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Hidden Business and Open Secrets: How Human Trafficking is Managed and What You Can Do About It

By adopting targeted policies, protecting communities and deploying capabilities in the interests of vulnerable groups, organizations can help to eliminate human trafficking.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the Canadian government raised public awareness about a poorly-understood industry by putting up posters that read, “Every year people are deceived or forced into a life no one would choose – sold into the sex trade, locked up in sweatshops, made to work for little or no pay. They are victims of human trafficking.” The hard truth is that trafficking occurs in Canada, the U.S., and many countries around the globe, and while

it affects many people, it principally exploits the poor, the young and the uneducated.

In 2008, we began a research project with the Division of Global Health and Human Rights at **Massachusetts General Hospital** to deepen our understanding of human trafficking, including its root causes and health consequences, and to determine how to end it. We conducted case studies in eight metropolitan areas of five countries

– New York City, Los Angeles, London, Manila, Mumbai, Kolkata (India), Rio de Janeiro, and Salvador (Brazil) – interviewing hundreds of health workers, anti-trafficking leaders and other knowledgeable people.

Our case studies revealed several important insights about trafficking as a business, its supply chain, and key opportunities for companies engaged in global trade to adopt practices that address it. In this article we will describe these findings and suggest mechanisms that forward-thinking executives can use to avoid complicity in trafficking.

Debunking Some Myths

When we set out our goal was to identify patterns that emerged consistently across the eight cities that we studied. Along the way, several myths were shattered.

Myth 1: Trafficking is rare

Although precise estimates are difficult to obtain, the **United Nations** reports that 2.5 million people are trafficked each year. Approximately 80 per cent of victims are women and girls, with most becoming engaged in the sex trade. Trafficking is difficult to define, in part, because sex for economic survival is prevalent in almost all societies. While child prostitution is universally considered sex trafficking, people have not converged on widely accepted criteria for identifying exploitative sex and involuntary movement among adults. The **U.S. State Department's** definition represents a middle ground as it associates trafficking with coercion, force and deception:

When a person is forced or deceived into prostitution, or maintained in prostitution through coercion, that person is a victim of trafficking. All of those involved in recruiting, transporting, harbouring or obtaining the person for that purpose have committed a trafficking crime. Sex trafficking can also occur alongside debt bondage, as women and girls are forced to continue in prostitution through the use of unlawful 'debt' purportedly incurred through their transportation or recruitment – or their crude 'sale' – which exploiters insist they must pay off before they can be free.

Through our research we found that the initial pathways into sex trafficking are diverse. In Los Angeles, some runaway youth engaged in 'survival sex', while in Salvador, Kolkata, Mumbai and Manila, some families were complicit in the relocation of their daughters. In some cities, victims – usually pre-teen or young teen girls – were persuaded to travel from rural communities by professional 'boyfriends.' After befriending the child, the boyfriend would make false promises to the family of 'a better life', often involving domestic work by the girl in an urban community. After transporting the girl to an urban setting, the boyfriend was dispatched on another assignment, and the girl was imprisoned by intermediaries and forced to engage in sex

work and illegal drugs under the protection of 'mother hens' – former prostitutes themselves. The imprisonment involved a tortuous process of psychological engagement in which the victim was conditioned into normalizing the experience.

Tolerance of sex for economic survival in any community can set the stage for prostitution and trafficking on a larger scale. The regularization of sexually-exploitative relationships occurred frequently in the cities we studied, although the terms of the normalization varied greatly. In some instances, runaway youth were 'pimped'; in others, organizations were diversified in complex drug, prostitution and illegal-goods schemes that involved large numbers of people in specialized roles who profited personally from the trade. In short, human trafficking is not rare because the exchange of sex for economic survival or advancement is also not rare.

