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Shaniya's Shame

The murder of 5-year-old Shaniya Davis highlights a disturbing and growing trend in the U.S.: the trafficking of young girls into sexual slavery.

By: Malika Saada Saar | Posted: November 19, 2009 at 2:46 PM

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The murder of 5-year-old Shaniya Davis, whose body was recently found abandoned in a wooded area of North Carolina, is yet another gruesome reminder of the pervasive violence against girls. Shaniya's mother, [Antoinette Davis](#), is [charged with trafficking her daughter and child abuse involving prostitution](#).



Shaniya's story is a heartbreaking one. And it —finally—highlights the issue of sexual violence and exploitation of girls—a problem that is becoming more rampant within U.S. borders. But in one respect, Shaniya's case is an aberration. Most girls are trafficked by men and pimps, not their mothers.

How many times a month, or in the duration of a year, do we learn of the rape, kidnapping and murder of a girl? In the context of a civilized society, the epidemic level of violence against our girls remains an irreconcilable contradiction.

Here are the unacceptable facts of violence against girls: It cuts across any divide of race, class, ethnicity and educational background. One in four girls will experience some form of sexual violence by the time she reaches 18. Teenaged girls of all races, from across the economic spectrum, are four times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault. For girls and women ages 15-44, homicide is the leading cause of death. And then there are the countless faces of girls listed as missing in newspapers, on milk cartons or posted signs.

So many of them, like Shaniya, were also subject to being trafficked. It is presently less risky and more profitable to sell girls rather than illegal drugs. As evidenced by the war on drugs or the fierce police response to the trafficking of meth, there are severe repercussions in a culture of crime and punishment for illegal drug trafficking. There is a significantly less punitive culture for selling girls. Rarely do pimps or clients receive serious prison sentences for exploiting girls.

What is happening that girls' lives are worth so little?

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Poll: Where would you most like to have a family reunion?

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Perversely, it is the girls—not the men—who suffer from any kind of criminalization of trafficking. Girls who've been trafficked frequently end up arrested for prostitution; prostitution is among the leading reasons for girls' incarceration. Girls arrested for prostitution are detained in juvenile facilities, where they are often subject to more incidents of sexual abuse by the staff.

In the juvenile justice system, 73 percent of girls have been subject to sexual abuse prior to incarceration. A recent [Oregon Social Learning Center](#) study of chronically delinquent girls found that the median age of first sexual encounter among detained girls was 7. The typical age of a girl being trafficked is 14.

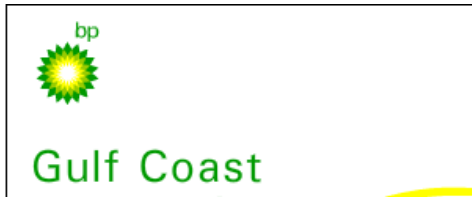
And remember, these are not girls from other countries. They are American girls, girls from places like Dayton, Ohio and Compton, Calif. In small towns and large urban areas, they are kidnapped or tricked by pimps into a life of prostitution.

I first encountered these vulnerable girls as a law student trying to think about how to bring the issue of women's rights as human rights home to the U.S. During those years, I met young women in Washington, D.C., Ohio and California who had been brutally trafficked, abused, molested and raped—just like girls in developing nations. Yet they were not usually perceived as victims. Instead they were cast as “hos,” prostitutes or “bad girls” dispatched to youth detention centers. No one was talking about educational initiatives, micro loans, psychiatric services or human rights for them.

Now, years later, these girls remain at the margins, forgotten and judged. There are few, if any, safe havens or gender specific, trauma-based programs for vulnerable girls. As the founder and executive director of a U.S.-based human rights and advocacy organization, I continue to see these girls, left behind in abusive homes, locked down in detention facilities or on street corners.

There is a rightful public outcry against the severe exploitation and trafficking of girls in Europe, Africa and Asia. A growing and powerful movement is emerging to shine light on girls in developing nations who are denigrated or cut down by violence. It is time to do that for girls in America, too—for girls like Shaniya who deserve to be safe and loved.

Malika Saada Saar is the executive director of Washington, D.C.-based [The Rebecca Project for Human Rights](#).



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bac

I don't think this is a 'growing trend' ~ I think that it is finally an issue that is getting more attention. It is sad that Shaniya is the latest face of this issue. I think it is a small way to honor her.

Please, let's not ignore that boys and young men are also sold into sex slavery.

