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NY to set tough prison time for sex trafficking

By [MICHAEL VIRTANEN, Associated Press](#)



Iryna, a 27-year-old former trafficking victim and native of Ukraine, tells reporters that she had been forced into prostitution by her boyfriend at 19 and threatened with knives and guns. "Being sold for sex is a slavery. ... I felt there is no hope for me," she said. *Photo by Matthew D'Onofrio.*

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New York set the stage Monday for throwing sex traffickers in prison for at least five years and up to 25 years.

The Assembly followed the Senate and passed legislation to establish tougher penalties to punish traffickers, splitting off one piece from a package of bills that had stalled because of a disagreement with the Republican-controlled Senate over abortion rights.

Speaker Carl Heastie, the new leader of the Democrat-controlled chamber, said Assembly members will move on to other bills in the package intended to advance women's equality with possible revisions and some others, including paid family leave that the Assembly will take up Tuesday.

On trafficking, Heastie said, about 17,000 people are brought yearly to the U.S. and forced into labor or sex trafficking against their will.

"Human trafficking is a brutal crime," said Assembly member Amy Paulin, chief sponsor. "We must demand more severe penalties for the worst offenders."

Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday he looks forward to signing the legislation. He said the victims in New York include more than 1,000 children every year.

The legislation will raise sex trafficking to a Class B violent felony, punishable by five to 25 years in state prison for the first offense. Under current law, it is a non-violent felony with sentences as short as one year. Advocates said the penalties for repeat offenses are also much harsher.

For patrons of underage prostitutes, the legislation raises the felony levels and prison times.

Lauren Hersh, an ex-Brooklyn prosecutor now director of anti-trafficking policy and advocacy at Sanctuary for Families, said the agency sees the devastating effects on victims and families.

Iryna, a 27-year-old former trafficking victim and native of Ukraine, told reporters before the vote that she had been forced into prostitution by her boyfriend at 19 and threatened with knives and guns. "Being sold for sex is a slavery. ... I felt there is no hope for me."

Hersh said she used the existing anti-trafficking statute, enacted in 2007, to convict another trafficker but the stronger statute will put them in prison years longer and thereby protect more people from becoming victims.

The Associated Press generally does not identify victims of alleged sexual abuse. Iryna identified herself to news reporters by her first name only.

The legislation will also allow victims to pursue civil penalties against traffickers and increases criminal penalties for labor trafficking.

Sonia Ossorio, president of the National Organization for Women-New York, said women and girls comprise an estimated 80 percent of sex trafficking victims and the U.S. Justice Department has named New York a major hub. The new law would require the Municipal Police Training Council and State Police superintendent to develop and distribute information to police about trafficking victims and available social services.

Ossorio said other bills from the women's equality agenda that may move soon in the Assembly include requiring employers to provide reasonable accommodations for pregnancy-related medical conditions and closing loopholes in the law requiring equal pay for women.

Senate Majority Leader Dean Skelos urged Heastie and the Assembly to likewise pass other individual bills that the Senate has already approved that would strengthen court orders of protection, authorize electronic filing of those orders, prohibit sexual harassment at even the smallest businesses and allow attorney's fees in winning discrimination cases in employment, credit and lending.