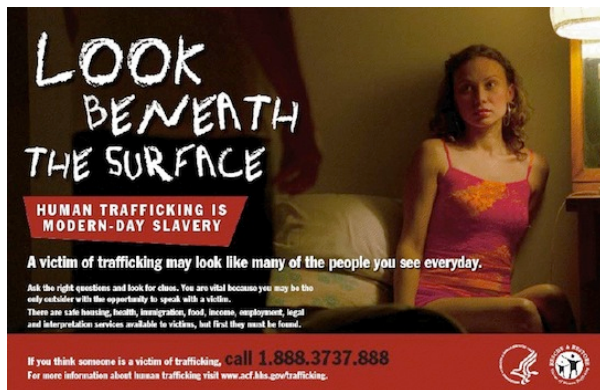


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The Real Story on Human Trafficking

April 11, 2011 by [Caroline Heldman](#) · [17 Comments](#)



What exactly is human trafficking and how can we help stop it? One of the best people in the U.S. to answer such questions is Department of Justice-certified human-trafficking consultant Dottie Laster, who has trained more than 5,000 police officers on recognizing and combating trafficking. She [hosts a weekly internet radio show](#), “Trafficked,” on Here Women Talk Radio. I had a chance to interview her about trafficking in the U.S. today:

Why have we begun hearing so much about human trafficking in recent years? Is it increasing?

I think that the rates have always been high, but we’re just becoming aware of it. However, it’s growing exponentially. Human trafficking is a lucrative and relatively low-risk crime, so it expands rapidly.

The Internet has made it worse. Social sites and chatrooms make it easier to connect victims with [johns](#), with less and less risk for the people behind the crimes—it’s more difficult for police to intervene online. However, it certainly doesn’t lessen the risk for victims.

And in the United States, we have a very strong economy, so we have a large demand. The demand outstrips the willing supply, especially in sex trafficking, so traffickers must coerce their victims.

What types of coercion do sex traffickers typically use?

Most of the victims are lured with false or fraudulent promises. “I have a job for you. I have a place for you to stay.” For international victims, their identification is usually then held from them.

Then there are some women who are kidnapped or sold by loved ones. This is an extremely heinous form of trafficking because it breaks all the bounds of trust.

Then there are “Romeo Pimps” who target, isolate, seduce and brainwash girls. They will say, “I love you. I love you. I’m the answer to your prayers.” They will scare friends away. They will lie and say, “Hey, your mom called and she really doesn’t like you.”

The Romeo Pimp uses little drops of love throughout the day to keep the target attached. The brainwashing is on so many levels that target don’t know which way is up. No bearing at all. They’ll feel like they made this choice and it’s their decision, and that they caused all this pain. Their pimp will starve them, beat them, and they’ll think it’s their fault because they didn’t make enough money.

What are some myths about trafficking that you can clear up?

The first big lie is the media fairy tale that prostitutes are willing. Complete consent is very rare; in my eight years of working in this, I have never yet seen a case where the woman got all the money and made all the choices. Every time I had a case where it appeared that way, once we heard the rest of the story we found that she was coerced and someone else was benefiting. The person exploiting the women is selling a product, making her appear willing even when she’s not. He makes her work even when she’s tired, hurt and overworked. The only two people who have free choice in the transaction are the buyers and the traffickers.

Another myth is that human trafficking requires movement. In fact, trafficking happens whenever someone is held in the service of another through force, fraud or psychological coercion. Many people in the U.S. don’t realize that it’s probably happening in their neighborhood.

What are the barriers that prevent us from effectively addressing human trafficking?

The biggest barrier is that we keep arresting the victims. I spend most of my day getting victims of human trafficking out of jail. They are typically arrested for prostitution or due to police believing that they’re here illegally, [even though] the [Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act](#) says they should not be arrested but should be treated as victims. While detained, victims think everyone dislikes and judges them. Everything and everyone tells them they are to blame.

Another barrier is that people tend to not believe the victim. It’s usually such a hellish tale that people who haven’t heard it or seen it before find it hard to believe. This is especially true if the victim is a U.S. citizen. We’re [supposed to be] the “land of the free.” We’ve dealt with slavery in historical times, but have a hard time thinking that it exists today.

