



STOLEN LIVES: THE ISSUE OF CHILD TRAFFICKING WORLDWIDE

HOW WE CAN CHANGE THE LIFE OF MILLIONS OF CHILDREN BY CHANGING OUR CONSUMER HABITS.

JIA HAO CHOO
DECEMBER 21

Child trafficking is a global issue affecting 1.2 million children under 18 every year. According to UNODC, children make up a third of the human trafficking victims worldwide. (This is just an estimated figure, as many cases remain unreported.) And I am here to tell you that **we are all child traffickers!** We are not traffickers in the sense that we do not actively look for our next trafficking targets. Yet, traffickers essentially exploit others for profits gained through illicit ways, and if we follow this definition, then we are all “traffickers”.



In this feature story, I am going to give you an overview of child trafficking and the mechanisms behind it. Then, I will convince you that you are, indeed, a child trafficker, and more importantly how you can stop being one by changing your consumer habit.

CHILD TRAFFICKING: A BRIEF INTRO

Human trafficking is a billion-dollar industry. In 2015 alone, it was estimated that a total of \$31.7 billion dollars



of illicit profits were made from trafficked victims, and at least several billions of the sum are generated from trafficked children. There are many different ways that traffickers can garner profits through their child victims such as through selling them into forced labours, sexual exploitation, armed forces, drug trades or illegal adoption.

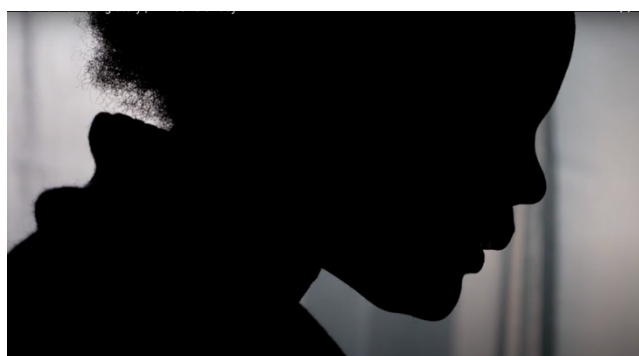
Specifically, forced labours and sexual exploitation are the two main sectors that child victims are forced into. According to UNICEF, about 100 million children are forced to work in 2020, and about 2 million children are sexually trafficked worldwide. A very common misconception about child trafficking is that it only happens to girls, but boys are as likely to be trafficked as girls, but for a different reason as boys are more likely to be forced into labours while girls are normally forced into prostitution. Furthermore, some marginalized groups, such as Latinos, African Americans, and homeless youths are much more likely to be trafficked. Remember I mention that children comprise of a third of human trafficking worldwide? In regions like Central America, children actually comprise up to 64% of human trafficking!

Essentially, it is very important for us all to recognize that child trafficking can happen at anywhere or time to anyone regardless of gender, religion or race, but some groups of people that are normally marginalized can be more at risk than others. Yes, a child may be trafficked in or out of your country right now!

MECHANISMS

The process of child trafficking is often complex, but we can simplify it into three main stages:

The first stage involves recruiting children. Many of you might think that children are forced into trafficking. For example, they may be kidnapped, lied to, or coerced into trafficking. However, some children may be voluntarily going into trafficking as they want to help to contribute to their families economically. In most cases, the motivating factors actually come from a combination of external pressure and self-volunteerism.



