

Child Sex Trafficking

An International Threat to the Wellness of Children

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Children are our hope. They are the inspiration for much of the humanitarian work in which many around the world are involved. Threats to the well-being of children are numerous. In addition to many living in less than stable familial environments, children today are continually forced to face the symptoms of a conflict-ridden society, regardless of their country of origin.

Creating an environment that extends beyond safety and includes meeting their basic need for food, love, and nurturing continues to be a goal. This must remain a goal as children and the women who care for them remain the most vulnerable to mistreatment and neglect in even the most economically advantaged countries. What follows is a short overview of the status of children worldwide with regard to safety and well-being, information about human trafficking, and recommendations for citizen involvement in prevention of the sex trafficking of children.

Integral to the healthy physical and psychological development of children, is that their basic needs are consistently met. Research demonstrates that in addition to physical needs, such as safety, food, shelter and access to medical care, children's psychological wellness is contingent on the nature of relationship with those primarily responsible for their care. Specifically, beginning at birth, the relationship must be characterized by security and uninterrupted attachment with their primary caregivers as this plays a significant role in healthy development into adulthood.

In spite of the focus on issues related to children, the number of children whose basic physical needs are not met and whose attachment to primary caregivers is at risk, remains a worldwide problem. The number of children who continue to live in poverty and without sufficient nutritional sustenance is alarmingly significant. According to a recent report published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), one in four children under the age of five is underweight and undernourished (2006). The report also indicates that 5.6 million children die yearly, in part because they are undernourished. Violence against children is also alarmingly high. According to Human Rights Watch (2001), millions of children experience violence first hand and vicariously in places such as their homes, in the homes of those they trust, in orphanages, in refugee camps, and in situations of armed conflict.

In a world where women continue to carry the bulk of the responsibility for childcare, it is important to consider their status when considering the status of children. Research consistently shows that violence against women and intimate partner violence in particular, is linked to maternal mortality and child survival (Etienne, Dalhberg & Mercy, 2002). Worldwide 10-69% of women reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (Etienne, Dalhberg & Mercy, 2002). According to the World Health Organization, 40-70% of the homicides of women are committed by intimate partners. Finally, worldwide, 1 in 3 women have been beaten, coerced into sex, or similarly abused in their lifetime (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 1999). This data does not reflect the numbers of women who experience threats to safety, physical abuse, rape and other violence consequent of armed conflict and other situations of political instability.

Several factors are known to contribute to increased vulnerability of children and women to violence and neglect. These include lower social status, state economic instability, political conflict and natural disaster. Each of these four factors contributes uniquely to human trafficking, one of the most horrifying and dangerous threats to the safety and well-being of this group.

Human trafficking has very recently come to the fore of consciousness in our global community. Human trafficking is an appalling abuse of basic human rights that affects the most vulnerable among us and exists in almost every country in the world. Also referred to as "trafficking in humans" or simply as "trafficking", this human rights violation is a form of modern-day slavery in which women, men, and children are targeted for sexual or other forms of economic exploitation.

The United Nations includes in its definition of human trafficking, all acts related to the recruitment, transport, sale, or purchase of individuals through force, fraud or other coercive means for the purpose of economic exploitation. This definition has been widely accepted by those involved in fighting the illegal activity of trafficking and it has been used as the foundation for law making in countries worldwide.

Individuals who are fraudulently pulled into trafficking situations, find themselves held hostage and under the control of the trafficker upon arrival at their destination. Often their physical movement is restricted, their identification papers are confiscated, and the lives of their families are threatened if they are noncompliant with the rules established by the traffickers. For those trafficked across international borders, traffickers will play on victim's distrust and fear of authorities in the country by telling them that they will be imprisoned or deported if they seek assistance.

