

Opening our Eyes to the World's Trafficking Nightmare

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, March 30, 2005

“Neighbors, I’m sure, thought I was family and had no idea I’d been sold for \$2,500 to be a servant,” described Micheline, a trafficking survivor, to a crowd at the International Institute of Boston. Micheline, who lost her parents as a young child, was 14 when her extended family told her she was moving to the United States. Eager and hopeful, her world crumbled when she found herself molested, abused, and forced to look after three young children day and night.

While Micheline’s life is despairing enough, that it happened in affluent Darien, Connecticut, is remarkable. Her story helps illuminate a grim and dire situation that many think of as a problem of the “underworld,” but in reality afflicts every section of the globe. Chicago police investigating prostitution houses are increasingly finding women from foreign countries, often without passports or visas. They are stumbling upon women trafficked through the illegal sex trade market. The Pacific Northwest is a major hub for smuggling women from East Asian countries into the United States. The “land of the free” is as guilty as any other country, importing tens of thousands of victims every year.

In Israel, 5,000 women, most smuggled from the former Soviet Union and beaten and raped during the journey, have been sold as prostitutes at auctions during the past four years. But trafficking isn’t limited to women or sex. Boys and girls are trafficked into domestic servitude, forced marriage, and bonded sweatshop labor. The International Labour Organisation estimates that more than 15 million children in Nigeria are engaged in child labor, trafficked from nearby countries like Togo, Mali, and Ghana. Horror stories are plentiful: A truck destined for Nigeria’s commercial capital, Lagos, was caught with 67 children, between the ages of one and 14, packed like sardines in an unventilated container. While raiding an orphanage in Lagos suspected to have connections with a trafficking ring, police found charred baby bones, most likely from the sale of body parts for use in rituals. Further investigation uncovered a trafficking scheme whereby pregnant teenagers were lured to the orphanage so their babies could be sold to buyers for \$1,800 each.

More than 800,000 women and children are smuggled across borders each year—and that doesn’t include those trafficked internally. All told, trafficking is a \$9 billion industry, ranking third behind drug and weapon smuggling but quickly catching up. The evidence is out there and tangible—every pop-up ad featuring mail-order brides or every spam email soliciting sex is a tell-tale sign that the trafficking industry is alive and flourishing.

Feeding on poverty and crisis, and wielding false hopes, traffickers are opportunists. Illegal adoption rings flocked to the areas in Asia hit hardest by the tsunami as over 50,000 children lost one or both parents. In a region already booming with syndicates, these traumatized and vulnerable orphans are being trafficked for child labor and militias. As if that region didn't have enough to worry about.

A form of slavery, trafficking preys on and affronts human dignity, often with extreme brutality and violence. Sexual trafficking incorporates a huge toll on public health, given the spread of HIV/AIDS. Eliminating trafficking should be of vital concern to all governments. Fortunately, some are taking notice. Hailed as a milestone in Asia's battle against this scourge, a Thai court recently convicted a Cambodian woman to 50 years in jail for trafficking eight women. Many such successes are due to pressure by John Miller, director of the US State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Ambassador Miller has added force to American policy and stoked the world's conscience. Now, countries that receive poor grades on trafficking are at risk of losing American aid. And it's worked—when Kazakhstan fell to a low rating their foreign minister condemned trafficking on national television.

Thankfully, the tides have turned for Micheline, who's now 30 and enrolled in college in Boston. She's out telling her tale, as painful as it is, to raise awareness for the millions of women and children with stories like her own. With better public awareness will come increased pressure from international governing bodies and local governments to curb and cure this worldwide pandemic. Only then will Micheline be able to wake from her nightmare and discover that it was only a distant dream.