

Sex trafficking: 17th-century abuses in a 21st-century world

A Speech by Hollie Brown

“The prolonged slavery of women is the darkest page in human history”. These 12 words were spoken nearly 170 years ago, not far from here in Seneca Falls, New York, by a woman who dedicated her life to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Elizabeth Cady Stanton spoke at what was the first women’s rights conference back in 1848. Little could she have foreseen, ten generations on, that those dark pages of slavery would still be recording the horrors of sex trafficking.

From time immemorial, the sexual gratification of men has been achieved at a tragic and incalculable cost to women. References to the savagery of primitive civilisations, the animal instincts of the male species and the expectation of perfect female submission have been proffered to excuse the sadistic cruelty dished out to the poor, the vulnerable and the defenceless.

I have but a few minutes to speak to you, but in those few minutes, around the world, unspeakable horrors will be meted out on women enslaved in the nightmare of human trafficking.

I am 17. Throughout our so-called developed world, girls much younger than me are being passed around as sexual playthings. They are being ripped apart, externally and internally. But the physical scars are nothing compared to the mental scars inflicted by the succession of predators who satisfy their urges and ignore the terrified, tear-filled eyes of those whose childhood is ending in the most horrific fashion.

We have no idea how many trafficking victims there are. How many children, lured into an animal existence by promises of security? How many girls whose virginity is sacrificed at the sexual altars of brutal, disease-infested monsters? How many innocent, frightened young women for whom slavery has become a living hell?

The global response has been pathetic. The US claims to be leading the way in combating sex trafficking but just look at the figures. Here, the Government spends 350 times more on drug trafficking than the sex trafficking of women. Three hundred and fifty times! In our so-called civilised society, girls and women are being beaten, stabbed, burned and tortured in the name of an industry that strips away every trace of human dignity.

These sisters, daughters and granddaughters have no voice. The horror of sex trafficking continues unabated. The shame of society’s response is swamped by lust and a marketplace for cheap sex. But

the true cost to society is enormous. We can no longer ignore the terrified screams and pain-filled whimpers of sex trafficking victims. We must act. These women do not need our sympathy. They do not need our money. They do not need empty promises.

Governments around the world must come together to address this wickedness. This highly organised crime must be met by highly organised crime fighting. And once the perpetrators have been caught they must be taken out of society. No longer must they be allowed to walk the streets and inflict their barbaric trade on those at the lowest ebb of distress.

Sex trafficking is not someone else's problem. Here in New York, a man smashed the face of his 17 year old slave girl, branded the name of his street gang on her body and beat her pregnant abdomen with a cane. She had started working as his prostitute at the age of 12.

Even the sacred cow of the American sporting calendar, the Super Bowl, is implicated. With sex trafficked girls expected to sleep with up to 50 men a day, this lucrative event draws proponents of this evil trade like bees to honey.

The victims of sex trafficking are losers in the lottery of life. From an early age they are subjected to humiliating, degrading acts of depravity. They are starved, raped, then gang raped. They are forced into drug use, beaten, confined, then raped some more.

One of the great anti-slavery campaigners of the 19th century, William Wilberforce, said, "*You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say that you did not know.*" The cancer that is sex trafficking will not be cured by a benign acceptance that it is simply a fact of life. Take the Honduras Judge who said that if the victim is older than 12, refuses to file a complaint and the parents benefit financially, he tends to look the other way. How sick is that?

There are more human slaves today than ever before in history. Many are the victims of sex trafficking. Traffickers traffic from 127 countries. They traffic into 137 countries. The trade in women and girls for sex has reached mammoth proportions. Yet the shame of our society is characterised by one conviction for every 800 women and children sold into sex slavery and moved around the globe.

Eight hundred thousand sex slaves are transported across borders every year. Many more are transported within borders.

I am 17. I am one voice demanding that this brutal and horrifying trade be stopped. But there are others. Women and girls are beginning to scream. They are beginning to shout. They are beginning to

rise up against the oppression of sex trafficking. United, they will attract the attention of Governments and expose the shameful inaction that has perpetuated this cruel industry.

The lottery of life to which I referred earlier has been kind to me. I have a loving family, a secure home and a future to which I can look forward. You too, may enjoy similar good fortune. But as you go home tonight, take a moment to think about Shareen, 13 years old, found near a railway line in India, raped so badly her intestines were outside her body. Or Kate, aged 15, found sobbing, caged like an animal, sitting in her own excrement with bruises from multiple beatings over her body.

Take that moment to ask, am I doing anything to address this evil industry? It is time for individuals, for nations, for continents to rise up and say “Enough!” Governments must act. The genie is out of the bottle. No one can look the other way and pretend they cannot see. We must fix our gaze squarely on the vile trade of the sex traffickers and stare them into oblivion.

Thank you for your attention.