



*Sisters of Saint Francis
Rochester, Minnesota*

OUR MINISTRIES: Human Trafficking Awareness



Woman carries sign during Postville, IA immigration protests.



Sign in Cambodia warning of punishment for human trafficking.

Artwork by Stephanie Holt, Mission 21, on display at a Human Trafficking Awareness Event at Assisi Heights

(credit: Hardwick Photo)



Terminology is Key to Showing Respect

Sister Anne Walch and Kathy Gatliff

The fight against human trafficking – people taken against their will to be sold and enslaved for sexual exploitation - is a global issue, and yes, even a local issue. Success of the human trafficking industry rests heavily on the shoulders of ignorance and apathy. Until we become aware of and overcome our personal biases and misconceptions about prostitution and labor trafficking, recognizing that no person is for sale under any circumstances, only then can we say we truly hold respect and reverence for every human person.

Human trafficking is a complex issue. Exploiting and forcing persons into servitude for labor does not just happen in big cities or foreign countries; it can be found in most every city, town or rural area – wherever there is a demand for cheap labor. Traffickers would not be able to take advantage of vulnerable people if there wasn't a societal demand for their products and services. Each of us might consider

our desire for cheap products in light of the fact that it is often at the price of persons working in unsafe and dehumanizing conditions.

You've seen the stories about the building collapse in Bangladesh, killing over 1,000 persons working in a factory to create 'name brand' clothing. The owner of the building was arrested and held on charges of negligence, illegal construction and forcing people to join in the work. And, don't forget, there was a raid on those working in harsh conditions at a meat-processing plant in Postville, Iowa. Several employees and lower and middle level managers were indicted and convicted on charges of conspiracy to harbor illegal immigrants, aggravated identity theft, and child labor violations. These stories may be worlds apart, but they have something in common: exploitation of others. These people shouldn't be viewed just as "workers" or "illegal immigrants" but rather as fellow human beings!

So what about prostitution? Is prostitution the world's oldest profession, or is it the world's oldest oppression? Rather than viewing prostitutes as criminals, we must look deeper to find that most are actually victims. They are victims of modern day slavery; having been stolen, coerced, lied to and held in check by fear tactics and physical threats to themselves, and their family members. Many of these persons have been taken far from their families and homes, and exploited into service for profit – not for their personal gain – but for that of their trafficker.

As Rochester Franciscans, it is our goal to make a difference by raising awareness of these horrific crimes to humanity. In doing so, we hope to enlighten others on how to view those enslaved - not as criminals, but as victims. We are educating others, and identifying ways to help the victims, reduce the demand, and rehabilitate the offenders. It won't be easy, but it will be worthwhile.