Wheelock Panel Probes Blurry Line Between Prostitution, Sex Trafficking

BY ALEXANDRA MALLOY

A round-table discussion hosted by Wheelock College on March 20 called attention not only to the treatment of prostitution and sex trafficking in America, but the levels of prostitution within the Boston community.

The panel focused on both preventative methods and strategies to stop the violence and the industry as a whole. The five panelists focused largely on implementation of the Nordic Model, a means to stop prostitution and sex trafficking that began in Sweden then spread to Norway and Iceland. The Nordic Model focuses on the arrest and punishment of pimps and "johns" (male customers) and working with victims through counseling and aid.

Frank Baker, District 3 city councilor, noted the need to increase concentration on the issue, comparing the situation to turning a battleship around in Boston harbor. He also directly offered the opportunity to further the conversation at a state level in efforts with panelist Donna Gavin, sergeant detective for the human trafficking unit of the Boston Police Department.

"On my street, Dorchester Avenue, it's never been like this. It ebbs and flows," said Baker in an interview with The Fenway News. "It's not a faceless or victimless crime, there's people that are being hurt."

Simon Häggström, detective inspector for the prostitution unit of the Stockholm Police, describes himself as a simple cop trying to arrest as many johns and pimps as possible. The unit consists of six officers and three social workers, and it works in tandem with a human-trafficking unit that has 25 officers and one social worker.

"I see prostitution as a male problem. In order to end this we as men have to take this as our responsibility," said Häggström.

Sweden has been at the forefront of battling both prostitution and human trafficking, passing the Sex Purchase Act in 1999, which states that any person who seeks sexual relations in return for payment will has committed a crime. The act makes only the buying of sex illegal, protecting the victim from criminal prosecution and focusing on the demand for sex instead.

"With no demand for sexual services, there will be no market," said Häggström. "You cannot make the act of buying sex just a moral question. When men buy sex, they are investing in organized crime."

Through the combined effort and unit of officers and social workers, the goal is to motivate and help victims get out of prostitution while also focusing on the johns and the underlying causes for why they feel the need to engage in prostitution.

The Swedish Sex Purchase Act has since been adopted by Norway and Iceland and is gaining support in France and the European Union as a whole.

Rachel Moran, who lived through commercial sexual exploitation from ages 15 to 22, has used her efforts to spread the Nordic Model through her native Ireland, as well as in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and France. The French senate is scheduled to vote on the model this month.

Moran launched the Turn Off the Red Light campaign across Ireland in February 2011. "It doesn't matter if it's one man a day or 20, the principle is the same. You're living to be molested," she said. "I want to see people accept prostitution for what it is."

Gail Dines, professor and chair of American Studies at Wheelock, addressed the social construction of the 'john and how media, culture and pornography help shape prostitution' on page 2.
men into johns and pimps. With pornography becoming affordable, accessible and anonymous (thanks to the Internet), Dines states that there has been a transition from mainstream soft-core porn to mainstream hardcore.

“How have we destroyed the core empathy of men to push them to this?” she asked. “Prostitution and pornography go together. Pornography is prostitution with the camera going.”

Cherie Jimenez, a survivor and the director of the EVA Center in Boston, turned the focus local. Working hands-on with some of these women, Jimenez calls the sex trade within Boston “brutal.”

“I see the difference. I see the brutality getting worse,” said Jimenez, comparing her experience to the current state. “As we argue this and as we keep doing this, the sex trade continues, and a really brutal one here in Boston.”

Gavin, along with Baker, noted coordinated efforts and recognition both on the city and state levels and the amount of support surrounding the issue. A representative from Mayor Walsh’s office, Meghan Costello, was also present.

“It’s incumbent on us to keep talking about this issue,” said Baker.

The success of the Sex Purchase Act shows in the numbers, with prostitution behavior dropping from 13.6 percent 1996 to 7.9 percent in 2008 in a country previously infamous for its sex industry. With the spread to Norway and Iceland, and the potential implementation in Ireland, France and the discussion of a EU-wide model, Moran hopes the model will sweep the globe and cross the ocean to the US.

“What America really needs” to look at is that when this model moves, so will prostitution, and America really doesn’t need to be in the position where huge chunks of the world are implementing the model,” said Moran.

“The only thing separating us as women was the 14-15 years between us and the ocean. I see the same story everywhere I go.”

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