A global volunteer organization working to improve the lives of women and girls through programs leading to social and economic empowerment.

Sex Slavery/Trafficking:
Frequently Asked Questions

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What is human trafficking?

A $32 billion annual industry, modern day trafficking is a type of slavery that involves the transport or trade of people for the purpose of work. According to the U.N., about 2.5 million people around the world are ensnared in the web of human trafficking at any given time.

Human trafficking impacts people of all backgrounds, and people are trafficked for a variety of purposes. Men are often trafficked into hard labor jobs, while children are trafficked into labor positions in textile, agriculture and fishing industries. Women and girls are typically trafficked into the commercial sex industry, i.e. prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation.

Not all slaves are trafficked, but all trafficking victims are victims of slavery. Human trafficking is a particularly cruel type of slavery because it removes the victim from all that is familiar to her, rendering her completely isolated and alone, often unable to speak the language of her captors or fellow victims.

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What is sex slavery/trafficking?

Sex trafficking or slavery is the exploitation of women and children, within national or across international borders, for the purposes of forced sex work. Commercial sexual exploitation includes pornography, prostitution and sex trafficking of women and girls, and is characterized by the exploitation of a human being in exchange for goods or money. Each year, an estimated 800,000 women and children are trafficked across international borders—though additional numbers of women and girls are trafficked within countries.

Some sex trafficking is highly visible, such as street prostitution. But many trafficking victims remain unseen, operating out of unmarked brothels in unsuspecting—and sometimes suburban—neighborhoods. Sex traffickers may also operate out of a variety of public and private locations, such as massage parlors, spas and strip clubs.

Adult women make up the largest group of sex trafficking victims, followed by girl children, although a small percentage of men and boys are trafficked into the sex industry as well.

Human trafficking migration patterns tend to flow from East to West, but women may be trafficked from any country to another country at any given time and trafficking victims exist everywhere. Many of the poorest and most unstable countries have the highest incidences of human trafficking, and extreme poverty is a common bond among trafficking victims. Where economic alternatives do not exist, women and girls are more vulnerable to being tricked and coerced into sexual servitude. Increased unemployment and

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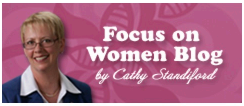

LIVE YOUR DREAM.ORG

An online volunteer and activist network offering flexible action opportunities to improve the lives of women and girls.

If you suspect an incident of sex trafficking in the United States, call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center's 24-hour toll-free hotline number at 888-3737-888. Callers can receive a number of services including crisis intervention, urgent and non-urgent referrals, tip reporting and comprehensive anti-trafficking resources.

Learn More

Access sex trafficking resources including facts, statistics, white papers and contact information for anti-trafficking programs.

Access this information in:

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한국어
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How to Help

Visit Soroptimist's online volunteer network, LiveYourDream.org, and find out how you can take action on this important issue.

the loss of job security have undermined women's incomes and economic position. A stalled gender wage gap, as well as an increase in women's part-time and informal sector work, push women into poorly-paid jobs and long-term and hidden unemployment, which leaves women vulnerable to sex traffickers.

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Who traffics women and girls?

Organized crime is largely responsible for the spread of international human trafficking. Sex trafficking—along with its correlative elements, kidnapping, rape, prostitution and physical abuse—is illegal in nearly every country in the world. However, widespread corruption and greed make it possible for sex trafficking to quickly and easily proliferate. Though national and international institutions may attempt to regulate and enforce anti-trafficking legislation, local governments and police forces may in fact be participating in sex trafficking rings.

Why do traffickers traffic? Because sex trafficking can be extremely lucrative, especially in areas where opportunities for education and legitimate employment may be limited. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the greatest numbers of traffickers are from Asia, followed by Central and Southeastern Europe, and Western Europe. Crime groups involved in the sex trafficking of women and girls are also often involved in the transnational trafficking of drugs and firearms, and frequently use violence as a means of carrying out their activities.

One overriding factor in the proliferation of trafficking is the fundamental belief that the lives of women and girls are expendable. In societies where women and girls are undervalued or not valued at all, women are at greater risk for being abused, trafficked, and coerced into sex slavery. If women experienced improved economic and social status, trafficking would in large part be eradicated.

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How are women trafficked?

Women and girls are ensnared in sex trafficking in a variety of ways. Some are lured with offers of legitimate and legal work as shop assistants or waitresses. Others are promised marriage, educational opportunities and a better life. Still others are sold into trafficking by boyfriends, friends, neighbors or even parents.

Trafficking victims often pass among multiple traffickers, moving further and further from their home countries. Women often travel through multiple countries before ending at their final destination. For example, a woman from the Ukraine may be sold to a human trafficker in Turkey, who then passes her on to a trafficker in Thailand. Along the way she becomes confused and disoriented.

Typically, once in the custody of traffickers, a victim's passport and official papers are confiscated and held. Victims are told they are in the destination country illegally, which increases victims' dependence on their traffickers. Victims are often kept in captivity and also trapped into debt bondage, whereby they are obliged to pay back large recruitment and transportation fees before being released from their traffickers. Many victims report being charged additional fines or fees while under bondage, requiring them to work longer to pay off their debts.