Myth 2: Trafficking only happens in geographically-bounded red-light districts


One might assume that the sex trade would be set up to meet demand, and that, as a result, if we looked at prostitution in red light districts, we would have a reasonably complete window into trafficking. While we certainly found trafficking in red light districts (e.g., Kolkata, India), we also found it on school grounds, in restaurants, and in transportation hubs. In Manila, Mumbai and Kolkata, seemingly legitimate businesses were widely recognized as sources of trafficked persons and in some instances, families who had migrated into urban areas knowingly sold their daughters into trafficking as an alternative to impoverishment.

What also became evident was that trafficking moves geographically and across socio-economic groups. For example, we found evidence of trafficking in Pune, a neighboring suburb of Mumbai, and our case study in New York City revealed recruitment at secondary schools where girls were offered money and drugs in exchange for sex.

Myth 3: Traffickers use physical violence as their main weapon of recruiting

While physical violence is prevalent, the main weapon used by traffickers is psychological violence. Adept at mental warfare, they so narrowly limit options for their victims that these individuals feel like there is no better alternative for them. Trickery is a central element of the trafficker's arsenal. In several cities, traffickers promised domestic work and livable wages, leaving women to discover upon arrival that they would be forced into sex work.

One social worker, noting uncanny similarities in the psychological violence inflicted by traffickers, said "it is almost like they have a trafficking manual." Our case studies revealed a common 'lover boy' scenario in which a man feigns caring in exchange for a woman's or girl's trust and then abuses that trust by coaxing the victim into commercial sex. A 'honeymoon period' occurs in which the victim continues to affiliate with the trafficker, or in which a girl glorifies her sexuality and dissociation. In our New York City study,



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a health worker reported that after recruiting girls from shelters and train stations, “the traffickers collect as much information as they can about the girls, their lives, and their families. This is how they keep their hold over the girls, creating fear in them by talking of threatening family members if they run away.” Our case studies repeatedly revealed traffickers stealing victims’ passports – another way to limit their options significantly.

Myth 4: Traffickers are solo entrepreneurs

Traffickers are rarely solo entrepreneurs. Whether they contract with ‘coyotes’ (human smugglers) or use mother hens to facilitate movement of women and girls, the supply chain can be extensive. Even physicians – for example, private doctors contracted by brothel owners in India to treat sex workers – can be complicit in trafficking. A pattern that arose across our case studies was the systemic ways in which communities evolved to support, encourage and profit from human trafficking. Hotels, convention centers and transportation companies can and do profit from organized prostitution, and ‘sex tourism’ businesses fuel it in Brazil and elsewhere.

Myth 5: Trafficking is a small-time business

The prevalence of prostitution in tourist areas means that hotel managers, conference organizers and tourist services can benefit as intermediaries in the matching of johns with prostitutes. In some communities, seemingly professional agencies became complicit in prostitution by regularly duping women into sex work. The most vulnerable of these victims typically did not speak the local language and were not legal immigrants in the target countries, which further oppressed and isolated them in the system. In some instances, women were transported on buses, ferries and aircraft – accompanied by a lover boy or other oppressor.

We saw evidence of complex and sophisticated support activities including cellular telephones and ground transport services. In certain cities, some brothel owners engaged private doctors to treat women and to secure ‘protection’ through payments to police. Human resource systems were clearly evident in the promotion of aging prostitutes into mother hen roles, and in the engagement of aspiring pimps as lover boys.

A Call to Action

Attacking trafficking as a business could prove much more effective at stopping the practice than so-called buy-and-bust police operations, which often put the victims on the front lines of prosecution. Impounding bank accounts, disrupting victim transportation and educating the families of potential victims are examples of how this call to action can work. Designing effective interventions is a complex task, because many trafficking victims do not seek – or are unaware of – help to get out of their situations.

Following are four major opportunities for organizations to combat trafficking.

