

Violated

Stolen Freedom

BY KARI UTLEY

No other word but *VIOLATED* describes the lives of children and adult victims of human trafficking.

AS WITH ME, the words *human trafficking* may evoke images from headline news of large tractor-trailers pulled over on the side of the interstate, revealing packed cargo of illegal immigrants being smuggled into the United States. Or you may recall stories of domestic workers revealing they were held hostage inside well-hidden rings of wealthy American citizens who paid a nice price for what boils down to domestic slavery. Or you envision slavery as in the historical sense, where people are captured and traded or sold to the highest bidder.

The Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (faastinter national.org) defines human trafficking as, “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of

threat or use of force/coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or of position of vulnerability or the giving/receiving payment or benefits to achieve having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.”

As director of church and community ministry for the Atlanta Association of Southern Baptist Churches in Georgia, Sharon Fields-McCormick’s task as one of North American Mission Board Mission Service Corps missionaries is to mobilize area churches to get involved in addressing the issue of domestic human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)—not an easy task nor an easy subject. But God has

been preparing Sharon for such a time as this for years.

Before becoming a Mission Service Corps missionary, Sharon was a civilian employee with the Department of the Army in Germany and served as the executive director of the Mental Health Association in Spartanburg, South Carolina.



“There is **no such thing** as a child prostitute
...**Children are prostituted.**”

In 2003 Sharon and her husband, Jack, made drastic decisions. Unhindered by things, location, relationships, or lack of immediate direction, they gave up careers, stable income, and their home to follow a calling of missionary service. Sharon presently serves as a disaster-relief chaplain while Jack serves in both construction and disaster-relief ministries.

Sharon denies there is anything unique about her calling to missions or to the cause of trafficking. Learning about the issue from Living Water for Girls, a home in the Atlanta, Georgia, area for girls ages 12–17 rescued from CSEC, Sharon says she is doing what anyone would do when God opens one’s eyes to injustice.

Today Sharon is burdened by what she sees as a lack of emphasis on building a strong self-identity in children, especially young girls, increasing their vulnerability to the recruitment process similar to the following: a man enters a girl’s life (perhaps a family friend, an older student, or in the case of a runaway, a “rescuer”). He provides her with food and shelter, takes her shopping, tells her how beautiful she is, how much he cares, and promises to take care of her. If she’s been raised that men will take care of and have authority over her, this fits. By the time she realizes what it’s all about, it’s too late—the beatings and threats to her family have begun.

When speaking on the issue of human trafficking, with an emphasis on CSEC, Sharon references



*(Left) Unable to show their faces, the young girls are photographed in a flower bed planted as part of horti-therapy.
(Top) The girls create a star photo image to show they are all stars. The peace signs interconnect to make the star, like their interconnected friendship. The bright colors of their nail polish remind us they are just little girls.*



PHOTO BY KRISTY CARR

Sharon (left) believes God is going to use WMU to fight this evil. What part will you play in this battle?

the historical value of girls and women in societies both foreign and domestic. This has nothing to do with a political stance for women's rights, but a biblical stance for all people being created equal with the same freedoms and choices. She frequently cites Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

In the world of human trafficking, freedom of choice has been robbed. In educating the church as to this modern-day form of slavery of boys and girls and young men and women, Sharon often encounters denial. Hearing "This doesn't happen in our community and especially in our church" is enough to motivate her to continue speaking out against the heinous crime of human trafficking.

How does human trafficking affect us, the church? Unfortunately, the church is not exempt from sexual misconduct and criminal behavior. According to Sharon, "Customers are in our churches. Stakeouts reveal men arriving to have sex with a minor, driving vehicles with car seats and fish symbols." Because human trafficking is such a broad subject and covers sins from recruitment and receipt of persons by means of threat to the giving and receiving payment or benefits to achieve control over another person, criminal behavior in this arena can sometimes be committed from as easy a location as the home computer.

What once was perceived as permissive behavior committed by those who need Jesus is now a multibillion dollar industry, second only to drug trafficking. Sharon describes it like this: "You're watching television and a commercial comes on the screen. Next thing you know, your appetite is stirred, you're feeling hunger, or maybe not, but the craving for pizza is so

strong that you get up and call for a delivery. If that craving is so strong that it causes you to react and purchase, then why do we think that viewing pornography on computer screens does not drive men and, yes, sometimes women, to react with the same compulsive behavior that more often than people realize leads to criminal behavior?"

At any given moment, day or night, with only a few strokes on the keyboard, some form of human trafficking can be committed. People are being sold and traded predominately for sex, but some as indentured servants.

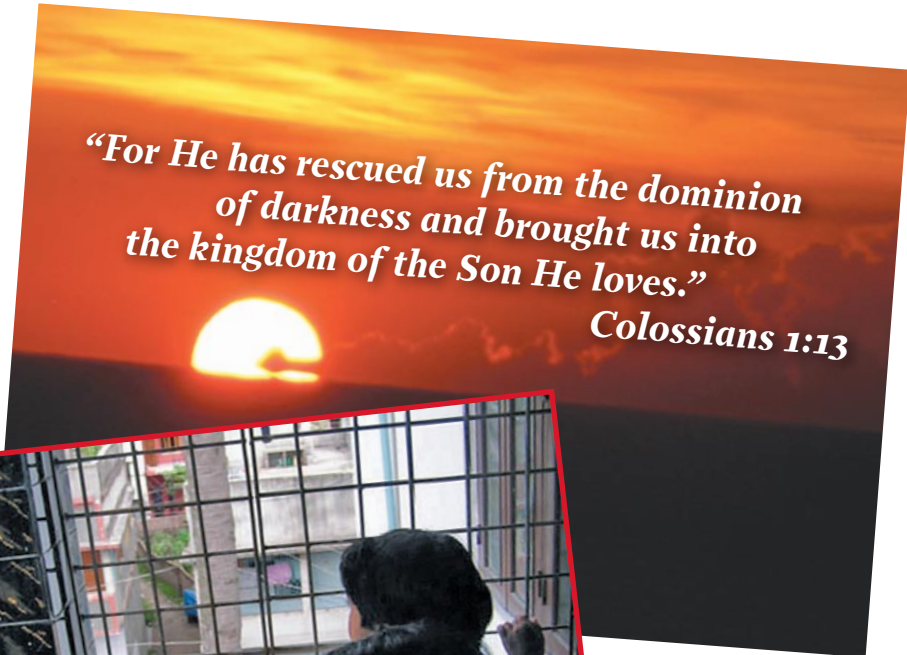
Human trafficking crosses all lines, all races, and all socioeconomic levels. "There is no such thing as a child prostitute," according to

Sharon. "Children are prostituted." And yet a child prostituted can easily grow into an adult prostitute or pimp, continuing the vicious cycle.

All victims of human trafficking are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually violated. Once freed, recovery is a long, hard journey and cannot be accomplished alone.

When asked how she remains unhindered to serve, Sharon quotes this passage from 1 Peter 4:10: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." What gifts has God given you? You are free. Become unhindered. Act. □

KARI UTLEY is a freelance writer with over 20 years of cross-cultural experience.



(Top) Sharon leads with this photo and Scripture in a slide presentation assuring that God will rescue the girls (middle) from darkness and bring them into the light of the kingdom. A simple sign on the front porch (bottom) lets the girls know the home, Living Water for Girls, is a safe place.

