



# Sex Trafficking

## SESSION 3

| *The role of globalization in sex trafficking*

### Introduction

Some contend that the globalized free market is the most efficient way to organize an economy to distribute resources, jobs, income, production, wealth, and goods and services. Whether globalization is viewed as a boon or as a threat, there is no doubt that its impact has been profound. The gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened noticeably over the past decade. As a result, most of the wealth is concentrated in a very few hands, while the majority scramble to get a piece of what is left. At the very bottom, the poor sink ever further into extreme poverty.

One significant aspect of globalization has been the proliferation of free trade agreements (FTAs). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and others have opened countries to cheap imports from abroad, causing job loss and dislocation. Rural areas are especially hard hit by cheap, subsidized foods coming from the United States (often dumped below the cost of production), destroying the ability of family farmers to survive on the land. The resulting economic hardship forces many people to move to urban slums or to find their way to the United States, where they hope to find work that can sustain their lives.

Globalization has had a significant impact on sex trafficking as well. When families descend into extreme poverty, parents sometimes become desperate enough to sell their children to traffickers, sometimes knowingly and sometimes lured by the prospect of high-paying work in restaurants, on large farms, or in factories that never materializes.



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As markets and labor forces have become globalized, economic and logistical obstacles involved in transporting new victims to distant lands have diminished. Enabled by inadequate interventions by government and by lax law enforcement and fueled by the enormous profits to be made, the global sex market is growing daily.

As we observed in a previous session, organized crime has found trafficking to be a potential gold mine through which to both extend the wealth of the criminals and solidify their power base across many national borders. According to the "Trafficking in Persons Report," "Prostitution and related activities—including pimping and patronizing and maintaining brothels—encourage the growth of modern-day slavery by providing a façade behind which traffickers for sexual exploitation operate."<sup>1</sup> A recent development attributable to globalization is the random factor in transnational trafficking. New trafficking scenarios have been devised and new routes set up, some of which defy explanation. According to the "Trafficking in Persons Report," in the past year Zambian girls were trafficked to Ireland, Filipina

women were trafficked to Cote d'Ivoire, Dominican women were trafficked to Montenegro, Chinese women were trafficked to Afghanistan, and a Kenyan woman was trafficked to Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Women trafficked into a country in which they are outsiders who do not speak the language and have no access to legal recourse can be more easily controlled and isolated by traffickers. The globalization of market and labor forces and the relaxation of travel routes have benefited economic growth, not just for legitimate business but for traffickers as well.

## Other Economic Benefits for Traffickers

The entrepreneurial spirit, often a force for economic good, can also be perverted. And for some traffickers, the huge sum of money to be made from the sexual exploitation of women and young girls is apparently not enough.

As a young child, Meena was kidnapped from her home in North India. A trafficker took her to the town of Katihar, where she was locked up in a brothel with twelve other girls. As she recalls, she was twelve or thirteen and had not yet started to menstruate when she was locked in a room with a customer who had purchased her virginity.<sup>3</sup>

When she resisted her attacker, the brothel owners beat her severely. But she continued to resist customers, despite beatings and threats of worse. Finally the owner forced her to drink alcohol until she passed out; then she was given to a customer. When she came to, she had to accept her fate—to service ten to twenty-five customers a night.

But Meena's owners were looking for something more. They wanted to breed her, a common practice in Indian brothels. The resulting progeny are valuable commodities—boys can be sold as forced laborers, while girls can be forced into prostitution. An added advantage is that such children can be used as hostages to force the mother's compliance.

When Meena alerted the police to her children's captivity, her life was in danger and she fled (although she continued to return to the brothel to plead for her children's freedom). Meena's son Vivek, who was forced to do the brothel's laundry, escaped when he was beaten

### DIFFERENT ETHICS?

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after protesting the proposed sale for prostitution of his twelve-year-old sister, Naina, Meena's daughter. With the help of an antitrafficking organization, the children finally got their freedom. But Meena continues to be in fear for her life.

More than 150 years after the abolitionist movement in the United States worked for justice for enslaved Africans, a new abolitionist movement is desperately needed.

