

The business of domesticating women: A study of female-targeted sex trafficking and sex tourism

By R Machado

The value of domesticating cattle was once explained to me by my biology teacher. Economically, it is a linear, self-articulating concept. Ethically it is a dimensional and faceted reality, which serves to exemplify the fact that greed is an inextricable aspect of the human condition. Dairy farming is arguably not parallel to the industry of sex tourism and human trafficking, but both are driven by the same capacity to exploit for monetary gain. The exponential growth of the global sex trade underpins a prevailing notion of women as commodities. It thrives in countries where the submission of women is more celebrated than the independence of women and further perpetuated by desperation induced by poverty.

Though crime doesn't discriminate based on gender, women are the primary victims of illegal human trafficking. In Cambodia, young women are sold, tricked or forced into prostitution to feed the burgeoning sex tourism industry. In Argentina and Mexico, young women are conned into leaving their homes and becoming prostitutes, under the ruse that they are being scouted for model agencies. Women are smuggled across borders from the Soviet Union into Germany, The Netherlands, Turkey and Iraq to work in brothels or on the street. Because of sluggish governmental action, judicial corruption and police disinterest, these girls are left exposed to suffer unspeakable violations to their human rights.

Lorena Martins, the daughter of former intelligence agent Raúl Martins, publicly denounced her father for sexually trafficking women into Mexico, where they worked as "dancers" in clubs and bars that he owned. She detailed a process her father referred to as "breaking the girls in". Girls are "rescued" by him from domestic violence and poverty. They are given lodging and promised work in legitimate professions – as models, receptionists or office assistants. The girls naturally jump at the chance to improve their lifestyles and view him as a sort of father figure. Eventually the support they received is retracted- such as accommodation, food, and clothing. The promise that Martins' company will handle the girls' immigration papers dissolves. Returning home is now not only problematic, but also riddled with legal complications, by which time the girls have given their passports and important documents to Raúl's lawyers and are left with no exit strategy and no help to turn to. Their options are defy the "bosses" and face unknown consequences or agree to settle their debts by becoming dancers and eventually prostitutes.

When I first read Lorena's account of her father's business philosophy and techniques, I questioned how this was allowed to continue for so long, without legal intervention. The answer: Raúl's customers were none other than members of the judiciary, government and police force; the very people who are supposed to protect and uphold the rights of their communities, utilize and profit from Martins' Business. Martins' infallible business insurance? He videotapes every encounter his customers have with the women from his bars. This leverage makes him virtually untouchable, to the point where regardless of the mounting evidence against him, the former Mexican Attorney General had seemingly no interest in taking his case and extraditing him back to Argentina, where he could be charged and face the consequences of his actions.

In 2012 the renowned Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho published a book entitled *Sex Inc.*, which details the stories of victims, perpetrators and consumers of international trafficking and sex tourism. While in Cancún researching Raúl Martins, she met a young woman named Arely who was tricked into leaving her home in Venezuela to work in Mexico as a model. For Arely, this meant she would never have to spend another day selling empanadas on the street for a living. Naturally, she grasped at the opportunity. Within weeks Arely found herself in Mexico, her papers and passport taken and a bill for \$5000 USD. With no money to pay off her debt or for a ticket back home, Arely agreed to work as a dancer in a club. She trained six hours a day, and unbeknownst to her, was accumulating a debt of \$10000 USD according to the club owner. So when she was offered a chance to pay it all back, she accepted. Except this time, she wasn't only dancing. She was taken to a hotel room and told to service the wealthy male clients there. Over the course of a few months, one client turned into hundreds. *How was I supposed to now I would end up like this, a whore?* Arely's story reminds me that while I type these words, there are hundreds if not thousands of girls who will leave their home for the promise of greener pastures, and be given a locked cage. Girls who will cease to be humans, but will simply be vessels with a pay-by-the-hour price tag.

Dealing in human misery and taking advantage of young impoverished women is clearly a lucrative industry, because the victims of sex tourism and trafficking are not solely consigned to South America. Sex tourism is also rampant in South East Asia; particularly Cambodia and Thailand. In Cambodia, girls can be poached from families, sold by neighbors and even family members to settle debts.

The reality of this strikes home when I read an article on CNN's news website about a mother who admitted to selling her 12 year old daughter to a brothel. There is no defense I can dream up, no infinite pit of desperation, from which I can imagine a mother draws the resolve to sell her own daughter to be raped. At 12 years old, Kieu's virginity was valued at \$500. Her mother even delivered her to the hotel where the 50 year old man who had purchased her innocence was waiting for her. The torture didn't end there, and still went for hundreds of girls in the Svay Pak region of Cambodia, and other areas, where "virginity selling" is commonplace. Girls are taken to hospitals and issued with a certificate confirming they are indeed virgins, and then sold and raped. The trade seeks young employees because customers believe they are less likely to pass on sexually transmitted diseases as well as the fact that they are more fearful and therefore obedient and compliant. Once "broken in" these girls can be sold to brothels or sex rings where they are forced into making pornography or prostitution.

