this conference — as more speakers described how they were learning about the tricks of the traffickers and pimps, and how they were learning to read victims' body language or see the pain in their eyes that led them to take a little more time and ask a few more questions — I felt that tension start to slip away. They were getting it. They are putting their compassion, intelligence, and commitment to justice to work.

There is a truism about what happens to people once they have gained an awareness of something: they do not unlearn it. There are people out there now uncovering pain and suffering they never knew existed, and working long hours to put the perpetrators in prison where they belong. There are tens of thousands of victims yet to be found, and thousands of perpetrators to be arrested. In practice, the criminal-justice system still arrests and deports more victims than criminals. Still, they are convincing me that if you give good people good laws and policies, they will do the right thing with them. The movement to end sexual exploitation and trafficking is underway, and it will continue to spread across the U.S. and around the world.

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