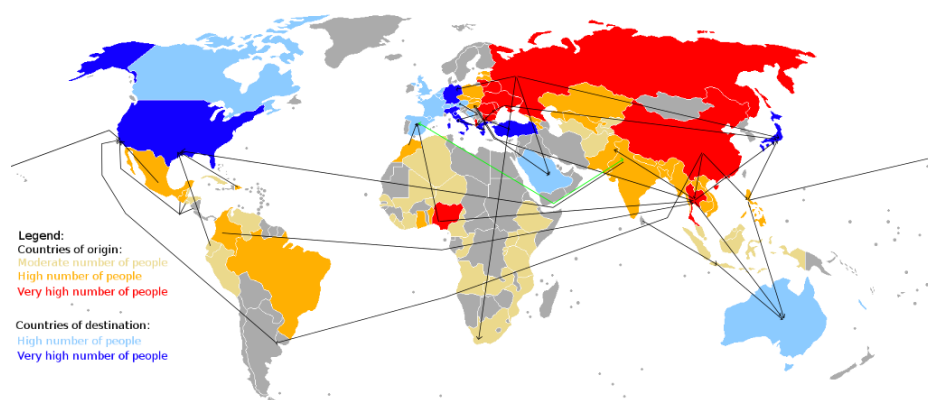
JOY - A TRAFFICKING VICTIM

For instance, “Joy” is a 17-years-old Nigerian who were trafficked to Italy. She voluntarily went into trafficking believing that she would work as a hairstylist and her life would be better there, but unbeknown to her, her trafficker lied to her and forced her into prostitution instead. So, the mechanism behind

what forces a child into trafficking is not straightforward. Yet, we can still identify some factors that make a child more vulnerable to trafficking.

For example, children who experience wars or natural disasters are more vulnerable to trafficking as they are often living in poverty, coupled with the lack of work or education opportunities. Living in poverty without work opportunities will increase the likelihood a child going into trafficking voluntarily to earn money. In fact, child trafficking rate is 20%-30% higher after natural disasters, as observed after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Furthermore, the lack of education means that children may not be aware of their rights and they might not realize that they are being lied to by the traffickers. So humanitarian crises, lack of work and education opportunities are all potential factors that make a child more vulnerable to trafficking. Moreover, social marginalization, which makes certain groups of people, such as African Americans or homeless youths, more likely to be denied access to adequate educational and work opportunities, can also be an important factor that motivates trafficking. Therefore, child trafficking is not only a crime but also indicating weaknesses in the government's ability to effectively safeguard children's rights to an equal, safe, and healthy development.

The second stage involves moving children locally, regionally or internationally. These cross-border movements of trafficking are the reason why child trafficking cases are under-reported, as different countries have different interpretations and laws on what constitutes as child trafficking. This means that once a child is trafficked to a country with less strict laws, they may be less likely to be reported or rescued.



TRAFFICKING ROUTES

THE EXPLOITATION: HOW WE ARE INVOLVED

The last stage is the exploitation of child victims. Child trafficking is essentially a business, where there is a “Supply and Demand” framework. The victims constitute the supplies in child trafficking, and the most obvious source of demands are the “traffickers” who use children to gain profit. But if we dig deeper, the actual sources of demands are actually the pimps or the corrupt factory owners who buy those children and exploit them.

However, that's not all. Demands can also come from people who actively or passively buy the products that are made by trafficked children. And that includes you! You might argue that you will never buy products made by trafficked children, but how can you be sure? For one, do you know that one of the largest sources of cocoa is the



CHILD LABOURS IN THE IVORY COAST

Ivory Coast, which has more than 250,000 child labours. So, how can you make sure that the chocolate that you buy are not from those child labours? Well, we simply can't...

It is not just chocolate or food, but also think about your clothes, electronic devices, or any other products that you purchase...how many of those can you make sure they come from legitimate sources? Globalization and global supply chains make it harder for us to identify where the products are made in, hence making it almost impossible for us confirm that they come from legitimate sources. So, you might be exploiting (unknowingly) trafficked child labours, hence making you a child trafficker!

No, it is not directly our fault, but we are a part of what causes those trafficked children to suffer, as they often go through psychological and physical traumas, sometimes even resulting in deaths. Can you live your life knowing that a child somewhere in this world is suffering because of you?

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

“A CHILD SOMEWHERE IN THIS WORLD IS SUFFERING BECAUSE OF YOU...”