Another big barrier is that the justice system doesn’t always properly prosecute those involved in sex trafficking. [Former NFL player] Lawrence Taylor [admitted in court](#) to having sex with a 16-year-old who had been beaten by her trafficker just before she arrived, and he received no jail time. This sort of thing happens all the time, and it sends a very strong message to prostituted citizens that they will not be protected.

What needs to happen, then?

I think public awareness is increasing, and I’m encouraged by that, but I am still surprised by how many people don’t see human trafficking when it’s right in front of them.

Law enforcement and the FBI have human-trafficking programs throughout the nation, and there are some amazing folks who are doing good work, but it’s very small compared to the scope of the crime. Human trafficking is a [\\$9.5 billion annual industry](#), and it’s being fought like drug crime, with a few agents. When you understand the scope, you understand we need more resources and dedicated people. As a nation, we need to make this heinous crime the highest priority.

What can the average person do?

Write an informational letter to your local newspaper; these can be very powerful.

Organize community “block walks” to hand out fliers and inform neighbors about human trafficking signs to look for.

Pass out posters. The Department of Health and Human Services has [free posters](#) with a hotline number,

and you can take them to your police department, your hospital, local churches or your school and ask to post them.

If you're in school, write a paper about human trafficking to educate students and professors. You can also start a blog about human trafficking. I've seen so many good ideas come from blogging.

My favorite type of activism is to do a five-minute patrol briefing at roll call for local police. The key is, don't go over your time. In my briefing, I define human trafficking, then give signs to look for: someone not in control of their identification, any minor involved in commercial sex or anyone whose communication or transportation is controlled by another. I leave them with a card with these indicators, and it does seem to work.

Here are sites with more information and resources:

- *Organizational training and public speakers:* www.lasterglobal.com
- *Legal services for immigrants:* www.bernardokohler.org
- *Free outreach materials/fact sheets* www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking
- *TRAFFICKED on Here Women Talk Radio* www.here womentalksocial.com
- *National information and hotline number:* 1-888-3737-888

Image courtesy of the Department of Health and Human Services [website](#).

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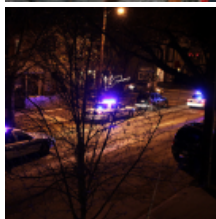
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- [When the Missing are Prostitutes, Police Let Trails Go Cold](#)



• [No Jail Time for Lawrence Taylor](#)



Comments

17 Responses to "The Real Story on Human Trafficking"



1. [Ed Drain](#) says:

[April 11, 2011 at 9:43 pm](#)

It would be nice if all the readers of this blog actually did *something* to fight HT. Polaris Project is a great organization that works to change laws in the US to more effectively fight HT here. It's easy to get involved in influencing legislators to give states the tools they need to deal with pimps and organized crime. You can get on their mailing lists on their web site: <http://www.polarisproject.org/>

[Reply](#)



2. [Jennifer](#) says:

[April 12, 2011 at 5:59 am](#)

In addition to the Polaris project I'd say find out what organizations exist IN YOUR STATE. I'd say all states have an organization or activist group of some sort. Find out who they are, what they do, how they function, their beliefs and ethics and if you think they're on the up and up (I promise not all of them are) then find out how you can be a part of the group or help spread the word.

And don't underestimate the importance of fair trade.

[Reply](#)



o [Mari](#) says:

[April 13, 2011 at 12:18 am](#)

Absolutely! Thank you for encouraging informed decision making Jennifer!

[Reply](#)



3. [L. Noble](#) says:

[April 12, 2011 at 7:48 am](#)

Human trafficking is indeed a serious issue, but I think this consultant is clouding the issue by making statements like "The first big lie is the media fairy tale that prostitutes are willing...I have never yet seen a case where the woman got all the money and made all the choices." If she had ascribed this to how it is for minors whose sexual services are being sold, or even street + massage parlor workers, this would make more sense. In my area there is an active and outspoken community of women (and also some gay men) who are quite clear that no one is forcing them to say work as an escort, whether through an agency or as an independent. It is trivializing and patronizing to those who are truly being

coerced to lump all these people in together.

