How the Internet Is Used to Facilitate the Trafficking of Humans as Sex Slaves

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Sex trafficking is so widespread, that “no country, no race, no religion, no class and no child is immune. (Nathan Wilson, Founder, Project Meridian Foundation, as cited in Neubauer, 2011)"

Introduction

Human trafficking is, sadly, a part of the fabric of the 21st century global community, but it has different goals than those of sex trafficking. One expert defines human trafficking as “‘an opportunistic response’ to the tension between the economic necessity to migrate . . . and the politically motivated restrictions on migration” (Chuang, 2006, pp. 137, 140).

To give an idea of how widespread sex trafficking is, understand that it is now more profitable for criminals to sell women for sex than it is to sell drugs. Drugs are disposable and finite. Women can be resold over and over and over again. These “commodities” are not as expendable as drugs.

Sex trafficking is multifaceted but can be viewed from the basics of how the crime is defined. The definition of the severe form of sex trafficking is defined as being “severe” if force, fraud, or coercion is involved. The other definition is noted as not being “severe” if no such force, fraud, or coercion is present or if the victims cannot prove such (“Protocol to Prevent,” 2000). This paper uses the two-tiered definition’s portion that does not require a showing of force, fraud, or coercion because that definition examines the exploitive nature of this entire criminal activity. By distinguishing between victims of this heinous industry who are able to show force, fraud, or coercion and those who are not, we are essentially giving the traffickers an “out” in being able to argue that the victim somehow cooperated or agreed to be trafficked.

When one contemplates the sheer volume of victims—from rural areas of Asia to bustling cities such as Brazil—it is astounding to realize we are considering the devastation of the lives of millions of innocent women and children (Corrigan, 2001; Parker, 2007). One must recognize that America is a major importer of sex slaves, with conservative estimates fluctuating between 18,000 and 20,000 (Opposing and Preventing, 2012). Of those, nearly 80% are women and half are minors (Parker, 2007). Cases of human trafficking have been reported in all 50 states in the United States (Polaris Project, 2012).

In the document Opposing and Preventing Global Sexual Trafficking (2012), posted by the Salvation Army,

Over the last 10 years, the numbers of women and children [who] have been trafficked have multiplied so that they are now on par with estimates of the numbers of Africans who were enslaved in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Given the expansive growth of this industry and how it is a fluid, ever-changing business, the ways in which this is able to occur must be examined.

Analysis: The Use of the Internet and How It Facilitates Sex Trafficking

There are multiple ways in which “sexual exploitation, such as prostitution, sex tours,
bride trafficking, pornography, live sex shows and rape videos for sexual entertainment” are encouraged and advertised (Hughes & Coalition Against Trafficking in Women [CATW], 1988). There once was a time in the not too distant past when individuals who wanted to have illegal sexual relations with a minor or with a stranger had to get up, get dressed, leave their home, and travel to a specific location. These predators would have to travel domestically or internationally to fulfill their perverted desires of molesting these victims. Those days are long gone. Men who desire to have sexual relationships with children and unconsenting women can do so at the push of a button. Finding victims is as easy as turning on a computer and searching online for unwilling individuals who are being used as sex slaves. The Internet has created a booming industry for sex slaves. Even though the majority of sex slaves are women, boys are targeted by predators as well.

One of the many avenues in which victims are taken advantage of and exploited is through the use of electronic media. Hughes and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) (1988) have called the Internet “the most unregulated communications network in the world.” The Internet has increased in commercial activity exponentially with the onset of the commercial sex industry. Historically, pornography was available predominantly in “photographs, magazines and videos” (U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003). Today, pornographic websites, online classified services, and the Internet are large facilitators of sex trafficking (Kloer, 2009). The profits made from offline pornography is estimated to be approximately $8 billion in the United States alone (Regan, 2002). Other estimates show that figure to be even higher at $10 to $14 billion a year (Geisler, 2009). An indication of the vast amounts of money to be made in the porn industry is a court case that pitted a battle over the domain name www.sex.com. The ruling in this case found the domain name to be valued at $65 million (Samson, 2003). There can be no discounting the power of pornography online as the estimates are that Internet pornography is now believed to net more than $12 billion a year (The Third Way Culture Project, 2006). This is approximately the equivalent of ABC, NBC, and CBS’s combined yearly revenue.

