What Is Human Trafficking?

Trafficking in persons, also known as human trafficking or modern slavery, is (The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other form of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.


The Muted Groups Theory

The Muted Groups Theory (Ardener, 1975) provides a critical anthropological theory to describe those who are considered powerless, or marginalized, in traditional social and community structures. It was first applied to women as a group, but has since been applied to many non-dominant groups.

Research Purpose

There is an important linkage between the two ideas; in muting, one’s voice is taken, and in trafficking, one is forced, coerced or tricked into a trafficking situation. In the case of trafficking, the dominant voices are those of the traffickers, and the muted voices are those of the trafficked people.

By conducting interviews with advocacy groups working directly with trafficked people, I hope to identify communication processes around trafficked people, anti-trafficking advocates, with special focus on media (movies, news, music) and public conceptions of trafficking.

Preliminary Findings*

Confidential and Institutional Review Board-approved interviews are ongoing with people working or volunteering with anti-trafficking organizations and groups to inform my master’s thesis. These quotes, taken directly from interviews, are representative of findings.

Sex Trafficking is By Far the Most Recognized Form of Trafficking

“There’s a lot of focus from a lot of organizations on sex trafficking and sex trafficking of women. That’s such a big piece of this, but it is very important to us that we not only talk about that [trafficking] affects males and females, adults and children, and cover all the types of trafficking. There’s a lot of people focusing on pimp control ... I think it’s really dangerous, literally dangerous to only promote that, because that means the public is not looking out for other things. There’s some studies out there that say that estimating that 50 percent commercial exploitation are males. If locally, people aren’t seeing that, that’s what it is but that doesn’t mean it’s not happening. If you’re not looking for that, then you’re not going to see it. That’s just critical, and we have to provide more thorough education.”

Media (Movies, Music, News, Social Media) Contributes to Trafficking Myths and Fears

“I think that there’s still that myth that’s been perpetuated by movies like “Taken” that people get snatched up in foreign countries. The truth is that this has been happening forever, but now we’re in the place where we’re starting to understand the dynamics behind prostitution. We’ve always assumed as a society that this was a choice, and if they’re doing these kinds of behaviors, we made assumptions as a society that these women were making a choice. The more we were starting to engage with victims, people realized “Wow there’s more than that.” They may have been victimized sexually, or physically assaulted ... Spouse trafficking, a boyfriend pimping out his girlfriend, survival trafficking, you don’t see that really depicted in the media, you don’t see that explained well...That’s a really straightforward victimization, but there’s a whole lot more nuance to their stories, and it’s hard to portray that, harder to tell that story.”

Freedom From Trafficking Situations is Only the First Step

“It’s a small number that don’t go back into the lifestyle or addiction. As far as long-term success stories, there’s not a way to know because the psychology is hard to break. [They] might successfully prosecute an offender, but that doesn’t keep that trafficked person from getting back into unhealthy relationships ... That doesn’t mean we give up, because it’s an everyday battle, and crime never goes away ... You have to believe that even if what I’ve said to them today, one day in some point, they knew things could be different.”

“Survivors” is the Often the Preferred Term for Formerly Trafficked People

“...Our goal is not to just make them survivors, but to help with an intentional metamorphosis ... Many have endured unimaginable trauma from childhood on, learning how to identify as a survivor but also an overcomer.”

*Interviews are ongoing; this information is current as of March 2019. Full results to be published in my upcoming master’s thesis.

References
