Sold into slavery: The scourge of human trafficking

by Jonathan Tran in the November 27, 2007 issue

Those who want to make lots of money and don't care about breaking the law to do it have three main options: they can deal in drugs, deal in guns or deal in humans beings. Of these dubious but lucrative businesses, trafficking in humans is the fastest growing. Estimates put the number of slaves in the world at between 12 million (the United Nations figure) and 27 million (the figure offered by Kevin Bales, president of Free the Slaves, an organization committed to ending global slavery). Recently, the Vatican declared that human trafficking in our time is a greater scourge than the transatlantic slave trade of the 18th century.

A few years ago, Representative Dan Burton (R., Ind.) opened a congressional subcommittee hearing on human trafficking by stating, "It is hard to believe in the 21st century that we are even talking about this." Burton's comment reflects the surprise that most people experience when hearing about contemporary human slavery. After all, the enslavement of human beings—specifically, forced prostitution of women and children—seems like something of another time. Most of us assume that such moments in history have passed, that the world as a whole has matured, gotten better, and that horrors like chattel slavery are a relic of a less civilized era.

Our surprise at discovering the scourge of present-day human trafficking betrays certain presumptions about our own goodness, presumptions that conceal the realities of the world we've made. In truth, rather than some aberration, slavery may be one of the most representative consequences of global capitalism. In the same way that chattel slavery epitomized the period of colonization, so contemporary human trafficking epitomizes the political, economic and social realities of the world in which we find ourselves. Economic inequality, war, political instability, systemic injustice, inadequate education, media penetration, migration patterns, corrupt governments, environmental disasters and other factors related to globalization contribute to the conditions necessary for human trafficking.

Global capitalism’s explosive growth has brought unimaginable wealth to some parts of the world, while displacing local economies and emaciating traditional forms of life as transnational corporations devour resources in search of greater and greater profits. In communities that for generations esteemed virtues that transcended material accumulation, those virtues have given way to the almighty dollar. Increasingly, anything can be commodified, and if one has only flesh to sell, so be it; what was once morally unimaginable is now a $13 billion industry. Further, technology shrinks the world, reducing conceptions of happiness to material prosperity and creating, along with actual poverty, something called “relative destitution,” the perception of poverty experienced when images of decadent wealth get broadcast all over the world.

The conditions that make human trafficking possible and profitable arise not just in the poor countries that supply slaves but wherever the demand for unprotected labor is outmatched only by the wealth and greed of those who pay for it. These dynamics produce a deadly combination: desperation and profiteering. When one is face-to-face with obvious evil, it is easy to demonize, scapegoating a few for the moral peace of mind of the many. However, doing so detracts from the systemic realities that make us all culpable. Says Stefano Volpicelli, who for years has studied and fought slavery: “Trafficking is not born from the minds of inherently malicious individuals whose only aspiration is to harm and degrade women. Without excusing vile behavior, it is a phenomenon in which both victim and perpetrator are born from the same scourge of utter desperation.” When we view the world through the complex matrix of globalization, we begin to see how human trafficking has come to be at home in our world; or more precisely, how we have come to be at home in a world of human trafficking.

Sarah looks out to the barely visible world beyond her barred window. Whenever she can, she watches feet go by—well-dressed feet, athletic feet, feet going places. This is her only contact with the outside world. Most of her waking hours are spent servicing her clients: having sex with men. Her door will open, a madam will bring in a man (sometimes several men) and the customers will get what they’ve paid for.

No longer a virgin or able to be passed off as one, Sarah does not command premium prices, and so her captors have less inclination to treat her kindly. Though infection with HIV/AIDS is a constant danger, that threat seems distant compared to the physical beatings and disorientation she experiences. Even if she could escape, which is highly unlikely, where would she go? Sarah is an illegal immigrant, having

been smuggled into the country. How could she explain herself, not even knowing the language? She knows that many of the local authorities cannot be trusted. Her captors tell her that if she does escape they will bring shame to her family, or perhaps kill them.

Sarah's story represents the plight of millions of women and children. The United Nations defines modern slavery, or human trafficking, thus: "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs." Much global slavery begins as dept repayment, in which slavery results from a debt "bond" incurred by the slave or the slave's family. In Asia, home of two-thirds of the world's bonded slaves, a person may spend an entire lifetime paying off a debt as low as 37 U.S. dollars.

In many countries there is no need to transport slaves across borders because conditions allow for slavery. However, by shipping sex slaves across borders traffickers can often gain higher profits—they can meet demands for the "exotic," for example—and also limit the possibility that slaves will escape.