Human trafficking victims experience various stages of degradation and physical and psychological torture. Victims are often deprived of food and sleep, are unable to move about freely, and are physically tortured. In order to keep women captive, victims are told their families and their children will be harmed or murdered if they (the women) try to escape or tell anyone about their situation. Because victims rarely understand the culture and language of the country into which they have been trafficked, they experience another layer of psychological stress and frustration.

Often, before servicing clients, women are forcibly raped by the traffickers themselves, in order to initiate the cycle of abuse and degradation. Some women are drugged in order to prevent them from escaping. Once “broken in,” sex trafficked victims can service up to 30 men a day, and are vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV infection and unwanted pregnancy.

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Who purchases trafficked women and girls?

Many believe that sex trafficking is something that occurs “somewhere else.” However, many of the biggest trafficking consumers are developed nations, and men from all sectors of society support the trafficking industry. There is no one profile that encapsulates the “typical” client. Rather, men who purchase trafficked women are both rich and poor, Eastern and Western. Many are married and have children, and in some cases, as was reported in one New York Times article, men have sex with trafficked girls in lieu of abusing their own young children.

One reason for the proliferation of sex trafficking is because in many parts of the world there is little to no perceived stigma to purchasing sexual favors for money, and prostitution is viewed as a victimless crime. Because women are culturally and socially devalued in so many societies, there is little conflict with the purchasing of women and girls for sexual services. Further, few realize the explicit connection between the commercial sex trade, and the trafficking of women and girls and the illegal slave trade. In western society in particular, there is a commonly held perception that women choose to enter into the commercial sex trade. However, for the majority of women in the sex trade, and specifically in the case of trafficked women and girls who are coerced or forced into servitude, this is simply not the case.

In addition, sex tourism—that is, the practice of traveling or vacationing for the purpose of having sex—is a billion dollar industry that further encourages the sexual exploitation of women and girls. Many sex tours explicitly feature young girls. The tours are marketed specifically to pedophiles who prey on young children, and men who believe that having sex with virgins or young girls will cure sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Often, these men spread HIV and other STDs to their young victims, creating localized disease epidemics.

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What is the impact of sex trafficking?

Trafficking has a harrowing effect on the mental, emotional and physical well being of the women and girls ensnared in its web. Beyond the physical abuse, trafficked women suffer extreme emotional stress, including shame, grief, fear, distrust and suicidal thoughts. Victims often experience post-traumatic stress disorder, and with that, acute anxiety, depression and insomnia. Many victims turn to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain.

Sex trafficking promotes societal breakdown by removing women and girls from their families and communities. Trafficking fuels organized crime groups that usually participate in many other illegal activities, including drug and weapons trafficking and money laundering. It negatively impacts local and national labor markets, due to the loss of human resources. Sex trafficking burdens public health systems. And trafficking erodes government authority, encourages widespread corruption, and threatens the security of vulnerable populations.

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What is Soroptimist doing to stop human trafficking?

As an organization of business and professional women working to improve the lives of women and girls and local communities throughout the world, Soroptimist undertakes a number of projects that directly and indirectly help potential trafficking victims. In late 2007, the organization launched a major campaign aimed at raising awareness about the devastating practice of sex trafficking. Soroptimist club members place the cards about sex trafficking in highly visible locations including police stations, women's centers, hospitals, legal aid societies, etc. In addition, the organization is calling on the public to do its part to end this heinous practice.

Soroptimist undertakes a number of other projects that directly and indirectly help victims and potential victims. These projects provide direct aid to women and girls—giving women economic tools and skills to achieve financial empowerment and independence:

The Live Your Dream Awards program—Soroptimist's major project—provides women who are heads of households with the resources they need to improve their education, skills and employment prospects. By helping women to receive skill and resource training, Soroptimist provides trafficking and potential trafficking victims with economic options.

The Soroptimist Club Grants for Women and Girls program provides Soroptimist clubs with cash grants for innovative projects benefiting women and girls. Many clubs undertake projects that directly and indirectly benefit trafficking victims: a Soroptimist club in the Philippines supports a shelter for abused women and girls escaping from sex trafficking; a club in California held a conference in support of the Western Regional Task Force to Stop Human Trafficking and a club in Chicago has held several educational events related to trafficking.

Soroptimist presents Human Trafficking Facts that Making a Difference for Women Award program honors women who work to improve the lives of women and girls. Kathryn Xian is a recent recipient. In 2004, she led a grassroots campaign against a local tour company offering Asian sex tours. She also testified at a Hawaii State House of Representatives hearing on trafficking. The hearings resulted in the passage of Act 82, which makes “promoting travel for prostitution” a Class C felony violation. Act 82 now serves as model legislation for other states. Soroptimist strive to presents Human Trafficking Facts that make a difference in women's lives worldwide.

Soroptimist's Disaster Relief Fund provides financial assistance to regions affected by natural disasters or acts of war, with special attention paid to services benefiting women and girls. Women and girls affected by disasters are often vulnerable to traffickers.

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