

Girl Child Trafficking: A Great Violation Of Human Rights

Story By: Frederick. H

**N**o matter where you are born, no matter where you live and regardless of your social and economic status, we are all human beings. As human beings, we should respect human dignity. Human dignity is grounded in our existence and therefore, no one has a right to decide on whether one should be treated with dignity or not. Sincerely, there is no reason to de-humanize others for selfish financial or material gains. While reflecting on the mission statements of Prince Wako Foundation, this particular extract struck me. “…look towards an environment…with minimized obstacles for every girl child and every remote community…” Fast forward, I want you to relate that extract with the benefits of fighting against trafficking and enslavement of girls and women in our communities. Think of the impact this would have on their education, their dignity, their contribution to the development of society and their access to basic utilities – Name it. Call it modern-day slavery, *trafficking in persons* is a complex global vice that has greatly violated human rights across all continents. Trafficking happens anywhere, people can be trafficked in their own country. A case in point. Early this year, Ugandan newspapers were flooded with stories related to the kidnapping and murder of Susan Magara, a daughter of a local businessman. The kidnappers received the ransom asked for, but still gruesomely murdered the Innocent girl. They cut off her finger and sent it to the parents, 21 days later they dumped her body a few meters off the road at Kitiko, Wakiso District. It should be noted, Girls and Women make up the majority of the victims.

Have you ever noticed something *out of the ordinary*? Have you ever tried to get to the bottom of that, ‘*out of the ordinary’*scenario? If you have never, it is high time you started doing so, you never know how many innocent lives you could save. Think of these storylines, ‘a young poorly dressed girl, cannot make any eye contact with anyone, but she is getting onto a plane with a well-dressed man who is overly protective of her’ – It sounds odd, right? Look at this other one. ‘When you have a trafficker waiting at home with your child, that says if you do not bring back a certain amount of money, then your child will be killed. If you get robbed, it is your fault, if you get raped, it is your fault. You incur more punishment for allowing these things to happen to you. So you always live in fear of your trafficker and resultantly, prostitution for his sake.’ Before delving deep into the ingredients of trafficking in persons, I will share the following story.

A brave and strong beautiful girl that survived trafficking and enslavement. For the sake of safety, her true identity shall not be revealed. “I was born to my mother when she was fourteen, my father was nineteen. After I was born …umm a lot of things went down. My father was distant…umm, my mother was an alcoholic, she had a boy, my first brother, his father was more of a father to me, she broke up with him and started dating another man who molested me when I was eight.” I looked at her and saw perseverance in her eyes, she narrated with a sense of heroism. “I told my mother about the molesting, but she seemed not to get the idea that there was something really wrong with that. Then I told the school authorities, they kept me there that night. After counseling, I demonstrated what was happening to me in front of the police, which was very hard.” She says, her mother definitely was called, but instead stood at the back screaming – drunk. In the end, Nisha was put in different foster homes until they placed her with her biological father. The relationship she had with her mother caused her to go on suicide watch but luckily, she got past it on noticing the pattern in her mother’s behavior, the woman was never going to change. Referring to her mother, she continued. "She got pregnant by my molester, so my youngest brother is fathered by my molester. Which is another secret that I have had to keep but, it has been hard for me."

She set the foundation for our discussion and narrated more. “When I was fourteen, I…umm decided to stay a little late at school…umm with some friends. They decided to go their separate ways and I decided to go my separate way home. There was a car that pulled up, the driver pulled up and said…hey do you need a ride... and I was like no I am alright.” Nisha says the guy drove the car and came back around, then pulled out a gun and threatened to shoot her if she did not get into the car. Terrified as she was, she got into the car, her kidnapper pushed her head down. He drove for some long hours, she feared for her life. “Finally we got to this big house, there was this big lady, the house was full of girls, everything did not seem right. So he explained everything to me, the rules and told me I was going to ‘hawk’ for him. I didn’t even know what that meant – He was the gorilla pimp. I was forced into it but other girls found it easy because they were connected by friends. I had to watch what the other girls did and do exactly that, prostitution. Going out there to make money for him, if I didn't, that was trouble." In doing this forced prostitution, she thought she had found a way of breaking free from her abusive step-father and the alcoholic mother who became violent when drunk. Several times she was arrested and thrown into jail, it became a cycle she could not break. “I got pregnant at sixteen. I did not know if I was going to keep the baby or let it go or if it was going to change me or make me worse, but I could not do anything but try. I did not go back into prostitution, I was like, this is my baby, I have to do something, this is someone that is going to love me for me and I don’t have to give her anything but a kiss and a hug and it was so wonderful and she changed my life a lot.” The pregnancy was a blessing in disguise, it pushed her towards giving up prostitution. Nevertheless, her childhood, her education, her dignity, had been wounded.

