

SB 235 Proponent Testimony

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Thank you, Chairman Grendell and the entire Criminal Justice Judiciary Committee, for your attention to the testimonies in support of Senate Bill 235. I commend you all for seeing human trafficking in Ohio as a problem. I hope to provide you with a compelling argument today and to present a social work perspective of the issue of human trafficking, specifically pertaining to sex trafficking.

I am a graduate student at The Ohio State University in the College of Social Work and currently intern at the National Association of Social Workers- Ohio Chapter. I have worked to empower young women for several years by volunteering my time with organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters in Chesterland, Ohio during high school and in Chicago, Illinois during college, and most recently have served at Rahab's Hideaway, a shelter that provides a safe place for trafficked women here in Columbus. I am speaking to you about human trafficking today from a place of passion because I feel that I am speaking for those who do not have a voice.

Realizing that human trafficking happens in the United States is a shock for most people. Realizing that human trafficking happens throughout Ohio and yes, here in the city and suburbs of Columbus, in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo and the rural areas in between is a startling discovery for our communities.

But we must realize that our children, community members, and even people we know are commercially sexually exploited, and this type of exploitation is a form of modern-day slavery.

Strip clubs are legal. Pornography is legal. Advertising for escort services is legal, even though in many cases these ads are a breeding ground for prostitution. These venues are normal in our society today, but we need to reframe how we think about commercial sex.

I would like to share with you briefly about the experience of someone I know:

- At age four, a young girl was placed into foster care, and from the first day and for the next four years, the young girl was sodomized and raped by the father and son in the family. When she was placed back with her mother, her mother's boyfriend sexually abused her. She was prostituted at age 11, with a quota of 20-25 men per night. By the age of 13, she was put into juvenile detention and was there for 5 years. During that time, she was raped and sodomized by a prison guard. Once she was released from detention, she continued along the only path she knew – prostitution.

There is another brief story I would like to share from the autobiography of Traci Lords¹,

- At age 10, she was raped by a 16-year-old boy. Her mother's boyfriend also sexually abused her. At age 15, she sought shelter with her mother's new boyfriend, who pimped her into pornography. She was featured in Playboy at age 15. She then came under the control of another pimp, who forced her into hardcore pornography, which included degrading acts such as bestiality. By this time, she was only 16 years old.

Stories like these are much more common than we think, which leads to the conclusion that this is a pattern. When we observe patterns of behavior and criminal activity, it is our duty to close these gaps in the system, in order to break these patterns of abuse and gateways into the commercial sex industry.

¹ Lords, T. (2003). *Traci Lords: Underneath it all*. New York: Harpers Collins Publishers.

How would you classify the previously mentioned stories from a criminal justice perspective? Are these cases of rape? Compelling prostitution? Child pornography? I would answer yes to all of the above, but what these charges all have in common is that they all fall under the term “human trafficking.” This legislation would redefine who the criminal is in these situations. The young girl not yet 18 who was molested, sodomized, and raped all before her 12th birthday and then turned out on the streets to sell her body would no longer be classified as the criminal prostitute, but would be considered the prostituted child, a victim.

The norms in our society consider the act of having sex with a child to be classified as rape, but if there is an exchange of money to a pimp, our society no longer considers this sex act with a child to be rape. It is labeled child prostitution, when in fact, children cannot legally consent to sex. There is a gap in our laws addressing the victimization of children in the commercial sex industry. Therefore, I strongly urge the Committee to reinsert the provision including crimes against children into the statute, in order to adequately protect this vulnerable population and to correspond with the federal statute, a law modeled after international standards.

While it is true that children from any background are vulnerable to being trafficked, children with life circumstances such as poverty, minority status, involvement in the child welfare system or juvenile justice system, are even more at risk to being placed in the bondage of modern-day slavery. Traffickers know who to target, and they know who will receive the attention of media.

Indeed, there is no choice. This is a form of modern-day slavery. No freedom of choice. No freedom of speech. No freedom of movement. Life and dreams are cut off from opportunities and from enjoying basic human rights. The restriction of these rights are perpetuated by a demand for commercial sex because adult men believe they have the right to purchase another human being for their own pleasure and by a culture that glorifies those, who prostitute and

exploit women and children, as having some sort of special status. To make this point, just yesterday on a local radio station 106.7, the hosts praised Steven Seagal as a “hero” for possibly harboring sex slaves in his home. The hosts discussed on the air how they would strategically obtain their own sex slaves and even called slavery “the new wave” of sex. When another host pointed out that what they were talking about was illegal, the men replied, who will tell? the slut? This broadcast reflects attitudes that exist in our community and it promotes a “culture of tolerance.”²

The fact is - human trafficking is fuelling the commercial sex industry of strip clubs, pornographic videos and photographs of both children and adults, street prostitution, massage parlors, brothels, and the list goes on.

We must put an end to this crime of human trafficking, not only because it has devastating impacts on the individuals involved, but also because it has residual effects on our communities and social systems. We channel adults and children who have been prostituted into the criminal and juvenile justice systems, while at the same time the men who paid to have sex with them are free in our society.

Rather than criminalizing the children and adults who have been forced into the commercial sex industry, we ought to provide supportive services to restore their lives, their dignity, and their ability to have healthy interpersonal relationships. If provided the resources - backed by political will - the services social workers provide can assist victims into becoming survivors who then can develop into strong leaders.

Social workers are charged with the responsibility to correct injustices and advocate on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals. We are blessed with the vision of seeing each

² Kotria, K. (2010). Domestic minor sex trafficking in the United States. *Social Work*. 55(2), p. 181-187.

person as worthy of human dignity and respect. But these standards should not only be held by a professional code of ethics; they should be institutionalized in our laws.

Ending this brutal exploitation and preserving human rights starts with the proposed legislation before you today that defines human trafficking as a crime in-and-of itself. The enactment of this law will create changes in the criminal justice and legal systems that will reinforce human rights and dignity and will put our community a step closer to shutting down organized human trafficking operations and protecting our children from exploitation.

I urge all of you today to please pass Senate Bill 235, in order to end the sale and exploitation of our men, women, and children here in Ohio and in the United States of America. Thank you again for bringing this issue into the light and thank you for your time today.

NASW Ohio Chapter