

Hurting, hunting Black Girls and Women: Facing a devastating sex trafficking crisis not limited to vans, strangers and abductions

BY RICHARD B. MUHAMMAD, BRYAN 18X CRAWFORD AND BRIAN E. MUHAMMAD THE FINAL CALL | @THEFINALCALL | LAST UPDATED: DEC 4, 2019 - 11:09:56 AM

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Social media warnings of white vans that lock from the outside and follow school buses, arrests in several states, accounts from Black women about kidnap attempts and thousands of missing women and girls have raised fears about increased sex trafficking in the Black community.

The problem, however, is wider than strangers snatching young girls and women, though that happens. It includes a plethora of abuses and failures, said advocates fighting to end the scourge.

The Black and Missing Foundation says Black people, just 13 percent of the American population, are almost 40 percent (232,881) of all missing persons. Black women, just seven percent of America's population, are 10 percent of all reported missing persons cases, said the foundation. In 2018, roughly 64,000 Black women and girls went missing, it said.

"African American youth are at increased risk for domestic minor sex trafficking, with being female, living in an urban area, and experiencing abuse prior to trafficking all being factors that are associated with risk for sex trafficking. Of the over 300,000 minors in the U.S. who are victims of domestic sex trafficking, it is estimated that 43 percent are African American girls," according to research by Thema Bryant-Davis, PhD., of Pepperdine University. The U.S. Justice Dept. has reported that of confirmed sex trafficking victims whose race was known, 26 percent were White and 40 percent were Black.

Advocates and survivors believe many missing women and girls are victims of sex trafficking. A 15-year-old Houston girl ended her life in mid-October. The young Latina disappeared at age 13, was drugged and sex trafficked. Her family found her two years later, but she was never the same. Family members were heartbroken when she killed herself.

Who cares about Black girls, women?



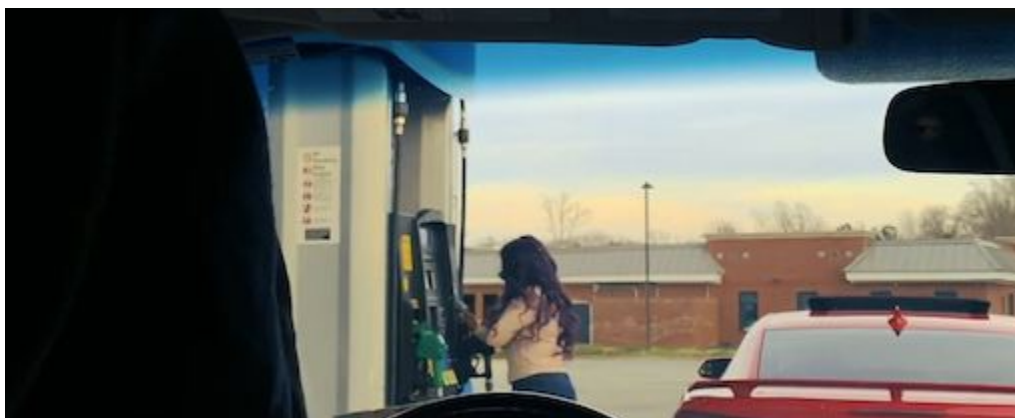


“A few years ago, around 80 girls in Washington, D.C., went missing in a month, and it was crazy to me that nobody was talking about this. I started doing research and couldn’t find anything about it,” said Imani Blair, a Virginia-based rap artist. She made a song and a video called “Shoot ‘Em,” about Black women being abducted and taken against their will. “Nobody was talking about it. No news was talking about it; and that made me feel some kind of way. And the more research I’ve done it, the more I’ve learned that this is a really big problem in our community.”

The video for “Shoot ‘Em,” features powerful images. In one scene, Ms. Blair pulls up to a gas station with a group of suspicious men sitting in a nearby car. She doesn’t notice them watching. From the time she pulls into the gas station, walks in and then out again, she’s on her phone; oblivious to her surroundings before she is surrounded and forced into the trunk of a car.

The images are haunting, but at the same time, all too real because this kind of scenario does play out in the Black community and other neighborhoods.

In addition to abductions and kidnappings, young women and girls are often lured into “the life” by promises of love, fame, money or all three. They can also be sold from one trafficker to another. In other cases, young women have gone to parties and found themselves held captive, beaten and forced into sexual slavery.



