

Scarves of Survivors

ISABELLA BLOOM



WRITER'S COMMENT: When I first saw the scarves from the organization Conscious by Kali, I was struck by their ingenuity and beauty, but what really gripped me was the brief message on each tag: "This garment was handcrafted with renewed hope and purpose by a sex trafficking survivor." When Professor Andersen assigned our UWP 104C term project prompt, I knew immediately that I'd write about Kali Basi and her organization. I saw this as an opportunity to learn about global sex trafficking, a topic about which I knew embarrassingly little. In the process of researching, interviewing for, and writing this article, I became appalled by the realities of global human trafficking, particularly in the U.S. I was privileged to meet via Skype some of the girls working with Basi and the reality of their struggles at such a young age pushed me to work hard on my article. I see journalism as a valuable way to share important stories that unveil key societal issues that we must mend.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The capstone project for my UWP 104C Journalism course is the term feature article, which requires students to work as reporters exploring one significant story in great depth throughout the term. For this sizeable project, students conduct several face-to-face interviews as well as extensive secondary research. Isabella's article is a powerful and troubling exploration into the dark world of human trafficking, a fast-growing, multibillion-dollar global criminal industry. Throughout this piece, Isabella does an excellent job of painting a clear mental picture of the tragic lives of

girls swallowed up into this world; she does this while simultaneously featuring Conscious by Kali, a nonprofit organization focused on providing survivors of human trafficking with opportunities to begin anew. Isabella's clear and concise journalistic writing, her vivid descriptions, and her effective use of pertinent, reliable sources combine to make this a feature article that informs readers while also inviting them to act on behalf of those who need a great deal of help but whose voices are so often silenced.

—Ken Andersen, University Writing Program

At only 13 years old, Amara's mother brought her to a children's shelter home in New Delhi, India. Amara was uneducated, pregnant, and about to have to look after her three younger siblings. When she spotted the cookies in my hands, she smiled, her eyes squinting.

India is the most dangerous country in the world to be a woman. Sexual violence and slave labor contributed to the 83 percent rise in reported crimes against women from 2007 to 2016, according to a 2018 report from the Thomas Reuters Foundation. (This same report named the United States the 10th most dangerous country for women; the only Western nation in the top 10 ranking, the U.S. comes in third—tied with Syria—for sexual violence.)

Until four years ago, Amara worked as a house maid, a position in which young children frequently work for a family in return for food, shelter or wages. Although promised wages, Amara never received them and she was sexually abused by her employer. When she became pregnant, her employer sent her back to her family. Amara had no community to turn to for support; her rapist faced no retribution.

Amara's mother placed her in a shelter home operated by Prayas, a national-level organization with 50 children's shelters that seeks to provide basic needs for and rebuild the lives of marginalized children in India.

Amara's family was poor; her mother owned a tiny shop that sold scrap metal and newspapers. When several villagers brought an item to the shop, believing it was stolen, Amara's mother refused to take it. In the dispute, Amara's mother was injured and taken to the hospital. She died two months later.

Last May, Amara (whose name has been changed to protect her identity) began receiving support at a center in New Delhi from the nonprofit organization Conscious by Kali. The center, entirely run and funded by the nonprofit, provides vocational training and mentoring for survivors of sex trafficking. Now, at age 16, Amara is a success story.

“She’s got a long ways to go, but she’s fulfilled her dream,” said Kalvindar (Kali) Basi, the founder of Conscious by Kali. When Amara came to Basi, she told her that her dream was to be trained and then make money so she could help her older sister, an 18-year-old divorcée, look after their three younger siblings. “She is now back living with her sister, earning money that is helping to put food on the table.”

Each morning after Amara gets her younger sister and two younger brothers ready for school, she proudly announces she is going to her “office.” There, Amara is learning a skill: how to create handcrafted apparel.

