

How Can We Turn a Blind Eye to This Rampant Need?

Whenever I see progress of any kind in the fight against the trafficking of children, teens and young women, I truly rejoice. Such was the case last week when the United States Congress passed the legislative package of the FOSTA-SESTA. Thank you, Representative Ann Wagner, R-Mo., Senator Rob Portman, R-Ohio and Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) for sponsoring the most aggressive bill against trafficking in US history.

The legislative acts sailed through the House on a 388-25 vote and the Senate on a 97-2 vote. Senators Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Rand Paul, R-Kan., were the only two dissenters in the Senate. We need to vote them and the 25 representatives who voted against the bills out of office. These acts should have been unanimous!

FOSTA stands for Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act. SESTA is the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. Combined, these two bills target the sleazy websites that were responsible for enabling and profiting from prostitution and sex trafficking. Many of the victims were teen and even pre-teen girls.

Within 48 hours, a number of websites used by traffickers shut down their personal ad sections. Overnight, some of the busiest prostitution portals in the country went dark. Being a realist as well as someone who has been fighting the evil of human trafficking for more than a decade, while thankful for steps of progress, I must ask, "How long will this victory last?"

Is this just a vacation for traffickers? Will many of them have secret meetings to discuss the various options in bypassing the new laws so they can (and I can assure you they

will) continue their sordid business of exploiting these precious girls and young women?

The website owners plead innocence, but in reality, they are either fully complicit or wink, knowing what kind of transaction they facilitate. These site owners have a lot of money to work with, and I have no doubt they will find another way to profit from the sexual exploitation of the girls.

In 2016, the CEO of perhaps the most nefarious of the websites was arrested for pimping. In the end, the charges didn't stick, and the website simply shifted where it placed ads that subtly and not so subtly offer sex. Will this happen again?

You notice that I don't name the websites. I struggled with whether to cite them or not. It is a real catch-22. Let me explain.

One night a few years ago, I was in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I was with a former pimp who had joined the fight against child trafficking. We were searching brothels for children and teens who had been forced into the sex trade. Some of the girls were as young as 4. Our mission was to rescue them and get them into safe houses.

While driving through a village renowned for trafficking small children, I realized it was the village my wife and I had seen featured on an American news show. I told the former trafficker, now rescuer, that a very popular fighter against crime in America had hosted the expose and it was being rerun that very night.

I smiled, thinking he would be impressed. He wasn't. His response surprised me.

"Jeff," he said. "That show is a very bad thing."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Why is it bad? I thought it would be good to have this crime exposed."

He explained: "This is what happens after the show airs. First, the brothel owners take all the minor girls and hide them. They go deep underground. They stay hidden for a few months. Their regular customers that they trust have to pay more money to be with a girl, so the situation actually benefits the brothel owners. The show also reveals the name of the city where trafficking is happening. Pedophiles and predators watch the show and think, *Oh wow! I didn't know about this city!* After a few months, when all uproar dies down, the pedophiles come to this village. They travel from all over the world, and the demand increases. With increased demand, the traffickers seek more girls, coercing and forcing them into this cruel life. And they raise their prices. Rather than helping by spotlighting the village, the show actually makes things worse. It is a vicious cycle."

I was taken aback. But it made sense. When I got home, I wrote to the host of the show and the producer. I never got a response.

I wonder if revered abolitionist William Wilberforce had similar struggles as he fought to end the British slave trade two centuries ago. His Emancipation Act of 1833 made owning another human being illegal in the British Empire, but slavery did not end. Neither did it end 30 years later after the passing of the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln on January 1, 1863.

Slave traders simply found alternate routes to bring slaves to buyers in America. It didn't stop there either. In various shapes and forms, slavery thrives to this day: we have child soldiers, sweat shop workers and children in brothels, just to name a few. While estimates vary, it is no stretch to say there are tens of millions of people in bondage today. More people are in one form of slavery or another in 2018 than there were enslaved during the hundreds of years of legal slavery in America! In other words, it has grown.

So my questions are, how long will the website shutdown caused by the new FOSTA-SESTA act last? How long will the prostitution ads be gone? Will new ones eventually pop up? If history is an indicator, unfortunately we can be sure that they will. With all my heart, this is one time I hope I'm wrong. But now is not the time to rest. The perpetrators will not.

Yes, let's be thankful for the stepping stone of FOSTA-SESTA, but remember that nefarious online advertising is only one front in this battle. Consider this, in January, the Polaris Project released a report concluding that 9,000 brothels masquerade as legitimate massage businesses. There is probably more than one such "business" in your city! That is only in the United States. Come with me to Southeast Asia and I will show you brothel after brothel after brothel.

Let's be thankful, but continue to press hard—hard in prayer, hard in writing to Congress, hard in supporting organizations that are on the frontlines, hard in doing anything and everything we can to stop this evil in our day. In Matthew, Jesus tells us to remember "the least of these." While exactly who He refers to in that passage can be debated, there is no doubt from the whole of Scripture and from Jesus' life, we are to remember the lowest of the low.

Who is any lower than a child who is enslaved and forced into a life of prostitution? How can we not take action?

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