



Identifying and Assisting Youth in Labor Trafficking

Nicole Kwame

University of Michigan, Ghana/USA

Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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I was living at a home, in an open neighborhood, where no one noticed what was happening in front of them; not even my neighbors. My journey. Human trafficking is when an individual or group of people are forced against their will to do something.

How My Life Began as a Victim of Human Trafficking

My name is Nicole Kwame. I am from Ghana, West Africa and I am the last born of five girls. My family was not considered rich, but education was always a major factor to us for success. When I was ten years old my trafficker who was a friend of my aunt came to our home and made a promise to me and my family to bring me to America for a better education and life. My mother opposed the idea but I was so eager and felt blessed to have such an opportunity, so I agreed to go with my trafficker. Another reason why I felt very comfortable going with her was because she also took my elder sister with her sometime before she came to get me. My understanding from my aunt and family was that she was taking really good care of my sister because they visited my sister and saw that she was doing well. I left my hometown and went with my trafficker to her house in Togo. Upon arriving to her home she immediately changed my name to something else; Sophie. There were multiple girls, girls older than me, who were in the house as well as some adults and a couple of younger children. By the third or fourth day into her home, I was assigned the duty of selling candies outside the house daily. I immediately started selling the candies and ended up doing this for over a year. Eventually, my trafficker started preparing my documents for the United States. During the preparation, she had me learn new identities and guided me through what I should say when I go to the embassy for my visa. I complied and learned all the information. I got my visa. After the visa, my trafficker, some of the other girls, and one of the younger children, and I came to the United States. This was in October 2002 and I was 11 going on 12. When we arrived in the United States, her husband came and picked us up from the airport and took us to their home where the lady's two sons and daughter also lived. Upon arriving in the States I was assigned the duty of babysitting the younger child who came with us while the other girls immediately started working at the African hair braiding shops like my sister did. One day my trafficker approached me and said that one of the braiding shops was busy and that she wants me to go help. I was between the ages 13 and 14 and had been babysitting for over a year. By this time, I knew the basic techniques of braiding hair because I taught myself how to do hair during the times I spent selling the candies back in Togo. Prior to leaving to the shop, she explained to me that a person is not supposed to work in the States unless he or she is 18 years old. She then continued and said to tell people that I was 18 years old when they ask for my age and tell them that I was going to school. She also told me to behave when I go to the shop so the owner can find interest in hiring me. She at last told me to bring her the money that I make from the shop including the tips. Certainly, I knew that this was the tradition since I witnessed the other girls doing this weekly. I did exactly what I was told and got hired to work in the shop. I worked 6 days a week from 9am until whenever we got done with the clients at night. I was making about \$250 dollars a week not including tips. After a few weeks into working at the shop, the lady asked the owner of the shop to increase my weekly payment. The owner did not comply with this request, so my trafficker transferred me from that shop to another shop. Following the same rules that I used with the first owner, I got hired at the second shop and was making almost twice the amount that I was making at the first shop. I worked at this shop for approximately a year and a half. By this time, I was working mostly 7 days a week because my trafficker had her own shop where I worked during my one day off from my job. One day while working at her shop, she called my family for me and monitored my conversation with my family. Prior to giving me the phone, she told me to tell my family that I was going to school and that everything was great; she sat next to me to make sure that I said exactly these things to my family. My daily life consisted of the shop and home for the years that I was in this situation. I worked almost every day and was forced to give away all the money I made. Somewhere

during my time at the second shop, I knew that her promise was a lie and that I was going to continue working. I lost hope and trust and could not talk to anyone about what was happening to me behind closed doors.

