

Human Trafficking: The New Slavery

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., L.P.
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Exploiting people is not a new thing in our society. In fact, as long as time has existed there have been periods during which whole groups of people were marginalized, enslaved, and mistreated. Consequently, it is not surprising that human trafficking existed long before and after our ancestors were shuttled through the Middle Passage in slave ships. Over the last decade, the United Nations has sought to intervene internationally with the global exploitation of people as commodities, especially women and children.

In fact, in 2000, they introduced a document entitled: *The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, (Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Organized Crime)*.¹

Their document provided the

first official legal definition of trafficking.² It defined trafficking in persons as

: “t
he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.
”

Statistics from the U.S. Department of State, suggests that the United States is the second

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largest region of destination for trafficked women and children, with as many as 50,000 trafficked victims annually. Almost 60% of trafficked victims into the United States are females and almost 50% are children. Researchers contend that women and girls who are trafficked are often sexually exploited, forced to work in domestic services, factories, farm labor, or as mail order brides or work in the pornography industry since the United States has the largest internet and child pornography market in the world. Additionally, if exploited girls and women come from other countries, they may be deceived into thinking that they will have greater opportunities in the United States if they follow their victimizers to the U.S. Consequently, in addition to being smuggled, many of these females enter the U.S. *legally* as military wives, or with tourist or educational visas provided by their traffickers. Finally, internationally exploited women, boys and girls may enter into an unreasonable agreement of debt bondage with their traffickers to repay “transportation” costs. In these cases, the individuals in question are often forced to engage in nonsexual labor by serving as nannies, day laborers etc. Remember, a few years ago when it was discovered that a South African boys choir had virtually imprisoned the youth into singing across the world? So, essentially “trafficking” is just a fancy way of saying, “pimping” –plain and simple.

Unfortunately, many of us believe that such abuses occur mostly overseas and do not affect us here in the United States, much less here in North Minneapolis. It is true, for example, that Nigeria is a key trafficker for the exploitation of girls and women who are exports to Italy. While it is accurate that trafficking occurs outside the United States, it is also true that girls and women are being trafficked, “pimped” or used everyday right here in Minnesota. According to the Department of Justice, the Twin Cities is the 13th most heavily trafficked metropolitan area in the U.S. with many coming from both *urban* and *rural* Minnesota. Multiple factors put girls and women at the greatest risk for exploitation. These include being immigrants, being in ethnic/racial minority groups, having lower socio-economic status, being homeless, as well as living in unstable family environments and having a history of childhood abuse. Consequently, those who are at greatest risk for domestic trafficking are immigrants, ethnic minority groups, adolescents, and runaway or homeless youth.

Pimping occurs on all kinds of levels and in a variety of contexts. For example, Tyler Perry’s movies have forced us to look at how (regardless of whether they were from an upper and lower socio-economic status) some mothers set-up their daughters to be sexually exploited. In the movie, *Madea’s Family Reunion*, an upper class African American mother put her daughter in a bath tub, donned her daughter’s face with make up, sprayed her with perfume, and left her alone in the bathroom for the child’s step-father (who was wealthy) to come in and rape her. Because of the mother’s financial and psychological dependency on the man, she sold her daughter to her spouse in order to assure a “quality of life” that she wanted. In the movie, *Precious*, an emotionally and financially dependent mother from a lower socioeconomic family exhibited jealousy toward her daughter as she allowed her male partner (who was also Precious’s father) to repeatedly rape Precious. The rapes from the incestuous relationship resulted in at least two

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pregnancies.

While most of us would say that those acts of child abuse occur “just in the movies”, it is critical to know that a recent Minnesota Student survey report indicated that 18% (10% of boys and 8% of girls) of African American ninth grade students reported that they were forced to have sex by their partners while dating. About 10% of ninth grade African American students reported that they have been victims of sexual abuse by individuals *outside* their family, while 19% (12% girls, 7% boys) reported that they had be sexually abused by individuals

inside

their families. To bring this point home, about a year ago, Russell Simmons and Al Sharpton visited Trenton, New Jersey to initiate a rally to take a stand against violence involving girls and women.

Their rally was a direct response to the news that seven men, ranging in age from 13 to 20 years old sexually assaulted a 7-year old girl in an apartment complex the week before. Most alarming was police report that the girl attended a party with her 15-year-old stepsister, who then sold herself and her younger sister to a group of men for an undisclosed amount of money.

