

An Internal Ethical Revolution
Hillary Jones

Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person. (Mother Theresa)

Rhoda Kershaw knew she wanted to be a singer since age eleven. When she received a standing ovation after a church solo, singing became her dream. It all seemed to become a reality at age seventeen, when a talent agent approached her with an offer, with the only requirement that she had to start her career in Japan. Seeing the door of opportunity wide open before her, she left for Japan just after her eighteenth birthday.

Rhoda lived in Japan for some time, where she found herself not performing on stage but working as a hostess at a night club attended by men in organized crime. One night she accepted a drink from one of the men, unaware that it was spiked, and her life was changed forever.

She awoke with naked Japanese mafia members around her. They locked her in a small bedroom and for three days the men brutally raped her. She managed to escape and find someone who would take her in off the street. She wrote, “In my naïveté I never imagined such sickness or evil existed.”¹

Unfortunately this is not a rare occurrence in the world today. Millions of women and children have been forced into slavery over the past decade, and the numbers continue to climb. How did this happen to Rhoda, and the countless others, in light of a decades-old international ban on slavery? Recently there has been an increased awareness of the world of human trafficking. We need an ethical revolution to begin within each of us, as we are morally complicit and obliged to act against this callous world of slavery.

In 1839, England founded the world’s first international abolitionist group. Twenty-four years later, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Civil War tore apart our own nation in an act to protect those who were mistreated and disrespected. In 1910,

the United States passed the Mann Act out of fear of ‘white slavery’ and, “this act prohibited unmarried women to cross state lines for ‘immoral’ purposes.”² The Immigration Act of 1924 and the Temporary Quota Act of 1921 led the way to strengthening U.S. borders and restricted the migration of immigrants from Europe and Asia. Such measures helped to lessen the prevalence of trafficking at the time. The 1949 UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and Exploitation of Prostitution of Others was the first international instrument that dealt with the issue of trafficking as forced prostitution. After this historic legislation, human trafficking has never been such a burning and insidious international issue until the recent 1990s.³

Despite legislation to protect individuals from slavery and forced prostitution, many continue treating people as property. The Fourteenth Amendment states that persons have the right to “life, liberty, and property,” and U.S. society has never regarded persons as property. Unfortunately, some ethics do not consider all human beings as persons. Personhood denotes being a member of the “moral community.” I base personhood on an ontological perspective, meaning that all human beings are human persons. I also believe that there is no such thing as a “potential person” or a “human non-person” regardless of disability, race, ethnicity, gender or any other attributes one could list in order to define personhood.

I know that not everyone shares my beliefs. Genocides, rapes and murders occur all over the world, and those who commit these crimes cannot be in agreement with my own convictions. So I must ask the question, what happens when people treat others as property rather than people, when people use one another as a means to an end? In 2006, the U.S. State Department estimated that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked globally every year. Within this estimate, approximately 80% are women and girls, and up to 50% are children⁴.

The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crimes reveals that human trafficking earns an estimated \$7 billion to \$10 billion a year.⁵ Trafficking of persons has become the third highest illegal practice internationally after drugs and weapons smuggling. Almost certainly the principal reason this business has grown is that human trafficking, especially for sex, has become a “lucrative underground activity.”⁶ Drug and weapons smugglers can only sell an item of their chosen contraband once. A sex trafficker can prostitute a woman or child repeatedly in one evening and make an enormous profit, without suffering any financial loss.

The United States has known of the existence of this industry for years and is trying to resolve the problem. Yet I am continually shocked at the number of people who remain unaware of this crisis, or worse, have denied its severity. If we are a leading nation currently engaging in this issue, why are there not more Americans with an understanding of these horrific acts occurring in our nation, let alone around the world? In 2000, President Bill Clinton passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) and in December 2003, President George W. Bush signed the Trafficking of Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, committing another \$200 million to fight sexual slavery for the following two years.

