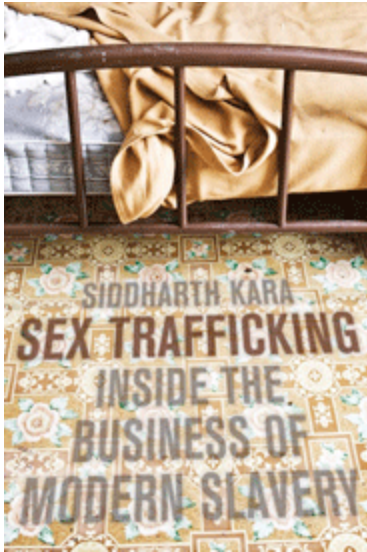


INTERVIEW WITH SIDDHARTH KARA, AUTHOR OF SEX TRAFFICKING



The following is an interview with Siddharth Kara, author of [Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery](#). You can also watch a [video](#) of Kara discussing the book.

Q. I thought most countries abolished slavery during the Nineteenth Century. Are there still slaves today?

Siddharth Kara: Yes, there are still slaves today, even though slavery is illegal in every country in the world. By my calculation, there were 28.4 million slaves in the world at the end of 2006. These slaves were in three primary categories: 18.1 million debt bondage/bonded labor slaves, 7.6 million forced labor slaves, and 2.7 million trafficked slaves (slaves who were coerced or deceived then transported into a forced labor or debt bondage situation). Of these trafficked slaves, 1.2 million were sex slaves. For reasons I discuss in my book, there will assuredly be more slaves in the

world today than at the end of 2006, with the highest growth in the trafficked slave category.

Q: Since sex slaves are a small percentage of slaves worldwide, why did you focus your book on this small category of slavery?

SK: Sex slavery is the first form of slavery I (consciously) encountered. I first came across sex trafficking while I was volunteering in a Bosnian refugee camp in the summer of 1995, an experience that profoundly affected me. In my research I focus on sex slavery for two additional reasons. First, it is perhaps the most grotesque and barbaric form of exploitation suffered by contemporary slaves. Whips, cigarette burns, knife slashes, beatings, broken bones—all slaves suffer these tortures, but sex slaves suffer these as well as ten, fifteen, or even twenty instances of forced sex each and every day. Second, sex slavery is by far the most profitable form of slavery. Even though only 4% of all slaves are sex slaves, these same slaves generate almost 40% of the total profits enjoyed by slave owners each year.

Q. What place does economic analysis have in addressing a human rights violation like slavery?

SK: Having met hundreds of slaves throughout the world, I am well aware that the moral outrage of slavery should be more than sufficient to provide motivation to abolish these crimes. However, abolitionists must not lose sight of the fact that slavery is essentially a crime predicated on economic benefit—i.e., maximizing profits by minimizing the cost of labor. Abolitionists must also not forget that powerful macroeconomic forces unleashed during the process of economic globalization in the post-Cold War era have been more responsible than any other force for the unforgivable rise in contemporary

slavery.

The first stage in the contemporary abolitionist movement was to reignite awareness of the fact that slavery still exists, most effectively achieved by Dr. Kevin Bales and his 1999 publication, *Disposable People*. However, awareness and outrage must be harnessed into effective action, which has for the most part eluded the global community thus far. The second stage of the contemporary abolitionist movement is to equip this outrage with a granular understanding of the global economic forces that unleashed modern slavery, and the microeconomic forces that allow it to thrive in nearly every corner of the world.

My book has been conceived as an attempt to unify outrage with economics, based on the premise that the economic analysis will provide the insight through which to design a more effective global response to this brutal crime against humanity. Only after understanding how sex trafficking functions, as a profit-driven business, can a more effective abolitionist movement be deployed that will attack the business by dismantling its fundamental premise: the exploitation of a vast supply of potential slaves to meet the demand for ever-greater profits in the worldwide commercial sex industry.