1. Understand where your business is at risk, and adopt an anti-trafficking policy. Some companies and industries are more vulnerable to involvement in human trafficking than others, including tourism and travel, transportation, distribution, agriculture, media and healthcare. The alleged ‘**Craigslist** killer’ murder of a young female masseuse inside a Boston hotel in April 2009 (which was not an instance of trafficking *per se*) provides insight into corporate actions that could address trafficking: should every hotel room have a panic button? Can hotel managers, convention-center operators, and cruise ship operators be held accountable for turning a blind eye to – or even profiting from – coercive or exploitative sex? In the aviation industry, should gate agents and flight attendants be trained to recognize young girls who are traveling under exploitative circumstances?

The complexity of these situations arises from the fact that the victim may be complicit in the disguise; for instance, the Craigslist victim was an active participant in the scheduling of the hotel room and was apparently seeking to avoid detection when the meeting was established. Successful interventions make outlets from the trade available in moments when victims are most likely to take advantage of them.

Gender inequalities and the objectification of women can also contribute to trafficking, and in these cases, the media and entertainment industry have particular exposure. The macro-social conditions that make possible the psychological manipulation of women and girls arise from broad cultural affect that may be



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cultivated by media and entertainment companies. For instance, some large companies make money by objectifying women or normalizing violence against women, which in turn creates conditions that allow for their exploitation.

Regardless of industry, organizations can adopt a number of specific practices to deter human trafficking. Some of the simplest involve enacting policies such as checking identification, educating employees to spot warning signs, and working with health and law-enforcement authorities to create safe harbours for trafficking victims. This last point is critical, as many victims are themselves vulnerable to prosecution.

We believe that all companies should consider how their activities may be vulnerable and adopt sophisticated deterrence policies that account for the complex psychological processes that unfold as trafficking victims transition into prostitution. Anti-trafficking policies in media and entertainment have led to movies and television programs that celebrate liberation. In financial services, anti-trafficking policies could have the same impact as anti-money-laundering and anti-drug policies. Internet providers that suspect sites of proffering minors for prostitution can work with law enforcement on prosecution strategies, and agricultural firms that hire migrant workers can train local managers to identify and prevent the transport of vulnerable children.

2. Protect your employees, customers and supply-chain partners.

Some of the most powerful opportunities for protecting employees, customers and supply-chain partners arise from an appreciation of the lack of outside options perceived by victimized women and girls. By extending counseling, education and support, companies can make employees and their families more aware of and less vulnerable to traffickers, and more likely to offer options to potential victims. For example, hotel operators, transportation companies and cruise-ship operators can offer safe havens to victims, and can work with authorities to prosecute and prevent exploitative behaviour.

Competitors can also work together to create standards for anti-trafficking practice akin to the free trade policies of the coffee industry. Opportunities are especially salient in the transportation, hotel and Internet arenas, where a code of conduct

against child trafficking already exists. Extending this code to cover the trafficking of women would be a major step forward. Regular reporting, rating systems, and educational policies are all potent mechanisms for raising the bar on taking trafficking seriously. The conferral of awards for 'best anti-trafficking practice' would elevate awareness and cultivate acceptance of behavior that deters exploitation. Furthermore, industry groups could come together to identify common risks and potential interventions related to trafficking that are specific to each industry. For instance, the transportation industry might develop trafficking-related questions that security personnel can pose to travelers who present phony passports.

Our research demonstrates that traffickers capitalize on the hopes of both the victim and the victim's family for a better life. By creating alternative career paths, a company can deter traffickers. Training programs, internships and certificate programs that allow girls and young women to develop career skills represent one potential set of solutions. The provision of jobs to unskilled young women may also deter trafficking. Any career path available to the poor and the uneducated is a step towards deterrence.

3. Invest to prevent trafficking in the communities in which you operate.

Anti-trafficking literature, policies, training and campaigns – such as those adopted in Canada a few years ago – are important symbols that can galvanize public interest and action, and are appropriate as vehicles for intervention in some industries. These initiatives are particularly important in convention centers, travel centers, distribution hubs and rural communities where vulnerable children and women may be at risk.

