

**Testimony of Mei-Mei Akwai Ellerman of Wellesley, MA, before the
Massachusetts Joint Judiciary Committee Hearing on the Human Rights for
All Bill (HB706), June 7th, 2005**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify this afternoon in support of the Human Rights for All Bill (HB 706). I consider it an honor, given our state's historic role in the birth of democratic rule, as well as a duty to ensure that Massachusetts joins the ranks of the leading advocates of human rights, not just within the confines of the United States, but as a member of the International Community.

My name is Mei-Mei Akwai Ellerman, founding member of the Board of Directors of Polaris Project, a Washington-DC-based organization dedicated to combating human trafficking and modern-day slavery. I am also the Coordinator for the recently launched Polaris Boston Chapter, and a Resident Scholar at the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center.

I would like to use my time to address a single issue: trafficking in persons, a form of modern day slavery. I come to you today as a representative of Polaris Project, a multicultural grassroots organization whose mandate is to provide victim services, conduct advocacy, and build the anti-trafficking movement both nationally and internationally. Passing the HB 706 is an important step in bringing the state of Massachusetts in line with the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, and other international human rights agreements. Modern day slavery, the third largest criminal industry after drugs and arms dealing, is defined as "the recruitment of people by threat or use of force, or by deception, for exploitation in prostitution, or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery." It generates billions of dollars across the world.

I will offer just a few statistics to give you an idea of the scope of modern day slavery: the estimate is that today 27 million people worldwide live under conditions of slavery; 800,000 women and children (as young as 9), are trafficked across borders; 17,500 women and children are trafficked into the US on a yearly basis, most of whom end up trapped in brothels, massage parlors, spas, with no hope of escape. Finally, 200,000-350,000 US born children are considered at high risk for commercial exploitation. Many victims are subjected to systematic rape, torture, virtually no pay, and enslavement with no chance of escape.

Passing the HB 706 would be the first step towards bringing our state in line with both of these protocols, as well as adding Massachusetts to the five existing states that have laws against trafficking (Florida, Texas, Arizona, Missouri and Washington State).

One last comment, as long as legislation against trafficking only exists at the federal level, the FBI and US Attorneys offices are going to be overwhelmed and unable to offer the necessary services to assist the thousands of women and children in dire need. Since the year 2000, only 530 trafficking cases have gone through the courts. The time has come for each state to step up to the plate, and by passing appropriate legislation, be able to tap into the resources offered by the state and criminal justice systems. It is also important for states to follow the TVPA model so as to ensure the adoption of a uniform anti-trafficking law across the country. I might add that, as part of Polaris' US Policy Program, it currently

offers assistance to US State legislators to help draft such a law.

I fervently urge the Massachusetts Joint Judiciary Committee to vote in favor of HB 706, to help our state regain its leadership role in the fight for human rights, and to ensure not just the well-being, but the very survival of hundreds of thousand of women, children and men, both international and domestic victims of modern day slavery. Their lives and future lie in your hands. I thank your for your time and for listening, I trust, with both your heart and minds.

In closing, I would like to leave you with the testimonies of two survivors.

Rosa, 14 Years old, Trafficked in Florida

"I was smuggled into the United States through Texas to Orlando, Florida. It was then the men told me that my employment would consist of having sex with men for money. I had never had sex before, and I had never imagined selling my body. And so my nightmare began. Because I was a virgin, the men decided to initiate me by raping me again and again, to teach me how to have sex. Over the next three months, I was taken to a different trailer every 15 days. Every night I had to sleep in the same bed in which I had been forced to service customers all day. I couldn't do anything to stop it. I wasn't allowed to go outside without a guard. Many of the bosses had guns. I was constantly afraid. One of the bosses carried me off to a hotel one night, where he raped me. I could do nothing to stop him."

Rachel Lloyd, Founder of GEMS in NYC and child sex trafficking survivor

"So what's it really like for us? The pimps tell us about the sneakers and jeans they'll buy us, but they never tell us that we'll never see any of the money we make. They don't tell us what will happen when we don't make the quota they have set for us that night, the beatings, the physical torture we'll receive if we break one of the ever-changing complex set of pimp rules. Looking at another pimp, for example, can earn a severe beating, so we learn very quickly to look down at all times to protect ourselves no matter what, to be loyal or faithful to the man that scares us the most."