



Sex Trafficking

SESSION 4

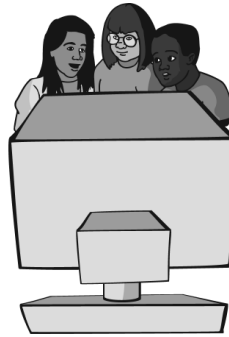
| *How the Internet is playing a role in sex trafficking*

Introduction

Technology is the engine driving the global economy, and no technology has shaped the world more significantly than information technology. A generation ago, Americans visited the bank to cash a check, communicated with family members via a phone wired into their houses, and relied on the post office to deliver an invitation or a bill to its destination. People had the choice of watching one of three or four networks on their televisions, and viewing a movie definitely involved a trip to the theater.

But today, our lives are shaped by technologies that change almost faster than we can acquire the hardware to use them. The Internet has exploded in the past decade, offering images from the other side of the globe, making communication instantaneous, and opening up hitherto undreamed of capabilities for information sharing. One can literally access the world from one's home computer, BlackBerry, iPod, or cell phone.

Yet there is a dark side to this enhanced capability. The same technology that enables us to view events happening on the other side of the world also allows us to access a dizzying array of information and images in the privacy of our own homes. A businessperson who would never consider sampling the sex trade on a business trip might take advantage of the anonymity of a cybercafé to access images with sexual content. Someone who might not dare enter an adult bookstore or video rental shop to obtain pornographic materials may be less scrupulous when such images are available at the click of a mouse. For some, mostly men, pornography becomes an addic-



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tion. According to the editors of *What Everyone Needs to Know About Sexual Addiction*, compulsive sexual behaviors and/or obsessive thoughts about sex that demand attention and eventually shape and control their lives are common factors for sex addicts.¹

The Internet Helps Traffickers

Until the growth of the Internet, the trafficking of child pornography in the United States had almost completely been eradicated. Producing images was difficult and expensive, as was reproducing them. Once produced, purchasing and trading the images was quite risky. Anonymous distribution was not possible, and it was hard for pedophiles to find one another and interact without detection.² But the explosion of technology has changed all that. The sad truth is that the same technology that makes our lives easier in so many ways has also given traffickers and perpetrators new tools to further the trade in innocent human lives. The growing use of digital cameras, minicams, and cell phones allows perpetrators to capture images easily and share them, victimizing women and children who may not even be aware the images have been recorded.

There's no doubt that community is being enhanced by the social networking made possible by access to chat rooms and instant messaging on the Internet. But some unsavory forms of community are also forming online, and they are flourishing. Predators go online not only to share pornographic images in chat rooms but also to swap stories and fantasies and to plan sex tours. Sex tourists use chat rooms, message boards, news groups, specialized Web sites, and peer-to-peer file-sharing servers to communicate about possible destinations.

The burgeoning technologies are sparking some new ways to victimize children. A particularly unsettling activity is the establishment of cybersex dens. Here children may be abused by a pedophile thousands of miles away in a foreign country and the images beamed to the Internet on a webcam. By entering a credit card number, pedophiles in the United States or elsewhere can pay to view these live webcasts.

Links between child pornography and sex tourism are significant. Besides using pornographic images to share experiences, perpetrators also use them to groom victims and then to blackmail them. The Protection Project estimates that child pornography is connected to 42 percent of the child-sex tourism cases it documented during a 2006 study. The International Center for Missing and Exploited Children reports that the victims in pornographic images are getting younger and younger. At the same time, the images are becoming more graphic and violent.³

The lure of the Internet, with the potential for forming friendships in cyberspace and the artificial sense of intimacy born in chat rooms, makes young teenagers vulnerable to exploitation:

"Nok, an inquisitive teenage girl, joined an Internet chat room on the recommendation of a friend." The conversation in the chat room centered on sex. "Nok's new chat room 'friends' suggested that she install a webcam to make their conversations more interesting." This seemed like a harmless idea to Nok, who purchased and installed the webcam. But soon Nok was coaxed to strip in front of the webcam.

"The owner of the Internet site, who had seen the pictures, invited her to his house." Once there, the owner spiked Nok's drink and raped her, simultaneously filming the abuse. Then the man threatened to put the film

on the Internet unless she continued to have sex with him as well as with other men and to strip on his pay-per-view webcam site.⁴

The same elements of the world of cyberspace that make this technology such a revolution in how we process information are the ones that make it so easily twisted to the uses of unscrupulous traffickers. But there is a heightened element of danger in technology—unsuspecting children and teenagers can be easily lured into providing the images that pornographers need.

Children and young people represent one of the largest categories of users of the new technologies. Because so many children have had access to the Internet, cell phones, webcams, and text messaging almost from the cradle, they are often more skilled in their uses than the adults who care for them. For many of our young people, these technologies form the framework for their social lives at home, in school, in cybercafés, and everywhere teenagers and children gather. In many countries where home computers are not common because the cost is prohibitive, children visit cybercafés to go online. These interactions are away from the supervision of caring adults. In countries where teenagers routinely own cell phones, text messaging takes place outside of adult supervision. Teenagers can easily both take and transmit images and access images from elsewhere.

