Panel tells of human trafficking in America

Trafficking event 'first of its kind'

By: Paulina Lopez

Posted: 2/8/08

Five speakers in the panel discussion, "Our Sisters are Not for Sale: Asian Trafficked Victims Into the U.S.," emphasized the lack of awareness of human trafficking among the public and the need for continued action against traffickers on Thursday.

Kavitha Sreeharsha, a staff attorney at Legal Momentum who works on policy advocacy for immigrant women, said trafficking stories about sexual slavery grab media attention but many other forms of human trafficking exist and are often ignored.

"Based on my experience, I have felt that there is probably someone trafficked into domestic servitude in every one of our neighborhoods," she said. According to the panelists many other women are trafficked into factories, restaurants and agriculture.

According to Sreeharsha, the State Department estimates that there are between 14,500 and 17,500 persons trafficked into the United States each year, but the numbers are far from accurate. Many will be enslaved in family homes, performing housework and caring for children, all while being intimidated into secrecy, she said.

"There never is barbed wire, locks on the door or security gates. Mentally, there is incredible fear," Sreeharsha said, citing veiled threats and deportation as intimidation tactics.

Approximately 110 students and community members attended the panel where speakers shared their professional experience with Asian human trafficking victims at the event, which was hosted by Korean American Women in Need and the Northwestern Asian American studies department.

Another panelist, Timothy Lim, highlighted the trauma that trafficked women often undergo at the panel held in the McCormick Tribune Forum. While pursuing a study on Korean-American sex trade, the political science professor at the California State University in Los Angeles interviewed a woman he named "A."

According to Lim, what began as a business recommendation from a friend became a life in America as a massage parlor sex slave. "A" was forced to sleep with 20 to 30 men each day to pay her capturers a debt for her illegal passage into America. Each expense she indirectly acquired, including the condoms her clients rarely used, would be hers to repay. It took five years before police finally rescued her, Lim said.

The panelists discussed solutions to human trafficking and the sex trade, focusing on activism and awareness.

"If there were no demand, predominantly from men, for young vulnerable bodies there would be no sex trade," said Rachel Durchslag, executive director for the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation. "Young men are growing up in a pornified culture. They are not hearing women's voices. We need to let people know the truth."

Jenny Choi, program associate for KAN-WIN, said she made arrangements for this panel hoping to spread interest in the subject among Asian communities. Choi said she was pleased to host the event at Northwestern, where students could be part of the discussion.

"There should be more collaboration between the university and community organizations," Choi said. "I feel like we could really get some work done."

Weinberg sophomore Sarah Malin said she enjoyed learning more about trafficking than the media usually portrays.

"I thought it was really impressive," she said. "They had people from both academic and non-profit fields."

Ji-Yeon Yuh, the director of Northwestern's Asian American studies at Northwestern and the moderator of the event, said the "ground-breaking" panel was the "first of its kind." Yuh showed the audience a video portraying the female victims of human trafficking at the beginning of the event.

"They are our sisters, our best friends," she said. "This is an issue that is close to our hearts, that we should all care about."

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