Child Trafficking in Your Own Backyard

By Deborah Swiss

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It happens in Boston, Massachusetts. It happens in Kolkata, India. More human beings are currently enslaved than at any time in history. Globally, 80 percent are women and children, most of whom are the victims of sex trafficking. About two million children are currently being exploited in the international commercial sex trade and it's not just a problem for the world's poorest countries. At least 100,000 children in the United States are forced into sexual slavery each year, with an average age of 12-14.

As Women's History Month comes to a close, it's a pressing reminder that we need to end the barbaric exploitation that has plagued every continent throughout history. Where do we even begin? Here are four examples of organizations that are mobilizing resources to fight against a legacy of human bondage that is inherited by one generation after another. For our generation, the Internet has only made it easier for predators to operate.

I recently attended an awareness event for RIA House (Ready, Inspire, Act), where I heard a mother's anguish as she described how her developmentally delayed daughter had been lured into meeting an Internet predator in a small Massachusetts town. For three days, her abductor sold the 17-year-old to other men before she was rescued in another state. Tragically, most trafficking victims are not located this quickly and resources diminish once a girl passes 18 and is considered an adult.

At this same event, I met Audrey Morrissey, a survivor who lived the very reason RIA House is being built as a safe house where victims of trafficking will find healing, mentorship, education and job training. Audrey was lured into the commercial sex industry at age 16 by a "boyfriend" who soon turned into her abuser. She became addicted to the drugs that temporarily numbed the degradation she was forced to endure for 13 years. Entering rehab saved Audrey. It brought her to My Life My Choice at the Justice Resource Institute in Boston where she currently helps adolescent girls break free from sexual exploitation through treatment and mentoring.

RIA House founding member Karen Masterson reminds us that the invisible chains used to enslave trafficking victims are often far stronger than iron shackles:

For many, the trafficker is their only access to food, clothing and shelter. Despite ever-present violence and abuse in the relationship, it is often the only human bonding these girls and women have once they have been coerced into a life of commercial sexual exploitation. In the absence of any coordinated, stable, long-term service program the question of choice is simply an illusion, one that we comfort ourselves with while we do nothing.

Keeping children in the classroom is one of the best ways to keep them safe from a trafficker's hands. On the other side of the world, education is doing just that for students from some of India's most brutal slums where the choice for thousands of young girls is slave labor or prostitution. Free the Slaves reports that
India has 14 million people in slavery, more than any other country. This includes an estimated 1.2 million child sex slaves.

Archita Roy grew up in India and now lives in New Hampshire. Upon retirement, she founded ADC Jewelry Designs with the motto "Adorn Yourself While Helping a Child in Need." Archita donates 100 percent of her business' net proceeds to three schools in India that take children off the streets and nurture them into productive members of society: the Omkareshwar Ashram School, the Taracharan School and the Calcutta Mercy Center. Archita explains, "Their mission is to provide a bridge out of extreme poverty by providing food, clothing, health care and quality education in a spiritually uplifting environment."

Like Archita, Ritu Sharma grew up in India and witnessed first-hand the violence and injustices suffered by girls and women. She heads the DC-based Women Thrive Worldwide whose mission is to help women in developing countries lift themselves out of poverty. The organization Ritu co-founded in 1998 addresses economic opportunity, education, world hunger, and violence against girls and women. Each initiative is founded on the belief that "when women thrive, the world thrives." Ritu helped develop the International Violence Against Women Act, which awaits congressional passage. This important act focuses on reducing sexual and physical abuse, cornerstones to human trafficking and sexual slavery.

It's time to get angry. Traffickers rely on our complacency. They target the impoverished, the uneducated, and the vulnerable, putting our children at the highest risk. Traffickers bank on the likelihood that no one will care. Action is the only thing they fear. And it all starts with us.