According to the United Nations, 87 percent of the slaves trafficked from one country to another are women and children forced into prostitution. The U.S. State Department estimates that approximately 800,000 new victims fall prey to transnational commercial sexual exploitation each year. Globalization has allowed the oldest profession in the world to go global. The Internet serves as a virtual clearinghouse, a sex bazaar connecting demand and supply. In its 2007 Trafficking in Persons report, the State Department told how Zambian girls are shipped to Ireland, Chinese women to Afghanistan and Filipina women to Côte d'Ivoire.

Trafficked prostitutes are usually duped into the trade. A 2005 study found that 95 percent of women smuggled from Romania to Germany believed that they would be doing legitimate work as maids or factory workers. Usually slave recruiters, under the guise of a trusted friend or family member, take advantage of those already at risk: young women or girls desperate for any viable opportunity. These recruiters

promise good jobs, a new start in an economically stable city or nation, and tell the young woman that they will pay the cost of transporting her to her new home. However, once there, her handlers change their story, claiming that she now owes them for transporting her; with her body, she will repay a debt that can run as high as $50,000. Once in a brothel she may be forced to service between 12 and 16 men a day until this debt is paid.

Brothels routinely compound debts by charging room and board, thereby sentencing victims to more years of slavery. Unfortunately, in some cases there is no option for repayment, as the slave is owned outright, having been sold by her parents in the direst circumstances. In these cases there is no possibility for repayment or freedom.

Upon arrival the slave is often beaten or raped into submission. Her captors seize her passport and documents, rendering her persona non grata, without identity, status or rights. These women and girls will work without rest, night and day, seven days a week for years. They will endure rape, disease, physical and emotional abuse and forced abortions. Many will be given drugs. Some, when they are no longer profitable, simply disappear, never to be heard from again. When that happens, the other slaves know not to ask questions or complain, recognizing that they could be next.

In the strangely efficient world of human trafficking, there are countries of origin, such as Ukraine, Cambodia and Nigeria, where desperate conditions render people vulnerable to enslavement. There are countries of transport, where criminal organizations operate sophisticated lines of transportation involving corrupt officials, shipping companies and established travel routes. And then there are countries of destination, usually countries where the wealthy possess the money to buy what they want, no matter its legality. As with all markets, there are demands for specific “goods.” Virgins are prized, and the younger the better. In some cases, young (what Bangkok street pimps call “small”) can mean five years old. Eastern European women tend to fetch the highest prices, probably because of the widespread acceptance of European standards of beauty. Of course, in a global economy, the “exotic” sells well too.

Operating slave brothels is surprisingly easy. Even in places where concerted efforts are made to root out slavery, the dynamics of human trafficking make it a crime difficult to prosecute. Since many of these organizations are ethnic specific,

operating within ethnic enclaves in large metropolitan centers, they manipulate subcultures impenetrable to traditional law enforcement. Even if police build cases against offenders, successful conviction and sentencing is unlikely in the face of such complexities as language barriers, victim immigration status and so on. Compared to prosecution of crimes involving illegal drugs, successful prosecution is rare and punishments usually minimal. These complexities and their emotional toll make enforcement unattractive to local authorities who are already overburdened and underresourced.

Ironically, the countries where moral outrage is most often expressed over sexual slavery tend to be the largest destination countries. The CIA estimates that as many as 17,500 women and children are trafficked into the U.S. each year, though other reports put the number as high as 50,000. The UN's Trafficking in Persons report listed the United States, along with Nigeria, Romania, China and Thailand, among the top 11 destination countries.

What is being done? In some ways, plenty. As slave trafficking gained increasing visibility in the late 1990s, local and national governments, international bodies like the UN, USAID and nongovernmental organizations began to commit significant amounts of time, resources and energy to addressing this growing human rights catastrophe. The UN focuses on a widely practiced approach, the "Three Ps": Prevention, Prosecution and Protection. Since trafficking often involves trickery, prevention includes creative means of warning potential victims. In the Ukraine, famous movie stars have acted in popular videos warning the general populace of these traps. Nations such as India have grown increasingly aware of the dynamics of slavery, and local religious communities utilize local channels to raise awareness and provide protection for women and children.

Bales reminds us that while today's 27 million may be the largest number of slaves ever held at one time, historically it is the smallest proportion of slaves relative to the world's total population, which suggests that slavery as an institution is declining. What remains to be done is to diminish slavery's profitability by driving down demand and driving up risks and costs for offenders. Perhaps most important, slavery is illegal in almost every nation in the world; at this point the issue isn't moral relativism as much as political and economic will. Significant efforts have been made to partner local governments with nongovernmental organizations to care for victims, creating places hospitable for healing. The United States has changed its immigration policy, granting political asylum to victims. In 2000, Congress passed

the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which protects victims from deportation after they testify against offenders.

