



# Sex Trafficking

## SESSION 2

| *Exploring the power dynamics in sex trafficking*

### Introduction

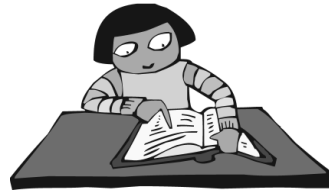
“Women and children first” is an adage we often hear employed when conversation turns to crisis situations. One can picture lifeboats loaded with wives, mothers, sisters, and small children being launched from a sinking ship. But this saying undergoes an ironic twist when viewed through the lens of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Women and children are first to be at risk, first to be exploited, and first to suffer from the effects of disease, grinding poverty, and abuse. They may also be first to be criminalized or deported. Yet, gender discrimination renders them last when it comes to access to the power needed to transform their own lives.

### The Issue of Power

First and foremost, the explosion of human trafficking for sexual exploitation is about power. There is money to be made from the sex trade—lots of it. The U.S. State Department estimates that human trafficking is second only to drug trafficking (and tied with the arms trade) in the amount of money to be made on an annual basis.<sup>1</sup>

With millions of dollars at stake, it’s no surprise that organized crime is deeply involved in sex trafficking. And where organized crime operates, governments are likely to turn a blind eye to the exploitation taking place within as well as beyond their borders. Lax law enforcement, indifferent judiciaries, and government officials silenced by the lure of the bribe are all a part of how power is used to carve out a zone for crimes against innocent victims.

Why is there such seeming indifference to a problem whose scope and complexity should make it a cultural



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crisis? The answer lies in part in the unequal power relations between the genders. Most of the world’s poor are women and girls, who comprise around 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people who live on a dollar or less a day in extreme poverty.<sup>2</sup> Gender discrimination means the denial of the basic rights of women. Men and women experience the worst aspects of extreme poverty differently, a fact that must be addressed if poverty is to be alleviated by 2015, as is the aim of the U.N. Millennium Development Goals.<sup>3</sup>

Unequal power between the genders manifests itself in poverty in complex and interrelated ways:<sup>4</sup>

- Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours and produce half of the world’s food, yet they earn only 10 percent of the world’s income.
- Women own less than 1 percent of the world’s property.
- Two-thirds of the children denied access to a primary education are girls.
- Seventy-five percent of the world’s 876 million illiterate adults are women. Every extra year a girl spends in school could reduce child mortality by 10 percent.
- More than half a million women die in pregnancy and childbirth every year. Of these deaths, 99 percent

are in developing countries. In some parts of Africa, maternal death rates are one in sixteen.

- Women hold only 14 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide. Only 8 percent of the world's cabinet ministers are women. Only eleven countries have met the U.N. target of having 30 percent female decision makers.
- Worldwide, domestic violence is the biggest cause of injury and death to women. Gender-based violence causes more death and disability to women aged fifteen to forty-four than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents, and war.

## Power and Traditional Understandings about Gender

Nowhere is the issue of the imbalance of power more evident than in the consequences women and children bear for certain traditional cultural assumptions. One aspect driving the demand for younger and younger children in the sex trade is the belief that children are less susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases and thus somehow "purer." In fact, children are more susceptible to such diseases.

The understandings that constitute masculine identity in many cultures fuel the demand for virgins, leading in turn to the recruitment of very young girls from remote villages and regions. Even if these children are later rescued from the sex trade, cultural expectations about gender and power are still at work against them. In many areas of the world and among many of the world's religions, girls who have been a part of the sex trade are considered defiled and are outcasts from their own homes, even if their dilemma was not of their own making.

Adult women experience a similar lack of access to the power that would enable them to control their own destinies. Among women involved in prostitution, those who have been trafficked commonly have the least power in negotiating the conditions of sex. They are routinely denied access to medical care or access to social services. This is consistent with one dynamic contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS in developing countries: the inability of many powerless women to determine when and with whom they will have sex. For years married women in Africa have, through no fault

of their own, contributed to the spread of AIDS when their husbands returned infected with HIV from remote cities where they had gone to seek employment.