“She’s not a fully qualified seamstress or anything, but she’s pretty good,” Basi said. “We’re paying for her transport here, and she brought her sisters to see it. The next day she came, she said her sister told her, ‘Don’t even wash the dishes. Go to office!’”

Conscious by Kali aims to provide training and employment for survivors of human trafficking by teaching them textile design and construction. As a nonprofit organization, Conscious by Kali uses the sales of survivor-crafted products, along with donations, to fund a rehabilitation program that instills confidence and prepares the survivors for an independent life.

Born in New Zealand and currently living in Seattle, Basi founded Conscious by Kali in 2016. Merging her East Indian heritage with western fashions, Basi helped a craft center at a shelter home in Kathmandu, Nepal teach the shelter women the art of textiles.

Last May, Basi opened her own center in New Delhi, where she could decide how to mentor the girls without oversight.

“We now have a platform where we can mentor the girls, and we have control of how we want to do it,” said Basi. Having her own center allows Basi to look at each girl individually and work with several shelter homes, mainly Prayas and Global Trust, to most effectively help them.

“Each one is an individual,” Basi said. “Each one gets individual teaching.”

In India, these girls have no community to turn to because of the stigma attached to sex slavery. If the girls' parents don't accept them, they have few options. Dowry is still very important and very prevalent, despite being illegal in India since 1961.

"You have the Dalit class, or the untouchables, you know, the lowest of the low," said Basi. "They still have a community. They have each other. This lot has no one. They are so dishonored that they are lower than the lowest."

At her center in New Delhi, Basi focuses on mentoring the girls. "If you cannot get them out of the victim state, it doesn't matter what you throw at them—they're never going to succeed other than being laborers," Basi said. Basi does not run her center like a factory focused on churning out products for sale. Instead, her goal is to mentor the girls so that they can become the guides and inspire other girls to fight for themselves as well. She wants to create leaders.

"That is my main focus," Basi said. "The impact from a survivor who's standing on her own feet saying, 'Look. This was what's done for me, look at me now,' is just incredible."

Along with mentoring the girls, Basi's center trains them to develop a skill. This way, these girls have hope for a future. Without an education, developing a skill creates the prospect of future work and the ability to support themselves.

Basi works alongside a master tailor to teach the girls at the New Delhi center how to felt, screen print, and paint silk scarves. In addition, they make dresses, vests, cushions and are starting to create recycled jewelry out of bike tires. A recent order of cushions overseas to Australia was met with high praise from the buyer. "She's blown away how beautiful they're done," said Basi.

The products that these girls create are not only beautiful, but inventive. The girls use silk saris for patchworking and even screen print freehand. "I'm always looking for a twist," said Basi.

After a girl has trained and worked at the center for a few months, Basi pays them a small wage so they can start saving and learning to manage money.

"Our main thing is to mentor them, train them and promise them that, even if she's not a good enough worker, we'll find something for her to do," Basi said. "As soon as she's 18, she's got work so she can start

dreaming her dream.”

The shelter homes provide the girls with lodging, food, and medical care until they are 18 so the problem arises after that. Basi explains how, in India, once these girls turn 18 there isn't much for them in way of employment. They can go to a shelter home for older women, but there is no training for employment there—or at least, she said, most of the training is inadequate. As most of these girls have never sewed, the master tailor at Basi's center has them first sewing straight lines on paper.

In addition to the master tailor, Basi employs someone as “center in charge” to escort the girls to and from the shelter home if they can't leave the shelter home on their own. Because some of the girls are underage or threatened by their assailants, the center in charge will transport them to and from the shelter home. Basi also employs a director who previously worked for the the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which works with underprivileged artisans throughout India. When he heard about Basi opening up her center in New Delhi, he offered his services.

A big obstacle the nonprofit faces is cultural: ingrained in these girls' minds is that marriage is the only way they will survive. Teaching them a skill and providing them with employment gives them another option; changing their perspectives is considerably more challenging.

