

Sex Trafficking: The New Slavery

Diane Bayly

Slavery was officially abolished in the United States in 1865. Yet slavery is now flourishing in the U.S. out of public view.

Lena, a student from Eastern Europe, had dreams of visiting the United States and improving her English through a study-abroad program. When she arrived at the U.S. airport, she was told that her study placement had been changed. She was given a bus ticket to a different city. Upon arrival there, traffickers took her passport and enslaved her in the sex industry for almost a year (CNN Opinion, November 25, 2009).

Maria paid a coyote (a crossborder smuggler) \$5,000 to bring her into California. When she arrived, the smugglers demanded \$6,000 more. Unable to pay, she was forced to work off the “debt” as a prostitute. She reported that her captors tortured her with an electric shock when she did not follow their orders (Fox News, November 16, 2009).

When Rosita was fifteen years old, a man walked up to her outside her school. He told her that she was pretty and that he wanted to be her boyfriend. He was a pimp. Over the next three years, Rosita endured an average of eight “customers” a day who were charged \$150 each. All the money went to her pimp. “I just felt like I was put out to die,” she said (CBS Evening News, July 22, 2009).

These are only three of the stories of the tens of thousands of sex slaves in the United States. Modern-day slavery, now referred to as human trafficking, is not just an evil of bygone years that we read about in history books. It is a present reality worldwide. Human beings continue to be bought, sold, and subjected to horrific conditions of bondage. In fact, human trafficking is now the fastest-growing source of profits for organized crime worldwide and is tied with arms trading as the second most profitable.

What is sex trafficking?

Human trafficking encompasses the illegal trade in human beings for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act

(TVPA) of 2000 defines sex trafficking as a crime in which “a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age.”

Children under eighteen do not need to prove they were deceived or forced into commercial sex acts to be considered victims of sex trafficking.

Trafficking should not be confused with smuggling, the illegal movement of a person across a border *with consent*, but those who are smuggled into the United States are especially vulnerable to becoming trafficked.

Lured by promises of a job, an education, a better life, opportunity, freedom, or even romance, women and children come to the United States from Asia, Europe, Central America, Mexico, and other regions. They never suspect that they will be forced to work in brothels, in massage parlors, or for escort services. Many describe being forced to provide sex acts for thirty men or more a day.

To keep these women and children enslaved, traffickers may use beatings, rape, threats to family members, debt bondage, and threats of deportation or imprisonment. For a variety of reasons, victims rarely identify themselves. Often they are unable to speak English. They are full of fear and shame and unfamiliar with the protective U.S. laws. They may also be afraid of what will happen to their loved ones if they escape. They are guarded by traffickers, mistrust authorities, and are unaware of how to get help. They do not realize that they can receive assistance and apply for immigration status as victims of the federal crime of trafficking.

Large numbers of children who are U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents are also being exploited for commercial sex purposes. The average age of entry into prostitution in the United States is twelve to fourteen. Youth running away from unstable home environments where they suffered sexual or physical abuse are lured by pimps with promises of love, security, and belonging. Pimps adeptly use grooming and recruitment practices, similar to those used by child sexual predators, to create trauma bonds and keep youth enslaved.

RESPECT LIFE

Regardless of nationality, background, or age, the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual scars of enduring sexual servitude cannot be overstated. Sex trafficking survivors often suffer from HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, mental health problems, violence-related injuries, drug and alcohol abuse, and problems related to pregnancy or forced abortions. It is not uncommon for survivors to have psychological disorders associated with suffering from extremely prolonged trauma and fear. Some survivors recount that they coped by “numbing” themselves, mentally “leaving” their bodies and imagining themselves elsewhere in order to endure daily rape by customers. This can lead to dissociative disorders in which their sense of self ceases to be integrated.

How widespread is this problem?

The statistics are staggering. The United States Department of State estimates that 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year for commercial sex or forced labor, approximately 80 percent of whom are women and children. This figure does not include the tens of thousands trafficked within their own countries. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes reported in 2009 that 79 percent of all global trafficking is for sexual exploitation, with increasing numbers of children involved.

The U.S. Department of State estimates that in the last ten years 145,000 to 175,000 foreign nationals have been trafficked into the U.S. for commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor. Data suggests that at least 100,000 U.S. children are currently being exploited in the commercial sex trade in the U.S., and another 200,000 are at risk.

Why is trafficking so prevalent?

The huge demand for prostitution, pornography, and sexual entertainment fuels modern-day slavery. The International Labor Organization estimates that commercial sexual exploitation netted \$28 billion in

illicit profits in 2005. Sex-trafficked women, girls, and boys are the most profitable of slaves. Unlike commodities in the drug or arms trade, women, girls, and boys can be bought, sold, and resold, earning pimps and traffickers enormous revenues with little risk of being caught or prosecuted. Buyers receive few penalties, if any. In the U.S., a sex trafficker or pimp can make over \$200,000 per victim annually due to the high demand for sexual “services.”

The USCCB Response

In a 2007 pastoral statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Committee on Migration, the bishops wrote: “Human trafficking is a horrific crime against the basic dignity and rights of the human person. All efforts must be expended to end it . . . to ensure that, one day soon, trafficking in human persons vanishes from the face of the earth.”

For many years, the Catholic Church has been actively combating trafficking in a number of ways, including advocacy, education, and direct assistance. As an example, from 2006 to 2009, the USCCB’s Department of Migration and Refugee Services helped provide assistance to 1,500 foreign national survivors of human trafficking throughout the United States and its territories.

We have only begun the journey to end the evil of modern-day slavery. As Catholics, called to reflect the light of Jesus in places of great darkness, we must speak out and work tirelessly on behalf of our brothers and sisters in captivity. We must educate others on what we can do to eradicate the deplorable trade of women and children for profit. And we must pray for the rescue and restoration of victims, for the redemption of traffickers, and for the protection of all human life.

Diane Bayly is Educational and Outreach Coordinator for the USCCB Office of Migration and Refugee Services.
