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The Empowerment of Women is a Prerequisite for  
Mitigating Human Trafficking

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on Anti-Human Trafficking

Dr. Peter Grothe

I arrived in the remarkable city of Freetown, Sierra Leone a week earlier than the other students who would be joining me for the “Challenges in Peacebuilding” course through the Monterey Institute of International Studies’ conflict resolution program. I started my trip early in hopes of having the important experience of volunteering at the Shelter for Trafficking Victims in Freetown operated by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Although I want to work in policymaking to prevent human trafficking, I needed more experience with victims of human trafficking to ensure my education on the issue is as well rounded as possible. I had not received a response to my e-mail inquiries and I was advised to simply show up in person, because communication in Africa is more effective face to face. Even with the understanding of this cultural difference, I still felt it would be intrusive to arrive at the IOM unannounced.

I talked with many welcoming people on my first day in Freetown and I was shocked to find out that I could not even call the IOM to make an appointment because cell phones do not have the capability to call landlines in Sierra Leone. I was worried. As a result of my support for the work the IOM does to battle human trafficking, I aspired to work at the IOM, I needed to make a good impression. I went to Freetown knowing that it might not be possible to volunteer but I was confident that I would find exciting, alternate ways to spend my time if necessary.

Most of the buildings in Freetown were not even visible behind massive concrete walls and barbed wire, and the IOM was no exception. When I arrived by taxi at the door of the steel gated and heavily protected IOM office, a friendly security team greeted me and called for the office manager. The manager was dressed in stunning traditional African men’s clothing. We sat outside briefly and I described to him who I was, where I was from and what I was interested in. He explained to me that the shelter for trafficking victims had been closed down two months prior. The shelter had shared the compound with a center for youth in trouble with the law, and the proximity of the center posed major challenges to the sense of security of the trafficking victims. I was disappointed to hear that there was no operating shelter where I could volunteer; however, I was more concerned with the well being of the victims who had been at the shelter. There were

attempts to place them with families while the IOM worked with the government to try to find a new location for the shelter.

The staff at the IOM were quick to offer me the opportunity to conduct informational interviews with them. The distinguished Chief of Mission, Tommaso De Cataldo, spoke to me about the anti-trafficking work being done globally by the IOM as an international organization, whereas in a later interview with Edward Bockarie, the head of the trafficking division, I gained insight about the work specific to Sierra Leone. I was thrilled to be given copies of key documents on the IOM's anti-trafficking efforts in Sierra Leone. I would later use these for my research.

Bockarie set up a meeting for the two of us with Joyce B. Kamara from the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, a government office, a few days later. Kamara had the significant responsibility of coordinating the anti-trafficking efforts in Sierra Leone between the United Nation's Children Fund (UNICEF), Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST) and the IOM. She organized monthly meetings to gather representatives from numerous organizations and officials from all around the country. Kamara identified the inadequacy of the judicial system as the paramount challenge of mitigating human trafficking in Sierra Leone.

The most memorable moment of my time with Kamara was when I mentioned human trafficking reports and studies on Sierra Leone, and she said she had not seen them. I gave her copies of the studies and she assured me that she looked forward to reading them. I was so happy to have helped in that minor way, as I understood how inaccessible these documents were in a place with sporadic electricity and no libraries or bookstores.

Kamara supplied me with reports on country and regional policies developed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). We discussed in depth the new regional guidelines on witness protection, regional policies on victim assistance, and the Ministry's strategic plan for the coming years. Upon leaving her office, I was moved

to say, “You do such important work. I really admire all that you do. Thank you for taking this time with me.”

My time in Sierra Leone was a crucial supplement to my previous experience and academic pursuits in the area of human trafficking. I tell my story of being in Sierra Leone, because I was so honored to have had the opportunity to talk to the leaders of anti-trafficking efforts in one of the most underdeveloped, war-torn, fragile countries in the world. I was able to better comprehend the stark reality of human trafficking in the aftermath of war.

Many years before going to Sierra Leone, I participated in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995. This was my first exposure to human trafficking as a global concern. I was attending the conference as a youth facilitator with a non-governmental organization called Projects for Global Harmony (PGH). PGH leads groups of people through a process of envisioning a better future, something many people are surprised to realize they have never done. The more defined a group’s vision is, the more likely it is to become a reality.

At the conference, men and women shared their ideas of a better future for women around the world during the brainstorming session that I co-facilitated. This vision was collectively illustrated in a mural as a lasting depiction of the participants’ vision and a powerful message to the local community.

