

Transcript 169

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. On today, we're going to be touching on a hot culture issue, partially driven by a recent movie, but also something that we at Got Questions are very concerned about and we received a lot of questions about over the years. We talked about human trafficking and specifically by a particular organizations role in fighting human trafficking. So joining me today is Beth. She's one of the associate editors at Got Questions Ministries and also Preston Goff of the Exodus Road. So both of you and thank you for joining me today.

Preston Goff

Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Shea Houdmann

And Preston, why don't you tell us and our audience a little bit about yourself? What's your role is at the Exodus road? And what the Exodus Road is all about.

Preston Goff

Yeah, absolutely. So, yeah, my name is Preston. I am the senior director of communications here at the Exodus Road. So I get the unique gift of having that chance to sit down with our teams and really deeply understand and hear the stories of the work that we're encountering every day. And then help share that with the average person around the world so that we can all get a better grasp of what this issue really looks like globally. And what each of our role really is in helping to combat it. The Exodus Road, we're we're a nonprofit that has been around for a little over a decade. And we are specifically responding, responding to the issue of human trafficking in three kind of primary way. The first is through intervention work, which means we assist law enforcement actually in helping to capture evidence that exploitation is taking place so that they can build what's called the target package that will eventually result in they they're being able to take action on behalf of somebody who's being exploited. Remove them from that exploitation. And then really help start them on their their path, their journey towards healing. We've been doing that for the the lions share of the amount of time that we've been operating as an organization. It's how we got our start. And today, actually, you know, we just have passed over like 2000 rescues in the in the last few months and have seen that really steadily climb.

Preston Goff

On top of that. The organization is also involved in the work of training and education. So we really believe firmly that the way towards really mass systemic change with this issue is helping to train those who are uniquely positioned to fight it in their local communities, to know how to recognize the crime, and then respond to it in ways that are trauma informed and holistic, and and understand the role of law enforcement, the role of social care and aftercare workers, the role of faith communities and churches and just different entities that are all concerned about, you know, uplifting their their local community.

Preston Goff

The last component really is aftercare, so I kind of touched on it that the Exodus Road is very intentional about operating with the trauma informed strategy as we are helping to helping law enforcement to actually remove people from trafficking situations. And yet that moment really is just the first step in a journey towards healing. We are really committed to walking alongside survivors when and where we can to help them to really imagine a different future for themselves that would really empower them to navigate the world free from the vulnerabilities that might have left them in a place where exploitation could take place in the first place. So yeah, it's kind of a three prong approach to our work.

Beth DeVore

Yeah, I heard about Exodus Road fairly early on when I was volunteering with a local trafficking recovery ministry and what caught my attention is I believe you had your start in Thailand?

Preston Goff

Yeah, that's right. We we started in Thailand, our founders and our their names are Matt and Laura. And they had moved to Thailand actually to work alongside an orphanage for young girls. And really in the process what they continued to hear from the community was there's a, there's a massive problem with the fact that there are no young girls left in the villages. And when they really started to dive in on that concept what they found was that in fact, many of the young girls were being removed from the communities and trafficked to urban centers for commercial sexual exploitation. And so they started to respond. And then the Exodus Road was really born out of that initial kind of realization.

Beth DeVore

We adopted our son from Bangkok, so slight personal connection there. But I very much appreciate what you guys are doing in Thailand. I think one of the more unique things that didn't even occur to me when I first heard about Exodus Rd. was how you work with local law enforcement. Can you explain why that's so important?