Chandra Cleveland, based in Columbia, S.C., is an expert who deals with sex trafficking, sextortion, and sexual exploitation. Much of her work focuses on highly vulnerable female runaways.

Among the girls was a common pattern of “friendship” with an older male who influenced them.

“As I kept hearing the stories—after they have been gone for days—it started adding up like this was a plot,” said Ms. Cleveland, who runs a group called It’s On Me 2. “Someone knew what they were doing in order to get these girls.”

Having worked in law enforcement for more than 30 years and through her organization, Ms. Cleveland gained experience working with sexually exploited women and girls.

She believes more awareness is needed through trainings and focusing on sex trafficking, missing females and violence against girls and women. She conducts community trainings as well as sessions at schools, colleges and even corporations.

She and other advocates stress females trapped in “the life” are victims—which has spawned a movement to change laws and end the prosecution of these victims, especially children, for prostitution. There are also efforts to strengthen punishment of customers, or “johns,” pimps, who may be male or female, and combat legalization of prostitution.



Female runways are often labeled fast or loose, noted Ms. Cleveland. But, she said, the girls were often seeking some kind of help and devalued by their community.

Such dysfunction left girls vulnerable to someone selling false hope and who ended up exploiting them, she explained.

“I tell parents ... regardless of the child that you raised, when they get around a manipulator such as this, they can change your child in three days to something you never met,” warned Ms. Cleveland.

If girls say something strange or suddenly change, parents and loved ones need to act quickly and find out what’s happening, Ms. Cleveland said.

Then there is the ugly online dimension to the problem.

“Social media plays a critical role,” commented Armie Hicks, a filmmaker based in Atlanta who wrote and produced the film “Circuit,” which explores human trafficking. Mr. Hicks was inspired to make his film because of work his sister did helping survivors of human and sex trafficking. He listened to their stories while working on the film.

“Women are increasingly being lured online with false promises of lives of luxury, love and security,” he said. “Predators can easily message and connect with vulnerable young girls on social media and dating apps.”



These same girls, whether going on a date or casting call for a movie, can end up captives and drugged to force their compliance—if seduction doesn't work.

And, the sellers or abusers of girls and women are often boyfriends and family members, not strangers.

“Our team was granted interviews with various women who had been sold into modern-day slavery as young girls by their own families or by men who they thought loved them and wanted to build a relationship with them,” Mr. Hicks explained. “They shared their heartbreaking stories, providing a glimpse into the very dark and dirty world of human trafficking that we needed in order to know that this was a much-needed film. As a father, son and brother of Black women, this scared the hell out of me.”

Ms. Cleveland said the increase in sex trafficking is also tied to the so-called gang culture with some shifting from illicit drug dealing to prostituting young girls.

“African American men who have been caught with drugs before have found out that it's easier to get a little girl from school and flip the value on her over and over again,” said Ms. Cleveland. “It's not like they have to hide a commodity, or they have to go and get it. The human commodity is more accessible, and they make more money.”

Since traffickers are looking for vulnerable victims, they may recruit girls from foster homes or group homes, or target women who are already in jail using online records about sentencing and release dates. They may send money to women who are incarcerated and romance them. Once the women are released, traffickers may offer drugs and a place to stay. In the end, they push the women into sex work to repay their debts, sometimes under threat of violence. They may also literally lock women into rooms or houses.

A billion-dollar industry

Human trafficking, or modern slavery, affects some 40.3 million people worldwide. That means for every 1,000 people, nearly six are victims of human trafficking. Nearly five million people endure “forced sexual exploitation,” and as the International Labor Organizations reports, some \$99 billion is made.

While only 19 percent of victims of human trafficking are sexually exploited, the money generated represents 66 percent of the global human trafficking profits. Every woman forced into sex trafficking generates approximately \$100,000 annually. Those persons trafficked for non-sexual purposes generate around \$22,000 a year.