## Trafficking Near to Our Doors

To some degree, the more obvious aspects of trafficking for the sex trade play out at some distance from the lives of most Americans. But the relationship of the imbalance of power between the genders and the problem of trafficking for sexual purposes manifests itself in some very specific ways that are not so far removed from where we live. Two examples of trafficking that touch our lives closer than we perhaps realize are forced marriage and the plight of immigrants. Two other examples, sex tourism and Internet pornography, are particularly repugnant to most of us, but they may be much more a part of the lives of people we know than we would want to admit. These issues will be addressed in sessions 3 and 4.

## Forced Marriage

The phenomenon of forced marriage has its roots in the traditional marriage practices of many cultures. A study presently under way by Mega Arumugam, a doctoral student at the University of Leicester, is examining the "bride trade" and its relationship to forced marriage in the United Kingdom. Arumugam believes that marriage can be an attractive tool for the sex traffickers.<sup>5</sup> The legality of the institution of marriage can lead to a false sense of security that there will be no coercion or exploitation.

Nongovernmental organizations are reporting an increase in brokered international marriages in Asia, a significant number of which are being used as a vehicle to traffic women. Some of the highest incidences of these marriages are in South Korea and Taiwan. But in some regions in the U.S., women are brought to become the brides of men from their own countries of origin and then coerced into becoming prostitutes to support their husbands. Some of these women experience physical and emotional abuse at the hands of their spouses. Many are living in silent suffering in our own communities.

## Exploitation of Migrants

Some Christians would be surprised to discover that trafficking occurs close to their very doorsteps. Many women and children are trapped in a life of sexual

exploitation when they unwittingly become a part of the rising tide of illegal immigration in this country. Many undocumented persons come from south of the border, but an increasing number come from Asian countries such as China and from Eastern European countries. In some cases, these victims enter into debt bondage with their traffickers, promising to pay back their travel costs in exchange for being transported to the United States. Once here, the traffickers escalate their demands for payment, sometimes quadrupling the cost of the travel. Women and children are forced into the sex trade to pay off a debt that will continue to spiral and will never be able to be paid. Other workers are forced into domestic labor or farm work, enduring gang rape or systematic sexual exploitation in addition to the labor to pay off the debt.

In Kentucky, raids of brothels in the Lexington area revealed that the women who were being prostituted were undocumented immigrants forced into the trade by their traffickers.<sup>6</sup> When raids take place, these women scatter to outlying communities, only to be back in six months. Once out, why would they return to a life of deprivation? The answer lies in having limited (or non-existent) choices. In many cases traffickers have confiscated any identity papers the women may have had, and all earnings have gone toward the debt they owe their abusers. Isolated in a foreign land where they are not likely to speak the language, the women endure threats to their own safety and to that of family members if they reveal their plight to law enforcement officials. Most do not speak English; therefore there are few places to go for help. The only place to obtain a meal and a bed may be the brothel in which they were imprisoned.

A recent ad campaign against human trafficking launched by the U.S. government promised to rescue and restore victims of trafficking with help such as housing, health care, food, and even citizenship. But what the ads don't say is that to take advantage of these benefits, victims must first agree to cooperate in the criminal investigations of their abusers. Those who cooperate face retaliation from their traffickers (whom they often know) or risk harm to their loved ones back home. Victims must also go through a process of proving themselves to be victims of a severe form of trafficking, as well as demonstrating they would face extreme hardship if they returned to their home country. The



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definitions of severe trafficking and extreme hardship are vague and difficult to pin down. Those denied the so-called T visas face deportation or prison because they are undocumented.

Other stumbling blocks exist. Identifying victims of trafficking is often the job of local law enforcement officials. These officials may arrest the victims because of their illegal status or misidentify them. Since many victims come from countries where corrupt law officials cannot be trusted, they may be fearful of disclosing their plight.

