

By Kate Herman and Sarah A. West



Ensnared

children in modern slavery

Children as young as 8 years old—and maybe younger—are being sold into a life of slavery and torture by their own parents, teachers, and others looking for a quick profit. How did this industry become one of the world’s top moneymakers?

Liena was just a teenager when she left her home in Latvia because, she says, “I couldn’t get along with my family.” She moved in with a friend and worked odd jobs, struggling to find food. When her friend told her of a woman who could help her find work abroad, she jumped at the offer to work at a bar and accepted the woman’s \$3,000 loan for travel expenses.

“Only when I was about to get on the plane did the lady ask me whether I knew what kind of job it was,” says Liena, who learned then that she had been sold into prostitution. “At that moment I didn’t think—I simply got on the plane and went to Denmark.”

When reality hit, Liena was stunned by her new situation. “On the first floor there was a bar, and on the second floor we had our rooms where we had to live, eat, and do our job,” she says. “The thing is, I had never done anything like that before. The first time was very, very difficult. Afterwards, I cried. We all cried.”

Liena eventually was sold again, this time to Germany, and ended up in jail before being sent home to Latvia. There, the woman who had sold her into

sexual slavery found her, threatened to have her raped or killed, and left her living in fear.

Liena (her name has been changed to protect her identity) shared her story with the International Organization for Adolescents (IOFA) to assist in making a training film that would educate young people on how to protect themselves when going abroad to work. Her trafficking experience is shared by millions of women and girls worldwide who are ensnared in an inescapable network of lies, violence, and sexual slavery—a problem that escalates despite global attention and pressure.

Inside the Ring

The practice of buying and selling humans for profit is an age-old enterprise, yet it is alive and well today in the form of human trafficking—the world’s fastest growing criminal industry. Consider these statistics: UNICEF estimates that 1.2 million children worldwide are trafficked each year. The numbers are so difficult to track that annual estimates of global trafficking, including men, women, and children, vary from 700,000 to 4 million. And it’s not just in tawdry Asian brothels or European red-light districts: In 1997 the CIA estimated that 50,000 persons were trafficked to the United States annually.

Though the numbers are disputed, one fact is accepted across the board: Trafficking ranks third-largest in sources of profits for organized crime, placing the multi-billion-dollar industry behind only drugs and guns. While the sex trade gets considerably more media attention than other forms of trafficking, reports of forced labor trafficking show the problem is much broader.

Countries facing economic strain, high unemployment, a lack of women’s rights, and corrupt governments show higher numbers of trafficked persons. Trafficking is predominant throughout East Asia and the Pacific, for instance, and spiked in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. But the problem can be found in nearly every country around the globe, including the United States.

In the wake of this sharp increase in trafficking, leaders around the world are taking notice—and action. Policy-makers, governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), women’s groups, and activists all have honed in on this problem. Indeed, trafficking has

become a unifying issue among feminists and religious fundamentalists, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans.

“There’s a special evil in the abuse and exploitation of the most innocent and vulnerable,” President Bush said in a September 2003 address to the United Nations. “The victims of sex trade see little of life before they see the very worst of life: an underground of brutality and lonely fear.”

Not Just “Over There”

The United States has become a primary “destination” country—one that attracts traffickers and their victims—in part because of its promise of prosperity. With recent improvements in tracking techniques and data collection, the U.S. government suspects there are between 10,000 and 20,000 victims of trafficking annually within U.S. borders alone—more than 750,000 victims in the last 15 years.

“Source” countries, such as Thailand, India, Cambodia, and Russia, keep the circles running—but the clients keep them in business.

U.S. commitment to thwarting sex traffic around the world began in earnest when President Clinton signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), unanimously passed by Congress in 2000. The law, which prohibits sex trafficking of children or others by force, coercion, fraud, and deception, has a three-part integrated framework:

1. Prevention of trafficking through education, public awareness, and economic alternatives
2. Protection for the victims
3. Prosecution of the traffickers

(The final umbrella legislation, the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, includes the Violence Against Women Act with a \$3.4 billion authorization to be used over five years.)