Although the mural done in Beijing represented a shared, common vision, the specific needs of women around the world are varied. Some women envision a world where they have equal access to education, health clinics and justice. Some envision having basic rights within the family, community and nation. Some envision being given the choice to wait until an appropriate age to make informed decisions about their bodies. Some envision being considered for any profession, not only the jobs their culture identifies as women’s work. Some envision equal pay for the same work as men. Some envision a world where prostitution is not the only way for them to make substantial

money. Some, like a Kenyan university student I met, envision being able to earn an “A” based on academic performance rather than on having sex with their male professors in order to receive high grades. These gender issues are part of what I believe makes the human trafficking of women particularly pervasive. The unspoken, socially derived idea that women can be treated as objects perpetuates the trafficking of women.

I also learned about trafficking and gender issues at the 2007 and 2009 Commissions on the Status of Women at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The conference topics were “Educating Men about Women’s Issues” and “AIDS.” My experiences strengthened my belief that the empowerment of women is a prerequisite for mitigating human trafficking.

I have been able to deepen my knowledge of human trafficking as a student at the Monterey Institute. Dr. Bill Hillar’s *Human Trafficking* workshop was an unforgettable and profound experience. Dr. Hillar’s course is designed to emphasize the emotional experience of exploring this global problem but I also gained an ability to discuss the issue in a professional and articulate way. I understood the psychology of the perpetrators by studying the methods of the traffickers in capturing, initiating, controlling and using their victims. Dr. Hillar’s workshop inspired me to focus on human trafficking on many projects and papers. For *Global Politics*, I presented on the trafficking of internal migrant women in China. For *Hispanic Language and Culture*, I did a paper and presentation in Spanish on Sex Tourism in Costa Rica and the policies the country utilized to battle trafficking. In my *Introduction to Public Policy* course, I wrote a policy memo on the T and U visas for victims of trafficking and crimes in the United States, addressing problems with the current procedure in assigning these visas. I am currently being considered for the role of a presenter at the Ted-X conference in April in Monterey to relate my idea of a new strategy for protecting migrants from human trafficking.

My coursework pertaining to human trafficking continued on my recent trip to Sierra Leone where my field research went beyond the informational interviews at the IOM and the Ministry. I focused my research on human trafficking while traveling Sierra Leone

interviewing peacebuilding organizations during the Monterey Institute course in January of 2010. In the context of conflict resolution I was seeking to understand challenges to peacebuilding posed by human trafficking. I spoke to numerous community based organizations in Sierra Leone working with women and they report a rise in domestic abuse, rape and the trafficking of children which are the basis for the paper I will submit for publishing with the Women's International Perspective.

Through my academic and professional investigations into human trafficking I have formed a serious sensitivity to the issue. Human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking is a grim violation of a person's freedom, body and dignity. Our physical bodies require safety, privacy and sanctity and the mind is so heavily affected by what happens to our bodies. The physical and mental brutality caused by abuses in sex trafficking is unbelievable. Trafficking victims are confronted with threats so fierce that it binds them to silence and obedience, making it a challenge to identify and help victims. Human trafficking is modern day slavery and it needs widespread attention and people's collective devotion to stop the trafficking of persons.

The root of preventing trafficking is not limited to the empowerment of women. Prevention entails educating all vulnerable peoples about what trafficking is, how traffickers find their victims and measures that can be taken to ensure safety. Knowledge about trafficking is crucial to helping people evade traffickers. Men who seek out prostitutes need to be educated about trafficking, as many would not continue if they knew the extent of harm they were doing by feeding the illicit industry. Another priority in prevention is strengthening legal and judicial systems in their capacity to handle trafficking cases and prosecute perpetrators quickly, as to establish a widespread knowledge of consequences.

Ending trafficking entirely is not a realistic, immediate goal considering its prevalence and lucrative earnings for perpetrators. The networks of trafficking are so extensive and multilateral that they are difficult to detect, never mind dismember entirely. The saying "an empty mind is the devil's playground" is applicable when contemplating how people

are capable of committing atrocious crimes such as trafficking. There are too many people in this world deprived of rights, basic needs and opportunity that make them capable of anything, including trafficking.

In conclusion, human trafficking can be mitigated through the promotion of gender equality. My interest in gender has given me a sensitivity to the social, cultural and psychological context of human trafficking. The majority of trafficking victims are girls, and I am of the firm belief that gender inequality is a major player in how human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking, has evolved. In the spirit of putting forth my intentions, I envision advancing the empowerment of women through policy work that is specific to creating economic opportunities, education and leadership for women as well as policies that directly address human trafficking.