

How God Is Equipping His Church to Set the Sex-Trafficking Captives Free

She was only 5 years old when it first happened.

I sat beside my friend in the orange jumpsuit as she told me about her involvement in prostitution and drugs. She waited in the cold detention center exam room, facing yet another simple possession charge.

Her voice quivered as she told me how ashamed she felt. “I just made too many bad decisions,” she said. But she also said her mom first engaged in prostitution to keep the two from being homeless after they fled my friend’s abusive father. One night a man soliciting her mother offered to pay extra if she would allow her daughter to participate.

Before my friend had even begun kindergarten, her mother sold her for the first time.

The abuse never stopped. The older she got, the more frequently it occurred. Now she sat in the detention center, carrying the pain of more than 30 years of abuse, trafficking and exploitation.

Prior to my work with survivors through a South Carolina nonprofit dedicated to fighting sex trafficking and exploitation, I had a sensationalized, Hollywood picture of what sex trafficking looked like. I assumed it always involved kidnapping, being chained to a bed and auctions to the highest bidder—as portrayed in the film *Taken*. And while that does happen today, in the U.S., exploitation and trafficking are much more hidden.

Traffickers skillfully use force, fraud and coercion to

control their victims. They often look for individuals with vulnerabilities such as addiction, abandonment, mental illness, financial difficulty or past criminal activity, so they can easily manipulate and control them.

Most people are trafficked by someone they know rather than a stranger. In fact, traffickers are more commonly someone who has built trust with the victim—family members, significant others, peers, family friends and even faith leaders.

A common tactic of recruitment is to approach women by pretending to be a loving boyfriend and waiting six months to a year before ever pressuring them to have sex for money. I learned from local law enforcement that traffickers looking for women to prey on often scroll through online detention inmate lists, looking for women with charges such as unpaid child support.

Traffickers commonly get their victims involved in activities that make them more isolated and dependent. They often ruin their victims' credit and force them to take illegal drugs and break ties with friends and family.

Busting the Myths

Shockingly, many trafficked women do not even realize that they are being exploited and abused. Like me, they have a Hollywood idea of trafficking.

One girl I worked with told me confidently that she had not been trafficked, saying she was willing to engage in commercial sex because her boyfriend asked her to.

"Are you allowed to take days off?" I asked.

"No. I told my boyfriend once I wasn't going to the work the corner," she said. "He slapped me across the face and told me if I didn't have his quota when he got home, he would kill me."

Violence, threats of violence, fraud schemes and coercion are all common tactics used to enslave. This is also true of child victims, the crimes against whom are even more hidden than those against adults. More than 91% of domestic minor victims in the state of Georgia were enrolled in school at the time of their exploitation. Though they suffered horrible violence and abuse, these kids were not locked up in a basement somewhere. They came in contact each week with peers, teachers and administrators.

In Greenville, South Carolina, the most common type of child trafficking is familial trafficking, meaning the trafficker is a relative. It's the mom who allows the landlord to rape her 16-year daughter in exchange for the rent or the uncle who offers his middle-school nephew to his drug dealer as payment for his next fix. Even teens use peer pressure, sextortion, bullying and blackmail to traffic their peers. These are just some examples of what child trafficking looks like in America.

Boys are trafficked almost as commonly as girls. Because girls are much more likely than boys to disclose abuse, the narrative that only girls are victimized persists. The truth is that boys are also being sexually exploited, but many suffer in silence for years before telling anyone.

During my time working with survivors, I encountered so much pain. I sat with women in the emergency room while they waited to have a sexual assault forensic exam performed using a rape kit. I waited with them in the courtroom when they received the news that they must return to prison rather than receive the opportunity to go to drug rehabilitation. I held their hand when they cried over a miscarriage caused by a beating.

But there were beautiful moments too. I saw God's power at work as moms reunited with their kids after successfully graduating drug rehabilitation. I celebrated with women who had earned their GED certificates and gotten accepted into colleges. I even got to baptize one of the women I worked with

and see her passionately recommit her life to Jesus.

After several years of working with survivors, I couldn't resist the pull of the Holy Spirit. I knew I had to do more to protect children and prevent these injustices from happening. My husband, Rick, and I sold our home in South Carolina and moved just south of Atlanta, where we knew the need for prevention efforts was enormous.

I launched an organization called Illuminate Justice to implement strategic efforts to stop child trafficking with prevention education with children in juvenile detention and foster care. Eager to get churches involved, Rick founded Rejoice City Coffee, a roastery that specializes in church café accounts and gives profits back to ministries that fight trafficking. Both of these ministries were birthed out of a desperate prayer that no more children would suffer the violent, isolating injustices lived by all the survivors I've been honored to work with over the years.

Reaching for Solutions

When faced with a challenge as enormous as sex trafficking, we must believe God will use His people to make an impact and see His kingdom advance in the life of one person at a time. Of course, God does not call everyone to start their own anti-trafficking organization. But there are four major ways you and your church can end modern-day slavery for good.

1. Decide to resist. The first and most essential way to end modern-day slavery is to resist being a part of the problem. Trafficking exists because of the solicitation and consumption of pornography. Our society cannot end human trafficking while simultaneously creating the conditions that promote it. Trafficking continues because of the high demand for commercial sex. If our culture moves toward rejecting pornography and all forms of paid sexual behavior, then sex trafficking will cease to exist.