The Semantics of Enforcement

The U.S. legislation set the international standard for eliminating human trafficking by defining the trade itself and threatening to withhold critical funding to countries



Myrna Balk, faculty adviser at Simmons College School of Social Work, worked in Nepal with young survivors of the sex trade, who asked her to share their artwork and stories to convey the gravity of their situation.

Said the teenager who drew this bird: “I was told I had to marry a man older than my father. I did not like that and left the village with a lady who promised me a job doing domestic work. This job was so bad I ran away when the woman of the house died. The lady who took me to the city found me and offered me a better job. I was sent to a brothel in India. While I was working in the brothel and crying, a customer took pity on me and gave me money to return to Kathmandu.”

Central Asia's
intricate sex trafficking routes span 24 nations



Source: © The Protection Project, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies; created by Neha Mathur

whose governments did not at least attempt to rectify the problem within their own borders. The U.S. State Department now tracks more than 100 countries for its annual *Trafficking in Persons* report, which ranks countries on a three-tiered system of compliance.

Despite global pressure, the sex trafficking industry continues to thrive, thanks in part to entrenched networks and a tendency among local authorities to target trafficked children and women as criminals rather than victims. Many authorities can't distinguish a trafficking case from a prostitution case on sight, says Melanie Orhant, an Equal Justice Works fellow at Ayuda, a legal and social service agency.

"They know something is going on, but they don't know what it is because they don't know what questions to ask," Orhant explains. "Even if they know what it is, they don't know who to go to for help in handling it."

And even though the United States wrote the precedent-setting legislation on trafficking, enforcement on U.S. soil is far from solid.

"I have not heard of an internal trafficking case here in the United States that was actually tried as a trafficking case," Orhant says. "There was a case in the Midwest involving a few girls who had been trafficked and forced into prostitution ... but it was tried

under a prostitution law and not as a trafficking case."

Regardless of nationality, any man, woman, or child forced into sexual slavery is considered a victim of trafficking. "The law does not distinguish between Americans and foreign nationals," says Derek Ellerman, co-founder of the nonprofit Polaris Project. "It's all trafficking under the law."

From China to Chinatown

Like Liena, most victims of human trafficking are lured into a ring through acquaintances, employers, or even relatives—anyone willing to sell someone into bondage to improve their own economic opportunities. In many cases, "the actual recruitment procedure is not abduction, it's by trust," said Radhika Coomaraswamy, the U.N.'s special representative of the secretary general on violence against women.

Victims can be sold into a ring for as little as a few hundred dollars, yet traffickers often charge their victims \$10,000 to \$15,000 or more for travel and other expenses. Rings themselves can be small groups of two or three people or larger, expansive circles organized domestically and internationally, such as the Russian and Albanian mafias and Chinese triads, according to the U.S. State Department. These groups often rely on their counterparts in ethnic neighborhoods overseas to complete

the circle. Traffickers use promises of education, false employment advertisements, fraudulent documents, and evasive immigration techniques to maneuver their victims across borders. “We cannot tell the difference between a girl coming here to buy eggs and a girl coming to work as a prostitute,” a border-town police chief in Thailand told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The cycle doesn’t end with a border crossing. Once victims are in the United States, for instance, they may be circulated from state to state. Unlike drug trafficking, which generally requires single transactions, people can be bought and sold multiple times. Traffickers often threaten their victims with drugs, beatings, and arbitrary “debts” to keep them bonded to the sex trafficking rings, making it particularly difficult for authorities to help these victims.

Breaking the Cycle

With stronger laws and worldwide awareness, the human trafficking industry is under the harshest scrutiny to date. Nevertheless, the January/February 2003 issue of *Foreign Policy*

listed the illegal trade in persons as one of the top five wars we, as a global society, are losing.

The tangible effects of human trafficking, and sex trafficking in particular, are impossible to ignore. Children ensnared in trafficking circles suffer lifelong losses—from education to health to their very lives.

“Sex trafficking is an almost inevitable death sentence for victims for several reasons,” Holly Burkhalter of Physicians for Human Rights testified to Congress.