Individuals can stay seated in the comfort of their home and “bid” on potential victims for sex and even pay for them via the Internet (“Teen Sold as Sex Slave,” 2010). This kind of transaction done in obscurity and anonymity has created an underworld that is fueling the sex trafficking industry. Men are able to hide behind screen names and firewalls and make identification much more difficult that when an officer could apprehend them on the streets.

Craigslist, which is used all over the country to sell anything from clothes to cars and everything in between, has also been used in offering for sale the sexual services of women and children. It has been estimated that Craigslist’s profits in 2010 were $122 million with $436.3 million from adult ads alone (Stone, 2010).

Craigslist has been referred to as an “online pimp” due to the extensive volume of sexual services offered on their site. The site officials have responded to negative media attention on this issue by saying that they are policing their website and “looking for signs of exploitation”; however, as of February 2010, there had been more than 3.5 million adult services ads posted by Craigslist the previous calendar year (Kloer, 2010).

Craigslist insists they are changing their process of screening ads, but it must be noted that even if Craigslist had 100 employees whose sole job was to screen these ads, each of these 100 employees would have to review approximately 1,000 ads a day (Kloer, 2010). That is the sheer volume of the quantity of ads posted on this site.

On May 19, 2010, an ad was printed in the San Francisco Chronicle as well as listed on the popular website Huffington Post. The ad was authored by two young girls who were “sold”
repeatedly on Craigslist by the men who exploited them. The girls, one as young as 11, were forced to have sex with strangers for “10 hours with 10 different men.” The pimp, of course, pocketed the money and forced these girls to do this over and over and over again. The ad is basically imploring Craigslist to take down and discontinue the “Adult Services” section of Craigslist. The young ladies were being forced to post their own ads on Craigslist and respond personally to the calls generated from their ad. They were transported from city to city and were in fear of beatings or ice water baths.

Cook County Sheriff Thomas J. Dart took a stand against Craigslist and filed a federal lawsuit against the online service for creating a public nuisance via the “erotic services” section of their page. The Sheriff called Craigslist “the single largest source of prostitution” in the U.S. Sheriff Dart’s claim was based upon the volume of “human trafficking and juvenile prostitution arrests his vice officers” had made (Sheriff Thomas J. Dart, 2012).

The Internet, as a conduit for sex trafficking, allows for cites like the Yellow Pages Online, mail-order bride sites, fraudulent employment opportunities, as well as numerous e-mail solicitations to be used as ways to trick, coerce, and entice unsuspecting victims into the web that is sex trafficking (“The Internet and Human Trafficking,” 2009).

Another form of exploitation via technology is online photo sharing. This process allows for large-scale production and dissemination of pornographic images of children, without the intrusive photo developer or postal worker uncovering the images (Kloer, 2009). Online photo galleries allow for the sexual deviant to choose victims to be sexually exploited from the comfort and privacy of his home. This also allows for the traffickers to have an even greater amount of flexibility to be mobile, all while sharing their pornographic images to their “clients.” These men are now able to choose escorts, companions, or even wives, after viewing this online photo album. This technology has revolutionized the way traffickers and pimps exploit their victims, remain “hidden” from the public eye, avoid detection by authorities, and maximize profitability (Kloer, 2009).

One such case of how pornography has moved from printed material to the World Wide Web arose in New Brunswick, Canada. Douglas Stewart, 51, was apprehended for being in possession of “millions of images of child sexual abuse” (CBC News, 2011). The judge in the case admitted that he needed time to access a proper sentence in the case because there had never been such a large amount of child pornography in a single case with a single defendant. This defendant possessed almost six million images of children being abused or in sexual positions. His stash of pornography “completely overwhelmed” law enforcement (The Royal Canadian Mounted Police) who had to employ additional servers to accommodate the evidence.

In a similar case in Vancouver, the authorities arrested Warren Allen for being in possession of pornographic images of children (Fraser, 2011). This man was a part of a global community of sexual predators who participate in online trading of images involving children being sexually abused. This global sharing of graphic images of children being abused and abused included children as young as 4 years old. To indicate the global reach of this practice, law enforcement arrested 12 individuals in Canada, ten in the U.S., and three in Europe. Thankfully, 25 children were rescued.

