

# **Out of the Darkness and Into the Light**

**Initiation into and exploration of the human trafficking movement**

**Melissa K. Booth**

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\*Note: The nonprofit referenced within remains anonymous  
to protect staff and/or victims.

## Seeing the Chains

It was close to one in the morning when I saw it. I was living in Washington, DC at the time, working as a 2009 summer fellow at an anti-human trafficking organization. Staff members had taken us out on a midnight “ride-along,” during which we were shuttled through the city to witness the specter of the commercial sex industry. We drove by brothels, some active and some closed after FBI raids, massage parlor fronts, and the track—a stretch of three blocks comprising the financial district by day and the city’s rampant street prostitution by night. The police knew about all of these locations, we were certainly not privy to any special information, but typically they simply chose to ignore the little dilapidated buildings or the track jammed with cars to pursue more “pressing” crimes. After a few disturbing loops around the track, we drove a stretch of road heading north out of the city that is lined with motels offering hourly rates. It was on this quiet city street that I saw it.

Just as we passed one particularly dingy motel, three people were getting out of a long cream-colored Cadillac in the parking lot. One man was stepping out from the driver’s seat on the left, while a man and a woman were climbing out of the backseat on the right. Once they all exited, the man on the driver’s side walked authoritatively toward another man standing in the shadow of the motel sign, while the woman stretched her back and then leaned to check her face in the reflection of the car window. She methodically ran a finger down each side of her mouth and gently pushed back her hair, then smoothed her clothes. I was struck, but it was the man who had climbed out of the car behind her that caught my attention. He was buckling his belt, lifting at the metal to adjust his pants, artlessly shifting the contents around like a baggage handler loading cargo. I remember that all of their faces—the men getting out of the car, the woman peering quietly at her reflection, the two men serving as look-outs on the second story, the motel proprietor being handed some cash in the shadows—all of their faces were empty. Expressionless.

It is amazing what the mind can absorb in a matter of seconds, like a dry sponge dropped in a lake. As I registered what I was looking at in those brief moments, I also

began to interject the statistics I learned during my fellowship: the average age of entry into prostitution in the US is between 12 and 14, any person under the age of 18 engaged in commercial sex is recognized by law as a trafficking victim, pimp-controlled prostitution is almost always trafficking, and on and on. But I also began to comprehend the extraordinarily complex social structures that prop up this ubiquitous crime: the paved road snaking out from the city, the parked car, the newspaper that prints advertisements for this motel, the men depending on the few dollars for keeping watch, even us driving by—all these components served as mechanisms to support, maintain, overlook, or even shroud human trafficking. We called the police to report what we saw, but when they arrived the car was gone.

While this formative moment crystallized my desire to join the anti-trafficking movement, it was the nighttime streets of Bangkok that first exposed me to the reality of human trafficking. In January 2009, I was in Southeast Asia for two weeks as a participant in a course titled “Challenges to Peacebuilding in Cambodia.” We started our field research with a few days in Bangkok, and on our first night we walked the streets of the red-light district. The lights, sounds, and people that comprised the raucous spectacle of the Thai commercial sex industry made a previously distant and illusive concept suddenly become real and explicit. As we passed poorly lit doorways leading into musty clubs, I caught glimpses of women dancing on bar-tops, wearing bathing suits and carefully numbered tags. With a sensation I would experience again later when looking into the vacant faces dotting the parking lot in DC, I saw the young girls swaying without rhythm, without joy or humor, but with heavy steps and lowered eyes. In Thailand we met with organizations working specifically on the issue of human trafficking, and practitioners described how women are sold by their families, men are forced to labor on fishing boats, and children are stolen from the streets of their villages. I began to perceive the depth, the breadth, and the profound suffering involved in the worldwide trade in persons.

With these poignant scenes of Southeast Asia still fresh in my memory, I intended to continue my study of human trafficking. In the spring of 2009, I heard about

the summer fellowship program with a nonprofit working to combat domestic human trafficking, and was eager to seize the opportunity. After learning about modern-day slavery on the other side of the planet, it was astounding to confront the profound realities of the crime here in my own country. I worked with the organization for eleven weeks, and my original curiosity developed into full-fledged dedication to the movement.

The fellowship began with forty hours of training on domestic and international trafficking issues and briefings on the variety of ways individuals can engage with the movement: lobbying, direct client services, grassroots and public outreach, legal advocacy, policy, law enforcement training, grant writing, community education, and many more. That summer I felt a surge of motivation and vitality—the more I learned the more I wanted to know. The opportunity to work alongside passionate people striving toward a common cause exhibited for me the type of work I now know I cannot live without. The images I saw in the recesses of midnight streets in Thailand became a substantive force for action that left an indelible imprint on my life and aspirations. Most importantly, I realized the grave error in the perception that human trafficking is something happening in dark corners and faraway places, down an alley, or behind closed doors. Instead, it is something that could happen to me. It is in our communities, in the hotel room down the hall; it sets up shop four blocks from our nation’s capital.

