

## **Where are all the Women?**

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Holland Professional Club

This story begins in Honduras on my second trip with Dr. Sterken and the Luke Society. The first trip was very impressive in that the women patients in our clinics in the villages were dressed conservatively in skirts and blouses and formed tight orderly lines to register. The women and children were seen first, next came the older grandmothers with an occasional child. The next group were older men and finally young men were seen last.

The next year saw a similar pattern except now the younger women wore jeans and tank tops. The lines to see the doctors were not as tight or orderly. Patients were seen youngest to oldest. Children often appeared alone, without an adult. Teenage girls previously appeared with the rest of the family, but as time progressed, appeared alone, and the dress was more modern and more provocative.

When asked, "Where is your mother," the answers were vague, especially with younger women working in the fields or a cotton mill in San Pedro Sula (6 hours by bus from their village). Younger translators would volunteer very little information. Later the teenage girls all but disappeared, as did the younger mothers.

The next year I had a translator who was older, more experienced. She reminded me of Poppa, who was a black woman who fit the description of God in the book, [The Shack](#). She was all business and not at all afraid of telling me what

was happening. I had the feeling I was talking with God. Her knowledge of Honduran customs and willingness to talk was informative and refreshing.

At first she was somewhat reluctant to reveal the truth. I finally asked her again. Where are all the younger women and girls? Seldom did we see teenagers, provocatively dressed, or younger mothers with their young children. Now grandmothers brought the children to our clinics. Poppa told me that most of the teenagers had been sold by their parents to older men to marry, work the fields or resold as sex slaves. Many were traded or resold up to Nicaragua or Mexico, or down to Costa Rica with promises of jobs as dancers. Women in the villages cannot get good jobs in Honduras, and getting an education is too expensive. Their poverty had forced them into slavery. Thus, the provocative dress would help them get a rich husband or a job abroad and many ended up in brothels, often in Chiapas, Mexico. This pattern of few younger women in the villages in Nicaragua was like Honduras. Children in our clinics came with grandparents or their fathers. Very few younger women were seen; they had been forced into slavery.

After many trips to Nicaragua, I kept trying to get more information. On one of the visits to a village at another medical clinic, a 24-year-old unmarried (unusual) woman came to my desk. She had come to the clinic alone, leaned forward and spoke very softly, glancing around so no one could hear her. She had mainly psychosomatic complaints and bone pain. "My head hurts, and my shoulders, arms and legs hurt." She did not work, and had not finished school. My translator that day was a nursing student in Grand Rapids, from Guatemala, and (finally) was as

interested as I was in my questions and the patients' answers. She did not hide the answers from me. The tears came with almost every question.

She had been sold by her parents (at 13 years old) to an older man. She was forced to work in the fields. Eventually she was sold to work in another city to work as a sex slave. After she escaped from her owner, her parents were too ashamed to have her return back home. She eventually connected with a brother who brought her back to live with a grandmother. The grandmother told her she worked for the Devil and abused her verbally. The brother abused her sexually on a daily basis. She also had been sexually abused by her father (prior to leaving her home at 13). Our group made arrangements for her to go to a shelter for rehab and possible relocation.

These personal stories from Honduras and Nicaragua suggest that women and children are abused, and poverty pushes these people into slavery. Using deceit for better paying jobs attracts the poor. Violent crime and corruption also contributed to the situation. The police return most of the girls to their owners, if they escape. Contributing to the trafficking is a free transit agreement in Central American, and very weak border monitoring of smuggling and trafficking. Most of the women who are trafficked start locally and are sold through a series of stops and ultimately to a different country.

For Nicaragua a culture of silence pushes the process. The role of parents – pushing daughters into prostitution with foreigners, tourists and local clients – is difficult. Girls are hired as domestic servants, and are coerced to have sex. The problems of sexual exploitation and trafficking are seen as normal behaviors and

human nature rather than a violation of rights. As in my example of the 24-year-old married at an early age: it was her fault and the women or girls are to blame.

Before leaving Central America it should be noted that the illegal migration of trafficking and its proximity to cheap sex and labor flow on a north-south axis. This follows a path from poor to areas of relative prosperity. Belize and Costa Rica are the wealthiest. This promotes sex tourism and, in particular, pedophile sex tourism. At the end of 2007 there were about 93,000 sex slaves in all of Central America.

In 2007 in India, 20,000 Nepalese were trafficked. There are 30,000 Nepalese prostitutes (of the 100,000 total) in Mumbai alone! The Nepalese are small and timid, but not cheap for the traffickers. The average price for a girl sold in India from Nepal is \$1350.00. In Central America teenage girls are sold by their parents for approximately \$200.00. In Central America when sold, these girls will cost a trafficker \$1500.00. They bring in over \$30,000 for the year, with a profit of over \$10,000.