There are numerous cases where men employ discretionary tactics in order to go undetected while sharing these illegal images. One such way is peer-to-peer file sharing programs (Man Arrested, 2011). These programs allow users to upload and/or download files to and from other users or groups of users. This is done in order to be surreptitious and to go undetected as they work directly with each other’s files. These programs do not allow the content to be viewable to the general public, and the content is not shared on a global, open network (P2P & File-Sharing Software, 2012).
The U.S. General Accounting Office (2003) (hereinafter referred to as GAO) has done research on how readily accessible pornographic images of children are on peer-to-peer networks. GAO was able to determine when using specific terms associated with child porn online that 42% of the results netted child porn images, 34% was adult porn, and 24% was non-pornographic.10 This same group also noted that juveniles are at greater risk of being unintentionally exposed to pornographic images if they use peer-to-peer networks. Predators have realized that if they embed these pornographic images in links that include search terms used by juveniles, these young people will “stumble” upon the images and land on these pornographic sites.11 Figure 1 contains a classification of downloaded images as gathered through the Customs CyberSmuggling Center.12

Figure 1. Classification of Images Downloaded Through Peer-to-Peer File-Sharing Programs

With the advent of social media sites such as MySpace and Facebook, young people are bombarded with “friend” requests from individuals who could potentially be hundreds of thousands of miles away. These people, who are strangers, could have nefarious motives.

Real Stories of Sex Trafficking Victims

The general public may wonder how and why these victims are able to be sold and trafficked. These women and children are victimized, brutalized, and treated in inhumane ways that create a genuine fear for their lives. Traffickers take control of their victims by isolation, confinement, and holding them captive. These perpetrators use and threaten to use violence against the victims and/or their families. Many victims have been traumatized to the point that they believe that the abuse is their fault and that they deserved it. Another tactic by pimps is to make victims become dependent upon them. Some force drugs on these women and children thereby creating an addiction. Some victims in this process actually “bond” with the trafficker. These victims are taught to distrust law enforcement and have been told that they will be deported if they attempt to contact the authorities. Many are not even aware that they have a right to go to the police and are duped into believing that they owe exorbitant amounts for fabricated debts (“Ways Traffickers Control Their Victims,” 2011).

There are countless stories of victims being exploited for sexual purposes via the Internet. One such story is of Katya,13 a foreign exchange student, who came to America with a friend to work as a waitress in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Once she and the friend arrived at Dulles Airport, they were greeted by two men (Alex Maksimenko and Michael Aronov) holding signs with their names on them. These men told the young ladies that they had been reassigned to jobs in Detroit where they would work but also would have time to work on their English skills. They then were given bus tickets to Detroit and had no reason to suspect any illicit motives. When they arrived in Detroit, their identification was confiscated, and they were given “stripping” clothes and told that they would have to dance for men in a nightclub for 12-hour days. As is employed in many trafficking cases, the victims are told that they owe the traffickers an exorbitant amount of money for varying fees. These fees are often five to six times more than the actual travel expenses. These women were severely beaten and sexually abused by their captors. They, and other women and children caught up in this sex trafficking industry, are intimidated through the use of physical
violence, mental torture, as well as food and sleep deprivation. Katya and her friend were fortunate enough to confide in a trustworthy customer who, after months of planning, was able to help the ladies escape from captivity. Maksimenko and Aronov were charged, convicted, and sentenced to time in federal prison for these offenses (Kahng, 2007).

