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Mon, September 29, 2008

Flesh Trade Targets Natives Young Aboriginal women used as a sex commodity in cities across Canada

By **TAMARA CHERRY, SUN MEDIA**

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On the street corners of Canada's largest cities, thousands of women are bought and sold every night.

Most of them, experts say, are aboriginal and an alarming number are trafficked.

"There's a total myth that Aboriginal women either consent to or are born into the sex trade," says Jo-Ann Daniels, interim executive director for the Metis Settlements General Council in Edmonton. "The average age of Aboriginal girls who are human trafficked is between seven and 12 years old."

In a four-part series running across the country this week, Sun Media looks at Canada's hidden trade in people; at the failure of this country to live up to its international obligations on human trafficking, to prosecute human traffickers and meaningfully help victims.

"It is Aboriginal girls and women who are specifically targeted in this country to be trafficked, in such huge numbers that it does not compare to any other population," Daniels says. "We believe that it is the root source of Aboriginal women ever being involved in the sex trade. We believe that Aboriginal women and Aboriginal girls have been domestically trafficked now for, I would say probably since the '50s when there began to be Aboriginal movement into urban areas or there were more contacts between Aboriginal communities and towns."

Aboriginal trafficking has been identified as a unique problem in government reports, non-governmental newsletters and at human trafficking conferences.

Poverty, abuse, racism and troubled historical relations have all been cited as reasons for the Aboriginal population falling victim to Canada's flesh trade at a far higher rate than non-Aboriginals.

FEW ARE LISTENING

But those in the know suggest few are listening and little or nothing is being done to deal with the indiscriminate exploitation of this population.

Members of the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW) in Edmonton began to hear stories from Aboriginal women about how they got involved in sex work after publishing their 2006 Crime Against Aboriginal Women report, says Daniels, a former policy analyst for IAAW.

"There was so few of them who had consented. There were so few of them who got any support to even recognize that they had been domestically trafficked," Daniels

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Given the total lack of statistics gathered on domestic trafficking in this country, it is no wonder there is nothing to accurately illustrate exactly how many Aboriginal people are being trafficked. But this is what is known:

- More than 500 Aboriginal women have gone missing or been murdered in Canada over the last few decades.

- According to research conducted by gang expert Michael Chettleburgh, 90% of the teenaged, urban prostitutes in Canada are Aboriginal.

- About 75% of Aboriginal girls under 18 have been sexually abused, says Anupriya Sethi, who has researched the issue. Of those, half are under 14 and nearly a quarter are younger than seven.

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"According to the Department of Justice and other witnesses, Aboriginal girls and women are at greater risk of becoming victims of trafficking within and outside Canada," notes the February 2007 report on human trafficking from the Standing Committee on Status of Women.

The report noted accounts from several experts about poverty, abuse and poor living conditions driving Aboriginal women into trafficking.

"Basically their handlers start them in Vancouver," Chantal Tie, a lawyer with the National Association of Women and The Law, told the committee.

"They work for them there for awhile, then they're sold to someone in Winnipeg and then to someone in Toronto, and so on down the line as they get moved around the country."

The RCMP's National Aboriginal Policing Service wanted to examine the issue further, the report noted, but lacked the funding and human resources to do so.

Later that year, the First Peoples Child and Family Review published a report by Sethi after she spent five months interviewing 18 "key informants," who ranged from trafficking victims to front-line service providers for sexually exploited women.

Sethi identified trafficking triangles through which Aboriginal victims are moved: Saskatoon-Edmonton-Calgary-Saskatoon; Saskatoon-Regina-Winnipeg-Saskatoon.

"These triangles are linked and they're spread all across Canada," Sethi says in an interview from Ottawa. "One of the trafficked women who I spoke with said that you sleep in the night and you're in Montreal and in the morning you wake up and you're in Vancouver."

"I don't know if there are international linkages," she says. "Once you're in Vancouver, are you taken? Once you're in Toronto, are you taken to New York or do you go to Los Angeles? I don't know. It hasn't been explored."

In big cities like Montreal, Aboriginal girls from northern communities are plucked right from the airport, Sethi says.

"Traffickers often know someone in the community who informs them about the plans of the girls moving to the city. Upon their arrival at the airport, traffickers lure the girls under the pretext of providing a place to stay or access to resources," she notes in her report.

'YOUNG, NAIVE'

Sethi quotes an Aboriginal outreach worker as such: "Girls tend to believe in the promises of the traffickers as they are young, naive and vulnerable in a new and big city. They are unsuspecting of the motives of the traffickers, since they belong to communities that have a culture of welcoming strangers."

Experts cite various reasons these girls are leaving their communities.

"Aboriginal communities are facing huge issues, whether it's poverty or

homelessness, sexual exploitation," Sethi says. "If you escape all that and there is this person who is targeting you... (who) offers you a shelter, offers you a job or better prosperous life, it's very easy to buy in."