## International Tourism and Trafficking

Child prostitution, with multimillion-dollar profits annually, is an organized business with clients, traders, distribution routes, and outlets that originated partially as a response to demand from tourists. This is significant because international tourism is the biggest employer in the world. Every sixth job in the world (on average) is somehow dependent on or related to travel and tourism. It's important to note that international tourism does not cause the exploitation of women and children for sexual purposes. Yet it does provide easy access to vulnerable children for those with a taste for perverted sexual experiences. Many U.S. and European travel agencies set up sex tours for thousands of (mostly) men from developed countries such as the United States, Japan, Sweden, and Australia.<sup>4</sup> Some U.S. corporations have been known to plan visits to red-light districts as a part of business junkets overseas. A businessman was overheard talking to his seatmate, an older colleague, on a flight home. He thanked the older man for opting out of a visit to a brothel in Bangkok, planned as the evening's entertainment at a business convention. The younger man, stunned by the planned outing, gratefully accepted his colleague's offer to share a cab back

to the hotel rather than visit the brothel with the rest of the group.

In a recent radio interview on National Public Radio with a writer living and working in Thailand, the writer commented that tourists regularly visited the red-light district of Bangkok, bringing their families along to gaze into strip joints and go-go clubs.<sup>5</sup> The district includes shops to tempt the pocketbooks of well-heeled tourists, but surely few who bring their families realize that behind the doors of the brothels, young girls are being prostituted. It is likely that many of the businessmen who frequent those brothels are either unaware that what they are doing violates U.S. law designed to protect children and young girls from exploitation or somehow have rationalized to themselves that it is acceptable to apply a different ethical standard while they are overseas.

Without exception, international tourism organizations are united in condemning the use of tourism for the purpose of sexual exploitation. But the impact of globalization on many economically depressed countries is that many must rely on tourism as their primary industry. While some countries view sex tourism as an unwanted but necessary evil, others directly tolerate sex tourism.

## The Human Toll of Trafficking

Over against the enormous economic gain being reaped by a comparatively small number of traffickers, government officials, and members of organized crime is an equally staggering economic toll. This toll is being paid by those who can least afford to do so: the children and women who have been exploited. And while the toll can be measured in dollars and cents, it can also be measured in terms of health that can never be restored and potential that remains forever withered. Perhaps the most obvious example is the threat to health posed by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Children involved in the sex trade are at dire risk because of the spread of HIV/AIDS. As was mentioned in a previous session, a common myth is that children are less susceptible to the virus than adults, but the opposite is actually true. It is estimated that seven thousand children and young people aged ten to twenty-four are infected with HIV every day.<sup>6</sup> Children lack the power to demand the use of condoms from their abusers. They also lack access to the kinds of information and education that



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would equip them to protect themselves. Sexual exploitation may involve rough sex that leads to tears in the vaginal walls and other body openings of adult women; for young girls whose vaginas are still not fully formed or for young boys, tissue assault can be severe. Such tears allow the virus easy entrance to their bodies, making them uniquely vulnerable to the ravages of the disease. The same is true for other sexually transmitted diseases.

The litany of health problems is staggering. Women and children may experience pelvic pain, rectal trauma, urinary tract infections or injuries, unwanted pregnancy, infertility due to chronic untreated sexually transmitted diseases, or mutilations. Malnutrition is frequently found in child victims, as well as more-serious untreated diseases such as cancer or diabetes. And victims often have bruises or poorly healed broken bones from beatings.

But there are other, more subtle assaults to the health of women and children who are exploited for sexual purposes. They may exhibit psychological trauma, depression, stress-related disorders, disorientation, or panic attacks. Many feel helpless or experience shame, guilt, humiliation, shock, or denial.

Many victims have been forced to use drugs or alcohol, perhaps at the beginning to subdue them for the initial attack. With continued substance abuse, victims may become addicted, which is a useful form of control for the traffickers.<sup>7</sup>

The toll on the health of the victims of sexual exploitation cannot be overestimated, for it is also a social and economic toll that societies must bear. Although difficult to quantify in the same way one can calculate economic gain or loss, the loss to a society of the potential of its women and children is incalculable.

## Responding

Issues as complex as the global economy and the part it plays in trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation can be difficult to grasp. It is that much more difficult to formulate meaningful responses that get at what is driving sex trafficking. Of the two possible approaches presented here, one is targeted at the travel and tourism industry.