Traffickers and pimps who kidnap young girls or pay their families for them, utilize techniques to make their "produce" more docile and submissive, and therefore more attractive to customers. *"They provoke disagreements and rivalry among victims living in the same space in an attempt to prevent the victims from uniting and rebelling easily"* according to Lydia Cacho. They reward young girls who adopt a 'hypersexualised' attitude and submit themselves for exploitation. These girls can be as young as five and learn to incorporate submissive traits into their personalities, in order to please their handlers. Because they can't understand what is wrong with the attitudes they adopt, they truly believe that prostitution is not only a legitimate path, but also their only one. By not resisting, their reward is experiencing a lesser degree of

mistreatment, and so their daily behavior is severely eroticized and they don't understand boundaries in relationships with any other individuals. Even upon escaping, girls like Kieu aren't free, they have to undergo intensive rehabilitation to de-sexualize their everyday behavior, and overcome the deep psychological trauma that they have been put through.

In Europe, girls from Moldova, Russia, Ukraine and Romainia make up the largest percentage of victims of human trafficking. They can be sold from orphanages by workers, or maybe they are promised modeling contracts or work opportunities in Germany and the Netherlands. Sometimes respected members within communities are paid commissions to alert pimps to easy victims. One scam detailed by researcher and Journalist Victor Malarek is where attractive young men begin relationships with prospective girls and invite them to a holiday weekend where they are then sold to traffickers. Some of these women comply because the threat of violence and death looms over them. "They are held against their will, beaten and raped repeatedly until they submit to every demand." Says Malarek. Often they are trafficked into countries without work Visas or legal documents. They undergo huge psychological pressure, and physical violence at the hands of their so-called "employers". If they refuse to work their punishment is violence, torture and rape. If they agree to work, they can be forced to have sex with several men a day. Because they can't offer any identification and are often in these countries with falsified documents, the government sees them as illegal aliens and can refuse help. In addition, these women are labeled as "whores" and ostracized from society. It is the women who are blamed for leading men astray, being temptresses and knowingly selling their dignity. In society's eyes they are irredeemable, and so many girls are isolated and feel as if there are no avenues open to seek help.

While undercover in Cancún, Cacho asked a customer what he liked most about Mexico, to which his reply was "Its beautiful girls, they are hot and sweet. I'm sick of American women; they are demanding and always looking for an argument, but Latin women are ...Latin women still believe in the sanctity of marriage and in showing a man respect." Viktor Malarek emphasizes this point further in his book *The Johns: sex for sale and the men who buy it*. Both Malarek and Cacho condemn this male mentality. The supply of the sex industry is elevating to alarming heights only because the demand is unparalleled. Men seek women they can control, and so traffickers adopt repulsive methods in order to "break girls in" make them accepting to exploitation, frame their situation as necessary, as if they should be willingly selling their bodies because they are indebted to their traffickers, or have no other way to avoid punishment at the hands of their captors. Framed in this way, the girls almost feel as if is consensual, because they have no other choice, and so they choose this path for themselves. The illegal trafficking network flourishes because it's proponents aren't merely petty criminals or uneducated corner-cutters who seek easy money. They are smart, aware of how to psychologically manipulate young girls and women and have no moral objections to achieving their targets.

An industry founded on immorality is allowed to expand because its instigators have no objections to persevere under any methods. Cacho details how this illegal industry is allowed to thrive by governments, is protected by politicians and the judiciary and policed by some of the most well-established criminal rings in the world. Worst of all: it is inflicted on helpless women, girls and children who are conditioned to

obediently accept their fate. The sophistication of illegal human trade has developed to the point where it will take more than merely shedding light on the issue to curtail it. Trafficking has proven that it evolves just as fast as we attempt to mitigate it. The battle is not just against the perpetrators themselves, but against the complacency of governments worldwide, the stagnation in political will to tackle this problem at the root, and indeed the corruption at levels of the police force, judiciary and government.

What use is our human predisposition towards empathy and disgust at our own failings if we allow it to be merely ornamental and not vehicle to act and provoke change? The atrocities being committed against women worldwide are met with apathetic resolve and inaction, leaving traffickers, pimps and mafia run-sex rings virtually unrivalled and unencumbered. There is a poverty of awareness if humans can congratulate our own advancement while we simultaneously allow women to be equated to cattle. Let us not allow our sisters to be domesticated any more.

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