Preston Goff

Yeah, I'd love to. The fact that the Exodus Rd. works with law enforcement is actually the thing that really drew me to this organization four years ago more than anything else. You know, when you think about what it means to actually remove somebody from a trafficking scenario, oftentimes what we see kind of in popular media especially is this idea that, like any person who who has the courage and the and the heart, can just walk in and pull somebody out. And that's often celebrated. But the reality is that in many situations, if that occurs, what that does is it it, it does it, it brings relief to that one individual and it creates a vacuum that's ready to be filled with another potential victim. And so when you work with law enforcement to really build these cases, what it does is it allows one, it allows law enforcement to better know how to see and recognize the crime of human trafficking in their local community and thus build a case and respond to it within the the government rules and regulations that allow for things like survivor protection, prosecution of perpetrators, all of these good things that really change the public's perception of the issue. But you also, you ensure things like a survivors access to either government or private based aftercare services and and things that are often not available when actions taken kind of outside of law enforcement. So it's hard work and it takes a lot longer to build cases on average. But the reality is that we we've really have seen that there is great power in working alongside

good men and women who are law enforcement who say, hey, we really don't want this to be the reality in our community and we want to change that. So it's been, it's been really encouraging.

Shea Houdmann

So Preston and Beth, as we talked about Thailand earlier, I have found that a lot of people in the United States look at human trafficking issue is this is something that happens over there. This is something that, yeah, sure, it happens in other countries, but it's not happening here in the United States. Now I know that's not the case, but Preston maybe what are some examples or even some statistics to help our listeners understand that like no, this is happening in first world countries like the United States. It is happening a lot. It's not an exception. It is all over the place. It is abundant to the point that is, is a serious problem that cannot and should not be ignored.

Preston Goff

Yeah. So the the most recent data on human trafficking was released in 2022 and it was published by the International Labor Organization, which tends to be kind of the guiding voice on how prevalent the issue is. And they, they've really have said that there's a around 50 million people around the world that are affected by the issue of human trafficking. Honestly, it's a really difficult process to go about making those estimations because human trafficking is very complex and from situation to situation it often looks very different.

Preston Goff

In the US specifically, there's there's different conversations around how prevalent it is. Some estimates, for instance from the Global Slavery Index put the issue at nearly 1.1 million people affected here in the states. Which you know is roughly the size of like Austin, TX in terms of population. It's pretty, pretty substantial. But there's, you know, there's kind of mixed conversations around, you know how that number is reached. I think overall, most researchers and experts in this would would agree that it's it's at least 600,000 and maybe up to to 1.1 million. Here in the states, you know, sex trafficking is really prevalent. And it's often a thing that gets a lot of attention, specifically in, like local news coverage and and national news coverage, however, labor trafficking is also really prevalent. You know, the US office of the Exodus Road, we're based out of Colorado. And in Colorado labor trafficking it plays a larger role in the number of overall trafficking cases than it does in other parts of the country. And it's because you, you know, you think about the the amount of migration and different people moving through the state and the role of agriculture specifically and how agriculture is 1 area where labor trafficking is more prevalent and there's a variety of factors that play into that, but yeah, it's certainly prevalent here. The reality is human trafficking exists in every single country in the world. It exists in every single state in the US. And it's often much more mundane than what people might imagine and for that reason, it really exists kind of within our everyday. It's it's not a stretch to say that you may have encountered somebody in the last month who is experiencing human trafficking exploitation.

Beth DeVore

I know that, I believe that labor trafficking is the most prevalent and then sex trafficking, but I recently heard of two other types of trafficking that the international authorities are identifying. That's organ harvesting and this totally makes sense but it never occurred to me, forced marriage. That takes a while to get my head around, but it's totally valid.

Preston Goff

Yeah. Certainly. Yeah. When you when you look at that 50 million number from from the International Labor Organization actually, the way that they break that down is I believe it's 22 or 24,000,000 specifically, people experiencing forced marriage. What I often share is that when you think about the experiences of people who are in a trafficking scenario, it's much more a situation where those categories are a Venn diagram and not so much as kind of compartmentalized experiences. And what I mean by that is you may have somebody who is experiencing forced marriage so they may have been Yeah, forced to enter into a marriage, especially at a young age. The the reality of child marriage is, is really prevalent. Yeah, in this forced marriage relationship, but also in a labor exploitation scenario where they're actually forced to serve not only the the sexual desires, but also the labor desires and the labor needs of an entire family unit. And so it's this really tragic situation where more than likely they're experiencing multiple different forms of human trafficking, even if forced marriage is kind of the the top tier one that they they're circumstance would be classified as.

