

## **Sex trafficking myths perpetuate the scourge**

By Diana Pressey

When people hear the words “sex trafficking,” they might think of the movie “Taken,” or abducted women who are physically unable to leave their attackers. But contrary to popular belief, sex trafficking is rarely this clear-cut. Victims’ experiences vary significantly, and sometimes, they don’t always come down to a lack of physical choice.

The lack of choice can be psychological, according to Meghan Sobel, who is an assistant professor at Regis University, a global media researcher and a human rights advocate. Sobel delved into what it really means to be trafficked for sex in her TedxTalk, “Sex trafficking isn’t what you think it is.”

She explained that it is easy to mistake trafficking for “the Hollywood version,” which entails “people being kidnapped and chained to beds.”

“By definition, trafficking means forced work,” Sobel said. “A victim of sex trafficking is someone who is forced to work in the sex industry against his or her will.”

This is a definition that seems common-sense. But the key word that is frequently misunderstood, according to Sobel, is “forced.” She said sometimes, it is not a person forcing the victim, but circumstances. For these kinds of victims, there is no other feasible option.

“The idea of choice can be difficult to pinpoint,” Sobel said. “It can be easy for people outside of the situation to confuse the appearance of choice with actual choice.”

She brought up the example of a man named Oi who was trafficked as a child in Thailand. He was born into a rural hill-tribe whose members are ethnic minorities and experience great discrimination.

Children in Thailand are typically expected to be financially responsible for their families. Sobel explained that since his parents were from Myanmar, Oi was considered “stateless,” meaning he wasn’t a citizen of any country, making it extremely difficult to find gainful employment.

“Without citizenship in Thailand, you can’t go to public school, you can’t access healthcare, and you can’t move freely outside of your province,” she said. “As a result, Oi’s options for earning money were very limited. When he was 12 years old, he followed an older boy from his village to the northern Thailand city of Chiang Mai seeking work.”

He tried selling flowers at first, but it was not enough. He followed another boy to a bar, which turned out to be “situated in the heart of Chiang Mai’s Red Light District, filled with young boys just like Oi,” who “eventually, extremely reluctantly followed in the footsteps of the other boys,” Sobel said.

She said that Oi was a victim of sex trafficking, even if his story does not align with most people’s definition of it: he entered the sex industry because he had no other choice. He was forced by circumstance.

Oi isn’t the only victim of sex trafficking whose story diverges from the typical Hollywood narrative.

Children like Oi living in unstable conditions are extremely vulnerable to sex trafficking. According to NPR, 60 percent of child victims recovered in an FBI 70-city sex trafficking raid were from group homes or had lived in foster care.

Homelessness and extreme poverty are also major risk factors, according to World Without Exploitation, a community of advocacy organizations that work to eliminate sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Autumn Burris, a survivor of human trafficking, founder of Survivors for Solutions, writer and international speaker, demonstrated this with her story, which she told to World Without Exploitation.

“Before I was even an adult, I was at risk,” Burris said. “A lifetime of grooming by society and unintentionally by my family made me vulnerable. My childhood years were centered on a dependence on men for money. Homelessness and substance abuse made me even more susceptible.”

She said the idea of prostitutes having control is a misconception, as they cannot control buyers’ actions.

“My only goal was to escape each situation alive,” she said. “No one should be punished for the crime of not having options. Society needs to let go of the myths and listen to survivors.”

In addition to youths in insecure living situations, victims of childhood sexual or physical abuse are also extremely vulnerable to trafficking.

Tiffany Mester and Tom Jones are survivors who were abused at a young age. Mester works at a treatment facility for high-risk youth and on the board of Hidden Treasures,

which supports female trafficking victims. Jones is the founder and director of The H.O.P.E. Project, which helps male victims recover from sexual abuse and trafficking.

Both of their stories do not fit popular narratives. They were both heavily abused as young children and perceived as prostitutes at many points throughout their lives. But prostitute is not the right word to describe their experiences: they were trafficked.

Mester's childhood abuse was physical and extensive at the hands of her family.

"Accepting the worst was all I knew how to do," Mester said. "When your loved ones exploit you, where do you go?"

She ran away with her older sister, who taught her "to turn tricks." Mester said she felt trapped. Eventually, her mother sent her to a youth recovery program, but then she met an older man who groomed and trafficked her for sex.

"I would do anything to maintain his love," she said. "Soon he started putting me on the street and then imposed quotas on me. I walked the streets after school, unsuspecting with my backpack, just another kid waiting for the bus ... Everything belonged to him; I only had a few changes of clothes and no money."

She said manipulation played a major role in her story.

"I had been brainwashed to believe it was my choice," Mester said. "My pimp and I were a family unit, and I thought I was contributing to my family."

"It's hard not to be defined by your trauma," she said. "I saw my reflection and hear my stepmom's voice in my head, 'You're worthless, nothing more than a prostitute.'"

Mester said that people must take action and give trafficking survivors a reason not to return to their traffickers, even if they feel attached. She said it's crucial to convey to trafficking survivors that "they have immeasurable value, and this does not define them."

Jones' story is similar, but it began with his father molesting him at the age of six and later selling him to other men

"So many prostituted or trafficked people have a story that started the same way," Jones said. "You want your parents to love you. The last thing I wanted my dad to do was think that I was a bad person. It wasn't hard to convince me to comply with everything he had me do. It wasn't very long at all where another man came to the house and he was allowed to molest me as well."

He said that he was unsure whether people outside the situation knew, but if they did, they didn't want to confront it because they didn't know how.

He explained that later, after escaping his father and spending four years in the Navy as an adult, he turned back to the world he knew because he did not feel that he had any other option.

“I found myself in the world of prostitution,” he said. “Nobody really wants to be out there on the streets. Every time that someone would pick me up, I would always ask them, ‘Do you know anyone that’s hiring? I need a job. I’ve got some skills.’ I was networking, I actually was networking. I didn’t want to be out there.”

Both Mester and Jones were initially trafficked by people, then found themselves unable to leave the world of sexual exploitation thanks to circumstance. This is the narrative of sex trafficking that media and conversations typically neglect: it occurs across a broad spectrum of situations, and the conditions of those situations can determine everything.

Sobel said to combat circumstance-based trafficking, people must confront the roots of the issue, or the “broader social, political and economic web of issues that create such problems,” and help others.

“Given that sex trafficking is often the result of poverty and inequality, it is very easy for people to get involved in lessening those things in their communities,” she said.

“Volunteer to tutor kids in lower-performing schools. Like I said in the talk, advocate for policy changes that bring about equality in things like education and healthcare. Clean up playgrounds that are in need of a revamp.

“Things like drawing an “X” on your hand and posting it to social media with some sort of ‘end trafficking’ hashtag won’t bring about much change, but working to promote equality will.”