In my practice, I often hear stories of mothers and fathers, who left their sons and daughters alone or with strangers that they barely knew in order for the parent to go to work or school, go out partying, or to obtain a few crack rocks, or in order to secure a place to stay. For my clients, the life-long effects of those early life boundary violations and abandonment experiences resulted in unhealthy coping behaviors including self-sabotage, drug/alcohol abuse, over-eating, sexual promiscuity, and pervasive personality disorders. Victims of such violations frequently display an inability to trust others, show affection or show self-confidence. Moreover, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder are often present. These symptoms include flashbacks, intrusive and recurring memories, nightmares, hyper-sensitivity to situations that remind the victim of the trauma, constant anxiety, fear, hyper-vigilance (always waiting for the other shoe to drop), as well as a sense of shortened life expectancy and feelings of impending doom.

According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), nearly 800,000 children under the age of 18 are reported missing each year in the United States. Of that number, reports suggests that approximately 33 percent are African-American.

African-American girls and boys who disappear often remain uncounted as “thrown away”. Sadly, this action increases their likelihood of exploitation by predatory ‘recruiters.’ ”

It is also necessary to talk about “pimping” within the socio-cultural context of our systems. For example, we know that over 45 percent of the children in foster care systems are African

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American. The trend, of course, is to place these children in permanent families as soon as possible. My concern is that foster care or adoptive placements do not always appear to be in the best interests of the children involved.

I recall one case of an eleven or twelve year old African American girl who was adopted by a white family living on an isolated farm in northern Minnesota. The family clearly did not know even one other African American person (except they saw a Black woman at the hair salon whose name they did not know). Not only were they planning to adopt the young girl, they also had two or three younger siblings to whom she would serve as their "big sister". Their plan was to "home-school" this young black girl and essentially provide her socializations through their church. Finally, when meeting the family in my office, I noticed that while the mother was happy to have "help" in the house; the father barely spoke a word during the entire session. The young African American adoptee reported that even when she visited their rural home in the past, the father did not say much to her at all. Although she desperately wanted a father--any father, there was clearly absolutely no connection between them. Nonetheless, against my protest, the child was quickly placed and adopted. In my spirit, I believed that she was being set up to be exploited as a "live in" nanny. So, while standards of practice require that I act as a mandated reporter when I suspect child abuse or exploitation, what could have been done when I suspected that the CPS worker was the one endangering the child?

It is easy to understand how exploitation of girls and women continues when we think of how trafficking occurs. Take for example a case of a girl called "Linda" (*not her actual name*). Linda's father was incarcerated since she was around 3 years of age, and she and her mother argued frequently. Matters got after her mother moved a boyfriend (who she met over the internet a month prior) into their home. The boyfriend lived with his mother, needed a place to stay, and was "in-between" jobs. After moving in, he quickly found work and started contributing to the household bills. Linda went on to report that as he brought more money into the home, he increasingly became more powerful to the point of becoming verbally abusive, and "man-handling" her mother in an effort to make his points. Linda also said that she felt uncomfortable when she was alone with the man because he looked at her "kind of funny."

One day, Linda skipped class with a friend to go the Mall of America to look at dresses for an upcoming school function. When she got home, apparently word had reached her mother about her skipping and she was in BIG trouble. Linda said that instead of her mother punishing her, the boyfriend yelled, and finally hit her several times with a strap. Linda ran away that night. She was able to stay with her friend for a few days, but soon had no other place to go but back home. This pattern was repeated for several months until eventually Linda ran away for good. According to her, she was quickly picked up by a male friend (35 years old) who let her stay at his place-no questions asked. Inevitably, he did ask a question about how she would "repay" him. The table turned, she was stuck by pride, shame, dependency, and helplessness.

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I have learned that not only do the victims of exploitation feel helpless, so do those who witness their victimization-- but there are key things that can be done. First, you must be able to notice the signs that someone may be in the position of being exploited. **According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, trafficking victims may show the following signs** : (1) *Accompanied by a controlling person or boss;* (2) *Not speaking on own behalf;* (3) *Lack of control over personal schedule, money, house key, I.D., travel documents;* (4) *Transported to or from work; lives and works in the same place;* (5) *Debt owed to employer/crew leader;* (6) *Inability to leave job; or* (7) *Have bruises, depression, fear, and be overly submissive.*

Consequently, if you think someone you know might be a trafficking victim, call the

**National
Trafficking Resource Center
hotline at 1(888) 373-7878**

or contact a local agency like

Breaking Free

(
651-645-6557

) or

Civil Society

(
651-291-0713

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We know that trafficking is connected to a myriad of social issues including poverty, gang activity, the illegal drug trade and failed child protective services. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon us to catapult our concern for the sexual trafficking of African-American girls and women to the forefront of our conversations about racial and gender equality, public policies, and our demands for social justice.

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