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NY laws to protect women, fight trafficking to take effect

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KATE SECKINGER/Gazette Reporter

Survivor Asia Graves, left, with Cassie McCracken, center, and Melanie Conte discuss how organizations like SAFE Inc. respond to commercial sexual exploitation of children in Schenectady. The women spoke at a conference at Schenectady County Community College earlier this month.

ALBANY — New laws designed to fight human trafficking and protect women in the workplace are coming to New York shortly after the new year.

Measures taking effect Jan. 19 include tougher penalties for human traffickers, as well as greater assistance for trafficking victims. Other new laws will prohibit companies from paying a worker less because of gender, discriminating against pregnant women, or denying someone a promotion based on family status.

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Provisions are also included to prohibit housing discrimination against domestic violence victims and to close a loophole that had prevented workers at businesses with fewer than four employees from being able to file sexual harassment complaints.

The bills were all part of a package dubbed the women's equality act, which lawmakers passed during the 2015 session.

Another unrelated law going into effect on Jan. 1 will require employers to give nursing women breaks at work to pump breastmilk.

Meanwhile, a business income tax cut starting Jan. 1 will save New York companies an estimated \$125 million.

Higher minimum wages went into effect on Dec. 31. The hourly wage went from \$8.75 an hour to \$9, while the minimum for workers in fast-food chain restaurants rose to \$10.50 in New York City and \$9.75 in the rest of the state.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo has said he will seek legislation to gradually increase the minimum wage for all workers to \$15 an hour during the 2016 legislative session. Members of the Assembly and Senate are scheduled to kick off the session on Wednesday in Albany.