

Awareness Harmony Acceptance Advocates



AHA Advocate Talk: Mary Crawford



Samantha Ellison: How did you become interested in learning and working with survivors of sex trafficking? What research have you done so far and what do you plan on doing with your research once it is complete?

Mary Crawford: I became interested in sex trafficking in South Asia because I had often travelled there and wanted to make a contribution to women in that area. I've published a book and several articles (listed below), on women's changing position in Nepal and the sex trafficking problem there, and I continue to go back to Nepal. Although I am not actively doing research now, I advise groups that are trying to reduce trafficking through educational programs.

SE: How would you define sex trafficking?

MC: Using coercion, force, or deception to force a person into prostitution or commercial sex work. Examples include women who leave Ukraine and other eastern-European countries to find work, but end up in brothels, held by force and fear, and young girls from Cambodia who are bought by brokers and taken to Thailand for the sex trade.

SE: It seems that the most underdeveloped or impoverished countries have had the most problems with sex trafficking. Why is this so? You specifically worked in Nepal. What were the estimated figures there and where were the girls and women often taken too? What work did they perform?

MC: Yes, you are right that trafficking often flows from “Source” countries that are poor, underdeveloped, or have high unemployment and few opportunities for the average person. “Destination” countries tend to be wealthier. They often have a big organized sex industry (Thailand, Philippines) or crime syndicates (Albania). In Nepal, the triggering conditions are extreme poverty in rural areas plus the very low status of women. Young girls leave home for what they think are good jobs in India, only to find that they are held captive in brothels in India’s big cities. It’s hard to know how many girls are trafficked, but one estimate is 5000-7000 every year. The brothel life is horrible for them. They are beaten and raped into submission, and then their sexual services are sold by brothel owners on a daily basis. Often, they are not able to get away until they become so ill that the brothel owners do not want them anymore. Common illnesses are TB, HIV/AIDS, other STDs, and effects of badly done abortions.

SE: What are some of the post-traumatic effects of survivors that are rescued from prostitution? You mention that these survivors have experienced an extreme and sustained form of gender-based violence, suffering from both physical and psychological trauma. Could you expand upon this?

MC: There has not been much high-quality research on survivors. As far as we know, post-traumatic stress disorder is common. Survivors suffer from shame and an inability to trust anyone. In Nepal, the psychological effects are often expressed somatically, as stomach pain, etc. Survivors also have a high rate of depression.

SE: What types of therapy and or rehabilitation programs are there for survivors? What challenges are there if any to find rehabilitation programs or therapy for survivors?

MC: In Nepal, most organizations helping survivors try to reintegrate them into their own home village or community. This can be difficult if families reject and stigmatize them. Programs also include education and vocational training.

SE: What are some problems that women face when they begin reintegrating back into society after formally being trafficked into prostitution?

MC: Psychological effects of trauma may interfere with reintegration. In Nepal, there is also rejection and stigmatization by society, although that is slowly changing.

SE: What are some ways that the stigma associated with being trafficked can be removed from communities? How can communities become educated on the prevention of sex trafficking and the problems associated with gender based violence?

MC: One group I work with, the Didi Project uses community education featuring the story of a young survivor. This seems to be effective, but we have not done formal evaluation.

SE: What can people do to help if they are interested in helping survivors of sex trafficking and or interested in the prevention of sex trafficking taking place?

MC: Be aware that it is not just a problem for poor women in underdeveloped countries. In Connecticut, where I live, the state agency reported 20 cases last year, 17 of which involved minors. Any actions that help women around the world claim their human rights, get the fair treatment that they deserve in the job market, and achieve autonomy – any actions toward these goals will help reduce trafficking by attacking the underlying causes.

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