

I know a woman who within days of being in New York was forced into a brothel overlooking Roosevelt Avenue in Queens. With a timer at her side she “serviced” 19 men in her first night in the underworld of prostitution. This is the ugly, degrading world of human trafficking in America today and cities from Buffalo to Spring Valley to New York City figure very prominently in it.

While the big Apple has had the distinction of hosting the largest trafficking ring ever prosecuted under the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, Long Island has been named by the US Department of Justice as one of 21 regions where human trafficking is rampant. JFK Airport tops the list as a major transit hub used by traffickers bringing victims into the US.

Few states in the nation have as compelling a need to tackle modern-day slavery, but the uncomfortable truth is New York has yet to complete the first major step by passing a crucially-needed law to criminalize trafficking, earmark funding for victim services, train local police, prosecutors and those who work in the courts.

Cops with trained eyes may have made a difference for the trapped women who passed through the Mexican crime ring that operated for 13 long years between Tenancingo, Mexico and Queens. Young, poor, uneducated Mexican women brought to New York were systematically raped, imprisoned and forced to work in brothels throughout the region seven days a week, servicing 25 men a day. Pregnancy ended in forced abortions. In 2006, federal prosecutors secured 50-year prison sentences for these traffickers.

In yet another of the Justice Department’s biggest cases, Mariluz Zavala was recently sentenced to 15 years in prison in a case where 69 Peruvians, including 13 children, were living in cramped, squalid conditions in Brentwood and Amityville, Long Island. While the men and boys dug ditches, the women and girls worked as domestics – all the while racking up debt for housing, meal plans and transportation that left these families as indentured workers.

A recognition that this modern-day slavery must be dealt with has swept the nation. In 2004, only 4 states had criminalized human trafficking. Today, 29 states have enacted legislation to fight trafficking at the local level, giving police and prosecutors the money and authority to go after traffickers. New Jersey, led by the Attorney General, has already set up a task force, trained its police force and a hotline is in the works. Lawmakers are working on a second trafficking-related piece of legislation.

While bills in the Senate and Assembly passed in 2006, they never made it to conference, the process where the two houses meet and negotiate to create a joint bill. The Assembly Codes Committee shockingly reduced the crime of trafficking in human beings to a D-nonviolent felony. Altering a Metrocard so that it tricks the turnstile is a D-nonviolent felony.

A year has passed since this disastrous chain of events and all the while traffickers continue to operate with impunity in our state. Brothels vaguely disguised as massage

parlors exist in neighborhoods everywhere, and shamelessly advertise in publications and online. I've been to Roosevelt Avenue in Queens where men on every corner in this prostitution district get paid to hand out fliers covered in naked women's bodies. They'll guide you to the brothels that line the side streets filled with women from Central and South America. Men pay the below-market price of \$25 for 15 minutes of sex.

It couldn't be more brazen. As long as they fly under the radar of federal prosecutors, New York is a great place to do business. High profit margins coupled with the negligible-to-low risk of arrest and prosecution bring these criminals to our neighborhoods.

A trafficking ring that operates six prostitution houses in a two and a half mile stretch in Spring Valley hardly worries about the police, local authorities say. The traffickers have so successfully filled the women with fear of violence, witnesses are hard to come by and an arrest for promoting prostitution is simply the cost of doing business. Rather than putting women further in harm's way, well-funded undercover operations and wiretaps to get evidence are what's needed. But you can't get a warrant for a wiretap for a crime that under New York State law isn't a crime.

Our elected leaders of the Assembly and Senate have held up progress for far too long and its consequences are playing daily in the miserable lives of women, men and children who are being exploited among us, in our neighborhoods. A strong and comprehensive anti-trafficking bill must be made law this year.

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#### Notes

Without a law that recognizes the fraud, deception, isolation, threats and intimidation that maintain fear, the American sex market will continue to have a fresh supply of cheap labor

If they escape they find their way first to churches or hospitals. Then organizations such as Sanctuary for Families and Catholic Charities.

In November another forced labor operation involving Mexican field workers at pumpkin farms in Albion in Western New York was shut down.

While federal legislation, funding and a clear mandate from President Bush have armed federal prosecutors with the tools to go after traffickers, the same cannot be said about our state and local efforts to combat this egregious human rights violation.

A large brothel in Flushing, Queens housing Korean women who spoke little or no English was shut down after a 10-month investigation by the US Attorney for the Eastern District of NY. The brothel had a “boarding house” where the women, who were illegal and smuggled into the US were kept. Immigrant documents, drugs and \$800,000 were seized. The brothel, which generated \$4,000 a day, was successful to a large extent because the traffickers had bribed two veteran police officers, who received free sex, drinks, cash and tips on other criminal activity. These officers were charged with public corruption and are awaiting prosecution. This large trafficking operation regularly advertised in the *World Journal*, a daily Mandarin newspaper.

Traffickers to meet demand in the sex industry services to rescued victims, incorporate the tracking of the crime as part of its criminal justice system, fund and focus local prosecution of traffickers and train our municipal police departments on identification and rescue.

The police can hardly recognize trafficking, much less take the time to investigate a crime that under New York State law isn't a crime. How would a passionate local prosecutor, of whom there are many who are ready for the challenge of taking down a trafficking operation, get approval for a wiretap for a crime that under New York State law isn't a crime.

I can only hope that history does not repeat itself. Will the stories about women's suffering today at the hands of brazen traffickers be front page news in 2007 or in 60 years. Getting a strong law on the books that gives local prosecutors the tools to go after traffickers should be the easy part.

The feds alone cannot bring this problem under control. The cases being pursued by local federal prosecutors represent a fraction of the whole picture of the organized crime of human trafficking. Without a law criminalizing traffic in New York and needed resources to tackle the problem at the state and local level there's no reason to believe it will diminish on its own. Indeed, especially the smaller traffickers who fly under the radar of the federal prosecutors looking to take down large international operations.

Trafficking in human beings for sexual and labor exploitation is the fastest growing illegal enterprise. Only drug trafficking is more lucrative. The United States has the distinction of being the second biggest destination in the world for trafficked people and New York has the distinction of being a major entry point and destination for trafficking victims.