In migrant farming, rural piecework and subcontracted textile processing, corporate policies that target and prevent the transfer of girls outside of the communities are also critical opportunities both for policy and for business innovation. By bringing good jobs into rural communities, companies can reduce the migration of vulnerable individuals to urban areas. Companies can also promote education generally and specifically about trafficking in the communities in which they operate as well as work with law-enforcement authorities to identify and prosecute traffickers in their supply chains who recruit young victims. Internet providers,

communications companies, and financial-services providers can combat trafficking by adopting algorithms that identify traffickers and working with law enforcement authorities to develop innovative mechanisms for detection.

Our research was particularly focused on opportunities in the health care sector. We recommend that hospitals adopt protocols similar to those used to identify, treat and refer victims of domestic violence. By asking questions on intake in a confidential setting, health providers can screen for potential trafficking victims and make the necessary referrals to other services (e.g., counseling, law enforcement, legal help). Unfortunately, our research also revealed a reluctance to intervene in the health system for fear of retribution by traffickers or placing undocumented immigrants at risk for deportation. Therefore, hospitals should provide security for employees who express concern about their personal safety, and basic information regarding victims' rights to residency.

Last but not least, philanthropic investments in education programs in source areas of trafficking represent an indirect, but profoundly important activity, because they remove one of the principal risk factors for trafficking – a lack of education.

4. Deploy your organization's capabilities to fight trafficking

Some companies possess built-in capabilities that are particularly relevant for combating human trafficking. These capabilities can be deployed in efforts organized by law-enforcement officials to disrupt and prosecute trafficking, and also to prevent the trafficking from occurring in the first place.

Major opportunities arise in human resources, training, job coaching and employment agencies. Skills training organizations can deter trafficking by providing young and less-advantaged girls with skills training that can be deployed to secure good jobs and develop viable careers. Human resource executives can use their skills in mentoring and training and job coaching companies can.

Companies in the distribution, transportation and telecommunication sectors can deter trafficking by training drivers and operators to recognize runaways and to provide them with rides to safety and other resources that can prevent their entrenchment in prostitution. Truck drivers, bus drivers, gate agents and cell-phone center agents often accumulate a great deal of tacit knowledge about the communities in which they operate: ask any seasoned driver that goes into and out of New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal at any point in time to identify which children in the terminal are runaways, and, using instinct and experience, he or she can make a correct assessment almost instantaneously. A major opportunity lies in capturing this knowledge, and in using it to support and reach out to children and women at precisely those moments when the trafficking process can be disrupted.

Many internet service providers have built excellent capabilities for identifying suspicious behaviour and for working with law enforcement authorities on prosecution. The next step is to reach out to vulnerable individuals with information and tools to meet

their economic, social and psychological needs. Similarly, financial-services companies can continue to work with the police to identify money-laundering schemes that may signal trafficking while at the same time providing low-cost micro-loans and urban references to young women who migrate from rural to urban settings in search of work. Finally, media and entertainment companies can continue to avoid the objectification of women as well as expand their offerings to provide realistic representations of urban life to vulnerable girls and young women.

The bottom line is that regardless of industry, you can take extra steps to prevent trafficking by deploying your company's best capabilities to disrupt trafficking processes early.

In closing

As the U.N. Special Representative of the Secretary-General on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises emphasized in an April 2010 document, the overarching goal is to foster "human rights-respecting corporate cultures and practices."

The central finding of our research is that engagement with law-enforcement officials to prosecute trafficking – while critical – leaves open important opportunities for prevention. By adopting anti-trafficking policies, protecting communities and deploying capabilities in the interests of vulnerable groups, organizations can exercise leadership in the effort to eliminate trafficking altogether. The recommendations herein provide a template for the prevention of complicity in trafficking, and for leadership in addressing it as a human rights and business issue. **R**



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