Internationally, organizations like UNICEF and Free the Slaves have become increasingly savvy, even tying monetary assistance to government willingness to prevent, prosecute and protect. Nongovernmental organizations have sprung up to focus solely on addressing human trafficking. One of the most impressive is the Christian organization International Justice Mission. Started by Gary Haugen, IJM partners with local law enforcement in order to rescue victims of slavery and prosecute the perpetrators. Utilizing investigative techniques, technological proficiency and legal expertise, IJM reports, it has rescued more than 800 women and children and secured over 90 convictions since 2003. “We have seen that this type of violence is not driven by the overwhelming power of the perpetrators—it is driven by the utter vulnerability of the victims,” said Haugen. “Provide trafficking victims with a strong advocate and you can effectively confront this problem.”

Coordinated efforts between business, government and nongovernment organizations have produced creative strategies ranging from utilizing media and technology to creating watchdog organizations to establishing unorthodox organs of prevention, protection and prosecution. The South African soccer team the Kaiser Chiefs organized a national awareness day; in Burkino Faso, activists partnered with a trucking union for monitoring purposes; drivers of moto-taxis in Thailand keep watch for child sex exploitation; Nepalese trafficking survivors formed Shakti Samuaha, a nongovernmental organization that lobbies officials to make policy changes; organizations in Bangladesh have focused specifically on the taboo topic of male prostitutes and have opened shelters for exploited children. In 2006 IJM received $5 million from the Gates Foundation to pioneer antitrafficking and related HIV/AIDS-reduction strategies. Recent IJM efforts include training Cambodian police on antitrafficking operations.

However, there is much yet to be done. One challenge involves U.S. immigration policy. Since 9/11 immigration officials have focused on homeland security. Unfortunately, this focus on security works to the benefit of organized traffickers. Increased security at U.S. borders means that undocumented immigrants are more likely to put themselves in the hands of smugglers who are organized, ruthless and profit-driven and for whom humans are disposable commodities to be traded and used for profit.

This trend has the secondary consequence of creating smuggling organizations that are more visible and therefore more easily monitored for the purposes of homeland security. One would expect this greater visibility to lead to greater detection and prosecution of human rights violations like sex slavery. But when the nation's priority is fighting terrorism, not ensuring human rights, the people trafficked in slavery are easily viewed as collateral damage in the global war on terror.

If Sarah dreams of a world beyond barred windows, Sister Eugenia Bonetti spends her life removing bars. Sister Bonetti has led the fight against human slavery in Italy, marshaling the significant resources of Italy's Roman Catholic community. A nun of the Consolata Missionaries, Bonetti served the first 24 years of her religious life working with women and children in Kenya. In 1993 she returned to Italy to minister to Turin's immigrant women. At the time she was largely unaware of what was happening on the streets of Italy.

Then she met Maria. Maria had emigrated from Nigeria, leaving behind three children in order to find in Italy some means of survival for her family. She ended up as a slave in the sex industry.

Religious orders like Sister Bonetti's began taking in escaped slaves, offering them shelter and protection. As more victims came to their shelters, and as the nuns struggled to make sense of what they were facing, these communities began working through religious, political and commercial channels to stem the flow of slave trafficking and meet the women's physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

"Our specific role was still rehabilitation and reintegration of victims: putting their lives back together," says Bonetti. "This is a delicate ministry that requires human and spiritual qualities of touching and healing the wounds, an unconditional love expecting nothing in return, the capacity to listen and understand without judging or condemning, allowing time to change and to grow, respecting their freedom of choice, ready to face even failure and disappointment."

Sister Bonetti leads a movement involving 250 sisters from 70 different congregations that offers sheltering communities, drop-in centers, help hotlines, pastoral ministry and education. Recently, in partnership with other nongovernmental organizations, the Union of Major Superiors in Italy pushed the government to pass a stricter law on trafficking. To date, no other European nation has gone as far as Italy in granting legal status to former sex slaves. That law has

benefited 600 to 800 women each year since its implementation.

At the end of a speech addressing sexual slavery in Italy, Sister Bonetti offered a prayer for a 21-year-old murdered sex slave named Tina. In her prayer Bonetti asked the Romanian girl “to forgive us because we are all responsible for her death.” She declared that “annually, hundreds of girls experience martyrdom on our streets.”

Sister Bonetti’s characterization of Tina as a martyr reveals the church’s alternative ways of understanding the world. The ability to reimagine these slaves beyond the terms of labor and tradable goods, beyond flesh-entrapped notions of sexuality, even beyond the intricate political maneuvering arising around this global phenomenon, creates a fragile space of genuine humanity within the impersonal, imperial reign of globalization.