The big question therefore is, what is your understanding of trafficking in persons? Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines *trafficking in persons* as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of 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 forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or services similar to slavery, servitude or removal of organs. From this, we identify three ingredients; the act that is done, e.g. recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons. Secondly, the means – how it is done. By threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim. Thirdly the purpose, why it is done, for exploitation. Exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery and removal of organs.

Such a universal definition brings consistency and should remind all of us – trafficking must be criminalized. In Uganda, We have the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons act 2009. This act criminalizes trafficking and gives legal provisions on the protection of victims of trafficking in persons. The Penal code of Uganda supplements the act, it criminalizes the processes of trafficking in persons, e.g. offenses against liberty, offenses against a person etc. The International Labor Organization, *A Global Alliance Against Forced Labor Geneva 2005,* opined that the most visible form of exploitation is for sexual purposes and approximately 79% of trafficking victims are trafficked for sexual exploitation, these being women and girls. This is so because many are trying to run away from poverty and thus experience economic desperation where they have limited opportunities and face gender-based violence. So with deception and promises for a better future, traffickers easily lure innocent girls into the habits of prostitution. Others Like Nisha are abducted on their way to or from school, losing their opportunity to have a consistent and progressive education.

Once the girls are under the custody of their traffickers, they are trapped and victimized. In case they try to resist, they are physically abused and tortured in order to submit to abusive orders. This is not only a gross abuse of human rights but a recipe for sexual and psychological abuse. It looks like these realities are farfetched, but remember the traffickers employ all kinds of techniques to lure their victims. They know they stand to earn a lot from such deals. The International Labor Organization estimates, over US$30 billion is generated in profits by traffickers every year – what a figure! These traffickers will make all kinds of fake promises and peddle lies, they will corrupt border guards just to make sure their plans succeed. They are so ruthless.

Never the less, we cannot sit back and relax because the vice is complex. We must do something to fight this. We can start with our immediate environment, eventually the impact of our small efforts will spread like a wildfire. The impact will definitely be felt given the effectiveness of our persistent efforts.

We can create awareness of the vice in our local communities through national campaigns. In Uganda, country wide campaigns are carried out by the government and Prince Wako foundation is beaming to add impetus to such efforts. With several local radio stations broadcasting in different local languages, the messages of the threat of human trafficking have trickled down the villages, keeping locals alert. These efforts should not die, they should grow louder every day.

Victims of trafficking must be identified, rehabilitated and integrated into the society. With their experiences, they can aid and give clues to authorities, adding impulse into the need to be aware of the vice and act immediately in response to suspicious persons or activities. Remember the odd scenario in the second paragraph.

Awareness events should be held in vulnerable communities e.g. girls’ schools and border towns. Governments or NGOs can start community groups to create awareness and lobby for relevant policies to tackle this threat of trafficking. In these groups and awareness events, facilitators should teach in broader terms the indicators of trafficking and encourage people to avoid entities that facilitate trafficking.

Modern slavery should be included in school curriculums. The vice of Trafficking in persons is ignored by many because they have not had firsthand experience of its negative effects. If this is channeled through school and proper learning processes, children will grow up with the self-awareness and hopefully, we will have experts in detecting, researching on and preventing the horrible act.

In conclusion, Prince Wako Foundation is aware of the devastating effects, *trafficking in person s*can have on the development of the Girl child. With concerted efforts that include counseling, supporting victims with free education and empowering families, we commit to strive towards minimizing the obstacles curtailing the development of the Girl child.

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