

Spotlight On: How the Internet Facilitates Underage Victimization in Human Trafficking

By Victoria Vanderschaaf

The International Organization for Adolescents (“IOFA”) is an independent, nonprofit organization with a mission to improve the lives of young people and reduce the vulnerability of youth to trafficking and other forms of severe exploitation. The organization was launched in 1999 in response to a dramatic gap in programming and services specific to adolescents, particularly those living in poverty or in areas of political instability around the world. IOFA is now based in Chicago, though it has developed direct service and research projects in over twenty countries. IOFA is currently focused on empowering orphaned youth and building effective response systems for child trafficking victims, which has become a prevalent social issue.

A significant IOFA project is their facilitation of a multidisciplinary task force to combat human trafficking, although not specifically geared towards youth. The task force was developed after an observed need to handle human trafficking in Chicago, as the city became a growing hub for human trafficking. The task force is a joint project of the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office and the Salvation Army STOP-IT Program. The task force is jointly funded by the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Office for Victims of Crime. Currently, the task force has four subcommittees: training, victim services, labor trafficking and LGBTQ.

The priority of the task force is to identify victims and combat human trafficking through seamless collaboration between law enforcement and social service providers, all while using a victim-centered approach in proactively investigating and prosecuting human trafficking crimes. IOFA’s role is to act as a facilitator and subcontractor to drive the goals of the task force, lead subcommittees and ensure smooth cooperation between all invested members of the steering committee.

Although IOFA has been fighting against human trafficking since its founding, the social issue has received increased attention since the Internet has transformed its practice. It is no secret that teenagers are frequent users of the Internet. Although the Internet only became accessible to a wide audience in the 1990s, it has become a frequented medium used pervasively among our generation’s teenagers. Teenagers nowadays are reliant upon the Internet for an expansive number of day-to-day activities. Unfortunately this dependency has also translated into a novel way for adults to commit crimes and for children to make mistakes. One example of this is the way the Internet has facilitated the victimization of underage girls through human trafficking.

According to The Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, “trafficking is committed by the threat of use or force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power over a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person.” The International Organization for Migration statistics indicates that 35 percent of the trafficked persons they assisted in 2011 were less than

eighteen years of age, which is consistent with estimates from previous years. These victims are normally recruited in their own country.

There are considerable ways in which the Internet has made human trafficking easier. Jasmine Prokscha, a Policy Research Intern for IOFA noted that based on her experience, a reoccurring pattern she saw in her work this past summer was the use of online classified sites to post advertisements of victims. Since the closing of the "Adult Services" section on Craigslist, the new and most frequented source of trafficking has become Backpage.com where, as Jasmine states, "law enforcement officials are constantly finding ads, particularly for trafficking minors."

Summar Ghias, the program specialist at IOFA, considers the biggest obstacle the Internet poses to be that, "tackling one website will not solve everything." As was the case with Craglist, "while some advocate to get rid of sites like Backpage, it is nearly impossible to not have new ones pop up."

Another frequented mechanism is recruiting victims via social networking sites. In some instances chat-rooms are used though as Jasmine observed, "even if children are wary of chat-rooms, traffickers have no issue going on Facebook, messaging a girl complimenting her appearance, and establishing a relationship that way." This is a familiar tactic traffickers use to gain the victims' trust. Besides expressing admiration of the victim the trafficker may promise to make her a star.

Offering employment, however, is the main ploy during which the trafficker may relocate the victim from her home, with a promise of a job that rightly seems too good to be true. This tactic especially emphasizes how the Internet simplifies human trafficking. "Employers" can post online ads offering a job, and then communicate with their victim without ever having to attain close proximity. Jasmine gave an example from her time at IOFA during which an individual in Denver posted ads to solicit Filipino nurses to come to the United States. He never had to actually go to the Philippines because all of the interactions were conducted over the Internet. The first time the women met him was after they flew to the United States where he subsequently trafficked them by withholding the wages they earned working at various nursing homes.

Certain characteristics of cybercrime help to explain why the Internet is a means to recruit human trafficking victims. It is easy, cheap, anonymous, fast, leaves only digital traces, can be hard to locate, and the perpetrator does not have to leave home. Jasmine believes the biggest problem in regards to the Internet and human trafficking is the anonymity that it provides. As Jasmine elaborated on this point:

It makes it harder for police to track pimps and johns. It makes it harder for caregivers to establish when a pimp is targeting a young girl. There even exist ways in which a john can pay a pimp that guarantees him anonymity, through vehicles such as bitcoins, a virtual currency, which makes it nearly impossible for law enforcement officials to trace, and subsequently prove that an individual is either paying for or receiving income from human trafficking.