A simple supply-and-demand principle drives this industry. Traffickers work tirelessly to recruit victims because the high demand for commercial sex makes their work profitable. They see human beings as commodities. But if the demand dramatically decreases, traffickers will have no reason to lure victims.

Pornography also fuels the industry. As many as 50% of trafficking victims say images of them while being trafficked were used to create pornography. Businesses like Pornhub and MindGeek make millions of dollars annually, monetizing child trafficking, rape and videos that capture unspeakable violence against women.

Resist being complicit in the abuse of others and make a firm personal stand against soliciting or consuming pornography. Offer support groups within your community to help others who may struggle with sex addiction. And don't limit these groups to males only. Both men and women struggle with pornography addictions, so create safe places for healing in your churches.

2. Support solutions. Invest in projects to prevent trafficking and support care for survivors. Steward your resources in a way that radically blesses the most vulnerable. Give a monthly donation to a local anti-trafficking organization. Encourage members of your congregation to spend time with vulnerable youth in your area. Leverage your influence at the company where you work to provide human resources to a nonprofit that serves women and children. Your time, treasure and talent can make a huge impact in the effort to end slavery today.

3. Stay aware. Keep educating yourself on the injustices happening in your community today. Learn more about the problems your neighbors face and then move closer. I frequently say to educators and pastors, "The eye cannot see what the mind does not know," meaning that the more we learn

about trafficking and exploitation, the more apt we will be in seeing the signs and being moved to help.

For a great place to start, read *In Pursuit of Love: One Woman's Journey from Trafficked to Triumph* by Rebecca Bender, an amazing woman of faith who boldly empowers leaders to fight human trafficking. Her testimony captures the harsh realities of trafficking in the U.S. while providing insight into how believers can fight the injustices.

4. Work for reconciliation. Know trafficking is not an isolated social problem. Just as slavery in the 19th century was rooted in hate and racial oppression, so is trafficking today. Although people of every color and ethnicity are exploited, women of color are especially vulnerable. Not only are they disproportionately affected, but they are also much more likely to be treated as criminals instead of victims.

A recent FBI study showed that Black children comprised 59% of all prostitution arrests of those under 18 years of age—more than any other racial group. A Los Angeles County study of juveniles arrested for prostitution showed that Black girls comprised 92% of the arrestees even though they make up only 3% of the overall county population.

U.S. law prohibits children under the age of 18 from consenting to commercial sex. The church must lament over and demand reform when white child victims of trafficking receive various social services, but Black child victims are taken to jail. God calls the church to the ministry of reconciliation. As Christians in America, we must be a firm voice of justice and equity in every situation. We must do the hard work of taking down the stronghold of oppression that exists today and pursuing racial justice if we are to end modern-day slavery.

Grieving Into Change

While living in South Carolina, I had a long commute to most of the jails I visited in my ministry to serve survivors of

trafficking. The time alone in the car let me start the day's ministry with a Christian podcast, favorite sermon or worship jam session. The long ride home gave me the space to grieve, cry all over my steering wheel, intercede and let God know this wasn't OK. Those long commutes gave my heavenly Father time to break my heart over the things that also break His and became the launching place for what would come next.

When Rick and I first began to feel the Holy Spirit's prompting to uproot our family and move to Georgia, I felt scared, but Jesus kept showing us that life with Him is such an extraordinary adventure. It was this revelation that prompted us to lay down our lives for those most in need.

Packing up the moving truck and driving south toward Atlanta was a simultaneously scary and exhilarating experience. We were making a radical move, rooted in the faith that God would see our lives as an offering from which He would receive, bless and receive glory. We were compelled to say yes to His calling. This calling is not free from pain, suffering or sacrifice, but it is free of regret—and full of joy. You never regret bravery, and you never desire less joy.

Rick and I are in new territory now, looking every day for the lost kids, the ones who have been neglected or thrown away. Though our work challenges us deeply, we have the comfort of being guided by the best shepherd—the one who has so beautifully shown us what it looks like to leave the 99 and find the one. Our prayer is always, *“Lord, every day we are blessed with breath, give us Spirit-birthed eyes to see the lost and vulnerable ones, and help us be brave in the rescue.”*

One person, one family or even one church could never meet the vast need that lies before us. However, I believe that as everyday Christians like us rise in faith and arm ourselves with a willingness to do hard things. We will serve those being abused. God will work through us, and we will see a day when this scourge of sex trafficking can be eradicated from

our nation. I am working toward a day when we have no more stories to tell of 5-year-old boys and girls who were violated, exploited and abused. My prayer is that you would hear God's call and say yes to whatever He is calling you.

READ MORE: For additional content that highlights the dangers of human trafficking, visit [. {eo}](#)

Maggie Turner is the executive director of *Illuminate Justice*, a nonprofit organization committed to ending child trafficking. Her husband, Rick, is the founder and CEO of *Rejoice City Coffee*, which gives 10% of its profits to the fight against sex trafficking. Learn more about their work by connecting on Instagram [@illuminatejustice](#) and [@rejoicecitycoffee](#).

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