### **Breaking Their Chains**

Human trafficking is the second largest criminal industry in the world, and the fastest growing. If the horror of human bondage is not enough to spur action, the sheer magnitude of the crime is. The International Labor Organization estimates 12.3 million adults and children to be victims of forced labor and sexual servitude at any time, and the global industry generates roughly \$32 billion annually. Every year, an estimated 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the US, and 250,000 American children are considered at high-risk for sex trafficking.

While the anti-human trafficking movement is relatively new (in the United States our first law directly addressing the crime was established in 2000), the strength of the burgeoning force is largely found in the remarkable fusion of otherwise strange bedfellows. Political conservatives, progressive campus organizations, far-right Christians, feminists, local community members, state and federal law enforcement, Democrats, and Republicans all coalesce to combat what they see as one of the most egregious criminal activities of our modern times. I believe the power of these coalitions is immutable, and in order to continue gaining recruits they must remain independent of any one party or belief system. Modern abolitionists should rigorously adhere to decriminalizing trafficking victims, criminalizing the traffickers, and doing anything to decrease demand. Once we truly understand the indiscriminate nature of the crime and the intolerable brutality of its victimization, we can agree that the issue is not about politics or religion or gender, but freeing *all* of humanity from the shackles of slavery.

In the past decade, a number of countries enacted anti-trafficking legislation, and over half the world's countries have enacted criminal legislation prohibiting all forms of trafficking in persons. But there is a wide chasm between the existence of laws and their enforcement. A critical step in achieving the goals these laws formalize is widespread training for law enforcement and service providers. For example, the United States has achieved commendable gains in its laws against human trafficking, but if a police officer arrives on the scene and only sees a prostitute, an illegal immigrant, or a runaway, without knowing the right questions to ask or the right signs to interpret, the laws are powerless to incite change. We need many more trafficking-specific services like shelters, transitional housing, mental health centers, job skills training facilities, and social advocacy groups to provide comprehensive services in healthy, stable, and compassionate environments. Individuals engaged in direct outreach must empathize, but not pity, and encourage, but not push.

Finally, while the magnitude of the crime can be daunting, we can disaggregate social issues of gender, power, structural violence, education, and socio-economics in order to look solely at the problem from a market-based approach. Labor and sex

trafficking compose an industry thriving on high profit and low risk. Studies often look at the survivors of trafficking, typically the women, to glean some truth about the industry. But without motivated sellers and scores of buyers, the industry would cease to be profitable and thereby cease to exist. Also, greater emphasis on slavery in supply chains is needed, requiring multi-national corporations to shift their attention from corporate social responsibility to corporate social accountability, reflecting their obligation to prevent slavery in their companies and their industries.

### **Breaking Our Chains**

One of the greatest hurdles societies face in attaining the abolition of modern-day slavery is similar to the reality of discrimination that continues to survive in the United States long after the practice of chattel slavery was abolished. A colossal myth of supremacy and privilege was constructed in order to justify the subjugation of blacks in our nation, and that myth has been much harder for us to disentangle from than the physical chains themselves. We have a number of cultural values and learned perceptions that cast a shadow on the path to freedom. In order for human trafficking, and especially sex trafficking, to reach a tipping point in our collective belief system, we must first confront the aversion people have to thinking about such heinous, back-door acts. Corporations seeking to champion a cause tend to avoid the “ugly” issues, and I certainly find that forced commercial sex and debt bondage are not popular dinnertime discussion topics. We must not be afraid to look into the face of our most pressing crimes, and see them for what they really are.

Aside from overcoming a general distaste for the subject, we face much more pernicious cultural barriers as well. Many of us have programmed, involuntary beliefs about the highly sexualized girl who asked for it, the glamorized pimp, the immigrant laborer who is grateful for the job, and the most devastating: boys being boys and girls being girls. We blind ourselves to the violence, the shame, the fear, the isolation, and the psychological victimization that blatantly exists behind our walls of fallacious perception. While human trafficking is indeed seeping into public awareness, appearing

in movies, classrooms, and newspaper headlines, we must continue to explore our own biases and challenge our social norms in order to see what our eyes are not trained to show us. The movement starts with each of us realizing individually that we cannot accept life in a world with slavery. I think of the man adjusting his belt in the darkened parking lot on a hot summer night and although I feel angry and tormented, I also feel determined to make a difference.