“I had a couple of girls on very good wages and as soon as the first guy who came into Kathmandu says ‘I love you,’ the girls fall for it,” Basi said. To combat this, Basi uses a seemingly simple method of mentoring.

Basi introduces three scenarios. She explains to the girls that in the first scenario, she could have a happy marriage. In the second scenario, her husband could die or his family could kick her out. In this scenario, the girl would be left without anything, including skills. In the third scenario, the girl could learn a skill and get a job. She could become independent, and then if she wanted to get married, she could, but she'd still have something to fall back on. “You give them options and you make them think,” Basi said. “And they'll opt in for the third.”

Now, one young girl is pushing back against her parents' pressure to marry. “She's not really strong but her voice is coming out,” Basi said. “She's getting a voice, saying, ‘I want to be trained for something. I want to stand on my own feet before I get married.’”

When Basi first meets these girls, she says they are confused and don't have many options. Basi works to give them the confidence and the voice to fight.

“You have these girls whose childhoods have been totally taken away from them,” said Basi. Stigmatized, traumatized, rejected by their communities and kicked out of their homes by their parents, these young girls do not have the luxury to lightheartedly play outdoors or even focus on their studies. They’ve already been through a lifetime of hardship. They’re working like adults, but in their entire makeup, they’re still children. They bustle into the center at 10 a.m. and line up for hugs and kisses from Basi, who they call Mummy.

Currently, Basi has 20 girls at her center in New Delhi. Three of these girls were 13 years old when they had babies. All of her girls are survivors of rape and sex trafficking.

All of her girls are also under 21 years old. The reason, Basi explains, is that when police are doing raids at a brothel, they can pull out any children that are under age, no questions asked. However, if someone is over age, police cannot pull them out unless they voice their protest and say, “I’ve been held against my will.”

“And they don’t have a voice,” Basi said. “They’re scared stiff.”

The same policy applies in the U.S. Sex trafficking is defined by the U.S. Department of State as an adult engaging in a commercial sex act through force, threats of force, fraud, coercion or any combination of these means. Because trafficking of minors does not require force, fraud or coercion to be illegal and prohibited, consent is an important aspect of identifying adult trafficking victims.

“You have to prove that you were essentially a slave and you have to be willing to testify,” said David Kyle, a UC Davis professor and co-author of *Global Human Smuggling*.

Most people are tricked into trafficking because they think they’re hiring smugglers, Kyle said. Traffickers typically promise impoverished women and girls employment in other countries, later manipulating them into sexual labor. Sometimes this work is phrased as payment for a debt, but the game of debt never ends. These crimes are organized, relying on victims’ awareness that they are breaking a law by hiring the smuggler. Increasing criminalization of undocumented migration in turn increases the victim’s fear of persecution. They also fear putting their families—whom traffickers often use as leverage—at risk.

“Because they’re undocumented or because they don’t have the protections of states, because they’re away from their home, they’re in a particularly weak position,” said Kyle. Even if law enforcement receives

a tip and shows up at an establishment, victims often do not speak up.

As an estimated \$150 billion-a-year global industry, human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal enterprises, according to California Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

The U.S. is no exception.

“In America, they have the ability to earn half a million per girl a year,” Basi said. “If they can break her.” If traffickers can get their victims to submit to force or coercion, the victims are that much more valuable to them.

“Our children are now the hottest commodity in the world and have been for a long time because you can sell them over and over again,” said Basi. “It’s not like coffee, it’s not like oil, it’s not like drugs where you use it once and it’s gone.”

It’s a myth that human trafficking only or primarily occurs in developing countries. According to the Polaris Project, human trafficking grows out of greed and profit not only in underground industries, but also in formal sectors including restaurants, factories, cleaning services, and construction.

