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Child Trafficking Under Our Radar: MP

Katie Rook, National Post

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In eight years of crusading against child exploitation and human trafficking, Manitoba MP Joy Smith says one of her greatest shocks was realizing a high-profile businessman in her riding was a pedophile.

As the mother of a police officer who had been assigned to a child exploitation unit, Ms. Smith (Kildonan-St. Paul) said yesterday she could not resist becoming involved with an issue that was exacting an obvious toll on him.

She met police officers, participated in police stake-outs and was surprised by how easily predators blended in.

"You wouldn't believe the people who participate in exploiting children," Ms. Smith said in an interview. "It's the most unlikely people."

Ms. Smith was in the tony Montreal enclave of Westmount yesterday addressing a conference on human trafficking. Ms. Smith told a crowd of about 400 that the trafficking of young girls and children for prostitution in Canada is going largely unnoticed.

"You think it doesn't happen and our Canadian public thinks it doesn't happen with ordinary Canadian girls, but it does. It's actually gone under the public radar screen."

Young women and children are bought and sold and forced to work in brothels throughout Canada. While some victims are lured from other countries with modelling contracts or the promise of citizenship, others are recruited within Canada. Human trafficking and child exploitation are not solely the problems of other countries known for their thriving sex trade industries, she said.

The RCMP estimates that in Canada about 800 women and children are being trafficked for prostitution each year. Advocacy groups suggest there could be as many as 15,000 victims each year, the audience heard.

Encountering an acquaintance among suspects being surveyed by police was a turning point for Ms. Smith.

"That really threw me because I knew him. I had known him before and I recognized him," she said.

Raising awareness about human trafficking and child exploitation is the first step toward solving a problem Ms. Smith describes as "rampant." While more can be done, she applauds steps that have already been taken.

"I think one of the greatest moments in Canada's history came on Feb. 22, 2007, when the House of Commons unanimously adopted a motion I put forward which called for the trafficking of women and children to be condemned and recommended that a comprehensive strategy to combat the trafficking of persons be adopted," Ms. Smith told the audience.

Recovering from sexual abuse is a lifelong process through which many victims struggle, Ms. Smith said.

"[In] working with young girls who have worked in brothels, whenever you talk to them their story is that they don't want to be there. It is something they were forced to do.

"Once they're rescued out of it, it takes them a long time to talk about it because [they see it as] embarrassing.

"When these kids have been forced into the sex trade, they've been raped, they've been intimidated, they've been threatened and that sticks with them. It takes them a long time to trust anybody."

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