



Braun: Human trafficking a dark, expansive international issue

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Patti Sapone/The Star-Ledger

Debbie Marulanda, director Refugee Resettlement & Human Trafficking with Catholic Charities meets with a client in her Newark office in this December 2007 file photo.

NEWARK — Call it modern-day slavery. That's what President Obama called human trafficking last week, just a few days before the Rutgers Law School in Newark held an all-day symposium on the same topic — and the participants in the conference were eager to echo the drama and urgency provoked by the chief executive's words.

"We should call it slavery," said Kevin Ryan of Fair Haven, the president of Covenant House, an international organization that shelters exploited and abused young persons, many of whom were rescued from prostitution.

"Trafficking is a euphemism — it's slavery for sex and slavery for labor," said Ryan, the former state

commissioner of children's services who broke down several times describing his work with children in the United States and five foreign countries.

The conference, sponsored by the law school's **Human Trafficking Prevention and Prosecution Project**, had been planned for months before Obama spoke at the Clinton Global Initiative on Tuesday and announced an executive order requiring federal agencies to coordinate efforts to end the worldwide exploitation of men and women. The president called trafficking an "outrage" that "must be called by its true name — modern slavery."

His words gave both timeliness to the conference, co-sponsored by the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office, and also license to use the word slavery to describe a complicated phenomenon that is both like the historic slavery of Africans here and very much unlike it.

Rutgers law professor James Gray Pope, who introduced a discussion on trafficking of people for cheap labor, said slavery was "just one step away" from current efforts by international corporations to reduce their costs by moving plants to nations where workers are unprotected and work for what seems like virtually nothing.

"If your sole mantra is 'Keep labor costs low,' then it's just a few steps down to enslaved labor," he said. He was referring to places like Haiti where some workers might get paid, not in wages, but in food and shelter.

Still, human trafficking is not exactly slavery of the sort that was the subject of the Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln 150 years ago in the midst of the Civil War.

Human trafficking could be the abuse and exploitation of workers from low-wage countries. But it also could be — **as it was in a recent federal case in New Jersey** — the importation of young women from Togo who were sexually abused and made to work as hair braiders for virtually nothing. It also could be the abuse of domestic servants brought here by United Nations diplomats and kept as virtual prisoners.

It also might be, as described by a representative of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the international operations of labor recruitment firms that supply American companies with skilled but cheap labor that weakens the power of domestic unions.

"They were trapped and they had no place to go — they were desperate and in debt," said Daniel Werner of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit his center brought against companies that imported hundreds of South Asian welders to repair damage to oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico after Hurricane Katrina.

Or human trafficking — at least as defined by federal law — could be practiced on a much smaller and more personal scale, like that found in the complicated relationships between women and their male friends who hire their lovers out as prostitutes, often to pay for the drug habits they share. Complicated for a variety of reasons — not the least of which is that these women may not view themselves as victims.

"The men will lure them into a relationship and push them into prostitution. They'll say, 'You're doing this for us, honey,' and so the victims don't self-identify as victims," said Scoles. "They feel guilty about what they've done, they'll feel foolish. They will blame themselves, not the men who got them into it."

Scoles conceded that, without the help of the women who worked as prostitutes, prosecuting their pimps under anti-trafficking statutes can be difficult if not impossible.

"A lot of the victims will go back to prostitution, go back to the traffickers — they often keep an emotional attachment to them," Scoles said, comparing the women to victims of domestic



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Dr. Wade Horn, assistant secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services, speaks as the Most Reverend John Myers, Archbishop of Newark, looks on during a press conference announcing an effort to eliminate human trafficking. The effort is concentrating the resources of law enforcement and religious groups in this 2004 file photo.

violence who return to the men who beat them.

"Until the victim is ready to get help, there is little we can do to prosecute."

But that's only the beginning of how complicated the netherworld of human trafficking can get. Bridgette Carr, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School, contended that efforts to end sex trafficking will not end until there is what she called a "paradigm shift" in social attitudes so that women working as prostitutes are thought of, not as perpetrators or criminals, but as victims.

"We have to begin thinking of these women the way we think of victims of sexual abuse," said Carr. "We would not prosecute sexual abuse victims as criminals."

To the extent children are involved, participants agreed, that certainly should be true — and under-age prostitutes often are still prosecuted as juvenile delinquents. But what about women who are not coerced into prostitution, who take on the livelihood voluntarily — should they be treated as victims?

"Not every woman who is a prostitute has been coerced into it," said Min Liu, an assistant professor at Kean University who attended the conference. The audience, predominantly women — as were the presenters — included many representatives of organizations established to help victims of traffickers.

And what would happen if prostitution is legalized as it is in some European countries and, on a limited basis, in Nevada? Could anti-trafficking laws be used to prosecute the employers of women who are engaging in a legal activity?

"That touches on a raging national debate about whether sex workers should be treated as any other group of workers and allowed to work — or whether women who must consider prostitution as employment are ever really free to make that choice," said another participant, Frances Bouchoux, a senior associate dean at the Rutgers Law School-Newark.

"Those who are trying to resolve the real, practical problems associated with trafficking feel there is no sense trying to resolve that theoretical debate."

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