

Missoulian

Sex trafficking easy to find in Montana, speakers at UM say



A Whiting Petroleum Co. pump jack pulls crude oil from the Bakken region of the Northern Plains near Bainville, Mont., on Nov. 6, 2013. (AP Photo/Matthew Brown)

April 17, 2014 6:05 am
By Martin Kidston

http://missoulian.com/news/local/sex-trafficking-easy-to-find-in-montana-speakers-at-um/article_20203d8c-c5cd-11e3-bb23-0019bb2963f4.html

Melissa Farley hadn't been in Montana for more than a day, but she'd already done her homework, dropping into a Missoula strip club to observe the "house moms," and browsing the Internet to see what turned up on the local market.

The sites she found included the "ultimate strip club list," chatboards with sex buyers looking for local action, and a Wiki sex guide detailing the industry in a number of regions, including Montana.

“If I can find it that easy, then believe me, sex buyers can find it faster than me,” said Farley, executive director of Prostitution Research and Education, based in San Francisco. “Money entices, persuades and coerces a person to perform sex. The payment does not erase the sexual violence, verbal sadism, domestic violence and rape that go along with the payment of that money.”

Farley kicked off the two-day conference, “Fight for Hope and Freedom: Human Trafficking, Montana and the World,” at the University of Montana on Wednesday.

Hosted by the Mansfield Center and Soroptimist International, the event brought experts together from across the globe to discuss a crisis that has left 27 million people entrapped in modern-day slavery, from prostitution to child soldiers to indentured labor.

Farley, a clinical psychologist who practiced for more than 40 years and authored two books on prostitution and trafficking, cited research suggesting that 2 percent of female prostitutes work in the “elite” class – a role glamorized by “Pretty Woman,” starring Julia Roberts and Richard Gere.

But in reality, Farley said, there’s nothing glamorous about the business. More than 97 percent of prostitutes are in the trade without a choice, either through direct enslavement or inequality. For choice to be possible, she said, physical safety, equal power and true alternatives must be present.

“Sex inequality, ethnic and racial inequality, and economic inequality are the bars on the cage of trafficking,” she said. “The side imposing consent has almost all the power, and the consenting side has little or no power. For a woman performing a sex act for a cheeseburger or a tank of gas, that’s not a real choice.”

Farley’s organization recently studied men who paid for sex in five countries. They conducted more than 700 interviews in the process and compared them to men who don’t buy sex.

Those who purchase sex, she said, often learned about sex through pornography. They also suffered from low self-worth, preferred multiple partners and opted for non-relationship sex.

“I don’t think prostitution is the same as rape – rape is worse, though it’s close to the rape end of the spectrum,” one buyer said in an interview. “It’s not rape because there’s superficial consent. On the face of it, the prostitute

is agreeing to it, but deeper down, you can see that life circumstances have kind of forced her into it.”

Working as a prostitute, the buyer concluded, was akin to someone jumping from a burning building. One can say they chose to jump from the window, but one might also suggest they had no other choice.

Like the mining camps of the past, Farley said, the Bakken oil patch on the border of Montana and North Dakota has led to an explosion of crime, including trafficking and prostitution.

Farley noted a number of reports, including groups of men coercing women to strip, increased cases of rape, forced labor and attempted abductions.

She also noted Sherry Arnold, the teacher who was kidnapped and murdered two years ago. Where men congregate in large numbers, be it Sturgis, the Super Bowl or the NCAA basketball tournament, Farley said, human trafficking is likely present.

“Resource extraction is often accompanied by prostitution and human trafficking” she said. “The ecosystem destruction caused by fracking to access oil and gas is paralleled by the quieter destruction of trafficked woman.”

Special Agent Carla Croft of the FBI and Cyndee Peterson, an assistant U.S. attorney in Montana, also noted the jump in trafficking that has followed growth in the Bakken.

Peterson said her office, under the direction of U.S. Attorney Michael Cotter, launched Project Safe Bakken in 2013 – an effort that includes state and federal agencies across Montana and North Dakota.

Human trafficking task forces also have launched in Missoula and Flathead counties, she said. A similar task force is forming in Billings, and discussions are taking place in Helena and Great Falls.

“There are things that we know, especially among sex trafficking,” said Peterson. “Pimps follow the money, no questions asked. They move their girls around the county going to different locations – wherever the money is. That’s why the Bakken is such a huge concern to us, because that’s where the money is.”

The U.S. Attorney's Office and its partners are working to raise awareness. Organized crime leaders are smart, Peterson said, and officials need eyes on the ground to help recognize the signs of an illicit trade.

"They've realized there's much less risk and more profit in selling a person than selling drugs," said Peterson. "When you sell drugs, your resource is depleted once it's sold. With a person, you can take that same resource and sell it over and over and over again. This is why all the organized crime and all the pimps are getting into trafficking people instead of drug dealing."

Arresting and prosecuting those high up the ladder hasn't been easy, Peterson said. When an investigation ends in an arrest, those who are busted are typically the women working the street corner or nabbed in the hotel room.

Those who run the business, she added, often do it from afar.

"Because of the coercion that goes on, which is severe, the (prostitutes) don't give up the pimps," she said. "There's a number of ways this happens, but the bottom line is, the dealers of the people are not getting caught."

"We have to make sure everyone knows how to recognize it, who to report it to, how to investigate it, and ensure the victim services are in place," she added.