

Visibility aids the fight against human trafficking

Zoe Ryan | Jul. 11, 2011



Sr. Mary Kuhlman

Her boyfriend forced her to move with him from Mexico to Florida when she was 16 years old. He was the only one she knew there.

He tried to kill her when he found out she was pregnant, and as a result, she ended up in the hospital.

With no friends or family in Florida, she turned to the Sisters of the Humility of Mary for help in 2007. The sisters made arrangements for her to be far away from her boyfriend, asking the Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin, Ohio, to take her in.

The police in Florida described her as a trafficking victim because the movement of a minor by another for purposes of sex is considered trafficking. When the Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin found out her story and more about human trafficking, "it was like an explosion in front of our eyes," said community member Sr. Mary Kuhlman. That was Kuhlman's first introduction to trafficking. "We had no idea [how big it was]. And part of it was just not looking."

Human trafficking is tied with the illegal arms industry as the second-largest criminal industry in the world, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and it is the fastest-growing.

"This is something that goes on, to varying scales, all over the world," said Alex Olivares, program director of the human trafficking department for Catholic Charities of the Venice, Fla., diocese.

Human trafficking has occurred if a person was induced to perform labor or a commercial sex act through force, fraud or coercion, according to the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000. The act, making trafficking a federal crime, was the first comprehensive anti-trafficking law in the United States. Many states as well have passed their own laws combating human trafficking.

Although all forms of trafficking affect both men and women, sex trafficking usually involves women being trafficked by men or sometimes by women.

"It's very difficult to draw the line or recognize the line between prostitution and trafficking because so many of the prostitutes started out being trafficked," Kuhlman said.

People enter into trafficking for a number of reasons, including running away from a bad home life, being prostituted by a spouse, being prostituted by family. Olivares said he also sees big operations, almost like organized crime.

"They use business cards; they put the girls in brothels that they move every weekend; they transport them from the northern part of the state down to the southern tip of Miami," Olivares said.



In such cases, it can be very dangerous work rescuing victims, said Ann Redmond, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet of St. Paul, Minn. Her community's Anti-Trafficking Working Group raises awareness and gives financial support to agencies that help directly with the issue.

"Everything in Catholic social teaching really supports the whole working against trafficking: the dignity of the individual, the option for the poor," Redmond said. "Poverty is the main reason -- if people weren't faced by poverty, they wouldn't be getting into this."

Shortly after taking in the girl from Florida, the Sisters of St. Francis in Tiffin received a call to take in another girl. They then studied the issue during the next year.

After that year of study, all four religious congregations in the diocese -- the Sisters of Notre Dame, the Ursuline Sisters of Toledo, the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, and the Sisters of St. Francis of Tiffin -- made a corporate statement that they would do all in their power to eliminate human trafficking, especially in northwest Ohio.

The Sisters of St. Francis in Tiffin opened a house in 2008 for victims of trafficking that can hold three women. The religious communities who made the statement meet monthly as the STOP (Stop Trafficking of People) committee, a group devoted to education and advocacy. Part of the committee also works with the spiritual needs of women who were trafficked.

In all of the U.S., there are only 50 beds available for trafficking victims to recover, according to Kuhlman. There are so many legal hurdles before one can open a center, especially if it is housing minors, she said. Receiving funding for operating costs is also an issue.

The Franciscan sisters of Tiffin provide a safe place, health care services, social services, English-language classes, GED assistance, child care services and more for women.

Their clients are "mostly American citizens from small towns, which is just a rude awakening for us," Kuhlman said. "When we first got involved, I think we were very much like a lot of people, thinking that this happens in foreign countries, and if we were going to help anybody we would be getting clients from foreign countries."

Statistics are difficult to rely on, so estimates are conservative. Kuhlman said that men and women who are trafficked usually do not self-identify: "They don't come out and say 'I'm being trafficked.'" Many times people who are exploited are threatened or fearful of what will happen if they reach out for help.

The Sisters of St. Francis have recently started building coalitions with social services, counselors, law

enforcement, judges, probation officers and parishes to talk about the issue and get key people involved so that when a client appears, the coalitions can provide wrap-around care. The FBI just trained the sisters on what it expects of such coalitions.

The good thing is that once people hear about the issue, most want to do something, Kuhlman said. That's why education is one of their primary goals.