In Asia a sex slave costs about \$150 to buy, and will bring the owner over \$12,000 for a year. In Asia, the sex act costs about \$4.50. In Italy and Western Europe there are slaves with much higher prices. The cost to purchase is about \$4800. The price for the act in Europe is about \$33.00. These slaves generate close to \$80,000 in profits per year per slave.

Thailand represents some differences from other areas of the world. Bangkok is the ultimate tourist destination for sex. There are many western style restaurants and hotels to attract Americans and Europeans and Asians. Prices for

services are cheap at \$2.50 for a ½ hour massage. One hour of sex costs \$2.50, and the fee for a week of a girl's service is about \$125.

In Thailand many are pressured into the sex industry by the parents to make money for the family. If a girl makes \$800 - \$1,000 a month, the money is sent to her home. It is the duty of the youngest unmarried daughter to care for her parents.

Not only are women trafficked in Southeast Asia, but boys suffer as well. They will be forced to catch fish 20 hours a day for months on end. They are forced to take amphetamines, and when they can no longer work, they are shot to keep the prices for seafood low.

The prostitution picture in Thailand is more complex than in most countries. This is partly due to the culture where it is the responsibility of the children to take care of their parents. There may be over 500,000 people working in the sex industry. The increase in wealth and increase in sex tourism contributes to this growth. Two out of three tourists in Thailand are unaccompanied men.

In North America the number of sex trafficking victims is relatively small. People are trafficked for forced labor in agriculture, domestic service and future work. Getting the slaves to the US is difficult and expensive. In Asia and Europe trafficking for sex represents 30-45% of the slaves brought into the US. The US represents about 20%. Most Mexicans are smuggled across the border and then become victims.

What about Michigan? Attorney General Schuette has organized a commission for trafficking, but only a few are prosecuted each year.

What about Holland? I have been told about a number of trafficking victims working the trailer park on Butternut Drive north of James St. The customers include Tulip Timers, Art Prize visitors, migrant workers and the Street. Look for women on James and 152<sup>nd</sup> St., working the Street.

Anyone can become a victim, including men, women of any age or race or background. Even in this community, victims can be recruited from runaways, malls, social media, families of other adults. Victims are too ashamed to ask for help and are often forced into drug abuse. Signs of potential victimization include staying out late, sexual activity with older men and withdrawal from family and friends.

If you suspect trafficking, report it to local law enforcement, Homeland Security, or the FBI resident agent. If you even think it's possible, don't hesitate. You are protected.

What makes the sex industry so attractive? Billions of dollars are generated every year and at profit margins greater than any industry in the world! The US State Department estimates over 800,000 people are trafficked each year, and maybe millions internally. Violence against women in many parts of the world by men with no enforcement of local laws also contributes to increased profitability.

In India 15,000 women are murdered every year over dowry disputes. In South Africa, one woman is murdered by her lover, every hour.

There is an inexhaustible supply of slaves decreasing the cost of sex by men. This opens the use to lower wage consumers to the demand for sex. Combating trafficking carries almost no risk for those who should be minimizing the problem. The prostitutes themselves also contribute to lack of enforcement of laws against

slavery, and it is not their fault. Most women entered the business because of abuse prior to their introduction into slavery. Nearly 100% of these women have been abused by a father, stepfather, uncle or brother. The break-in period is shortened by this problem of prior abuse. Prior abuse enhances a lack of self-worth. Almost 100% return to prostitution, leading to self-destruction, diseases, drug abuse and inability to escape even after therapy. Most die in their 30's.

Ending the exploitation is difficult. But here is what we can do:

1. Raising awareness of the crimes
2. Financial help for those women in need of shelter, health care, counseling and vocational training.
3. Vigilance on a local level.
4. Aggressive action by legislators
5. Social media as a tool to eradicate slavery.

In Holland there is help!

- JFON – Justice for our Neighbors. This organization (under the First United Methodist Churches in Holland and Grand Rapids has clinics providing shelter and placement, healthcare, counseling, interpreters, visas, travel funds, protection and safety!
- FBI agent Carmen Kucinich in Grand Rapids specializes in victim help She is extremely helpful, working mainly with teenagers and very willing to provide help.

- Finally: Sweden has enacted trafficking laws and enforcement almost eliminating traffickers and sex slavery. These laws focus on traffickers and the buyers of sex. Buying sexual services is now a crime in Sweden and women are safe. Since 1998 no homicides related to the buying of sex have occurred.

While the trafficking world is complicated, corrupted, pervasive multi-national, culturally accepted in some areas, and extremely profitable, we can no longer look the other way. We all need to become fanatics in the eliminating of Human Trafficking as a world-wide problem.

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HPC Presentation