Trafficking in human beings is a global issue that is very difficult to research; therefore, there are a wide range of estimates as to the extent to which it takes place. The International Labor Organization (ILO), which is the United Nations (UN) agency responsible for addressing labor standards and social protection issues, estimates that there are 12.3 million people enslaved in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, sexual servitude, and involuntary servitude at any given time. Human Rights Watch (2003) and the State Department of the United States (2005) are among those who estimate that 800,000 to 900,000 women, men and children are trafficked across international borders each year for the purpose of economic exploitation with approximately 100,000 more trafficked within the borders of their own countries.

Of those victims of transnational trafficking, estimates indicate that approximately 80% are women and girls, up to 50% are minors, and the majority are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation. Information from the United Nations Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention (www.odccp.org), approximately 2 million women and girls are trafficked yearly. It is further estimated that global trade in women as merchandise for sex industries generates between seven and twelve billion dollars annually (Hughes, D., 2000).

In addition to the factors noted above, the marginalized status of women, the sex tourism industry, and the quest for inexpensive labor contribute to this atrocious exploitation of humanity. Globalism has also contributed significantly to the growth of this black-market industry, making it easier to advertise, buy, and sell women and children all over the world.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is perhaps the most heinous of all human trafficking situations. The *Declaration and Action Agenda of the World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children* (1996) offers the following definition: "The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a fundamental violation of children's rights. It comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children, and amounts to forced labor and a contemporary form of slavery."

Children can be sexually exploited for financial gain in a number of ways. Prostitution, pornography, and child trafficking for sexual purposes are three of the primary and overlapping ways that such exploitation occurs. That is not to say that these are the only mechanisms of abuse, however they are most primary. Two examples of additional forms include early marriages, sale of children for marriage and reproduction, and sex tourism.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children clearly impinges on the child's right to autonomy, health, and psychological well-being. Children who are trafficked for sexual exploitation often face horrifying physical violence that can result in injury or death. Children are hit, beaten with fists and with objects, and raped in order to ensure their compliance with the expectations of their captors. It is not uncommon for children who have been trafficked into sex slavery to be forced into sex acts with up to 20 men daily (O'Connell, 2005). Often, protective measures against sexually transmitted disease are not taken, and therefore children are vulnerable to a wide range of dangerous illnesses, many of which are likely to shorten their lifespan.

Such threats to physical safety also play a role in the psychological trauma of being trafficked. In addition to physical violence and rape, trafficked children face painful separation from their caregivers and the ongoing threat of harm. Reactions to this and any type of abusive situation vary from person to person. Children who have been trafficked have reported feelings of worthlessness and shame. Another common reaction to an abusive and dangerous situation is to identify with the abuser. This creates a false sense of safety that can sometimes help the victim make it through terrifying circumstances.

Clearly there should be no room in our world for any type of mistreatment of children. However, hundreds of thousands of children endure the most vile and inhumane conditions on a daily basis. With regard to protecting children from being trafficked, there is a need to strengthen the criminal justice response to trafficking through education, training, and legislative reform. In addition, strong psychosocial support must be in place in communities worldwide in order to meet the needs of survivors.

A step in the direction toward rectification of the abuse and neglect of children through trafficking is education and volunteerism. Reaching out into our own local communities to educate about the status of children worldwide is something that everyone can do. Prevention education regarding sex trafficking of children and women is especially important. Checking in one's community to ascertain whether work is being done to inform critical personnel such as emergency room employees, medical staff at women's health care centers, and law enforcement agencies about how to effectively identify and support victims of trafficking is essential. Connecting with organizations,

such as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) and UNICEF and using their resources in support of activism is another easy step.

The Project to End Human Trafficking is an example of a grassroots non-profit organization that was formed to work against the economic exploitation of children and women in a local community in the United States. The project grew and now, in addition to addressing local needs, the organization works internationally as well. The current international area of focus is Latin America, in particular Costa Rica.

Activities through which the project's objective is actualized include conducting and publishing research, offering presentations to promote awareness, and advocating for the provision of mental health services and other psychosocial reintegration support for victims of trafficking. As an organization grounded in a feminist philosophy, the project hopes to work collaboratively with others involved in this important work. For more information about the work of this group and others go to:

www.endhumantrafficking.org.

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