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Humans for Sale: A Cycle of Extortion, Abuse, and Profiteering

Lan sits in a filthy van crammed with twelve other young Vietnamese girls from her rural hometown. Amid the darkness of night and body heat, she hangs on to the promise of decent shelter and well-paid labor while dreaming of a better life in a foreign land. She does not have the slightest clue, however, that she is trapped in a highly organized web of a human-trafficking attempt and in a couple of hours, her “new” life would be filled with torture, rape, and exploitation.

It is hard for one to grasp the idea that slavery still exists in the twenty-first century, but modern day slavery, or human trafficking, is more prevalent than it has ever been, and Lan is just one of thousands of victims of this horrendous crime against humanity. A frighteningly fast-growing industry, human trafficking forces us to question its nature and the people involved, as well as how it has become so prevalent in today’s society and what we can do to combat it as a globalized world.

Contrary to popular belief, human trafficking is a very prevalent international crime. Commonly referred to as “modern-day slavery,” human trafficking is defined by international law as the act of “when a person is induced by force, fraud, or coercion” to engage in labor, sexual acts, or other involuntary services for the gain of payments or other benefits¹. It is performed for many purposes, including sex trade and “labor situations such as... domestic servitude [and] labor in a prison-like factory” (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.). According to the International Labor Organization, it is estimated that roughly twenty-one

¹ Other benefits may include sexual services, domestic servitude, bonded sweatshop labor, or other debt bondage (State of California Department of Justice, n.d.).

million people are victims of this horrendous crime worldwide with hundreds of thousands in the United States despite the fact the slavery is officially illegal everywhere.

It is not surprising then that in the twenty-first century, human trafficking has alarmingly become a highly-organized and thriving business by robbing and violating the most fundamental rights of human beings. Victims of human trafficking are frequently forced to live and work in poor and unsafe conditions and often suffer physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological abuse (Ngwe & Elechi 2012). Perhaps the horror of this crime is best understood when we realize that we live in a “modern” era in which a human being is so easily stripped of their freedom and “can be bought for as little as \$40, used up, and then discarded like a Styrofoam cup” for the profits of criminal individuals and enterprises (Kara 2009). Human trafficking is thus morally disturbing and is distinct from other equally horrifying crimes because of this very reason: it turns humans into mere consumable objects with no voice or emotion that can be exchanged or disposed of when necessary.

As an international crime, human trafficking thus leaves its mark and scars on citizens of nations around the globe. In one heartbreaking instance, seven-year-old Tola from Thailand was lured from her family and enslaved by a couple who owned the field on which her family worked. For five years, the couple held Tola locked and enslaved while forcing her to perform domestic labor. If she failed to do perform the given tasks properly, “she was kicked, slapped, and beaten with a broom. Sometimes the couple locked her in a cage and poured boiling hot water over her. On one occasion, the traffickers cut off her ear lobe with a pair of scissors” (Trafficking in Persons Report 2013). In another case, a man named Chewazi from Zimbabwe left his home country to seek a better job promised to him by traffickers in South Africa only to

be forced into harsh farming labor with no wage² where physical and mental abuse is a daily reality. Most recently, sex-trafficking survivor Nicole Campbell from Illinois, United States was found with a tattoo of a horseshoe and the word “PRODUCTION” across her neck. The tattoo, needless to say, is a revolting attempt of the traffickers and the “owners” to loudly and clearly announce to the world that Nicole is nothing but one of their “branded” slaves and products.

In the attempt to understand why such horrifying act can exist in today’s society, the study of the parties involved: the victims, the traffickers, and the consumers, is extremely necessary. The victims of this crime are diverse and thus there is “no single profile for trafficking victims; trafficking occurs to adults and minors in rural, suburban, or urban communities across the country... Victims of human trafficking have diverse socio-economic backgrounds, varied levels of education, and may be documented or undocumented” (National Human Trafficking Resource Center, n.d.). However, they also share certain traits, such as “poverty, young age, limited education, lack of work opportunities, lack of family support, ... history of previous sexual abuse, ... and living in vulnerable areas³” (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace 2009). Individuals with these commonalities are often targets of criminal trafficking rings since they have insufficient societal or governmental protection and support. In addition, the victims are usually from poor countries or local areas where human trafficking is a major source of income.

Girls and young women are specifically target for sex trafficking, which is defined by U.S Code § 7102 as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” These victims are often sold by their poverty-stricken and often rural families or leave home on their own to travel with traffickers. In many

² In return of his labor, Chewazi only received a piece of bread and some water (Trafficking of Persons Report 2013).

