

Sex trafficking runs rampant, expert says: Forced prostitution

News in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

Catholic Sister Clare Nolan stood before a packed audience at the City Club of Cleveland and asked her audience to think about some numbers: Somewhere between 700,000 and 2 million women and girls are taken beyond their national borders and forced into prostitution each year. One million children are channeled into the sex industry annually, starting as young as six. In Asia, pimps buy girls for about \$300; virgins cost \$3,000 to \$5,000.

Asian girls delivered to the U.S. retail for about \$20,000. Each year, crime syndicates transport about 50,000 foreign women and girls into the U.S. to sell into prostitution.

Then Sister Clare, a United Nations expert on human trafficking, challenged her audience to do something about these facts, noting that the numbers, as shocking as they are, are conservative estimates from the UN and U.S. State Department.

She defined prostitution as unvarnished gender violence. In Thailand, a popular destination for Western sex tourists, Nolan said she has met women who contemplate suicide daily and who live in permanent gynecological pain. Such girls and women are akin to prisoners of war, she said. They are duped, coerced, beaten, raped, drugged, intimidated and kept in isolation. Unlike illegal drugs, women can be sold again and again.

Voluntary prostitution is a popular myth, the sister said: "If there is anything that excludes women from the human family, it is prostitution." Said Nolan, "Such women become symbols, the classic fallen woman; or jokes, the world's oldest profession; or fantasies like [the film] *Pretty Woman*. But they are always denied their individuality and personhood."

American men who travel abroad are struck by the prevalence of prostitution, added Joe Cistone, executive director of International Partners in Mission, a small, faith-based foundation that brought Nolan to Cleveland late last year. The group makes

grants at home and overseas to fight human trafficking.

“What breaks my heart is to be propositioned by children six and seven years old,” said Cistone. “There are boys, girls, women. If you go to Bosnia on business, some just assume they should send a 16-year-old up to your room.” Crime syndicates are ruthless, said Cistone, who ran a refugee center in Rome about ten years ago. In Eastern Europe, he said, it is typical for criminals to videotape their gang rape of a young girl, show her the tape and threaten to send it to her parents unless she submits to sex slavery.

Such exploited women are found in war-torn, impoverished and unstable regions and imported into wealthy nations such as Italy, Israel, Japan, the U.S., Holland and Germany. International Partners in Mission helps pay for Catholic sisters, wearing religious habits, to go into European streets and rescue immigrant women who have been forced into prostitution.

Joan Brown Campbell, former general secretary of the National Council of Churches, who gave the invocation before Nolan spoke, said she saw similar exploitation in the Philippines. “Nothing made me weep more or made me more sad than the trafficking in not only young girls but young boys, too,” she said. “It is very hard to see and very hard to get over.”

Cistone said he was not surprised that Nolan’s Cleveland audience of about 150 was mostly female: “Guys don’t want to hear about this. It makes men uncomfortable. The way men view women is part and parcel of the problem.” Nolan, whose order—the Sisters of the Good Shepherd—serves the poor in 61 countries, agreed that notions of male entitlement fuel prostitution.

“In my church,” she said, “we have recognized a lot about sexual exploitation of children by clergy. The clergy are one of the most privileged of male groups in a patriarchy. We have seen it here in the U.S., notably in Boston, and also recently in church structures throughout Africa. This is not simply an unfortunate aggregate of individuals with problems. This is a system clearly out of balance.” *-Karen Long, Religion News Service*