

Trafficking in Persons

By Dr. Nancy A. Murphy, LMHC

On a recent international flight, I sat next to a handsome young man from Vietnam. He reminded me of my sons. He was in his early twenties, dressed in shorts, a tee-shirt, baseball cap and sunglasses. He was engaging and polite. We exchanged our destinations and made small talk about our homelands. He told me he was in the transportation business, and when I pressed him, he explained. I was thinking trucks, airplanes and trains, but it was not so easy. He said that, as a part of a family business, he contracted with companies outside of the country in order to locate Vietnamese employees who would work long hours at good rates. In his words, he “provided transportation to their new destination and made sure they remained good employees.”

I inquired about the various recruiting methods he used, the ways he obtained visas and housing, and about the working conditions. He told me he had no problem recruiting labor. With the average annual income at \$500 per year in rural Vietnam, it was easy to lure people to employment with promises of making at least three or four times that amount. Housing and working conditions, he claimed, were not his concern but that of the employer. He complained that their biggest problem was getting the laborers to stay at the companies where he had made the arrangements. He said they often tried to leave and go to the factory up the street that was promising more. He sometimes took measures into his own hands to make sure that the laborers would keep their promises to him. He felt that making threats was effective for employee retention.

As our plane touched down in HoChiMinh City, he asked me what I did. When I told him that I studied global issues of domestic violence and human trafficking, he became strangely silent. After a moment, he brought out his wallet and showed me a picture of his wife and daughter. His wife was in the States traveling as an entertainer for six months, and his young daughter was with his parents in Hanoi. He told me that he was doing this work for his family and that he wanted to have more children and the kind of family that we have in America, “the kind that lives in a big home, with nice cars and expensive educations.”

As we disembarked, I attempted to gain some contact information from him, but he knew better than that. Instead he headed off quickly in order not to be followed and I was left with the knowledge and certainty that I had been in the presence of a young, ambitious, family-oriented trafficker of his own people.

Trafficking in persons is ongoing exploitation that occurs within and across borders. By definition, travel is not always involved, although it often is. In general, victims have either never consented to their conditions, or their initial consent is rendered meaningless by the victim’s age or by coercive, deceptive, or abusive actions on the part of the traffickers.¹

Although most countries have passed laws against trafficking and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights condemned it in unequivocal terms in 1949, human trafficking continues in diverse

forms. This practice is now the third largest type of illegal trade in the world, after drugs and weapons.ⁱⁱ In 2005, the International Labor Organization estimated that over 12 million people around the world have been forced to work against their will under threat of punishment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most, but not all, are used for sex. Forty-six percent of people trafficked into the U.S. are pressed into some form of prostitution. Domestic service accounts for another 27 percent; agriculture, 10 percent; sweatshop or factory labor, 5 percent; and hotel and restaurant work, 4 percent.^{iv} But trafficking takes many forms. Human egg harvesting is a growing form of exploitation in the US, and can be considered trafficking under the UN Trafficking Protocol. Young women are being recruited on college campuses and offered \$25,000 and more to donate eggs for IVF treatments, depending on the criteria. The taller, blonder, leggier, more athletic, smarter, etc., get more money.^v

Many are forced to leave their home countries because their own countries don't care for them. Their poverty, or lack of access, is usually the result of lack of education, social marginalization (certain groups will never be allowed close to power and money), gender (women in certain places cannot work), and various forms of discrimination. The countries are often glad to see them leave: the departure of the weak, the marginalized, in short, the "undesirables," means that fewer jobs will have to be created at home. And the governments benefit greatly from the money many of the labor migrants send home. In some countries, remittances from overseas workers comprise a large (if not the largest) source of GDP in the country and are more than the total amount of foreign aid from other countries; furthermore, there is no debt-repayment for the country either. Trafficked persons are not always among the poorest of the poor. Many of the women trafficked for sex, for example, are savvy and educated, ideal for crossing borders and relating to Western clients.

Everywhere, human trafficking is growing. Tragically, because of greed and profitability, vulnerable human beings are held with the threat of violence. Story after story pours into my inbox every day of trafficked women, men, and children, from Hungary, Bulgaria, Moldova, Texas, Washington, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Congo, Sudan, Mexico, Australia, Japan, Brazil, India, Burma, Nepal, and Nigeria and right in our own back yard in cities across the United States. Each is a story of brutality, physical and psychological manipulation, and cruelty. Rape, beatings, torture, starvation, physical exhaustion, isolation, control, and deception are all tools used to force and coerce. The reactions of the victims to this trauma are predictable: fear and shock; disorientation and confusion; despair and withdrawal, passivity and avoidance, ideas of shame and guilt; feeling of unworthiness; feelings of uselessness and helplessness; suspicion and distrust; suicide and murder. Families are torn apart, mechanisms that should be in place for protection are eroded, and community, hope and dignity are destroyed.

What are we as a faith community called to do?

Each one of us needs to ask ourselves, what does it mean that we are part of a country that seems to have such a demand for exploited labor? What is it about our lifestyles, our choices, our actions, and our beliefs that have made the U.S. a participant in this exploitation?

The awareness of trafficking is conveniently distanced from where most of us live. In the U.S., sex trafficking takes place in hidden brothels, many of them private homes in affluent neighborhoods, or in the strip clubs and massage parlors that are part of the "seedy side of town," where "nice people" don't

go. Domestic service also takes place inside homes where only the invited can enter. These individuals are “hidden in plain sight.” What are we willing to risk in order to see, to hear, and to act?

Whatever our faith tradition, we are called to confront oppression and the exploitation of vulnerable persons. We are called to protect the most vulnerable, particularly the sojourner or stranger, read “immigrants” among us. We are called to speak truth to power, i.e., to confront institutions (governments, corporations, etc.) which knowingly participate in trafficking. Just because trafficking is illegal and immoral doesn’t stop it—human trafficking thrives on secrecy and public apathy and ignorance. We are called to make justice and seek healing in the midst of this profound distortion of human relationships.

Take Action

- *Educate* yourself and others. <http://www.state.gov/g/tip/>
- *Partner* with those who are working to end trafficking and exploitation.
- *Pay attention to your own context*, for example:
 - Who is bussing the tables at your favorite Chinese restaurant?
 - How are your pension and investment funds being invested to ensure money in companies is not profiting from human trafficking?
 - What is the legal sex industry in your community? If there are legal businesses, there is also potential for abuse, because traffickers hide their victims in legal businesses with false papers, and benefit from secrecy and shame, knowing that the ones who frequent those establishments will not cause them any trouble.
 - What services are available for runaway teens on the streets of your city and how can you support them?
- *Identify advocacy groups and contribute* financially to the work of freeing victims of human trafficking.
- *Engage* politicians in these issues.

Let us contribute to bringing hope, love and justice to those victimized by this scourge of trafficking in our own communities. This is our witness as people of faith.

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ⁱ Trafficking in Persons Report: June 2005

ⁱⁱ U.S. State Department

ⁱⁱⁱ Ending Slavery: An Unfinished Business, 2006 Church Mission Society and Citizenship Foundation.

^{iv} Human Rights Center at the University of California at Berkley

^v Author’s files: correspondence with Michele Clark, international trafficking expert.