Q. How did you go about researching this subject?

SK: When I began my research in the summer of 2000, few people knew what sex trafficking was, so I decided the only way to find out was to go straight into the field and learn for myself. I used money saved from my business career and took three separate trips to more than a dozen countries. I walked into brothels, massage parlors, and sex clubs to see for myself how the industry functioned. I journeyed to the villages and towns from which the victims originated to understand the conditions that gave rise to their exploitation. I traveled to numerous borders to understand how the movement of victims was accomplished. I interviewed victims of trafficking for purposes other than sexual exploitation, and I interviewed over two hundred individuals in other forms of contemporary slavery.

Word of mouth and hustling with locals were my best tools for finding the sex slave underbelly in each country. In cities like Chiang Mai in Thailand or Mumbai in India finding sex slaves was easy—the brothels were in plain view, even though they were illegal. In Moldova, sex clubs were numerous and prostitutes came right to my hotel door the evening I arrived. In other countries such as Italy, where the laws against illegal brothels are more strictly enforced, it took time to track down sex slaves. Eventually, I learned that in most countries, taxi drivers almost always knew where to find cheap sex, and cheap sex was almost always provided by slaves.

Because of the extreme sensitivity and potential danger in discussing trafficking ordeals, I established two ground rules to ensure I never, ever made a victim's life worse than it already was. First, I was determined to do no harm. I never forced a conversation, and I never solicited one where the victim would have suffered for speaking to me. In shelters, I did not approach interviewees with a list of questions that I expected to be answered, but instead I approached them with a casual conversation. The results were often long, honest, detailed discussions, in which the victims poured their hearts out. Second, when visiting sex establishments I was always equipped with information on nearby shelters and health services, just in case a sex slave requested assistance. In most cases, I did not offer the information unless asked, since many sex slaves had convinced themselves they were not slaves, and suggesting otherwise would only distress them. Nevertheless, I occasionally left the information behind, hoping it would prove beneficial to someone, at some point.

Q. Were you ever in any danger?

SK: There were a few close calls during my research. In the book, I describe one incident when I was cornered in a pinjara, which is a small, box-like room in which many slaves are sold for commercial sex on

Falkland Road in Bombay. I made a foolish error in judgment one day and found myself cornered by a few thugs. I think the Fates were watching over me that day because I had a sliver of a moment in which I was able to escape.

Q. Meeting so many slaves must have been so difficult, were there any highlights?

SK: Positive moments during my research were few and far between. For the most part, the encounters were exceedingly difficult. Stories of liberation were always uplifting, but the challenges faced by slaves after they are free can be almost as difficult as the slavery itself. Many face the same conditions of poverty, bias, and lack of opportunity that consigned them to slavery in the first place. That, plus the physical and psychological damages they have endured, creates immense challenges to a functional life.

One of the lowest points of my research also provided a momentary highlight. I end the book with the narrative of a young Burmese girl named Aye, who had been a slave in a goods-processing facility in Thailand for ten of the first fourteen years of her life. Meeting Aye shook me to my core. After our interview, I asked if she would share some of the art she had been making in the shelter in Chiang Mai—pencil holders, postcards, and such. She was thrilled and hurried to retrieve her work. She handed me piece after piece with such glee. Each time I took hold of her little bits of art, she bowed her head in sheer joy that I was enjoying something beautiful she had made with her own hands.

I remember feeling complete despair during those final days of my last research trip—Aye's bleak tale of brutish exploitation, and the bent and terrified manner with which she carried herself—left me feeling so despondent . . . until we spent some time looking at her artwork, and the smile that lit up her face was so innocent and pure, it could not help but lift my spirits.

Q. What can people do to help?

SK: In my book, I call for a new brand of global abolitionist movement predicated on a more unified, targeted, overwhelming response from governments, international organizations, and individual citizens alike. Individuals have a crucial part to play. First, they can support grassroots anti-slavery organizations, either through volunteer efforts or financial contribution. Second, they can demand that their governments take the steps required to abolish slavery once and for all. Third, and perhaps most important, they can serve as the frontlines of a new abolitionist movement, by forming a system of anti-slavery community vigilance committees, which is a concept I discuss in the book and am working on implementing as we speak.

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