Also, the consultant quoted makes no mention of trafficking for other reasons, such as domestic servitude, and there are many persons who are entrapped in such a way. Perhaps she gets more mileage (and more lucrative consulting contracts?) by only referencing the more sensational sex trade side of trafficking – it's just not as exciting talking about a housekeeper whose passport is kept under lock and key while they slave without compensation.

It would be great to see Ms. spotlight commentators who can make distinctions between the self-determining erotic service workers who are marginalized by a still fairly puritanically sex-negative society and the unfortunates who need to be seen and offered a way out. As a feminist and woman, I believe in supporting those who do have a choice as well as urging rescue for those who do not. Where I do agree with the consultant quoted is that arresting the sex worker is in either case not constructive.

[Reply](#)



4. *Jacqueline* says:
[April 12, 2011 at 9:07 am](#)

I think you are doing a marvellous job here: you do have my support. BUT. Surely, you're not saying that all prostitutes are victims of trafficking? I'm asking because read much of Audacia Ray's work.

[Reply](#)



- o *JulieI* says:
[April 15, 2011 at 4:50 pm](#)

Unbelievable. How would you feel if you were telling someone about your rape and they replied, "But what about women who like getting paid for sex?"

If you responded to my rape that way there's no way you could convince me that you truly had mine or other rape victims' best interests at heart.

[Reply](#)



- *Sina* says:
[April 28, 2011 at 3:04 am](#)

This article does not simply raise awareness about trafficking, but it claims that consenting prostitution is very rare, so I think Jacqueline's question is absolutely justified. If a rape victim would claim that most sex isn't voluntary, yes, I would ask them what about the women who like sex.


[Reply](#)



5. *Blanca Figueroa* says:
[April 12, 2011 at 7:17 pm](#)

There are so many forms of trafficking. Thank you for raising awareness. Every day young girls in Peru are enticed to the big cities from the highlands and the shantytowns with the promise of well paying jobs as domestic workers only to become trapped in a life of servitude. Many, many suffer sexual abuse. Exploitation is the norm. They rarely know their rights and often feel they have absolutely no way to escape from their grim reality. The families that sent them into domestic work rarely felt they had a choice and the girls don't often tell the stories of the abuse they suffer at the hands of their "employers". But we're making progress. Read more about the services that the La Casa de Panchita provides for 5000 girls and women in domestic work each year in Peru and our successes to date in advocacy and policy change. We are part of the anti-slavery movement and the Peruvian Ministry of the Woman is one of our important allies. <http://www.gruporedes.org> Facebook: La Casa de Panchita

[Reply](#)

6.  [@DianaScimone](#) says:
[April 13, 2011 at 11:42 am](#)

Thank you for shining light on this horrendous subject.

The Born2Fly Project works to stop child trafficking through an awareness and prevention program. Each year more than 1 million kids are trafficked for sex and labor including throughout the US. Some of them are just 4 years old.

Our goal is to reach kids before the traffickers do. We do this by educating at-risk children and teens and their parents about the lures traffickers use. This strategic 6-week community campaign includes a curriculum, wordless book (wordless so we don't have to translate it into 100s of languages), posters, activities, hand-outs, and more. We're currently testing the materials in the Dominican Republic, Bulgaria, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Please click the links below to learn more about how you can help stop the traffic.

Diana Scimone
Director

The Born2Fly Project to stop child trafficking <http://www.born2fly.org> <http://www.dianascimone.com>
Twitter: @DianaScimone


[Reply](#)

7.  [Sky](#) says:
[April 13, 2011 at 6:02 pm](#)

There is an organization in Los Angeles that has been able to provide services to survivors of human trafficking to the point where many clients are now financially and emotionally stable. It is one of the services that the Thai Community Development Center (Thai CDC) provided in the past 16 years. In light of an increased number of victims, Thai CDC launched the Slavery Eradication and Rights Project (Seri Project) in March 2011. "Seri" also means freedom in Thai. If you want to find out more about human trafficking/labor trafficking, please check out: <http://www.seriproject.org/>

Please get involved or if you do not have the time, contribute funding to ensure the continuation of comprehensive services so that human trafficking is a thing of the past!