A report released by the Bureau of Statistics in the Department of Justice in 2011 analyzed confirmed trafficking victims in the U.S. from January 2008 through June 2010. The report reveals 83 percent of sex trafficking victims were identified as U.S. citizens while 67 percent of labor trafficking victims were identified as undocumented immigrants.

The U.S. Department of State estimates trafficking of 14,500 to 17,500 people into the U.S. each year, with populous border-state California as one of the top four destinations.

“It’s really hard for us to say what trafficking looks like in the states with certainty—really anywhere in the world with certainty—because it’s such a hard population to get data on,” said Rachel Robitz, a physician and researcher at the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento.

The International Labour Organization estimates 40.3 million people globally living in modern slavery at any moment in 2016. Of these victims, the organization estimates 4.8 million are trapped in forced sexual exploitation. One in four victims of modern slavery are children.

Robitz says that although anyone with any socioeconomic status or from any ethnic group can be and are trafficked, certain populations are at an increased risk.

“We know that, for example, homeless youth are at an increased risk of being trafficked for sex,” said Robitz. “LGBT youth who have been kicked out of their homes and don’t have a lot of support at home are at an increased risk. We know that migrant workers, folks who are crossing borders, are at increased risk of being trafficked for labor. There are a whole variety of factors, and really anything that makes people vulnerable puts them at risk.”

Robitz researches the physical and mental health needs of human trafficking survivors. Previously, Robitz provided psychiatric care, including evaluation and medication, for trafficking survivors. Now, she is conducting a qualitative study on the relationship between survivor leaders and the organizations they work with to understand how this impacts the survivor leaders’ well-being.

The physical health impacts of trafficking on survivors is threefold, according to Robitz. The first is trauma or traumatic injuries either inflicted by a trafficker, someone else in the trafficking situation—such as a buyer of commercial sex—or self-inflicted traumatic injuries. The second includes occupational risks. Trafficking victims often have little to no access to personal protection equipment to treat or prevent injuries or diseases such as STDs. Third, victims often have issues related to poor living conditions including malnutrition, dehydration, and skin conditions. Trafficking victims also face mental health impacts such as depression, PTSD, anxiety, and self-injurious behavior including suicide.

While human trafficking is often viewed from a criminal justice or human rights perspective, Robitz says it’s also important to address the issue from a public health perspective.

As the co-chair for the direct service committee for the organization HEAL Trafficking, Robitz advocates to human trafficking advisory councils, encouraging them to involve medical providers in the process of treating survivors.

HEAL Trafficking works to improve public policies and support anti-trafficking efforts. It also facilitates collaborative research projects, including investigating the effectiveness of healthcare screening and response protocols. Identifying patients in health care agencies at risk for trafficking may help prevent or allow for intervention in trafficking.

While many notable agencies and organizations combat human trafficking, each person involved—including consumers—is vital in the fight against this growing criminal enterprise.

Although Conscious by Kali does a lot for traffic survivors, the organization needs more funding. Basi says she wants to move the center to a better place. Every time it rains, it floods; the girls have to walk through the flooded streets to get to the center. It's not a safe neighborhood; just the other day a shooting took place right outside the center. Some potential buyers refuse to come.

"I'm struggling; we've got to move out of here. It's in the slums," Basi said. "The ultimate dream is to have our own place, land, grow our own food, have our own center where the girls can stay, have a place for their children."

Basi's organization has a donation page on its website, www.consciousbykali.com. The bulk of their funding comes from what they make and what Basi can sell overseas. However, donations allow Basi to focus on training and looking at different ways to improve rather than worrying about where she's going to get the money to pay the next bill.

To donors, Basi says, "You're actually helping a survivor stay alive, get her dignity back and stand on her own two feet." One hundred percent of donations goes into providing for these girls and Basi hopes that soon the organization will become self-sufficient through the sales of products made by the girls.

"When I'm thinking about where I'm going to get the funds to pay for our rent or to keep the center going, I remember their stories and that keeps me going," Basi said. "No way will I let my girls down."