

Human trafficking in Ottawa: At least 150 women used as sex slaves, research suggests

‘I had nothing left,’ former victim says of her years-long ordeal

BY DEREK SPALDING, OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 3, 2014

OTTAWA — Jasmine thought she had a normal relationship with an older guy, whom she describes as a bit of a “bad boy.”

They dated almost a decade ago when she was in her early 20s. Just six months into the romance, however, things changed when he was arrested and thrown in jail.

Jasmine says she had no idea what happened until a mutual friend reached out to her. The man told her she would have to repay a massive debt her boyfriend owed by sleeping with men for money.

She refused and was severely beaten. She was later taken to an apartment building above a commercial property near downtown Ottawa where she was raped by several men for hours.

Her first John visited her that night.

The brutal attack was part of a horrific ritual that’s referred to as “the breaking ground.” It’s a common tactic used by human traffickers who force young women into prostitution. And it happens in cities all across the country, say police, who are becoming more aware of the problem.

New research shows the sex-slave industry in Ottawa could be bringing in nearly \$26 million a year for traffickers, says one advocacy group that’s studying the issue locally. The anti-human-trafficking group PACT Ottawa estimates, it says conservatively, that there are at least 150 women being forced into prostitution in the nation’s capital. The vast majority of victims are Canadians, and most are from this city.

“We are 100-per-cent confident there is much more (in Ottawa),” said Elise Wohlbold, who has led the research for Project IMPACT. “We were very conservative because of the methodology we used.”

Jasmine, who still fears for her safety and did not want to publicly reveal her identity, grew up in suburban Ottawa. After her trafficker broke her down that day, she was fed a steady dose of OxyContin and spent the next four years servicing men in hotels.

Her experience is a textbook case of human trafficking, which is often confused with human smuggling, during which women are shipped overseas or across borders and forced to become sex slaves. But smuggling is just a portion of human trafficking, which is a lucrative global industry estimated to be worth \$32 billion.

In North American cities such as Ottawa, the bulk of human trafficking is domestic, say police and service groups who say they are just starting to get an understanding of the problem.

Insp. Paul Johnston of the Ottawa police says women are often sought out by people they know.

“A lot of times, particularly in domestic human trafficking, the profile of the trafficker is often the boyfriend,” he said. “(The women are) recruited through acquaintances and then they’re manipulated and coerced into the sex trade. It can start as a relationship, but that person has plans to turn them.”

Jasmine says she now questions whether her boyfriend at the time was part of a scheme that landed her in four years of hell.

She was fortunate enough to get out. She escaped her trafficker and has spent the past three years recovering from her drug addiction. But it wasn’t until a year ago, she said, that she even understood what had truly happened to her.

She recalls the early beatings when she refused to be prostituted. The attacks were severe.

“From then on, I remember the events, but I don’t have an emotional attachment to what happened,” Jasmine said.

Like most trafficked women, she was steadily fed drugs — in her case, four times a day.

“They fed me full of pills. But honestly, I don’t think I would have been able to get through it without that. You’re so drugged that you don’t have any emotions.”

She was forced to see men as early as 7 a.m. and would work until well after midnight. At \$300 a visit, the money added up, but she never saw any of it.

PACT Ottawa estimates one trafficker can bring in almost \$550,000 a year by controlling three women.

Over the years, Jasmine tried to run, but that was difficult to do. Her traffickers took all her identification and threatened to kill her family. They hacked her social media and email accounts and sent photos of her having sex to her family and friends.

“That was the day I was completely cut off from everybody,” Jasmine said. “My family was ashamed of me, my friends were ashamed of me. I had nothing left.”

Shaming is another common ploy traffickers use to isolate their victims, said Helen Roos, the head of the Ottawa Coalition to End Human Trafficking.

“They do everything they can to make these girls feel there is nowhere they can go,” she told the Citizen.

Over the four years she was prostituted, Jasmine said she was interviewed by police and questioned by health-care workers when she visited hospital and clinics, but no one saw the signs of what was

happening.

“My story was always that I was dating a guy and I was addicted to drugs,” she said. “I didn’t think anyone would understand.”

But police and service groups are making a concerted effort to educate the public about the signs of human trafficking.

Officers across the country brought attention to the issue last week when they released findings from a two-day anti-human trafficking blitz. Posing as Johns, police in 26 cities stretching from Alberta to Newfoundland interviewed 330 women, arrested eight people and laid 28 individual human trafficking or related charges.

The campaign was dubbed Operation Northern Spotlight and it identified girls as young as 15 being forced into prostitution. Ottawa police spoke to 29 women with some as young as 19, but no arrests were made.

Police and service groups all agree the numbers provided by PACT Ottawa represent just a small portion of human trafficking in Ottawa. The preliminary figures were not due to be released until May and could change by the time a final report is produced.

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