The best way to combat human trafficking is to stop it before it happens. And there are a lot of ways to get involved in combating child trafficking, such as advocating for stricter child trafficking laws, strengthening child protection system and ensuring equal access to education. They are all valid ways to combat child trafficking as they can help to reduce the vulnerability of children in a community to trafficking. But I think there is a much simpler way that everyone can do on a daily basis.

We know that our consumerism motivates the economic reasons behind child trafficking, so perhaps the simplest way that we can all do to combat child trafficking is by changing our consumer habits. Make sure that we purchase products from legitimate sources by buying from companies with transparent supply chains, buying products labelled “fair-trade”, or buying survivor-made goods. If we all do our part to only purchase things from



legitimate sources that do not employ child trafficked labours, we can reduce the demands for child trafficking, hence reducing the supplies, putting less vulnerable children at risk.

I know that it is difficult to identify which companies/brands are legitimate without doing prior research, and that it might be an inconvenience having to read the labels every time you want to purchase something. Therefore, I propose to make an app/website that serves as a repository for a list of companies with their slavery footprints, measured through their transparency of supply chains and the likeliness of child labours involved in making the products. This will simplify the process as we can just use the platform to search for companies with a low slavery footprint to purchase things from. Having a virtual app like this also allows integration with online shopping platforms so that people who shop online can also identify which brands to look out for.

I recognize that changing our consumer habits only works to reduce the number of trafficked children in forced labours, and it does not target other victims who are forced into prostitution, armed forces and other sectors. However, if everyone starts to be more careful with their consumer habits, there will be an increased public awareness regarding the issue. Once there is enough momentum, more and more people will be more likely to get involved to advocate for better policies and child protection system that combat child trafficking as a whole.

In short, child trafficking is a serious issue affecting millions of children worldwide, and you may even play a part in it! But we can help to tackle the issue just simply by changing our consumer habits. So, when are you going to start taking the action?

Image Sources:

https://www.humanium.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/shutterstock_648575884-scaled.jpg

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414f7a4d444d77457a6333566d54/img/cf4f233a4b804577b4125390b319f052/cf4f233a4b804577b4125390b319f052.jpg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6meujGh6PQ>

<https://www.raconteur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/children-working-on-cocoa-farm-e1562056777622.jpg>

<https://afairtradeplace.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/fair-trade-logos2.jpg>

https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/styles/hero_mobile/public/UN0202141_0.jpg?itok=PAx3OK_4

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trafficking_of_women,_children_and_men_routes.svg

Research and Information Sources:

https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2016/December/almost-a-third-of-trafficking-victims-are-children_-unodc-report.html

https://www.unicef.org/sowc06/fullreport/full_report.php

<https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-labour>

<https://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/CSEC/lang--en/index.htm>

https://www.unicef.org/media/files/IRC_CT_Asia_Summary_FINAL4.pdf

<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/child-trafficking-myths-vs-facts>

https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_IPEC_PUB_10771/lang--en/index.htm

<https://www.thorn.org/child-trafficking-statistics/>

<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/Traffickingen.pdf>

<https://www.savethechildren.org/us/charity-stories/child-trafficking-awareness>

https://ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/nadel-dam/documents/mas/mas-essays/MAS%20Cycle%202014%20-%202016/Essay_Manuela%20Bruehlisauer.pdf

<https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/what-fuels-human-trafficking/31692>

https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/An_Introduction_to_Human_Trafficking_-_Background_Paper.pdf

<http://www.endslaverynow.org/act/buy-slave-free>

<https://www.endslaverynow.org/blog/articles/products-made-by-child-labor-with-alternative-options>

<https://aspe.hhs.gov/report/study-hhs-programs-serving-human-trafficking-victims/what-are-challenges-identifying-victims>

<https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/protect/trafficking>

https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/impact_transnational_report-final_1.pdf

<https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdossiers/279050/trafficking-in-children>

<https://theirworld.org/explainers/child-trafficking#section-6>

<https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/what-fuels-human-trafficking/31692>