Olivares said things would be a lot more difficult without all the donations from nearby parishes. Whenever he needs materials for a girl or a woman or her child, he gets "bombarded" with diapers and other necessities.

Kuhlman and her community receive loads of personal care items, toys and clothes for the girls and women, but the abundance of material isn't necessary for the few people they serve.

"It's a little harder, I think, to get people to go to the next level, where they will form coalitions among themselves to be on the lookout, to notify legislators of this issue and demand that there be laws that criminalize trafficking," Kuhlman said.

Redmond's introduction to the trafficking issue was when someone approached her and the sisters to hold a conference on international trafficking at the College of St. Catherine (now St. Catherine University) in St. Paul. Minnesota is a target area for traffickers because of its transportation systems and porous border next to Canada, Redmond said.

"In 2003, not a lot of people knew about trafficking, particularly that international trafficking was being done in Minnesota," Redmond said.

Kuhlman and Redmond both said they aren't the only ones combating human trafficking: Women religious all over are focused on combating this issue.

Some girls are prostituted or labored as young as 5 years old, Kuhlman said. "They're not rebuilding a life; they didn't have one basically," she said.

The first major challenge, Olivares said, is for the girls and women to get over the stigma and shame; then it's stabilizing and finding a new way of life.

"One of the things we try to teach our clients is self-reliance and betterment," Olivares said. "If you don't speak English, get in an ESL classes. If you want a respectable, decent job, go to job training. ... It's important to get them to see that there are other things out there for them, that they don't have to either fall back on the same old crutches or same old cycle that they've always been in."

Just feeling safe is difficult for these girls and women, Kuhlman said. One girl the sisters took in chose the smallest room in the house so she could see anything around her, and she always kept her door locked.

Trust is a major hurdle. The girls and women who have been in trafficking are so desperate to please, Kuhlman said, that they'll tell you whatever they think you want to hear.

"It takes a long, long time to build some trust where we're getting the real story, or that they will trust us to do what we say we will do," she said.

"They can be so attached to their trafficker that they protect the trafficker, even knowing they don't want to live like that," Kuhlman said. "This person has taken care of them, given them a place to be -- even though they may have beat them or raped them, [the victims] make the connection so strongly that part of their dilemma is breaking that."

Counseling helps them break that connection, she said, but "it's a slow process." Some of the girls and women chose to go back to their traffickers, Kuhlman said.

Finding counselors trained in this kind of psychological trauma is difficult, she said. Even then, an open appointment may not be for weeks.

Olivares' department provides counselors who work pro bono or for reduced fees. The children of the women receive counseling as well.

Catholic Charities receives a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. The funding had previously been limited to immigrants and foreign nationals, but over the last year revisions have been made to include domestic-born victims as well, Olivares said.

Olivares and his staff visit clients once a week, coordinate services, provide counseling and payment for housing and transportation, and work with law enforcement and immigration attorneys.

Clients come through referrals through law enforcement or other community agencies.

They are placed first in emergency shelters, then are moved to an apartment within a few months when they are ready and when law enforcement says that it's safe, Olivares said.

People have done very little to address the consumerism side of the issue, Kuhlman said. Traffickers aren't penalized much. In Toledo, Ohio, there is a "John school." If the traffickers are first-time offenders, they go to this school in lieu of jail to learn about how their actions affect women, and then their record is expunged. However, when women are picked up for prostitution, they are often arrested, which remains on their record.

Kuhlman said that more and more police are being trained in recognizing trafficking victims.

Wherever there are big gatherings of people, there's a good chance that there are people present who are trafficked, Kuhlman said. Sporting events such as the World Cup and other large gatherings, such as national political conventions, are a magnet for traffickers and the people they exploit.

Olivares met a woman who was beaten so badly her gums were split. It was a difficult case, he said, but once she was rescued and when she received her work permit and other materials to help, she was so happy and so eager to be moving to the next stage of her life.

"It's very few and far between and it's not the daily occurrence, but whenever something like that happens, it makes it worth it," he said.

Olivares says he doesn't think that trafficking is becoming more prevalent, but rather more people are aware of the problem.

"Whereas before it was almost completely invisible; now it's only half-invisible," he said. "So if someone goes to a restaurant and notices that the busboys and busgirls are changing every two weeks and they look afraid and they have marks on them, someone will report that to someone, whereas before they wouldn't have even thought twice about looking at them."

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