As disturbing as this may seem, there is a website, www.slavefarm.com, that openly advertises for sale women who appear to have been beaten, abused, and tortured who are photographed bound, chained, and tied.14 This site openly claims to be “the world’s largest amateur BDSM site since 1998.” Beneath a photograph of a woman, hands tied behind her back, lying on her stomach, with her anus appearing to be bruised and bleeding, is a caption that says, “securely cuffed, hogtied and waiting for her punishment. This new slave is learning fast.” The photos are horrendous and brutal. They do not appear to be fabricated or staged. Another caption beneath a photograph of a naked lady with her nipples pierced by a chain that is attached, has a whip draped around her neck and has tape on her mouth as well as her eyes covered reads, “Can’t see, can’t talk . . . just waiting for pain and lust.”15 Other captions read, “our favorite slave Cathy tied hard and tormented,” “beautiful slave babe tied in the pillory,” “pet girl with rubber hood forced to drink like a dog,” and “blonde bitch gagged and hanging by her feet” (Franzblau, 2007). One photograph shows a naked woman lying on a table on her stomach, her arms are tied to the legs at one side of the table and her legs are tied right below the knees to the other two legs on the table.16 A member on the site leaves a post that reads, “Man does that look like fun. I would whip that ass til is (sic) was red and then fuck that right in the ass. Love her tied down like that.”17

In addition to having access to graphic, violent, and brutal pornography, membership has its “privileges.” Members have the ability to use the site to participate in auctions and rentals of victims, mainly women.18 The author notes that these sections of the website are “essentially host sites for sex traffickers.” When an NGO brought this website’s actions and activities to the government’s attention, no action was taken against the site, and it still is in operation up to the date of this publication.19

An obvious example of this Internet site being used as a means for sex trafficking was a posting that was shown last year in which there was an offer to sell women who were from Thailand and Ghana to men in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the U.S.20 These poor and desperate women were being sold at a set rate and were described as “willing to become a ‘perverted man’s slave, toy and housekeeper.’”21 After the preference particulars were worked out, the buyer would be sent pictures of the slave and she would then be signed to a contractual slave agreement. The seller agreed to ensure that all entry documents for the slave would be provided as to her entry to the destination country.

One member, in response to an ad that stated, “I am very much interested in being auctioned off and am open to location,” gave a warning to all those viewing the post:

Bear in mind that slavery is illegal in North America, and most parts of the world, so a slave auction would not result in any legally enforceable ownership. While this is a relatively common fantasy, the reality differs a great deal. In my limited experience actual slave auctions can be split into two drastically different categories. First there are auctions held within a community where the buyers and “merchandise” are all well known. These tend to be of relatively short duration and clearly defined terms for how the slave can be used. Since communities engaging in this form of “play,” because it is play, tend to police themselves these seem to be generally positive experiences for all involved. People who are not suitable and trusted are not likely to be invited...
to participate in an event like this. The other sort of slave auction is associated with human trafficking. Nobody in their right mind would want to be subjected to this sort of sale. To these buyers kink or fetish is irrelevant; the return on investment is the only thing that matters. The property might be put to work in a brothel but just as likely put to work making counterfeit Nikes or harvesting crops. If you disobey these people you’re not going to be spanked or caned, but rather beaten within an inch of your life or killed. There is nothing wrong with having this fantasy but you should be EXTREMELY careful about making it real. Think really hard about what you are trying to accomplish and make sure you have considered all of potential consequences, not just the fun ones.22

The person who posted this is well aware of the fact that trafficking in humans is illegal and is not advising potential buyers to not pursue the course of action but, rather, to “consider all potential consequences.” Many of these members appear to see this all as a “fantasy” life and as a sort of parallel universe. But this is very real to these women who are being dehumanized, humiliated, and tortured for anyone with a computer to see.

This website is in violation of numerous laws, including the federal mandate known as the Mann Act, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, as well as “most states’ laws concerning conspiracy, facilitation, promoting prostitution, rape, assault, battery, and unlawful imprisonment.”23 This website is clearly being used as a vehicle for those intending to traffic in humans and promote the crime of prostitution. This information proliferated on this website should no more be considered free speech than a man walking down the street offering his sister up for sale to be used in pornography or as a prostitute.24 The government’s response to this website has been abysmal.

The World Wide Web is just that: WORLD WIDE. A person could be in Tokyo, Japan, writing another individual in Houston, Texas, and their communications are instantaneous. No delay in call and response. This ability to communicate to individuals all over the world at such a fast pace and with virtual ease has allowed websites like www.Dexterhorn.com to flourish and grow.25 This is a website that, in no uncertain terms, promotes sex in Asia with underage individuals and has the banner of “Where to Find Sex and Adventure WORLDWIDE.”26

In order to access the information regarding the “naked photo galleries,” reading books online and video clips of “Hot Latina” and “Hot Asian” chicks, one would have to sign up to become a member and pay $7.95 per month.27 The site sells pornographic videos as well as offers some pornographic videos for free in an effort to promote the sex tourism business.


