

SEX SLAVERY: AMERICA IN DENIAL

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SOCIETY calls them pros titutes, but it would be more accurate to call them slaves.

Hollywood glamorizes the "happy hooker" and the media deceive by portraying the exception (the woman who is enjoying the "high life" as a prostitute) as the rule. The reality is much more gruesome.

Just last week, the FBI rescued 48 teenagers, some as young as 13, who were working in the illegal sex trade. Suffice to say, they weren't taking bubble baths at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel with a Richard Gere look-alike.

Rather, young girls - and sometimes boys - are held hostage by a pimp, who forces them to turn tricks or auctions them off to the highest bidder.

Right here in America.

Consider: Had that FBI sting last week come a few years later, many of those rescued girls would be over 18, and people would argue that as adults they "chose" to become prostitutes - and the girls would be treated as criminals.

In fact, they're still simply sex slaves. And it *is* slavery, because they never see a dime of money from the pimps, and they have no freedom of movement.

Advocates talk ominously of the initial "seasoning period" when the victim is repeatedly raped, beaten, starved, locked in a closet and generally forced into submission. The pimp then gives her a new name and tells her she's now a prostitute.

Why don't they run away?

Linda Smith, the founder of Shared Hope International, rescues victims of the sex trade. She says, "The pimp tells her, 'I know where I got you and I will get you again, and what just happened to you it will be worse. If I don't get you, I will get your family - your grandmother, sister or mom.' After that, the girl looks like a willing participant, but she is terrified."

Some are kidnapped, like two cousins (ages 14 and 15) in Toledo, Ohio, who were grabbed during a walk in 2005 and forced to turn tricks at a local truck stop.

Some are runaways, like Ingrid Hayward's daughter, who was held captive in New York City for 11 months and forced into prostitution. Due to a lack of police resources, Hayward was left on her own to rescue her daughter.

Hayward told me, "Our country is in denial about this problem."

True. Human trafficking is a global epidemic, but one most Americans associate with Thailand, not Toledo.

Hayward started the Newark Coalition Against Human Trafficking, one of countless groups battling what advocates call modern-day slavery.

The frustration shared by every advocate I spoke to is with federal and local governments' unwillingness or inability to enforce the laws on the books.

"The Department of Justice prides itself in having increased their trafficking prosecutions 10-fold - but from a baseline of close to zero, it is not that impressive," says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of Equality Now. "Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, as of December 2008, the DOJ successfully prosecuted about 100 sex-trafficking cases, a dismal record."

Especially when you consider that the FBI estimates that 100,000 minors in America now live in forced prostitution.

Sadly, many officials hold tight to the fantasy that prostitution is a victimless crime, and don't make fighting it a top priority. But there is also the issue of a lack of resources. Even most major police departments don't have even one person dedicated to fighting this blight on our society.

But there is hope.

Obama has identified as his favorite predecessor Abraham Lincoln, the emancipator of slaves. Obama now has the ability to confront today's version of slavery with the power of the presidency.

Obama will have a major opportunity when the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Act is up for reauthorization in 2010. He can push for stronger language in the new bill, and for directing funds to police departments that crack down on sex trafficking with arrests and prosecutions of "johns," something that rarely happens.

But just as important, Obama should use the bully pulpit to force a cultural paradigm shift that says we as a society will not tolerate slavery.

Sex slavery - no matter the age of the woman - is not a choice. It's time someone talked about that. Who better than President Obama? kirstenpowers@aol.com

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