

The Living Hell of Modern Slavery

By Andrea Dean

Like me, you had probably presumed that human trafficking happens somewhere else. I thought: "Sure it is a problem but not here where I live!" Let's dip into some stories of modern day slavery to make it clear that this happens to real people, with names, with families and who endure a living hell in our own times.

Pang's Story

At 15 years of age Pang was offered the opportunity to work at a restaurant in New Zealand. Her family in Thailand paid thousands of dollars to help her make a new life. With a group of four other girls she travelled to New Zealand. Upon arrival their passports were confiscated by the traffickers. The young women were imprisoned and forced into prostitution, living in overcrowded conditions. Pang lived under guard and was compelled to work in the sex trade. The majority of her earnings were taken by the traffickers.

Min-Jun's Story

Min-Jun, a 35-year-old construction worker, was lured to New Zealand from Korea with the promise of a better life. Immediately after being collected from the airport, he found himself living on a rural property and sharing a room with seven other men. They were taken in a van each day to a building site, not knowing where they were or who they were working for. He was paid below award wages and then charged exorbitant rates for substandard food and lodging.

Maria's Story

When Maria arrived from the Philippines, having paid for her own visa and airfares, she hoped to earn enough money to support her mother and her young son. Her fiancé took her passport and put her to work in the family shop seven days a week. Maria was given only \$20 a fortnight and was never paid a wage. The promised English classes never happened. Maria spent all her time at the shop or at her fiancé's house cooking, cleaning and gardening. She was trapped.

Bohai's Story

Bohai, a Chinese international student studying business in Auckland at a private training college, works 55 hours a week for a cleaning contractor. He has a massive debt from his college fees and receives just \$11 an hour from his boss. This is in breach of both the minimum wage and his student visa, which allows only 20 hours of employment per week.

Facing Up to Trafficking

These four stories just scratch the surface of what human trafficking looks like. It is true that most of the victims are women and girls but that is not the whole story. Right now, there are millions of people who are ensnared in the cycle of trafficking and their experience is diverse. While 22 per cent of those who are trafficked are forced into sexual slavery, 68 per cent of human trafficking supplies labour to produce everyday low-cost services and items. To get to the root of a human rights violation, it is important to represent it accurately and it helps to understand that there are various forms of trafficking.

Trafficking in Local Regions

Although people are at greatest risk of human trafficking in poor countries (particularly India, which has the highest rates of trafficking worldwide), modern slavery also exists in low-income regions. In fact, trafficking does not always mean transportation across-borders, but also refers to compelled service and often happens close to home. About 35 per cent of those trafficked end up being exploited domestically, with about 37 per cent reported as crossing borders within their original sub-region.

Why don't they escape? While there are instances where people are virtually imprisoned, at other times trafficked individuals are in a cycle of self-blame and deep fear, which makes escaping or asking for help difficult. They may not know the local language or may live with the threat of violence against themselves or their loved ones.

Confronting the Evil

What changed my perspective about human trafficking was meeting a Catholic religious sister who is a member of ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans). There is an equivalent group in New Zealand, ANZRATH (Aotearoa New Zealand Religious Against Trafficking in Humans). The members of these groups are working for change, raising consciousness of the issues, developing educational materials, helping individuals affected by trafficking and lobbying governments.

The ACRATH and ANZRATH websites urge us to ask questions about how and by whom the products we purchase are made, and identifies the fashion and chocolate industries as notorious for instances of forced labour and exploitation.

Taking Action

“Who is making my clothes?” Once we identify our favourite clothing brands, it is an easy step to see how the company measures up on workers’ safety, wages and other conditions. A helpful guide is *The Truth Behind The Barcode*, a report on manufacturing conditions within the fashion industry produced by Baptist World Aid. The idea is not immediately to drop our favourite brand but to lobby the company to improve its practices.

“How ‘sweet’ is my chocolate?” Easter is a huge occasion for giving chocolate. It is an opportunity for us to be aware that internationally most chocolate is made using cocoa beans picked by children, many of whom have been enslaved or forced to work in exploitative conditions. Again, the idea is to explore the reputation of our favourite chocolate brands and lobby for change.

Be Alert and Aware

With regard to human trafficking close to home anti-trafficking groups recommend that all of us, as members of our local community, can:

- Report any suspicious activity or people that may seem to be involved in human trafficking.
- Email the website link (ACRATH or ANZRATH) to all your friends, family and co-workers.

- Call our local travel agents and inform them of the issue so that they can be aware of and prevent potential predators from taking trips by signing the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.
- Write to our local MP and encourage them to fight for more money to go towards ending slavery and trafficking as well as strengthening laws to prevent trafficking in New Zealand.
- Help start, promote and support a walk-a-thon or other such event in our area to raise money and awareness.

We can exercise respect for human dignity by learning the names of those who live and work around us. In this way they will no longer be faceless and nameless. We can call them by name, find out about their families and bring their stories of struggle and injustice into the light. We'll find that they are people with hopes and dreams and who frequently make extraordinary sacrifices for their families.

Together, taking these concrete steps we can make a difference to the lives of real people who endure "a living hell in modern times that no human being should ever have to experience".

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