

The U.S. Senate recently passed a resolution to make January 11 a National Day of Human Trafficking Awareness. In every country throughout the world—including the United States—women and girls are trafficked and enslaved for sex. They are someone’s mother, daughter, sister, friend—hidden behind locked doors and pulled shades, forced against their will to engage in sex acts with dozens of men a day.

Sex trafficking—the transport of women and children within and across national borders for the purposes of sexual exploitation—is a \$32 billion dollar annual industry. Right here in the U.S., an estimated 14,500-17,500 victims of human trafficking are brought in each year, most of them women and girls trafficked for sex. As an international organization of business and professional women working to improve the lives of women and girls, Soroptimist helps women and girls escape poverty, abuse and violence. The issue of trafficking is addressed through our Soroptimists STOP Trafficking project, which seeks to create awareness about this international problem while encouraging local communities such as ours to mobilize for the protection of these women and girls.

One aspect of this problem that receives relatively little attention is the “consumers” (predominately men) who support this illegal and dangerous industry. They remain faceless and nameless, and often go unpunished for their role in an industry that is violent and degrading to women.

Just as trafficking victims may come from any number of backgrounds, the men who create demand for trafficking victims and support the commercial sex industry are equally diverse. They are rich and poor, single and married, and from Eastern countries and Western lands. All of them, however, share a common mentality—that women and girls have little or no value and can be bought and sold like cattle. They feel that when money changes hands, they are absolved of their crime.

How can the demand for sex trafficking be reduced? The approach is twofold. First, we believe it is critical to work to change men’s attitudes about the value of women and girls in society, and about the dangers of sex trafficking. Women and girls who work in the commercial sex industry experience physical and emotional degradation. They are modern-day slaves with no control over their bodies or their lives. Further, sex trafficking has far-reaching negative effects on communities by removing women and girls from their families, fueling organized crime, and burdening public health systems. It also undermines government authority, encourages widespread corruption and threatens the security of vulnerable populations, such as poor women and ethnic minorities.

Second, we call upon law enforcement officials and local, national and international governments to enforce stricter punishments for the men who support sex trafficking and the commercial sex trade. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 made human trafficking a federal crime. In addition, several states have enacted laws against human trafficking. We ask that these laws be vigorously enforced.

Yet, too often, these men get off with little more than a slap on the wrist and are rarely held accountable for their actions. In fact, women who are trafficked often receive harsher punishments than the men who purchase them for sex. The Dick Dasen scandal is a local example of this type of injustice and how sexual exploitation often feeds other criminal activities, even in small communities such as ours.

There can be no real progress toward ending the sexual trafficking of women and girls unless men are actively participating in eradicating sex trafficking, and law enforcement officials and governments send out a stern message to men caught participating in the commercial sex industry. There can be no real progress until communities take it upon themselves to educate men and boys about the negative impact of trafficking upon women and girls, and work to change negative social and cultural attitudes

about the status of women and girls. Soroptimist believes it is possible to effect positive change, and that by calling attention to sex trafficking and the demand-side of this epidemic, we can make a difference for women and girls caught in its clutches.

The Soroptimist website at www.soroptimist.org provides an abundance of information about sexual trafficking and what individuals can do to stop it. Information includes a white paper on sexual trafficking, frequently asked questions, and a document called “What I Can Do to Stop Sexual Slavery.” Our local Soroptimist Clubs contacts are also found on this web site.

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