

Bay Area identified as largest hub for sex slaves in United States

The traffick light is always green at city's numerous massage parlors

While most tourists leave their hearts in San Francisco, thousands of foreign women now arrive here without their human rights. Meanwhile, two sheriffs and an SFPD officer are detained in prostitution raids.

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Just when you think the evening news couldn't get any more twisted, the sheriff and undersheriff of San Mateo County are caught in a Vegas brothel during a raid to rescue sex slaves.

Dubbed "Operation Dollhouse", a multi-agency task force of federal and local law enforcement descended on a suburban home two miles off the main casino strip late one Saturday night in April. Unaware of the impending raid, Sheriff Greg Munks and Undersheriff Carlos Bolinas arrived at the house some time earlier in the comfort of a limousine. Six traffickers were arrested in the sting, which involved several locations and more than two dozen Asian women. The victims were transferred to local area shelters pending hearings on their immigration status. Some were underage.

All the customers in the brothel, including the two officers, were released without charges. Sheriff Munks told reporters afterwards that he thought he was being driven to "a legitimate massage business" and apologized for his poor judgment. He said he and Bolinas had participated in an annual law enforcement run earlier that day and were suffering from stiff muscles.

Both men continue to direct the peninsula law enforcement agency.

In May, a 37-year veteran of the SFPD was collared in another prostitution sweep. Sergeant Donald Forte, 58, is alleged to have engaged in "lewd and lascivious acts" with a 14-year-old girl in his car



At least five massage parlors populate this block of O'Farrell Street in the Tenderloin. While some businesses offer legitimate services, their number has more than doubled citywide in four years.

during a visit to Oakland. He has been placed on leave without pay.

In July, a joint task force of F.B.I. and police in three Bay Area counties launched "Operation Strikeout", targeting a crime ring that supplies prostitutes for major tourism events - in this case the All-Star Baseball Game in San Francisco.

While no law enforcement personnel were detained on this occasion, neither were any of the

ringleaders of the trafficking operation. Oakland police said they captured several pimps, as did police in San Jose and Campbell, but Captain Tim Hettrich of the SFPD vice squad said that of the 57 arrests made here, none were in connection to baseball. Fifty prostitutes were cited or arrested, along with a few of their customers.

According to a spokesman for District

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Attorney Kamala Harris, Police Chief Heather Fong's men and women in blue have yet to make their first collar for sex trafficking, even though the city has been identified as a top destination for foreign and domestic smugglers alike.

Tim Silard, who serves as Harris' chief of policy, said the lack of arrests is particularly troubling since his boss co-sponsored the California Trafficking Victims Act, a state law that went into effect in 2005. The measure was offered by Assemblywoman Sally Lieber of Mountain View. Oakland and other California counties have already apprehended and brought charges against those who transport women and children from one city to another (or from outside the country) for commercial sex. San Francisco has not.

Caught in the crosshairs of an election year, District Attorney Harris has been criticized in the press for not being tough enough on crime. However, at least in one category - domestic violence - the trial conviction rate has doubled since she took office in 2004.

Silard pointed out that Harris does not employ her own law enforcement unit. Prosecutions, he said, are dependent on the SFPD nabbing the criminals. "What she would like to see, and our office would like to see is coordinated investigation which targets what we identify as the true perpetrators behind this industry."

Last year the police department logged almost 1,400 arrests for prostitutes - an average of four per day. By contrast, arrests for pimping and pandering have diminished to a trickle this year.

Captain Kevin Dillon of the SFPD's Northern Station blamed that dip on sex workers who fail to finger such individuals when questioned by police. The bond between hookers and their pimps

is a strong one, Dillon told a June meeting for residents of the Polk Gulch neighborhood, which is adjacent to the Tenderloin.

Asked by a local shop owner if the SFPD could offer rehab or other assistance to sex workers in return for cooperation in pimp arrests, Dillon insisted the women didn't want to be helped. As



Assembly Speaker pro Tem Sally Lieber authored the California Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

for witness protection, "It's not needed," he said.

Silard doesn't share those views. "Certainly when you're talking about the more sophisticated criminal enterprises, they're in enormous danger," he said of the street prostitutes and women trapped in some massage parlor brothels. District Attorney Harris has secured funds to establish a safe house for young girls so their pimps can't find them, he said.

(The city offers few housing alternatives for adult prostitutes.)