Children who have been trafficked may fear law enforcement officers even more. Though the estimates are that children may make up as much as one-third of trafficking victims, only forty-five had received visas or other help as of 2004. "Most children come alone and are too traumatized to be able to convince law enforcement officials that they are survivors of trafficking," says Margaret MacDonnell, Children's Services Specialist with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Migration and Refugee Services.<sup>7</sup>

Because the risks are so great and the requirements so difficult to meet, few trafficking victims actually can take advantage of the government help intended when Trafficking Victims Protection Act was passed in 2000. Out of an estimated 14,500 to 17,500 persons trafficking annually to the United States, only about 729 survivors and another 645 family members of survivors had received T visas as of 2006.<sup>8</sup>

As Christians continue to grapple with immigration reform in this country, the dimension of the sexual exploitation of undocumented immigrant women and children must be a significant part of the debate. The requirement that trafficking victims must testify against their exploiters seems logical on the face of it. But closer examination using the lens of possible institutionalized

and socialized gender bias and the imbalance of power may reveal the same kinds of assumptions that in the past were a barrier to justice for rape victims, who often had to prove that they did not “ask for it.”

## Responding to Victims of Trafficking on Our Doorsteps

As Christians, we have a mandate from Jesus Christ to respond to the plight of those on the margins and especially to act on behalf of those whose voices may be muffled or silenced. When we consider how to respond to victims of sex trafficking, we may be stopped short by our own repugnance for the kind of exploitation they are enduring. But women and children are living in slavery in our own communities, and there are things we can do to respond. Some possible actions include the following:

- Explore how to train church members to be more observant and to ask the right questions of women or children they encounter who seem to be in distress. Members of congregations who might be appropriate for this type of training include doctors, nurses, social workers, teachers, law enforcement officers, and others who may come in contact with victims of trafficking. A national resource for training is the Freedom Network USA, which has trained religious leaders, the U.S. Department of Justice, the FBI, local police, social service agencies, medical professionals, and others to recognize and become partners in addressing human trafficking. Visit <http://www.freedomnetworkusa.org/>.
- One of the biggest needs for those who escape trafficking is transitional housing. Consider partnering with others to set aside an apartment or rooms for those who may need temporary housing. Contact your local office of the U.S. Department of Labor to find out if your area has a group working against trafficking and what specific resources, such as housing, may be needed.
- In some communities ecumenical groups and secular agencies are setting up trafficking working groups to address the needs of victims in a more comprehensive way. Find out if your community has such a group.
- Congress passed the Trafficking in Persons Act in 2000, reauthorized in 2003, which mandates reports from other nations on how they are addressing traf-

ficking (the Trafficking in Persons Reports) and which set up the T visa program. Yet little has been done in a systematic way to document trafficking in the United States. More legislation is needed to address this need and to put in more stringent protection policies. Some states, such as New York, have established their own antitrafficking laws to further protect victims. You can learn more about these efforts through the Freedom Network USA.

- Little research has yet been done on children or teenagers within the United States who may be vulnerable to traffickers who may force them into prostitution. What is suspected is that children who are runaways or who are forced out onto the streets are at particular risk. Find out what your community is doing to provide comprehensive services for these young people.

Domestic violence and rape can be considered to be manifestations of the misuse and abuse of power. By the same token, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation represents a most profound and disturbing abuse of power. It is a crime where power is wielded against the most vulnerable of the vulnerable in order to reap great economic gain. How globalization and the global economy have fed this evil will be the topic of session 3.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. The Campaign to Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking, “Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking,” [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking/about/fact\\_human.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking/about/fact_human.html).
2. Generation Why, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/generationwhy/issues/gender/>.
3. According to the United Nations, “The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—which range from halving extreme poverty to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the date of 2015—form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the leading development institutions. They have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest.” See UN Millennium Development Goals at <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>.
4. Statistics as cited by Oxfam at [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam\\_in\\_action/issues/gender.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam_in_action/issues/gender.html). More information on women is found at <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demo-graphic/products/indwm/wwpub2000educ.htm>.

5. Ian Morgan, "Forced Marriages and Sex Trafficking Explored in New Study," June 13, 2006, <http://www.24dash.com/print/News/7/6862.htm>.

6. Information about immigrant women in Kentucky and suggestions of ways to help come from Julia Thorne, Manager, Immigration Issues, Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

7. Pueng Vongs, Pacific News Service, "Gov't Effort to Stem Human Trafficking Helps Very Few," December 16, 2004, at <http://news.pacificnews.org/news/>. Scroll down the page to Archive link, and click on December 2004 to find article.

8. U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report," June 12, 2007. Accessed at <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2007/82811.htm>.