A recent study by the University of New Hampshire, published in the February 2007 issue of *Pediatrics*, found that 42 percent of Internet users aged ten to seventeen said they had seen pornographic images on the Internet over a recent twelve-month period. Of those, 66 percent said they had not sought out those images and did not want to view them. The study also found that one in seven had received an unwanted sexual solicitation or approach in the last year. More than one-third of the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old boys said they had visited X-rated sites in the last year.⁵

Aside from the easy access many children and youth have to X-rated material on the Internet, there are other real dangers associated with the Internet. Yet most children and youth underestimate the dangers inherent in access to global technology. In its research ECPAT has found that most children feel safe in cyberspace. Very few understand the risk they take when they give out personal information on the Internet. In what seems to be an anonymous world, a false sense of intimacy can

be engendered with those a child knows only through seemingly casual interchanges of messages. But children can be talked into meeting child abusers or pornographers. And once images are obtained, they can be downloaded or reproduced hundreds or thousands of times for years to come. Children who experience this kind of violation may not experience the devastating physical damage of an actual sexual assault, but the emotional and psychological wounds are profound. Virtual trafficking is already both enormously damaging to its victims and incredibly lucrative for its perpetrators, and it continues to grow.

Responding

Like it or not, technology will continue to explode, enhancing communication in newer and better ways. We can embrace the possibilities newer forms of technology bring us, striving to use these forms to make our lives and the lives of others better. At the same time, we dare not turn a blind eye to how others whose motives are suspect are using technology for evil. And there's a certain irony in the fact that porn-site architects have pioneered some innovative uses of technology. They were among the first to perfect full-streaming video and audio on the Web and to persuade apprehensive consumers to divulge credit card numbers to an unknown person on the Internet, an innovation that advanced e-commerce immeasurably.⁶

Christians who care about children and young people may take steps to ensure that there are limits to their access to the Internet. Recent studies by the Kaiser Family Foundation show that children and youth are piling up staggering amounts of screen time—that is, time spent on text messaging, computers, video games, and television—to the detriment of other activities like outdoor play, schoolwork, or time with the family. Because we live in a media world, many of us seem oblivious to its effect on our children. The violent images children are already exposed to have been shown to be damaging to their development. But children and youth who are sophisticated in using the Internet may be only a few mouse clicks away from truly horrific pornographic images and to chat rooms where predators await.

Parents also need to monitor the chat rooms their young people are entering and to impress upon children and youth the dangers of sharing personal information via



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the Web. Parent should monitor as closely as possible technologies such as webcams, cell phones that access the Internet, and whatever new technology is waiting in the wings.

A more sensitive issue to explore is that of adults who view pornographic images on the Internet. Because of the Internet's anonymity, it might be easy to assume that it is relatively harmless to view pornographic images. Some adults who would recoil at the idea of viewing child pornography may consider the viewing of images of adult men and women with sexual content as harmless. But for every site disseminating images, there may be real women and men being victimized. There are traffickers and pornographers making huge profits by exploiting human misery. And there are adults whose perceptions about sexuality are being shaped by the assumption that sex is a commodity to be marketed. What seems like a relatively harmless act is inextricably bound to an industry that preys on women and vulnerable children. It is only the perpetrator who benefits by reaping huge profits.

ECPAT International, a network of child-protection agencies working against child prostitution, pornography, and trafficking, is at the forefront of the push for greater research, recognition, and action on the issue of violence against children in cyberspace. ECPAT calls for:

- The Information Technology (IT) industry to expand its self-regulation to prevent harm and violence and harm to children;
- Children as users to learn how to play a prominent role in counteracting violence in cyberspace;
- Governments to put in place laws and training that respond to the realities of Internet child sexual abuse;

- A monitoring structure to ensure the implementation of the recommendations of the U.N. Secretary-General's Global Study on Violence Against Children.⁷

At a regional consultation in East Asia and the Pacific, adults and children met to discuss how children experience violence in a variety of settings, including cyberspace. Children who were part of the consultation expressed the belief that while all children are vulnerable, those who are in economically or socially difficult situations, those who have already been sexually abused, and those who feel lonely and alienated are at particular risk. They recommended improved child-protection policies for the Internet, as well as improved funding for hotlines, monitoring, and awareness raising about the dangers of cyberspace. Equally important was the recommendation that there be psychological resources for those who have already been exploited.⁸ These recommendations, although specific to the East Asian context, would apply equally well to the American situation.

Conclusion

Human trafficking has been rightly called a form of modern-day slavery. For women and children, all forms of trafficking carry with them the risk of sexual abuse, but trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation can truly be named as an ultimate evil. The global economy has magnified the possibilities for traffickers to make huge profits at the same time as it has magnified the suffering of its victims. Trafficking is built on the foundation of historical and traditional attitudes and realities about the lives of women. The imbalance of power because of gender discrimination continues to render them and their children vulnerable.

At the same time, the reach of the traffickers is being expanded and enhanced by the new technologies, those that have the potential to make life better for us all. The combination of rigid gender attitudes, global poverty, and technological expertise make this new form of slavery a real threat to us and to all women and children.

Any approach to combating sex trafficking must take into account both the supply side (the traffickers) and the demand side (buyers of sexual services). On the supply side, attention must be given not only to those who reap huge profits from human suffering but also to the conditions that make women and children vulner-

able to exploitation by trafficking. On the demand side, law enforcement and governments must be willing to vigorously prosecute traffickers and their cohorts, fight the corruption that allows the trade to flourish, identify trade routes, clarify definitions of trafficking, and train personnel to identify victims and direct them to help.

The "Trafficking in Persons Report" emphasizes that the "three Ps"—prosecution, protection, and prevention—are key to eliminating the problem of sex trafficking. These elements place the emphasis on traffickers and the consumers of sex trafficking, where the emphasis rightly belongs. But at the same time, we cannot afford to ignore those who are victimized by the traffickers. The "three Rs"—rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration—also deserve our best efforts.⁹ Only by addressing both the issue of trafficking and those whose lives are being destroyed by it can we make a real impact on this problem. If we hope to eliminate modern-day slavery in our time, we must act—and act now.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

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