"I haven't seen the image that I think people have in their head about people being scooped off reserves and taken other places," says Anette Sikka, who is researching the issue at the University of Ottawa.

"Chronic runaways are a real issue with trafficking in the Prairie Provinces," she says. "It tends to be if a young girl has run away a number of times, people stop looking." Experts interviewed by the Sun agree common factors that contribute to non-Aboriginal victims being forced into the sex trade -- such as poverty, drugs and abuse -- are much more prevalent in Aboriginal communities.

"There's a lot that unites us as Canadians, whether we're African Canadian, white or Aboriginal. But there are some distinctions with the Aboriginal community that I don't think most policy makers truly understand," says Chettleburgh. "The generation of young at-risk Aboriginals we have right now, many of them are the product of parents that went through the residential school experience and they've lost that touch with what makes them Indian."

'THIS IS ALL THEIR FAULT'

"I think there is a conception in people's minds that Aboriginal people aren't doing anything, this is all their fault, without making a connection to the whole issue of colonization and what colonization has done to harm the healthy development of Aboriginal people," says Marlyn Bennett, director of research for the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada in Winnipeg. "You have parents who don't know how to be parents."

Like international trafficking cases, in some Aboriginal communities, the exploitation is familial -- fathers and uncles exchanging incest for food and shelter, Sethi says.

"It's the whole bigger picture and if you miss it, then you'll miss the point," Sethi says. "How many Aboriginal men healing centres have you heard about?"

While experts have cited instances of Aboriginal victims being recruited by Asian and Somali gangs, says Chettleburgh: "There's no shortage of Aboriginal on Aboriginal victimization in the country." He points to Winnipeg where large gangs such as Indian Posse, Native Syndicate and Red Alert "are definitely running the girls on the street."

"I could take you to north Winnipeg, show you a street corner in the middle of a Monday afternoon, you'll have three girls, 12, 14, working the corners. Obviously they're being pimped out by gang members, but their customers are white guys driving middle class sedans that have come from the 'burbs, who are paying for their \$20 (sex acts) in back alleys and they disappear back to where they came from."

In Hobbema, a notoriously crime-laden reserve south of Edmonton, young women who have identified themselves as Indian Posse Girls claim to run the prostitution rings, Chettleburgh says.

"And largely their customers aren't the domestic demand," he adds. "It's these guys that are driving through the community looking for a score."

"Things like this don't happen without racism being the core cause," Daniels says with emphatic frustration. "The number one killer in this country for Aboriginal women isn't diabetes or cancer. It's rape-slash-murder. It can grow to such horrific heights and still, what's happening? Where's the human outcry? If it happened to soccer moms, it would be a completely different story all together."

"Just simply being an Aboriginal woman puts you at risk. I can go and stand on the corner of 108th St. and Jasper Ave. (in Edmonton) waiting for a ride to come along and I will get solicited," she says. "Aboriginal women who smoke, they'll go out on the side there, away from the entrance of their business buildings, of their offices, and they'll get solicited. It's a real problem. That's how racialized the sex industry is in this country."

'TARGETS ABORIGINALS'

"It just so targets Aboriginal women."

Asked for an estimate of the number of Aboriginal women and girls being trafficked in Canada, Daniels pauses.

"At this point, I would say hundreds," she says. "If we say thousands, I don't know if that's 99,000 or 3,000. So just hundreds at this point."

"The women out there now, tragically are --" her voice trails off. "I don't know how to say this. There's just a lot of Aboriginal women and girls out there."

Those who care have made several recommendations to the government: Look closer. Come up with a plan. Save our children. But where is the response?

Even the U.S. State department acknowledges the problem, noting it in their 2008 Trafficking in Persons report: "Canadian girls and women, many of whom are Aboriginal, are trafficked internally for commercial sexual exploitation," the report says.

The Aboriginal issue hasn't been ignored, Winnipeg MP Joy Smith, who co-chaired last year's Status of Women report, says just days before the federal election is announced. The only reason Smith, who has passionately taken on the issue of human trafficking for several years, can give for her government not addressing Aboriginal trafficking is that they can't get anything done with a minority government.

Human trafficking can't be ruled out when considering all the missing Aboriginal women in this country, Bennett says.

"Where are all these women? Where are they? Are they dead?" she says.

"Whether these women are being moved around, we don't know that and we need to look at that and we need to find out."

"It's very rare with regards to the Aboriginal population that somebody goes in for money into voluntary sex work," Sethi says. "Unless we take a step back and see why it's happening, we'll never be able to get through this problem. We'll always see it as voluntary prostitution and their problem."

"Either it's ignorance or it's stereotype or it's total indifference or it's racism or it's a mix of all these factors," she says. "Before we go any further into prevention and targeted initiatives, let's just start acknowledging that this issue is human trafficking and not just sex work."

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