[Reply](#)

8.  [Dawn E. Worswick](#) says:
[April 14, 2011 at 9:17 am](#)

I am a survivor of child sex trafficking and Dottie is right, most women do not prostitute on a regular basis on their own or they were sexually abused as children or were introduced into the trade as a teen and chose never to get out.

This whole idea that the cathouses in Nevada that are legal brothels that employ willing woman is not the norm. Pimps and brothel house managers trick the girls and kids into signing a 'contract', as they do in most porn. The sex industry is a big nasty profitable misconception that will not go away until we DO something drastic to stop it.

Please read my book Poisoned Candy and Sugar Daddies for the real scoop. It is a resource guide for parents on HOW to protect their children in today's dangerous culture.

Have you seen the sheer numbers in pedophile and porn busts lately????? Our kids just aren't safe anymore. We need your help to stop them from using our children.

Friend me on FB, get the info from my INFO page and buy the book...you will not be sorry.

[Reply](#)



9. *Sheldon* says:

[April 15, 2011 at 1:19 pm](#)

“Pimps and brothel house managers trick the girls and kids into signing a ‘contract’, as they do in most porn.”

Are you saying that most adult porn features performers who are tricked into signing contracts? Evidence, please!

“This whole idea that the cathouses in Nevada that are legal brothels that employ willing woman is not the norm.” So, why not MAKE IT the norm and extend legalization everywhere, not just to a few counties in Nevada?

[Reply](#)



10. *nwoslave* says:

[April 15, 2011 at 6:08 pm](#)

Calling prostitution human trafficking is a poor attempt at making women out to be victims and men as oppressors. Women willing choose to be prostitutes for the money.

[Reply](#)



o *Kay Van Hoesen* says:

[April 25, 2011 at 2:11 pm](#)

I had the same naive opinion until I started listening to "TRAFFICKED" shows on <http://www.HereWomenTalk.com> ("HWT"). I'm the founder of HWT, and since launching Dottie Laster's show, my eyes have been opened, and I no longer have my head in the sand. Now I know that the vast majority of women are coerced and intimidated, threatened with abuse, and they live with the threat of their children and family members being abused if they don't perform. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

[Reply](#)



11. *Joseph Ellis* says:

[April 27, 2011 at 8:46 am](#)

Thank you for this Q & A, very good, I will be linking to it from my blog. It also has me thinking about it in terms of other multi billion dollar industries. Human trafficking is more profitable than the NFL, all ice-cream sales in the U.S., etc., that's huge.

[Reply](#)



12. *Sina* says:

[April 28, 2011 at 3:20 am](#)

I don't understand why one has to make false claims such as "most prostitution is involuntary" to justify helping trafficking victims. OF COURSE one does not come into contact with independent, voluntary prostitutions if one is an anti-trafficking consultant. I also don't see how the fact that most prostitutes do not keep all of their money means they aren't voluntarily doing it. I also need to pay my driver and cover person, which amounts to a significant share of my income. But they are my assignees, not my bosses. In the US, i'd imagine the cost are even higher as one has to hire security because the police doesn't protect against attackers but instead abuse themselves. This may make it easy for pimps to step in.

Helping trafficking victims and raising awareness is important, but please don't do it on cost of sex workers. Claiming that all sex workers are victims does nothing to advance the situation in the sex trade, neither for sex workers nor for actual victims. on contrary it increases stigmatisation and a conception that one doesn't have to take us seriously, and it trivializes real abuse.

[Reply](#)



o [Kay Van Hoesen](#) says:
[April 28, 2011 at 11:51 am](#)

It's absolutely true that some people voluntarily work in the sex trade and enjoy it. We actually hosted a heated debated on legalizing prostitution with representation from a sex workers' organization. http://herewomentalkradio.com/home/archives_detail...

I'm the founder of HWT, and since launching Dottie Laster's show called TRAFFICKED on our radio network <http://www.HereWomenTalk.com>, my eyes have been opened. Unfortunately, I now know that the vast majority of women are coerced and intimidated, threatened with abuse, and they live with the threat of their children and family members being abused if they don't perform. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

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