

Trafficking in vulnerable humans a tough problem

Times & Transcript (Moncton)

Thu Oct 1 2009

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Section: Opinion

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This summer, the film 'Taken' was released on DVD. The film is an action-packed affair about the abduction of two women by human traffickers and the subsequent rescue of one of them by her father -- conveniently a former CIA operative.

The movie is shocking for two reasons: the depiction of the horrors of human trafficking and how neatly and happily it is wrapped up in the end.

The movie's adrenaline kicks in when the father uses his contacts to determine what has happened to his daughter; he's given the grim assessment that she's been taken by traffickers who specialize in sex slavery and he has a window of 96 hours in which to find her -- after that, she's essentially disappeared.

What follows is an intense look into the world of human trafficking: people bought and sold like livestock, drugged and kept in incredibly abusive conditions.

Of course, by the end of the film the daughter is recovered, appears no worse for wear, and her relationship with her father seems greatly improved. Our horror at human trafficking is neatly contained by a happy ending: we can turn off the film, confident that such things only happen in movies.

The horror is real and should stay with us. The happy ending should not.

Human trafficking happens -- it happens here, in Canada -- and it doesn't often end so neatly.

Information on human trafficking is hard to obtain. We know that it's the fastest growing illegal industry in the world -- some project it to be the second most profitable criminal industry, trailing only drug trafficking.

According to a 2005 report by the United States Department of State, 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked internationally every year. Eighty per cent of them are female, and a large percentage of them children. Men are trafficked as well,

often as forced laborers. Human trafficking occurs domestically also, with citizens being shipped between regions of a country.

The personal trauma caused by human trafficking is beyond imagination.

The cost to society is also unfathomable -- the United Nations research on human trafficking says that organized crime is one of the primary ways in which national wealth is redistributed, influencing political power, societal relations and markets. Then there are the resources spent on caring for victims, prosecuting offenders, launching prevention programs and so on.

The reasons the industry can thrive and grow are just as layered and interconnected as are the costs of human trafficking.

Social problems enable human trafficking. It cannot be approached as a stand-alone issue. It is linked to lack of opportunity, poverty, instability.

Ask who is vulnerable, and those will be your victims of human trafficking. In Canada, **Aboriginal** women are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking because of high rates of violence, poverty, family breakdown and substance abuse issues.

Human trafficking has been a separate offense in the Canadian Criminal Code since 2005. To date there have been five prosecutions, all domestic cases.

Prevention and prosecution are two important elements to combating human trafficking.

Because of the interconnected nature of the factors contributing to people's vulnerability to human trafficking, a simple solution doesn't exist.

A bill is expected to be debated this fall in Ottawa that would allow immigration officers to not allow in the country people looking to immigrate to work as nannies, strippers and farm workers when the immigration officers think they will be 'at risk or vulnerable,' and to turn over the file for investigation of the potential employer.

The upcoming 2010 Vancouver Olympics will potentially be a focal point for Canada's attention to human trafficking.

It is widely thought that there is a link between massive sporting events and an increase demand for paid sex. University of British Columbia law professor Benjamin Perrins, an authority on the issue -- the United States State Department calls him one of nine worldwide 'heroes' in the fight against modern-day slavery --

says that the influx of visitors to Vancouver will only worsen the existing trafficking problem in British Columbia.

The organization REED (Resist Exploitation, Embrace Dignity) has launched a grassroots campaign, 'Buying Sex Is Not a Sport,' in anticipation of the games. The Salvation Army has also launched its own campaign, 'The Truth Isn't Sexy,' that features striking images of the abuse that victims of human trafficking face.

That campaign is troublesome in that it comes very close to treating all sex work as human trafficking.

Vancouver's Sex Industry Worker Safety Action Group has released a report on human trafficking, sex work safety and the 2010 Games that argues the link between large sporting events and an increase in sex work is untrue.

The group worries that exaggerated claims of an increase in human trafficking will have a negative impact on local sex workers -- for example, resulting in crackdowns on street sex workers, forcing workers to more furtive and riskier ways of doing sex work.

One group melds together prostitution with human sex trafficking.

Another says there's no proof that large sporting events cause an increase in human trafficking.

This is a situation made possible by the fact that hard facts on human trafficking are hard to come by.

This serves to illustrate the complexity of the issue of human trafficking, the need for informed dialogue -- not happily-ever-after movie endings.

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