How I got Rescued; my new Journey

It was a Thursday between 5am and 6am. It was early September 2007 when the police knocked on the door coming to my rescue and arresting my trafficker, her husband, and her older son. At this time, I was living with her older son where some of the other girls also lived. The rescue was very intense and scary because the police officers held their guns at us – everyone – which triggered a lot of mixed emotions; we were all crying. We were fearful, I was fearful. While some of the police officers were arresting the son, the rest of them assured us that they were here to help us. One officer told us, “Do not be afraid, we are not going to hurt you.” They slowly calmed us down and took us to the huge van that they brought with them and took us to a hotel. Upon arriving at the hotel, they immediately began questioning me and the rest of the girls about my real identity and my documents. I never saw what any of my documents looked like. Surprisingly, I found out that the documents which I came with were fake after speaking with the police officers. The girls and I were curious about how the officers found out about the trafficking so we asked them. They told us that they had been investigating us for about a year after receiving a call from an anonymous person about what was happening. For approximately two weeks, the officers held us at the hotel where they immediately started working on getting in touch with our relatives. The federal government worked with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which coordinated a placement for me in the unaccompanied refugee minor program, since I had no relatives in the United States to care for me. By the end of the two weeks, they told us that those of us who were under the age of 18 were going to come to Michigan and go to school. They told us about Bethany Christian Services and the services that would be provided for us through it. They informed us that Bethany Christian Services would provide foster homes, school, and a fresh start for us. Not long after this, two people from Bethany Christian Services flew to where we were and took us with them to Michigan.

How My Life is now as a Survivor

Immediately after arriving in Michigan, my case worker from Bethany Christian Services found a school for me and I started attending school. Bethany gave me a great foster family. Another service that Bethany Christian Services provided for me was counseling; this helped me greatly. I came to Bethany Christian services as socially isolated but, all the staff worked together and helped me grow as a person. Prior to coming to this organization, I did not have any independent skills but, Bethany Christian Services helped me gain these skills. During my time in the foster home my social worker visited me monthly to ensure my safety and made sure that I had everything I needed. She worked with my foster mother to make sure that all of my educational and personal needs were met. With the help of Bethany Christian Services and my foster family, I graduated three years later with my high school diploma. Immediately upon graduation I moved out of my foster home and began living on my own. This life skill was one of the independent skills that I gained through Bethany Christian Services. I also continued my education by going to a community college where I received my associates' degree two years later. In the past, I have had some opportunities to speak about human trafficking through public presentations. Currently, I am attending a university located in Michigan majoring in nursing. I love and enjoy helping people. Educationally, socially, mentally, and personally I am what I am today because of the help of Bethany Christian Services. I am very grateful and thankful. Words cannot express my gratitude to God and Bethany Christian Services. I am a success.

Recommendations

There are two recommendations that I feel are important in dealing with youths exposed to labor trafficking. The first recommendation has to do with identifying the youths. A strategy that I feel is helpful when identifying an individual in human trafficking is communication. One can do this by interacting with the individual while paying close attention to the nonverbal cues of the individual. I say this because when I was in this situation I never had anyone, especially the monthly clients whose hair I braided, that would talk to me in a sincere way. For example, I had one client who specifically requested me to do her hair. She always asked me what age I was and I always responded that I was 18 years old. This went on for a long time and one day she asked the same question and I gave her the same answer. She paused and said, “When are you going to turn 19?” This was when I realized that I had been 18 for years and completely forgot that a person's age changes every year. The client looked at me suspiciously and didn't say anything else after that. This was a great time for someone to potentially discover what was happening to me, but instead, nothing happened. I felt invisible because it was like no one was seeing what was in front of them. However, an individual in a human trafficking situation might not open up easily to communicate with others because of a natural fear of her or his trafficker. I had this fear. But I feel that a difference could be made by simply putting forth the effort to truly communicate with them. Through building an empathetic rapport with an individual, they would be more willing to come forth and trust you. This is one major challenge that the individual will have. The second recommendation is assisting survivor

youths of human trafficking. One can assist youths by actively being involved in programs or organizations like Bethany Christian Services as foster parents or by donating funds to help take care of the youths like me. For example, I could not have made it through my years of living on my own had it not been for the help of Bethany Christian Services. They helped provide all the financial support for me until I was able to make it on my own. Many youths who need assistance in all aspects are entering Bethany Christian Services every day. Bethany Christian Services is able to provide services to these youths because of donations. To inform you, labor trafficking—just like sex trafficking—is a serious situation and it is happening to many youths and adults around the world. Globally, people need to pay attention to labor trafficking too. You can help.

Personally, I have grown to be a strong, brave, independent, and motivated young woman. I have successfully accomplished many things both intellectually and personally. Now I keep in contact with my family weekly and they are at ease. Life now is better.