



Are you 55 and older with joint issues? Read this...

Instaflex.com



What Happens When You Take a Free Testosterone Supplement?

Nugenix.com



One easy habit for a happy, healthy mood

Lumiday.com

March 4, 2013

HUFF POST POLITICS

Women's History Month Call to Service: Free Our Sisters From Sexual Slavery

Posted: 03/01/2013 2:23 pm

As we celebrate Women's History Month and lift up the heroes of liberation, we must free our sisters from sexual slavery. Human sex trafficking is a danger to our communities and a scourge on our souls; it must be stopped.

To their credit, female and feminist leaders in Congress took a big step forward this week in [passing](#) the Violence Against Women Act, including the Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence Registry (SAFER) Act, and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). Our call to service this Women's History Month is to use these laws and tools to free our sisters from sexual slavery.

As I mentioned yesterday [on Current TV](#), passage of the VAWA was a great day in America and a personal day of justice for rape survivor Congresswoman Gwen Moore, who fought tirelessly to bring other women out of the shadows -- especially native women, immigrant women, and lesbians. Passing VAWA and SAFER and TVPA was a great day because we were able to defeat the forces of misogyny, male privilege and white privilege that all too often legislate inequality.

Authorizing the money and the law is only the first step -- we must fight the sequester of funds that threaten these lifesaving services, and we must do more as community leaders to make progress against this scourge on our souls.

As President Barack Obama [said](#) in a 2012 to the Clinton Global Initiative:

Our fight against human trafficking is one of the great human rights causes of our time, and the United States will continue to lead it -- in partnership with you. The change we seek will not come easy, but we can draw strength from the movements of the past. For we know that every life saved -- in the words of that great Proclamation -- is "an act of justice"; worthy of "the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

What is to be done to achieve this "act of justice" and free our sisters and brothers from sexual slavery?

First -- what should be obvious -- acknowledge that sexual slavery is not a choice. I say "what should be obvious" because sadly the truth is otherwise. Chris Kelly, author of California's [Proposition 35 CASE Act](#) told me this week that one of the steepest obstacles to passage was the mindset that somehow sexual slavery is a "lifestyle choice" made by the girls themselves.

Well. To begin with, the average entry age of a minor being exploited in sex trafficking is 13 years old according to the trackers at SharedHope.org. Putting aside for a moment the reality that girls below the age of consent being sold into slavery or pimped into prostitution by adults are not making "choices," let's consider the othering behind that view. I saw it all the time as a sexual assault prosecutor: otherwise empathic people who don't want to consider rape or domestic violence engage in victim blaming and slut shaming: "She dressed too provocatively," "she chose to be in that relationship," "she didn't report immediately" or "she went back to him" -- all of which conveniently absolve the juror of any personal risk because "I wouldn't dress/act/respond as she did so it can't happen to me." Denial may help us cope in the court of law or the court of public opinion, but it is devastating if not deadly for the victims.

How pervasive is this victim blaming and slut shaming? I need not remind you all of the steep climb we face on addressing sex and sexuality in America -- this week alone we had the National Review blog [blame Military Sexual Trauma on the raped servicewomen](#), despite the Oscar-nominated *Invisible War* documentary showing clear evidence to the contrary, and the Oscars host making a Chris Brown-Rihanna domestic violence "joke" shortly before he and the *Onion* odiously sexualized nine-year-old best actress nominee Quvenzhané Wallis. So yes, we've got a long way to go in changing the attitudes about sex and sexuality before we can get to a fully mature conversation about sexual slavery -- but for the sake of the victims we cannot afford to wait for unanimity. We are our sisters' keepers and must legislate accordingly.

So step one: throw off the mental blinders and admit there is a problem of sexual slavery in society.

Then step two: look for the signs of sexual slavery in your community. As Vicki Zito, the mother of a survivor, [says](#) on the Proposition 35 CASE Act website: ""The fact is human trafficking is happening right here, right now, in the United States, probably in any city where anybody lives. Just because you don't know anything about it doesn't mean it's not happening."

How can we look? The United States Department of State [lists](#) "20 Ways You Can Help Fight Human Trafficking" including these indicators and questions:

Human Trafficking Indicators While not an exhaustive list, these are some key red flags that could alert you to a potential trafficking situation that should be reported:

- Living with employer
- Poor living conditions
- Multiple people in cramped space
- Inability to speak to individual alone
- Answers appear to be scripted and rehearsed
- Employer is holding identity documents
- Signs of physical abuse
- Submissive or fearful
- Unpaid or paid very little
- Under 18 and in prostitution

Questions to Ask

Assuming you have the opportunity to speak with a potential victim privately and without jeopardizing the victim's safety because the trafficker is watching, here are some sample questions to ask to follow up on the red flags you became alert to:

- Can you leave your job if you want to?
- Can you come and go as you please?
- Have you been hurt or threatened if you tried to leave?
- Has your family been threatened?
- Do you live with your employer?
- Where do you sleep and eat?
- Are you in debt to your employer?
- Do you have your passport/identification? Who has it?

Third, engage with health professionals to learn the effects of human trafficking on survivors. As Chris Kelly points out, during Proposition 35's campaign, women were coming forward and telling their stories as never before. The culture of empowerment is more open now than it ever has been; however, even the strongest survivors have nightmares, post traumatic stress, and long-term psychological harm. There are [more resources](#) available under the Affordable Care Act and the [Mental Health Parity Act](#).

Fourth, teach our children. The earlier we can intervene with alternatives and information, the better chance we have at saving young lives. Kids are smart -- they know who among their peers are in deep trouble yet often feel powerless to change anything. After all, why raise a question if you cannot offer a solution. Fortunately there are resources available for law enforcement and educators to give assistance to those who suspect that a friend may be in over her head. A call to 1-888-3737-888 -- a [free confidential hotline](#) run by The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) -- may save a life. Bringing in survivors to address schoolchildren in age-appropriate peer-based messaging will also open eyes -- and open doors for those who don't see a way out for themselves or a friend.

Fifth, improve law enforcement training to combat trafficking at [grand events like the Super Bowl](#) and smaller venues like your city's local massage parlors. Again, [education of law enforcement, business owners, and community leaders](#) is essential to success. To those who take the view that all this is prostitution, a victimless crime, legal in some jurisdictions, and unworthy of our law enforcement resources I would say this: underage prostitution is always illegal, and all too many prostitutes of legal age may be trapped in the life by a sexual slaveholder. We must see each situation clearly for what it is -- not a lifestyle choice or a case of "release the john and prosecute the prostitute" -- but a crime with devastating life consequences for the sexual slaves involved. I remember working many a misdemeanor arraignments calendar with the "B girls" -- prosecuted under California Penal Code section 648 (b) for soliciting prostitution -- get arrested, get processed, get released, get beaten by their pimps for losing 4-5 hours of "work" time, and then get back to court as assault victims. The vicious cycle rarely ended well -- so we must break that cycle with the anti-trafficking laws and tools available if we want to free our sisters.

Sixth, reach out to the trafficking survivors in your community and embrace them back into civic life. It is one thing to say that we should combat trafficking but it is another to say we will now embrace our sisters as employees, as classmates, as community partners, as peers, as friends. With freedom from sexual slavery must come the opportunity to build a better future in the community. Openly giving people a second chance at life is the real proof of our commitment to making progress for our sisters not just during Women's History Month, but throughout the year.

Follow Christine Pelosi on Twitter: www.twitter.com/sfpelosi

-