

Trafficking Children: Recruitment and Extraction

Only on rare occasions will a sex trafficker abduct a child from a neighborhood that enjoys social power. Doing so carries too high a risk. A family from an empowered community is more apt to mobilize legal and political authorities to conduct an extensive search for an abducted child. If caught, recruiters face a higher probability of prosecution and place their entire operation at risk. Why would recruiters take that risk when so many candidates can be found in relatively powerless neighborhoods?

Furthermore, recruiters can deceive destitute families more easily with promises of a better life. The allure of a steady job may cause parents to overlook the risks of sending their child off to a faraway destination. Teenagers might be promised a modeling job in another country or less glamorous, yet high-paying work in a restaurant or a retail store. Parents of young children in the rural areas are told that a wealthy family in the big city needs a domestic servant or a nanny. These offers are crafted to extract children from the reaches of those who might care for them. Recruiters have no intention of fulfilling their promises of course; they intend to sell the children to a brothel owner at their first opportunity. But their game depends on maintaining the illusion of a golden path out of the depressed conditions that the families face.

In that regard, lower-middle-class families with heightened aspirations can be as vulnerable to traffickers as the most impoverished family. A shortcut to upward social mobility holds tremendous appeal.

Consider the case of Lan, a seventeen-year-old Laotian girl living in Bangkok. Her mother migrated to Thailand with Lan and her two siblings when the children were all under ten years old. The mother worked in a local street market, and the children contributed to the family business. Years passed, and the family's hard work lifted them out of dire poverty. Lan works today in a luxury tourist hotel in Bangkok as a waitress. She owns her own car and a modest wardrobe of fashionable western clothes.

Lan has tasted enough of the "good life" to entertain aspirations for an even more glamorous lifestyle. Her best friend met an American visiting Bangkok on a business trip, and he occasionally sends her friend a plane ticket to meet him in some exotic holiday spot. The American recently invited Lan along and sent her a plane ticket, too. Despite the prevalence of sex trafficking in Thailand, this invitation did not raise a red flag for Lan. She in fact aspires to find a "friend" who will offer her nice gifts and travel like her friend receives. It will be only a matter of time before a well-heeled trafficker will ensnare Lan unless her attitude changes.

Parents with material aspirations are at times willing to put their children in dangerous situations. It is not uncommon for parents to deliver a child to a recruiter even when they are fully aware that the child will be exploited sexually. The recruiter might pay the parents a cash advance for their child's future earnings, with the promise of more payments to come. For their part, recruiters make these arrangements so that they can establish a steady trade in a region. Neighbors will witness the recruiter's credibility, as well as

the financial rise of the family that has sold their child, and will become more willing to sell their own children.

Abolitionists fighting sex trafficking in both Southeast Asia and Latin America report that parents commonly sell their kids so that they can make an improvement on their home or purchase a vehicle or other consumer item. These stories align with a report in the New York Times that parents in Albania sold their children to traffickers so that they could buy a color television.

Nonetheless, the sex trafficker who deals in children usually wants to extract recruits from their home region as expeditiously as possible. When kidnapping is involved, the trafficker has more reason to fear arrest. Even if the parents of the abducted child do not get involved, an adult relative or friend may advocate for the child and press the police to take action.

An anonymous individual who bears the stigma of “child prostitute,” on the other hand, is much less likely to have an advocate. Foreign children evoke even less sympathy than those who share the nationality or ethnicity of the mainstream population. For that reason, traffickers typically shift child slaves to the other side of the country or, even more effectively, across an ocean.

In that regard, Save the Children investigators discovered that kids who are trafficked from the rural regions of Peru become invisible to law enforcement officials in the capital: “It is alarming to view the impunity with which networks trafficking in minors operate in [Lima], in full view of authorities who not only do nothing, but who . . . also do not consider that children and adolescents are people who need to be defended and protected.”

The testimony of nine-year-old Guadalupe in Lima illustrates a more unusual case: how a parent and a trafficker might work together as allies. Guadalupe’s mother had made a financial arrangement with a pimp “to employ” her daughter. As a way to introduce very young girls into sex commerce, pimps in Lima commonly place them on the street only to tempt passing clients. Once a john stops and inquires of her availability, the pimp will bring in a slightly older, more experienced girl to turn the trick. This bait-and-switch role does not last long, especially once the pimp has made a tidy sum selling the young girl (usually multiple times) as a virgin.

Guadalupe fortunately met a street counselor from Lima-based Generación before the pimp had the opportunity to sell her off as a virgin. She moved into one of Generación’s high-security shelters where the pimp could not touch her. Guadalupe’s mother then visited the shelter and demanded, “I want my daughter back!” At great institutional risk, Generación denied the mother her request; the staff knew what Guadalupe’s fate would be if they relented.

Neither Generación nor any other child service agency wants to be in a position where it has to wrestle with parents over the well-being of their child. But abolitionists have to deal with an uncomfortable truth: Not every parent has come to the firm conviction that a child, their child, is not for sale.

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