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Georgia Law Turns Focus on Sex-Trafficked Girls

By Diane Loupe
WeNews correspondent
Monday, May 23, 2011

The problem of child sex-trafficking is widely associated with foreign countries such as Thailand and India. Advocates hope new sex-trafficking laws like the one passed in Georgia will focus concern on U.S. girls.

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ATLANTA (WOMENSENEWS)--When a young woman here tried to escape her pimp in April 2010, his retaliation was swift and brutal. He ordered four other sex workers to beat the runaway until her eyes swelled shut and a bottle pierced her head.

Then the pimp locked the 21-year-old woman in a 3-by-5 foot dog cage overnight, bragging about her debasement by texting photos of the caged woman to other pimps. Police, tipped off by someone horrified by the photos, searched a hotel until they found the woman alive and arrested the pimp and prostitutes.

A new law here, aimed at helping protect victims of sexual trafficking, will likely change the way such a case is handled.

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Georgia legislators in April set higher fines and longer sentences on pimps, with a 25-year minimum prison sentence for coercing sex from anyone under 18. Buying sex with a 16-year-old carries a five-year sentence. The new statutes also protect adult women who were coerced into prostitution, such as the caged woman, from prosecution.

An estimated 250 to 300 underage teens and girls are sexually exploited each month in Georgia, says Kaffie McCullough, campaign director of A Future. Not a Past, a campaign to reduce juvenile prostitution in Georgia.

Many Georgians associate child sex trafficking with foreign countries and aren't aware that it's happening in their own state, says McCullough.

Malika Saada Saar is founder of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights, a group based in Washington, D.C., that works to prevent violence and exploitation of women. She echoes McCullough's complaint that U.S. child exploitation gets ignored.

American Girls 'Not Recognized'

There's support for "girls in India or Thailand, girls from fractured families, who have endured abuse, who



Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta

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are very vulnerable, who have been lured or kidnapped into being trafficked for sex," says Saar. "But girls from those same situations from American circumstances are not recognized as victims; they are cast down as bad girls making bad decisions."

McCullough says the new law allows prosecutors to seize the illegally gained assets of pimps and to use them for law enforcement and to provide minors with victim compensation funds to provide counseling and residential treatment.

State laws on human trafficking are relatively new so their effectiveness is unproven. But Saar wonders how effective the new laws will be, given what she sees as a failure by authorities to prosecute existing laws against statutory rape.

"The commercial sex industry has ceased to be an industry of adults," says Saar. "It's about buying girls. You talk to any pimp. He wants young girls; young girls make more money for him. Demand that exists is for very young girls."

This market demand is fueled in part by the larger society's hypersexualization of young girls, Saar says.

Saar wants to prevent girls from winding up in detention centers where they face the risk of further sexual harassment or violence.

"There's no opportunity to heal from the intense trauma that has been done to them...We have a long way to go in terms of reforming our juvenile justice system and our child welfare system," she says.

Saar supports a coordinated campaign to ask law enforcement to make prosecution of buyers an equal priority to the prosecution of traffickers.

McCullough agrees. "To me, if we don't stop the demand, we won't ever stop this issue. There are always going to be 13-, 14-, 15-year-old girls out there," she says. "We need to start making it not okay to buy them."

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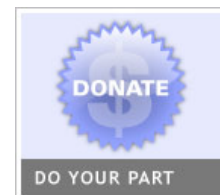
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My heartfelt sympathy to the young woman who was so viciously beaten and caged, and to the other young women who felt forced to beat a friend. To do such a thing may mean that they had lost all sense of any value in their lives, other than deep personal fear for their own lives and a vain hope that they might someday escape, somehow.

"Georgia State Sen. Renee Untermann, a Republican insurance executive, has championed the latest Georgia law, along with previous laws against child trafficking. "People don't want to hear about 50-year-old men having sex with 12-year-old girls," says Untermann."

This might read "50 year old men don't want to be prevented from having illicit sex with 12-year-old girls".

When I was a 12 year old girl in a small town on the prairies of Canada, there was one classmate from a single parent home, thus, she and her mother and her grandmother were all condemned as bad people, and the classmate was continually coerced into sexual situations with boys and men of the town. She was considered easy. No one blamed the father or grandfather. The grandfather was an alcoholic who had left the scene; the father was protected as having 'made a mistake' in getting my classmate's mother pregnant. Very typical, and no one wanted to protect any of the 3 generations of females caught in a grip of testosterone where men could let go of their usual moral stances on life - it was the bad women's fault, they said, and thus swept their own fault under their moral rugs! In many ways, our town was helpful and supportive of people in dire situations; this was a true exception where these women and girl were very badly used. It sounds as though Georgia is still where we were in the 1950's.





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