



THE MALE FACE OF SEXUAL SLAVERY

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

There's nothing sexy about forced porn.

Bekunda Sunday still remembers the pride in his mom's voice when he told her he'd landed a job in Kenya. He was 24 and studying tourism in Kampala, the capital of next-door Uganda. Struggling for money, he couldn't believe his luck when a stranger named Charles offered him a job in his brother's factory in Nairobi. He hung up on his mom and jumped into his new friend's car with another Ugandan boy his age named Sam.

Two days later, Sunday says, he watched, trembling and wearing nothing but underpants, as a man tied Sam to a chair and asphyxiated him with a plastic bag. Sam had tried to escape, his executioner explained. No one would try after that. They were sex slaves now.

Sunday's story, though rare, isn't unique. While most people assume that only women are victims of sex trafficking, it turns out that a small yet silent group of men are often victims of this inhumane trade, according to human rights officials. And in East Africa, where the porn and sex-work industries are booming today, demand for young men is on the rise — meaning cases like Sunday's are multiplying. According to Kenya's National Crime Research Centre, the number of people forced into human trafficking, of both genders, has grown; 23 percent of foreigners trafficked into Kenya are male. Many are forced to work on coffee or tea plantations, but, as the report notes, the second most common use of forced labor is sex exploitation.

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To be sure, women and young girls are still the most common target — they make up about 98 percent of sex-trafficked people, according to the International Labor Organization. Getting specific data on men worldwide is extremely difficult. “Male sex trafficking is highly underreported because victims are too afraid of being shamed if they speak up,” says Radoslaw Malinowski, CEO of the nonprofit group Awareness Against Human Trafficking. That’s especially true if they have been raped or forced to have sex with other men, which is a strong social taboo in countries like Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

But the lack of social awareness of this topic is what made Sunday so trusting in the first place. He didn’t doubt Charles when the trafficker picked up six other young boys and girls, nor did he second-guess the man when he said they would cross into Kenya through an illegal border pass. Fear struck only when the wide-eyed students walked into a large two-floor house in Nairobi and saw three large bouncer-looking men in the living room. One of them said, “Take your clothes off.” And Sunday knew he was in trouble.

After being stripped down and beaten up, Sunday recalls, he was locked into an individual room for three months and forced to sleep with men and women. He would often be told to follow a script while his captors filmed. He managed to escape after being told he had been sold to a man in the U.K. and driven back to Uganda to get his paperwork for the trip abroad. He jumped out of the car as they were stopping for food in Kampala and went straight to the police station. Officers promised to help; two years later, Sunday has lost all hope of seeing Charles behind bars.

For its part, the Ugandan National Counter Human Trafficking Taskforce says Sunday’s case is still open, and the unit’s coordinator, Moses Binoga, denies the accusations, explaining that “human traffic is a very complex crime which involves the participation of very many players.” Meanwhile, regional governments are trying to curb trafficking with new policies and further police training. Rwanda, for one, enacted tougher penalties for traffickers and, according to police reports, has rescued more than 150 victims since 2011. Kenya has set up a Counter-Trafficking in Persons Advisory Committee to raise money and fund law enforcement training, educational campaigns and protection for survivors who decide to stand up and testify against their enslavers.

Yet, for 150 reported cases of trafficking in 2013 in Uganda, 146 suspects were arrested but only four of them were convicted. And right now, there aren’t any programs to help men specifically, experts say. Malinowski argues that putting sex traffickers out of business will also require decriminalizing the industries they profit from, arguing that East Africa’s laws against prostitution and porn are doing more harm than good.

The first step to stopping this cycle of exploitation, though, experts say, is to help male victims tell their stories and warn others of similar risks. When Sunday eventually returned home, he found out his mother had passed away; meanwhile, he was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder and several sexually transmitted infections. His extended family, he says, begged him not to go public for fear he would shame them. But he says he’s had no choice: “I owed it to the ones I left behind.”