

## Rural Women and Children: A High-Risk Group for Trafficking in Persons

This document is a summary of “Rural Women and Children: A High-Risk Group for Trafficking in Persons,” a panel that was a side event to CSW (the UN Commission on the Status of Women). The event was organized by the NGO Committee on Migration, specifically its Trafficking Taskforce, and was on March 8, 2:30pm, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of the Church Center of the UN.

Moderator: Erica Carlino of the NGO Committee on Migration

First Presenter: Crystal Solorio of Polaris Project

Second Presenter: Kate Keisel-Stagnone of Polaris Project

Third Presenter: Lori Cohen of Sanctuary for Families

Honored Guest: Sheepa Hafiza of BRAC

**Why “Rural Women and Children: A High-Risk Group for Trafficking in Persons”?** This event came about as a way for the NGO Committee on Migration to be involved in CSW, and as a way for the Committee’s taskforce on trafficking to get some real work done as a team.

**What was its focus?** More specifically, the event was a way for those of us who specialize in the rights of migrants and in the rights of (migrant) trafficked persons to be part of CSW, whose priority theme this year was “rural women.” Thus, we did our best to present basic information/insight on the topic of trafficking (what it is, what it looks like) while also being thoughtful about the theme of rural women. We did this by trying to convey that rural women and children are a population that is—throughout the world—acutely subject to trafficking situations. The panelists made particular mention of the challenges that would be present (in transit and destination countries) should the trafficked person be from a quite rural area.

**Why March 8<sup>th</sup>?** March 8 was the day that CSW gave to us as a group, and we were just one of hundreds of groups that planned a side event to the main program of CSW. This was near the end of the second week of CSW, and it was excellent timing because March 8 is International Women’s Day, which became part of how we talked about the event—leading up to it as well as on the day. (The event was a couple hours after the Women’s Celebration March that was part of the UN’s way of commemorating International Women’s Day.)

### **What was the thrust of the remarks from the presenters from Polaris Project?**

Kate Keisel-Stagnone and Crystal Solorio gave an overview of trafficking, especially where the U.S. is the destination country. Polaris Project (<http://www.polarisproject.org/>) works out of New Jersey and has experience serving/aiding trafficked persons from all over the world. They showed a video detailing the experience of trafficked girls/women from West Africa who worked in salons as hair braiders ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_tQDYvPrE6k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tQDYvPrE6k)). The video both gave people a sense of what trafficking looks like and also did some work to help us step out of the stereotype that trafficked persons only do a narrow range of things in their slavery (i.e., sex work). Kate expressed the view that prosecution has to be so much more thorough—that this is a main way to decrease instances of trafficking. She said that only one trafficker is convicted for every 800 victims. She further said that arresting the johns is what will decrease demand, which is so needed.

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### **What was the thrust of the remarks from Lori Cohen?**

Lori Cohen is an attorney at Sanctuary for Families (<http://www.sanctuaryforfamilies.org/>), whose main work is to aid victims of domestic violence (DV). Lori's work has put her in the service of sex trafficking victims from Central America. She spoke of the "wheel of power and control" that is an analytical tool for looking at DV situations, and how applicable/true it is for trafficking situations. She took us through the wheel of power and control and elaborated on how each piece in the wheel ("isolation," "rape," "using family members," etc.) unquestionably had a role to play in a trafficking case. She spoke of the psychological consequences of trafficking. She told us about one of her clients, "Angela," from Oaxaca, Mexico. The challenges that seem particular to *rural* women, as Lori sees it, are that: you don't speak the language or even the language that is primarily used by your trafficker, you very possibly have a traditional upbringing that included little-to-no education about sex, you may have a heightened connection to / reliance upon family (which is used as a threat/intimidation factor by the trafficker), and you are basically easier to isolate.

### **What about the "honored guest"?**

Sheepa Hafiza is the director of BRAC in Bangladesh. Her organization combats trafficking on massive scale and it was the NGO Committee on Migration's pleasure to have her at CSW and at the event. Sheepa's brief remarks served as a reminder that trafficking situations are migration situations, and she made the point that migration is not safe (and thus migrants' rights are not being respected) if there is trafficking risk. BRAC has a "Safe Migration Program" that addresses this.

—Russell Lum (March 28, 2012)

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