"You want to build your case on more investigation and surveillance and evidence instead of relying solely on the testimony of women and girls who could be further victimized." Families may also be threatened, he said, adding that SFPD Special Investigations Division is equipped to undertake such assignments.

"If those cases come to us, we've always been successful at securing prosecutions," Silard

noted. "I don't know why they've dropped off so substantially."

"Capturing" the victims

Up until a few years ago, most immigrants lured or coerced into debt bondage schemes were prosecuted here as illegal aliens. Experts say anemic enforcement against traffickers has allowed the trade in human beings to eclipse gun-running as the second biggest moneymaker within the criminal underworld. Only drug dealing still reels in more profit.

About 80 percent of trafficking victims are thought to be women and girls.

In 2000, the United Nations adopted the Convention Against Transnational Crime, a measure aimed at compelling national governments to address sex slavery and forced labor schemes. That same year the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was passed by the U.S. Congress. The new federal law created a T-Visa, granting legal immigrant status to those trafficked here if they aid in the apprehension or prosecution of their smugglers.

In practice, victims are not always afforded the safety net offered by TVPA, even when they do agree to testify. Deportations continue, with many women facing the prospect of being re-trafficked by the same crime racket that lured or coerced them the first time around. In such cases, the victims are told the "debt" for their original travel expenses remains unpaid; therefore, they're subject to redeployment until the alleged expense is reimbursed to the traffickers. In receiving countries where prostitution is illegal, women are typically indentured in massage parlors.

Meredith May, a staff writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*

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reported this spring that an 18-month "Task Force to Combat Trafficking" formed by Mayor Gavin Newsom had succeeded in closing 17 establishments.

However, no criminal charges were filed against any brothel owner and a few of the closed businesses have since reopened under different names. That's because the lead agency in the task force is the Health Department rather than the SFPD. (The maximum fine imposed on a business found to be operating as a brothel is \$2,500.) It was also unclear why the task force was scheduled to last only 18 months.

Newsom gave a keynote address on his anti-trafficking efforts to the Annual Conference of U.S. Mayors, held in Los Angeles at the end of June.

An agency under the direction of the Department of Homeland Security, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, is charged with enforcing the the federal anti-trafficking law.

According to Hediana Utarti of San Francisco's Asian Women's Shelter, between 2003 and 2005, hundreds of trafficked victims were freed from Bay Area brothels and sweatshops. She contrasted that surge of activity with the past two years, when only a small number of victims have escaped from debt bondage, all on their own initiative.

Earlier this year ICE conducted a series of roundups of undocumented Latin Americans in several counties, none in response to human trafficking.

"What I heard is that the funding to do that kind of raid is not available," Utarti said. The Asian Women's Shelter provides 18 beds for victims, operates a 24-hour hotline, and administers an array of social and vocational services to help women get back on their feet. During the 2003-2005 period, Utar-

ti said her staff brokered housing and social services with other area shelters in order to accommodate the large number of women. The federal government underwrote the costs.

A website called **endtrafficking.org** went online earlier this year in conjunction with a billboard campaign

urging victims to contact one of four participating nonprofits for help in escaping their situations. The Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach program handles the T-Visa application and provides counsel in legal proceedings.

APILO staff attorney Erin Gangitano said both the SFPD and ICE rely on her team to act as advocates for the victims after raids. "They may alert us ahead of time that there's going to be a bust, so that we can get ready to be out there and talk with the women," she said. "Sometimes there may be a massage parlor or sweat shop that we know about but law enforcement chooses not to do anything about it." Gangitano said she wasn't sure why the federal sweeps suddenly halted in 2005.

The four-agency collaboration is funded in part by a grant from the Commission on the Status of Women. According to a COSW representative, the commission is not otherwise active on the issue of trafficking in San Francisco.

Even when the immigration authorities and police do intervene in a sweatshop or brothel, the underlying infrastructure of these operations tends to remain intact, said Utarti of the shelter. "Sometimes when you do a raid on one



SFPD's Lt. Mary Petrie (speaking) described the department's handling of child prostitutes and her own experience as a decoy officer at **girlFest** on July 20th. She is flanked by Anne Bissell (right) and panel facilitator Kathryn Xian.

place it doesn't mean that you stop the problem because what happens is that the pimps or the traffickers are not being captured. The authorities basically are only capturing the victims."

Assemblywoman Lieber concurred that enforcement of anti-trafficking measures like hers has a long way to go, given the traditional vice mentality within the law enforcement community. "Causing a paradigm shift, getting the word out to the police departments, getting it to be part of their training is a process that's going to take time," she said.

