

Ministries Unite to Shatter the Travesty of Sex Trafficking

She wasn't kidnapped. She followed her heart.

Rebecca Bender was far from the average sex trafficking victim. She didn't grow up in foster care and was never an at-risk youth. In fact, she was a varsity athlete and boasted honor roll achievements in high school.

Likewise, her boyfriend seemed like an American-pie sort of guy. Bender met Sam (not his real name) after she moved to Oregon with her baby and a few friends. He was 24; she was 18.

"He was just gregarious and the one who everyone wanted to be his friend," Bender told *Charisma*. "All the girls wanted to be his, but he took an interest in me."

This "gregarious" boyfriend packed up Bender and her daughter, and the three moved to Las Vegas in 2000. Soon, Sam coerced her into selling sexual favors for his personal profit. Her boyfriend became her sex trafficker.

In a six-year period, she endured forced prostitution, broken bones, emergency room trips, brandings and a near-death experience. Bender still remembers the night a client asked her to lay on a bed pretending to be unconscious while he serviced himself in the corner. The recount is horrifying yet common to sex trafficking victims.

"I was lying there with my eyes closed when all of a sudden, he was on top of me, strangling me and raping me," Bender recalled as tears choked her voice. "I tried to fight him, but I couldn't. I remember thinking, *This is it, my baby's not going to have a momma*. My vision started to go blurry, and I

felt an overwhelming shaky feeling. Suddenly, he leapt out, jumped off and ran out of the room.”

It wasn’t until 2007 when Bender’s pimp was arrested, and she found herself encountering God inside the walls of a Christian shelter. “His voice wasn’t audible but a piercing thought that radically shifted my paradigm,” she recalls. “I still remember verbatim: ‘That feeling is the feeling of life, not death. It was Me who released his hands from around your neck.’”

That was nearly a decade ago. Today, Bender is an ordained minister pursuing her master’s degree at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Married with four daughters, she’s sounding the alarm about sex trafficking and helping the FBI and Homeland Security recognize and rescue victims—and there are millions of them.

The Human Trafficking Epidemic

The U.S. State Department defines trafficking as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage or slavery. The federal agency reveals 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders every year, of which 80 percent are female and half are children. Social activism site Do Something reports there are 20 to 30 million slaves in the world today.

The University of Pennsylvania’s Richard Estes and Neil Weiner conducted a case study revealing the most common age of entry into prostitution for minors in the United States is 12-14 years old for girls and 11-13 years old for boys—and as many as 300,000 children annually are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 6 endangered runaways reported to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in 2014

were likely sex trafficking victims.

While the statistics seem overwhelming, organizations like Exodus Cry actively seek to abolish the commercial sex industry in the United States and abroad. Exodus Cry also created the documentary *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls* to educate viewers about the evils of the commercial sex industry.

“The first thing that is important for people to realize is that the commercial sex industry is an institution of violence and exploitation,” says Exodus Cry Director Benjamin Nolot, who founded the organization in 2007 while on staff at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City.

Exodus Cry works through social and legal reform—and plenty of prayer. The ministry also works to identify the cultural, spiritual and industrial roots necessary to abolish the commercial sex industry.

“We recognize there is a vast spectrum of circumstances and various routes that can lead to the destination of exploitation,” says Exodus Cry Director of Intervention Helen Taylor. “From the American teenage runaway who is picked up by a trafficker and ends up being sold for sex over the Internet, to the Cambodian village girl offered a job as a waitress, only to find the ‘restaurant’ is in fact a brothel and she has no means of escape.”

How Porn Feeds the Sex Slavery Beast

Today’s slave trade shares many parallels with the African slave trade in centuries past. But slavery didn’t disappear with the likes of William Wilberforce or American abolitionists. Rather, it morphed into a different beast.

Nolot quoted Victor Hugo, whom he decreed a prophet of our time: “We say that slavery has vanished from European civilization, but this is not true. Slavery still exists, but

now it applies only to women, and its name is prostitution.”

Since 2010, Exodus Cry’s intervention team has hit the streets and strip clubs with gift bags or roses and a message of love and hope. The ministry also hosts events like Banquets and Beauty Pamper days. In 2013, Exodus Cry pioneered an outreach model to reach girls sold for sex online on websites like .

“The internet has swiftly become the world’s largest red-light district, and we knew that if the johns (prostitutes’ clients) could easily find women this way, so could we. In 2015, we began a Bible study program to sexually exploited girls in a local jail,” Taylor says. “Once off the streets and away from their pimps, drugs and the chaos of ‘the life,’ we’ve found jail to be an incredible ‘wilderness of encounter.’ A remarkable number of girls have met the Lord and been transformed.”

What many people don’t realize is pornography feeds the sex trafficking industry—and many Christians are feeding the slavery beast. According to Barna Group, 77 percent of Christian men aged 18 to 30 look at pornography at least monthly, 36 percent view pornography on a daily basis, and 32 percent admit being addicted to porn.

“Pornography serves as fuel for trafficking because of the way it grooms men to think about women and sex. Most people first experience porn as children, before developing the frontal cortex of their brain. This is the part of the brain where we learn to make judgments about things we see,” says Nolot. “Children are literally overwhelmed by these images, and it shapes the wet concrete of their sexuality.”

Shame can also fuel trafficking and the commercial sex industry, according to Christine Caine, who recently wrote the book *Unashamed* and works with sex trafficking victims through her ministry, A21.

“In a lot of our work with the girls in post-trauma therapy,

it's amazing how deep that shame runs, how they feel they are damaged goods," says Caine. "They think if God loved them, He wouldn't have let that happen, and that's where the lies come in. That just screams in their head nonstop. But really, how you overcome shame is unconditional love and grace in God, and that's the only way you can walk into your future."

What Christians Can Do to Stop Modern-Day Slavery

Annie Lobert—a sex-trafficking survivor who escaped in 2003 after a near-death experience and now leads Destiny House, a 12-month program to help free women from trafficking—urges the church to get more involved in issues like human trafficking.

"Part of sex trafficking has stemmed from the refusal to talk about real issues like porn addiction, like sex addiction or pedophilia addiction," Lobert says. "Any sexual sin has been taboo for our churches for hundreds if not thousands of years."

Nolot agrees. In his experience, the church will talk about anything but gender and sexuality. "We have to begin engaging our congregations on these weighty subject matters that are so central to our lives," he says. "In the absence of a clear voice from the church, other industries are having a profound impact on shaping how we think about what it means to be a sexual being in this world."

The power of prayer is also vital in setting the captives free, and engaging with the foster care system can create opportunities for churches to live out Christ's command to care for the orphans, reducing the victim count. If one family out of every three churches adopted a foster child, Nolot says, the church would clear out foster care. Partnering with ministries in the battle and sponsoring survivors are other ways to help.

"Jesus makes it clear that the authenticity of our faith is measured by our response to vulnerability," says Nolot. "We've

reduced Christianity to a belief system and code of moral ethics, but we've missed the fact that it is actually the practice of something. The God who guards the paths of justice sees this, and He is mobilizing His people to intervene and respond to the vulnerability of others out of an empathetic heart."

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Discover more about how God rescued Rebecca Bender from prostitution and sex trafficking at [.](#)