³ These areas can be classified as rural, poor, or “developing” regions with low living standard, high crime rate, or high illiteracy rate.

instances, they are lured by traffickers at bus stops, gas stations, and even at their own hometowns with promises of better job, education, and sometimes even love and marriage at a big city or in a different country. Once fallen into the trafficking rings, these girls and women are “made properly compliant by beatings, rape, and [forced] drug [use]” before they are sold to buyers or brothels where they have to service “a dozen or more clients per day, with the price varying with local wealth and demand” (Kara 2009).

While many often assume that the sex trafficking or slaving of women and young girls only happen in brothels of some far-away and foreign lands, which can certainly be true in some cases, this horrifying crime in reality also exists in areas much closer to home. In December 2006, a police raid in Clayton County in Georgia, U.S revealed a series of massage parlors as fronts for prostitution and human trafficking. Thirty-five women in thirteen of these spas were found to be illegal residents who have been forced to perform sexual services against their will. According to the Clayton County police department, one particular woman actually “escaped at one point and was caught and brought back ... she was assaulted ... she even had an STD and was still forced to perform various sex acts.” All spas in Clayton County had to close afterwards as a result of the incident. However, disturbingly and for unclear reasons, most were allowed to open again in March of 2007.

Another similar case of human trafficking in Georgia took place in Macon city. According to The Washington Times in 2012, the area is only a hundred miles away from Atlanta – “one of the biggest hubs of sex trafficking in the [U.S.]”⁴. The news source also states that on the highway alone, Macon police discovered that fifteen Asian massage parlors were offering sexual services by exploiting human trafficking victims. Cases like these surely play a

⁴ Other major human trafficking hubs in the U.S include Houston, Texas as well as the state of California and New York.

major role in revealing the hushed reality of human trafficking in the United States and specifically in the state of Georgia.

Playing a key role in smuggling rings and rarely acting alone, the traffickers are another party of human trafficking that are usually involved with webs of organized crime enterprises. Traffickers usually act as different “links” in these organizations; they perform various and often specific jobs in certain domains, such as recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and receipt of persons in order for the trafficking as well as buying and selling of humans happen quickly and smoothly (The NO Project 2010). These organized groups conduct most of the local and international human trafficking attempts for the massive profit of estimated \$32 billion a year (CNN 2011). Moreover, these groups are often participating in the trafficking of drugs and weapons across national borders. Therefore, due to the risky and professional nature of their criminal acts, human trafficking groups frequently use violent and brutal means to ensure the success of their activities (Soroptimist International of the Americas n.d.). Traffickers also tend to have extensive connection and influence locally and nationally through means of bribery and promise of great profit, resulting in even local government and police force being involved in human trafficking webs in some cases.

On the other end of the human trafficking web are the consumers. Just like the victims, consumers come from a wide range of backgrounds and ethnicities with most coming from wealthy and developed regions. Even though there is no single description of a “typical buyer,” many of the consumers are men from Western nations; so much that human trafficking has been called “a problem of demand from oblivious males, and as a problem of social structure and the status of women” (Kara 2009). These men, single or married, willingly participate in illegal sex trades of trafficked and coerced women, girls, and boys in form of prostitution or even sex

tourism – “the practice of traveling or vacationing for the purpose of having sex” (Soroptimist International of the Americas n.d.).

Another increasingly popular type of trafficking buyers includes desperate patients or families of patients in need of organ transplants. According the World Health Organization or WHO in 2004, there are currently 120,000 patients on dialysis treatment and about 40,000 people waiting for a kidney in Europe alone with a current transplantation waiting list of approximately three years and climbing. Trafficking of human organs, often referred to as the buying and selling of organs in the “black market”⁵, provides this type of purchaser a way to save their own lives and their loved ones’ by avoiding the complicated and lengthy legal procedures and the dreadfully long transplant waiting time. Even though organ buyers are often aware of the illegal nature of the selling and buying and some even know of the horrendous acts committed on trafficked victims in the process of obtaining their organs, they often choose to ignore these facts as they believe reaching out to human traffickers is the only mean to carry out their transplantation.

With many parties involved and a complex operation network, human trafficking still exists and is even prospering in today’s society despite the numerous acts and instruments that outlaw and attempt to stop it. As previously mentioned, it is argued that some reasons for the thriving of this industry are the “inability or unwillingness of countries to enforce existing law” due to the corruption of government systems or the lack of resources, and the “demand” for sexual trade, cheap labor, and human organs from “buyers” (Lagon 2014). In some cases, the “ease and ability to re-exploit individuals” also helps human trafficking experience “a dramatic resurgence in recent years” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2014). In addition,

⁵ According to Glaser of Washington College of Law in *Formula to Stop the Illegal Organ Trade: Presumed Consent Laws and Mandatory Reporting Requirements for Doctors*, the organ “black market” is where illegally obtained organs and tissues are sold and bought.

there are many barriers and challenges in accessing and providing services for human trafficking victims, such as “an overall lack of knowledge about human trafficking and lack of public awareness of the issue, and differing definitions and perceptions regarding who is a victim; ... [in addition], trafficking victims are [also] reluctant to identify themselves as victims” (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace 2009). These barriers especially create a disconnection between the trafficked victims and officials as well as the general public, resulting in victims being isolated and thus becoming even harder to identify and communicate with.

