

Human Trafficking was the subject of *Possumus* in the fall of 2006.

Slave Trade Thrives in Minnesota

by Christina M. Cavitt

"I just rescued a child!" Linda Miller announces happily upon returning to the small lobby of Civil Society in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. Her agency provides legal support and systemic change advocacy for the state's diverse communities. Most of its resources are focused on helping victims of human trafficking. Miller, a licensed attorney, serves as the organization's director.

Her co-workers burst into applause at her news, riding a wave of relief and hope in the ocean of despair that is human trafficking.

Three hours earlier, a St. Paul area high school counselor called to say, "There's a highly mobile kid sitting outside my door. If you want to help her, come now!" (*Highly mobile* means someone who is very likely to run away.) According to the teenager's mother, the girl had been missing from home for several nights. The 14-year-old's file indicated she recently transferred from a nearby school, that she was possibly a drug user, probably mentally delayed and likely working as a prostitute. She had an uncooperative attitude, too, simply clamming up when officials questioned her.

"Some teachers, counselors, police officers, and even social workers act judgmentally toward juvenile trafficking victims," Miller explains. "Naturally, that makes kids defensive. At Civil Society, we try to help them understand their options. We laud their strengths instead of denigrating their life choices."

When Linda met the student one-on-one, she cast no judgment and in her gentle way got the girl to drop her tough act. She discovered the young lady was intelligent, likable, and athletic enough to want to join the varsity basketball team and filled with teenage insecurities. Sadly, her insecurities made her vulnerable to a local pimp who'd begun "grooming" her to become a prostitute.



Linda Miller and Karen Fernow, Civil Society non profit consultant, at the agency's office.

"That guy told her she's gorgeous (which she is) and that he loves her (which is a lie)," Miller says. "She was at a point where she wasn't thinking clearly, but she hadn't completely bought into him yet. I talked

with her about her strengths and pointed out the options available to her. I hope we reached her in time. But we can never be sure. We need to continue with the support we give these kids. And the help and encouragement provided by the CSJs and consociates is critical to our work.”

A self-renewing commodity

Human trafficking has deep roots worldwide and is thriving in Minnesota. Victims are exploited through force, fraud or coercion to perform commercial sex or labor. This modern-day slavery is the fastest growing criminal activity in the world. It’s big business, tied for second place in illegal commerce with arms trade. Drug dealing is at the top of the list.

The U.S. Department of State 2004 Trafficking in Persons Report estimates some 600,000 – 800,000 human trafficking victims each year – many in Minnesota. The slave industry’s ‘product’ shelf-life has an advantage over drugs and weapons. After a drug is smoked, injected or ingested, it’s gone. When a gun is sold, its major profit potential is realized. A human commodity, on the other hand, is self-renewing.

“Women and children are raped as many as 40 times a day,” Miller says. “These violations happen right here in Minnesota – in the picture-perfect Twin Cities – every day, and not just in shabby neighborhoods, either.” Victims for whom traffickers are able to get high prices operate in wealthy areas and at the best hotels because of groups like “The Nice Guys” – rich business people self-titled because they claim to not beat women and children.

In 2006, *Possumus* magazine published an eye-opening article about the horrors of human trafficking in the metro area titled “Right in our Backyard.” Since then, awareness of the problem has increased and hundreds of victims have been rescued. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands remain in the dark dungeons of forced labor and sexual slavery.

Hope, Reconciliation and Justice For All

Human trafficking thrives in part because of the subordinate position women hold in many parts of the world. As a United Nations accredited Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), the Sisters of St. Joseph are committed to the United Nations Millennium Development goals established in 2000:

United Nations Millennium Goals

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. *Promote gender equality and empower women*
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

The Anti-Human Trafficking Working Group of the Justice Commission of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, St. Paul Province, and Consociates is focused on #3. The working group labors to prevent human trafficking through:

1. Education and public awareness;
2. Supporting legislation that incorporates anti-trafficking and protection measures for victims;
3. Providing for survivors’ unmet needs.

Amidst picturesque lakes, lush summer foliage and stunning winter landscapes, Minneapolis and St. Paul appear to be idyllic cities. But people moving through the cattle market of human trade remain uncounted and see a very different place.

