

Trafficking Children: Control And Violence

Once traffickers extract victims from their home community, they typically sell the children to slaveholders who deal in commercial sex—for example, pimps or the owners of strip clubs, sex bars, brothels, karaoke clubs, or massage parlors. Most traffickers have a steady relationship in place with the slaveholder; hence, they know who the buyer will be before they recruit the child. Although it is more rare, some traffickers act as both recruiter and operator of their own “retail” sex shop.

The slaveholder acts swiftly to take complete control of the child’s life. Passports, birth certificates, national identity cards, and any other documents of citizenship are stripped from the child’s possession. The child is kept closely guarded and locked in a room when not accompanied. Even if escape were possible, the child has no money, probably does not speak the local language, and does not know to whom he or she could turn for help. Given their past experience, slave children would not instinctively trust public officials or the police.

The slaveholder also generally manipulates a relationship of financial dependence with the child. Basic life necessities like food, clothing, and shelter are charged to the child’s “account.” Until that money is repaid, the child is obligated to continue in the slaveholder’s service.

Slaveholders will buttress these social controls with the constant threat of violence. Almost all trafficked children will testify that they were victims of an extreme act of violence within the first forty-eight hours of their abduction. Whether through rape or brutal beatings, slaveholders use violence to imprint their dominance. In the logic of the trafficking world, a terrified child is a compliant child. The slaveholder therefore will never let the child slip out of a state of terror.

Ranchers refer to “breaking the spirit of a wild horse”; in a macabre sense, that is how slaveholders approach child sex slaves. The sex slaves will have to learn to comply happily with whatever sexual act a client requests. The liberal application of violence early on will crack the resistance they will inevitably mount. If a client ever complains that the sex slave was less than accommodating, swift and brutal punishment will be meted out.

The threat of violence becomes a ubiquitous force in the life of a sex slave. The child knows that a failed escape attempt would result in a severe beating. Moreover, the slaveholder may threaten to harm the child’s family even if the child does manage to get away. To remind the child of that fact, the slaveholder may occasionally drop some piece of current news about family members, whether real or fabricated, as if to say, “Yes, I am watching them, so don’t do anything stupid.”

Dina, a sixteen-year-old girl who presently finds refuge at Lima-based Generacion’s center for rescued sex slaves, relates how she spent four years under the control of a pimp because she feared for her

family's welfare. She has three younger sisters and a brother. The pimp threatened to pursue them as replacements if she ever left him. He would taunt Dina with a stream diet of comments: "Hey, I saw your sister on the bus in Lima this afternoon. Geez, chica, she is turning out to be as pretty as you."

Many mornings Dina would wake up and tell herself that she could not spend one more day in her hell. But then she would see a mental image of her sisters, and she steeled herself to endure whatever might come her way.

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