

My Take on 'Taken'

By

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The major film 'Taken' was released in 2008, starring Liam Neeson in the role of a father whose daughter has been abducted by a sex trafficking ring and sold into sex slavery. Despite its origin story having been based on [lies](#), it remains a seminal reference point for sex trafficking due to its mass media marketing. It stands today as a cautionary tale for families in its portrayal of what can happen to our unsuspecting daughters while travelling abroad.

But before I summarize the full movie, let me first explain why I *wanted* to like this movie (other than just enjoying a good action movie). My background is in international criminal law. I have seen every type of crime from around the world. Despite the depiction of black and brown people as pathologically criminal in the United States, I know that crime occurs everywhere. All crime is committed everywhere. In particular, I have worked directly with the countries of France and Albania. I know that the French consider themselves to be more liberal, if not *avant-garde*, when it comes to sexual permissiveness, even when it involves children. More so, I know that when it comes to organized crime, Albania emerged from the Cold War with a criminal infrastructure that began to rival their neighbors across the Adriatic. I have seen sex trafficking (primarily from Eastern Europe) in depth and have experience putting sex tourism cases together. I have seen the depths of depravity regarding child sexual abuse and pornography. I have witnessed the crime rival (and maybe eclipse) drug trafficking as the organized

crime de jour. So, an action movie that allows me to flex my career field muscle is particularly inviting.

Taken is the story of a father, a former CIA officer, seeking to find his daughter who has been sold in a sex trafficking network. The daughter, a blonde teen, is going on her first solo trip to Europe with a friend. The father quells his doubts about the travel by insisting his daughter stay in touch with him. Almost immediately upon arrival in Paris, the daughter and her friend become targets of an Albanian sex trafficking ring. The girls are befriended by a genial young man at the airport who learns where they live by sharing a taxi with them. The daughter concurrently finds out that her friend lied about staying with her friend's family and contacts her father. While on the phone, the traffickers enter the apartment and abducts both girls for potential sale into sexual slavery. This begins the father's search for his daughter with a vengeance.

While the father kills and maims his way through various levels of the trafficker's schemes, we learn that traffickers use drugs and violence as tools for obedience. Girls can be sold in mass market schemes that amount to nothing more than a dingey space with curtains for walls (low end sexual exploitation by prostitution), to elaborate elite spaces that sell to the highest bidder (high end sexual slavery). It is noteworthy to point out that the friend is apparently experienced sexually, while the blonde teen is virginal and seemingly the most coveted of the two. In fact, as the movie moves along, the daughter is one of the most coveted in the elite circles of sexual slavery. As we can all expect, as the father works his way through the tough and seedy world of sexual exploitation to the high-finance world of upper-class sexual slavery, the father saves his

daughter from the impending violation of her virginity to a rich Middle Eastern man. This tale is now stuck in the American psyche as their entrée into the world of sex trafficking.

But consider this alternate scenario:

An inner-city neighborhood with a portion that is undeveloped woods on one side of the street and an undeveloped foundation of a house on the other. On either side of this small stretch is are the homes of primarily middle-class families who live normal American lives. But on this small stretch of a city street, an older model SUV is parked. To the middle-aged woman walking her dog, she can see two black men in the vehicle and a young black girl. She can see movement in the vehicle and the girl's head pop up wiping her mouth. The girl could have been her as a child, with hair caught up on top with a band, but also standing out every which way like it refuses to be tame. This girl looks to the woman to be very young, maybe only 10 or 11 years old. And it looks as if she has been involved in a sex act. The woman notes the license plate on her phone, while walking very close to the vehicle, and waves. She later reports this to police as the neighbors have been alerted to a 'prostitution ring' in the neighborhood.

This scenario is very different from that premised in 'Taken.' No extravagant foreign travel. No foreign actors kidnapping girls into the sex trade. No make-up and sexy clothing. No wealthy men bidding on the virginal blonde teen in to the thousands of dollars. No father seeking vengeance upon those who would so abuse his daughter.

No, the banality of the alternate scenario makes it almost hidden from the daily gaze of even the people who live in that very neighborhood. In fact, that neighborhood is mine, and the lady walking her dog was me. And that scene is one that I have witnessed more than once throughout the years. And that scene haunts me to this day because it was sex trafficking on the most basic level with a girl who looked hardly old enough to understand what was occurring. But the fact is, she is the face of sex trafficking in America. And despite the headline grabbers like Jeffery Epstein, who

preyed upon troubled girls to be pimp to the rich and famous, most American sex trafficking victims are this girl. Young and black.

Statistics show indisputably that the alternate as the reality. According to Rights4Girls:

- Sex trade survivors are disproportionately women of color
- Child sex trafficking survivors are disproportionately black girls
- Sex buyers are disproportionately white men
- Black women and girls are the majority of prostitution arrests

While 'Taken' (and its two follow-ons) remain as American TV rerun fodder, its narrative needs to be challenged with facts. White men (not Arab sheiks) are and remain the primary buyers of sexually exploited black girls and young women. Black girls and women are routinely arrested as perpetrators of crime instead of being view as victims to be saved. No one looks for black girls and young women as they remain the majority of missing persons in this country. Black girls and young women despite being disproportionately survivors of the sex trade are routinely denied programmatic dollars that are set aside for their recovery. Although the block-buster movie has yet to be made of the young black girls who get swept into the world of sexual exploitation, just remember that 'Taken' started with a very flawed premise. The parents of the young girl let their daughter go away to another country without the most basic of precautions and we think every school age child knows: Don't get into a car with strangers.