

U.S. urged to stop Marianas trafficking

WASHINGTON - A Filipina forced into the sex trade and raped hours after her arrival in the Northern Mariana Islands appealed to U.S. senators to change immigration and labor laws in the commonwealth.

"I know there are other women out in the (Mariana Islands) community like me," Kayleen Entena said in her Feb. 8 testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources; its jurisdiction covers U.S. territorial islands and other insular areas.

Ms. Entena was joined by Good Shepherd Sisters and a laywoman working with the nuns, who run shelters for victims of human trafficking on the islands and around the world.

Victims "are just afraid to speak out because they do not know where to go or just because they have to support their family back home," said Ms. Entena, 23.

While living with her family in the Philippines, Ms. Entena was recruited to work in a restaurant on Saipan, one of the Mariana Islands. However, Ms. Entena said, she was tricked into the sex trade and was forced to have sex with male customers.

After trying to escape twice, Ms. Entena and another women fled the brothel with the help of a young man and his mother.

Lauri Ogumoro, who heads "Guma Esperanza" (House of Hope), a Good Shepherd-run shelter on Saipan, said because of ineffective local government policies that do not fall under U.S. federal immigration and labor laws, many guest workers flock to the islands in search of jobs and are tricked into harsh working conditions and human trafficking.

In an interview following the Senate hearing, Ms. Ogumoro told Catholic News Service that she does not know the solution to the problem in the islands.

However, she said, the “ease of which people can circumvent the system” has to stop and needs “major change.”

Good Shepherd Sister Helene Hayes, who led a Good Shepherd Sisters’ research project about human trafficking in Southeast Asia and Europe, told CNS the shelter provides direct services for victims of human trafficking.

Shelter workers go into areas where there is forced prostitution and give women an unmarked business card with a phone number linking to the shelter, she said.

The outreach is done discreetly, she added, because “traffickers are vigilant” and part of organized crime.

Allen Stayman, a staff member of the Senate committee, said Asian businessmen have found gaps in the labor and immigration laws, which have allowed them to profit from the lax and poorly supervised system.

Though the Senate passed a bill federalizing the island’s local laws six years ago, special interest groups stopped the bill from becoming a law, Mr. Stayman told CNS.

The Senate “testimony shows from personal experiences that the situation is unacceptable,” he said.