

Research helps raise awareness of human trafficking

November 21 2014, by Melanie Titanic-Schefft

Human trafficking — or the control, ownership and sale of another human being for monetary gain — was a common occurrence centuries ago, but many believe it doesn't exist in this day and age and not in this country.

"Not so," says ALyse Zook-DeLange, UC communications graduate student, "The problem still exists all over the world, and right here in our own hometowns."

While most people view prostitution as a form of [human trafficking](#), DeLange points out that it is really not. Prostitution is a choice, but human or [sex trafficking](#) is not and is the central issue of a comprehensive research paper that DeLange will present in November.

The scope of DeLange's research centered around the public's perception of human trafficking gleaned from personal interviews she had conducted with spectators after viewing the "Invisible: Slavery Today" exhibit at Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in 2012.

DeLange presented the research findings from her master's thesis entitled "Museum as site of meaning: Exploring audience responses to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center's Invisible: Slavery Today exhibit," at the National Communications Association Conference in Chicago on Nov. 20. DeLange's talk was part of the NCA's first ever, half-day seminar on human trafficking.

Using the visual elements, spatial qualities and overall messages in the 2012 exhibit, DeLanged reflexively analyzed how the visitors utilized the space to understand the issue of human trafficking. And as part of the two-fold purpose in her research, she combined her own personal perceptions and critiques as another relevant lens.

Through her analysis of the participants' construction process of the exhibit, DeLange found three overarching themes emerging; how the exhibit constructed and critiqued human trafficking as an American phenomenon, the different facets of human trafficking and the physical features of the exhibit.

Altogether, DeLange proclaims *Invisible: Slavery Today* as an extraordinarily powerful exhibit that discusses modern day slavery in ways that visitors can interact with and learn from, particularly regarding the new understanding of the scope, gravity and proximity of human trafficking as it exists today.

"Human trafficking and sex trafficking are too often seen as synonymous when indeed they are not," says DeLange. "Defining what human trafficking really is and the clouded misperception the general public has about this problem was one of the goals of my research, and another goal is to start conversations about this issue."

DeLange's fundamental research began as an undergraduate student, spending the better part of her sophomore and junior years of college working in India. Both years she worked under an Indian group in Mumbai supported by the Aruna Project that works in one of the largest red-light districts in India to help rescue women and pimps. Funding for Aruna is primarily private funding from global organizations made of Indian nationals, on the ground, who are working in the red-light districts to let the women know there are alternatives and that they do not have to choose this lifestyle.

During that time DeLange hung out with students on several Indian college campuses discussing their own red-light districts full of over ten thousand sex workers.

"Surprisingly," says DeLange. "Those students are no more aware of India's human trafficking problem than Americans are of those same issues here."

Human trafficking is often perceived as sex trafficking, according to DeLange, but sex trafficking is only one of several ways a human can be enslaved. Brainwashing, forced labor, child labor, and domestic servitude as well as sexual slavery are common forms of human trafficking and DeLange found that it happens in most of our American hometowns.

By taking a very qualitative and interpretive approach to her research, DeLange gives a broad view of the many facets of human trafficking. In the foreground, she looks at:

- How Americans understand the truth about the human trafficking issue
- How Americans respond and handle the issue

Her ultimate goal for this project is:

- To make the public aware of the truth behind this issue
- Start conversations about how we can end this behavior

DeLange found that the general perception of human trafficking is that the victims are kidnapped. And while kidnapping does exist, the true scenario is much more relational than it is a kidnapping situation. Her findings reveal that it more commonly revolves around vulnerability. The traffickers or perpetrators tend to build a relationship with the vulnerable

women or victims and win them over, show the victims love and attention when they feel like they don't have any, then slowly manipulate the victims to get them where they want them.

One of the many examples of domestic human trafficking from the exhibit talked about a woman who was brought to the U.S. to be a domestic servant, forced to live in unlivable conditions in a garage and brainwashed into thinking that if she left she would be arrested as an illegal foreigner.

Another example was a ring of men in Bloomington, Indiana who looked for signs of vulnerability in young, single pregnant women who were struggling financially. The men would pose as a boyfriend figure, convince the women to rent an apartment out of their price range by promising to help, then when the women could not continue to pay the rent, the men would force the women to sell their bodies and sometimes their children. Even in a well-known college town less than an hour away, these scenarios play out and DeLange hopes to spread that awareness.

Vulnerability also explains why victims from other countries fall prey to human trafficking. While in India, DeLange traveled to several cities talking with victims and asked them to tell their stories. She found that scarcity of water has a direct correlation to trafficking in many third-world countries because women frequently had to walk long distances each day to get water. Traffickers would often come into their villages and manipulate them into going with them into the city to get a job that would pay them a lot of money that they could send home to their parents. But when they get there they are instead sold to a brothel owner. The women would most often stay in that situation because they ultimately thought it was a better option. They wouldn't have to walk so far each day and they could indeed send money home to their parents.

"Even in the U.S. we still have child labor," says DeLange. "And we have people who are forced to work, either as illegal immigrants or victims of financial oppression."

Two key tenets to Delange's findings are that most Americans don't understand the many different forms of human trafficking, and when educated appropriately, they respond with very consumeristic choices when asked what changes they might make now based on their new understanding of the situation.

"What happens now and where do we go from here?" asks DeLange at the end of her analysis. "In response, most people wanted a list of stores who participated in slave labor so they could stop shopping at those stores, or wanted to know where they could donate their money to help stop this abhorrent behavior."

DeLange explains that these attitudes are ultimately embedded in a very American, Western, capitalistic approach to life whereby we fix this problem by being better or more conscious consumers, or we fix our consumerism so this doesn't happen, just to name a few.

The results of Delange's research have helped direct her into digging deeper into finding solutions for the root causes for the vulnerability and starting conversations that say, "Hey, this is a problem, and what can we do about it?"

Provided by University of Cincinnati

Citation: Research helps raise awareness of human trafficking (2014, November 21) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-awareness-human-trafficking.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.