The U.S. State Department has created a *Trafficking In Persons Report* to monitor nations of interest around the world implicated in human trafficking, whether countries of origin, transport, or destination. The State Department uses a tier system and annually assesses the government response of countries with a significant number of victims of the most severe forms of human trafficking. The foundation of the tiers is the governmental effort to stop trafficking.

Our government created this tier system with good intentions, but unfortunately it is not enough to deter trafficking in most countries. It acts as more of a public embarrassment than as an actual consequence of failing to comply with the TVPA’s minimum standards. The countries

that remain in the Tier 3 (meaning they are doing nothing to comply with the TVPA) are subject to certain sanctions and the U.S. withdrawal of “non-humanitarian related, non-trade-related foreign assistance.”⁷ However, Saudi Arabia is one of fourteen countries listed in Tier 3 in 2008, and they are one of our allies. Even more interesting, the United States is on the list of top eleven destination countries for human trafficking, yet does not include itself in this report.⁸ Destination countries have the wealth and demand for this industry; they keep it going.

This crisis is growing and has become enmeshed in all corners of the globe. In the United States we remain physically cut off from the troubles of other countries around the world by distance. The Pacific and Atlantic oceans provide us with a “moat” that permits us to sit back with our “drawbridge” up and watch the struggles of other nations at a secure distance, leaving us with a sense of no obligation to help. This distance comes with a price: we have easily fooled ourselves into the philosophy that there is nothing we can do from so far away. The distance dulls the sting we should feel for another nation’s plight, and is not an acceptable excuse for disregarding this issue.

It should not be about countries, distance, or politics; but about humanity and lives, and ensuring that people treat one another with equal respect. Regrettably, there will always be malicious acts against humanity that we cannot prevent, despite our best efforts. Does this mean we should refuse to take action? My own convictions lead me to believe that when we witness such ill-treatment of people against one another, we not only should act, but we must act. We are obliged to help others to the best of our own capabilities, even in the smallest measure. We are all persons and we all belong to the same “moral community,” and are required to do what is morally right for one another.

Even with this obligation we cannot deny that distance does affect us, and enables us to be insensitive to the empathy we should feel for others in anguish. However, 14,500 to 17,500 human trafficking victims make their way to the U.S. each year.⁹ Many feel that these numbers are gross underestimates, with the numbers really between 50,000 and 100,000.¹⁰ We cannot turn our backs to the existence of this evil any longer.

Are people willfully ignorant, or are they just insensitive to the suffering of victims? Not twenty minutes away in the next town from where I live, police have identified a massage parlor where women and children are taken for prostitution. Yet people who work across the street are ignorant or numb to what goes on before their very eyes. If they know about the prostitution and do nothing, they are surely complicit in the harm that befalls these innocent women and children. We can no longer dull the pain of trafficking with the analgesic of distance when we know it happens in our own back yard.

“Every two to four years the world looks away from a victim count on the scale of Hitler’s Holocaust.”¹¹ When people discovered what was happening with the Holocaust, they acted to help these innocent people get out of their turmoil. Yet, every two to four years we start the victim count over and go through another cycle, equivalent in number to the Holocaust. It appears that current efforts are not enough. We have legislation and many non-governmental organizations to address this menacing problem. However, even with these positive forces we cannot as individuals sit back and let others try to clean up the mess. Everyone needs to get their hands dirty if we would shut down this industry.

The increased demand for cheap labor workers and sex has caused the recent rise in trafficking in the U.S. We Americans have actually created a demand for the industry. Any place there is a “swell of men” such as sporting events or political rallies, traffickers take

enslaved women and children to turn a profit.¹² Basic economics tells us that an increase in demand will require an increase in supply. One of the biggest drawbacks to current legislation on human trafficking is the focus on the supply, e.g. victims and criminals, of trafficking, not the demand. Any form of legislation will have unintended negative consequences. I fear that the negative consequence will be to forget the demand side of the economics of trafficking, and to focus purely on the supply.