And this is a daily occurrence .. not just once in a while when the media decides to fill a spot..
May 26, 2011, 3:18:29 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



Carmelita Rollins

The title of this article is wrong. It should be entitled "America's Shame". Shaniya had nothing to be ashamed of. But we as a nation should be ashamed that babies are treated in such a horrible way. That girls and women are sold for into sex slavery. We should be better than that. We should hold ourselves in much higher regard. Shaniya's mother was anything but a mother.

May 19, 2011, 3:10:25 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



Travis Chuffington

While I agree the girl has nothing to be ashamed of, neither do the people of this country. America did not do this, can we stop blaming the "system" for everything. Her mother is to blame.

May 26, 2011, 3:59:04 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



Emilio Lizardo

It makes great emotional copy but no real study supports any large scale existence of trafficking girls.

But it's a great way to milk money from the government for your NGO.
May 17, 2011, 2:15:09 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



Tanya Reeves Forsberg

Unbelievably, this _itch is pregnant again. What kind of world do we live in where you have to have a license to drive or own again, but ANYONE can bring a life into the world and apparently do what they want with 'it'. I'm not going to even get started on the ANIMALS who would rape a helpless little child. Poor, poor little baby.

May 6, 2011, 2:49:53 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



"For girls and women ages 15-44, homicide is the leading cause of death." Reference please? I don't think this statement can be supported. It is true that 'unintentional injury' is a leading cause of death for most females under the age of 40, but that encompasses all manner of accidents - traffic, etc.

I would be very surprised if this statistic is correct - but I'm happy to be pointed to the data that supports it, if it exists.

April 18, 2011, 12:39:17 PM PDT – Flag – Reply

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"As evidence, murder by intimate partners is the leading cause of death among African American women between the ages of 15 and 45."

West, C. (2004). Black Women and Intimate Partner Violence.
Journal of Interpersonal Violence, Vol 19, No. 12, pg 1489
http://www.drCarolynWest.com/media/sites/162/files/Black_women_and_intimate_partner_violence.pdf
April 24, 2011, 5:03:33 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



[Express12](#)

Quiney, I agree with you and i even went a step further, as I read this the first thing I thought about was the resources that would be wasted on these nasty people to bring them to justice. Just pass GO, line them up and execute their asses. No prison terms, etc.

April 14, 2011, 2:02:04 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



[penny wu](#)

If we lived in a simple world where we could be sure about the guilt of each person charged I would not have a problem with the idea of executing a person who is guilty of such a crime.

But people on this forum should know better than most that in many instances men, often black men, have been convicted of horrible crimes & executed despite the fact that they were innocent. The eye witness says "The guy who did this was black – yeah, that black guy over there – that looks like him. Yeah, I'm sure: that was him." The prosecutor wants a prosecution at any cost: even if he hides evidence that might tend to exonerate the accused.

The problem with execution is that there is no chance to ever be freed when future evidence shows you were innocent.

April 16, 2011, 2:58:04 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



[txcracka](#)

many men have not been executed. That is something that just gets parroted out and repeated over and over.

I agree about the statements made about the prosecution. Most prosecutors want to be judges and you gotta show a good "record". That whole system needs some light put on it.

The problem with execution is we do not do it enough. I want innocent man to spend even one day in prison much less be executed.....but either he did it or he didnt....that means not even one day in prison or the death penalty. There are plenty of people who did it....they will say they did it and they still dont get the death penalty. You will have "black leaders" local naacp etc defend the most worthless black guy..which pisses off the white and in turn makes them more willingly to convict other blacks by not being as cautious in convicting the next time something happens...which in turn again makes good black people take up for worthless black people because they understand that people get railroaded sometime. -----Meanwhile we got scumbags, black and white molesting and killing little kids and we are all wringing our hands instead of being straight up about a mans guilt or innocence and then letting him go completely or hanging the guy. ----- about once a week in my area i hear of something that deserves the death penalty.

April 20, 2011, 8:30:29 PM PDT – Flag – Reply



[Eric Devezin](#)

I @ [TheRoot247](#): Shaniya's Shame

April 11, 2011, 12:22:14 AM PDT – Flag – Reply

via Twitter



[DQuiney](#)

everyone involved in shania's davis murder, including her mother should be given the DEATH PENALTY.

i don't understand why this country gives soo many child rapists/murderers prison time where they r released in 5-8 yrs. to do it all over again upon some innocent child.

if a person rapes and kills a child it should be automatic death penalty.

April 10, 2011, 11:20:11 AM PDT – Flag – Reply

Liked by Tanya Reeves Forsberg



[Travis Chuffington](#)

Why does it have to be a child. Should someone who rapes and kills an adult also be

put to death?

May 26, 2011, 3:57:05 PM PDT – Flag – Reply

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