“What the market will bear, the unscrupulous will provide,” Miller says. “In fact, Minnesota is said to be among the top 10 states in domestic and international trafficking for a number of reasons. For one, the state’s diverse population makes victims invisible within large pockets of immigrant communities. Its vast rural areas

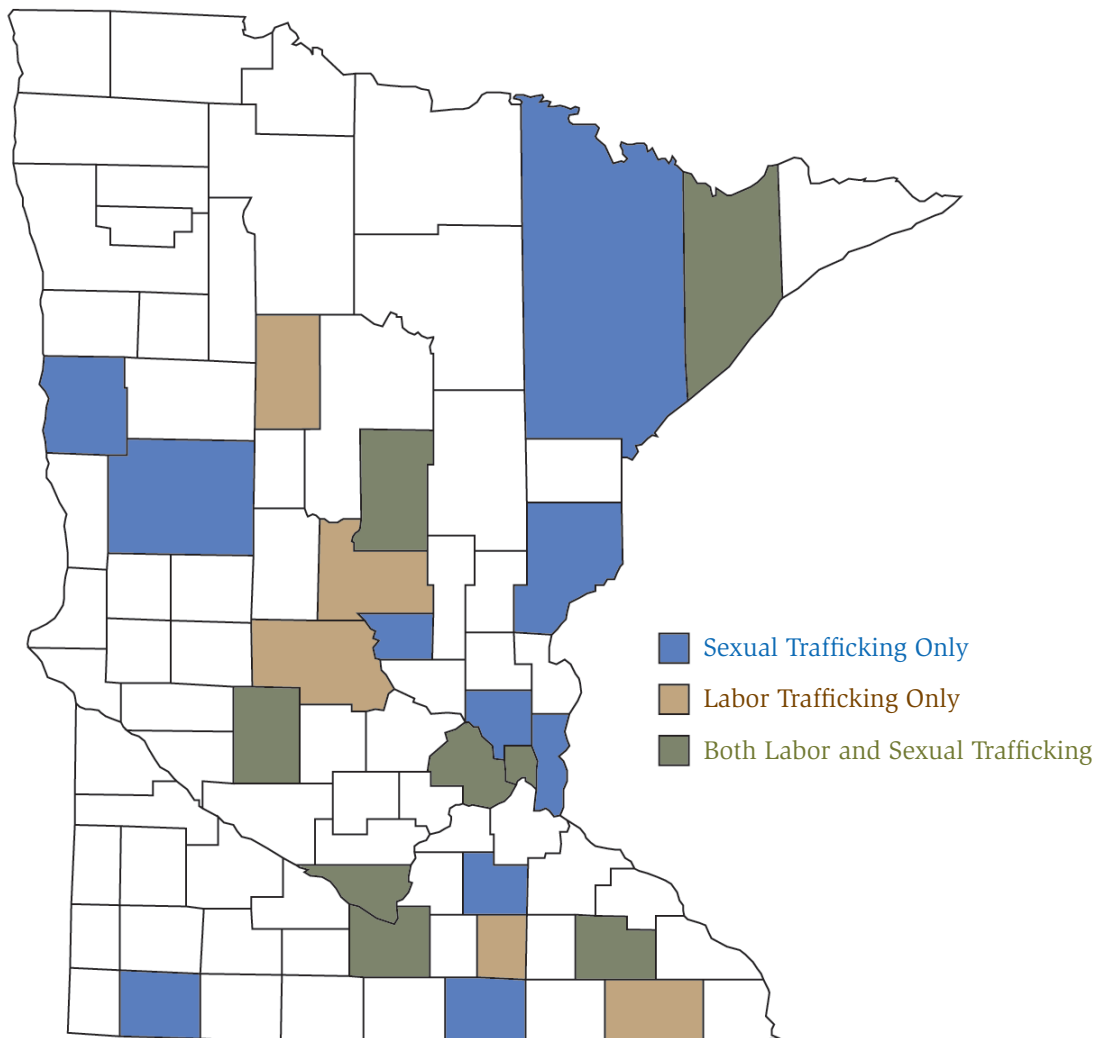
provide excellent cover for housing and processing people through the system. Other factors conspiring to facilitate Minnesota’s human flesh trade include sharing a border with Canada, the large harbor in Duluth and the Twin Cities international airport.” The Minnesota American Indian Women’s Resource Center reports that the insular culture on Native American reservations further masks the nightmare.