A key factor of utilizing technical opportunities is the cheapness and accessibility of new technologies. Jasmine observed that, "a pimp normally cannot walk into a young

girls bedroom and establish a relationship that will enable him to traffic her. However, through the Internet, a pimp can now communicate with anyone.”

There are two types of underage human trafficking victims: victims who are totally innocent and victims who contribute to their own victimization. Innocent victims are those who mistakenly come across a site used for human trafficking. An example of this would be girls seeking a job such as model, dancer, or nanny who are lured by human traffickers posing as an employment agency. This also includes a victim using a chat-room or dating site, without being mindful of its particular dangers. The youth and/or innocence of these underage victims make them more likely to be taken advantage of.

On the other hand, victims who contribute to their own victimization are the ones who inadvertently do so because of their naïve belief that nothing bad will happen to them. They may either overestimate their own intelligence or underestimate the trafficker’s abilities. Another possibility is that the victim is in a desperate situation and therefore knowingly allows herself to be exploited at the hands of the trafficker with the hope that she can eventually escape when she wants to. Alex, a fifteen year-old, who escaped from human trafficking, told her story to the FBI and, as she put it, “you learn quickly that the only people who are really willing to feed you, clothe you, and shelter you are your parents, so I had to figure something out.”

The common trait for both types of underage victims is vulnerability, which is especially common amongst, though not specific to, teenage girls. Summar notes that IOFA “sees research from places like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (“NCMEC”) that point to vulnerabilities that might be common to victims. This includes the statistic that one in eight endangered runaways reported to NCMEC in 2012 were likely sex trafficking victims.” Other vulnerabilities that Summar has recognized include: immigration status, a history of abuse or exploitation, dependence on third parties or the Internet for information about migration or job opportunities, and commercial sexual exploitation in the form of transactional sex for basic survival needs. Jasmine points out that traffickers can read into whether or not a girl is in a vulnerable position. She states that, “often times, underage girls are in a more vulnerable position because they have to rely on adults in order to provide for both their physical needs such as food and shelter, and emotional needs when their parents can not or will not, do so.”

Regardless of whether the child was drawn in to human trafficking fraudulently or through her own active decision, she is nonetheless a victim. Specifically in Illinois, as part of the Illinois State Children Act, all minors under the age of eighteen are immune from prosecution and are considered victims of human trafficking. Consistent with the law’s presumption that minors cannot provide legal consent to sex, they also cannot consent to selling sex. In addition, the law raises penalties and limits the availability of affirmative defenses for those exploiting minors.

IOFA works to combat the problem of human trafficking of underage girls notably through their task force and community education. In order to comprehensively combat human trafficking, the task force Law Enforcement Working Group (“LEWG”) tracks Internet crimes by going through cyber tips from the NCMEC. These tips are usually found on places like Backpage.com. In many cases, ads posted show young girls

or boys who look well under the age of eighteen. The prosecutors at the Cook County State's Attorney's Office will investigate each of these ads and verify whether or not they are cases to pursue further. The FBI, Cook County State's Attorney's Office and other core group members then use that information to prosecute traffickers and provide services to victims.

Jasmine explained that IOFA also addresses this problem by using the Internet to get information out to the public. Through blog posts, Twitter, and Facebook, IOFA provides information about human trafficking. Jasmine expressed that this is done with the hope that, "the more people that know, the more that can stop human trafficking, and report it when they see an ad or something that promotes human trafficking on the Internet." If the use of the Internet to promote human trafficking can be weakened then it would be less likely to facilitate acquiring underage victims for its purposes.

Since the Internet has changed the dynamics of human trafficking, the relevant organizations such as IOFA, have modernized their response. Since the characteristics of the Internet make human trafficking easier in many ways, these organizations use their resources to make it harder. The group cohesion that occurs in response systems such as the task force, increase the possibility of helping victims whom likely necessitate such services. The task force directly addresses human traffickers by investigating ads that may lead to a potential prosecution. IOFA's efforts at community education also encourage persons outside of law enforcement or service organizations to be proactive. This two-fold approach is consistent with IOFA's mission to improve the lives of young people and reduce their vulnerability to trafficking.

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