However, anti-trafficking activists often point to Lieber's own city of Mountain View as a model for how the crime should be addressed elsewhere. Lieber was the mayor at the time of a crackdown in 1998.

"We had some major busts of massage parlors," she said on the phone recently from the state capitol. "Our police there broke up a multi-million dollar trafficking ring called Smiles of China, so I really wanted to take that on in the state legislature." The San Francisco Bay Area is home to more trafficking victims than anywhere else in the United States, she said.

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Under her bill, victims now have legal standing to sue their captors in court and can get immediate financial assistance from the state. A special task force set up at the California Attorney General's office to monitor enforcement of the act was expected to issue its first report this summer.

Panel Debates Mostly Cons of Sex Industry

According to prostitution survivor Anne Bissell, a shift in American culture has turned the sex trade into an acceptable occupation, one with a lifetime of repercussions.

"That which becomes a commodity becomes disposable," she said at a July 20th event in San Francisco.

Bissell joined a panel discussion at Sanchez Middle School in the Mission, sponsored by GirlFest, a national nonprofit. Other speakers included Nola Brantley, Oakland's leading voice on the plight of child prostitutes, Lt. Mary Petrie of the SFPD Vice Squad, prostitution researcher Melissa Farley, and Swedish poet Agneta Falk.

Activist Brantley is credited with starting Alameda County's first Transition/Recovery Center for sexually exploited children. She assailed local police agencies for treating juvenile prostitutes as criminals rather than as victims of rape and extortion.

Brantley said MTV and other media outlets aimed at youth glorify pimps and promote an endless stream of prostitute role models who are women of color. With the fervor of a Baptist preacher, she also questioned the message that's communicated when a fashion designer puts the word "Sexy" on a pair of underpants destined to be worn by a seven-year-old.

Farley, who heads the non-profit firm Prostitution Research

and Education, said that in Nevada, where the two sheriffs were detained, advertisers spend \$2 million a day to sell commercial sex to male tourists. Closer to home, the popular online bulletin board Craigslist churns out 25,000 prostitution posts every week and a half, she informed the gathering, even though the sex trade is illegal in California. She said her repeated phone calls to the real-life Craig Newmark have yet to be returned.

Alternative newspapers like the *Bay Guardian* and *S.F. Weekly* also play a role in bolstering demand for prostitutes, she said. The so-called escort services advertised alongside massage parlors in these publications are not the high-class call-girl service that most people have been lead to believe, she said.

Agneta Falk, a poet and visual artist born in Stockholm, described a law adopted a few years ago in Sweden that makes pimping and solicitation of women by johns felonies. (Both crimes are misdemeanors here.) Taking into account the socio-economic situation of poor women and the high incidence of sexual abuse among all prostitutes, the Swedish law recognizes them as victims regardless of immigration status, effectively decriminalizing their role in the sex trade. Prosecutors are also not required to prove coercion by the traffickers as an element of the crime, a key factor in obtaining convictions, Falk said.

"They go after the root of the problem," she explained. Since the law was enacted, the number of sex slaves in Sweden has diminished, prompting the parliaments of Norway and other European countries to consider similar legislation.

Lt. Mary Petrie of the SFPD claimed there was some improvement in the situation here, in spite of the gloomy picture painted by

other panelists. "Things are getting better," she told the audience. "Our first goal is to help the victim get out of that situation."

Among the first women to graduate from the San Francisco Police Academy in the 1970's, Petrie said an early job assignment involved putting her hair in pig-tails and waiting at bus stops with a backpack. Even in those days, she said, the decoy work yielded quick results as pimps came along and commenced their hustling rituals.

Responding to allegations that criminalizing child prostitutes simply aggravates their already low self-esteem, Petrie countered that "the trauma ship sailed a long time ago" for most minors caught up in sex work. Simply releasing them back to their environment, she said, is not always a tenable proposition.

As it is, Petrie's unit encounters most child prostitutes in the emergency ward. While the option of holding anyone without charges is frowned upon by civil libertarians, Petrie said, an effort to establish some form of protective custody is currently under consideration.

The lack of 24/7 housing and social services for such victims poses an even more formidable hurdle, she added, leading police officers to inevitably err on the side of caution. So charges are filed and the girls are sent to detention facilities. Some are even relieved to go, Petrie said.

Note: The City Edition contacted both Mayor Gavin Newsom's office and the SFPD for comment on this story, but did not hear back from either.

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