Domestic trafficked victims are United States citizens. Traffickers of international victims typically

obtain and keep the visas (often fraudulent), which they obtain in order to get the victims into the U.S. Each group has its unique set of problems, but if they escape exploitation, survivors from both camps suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

According to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report, trauma is described in terms of complexity, from a single traumatic event to repeated exposure “frequently of an interpersonal nature, often involving a significant amount of stigma

Minnesota Counties with Identified Trafficking Victims



or shame." The study's authors noted that human trafficking victims – especially sex slaves – experience the most complex symptoms, "including anxiety, panic disorder, major depression, substance abuse and eating disorders, as well as a combination of these."

Suffer the children

In the world of trafficking, children are worth a lot more money than adults. According to the U.S. Department of State Trafficking in Persons report, more than half of victims trafficked into the United States are thought to be children. It is no coincidence that most of Civil Society's work is with children ages 14 to 18, but they find increasingly younger children in need of assistance, and they serve the needs of adult victims, as well. Linda Miller points out four major areas where assistance is critical:

1. Housing, food, medical, safety and security, language interpretation and legal services.
2. Mental health and counseling.
3. Income assistance: cash, living assistance.
4. Legal status: T Visas, which allow trafficking victims to stay in the U.S. and assist in investigating and potentially prosecuting traffickers; immigration, and certification.

"It would be unrealistic for me to expect to see the end of human trafficking in my lifetime," she says. "Eradication of the criminal element is out of my hands. So I stick with what I can do, and that's helping victims become survivors and then provide the evidence in order to convict the traffickers."

Making lace with prostitutes

Minnesota's heartiest and most dedicated individuals and organizations – organizations such as the Sisters of St. Joseph – share Civil Society's goals.

The Sisters of St. Joseph have been helping the disadvantaged for a long time. They trace their roots to 1650 in Le Puy, France, where six women committed

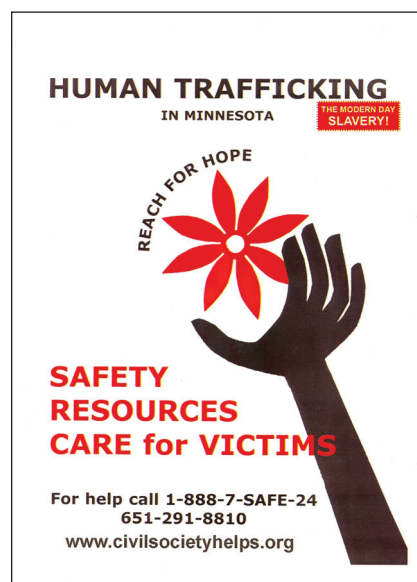
themselves to a life of prayer and service to those who were poor and needy. They taught lace making to young women so they could support themselves without having to resort to prostitution.

"The CSJs have a reputation for getting things done," Miller remarks, smiling. "They are an organized group of women and they understand systemic change. That's why I was so excited when they invited me to the Province in 2005 to meet with Sister Gina Webb, CSJ (a member of the Province leadership team at the time), Joanne Tromiczak-Neid (CSJ Justice Commission coordinator), and Sister Mary Hasbrouck, CSJ (chair of the Justice Commission's Anti-Trafficking Working Group) to discuss how they could help."

Since that day, the Anti-Trafficking Group of the CSJ Justice Commission has partnered with Civil Society and despite government aid cutbacks, progress has continued to reach and aid trafficking victims

and survivors.

Much of the work has centered on awareness. For instance, Sister Ansgar Holmberg, CSJ created an outreach poster featuring Civil Society's crisis line. She designed it to be easily translated. Today, the sign is available in 25 languages.



CSJs participate when Civil Society personnel testify before the senate. They organize volunteers and donate research, time, resources and emotional support for survivors and Civil Society staff. When there was a major federal bust in 2007, dozens of victims suddenly showed up at Civil Society with needs that couldn't wait.

“The CSJs worked with us to provide bus cards, personal items and gift certificates for food,” Miller remembers. “We wanted to get these people out – not keep them holed up someplace. But when you have a bunch of people with different ethnicity from yours, where can you take them for dinner? I invited Sister Mary Hasbrouck to come with us. I said to her, ‘I hope they don’t choose Kentucky Fried Chicken again,’ and she suggested Old Country Buffet, which they simply loved.”

Additionally:

- CSJs and consociates organized awareness training for volunteers at St. Mary’s Health Clinics and Methodist Hospital to identify human trafficking victims. They provided a business card-sized handout that outlines trafficking signs. The general public thinks a trafficker is an easily identified, sinister-looking character. But, in fact, many little girls are solicited by slightly older girls. They are the ones used by pimps to solicit recruits.
- Sister Ann Redmond, CSJ set up the first Minnesota Conference on Sex Trafficking in 2006 at St. Catherine University.