“Domestic minor sex trafficking is the commercial sexual exploitation of children within U.S. borders. Congress, in the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, has made sex trafficking of a minor a crime. Federal law makes it a crime when a person ‘recruits, entices, harbors, transports, provides, obtains, advertises, maintains, patronizes, or solicits by any means’ a minor for the purpose of a commercial sex act. When considering the crime of domestic minor sex trafficking, under the TVPA, the victim's age is the critical issue—there is no requirement to prove that force, fraud, or coercion was used to secure the victim's actions if the victim is a minor. According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 7 endangered runaways reported to NCMEC in 2018 were likely child sex trafficking victims,” said the Protected Innocence Challenge, which does an annual report on domestic child sex trafficking.

Its 2019 report found positive changes in laws that once punished child victims. The group wants to see continued changes in laws that target customers and pimps, which have seen increased penalties.

A federal judge sentenced rapper Jaimian Simms, a 27-year-old Black man, to life in prison Nov. 22 following his conviction for conspiracy and sex trafficking. U.S. District Judge David Hittner ordered \$1,575 in restitution to a 17-year-old victim. At trial, the jury heard that Mr. Simms trafficked adult and minor females. The jury also saw and heard three rap videos featuring Mr. Simms which contained many of the terms used in prostitution. "He references selling 'White' women and how successful he is at being a pimp," said federal prosecutors. "The defense attempted to convince the jury that the women were not victims and engaged in the sex acts willingly nor did he use force, fraud or coercion to make them do so. They were not convinced and found him guilty of conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of a minor and sex trafficking of a minor."

Sex trafficking victims are often presented in online ads and sometimes in dating apps. The online website BackPage.com was shut down in 2018 for running ads soliciting sex.

Federal authorities charged a South Florida man, William Foster, with running a sex ring and recruiting girls from foster homes in November. The man had the women, two of whom were brought into the operations as minors, selling sex as far away as Detroit and created a non-profit foster care company, said authorities.

Jason Roger Pope, 42, from Florence, S.C., withdrew his request for bail in October as he faces sex trafficking and child sex crime charges. Federal authorities say the 42-year-old White male preyed on young females, often boasting of his Black conquests, according to BET.com. He is charged with promoting the prostitution of a minor, kidnapping, three counts of trafficking people, and criminal sexual conduct with a minor in the second degree. Authorities say others may have been victimized and are seeking help from the public.

"Arrest warrants show that between July 2017 and July 2019, Pope allegedly forced four underaged girls to perform sex acts at his home. One of the girls was reportedly as young as 13. Another alleged victim, a 17-year-old girl, told police Pope gave her money, drugs and/or other items in exchange for sex," BET.com reported. "Between July 1, 2018, and Sept. 1, 2019, Pope sexually assaulted a 16-year-old, identified as A.B., and paid the victim for sex acts, according to arrest warrants," said BET.com citing TV station WMBF. Authorities also accuse the deejay and party promoter of sexually assaulting a 14 year old, holding another teenager in his home against her will and assaulting her. One victim feared she contracted AIDS from Mr. Pope, whose record of improper conduct with minors goes back to 2011, said BET.com.

"According to a Facebook screenshot, Pope reportedly once bragged that 'I'm 36 with 693 BODIES (All Black females), WBU?' Atlanta Black Star reports," said BET.com.

Some feel more needs to be done on the enforcement side.

"While the demand for African Americans for sexual exploitation is higher than that of other races, the penalties associated with trafficking African Americans are less severe resulting in smaller jail sentences for abductors," filmmaker Hicks said. "Survivors cannot even receive the small comfort in knowing their abductors and abusers are justly punished for their crimes."

Sudan Muhammad, who lives in Prince Georges County, Md., is publisher of "Youth Creation Community Outreach" as part of her ministry to expose sex trafficking, help victims and warn the public. She visits areas rife with prostitution and often shares information via social media. She offers food, clothing, a listening ear and help to women trapped in the life.

"I'm a survivor. I was a part of human trafficking back in the 80's. I know what it's like," Ms. Muhammad said. "This is back when young women and girls were sold for crack, being unsuspecting, set-up, and not knowing what was going on."

Ms. Muhammad said in the DMV area (Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia), human trafficking is all too common. Some put themselves at risk, some put their children at risk out of financial desperation, she explained.

