

Media chided on sex trafficking

Don't dwell on prurient aspects in coverage, say participants at a U.N. panel discussion.

By MARK MORRIS
The Kansas City Star

UNITED NATIONS | Diplomats and researchers Wednesday urged journalists to not dwell on the salacious details of sex trafficking when reporting on the fight against modern-day slavery.

The admonition came at a U.N. panel discussion in which reporters, filmmakers, public officials and social-service providers were asked to examine the media's role in exposing human trafficking.

Former ABC News correspondent Lynn Sherr, who moderated the panel, acknowledged: "Members of the news media often don't always get it right," preferring instead to focus on sensational stories of abuse.

But Sherr noted that organizers of the panel invited journalists and researchers whose work represented some of the best reporting on human-trafficking issues.

The panel included Kansas City Star reporter Mike McGraw, who was among a team of journalists that last year published an award-winning, five-part series on human trafficking. The Star found that the U.S. government was failing to find and help thousands of human-trafficking victims.

Noy Thrupkaew, a fellow at the Open Society Institute in New York, encouraged reporters to work harder to paint three-dimensional pictures of those who have endured the abuse of modern slavery.

"It's more than the moment of dramatic epiphany and rescue," Thrupkaew said. "Think about what happens in the life of happily ever after. It's a story not only of deprivation but one of resilience."

An Israeli documentary filmmaker, Guy Jacobson, acknowledged that maintaining objectivity also was a problem, particularly after delving deeply

into the subject. His latest film, "Redlight," which premieres soon, contains footage he obtained by using undercover cameras in Asian brothels.

Jacobson asked for a show of hands from the more than 400 people who attended the panel discussion in the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council chamber.

"Who thinks that 5-year-olds should be working in a brothel and raped every day?" he asked. "If you do, me and my baseball bat will have that discussion with you outside."

Panelists agreed that protecting victims of human trafficking should be the prime consideration for journalists.

"When I met my first victim who was still in jeopardy, I realized that the preponderance of my victims were still alive, but could soon be dead if I didn't do my reporting correctly,"

@ Go to KansasCity.com to read The Star's series on human trafficking.

said E. Benjamin Skinner, a senior fellow at the Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism at Brandeis University.

Panelists also decried the lack of consistent statistical information on human trafficking. U.S. human-trafficking czar Luis CdeBaca contended that 50,000 people worldwide last year had been freed from slavery. But U.N. Under-Secretary-General Antonio Maria Costa argued that the number was less than half that figure.

"Data is a huge problem for this issue," McGraw noted. "We live in a country that claims to have more than 14,000 victims coming in every year, but we have a visa system that will only help 5,000 a year,

even if we found every one."

Even the definition of human trafficking can sometimes trip up reporters, CdeBaca noted.

"If you look at an article in Arizona they mean alien smuggling," CdeBaca said. "If you look at an article in Kansas City or in Florida, they mean slavery."

Costa said the media's role in raising the public's awareness and understanding of the issue was essential.

"How do you rate the role of media?" Costa asked. "The performance would not be an A or B. Maybe a C, if that. But we need the media as a multiplier."

The panel was sponsored by the Schuster Institute, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, and the U.S. Mission to the U.N.

To reach Mark Morris, call 816-234-4310 or send e-mail to mmorris@kcstar.com.