Another major reason for the thriving of the trafficking industry is its massive and easy profit. Functioning like a business, human trafficking has “a large demand, easily available supply, low costs, and low risks in many parts of the world.” The people involved are thus “rational actors” trying to maximize their outcomes and are “willing to destroy life for profit” (Kara 2009). The mapped-out business model of supply and demand works especially well in favor of the traffickers, as the criminal “investment” costs next to nothing but yields huge returns each year. This “business” is thus very attractive to competent and well-organized criminal groups and will remain so for a rather long time with the inefficient methods currently employed to combat it.

In addition to the most common reasons mentioned, human trafficking can also thrive due to various causes specific to each region or area where the issue exists. For instance, the mining of gold in Peru’s jungles greatly contributes to the human trafficking of women and girls in this country. Lured by the promise of good and legitimate labor in the gold extraction business, the victims often abandon their homes in towns near the gold mines and fall into the trap of traffickers. Instead of receiving of a decent job, most young girls in this case are instead being exploited in brothels, nightclubs, or bars (Trafficking in Persons Report 2013).

It is clear that the national and global impacts of this horrendous yet prevailing crime are frightening. Many nations such as the United States have unwillingly become both the source and destination for thousands of human trafficking victims and thus face serious national and international security, immigration, and civil problems. By forcefully depriving individuals of their liberty and self-worth, human trafficking further poses as a major threat to the global effort of promoting equality and human rights.

Needless to say, we need a more global solution to tackle the issue of human trafficking. Local and regional efforts, such as the United States' Trafficking Victims Protection Act, are plenty but as mentioned, not as effective on an international scale as they fail to address the issue through a global perspective, which involves the connection between multiples cultures and peoples. A global effort would include, but is not limited to, raising awareness and educating the public, helping the public to report suspected cases, partnering with international law enforcement agencies and dedicating offices specialized in issues pertaining to human trafficking (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.). A global effort also requires nations to realize that, again, human trafficking is a business in its simplest form and needs to be addressed as such. It is necessary that the crime be analyzed as a business system, "showing where the profit is and where the costs are dependent upon the trafficker expending funds to counter risks of financial loss or imprisonment" (Kara 2009). In other words, in order to make human trafficking less profitable, one needs to drive up the risks and thus costs in the right areas.

Recent notable works in combating human trafficking include the United Nations partnerships with international experts (UN News Centre 2013) and other non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) or international organizations' (IOs) global outreach and efforts, such as

those of World Vision⁶, Kick for Life⁷, and Red Cross⁸. One of the main functions of the NGOs and IOs that are involved in the combat of human trafficking is to quickly and effectively identify the victims in various regions worldwide. These organizations also work to recognize potential trafficking victims or those with the highest risk of being trafficked⁹ and if necessary, participate in the rescue of victims and provide crucial recovery and educational programs to aid the victims in their physical, mental and emotional healing as well as their adjustment to a healthy and normal life.

Another recent, important advancement in the fight with human trafficking is the awarding of the 2014 Noble peace prize to Indian advocate and activist Kailash Satyarthi. A joint-winner of the highly respectable award, Satyarthi has spent his life fighting for human trafficking victims, especially trafficked children in India, and has endured threats and even physical violence as the result of his work. His awarding is thus important to significantly raise awareness of the general public on this issue by recognizing the efforts and outcomes of his selfless services for his home country and the world.

The terrible practice of human trafficking is perpetuated by traffickers who are willing to exploit other vulnerable people both physically and emotionally for the sake of profit. Any harm that they undergo is simply a necessary part of the job. Lax local governments and a dearth of public awareness facilitate human trafficking; a lack of protection and attention offers no security to those who can offer no defense of their own. Satyarthi refers to the persistent issue of human trafficking in an interview with The Guardian in 2010 as a “moral examination that one has to pass... to stand up against such social evils.” It is thus each and every individual’s

⁶ An Evangelical Christian humanitarian aid organization founded in 1950 and located in Monrovia, California.

⁷ A humanitarian organization and charity located in Lesotho, southern Africa.

⁸ An international organization specialized in community service and emergency assistance with many local branches around the world.

⁹ Traits or commonalities to identify potential victims are previously mentioned in the paper.

responsibility and moral obligation to take part in the fight against this evil act since without external aid, unfortunate people everywhere just like Lan will continue to be exchanged, consumed, and eventually disposed of without a second thought about any rights she possesses.

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