Bukola Oriola (left) is a Nigerian international human trafficking survivor whom Civil Society helped to safe surroundings so she could provide evidence against her trafficker. In 2010, she partnered with Civil Society on more than 70 presentations. She also wrote Imprisoned: the Travails of a Human Trafficking Victim. At center is Raj Chaudhary with SEWA (South Asian Women’s Association), a Civil Society subcontractor who provides culturally and linguistically specific outreach to human trafficking victims. Sister Mary Hasbrouck is on the right.

- CSJs provided Civil Society with intern case managers through the St. Joseph Worker Program.

Systemic change

“Human trafficking is an enormous problem,” Sister Mary says. “But there is always hope. We have to keep helping victims today and creating systemic change for tomorrow.” She notes that while there’s no time for laurel resting, workers and volunteers can at least look back on victories as a way to draw energy to keep up the fight. For instance:

- More people know about the problem.
- Brave survivors have come forward to tell their stories. Some, like Bukola Oriola (see photo at left), have written about their experiences.
- Although no sex traffickers have been charged or convicted under Minnesota’s state sex trafficking definition, in May 2007 and November 2010 the federal government made major busts that convicted more than 30 sex traffickers (2007) and indicted more than 30 sex traffickers in 2010.
- Federal law is now used substantially to arrest traffickers.
- Civil Society has rescued hundreds of victims who they have identified to be trafficking victims under federal law.
- Minnesota Statutes needs to replace the term “prostitution” with “commercial sex act” (so prosecutors can spend their time proving that the sex trafficker is guilty, rather than trying to prove the chief witness (the victim) intended to prostitute her/himself).
- There is increased media attention.
- Some law enforcement personnel and agencies are showing understanding that victims need to be treated as victims in order to arrest and prosecute more sex traffickers. For instance, in Chisago County, authorities recently treated a commercial sex act victim like a victim – not a criminal.

Answers simple, but not easy

The first step toward systemic change is awareness. “People have to wake up, read the paper and face the fact that these atrocities are happening right under our noses,” Sister Mary notes. “Young women do not choose to get involved in commercial sex, unless you consider the alternative – remaining at home to be raped by your father and brothers – a choice.”

The Civil Society website (civilsocietyhelps.org) is a good place for citizens to start learning about how they can help, says Sister Mary. Then, after the initial shock of realizing the depth and breadth of this blight on Minnesota’s landscape, they can support legislation, provide funds and/or offer in-kind gifts and services

like teaching English or donating legal, vocational counseling, case management and medical, dental, and psychological support.

Hoop dreams

What about the 14-year-old baseball hopeful mentioned at the beginning of this article? Will she make headlines at a hotel bust? Or will her fame come from shooting hoops at a local basketball tournament?

“I like to think the latter,” Linda Miller says with her remarkable optimism. “There is always hope, and hope is what gives us the strength to change the world – one survivor, one legislation, one day at a time.” †

Letters Will Change the Law

“Human traffickers often transport victims across state lines, turning their crimes into federal offenses,” says Minnesota State Representative Joe Mullery. “Unfortunately, anti-trafficking bills aren’t front-burner issues for national lawmakers because victims aren’t voters and voters aren’t writing to Congress. In my entire political career, only one constituent has ever written to me about trafficking, and she worked for a social agency.”

Representative Mullery is appalled that human trafficking exists anywhere; he’s outraged that it flourishes in his home state of Minnesota. He firmly believes in Civil Society’s mission and actively supports the Sisters of St. Joseph in their efforts to create systemic change and help trafficking victims. Most recently, he spoke at St. Catherine University. He’s also an integral part of anti-trafficking state legislative efforts. He was the first legislator to introduce legislation that awards mandatory civil damages to those trafficked.

If the public wants to stop the practice of modern-day slavery, he continued, they have to tell their congressmen and women how they feel. A *lot* of people have to send letters or it won’t make a bit of difference.

“In the U.S., we need more federal laws, and funds, to protect victims and prosecute pimps,” he says. “We also need stronger state laws, but the Feds must take the lead. Those laws will cascade into state and local governments and law enforcement agencies. When congressional offices are flooded with voters’ letters demanding anti-trafficking legislation, we’ll start to see things change.”

