

Our Culture Allows Human Trafficking to Thrive

Human trafficking has been making its way into the spotlight of mainstream media and social networks with events like the recent International Women's Day and Shine a Light on Slavery Day, and of course with the controversies surrounding the Super Bowl about whether it is or is not one of the largest venues for human trafficking. In the midst of all of these national events and newspaper articles and social media campaigns, I can't help but wonder what it will really take to end human trafficking, if that is even at all possible.

I think that many of our current efforts are important to fighting human trafficking. We need victim services, law enforcement training, and education and awareness campaigns. We need continued partnership among organizations, collaboration with foreign governments, and support for current anti-trafficking policies. But in order to truly begin to combat human trafficking in America, I think we need to get to one key root of the problem—our society.

A few years ago, Amazon was selling a book on ages of consent around the world as a guide for those interested in sex tourism. Amazon has also been criticized for selling books on the practice of pimping and, more recently, fiction books containing glorified sex slavery. An anti-human trafficking organization was able to get the age of consent book taken down, and others protested the fiction book, which led to its removal; but what concerns me is that the market for books like this exists enough for someone to blatantly put them on Amazon. In a culture where sex really does sell—products and itself—the values of relationships, dignity, and, yes, even sex have been tremendously diminished.

We, as Americans, have made it easy for human trafficking to thrive in our culture. We demand cheap goods and quick products. We often forego relationship commitments, and we've made sex a commodity. Something deeper has to change in our society in order for human trafficking to change.

In our culture, money is king, so we spend most of our days working nine-hour jobs and using our free time to work on *other* work. Because we've placed so much value and dignity on money, we often forget the worth that human beings hold on their own. I interned in Washington, and to some people, my entire worth was based on which office I was working for and what I was majoring in at college. We spend a lot of time talking about our jobs, our work, our academics, our accomplishments. Human trafficking continues to thrive because we value business over relationships, money over human dignity.

I have, unfortunately, had a handful of people ask me why I would want to spend my career working with an issue like human trafficking, which is a huge problem, for such a small return. My answer is always that someone has to, and even if I can only help one person, that will make it worthwhile. Fighting human trafficking will never be profitable, at least not in economic terms. If anything, stopping trafficking could potentially damage economies because of the amount of revenue it brings in through the black market. This industry is not scientific or mathematical. The "facts" are usually estimates and the statistics are hard, if not impossible, to find. The return from working to free these victims and give them better lives is not tangible, but for me, and others that share this passion, it is worth a lifetime.

What will it take to really make an impact on the human trafficking industry? It will take businesspeople and politicians committing to ensure that workers are paid living wages and have their rights protected. It will take collaboration and transparency between businesses and corporations to confirm that even the companies supplying the raw materials are not participating in forced labor. It will take both men

and women changing the idea that sex is just another industry instead of an important piece in relationships. It will take an effort to target the job market, the family system, and even immigration laws to prevent human trafficking on a long-term scale.

It will take a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of long-term commitment, and a lot of perseverance. For a product on the market, it might not be worth it. But humans are not products. They are worth our time and effort and energy because they have life. And to me, that's worth a lot more than a good business deal.

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