The site sells books and includes titles such as A Gentleman’s Guide: The Erotic Women of Southeast Asia. The book encourages men with low self-esteem to not be discouraged by their looks by saying,

Southeast Asia: there’s more pussy out there than you ever dreamed possible. Best of all, it’s readily available to anyone. If you don’t believe me ask my old friend, “Wheelchair Tom,” as we called him. He was the ugliest 55 year old son-of-a-bitch I’ve ever known. If that guy could score three underage girls a day, without even blinking, I have a feeling you’ll do just fine. (as quoted in Franzblau, 2007, pp. 2-3)
This website not only promotes sex tourism but encourages travelers to videotape their sexual encounters with the children and women with whom they will be having sex (Franzblau, 2007). The books note that the traveler is free to have any photographs developed in Thailand and mailed back to the U.S. but ONLY if the victim is over 18 years of age. The site offers materials that speak of not only renting the victims but of buying them as well. One of the many factors that contribute to the proliferation of sex trafficking is the lack of financial and educational opportunities offered to so many poor people in this world. Traffickers take advantage of that fact and capitalize on their victims’ vulnerabilities. The books speak of that fact by signifying to the traveler that they are free to negotiate with the families of these young people as their desperation may get the traveler a good deal. The Internet is currently being used to promote and facilitate “johns” travelling to foreign countries to have sex with children and being offered opportunities to buy them from parents. Many times, these families are in desperate straits, impoverished, or have been tricked or coerced into selling their children. The Internet is being used to allow this to happen seamlessly and with little to no effort on the part of the buyer.

Conclusion

Likewise, for those of us who are in position to do something to combat human slavery, however small our contribution, neutrality is a sin. (Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz, Department of Defense, 2011)

The Internet has the power to allow people to communicate in ways once never imagined. The amount of information accessible to people just by way of their fingers is amazing. We can talk to one another, see one another, and exchange ideas with one another from hundreds of thousands of miles apart. This incredible way of communicating with one another has the potential for good and the potential for evil. This same Internet can be used to facilitate harmful and devastating pain in the lives of many. The Internet has allowed our world to become a global village where borders are no longer limiting where individuals may travel. This can be a positive; but in the context of sex trafficking, this is a negative.

The Internet is currently being used to facilitate sex trafficking via websites that advertise women and children for sex, websites that host auctions for people for rental and sale, and websites that advertise and promote sex tourism as well as pornography. The Internet is an avenue that traffickers, pimps, and johns have figured out can promote their business to levels never seen prior to the Internet’s wide expansion and use.

Traffickers have created a fantasy world for the demand that is evident for these victims. They feed into the basest desires of johns, supplying these predators with women and children who are helpless to defend themselves. This fantasy world is all too real for these victims as the laws and the governing authorities have yet to adequately respond to this situation.

Trafficking includes a link in the chain of components that allow the industry to operate. The hidden link in the chain that must be addressed is the demand link (George, in press). We must tackle the demand issue in order to make a dent in the problem.

The CATW offered some laudable goals in its recommendation to the United Nations Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery:

[It is recommended] that governments, as a matter of priority, review, amend, and enforce existing laws, to prevent the misuse of the internet for trafficking, prostitution, and the sexual exploitation of women and children; that governments and nongovernmental organizations undertake further investigation of the misuse of the internet for the purpose of promoting and/or carrying out
trafficking, prostitution, and the sexual exploitation of women and children; urges governments to act more forcefully to eliminate the trafficking in persons, the exploitation of the prostitution of others, and sexual exploitation on the internet; urges governments, in cooperation with interested nongovernmental organizations, to develop educational programs and policies and laws addressing the use of the internet by prostitution customers for the purpose of engaging in sexual exploitation; recommends that governments investigate and use as evidence of crimes and acts of discrimination advertising, correspondence, and other communications over the internet to promote sex trafficking, prostitution, and sex tourism . . . calls for new levels of cooperation among governments and national and regional law enforcement bodies in order to combat the escalating trafficking and prostitution of women and children, the globalization of this industry, and the misuse of the internet to promote and carry out acts of sex trafficking, sex tourism, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation. (Hughes & CATW, 1998)

The World Wide Web is being used in such a way that many victims are being caught in its web of violence, sexual deviation, and fetishes. We, as a global community, must rise to the challenge and seek to find ways to punish the perpetrators and free the victims from this life of slavery.