In the last decades many corporations have begun to acknowledge their role as corporate citizens in society and have begun to evaluate the standards that undergird their corporate operations. In the travel and tourism industry, some corporations have initiated efforts to reduce the negative impacts that improperly managed tourism operations might have on peoples and cultures. Without a doubt, the sexual exploitation of women and children is the most significant issue.

Many in North America in the travel and tourism industry have embraced the efforts of the organization End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT-USA) in launching the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism. Signers of the Code commit themselves to the following:

1. To establish an ethical policy regarding commercial sexual exploitation of children.
2. To train the personnel in the country of origin and travel destinations.
3. To introduce a clause in contracts with suppliers, stating a common repudiation of commercial sexual exploitation of children.
4. To provide information to travelers, by means of catalogues, brochures, in-flight films, ticket-slips, home pages, etc.
5. To provide information to local “key persons” at the destinations.
6. To report annually.<sup>8</sup>

Launched in 2004 by a consortium that included ECPAT, UNICEF, and the World Tourism Organization, the Code has the potential of being a significant force in the fight to end sex tourism.

According to ECPAT-USA, an estimated 25 percent of sex tourists outside the United States are American. In 1995, *Business Week* reported that the United States was the home of at least twenty-five sex-tour companies.<sup>9</sup> The Code has the potential of being a powerful tool in the fight against sex tourism. Some large hotel chains in the United States have resisted becoming signatories, citing liability concerns, but they point to corporate policy statements developed specifically for their own employees that address the same concerns. Christians can inquire with the travel agencies they use to book travel and the hotels in which they stay to see if those companies have signed on to the Code or have their own policies that support responsible tourism.

## Building Livelihoods

A much broader area of response has to do with the pervasive abject poverty in which many families live. Of the estimated 1.3 billion people who live on a dollar or less a day, 70 percent are women.<sup>10</sup> Policies and programs that seek to provide access to livelihoods that can support a family will go a long way toward protecting women and children from the lure of good wages offered by unscrupulous traffickers. Approaches such as microcredit, in which women are offered very small loans to underwrite small businesses, are often enough to lift them out of poverty and put them on the road to self-sufficiency.

## The Grameen Bank

Microcredit originated with the founding of the Grameen Bank by Nobel Prize winner Mohammad Yunas. Yunas, a young economics professor at Chittagong University, became frustrated during the famine in Bangladesh in the late 1970s. As a university teacher, he felt that the economic theories that he was teaching had no effect. What was going wrong?

In an effort to find out what was wrong, Yunas went to speak to the villagers in the nearby town of Jobra. While there he noticed a woman making a bamboo stool. In conversation with her, he discovered that she made only two pennies a day. Because she did not have the money to buy the bamboo, she had to borrow from the trader who purchased the final product from her. The trader determined how much the stool cost, made the profit, and gave her the cost of the raw materials. And she was left with two pennies a day.

When Yunas asked her what she would do if she had the money to buy the bamboo, she replied that she would immediately double or triple her income by selling the stools. Although he was eager to give her the money himself, he resisted. Instead, he decided to find out if the woman was alone in her plight. With the help of one of his students, within a week he compiled a list of forty-two people who needed capital. The total amount of money these people needed to start a business was only \$27.

Yunas decided to go to the bank himself to obtain a loan for these people. There the bank officials told him that the institution didn't lend to poor people because they were not credit worthy. After much debate, he offered himself as a guarantor and was loaned the money, which he then distributed. Soon people were repaying the loans, and the program expanded.

Then an idea struck him. Why not set up his own bank? It took two years to convince the government, but finally, in 1983, the Grameen Bank was born. Today the Grameen Bank has lent more than \$5.1 billion to 5.3 million borrowers, the majority of them women (96 percent). Payback on these loans has been 98 percent.<sup>11</sup> Today, many microfinance programs exist that follow in the footsteps of the Grameen Bank.

The connection between comprehensive approaches to hunger, poverty, and sex trafficking is at the same time both fairly obvious and less satisfying in terms of seeing a concrete result, but it is critical all the same.

The global economy is so much a part of our lives that it is difficult to step back and analyze its impact. We are affected by it every time we use an ATM, go online, or hear a reporter commenting on the scene of a disaster. We in the United States are the beneficiaries of the goods and services that globalization has brought. It follows that we are called to examine the evils, such as trafficking for sexual exploitation, that are also the result of globalization and to respond faithfully and responsibly where we can.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

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