"Prince Georges county is said to be the richest Black county on paper, but you have a lot of people working low end jobs who can't pay upwards of \$1,500 a month for their rent. You wouldn't believe the number of evictions that

happen in Maryland,” said Ms. Muhammad. “So, you have a lot of scouts in our community—procurers, they call them—who tell these young girls if they make a movie, they can make upwards of \$2,000 and pay their rent in a couple of minutes. This is why pornography is so normalized in our community because these girls and women think the quickest way to make money is to lay on their backs.”

Mothers and fathers in the Black community are pimping their own children out for money and if they come up missing, they won't tell the police the real reason their child ran away, she added. It's not uncommon to walk DMV streets and see advertisements for girls to make pornography, or work in strip clubs, she said.

“Allah had to put me through something so I would have a deep amount of empathy, compassion and understanding. So, I became an advocate for other women ... who are suffering and nobody's hearing them because nobody's listening,” Ms. Muhammad said.

Judgments passed on women and girls caught in “the life,” and reducing them to nothing more than whores, sluts and thots needs to stop, advocates said. This mindset helps justify exploitation of Black women and girls, they said.

A call for Black men to stand up

“When I'm out and I see a group of Black men, I should feel safe. I should feel like those are my brothers and if something happens, they're going to help me. Unfortunately, that's not the case,” Imani Blair said. “I think if Black men showed more love and support for Black women, especially in public spaces, and not in a creepy or sexual way, we'd be good. We just need more love and support; I got you and you got me.”

“Men have to look at ourselves in the mirror and realize the responsibility we have to protect our women,” Mr. Hicks added. “Men have to listen up. If women are complaining about predatory men or habits, we have to listen and take them seriously. Men have to step in and confront predators if we see someone being targeted. Men must also confront and challenge our own misogyny and sexist views of women. By doing this, our frame of thinking begins to change and as a result, other men's view on misogyny changes as well.”

“Those of us as Black men who are standing around pontificating on this subject matter of sex trafficking, and untold numbers of missing Black women and children, needs to stop pontificating,” Craig Khanwell declared.

Mr. Khanwell, founder of the Columbia, S.C.-based Vision Walkers, said Black men must organize and address the problem. Black men need to patrol the community, making “our women and our children” safe, instead of going to White law enforcement agencies, he said.

“Oft times it's those same law enforcement agencies and others—even the military—are involved in the sex trafficking of our women,” he said.

“If we have to make examples of people then that's what has to be done,” Mr. Khanwell continued. “We've been talking to damn much and doing too little.”

Blacks are “sitting back watching while the sellout negroes—because there are a lot of Black men in this—are selling our women and children across the country and the world,” Mr. Khanwell said.

The devaluing of the female is a universal problem beyond color and nationality, however because of the history and sordid legacy of racism and slavery, Black women in America are disproportionately exploited.

The Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, who has a track record of advocating for the uplift and advancement of women, has warned about the devastating impact of abusing females.

“We must respect and honor women if the nation is ever to be great,” Minister Farrakhan wrote, in his book, “A Torchlight for America.”

“When we do not have a proper appreciation for women, this is reflected in society. Women should be active in every field of endeavor except those that degrade them,” the Minister advised. “The maintenance of women as sex objects is destroying society,” he warned.

Sex trafficking is “commodification and consumption of bodies,” and victims can be adults or children, male and female. Law enforcement says the illicit trade involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to perform sex to financially profit third parties. Sex trafficking is human trafficking specifically for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Sexual slavery is when a victim is forced, in a variety of ways, into dependency on their traffickers and pushed into sex work.

There is no “type” of female in sex trafficking, said activists and advocates. They come from various social and economic backgrounds. College girls are being targeted, said Ms. Cleveland.

Those who buy sex services include pastors, police officers, attorneys—almost anyone.

Black organizations and faith groups, like mosques and churches, need to get involved combating the crisis that is disproportionately affecting Blacks, said advocates.

“If we wait on someone else to save us, the numbers will continue to grow,” warned Ms. Cleveland. “Our community needs to step forth, get educated and change the way that they think about our Black women and girls.”

“Until we learn to love and protect our woman, we will never be a fit and recognized people on the earth. The White people here among you will never recognize you until you protect your woman,” warned the Hon. Elijah Muhammad, patriarch of the Nation of Islam, in his writings.

“My beloved brothers in America, you have lost the respect for your woman and, therefore, you have lost the respect for yourself. You won’t protect her; therefore, you can’t protect yourself,” he wrote.