Children have no ability to insist on the use of condoms, they are forced to have sex with multiple partners daily, and the often-violent sexual encounters expose girls’ physically immature bodies to a greater number of infections and diseases, Burkhalter said. At the height of Thailand’s AIDS epidemic, more than 80 percent of HIV/AIDS cases could be attributed to women in the sex industry and their clients.

“It seems highly likely that coercing or forcing millions of cases of girls and women into violent, unprotected sex acts with multiple

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Trafficking,

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partners is a significant factor in the spread of the AIDS pandemic,” Burkhalter said. “[These] men seek ever-younger partners or virgins to avoid becoming infected themselves or in the mistaken belief that having sex with a virgin will cure a person of AIDS.”

Education is not an option for trafficked children, whose captors hide them from ordinary, functioning societies. “No trafficker would take the chance that a child would go talk to other people about their situation,” Ayuda’s Orhant says of trafficking victims. Traffickers use the pretext of education to attract victims. But, says Orhant, “Education is just a front: It’s a way of tricking parents into thinking their kids are going to have a better life.”

Many source countries already have low school enrollment. One of the most egregious offenders is Cambodia, with a school attendance rate of only 65 percent. There, the U.S.-based

International Justice Mission documented brothel owners offering kindergarten-aged Vietnamese girls to undercover agents posing as sex tourists. Only after intense diplomatic pressure did the government shut down the Sway Pak neighborhood, known for its sexually deviant visitors.

Boys aren’t immune to trafficking, either: In September 2003 in Nigeria, where school enrollment is only about 56 percent, more than 200 boys aged 4 to 13 were discovered working as slaves in granite mines in exchange for peanuts—literally. An investigation revealed that the children had been smuggled in sacks from their native Benin into Nigeria; at least six of their traffickers were arrested, and authorities were seeking to prosecute the children’s parents as well.

About 60 percent of trafficked Albanian people are children, according to Save the Children and the International Organization of Migration. Albania, whose school attendance level is about 90 percent, is a source country that traffics victims into Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and Britain, and it has sent nearly 50,000 victims

into Italian brothels within the past two years alone.

But there is hope. Israel, for example, is working to improve victim services to address concerns that victims, particularly of the sex industry, were being treated as criminals and forced out of the country without protection or security. In Mexico, where dozens of organizations have banded together to end child abuse, taxi drivers display stickers that warn: “Don’t mess with our children.” And in Thailand, at least 18 hotels, including the Shangri-La, Westin, Hyatt, and Marriott, are helping to train girls from impoverished communities for careers in the hotel industry.

The U.S. trafficking act took a big step in the right direction, but enforcement must be a priority among all governments—including here at home—if human trafficking is ever to end. With that in mind, groups like the International Organization for Adolescents are working to train local law enforcement officials to identify and handle trafficking situations—another key to ending this vicious cycle. Without help, vulnerable children and their desperate parents will continue to fuel the cycle, says IOFA Co-director Alison Boak.

“In my work, I have seen that these children are waiting for someone to tell them how much they love them, and when traffickers do that, they have the kids right where they want them,” Boak says. “These are children who just want to be loved and cared for, and if this is the only way they can get that love, they’ll take it.”

Continued attention in the press also may accelerate efforts at prevention. Trafficking has become a “media darling” in recent months, says Denise Brennan, an AAUW Educational Foundation American Fellow who is studying trafficking in the United States. “There is so much interest and lurid fascination with this issue,” she says. “Some of it is out of genuine compassion, but some of it is pure voyeuristic impulse to see what’s happening to these children at the hands of the world’s worst pirates.”

For Liena, a promise of hope became a child’s worst nightmare. For millions of children around the world, that nightmare is a daily reality.

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“The parents are depressed because a broker took their child away from them,” the artist explained. “It shows a place where girls are taken and given cruel treatment.” In 1996, the teenager was brought back to Nepal from India, where she was a held captive in a brothel. She immediately returned home, but was ostracized by her village. She then went to ABC Nepal, an NGO that shelters former sex slaves, which is working to convince her village to take her back.