

*Human Trafficking: Minnesota's Hidden Slave Trade*

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“I became a middle class teenage sex slave...I was drugged and beaten and sexually assaulted over and over [by dozens of men] until I passed out...The police brought me home that morning and my parents were furious, thinking their daughter had snuck out to go party and have fun. They didn’t notice I was still in my pajamas and had no shoes on and that I was in shock.”

The phrase “human trafficking” is often associated with defenseless inhabitants of third-world countries who are sold into sexual slavery or forced labor. However, the above quote is the testimony of American citizen Theresa Flores, a fifteen-year-old sex slave living in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. For two years an organized crime ring controlled her through threats to herself and her unsuspecting family. Clearly, developed countries, like the United States, are not free of human bondage. Between 14,000 and 17,000 men, women, and children from various cultures are trafficked into the United States each year. Thousands more remain undocumented because they are citizens of the U.S. who are sold within their home nation. A surprising number of these unwitting victims are taken to Minnesota, a state that is only beginning to recognize human trafficking as a viable domestic threat. Human trafficking is a pressing worldwide issue and no country or state is completely blameless.

The United Nations defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force.” In a 2006 report, public safety personnel officially announced that this form of modern slavery has come to Minnesota. Traffickers lure their victims to the United States with false promises of a better life. These unassuming individuals, most commonly from countries including Mexico, Russia, Laos, and the Philippines, then travel to the U.S. only to be forced into the sex or labor industry with little or no pay. However, immigrants are not the only victims. Regardless of their country of origin, women with low self-esteem can easily be trapped in an abusive situation. Native American women and girls, for example, more commonly experience sexual abuse than other women living in Minnesota.

A 2008 report to the Minnesota Legislature on human trafficking reveals that between 2006 and 2007 there were a total of 1,811 trafficking-related charges and 729 convictions in Minnesota. However, many victims do not seek help either because they fear deportation or do not realize they are being exploited. Executive director Linda Miller of the nonprofit organization Civil Society explains, “[These victims are] from non-democratic countries where they have not learned of a system that can help, they’ve only learned of systems that hurt.” St. Paul policeman Sgt. John Bandemer attempts to further ameliorate victims’ fears, “The act they’re committing may be illegal. But because of the circumstances they’re doing it under, we’re not going to prosecute those people and we’re certainly not going to send them back...right into the hands that trafficked them in the first place.” The federal Violence Against Women Act is one such law that allows these freed slaves to remain legally in the United States.

Recent legislation further addresses Minnesota’s increase in human trafficking, particularly the sex trade. The United States Department of Justice ranks Minnesota as 13<sup>th</sup> in the country for sex trafficking. This somewhat shocking figure most likely results from Minneapolis’s international airport and the state’s high immigrant population and shared border with Canada. The economic recession has only stimulated this cruel trade. Senator Ann Pappas (DFL-St. Paul) is sponsoring a new bill to help protect victims and prosecute traffickers. This law will recognize prostitution as a form of sex trafficking. Pappas maintains that prostitution is a form of slavery, “You have vulnerable people who were abused or raped as children, who are flattered and cajoled or coerced into performing sex acts with strangers.” Vednita Carter, executive director of the victims’ rights group *Breaking Free*, estimates that there are currently 8,000 to 12,000 women in prostitution statewide in Minnesota, not solely in urban areas.

Sex slaves and other victims of human trafficking are bound to their abusers through fear. Traffickers physically and emotionally abuse their victims through starvation, beatings, rape, drugging, or the threat of deportation. Attorney Sonseere Goldenberg explains how foreign women, including her Russian client Tatiana Ivanova, are most commonly tricked into abusive marriages, “It’s a typical pattern. [These women are] courted by men who are looking for submissive non-American wives who will keep a home, who will be a slave in the bedroom, who will do all of their tasks...[The husbands then] keep [their wives] cooped up in a little apartment...and control everything they do.” Although Tatiana Ivanova escaped her servile marriage in Minnesota, many women still remain silenced.

Human bondage is a grave yet widely unrecognized human rights abuse. Still recovering from the shame of its history of black slavery, America does not wish to acknowledge that the vestiges of this inhumane practice still exist. Victims of this slave trade often remain unnoticed. Little awareness exists surrounding this issue because all too often human trafficking hides behind the guise of illegal actions, including prostitution or undocumented immigration. In this manner, the victim unfairly becomes the villain. Although the physical abuse in human trafficking situations is often terrible, the virtual stripping of the victim’s identity is perhaps the most dehumanizing. Freedom forms the foundation of the United States Constitution, yet it is still denied to so many. Theresa Flores emphasizes, “Slavery did not die 150 years ago like we believe...I know this for a fact because I was [a slave]. Human trafficking is the foremost youth and women’s issue of our day.” America’s “dirty little secret” of human trafficking must be exposed. Department of Defense Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz eloquently summarizes, “For those of us who are in [a] position to do something to combat human slavery, however small our contribution, neutrality is a sin.”

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