Men seem to want something “different,” and therefore they pay for exotic women. These women come from other countries and make their way to destination countries like the United States. Men also want virgins, or “clean” women, and so traffickers are using younger women; this has led to the use of children in the industry as well.¹³

In many countries men buy prostitutes for one another, and even in the U.S. men go to strip clubs as a form of celebration for some achievement. In our society, we view this as nothing more than “boys being boys” and never think twice about it. This acceptance must change. People view the male biological desire for sex as something uncontrollable, and therefore equate this desire with an acceptance of paying for sexual acts. One cannot doubt the sexual needs of men as innate; however buying sex is not an innate trait. It is an action society has created and accepted over the passage of time.

One attempt to validate the purchase of commercial sex is the excuse that men do not realize they are contributing to the trafficking industry. This plays into the myth that women “like it” or “get paid a lot of money for it.” The choice to solicit sexual acts lies in men’s hands regardless if a woman chooses the industry or someone forces her into it. Because men always have the choice, and not the women, there must be a significant change in our ethics.¹⁴

The average john (male who solicits sex) is around the age of thirty, married, with a full time job, and has no previous criminal record. He can be any nationality or race. Most johns are ashamed of themselves for their acts and never go back after the first purchase, yet some truly have a sexual addiction as well as other psychological problems. A habitual buyer may use prostitutes over one hundred times since starting the habit. If therapy could help these men and end their use of prostitutes, there would be a significant decrease in demand for sex trafficking.

Society itself contributes to this problem. Studies show that pornography desensitizes the sexual objectification of women after repeated viewing.¹⁵ If society viewed pornography and commercial sex more negatively, sex trafficking would decline as the demand decreases. An ethical revolution against commercial sex would be cyclical. If our society was less accepting of commercial sex, it would not be as easy for men to solicit it. If men did not solicit sex as often, society would have no reason to accept this and the norms would change. In order for our society to truly change, we should make these changes in our own lives, and also pass these views on to our children. Parents should raise their boys to respect women and to never objectify them, and should raise their daughters to know and believe they are worth more than their sexuality.

“It takes a whole pornified village to instill the idea into young girls’ minds that their worth is wrapped entirely in their sexual availability to men.”¹⁶ In many other countries, girls are actually encouraged to join the sex industry as a way to help their families out financially. Despite personal objections, they often succumb to the industry as the familial pressure is too much to bear. These women do not have the support system to keep themselves out of the sex industry, nor do they have a lifeline once there.

We may prevent some women from falling into the industry with better education and awareness of the hidden dangers of sex trafficking. Unfortunately, women living in poverty do

not have the best support system and are easily deceived by false promises and job offers, as in the case of Rhoda. We should change the misconception that women choose this life, and since this is clearly not the case. We should stop treating the commercial sex industry as “a part of life” and face the truth: women and children suffer abuse and trauma daily because of our rationalizations. Regardless of what our leaders wrote long ago, slavery is not dead in this country.

If Rhoda had been more aware and informed about the dangers of sex trafficking, she might not have chosen to go to Japan. She might have avoided such trauma at her young age, a trauma that took fifteen years to overcome.¹⁷ Fortunately, some U.S. legislation is in place to address this global problem, but it is obviously not enough – thousands of women and children are trafficked into the United States annually, and between 2000 and 2004 only 265 people were rescued from slavery.¹⁸ In 2004, U.S. State Department figures reveal only about 3,000 successful convictions of criminals worldwide for crimes related to trafficking.¹⁹

People should not be treated as commodities, and when this occurs others must step in. Our society desperately needs an “ethical makeover.” It is simple to blame one another for the existence of this industry, but we ourselves are to blame for not speaking up to prevent this backslide into ethical darkness.

For those that choose to violate the ethical standard, we each have a responsibility to stop them. For the victims of trafficking, we must help them. I believe that enlightened people may surprise themselves with their potential. My desire is that we can see where we have slipped ethically and can react with shame. Each one of us is culpable for the lives of women and children enslaved for another’s selfish gain. We now have the resources and the information to start this revolution; it is up to each of us to decide what to do about it.

References:

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