



Testimony of

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Testimony on Commercially Sexually Exploited Minors

Good afternoon. My name is Amy Rassen, Senior Advisor at the SAGE Project, Inc. located in San Francisco, California. I have been working in the social service field since 1968. As you might imagine, over these long years I have encountered every kind of social problem imaginable. Yet I have never seen anything like the inhumanity of people enslaving other people, especially children, and the inevitable results.

So, it is fitting that today I represent SAGE, a nonprofit organization with one primary aim: bringing an end to human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adults.

While we take our freedom for granted, slavery not only exists but thrives worldwide today in the form of human trafficking. With partners from all over the US and around the world, SAGE works to end human trafficking, one step at a time, through education and advocacy. In the Bay Area, we give hope to children and adults who have been exploited by human traffickers. Comprehensive services — case management, mental health counseling, support groups, life skills training, vocational guidance, job preparation and mentoring help them escape, recover from their trauma and, ultimately, acquire the skills and strength they need to heal and start new lives. SAGE is unique in that it is one of the few organizations in the country that was created by and for commercial sexual exploitation survivors. The personal knowledge and experience possessed by the SAGE staff provides the passion and expertise to reach victims and influence change locally, nationally and internationally.

I have been asked to speak to you today about the following:

1. Sex trafficking as a form of gender discrimination
2. Federal efforts to eliminate sex trafficking
3. Ways to improve the government's efforts

To begin with, human trafficking, or modern day slavery, is a criminal industry, second only to drug trafficking, that thrives worldwide, **including in the US**. Around the world, as many as 27 million men, women and children live in bondage.¹ According to the United Nations, people are reported to be trafficked from 127 countries to be exploited in 137 countries. Forty-three percent of all victims are sexually exploited; others work in conditions of slavery. Ninety-eight percent of victims are women and girls.² The latter clearly illustrates the unique way in which human trafficking and gender intersect. As Secretary Clinton said, “modern slavery disproportionately affects women

¹ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/03/185905.htm>

² International Labour Organization, forced Labour Statistics Factsheet (2007)

and girls. And as it does so, it disrupts family networks, and it undermines the foundation of stable economies and societies.”³

Children are our future. They need us to make it possible for them to grow into healthy, educated, civic-minded citizens. So, today, I would like to focus my comments specifically on domestic minor sex trafficking, a criminal activity that desperately requires national attention. Staggering is its under-recognition. This population of victims, American children under the age of 18, is under-researched and largely overlooked.

The extent of the general lack of awareness of what is happening in our own backyards can only be described as nation-wide blindness.

1. Sex Trafficking of Minors as a Form of Gender Discrimination

The crime of domestic minor sex trafficking clearly reflects the impact of gender discrimination on young girls in our society.

Simply defined, the crime of domestic minor sex trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of American children within US borders. According to the Trafficking of Victims Act of 2000, it is “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act” where the person is a lawful US citizen or permanent resident under the age of 18. Commercial sexual exploitation of children is both hidden and highly visible. We see these children in every major US city, throughout various social service and criminal justice systems and increasingly being sold on the Internet.

The precise scale of the problem is hidden and unknown. It is estimated by the FBI that the average age of entry into the commercial sex industry is a mere 12 years old. Experts at Shared Hope International estimate that 100,000 American juveniles are victimized through prostitution each year. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 5 of **all** girls in America and 1 in 10 boys in America will be sexually victimized before they turn 18. We know that sexual victimization is associated with youth who have been trafficked.

Since 2003, the FBI’s Innocence Lost Initiative has recovered over 1,800 domestic minor sex trafficking victims. This number does not include the thousands of youth who are identified and served each year by agencies across the nation such as the SAGE Project. Each year, SAGE helps approximately 200 domestic minor human trafficking victims and youth identified as high-risk from being trafficked. **While significant, these numbers are small compared to the actual scale of the problem.**

Who are these youth who remain invisible before our eyes and where might we find them? We see two primary trends within the domestic minor human trafficking population: early sexual abuse, and exposure to either or both the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Other trends include high rates of poverty, domestic violence, poor academic skills, and runaways. These trends act as smoke signals for where one might find victims and those at greatest risk of victimization. She is the student who sleeps at different friend’s house each night because of the fighting happening at home. She is the girl who runs away when her parents physically abuse her. She is the foster kid who, after enduring one neglectful foster parent after the next, gets in the car with a man three times her age simply because he promises her love and a fresh start. She is the sexual

³ <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2012/03/185905.htm>

abuse victim who, due to immense shame and trauma, has lost all sense of appropriate boundaries and lets adults touch her for money.

In the absence of supportive families and empowering mentors, young girls fall victim to negative stereotypes and messages about their self-worth, and become easy prey for those who know how to manipulate and profit from their vulnerability. Society, through vehicles such as the media, fashion and music, sends the message to our children that pimping is cool, being sexy and “hot” is in, and the ability to compete with other girls for the attention of one man is a winning quality.

