



Human Trafficking Adopts Technology for Victimization

by Sheila Hopkins, Service Commission Team

Secluded in a luxury waterfront home during the day, the women were driven to a local strip club six nights a week where they were forced to work dancing and prostituting themselves. If they did not earn a predetermined amount of money, they came back to the residence to face beatings and sexual assault by their perpetrators. Using computers, the pimps recruited young women from abusive or unhappy backgrounds with the promise of a better life. Instead, they were held by the pimps who confiscated their clothes, credit cards, identification, and money. A break in the case by a detective newly trained to identify victims of trafficking led to the rescue of these women and ongoing prosecution by a state attorney.

Despite passage of the Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) by Congress and efforts in many states to initiate laws to aid victims of trafficking, technology enables our global society to communicate 24/7 for good or for evil. A form of modern day slavery, human trafficking is the exploitation of people for commercial sex or forced labor through fraud, force, or coercion. The U. S. State Department estimates over 800,000 people annually are victims, about 18,000 brought into the United States annually, approximately a third of them children under the age of 17.

An increasingly globalized economy brings into focus the primary causes of trafficking: poverty, greed and sex. Poverty in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and parts of Europe make them fertile grounds for recruiting. Young men and women are shown computer pictures of beautiful hotels on the beach where they are promised summer employment through an employee leasing company, earning money to pay for their college education. Once they arrive in the U. S., they are crowded into a residence with fees for housing, transportation, uniforms, etc. deducted from their pay. The cost to change their return ticket home is prohibitive, especially when the deductions often cause their pay to fall below the federal minimum wage. These unregulated companies use force and psychological coercion to control the employees, threatening them with eviction or deportation.

Domestic sex trafficking of U. S. citizen minors is the most recent cause for concern among law enforcement as runaways and problem children are recruited on the streets, in malls, and also online through MySpace and Facebook. Out on the streets, these youth are looking for food and a place to stay so recruitment into prostitution is becoming commonplace. Since minors cannot consent to sex, they cannot legally be arrested as prostitutes. More funding for housing and support services and further education of law enforcement and the judicial system are critical to bring attention to the plight of these children who are victims, not criminals.

The newest spin on sex trafficking is the use of cell phones to promote prostitution. This is becoming a more effective means to evade detection by law enforcement. Advertising on websites such as Craigslist or Backpage.com replaced street corners and ads in local community newspapers as the previous vehicles to promote prostitution. Pimps distribute cards with a cell phone number to call for "services," sometimes showing a depiction of a nude woman, and a deal is made to deliver women to a specific location, many times a hotel, for a client or several clients.

John Paul II, in the *Gospel of Life* (n.3), reiterates the grave offenses against the dignity of the human person, particularly those most vulnerable due to conditions such as poverty, that were addressed by the Second Vatican Council in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

Whatever is opposed to life itself...whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons, all these things and others like them are infamies indeed. They poison human society, and they do more harm to those who practice than to those who suffer from the injury. Moreover, they are a supreme dishonor to the Creator (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.27).

To learn more about human trafficking and how you can help victims, go to the website of the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking or call 1-888-373-7888. ■

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