Endnotes

1 Nathan Wilson is the founder of the Project Meridian Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, which helps police identify traffickers and their victims.

2 We are in essence providing a ready-made defense for these perpetrators who will argue that a victim was not forced or induced via fraud or coercion and as such she understood and/or agreed to be trafficked. There are cases where a victim may not be able to prove force, fraud, or coercion but nevertheless that is how she was tricked into this industry.

3 Parker (2007) references the movies Sold and Trade, which both chronicle the stories of victims of the sex trade and how their lives have been impacted.

4 Quoting Dr. Laura Lederer, a senior state department advisor on trafficking. She has studied sexual trafficking for 20 years at Harvard University.

5 The District Court further awarded plaintiffs $40 million compensatory and $25 million in punitive damages against Defendant Cohen.

6 See www.stopenslavement.org/archives/stop-traff806.pdf (as quoted from Saada Saar [2010]).

7 Quoting from the article: “Sheriff Dart demanded [Craigslist] either better monitor [the] postings or remove the category altogether. Just two months later, amid growing national pressure, Craigslist’s administrators relented and made the very changes Dart demanded. Continuing that fight, Dart established a first-of-its-kind prostitution intervention team, which has drawn nationwide interest. Made up of former prostitutes and licensed supervisors, sheriff’s staffers accompany vice officers on prostitution stings and perform on-site intervention after an arrest, encouraging women to immediately go to a recovery house and proceed with life-changing choices.

8 Stewart had been collecting pornographic images since the 1980s and had in his possession 4.7 million pornographic images and 1.2 million depictions of children nude or in bathtubs.

9 It took approximately 700 hours to categorize the images.

10 Of the 1,286 titles, 543 were child porn, which equalled 42%. In another search (using three specific words), the analyst downloaded 341 images, 44% of which were pornographic images of children.

11 These “search terms” included names of cartoon characters and celebrities.

12 The GAO noted that because pornographic images of children cannot be accessed legally by people or institutions outside of law enforcement for legal purposes, GAO worked with the Customs CyberSmuggling Center to perform the requisite searches. Customs “downloaded
and analyzed the files; GAO performed analyses based on keywords and file names only.”

Katya is not her actual name. Her identity is being concealed for her protection and privacy.

See www.slavefarm.com. Please note that this site is very graphic and disturbing (last visited November 9, 2011).

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Member’s identity is not revealed.

The site is being used as a vehicle to sell, purchase, and rent human beings.

Equality Now went to the FBI and to the Department of Justice with “auctions” that were being held on www.slavefarm.com, and the governmental agencies indicated that if the women were not participating against their will, then they would not launch an investigation into the matter. I last visited the site on November 11, 2011.

The seller was required to give an e-mail address, state whether he wanted a woman from Ghana or Thailand, her age, and what kind of sex she would be performing for him.

There really is no difference in these.

This site is based out of California; http://dexterhorn.com (last visited November 11, 2011).

The opening page of the website shows approximately 11 Asian girls all naked, some in sexually suggestive poses with one another. The females appear to be very young, but the website has a disclaimer at the bottom of the web page that reads, “All images contained on the website of a sexual nature are of persons 18 years of age or older.”

The site offers differing plans at differing prices. The basic “Silver Plan” costs $7.95 per month with some limited access to certain features. It costs $35.69 for 180 days for the “Gold Plan,” which allows greater access, or $59.69 for a year with full access to the site’s features.

At p. 268. The book encourages the traveler by saying, “there’s nothing more exciting than making your own private collection of nudity photos and XXX rated home videos. When you see yourself on TV doing it with 2 or 3 young girls at the same time, well-hey! You’re a star! Yeah you’re fat, toothless and stupid, but sure, you’re a star.”

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