Who are these traffickers? They are pimps, many posing as boyfriends, father figures or “sugar-daddies” with promises of love, affection and a fairytale, only to be followed by physical and emotional abuse. They are drug-addicted parents, members of the family or guardians, and they are peers who are themselves caught up in the web of exploitation and violence. They are also sexual predators who identify vulnerable children in the mall, schoolyard, clubs or, as is more and more often the case, through the Internet. We love the Internet for its ability to remove geographic boundaries and make communication seamless and instantaneous. These same qualities, however, facilitate and fuel the growth of child exploitation. Approximately 1 in 7 youth online (10 to 17 years old) have received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet.⁴ A trafficker in San Francisco now has access to children from Boston to Los Angeles from the privacy of his home.

The current state of our child protection system makes it difficult both to protect vulnerable children from human traffickers and for a child victim to leave behind her history of exploitation when she enters adulthood. In the absence of protective, therapeutic shelters, and nurturing, well-resourced guardians, law enforcement officers have few options other than to arrest domestic minor human trafficking victims for their own safety. Consequently, the youth are criminalized for their own victimization. Once in the criminal system, these youth are often charged and sentenced, starting not only a criminal record that will be difficult to shed when applying for a job, looking for an apartment or starting new relationships, but will add new layers of trauma that, like an onion, must be peeled back one layer at a time during a hoped for recovery process until they are able to become whole again.

2. Federal Efforts to Eliminate Sex Trafficking of Domestic Minors

The federal government has taken a strong stance to wipe out human trafficking. Three examples follow:

- Federal laws, specifically the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act are among our strongest tools to combat this crime. The TVPA of 2000 including subsequent reauthorizations has defined all minors, under the age of 18, who are “recruited, transported, harbored, provided or obtained for the purpose of a commercial sex” act as victims of trafficking, including minors who are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents. “Payment” for the sex act can be anything of value given to or received by any person (e.g., drugs, food, jewelry, a place to stay, etc.). The framing of this law accurately portrays the complexity of domestic minor sex trafficking cases, specifically the manipulative and abusive tactics that may lead a child to believe she is selling her body out of “love” for an older man

⁴ <http://www.missingkids.com>

posing as a boyfriend or father figure, making it emotionally impossible for her to identify underlying force, fraud or coercion.

- The President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons coordinates the federal government's anti-human trafficking efforts. On March 15, 2012 the President directed his cabinet and senior advisors to find ways to "strengthen the federal government's current work, and to expand on partnerships with civil society and the private sector, to bring more resources to bear in fighting this horrific injustice."⁵ This speaks volumes about the federal government's commitment to end modern day slavery.
- Leadership within federal agencies, such as the Department of Justice's Office for Victims of Crime and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, as well as the Department of Health and Human Services have worked hard to support and promote cutting-edge evidence-based models for identifying and serving domestic minor sex trafficked victims, and building multi-disciplinary networks that bridge community-based organizations, law enforcement and social services. SAGE has received support from all three of these agencies for this exact purpose.

3. Ways to Improve the Government's Efforts

Much remains to be done.

Despite the strength of our federal anti-trafficking law, domestic minor sex trafficking victims are most often not recognized or treated as such upon identification. The United States has historically criminalized domestic minor sex trafficking victims as child prostitutes, instead as victims of rape or sexual assault, making their only access to resources those offered through the criminal justice system. State by state, legislators have worked to pass laws that chip away at this trend of criminalization. The federal government can ensure that youth who have been victims of commercial sexual exploitation are not considered criminals. The government can also continue to train law enforcement, health professionals and community workers to recognize the signs of youth who have been exploited.

Prevention is key. If the average age of entry into commercial sex exploitation is 12 to 14, we must start educating youth as young as 9 and 10 years old on the myths and realities that sustain and glorify the sex industry. Schools, after-school programs and wellness centers are places to start, but we must also send a clear message to the media and fashion industries that our children are not commodities, and that they are in part responsible for the frightening predicament laid before us.

These are not "bad kids" and they haven't chosen to be prostituted. They are a marginalized, vulnerable and desperate group with special needs. They are also every day, average kids that we see in our local towns and cities, at the malls and hanging out with our children. Domestic minor sex trafficking occurs where vulnerable children fall through the cracks. Traffickers know this. The federal government can, for example, fund more programs to keep kids get off the streets and protect them from online perpetrators via stronger Internet safety laws. The government can also ensure access to safe, supportive housing as viable alternatives to incarceration. Continued funding of the systems that support and monitor foster parent programs in particular is needed, as is additional support for youth as they age out of the child welfare system.

⁵ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/15/statement-president-meeting-interagency-task-force-monitor-and-combat-tr>

Conclusion

It takes all of us to combat this heinous crime. Partnerships that reflect true collaborative efforts, education campaigns that are multi-dimensional and well funded, and intervention strategies that reflect emerging best practices, are the pillars of a comprehensive strategy. The federal government must make sure there exists a holistic approach to deal with this inhumanity.

Every system and institution working with children must be onboard to ensure that a clear message is sent: our children are not for sale, and anyone who tries to exploit them will face the consequences. It is only by taking these actions can we show our own humanity, but also ensure a safe and healthy future for all children.

Thank you.