Beth DeVore

Do you know of any other kind of situations that could be labeled human trafficking in the future?

Preston Goff

It's a good question. Well, let me talk a little bit about kind of where a lot of human trafficking cases are really moving and that it's in the online space. You know, when you think about the role and the just immense boom that we've seen of what's called csam material, which is child sexual abuse material. It's just really astonishing how much that's growing and how linked that is to the crime of human trafficking. So, for instance, in the Philippines, which is one of the countries where the Exodus Roads works, the the issue of the generation of csam material is really at an all time high. And the Philippines happens to be one of the the biggest countries in the world for the production of this content. And unfortunately, when you think about that kind of crime, it's obviously there's there's a physical exploitation of a child, but there's also an ongoing digital exploitation of that child where, you know, they're being sold over and over in the online space through content that can live on into perpetuity if nothing's done.

Prestson Goff

The really just astonishing thing when I talk to people too, is that from what we've heard from law enforcement professionals that we work with, we partner with the National Bureau of Investigation in the Philippines and the Filipino National Police. And what they've reported to us is that in many of the situations, in the cases that they're working, they they're disrupting a clientele that is mostly Western, that is looking for that material. And so when you think about this, this issue in the way that a global online marketplace makes the access to other people across the world like possible. It really is a constant reminder to those of us who are living in the West especially, that the brokenness that exists halfway across the world, we we are implicated in. And and we have a real responsibility to, to bring healing to our communities so that those that are experiencing brokenness don't go and exploit somebody else halfway across the world for their own gain. So it's a multifaceted crime that, like I said, that takes on many, many different characteristics and increasingly because of the online world, we all have a role in helping to stop it.

Beth DeVore

I understand in the Philippines, a lot of that abuse is being carried out by family members and family friends, people close in the community. With your presence there, are you seeing any changes in the environment? Any sign that the adults who are creating the content are stopping and thinking about the damage that they're doing?

Preston Goff

You know, in many, many cases of trafficking around the world, the the perpetrator of the crime is often somebody that is known by the survivor or by the victim. So that's really consistent, even with what the crime looks like in the US in terms of a family member being maybe being involved, or a loved one, a current or past boyfriend or girlfriend. You know, one of the really great initiatives that we've been just really focused on in the Philippines is this idea of Community education. And so several several times over the last few months, we've been able to work with the National Bureau of Intelligence and the Filipino National Police to go in and offer these large scale community kind of engagement training weekends that says, hey, like, this is what the crime of human trafficking looks like when we talk about online exploitation in these communities. And those communities are often picked and selected by our police partners, actually because of the amount of cyber intelligence that's gathered. So realizing that a lot of a lot of content is being uploaded from IP addresses in certain areas. And so that gives us real clarity on OK, we can go in and make a big difference here.

Preston Goff

I think some of the impact of that is still yet to be determined right, like it takes a bit of time to understand you know how the tide is changing from a data perspective, but when you just think about the feedback that we get from the community and the and the openness and the increased willingness to really talk about this, this issue, it's been really positive. And we really believe that that is a continued pathway for changing an entire mindset about this crime. The cool thing about that is that it's not only an educational initiative because by bringing law enforcement in, what it does is it strengthens a relationship between local law enforcement and the Community they serve. And it builds these pathways that allows the community to continue to see them as a trusted, a trusted force that's there for their protection and and there to help yeah, keep them safe. And it's actually resulted in leads that that result in actual cases that would remove somebody from trafficking. So that's really encouraging.

Shea Houdmann

In the beginning you mentioned like the three prongs of the Exodus Road, so the the law enforcement side, the education just making people aware of what's going on, but then also the aftercare aspect. This is perhaps the one where I'm the most familiar with in terms of I know of several different organizations who are focusing on aftercare. That once someone gets rescued out of human trafficking, no matter what type of trafficking it is, there's a lot of trauma that person has experienced. They need a lot of counseling, they need protection, et cetera. What are some of the things that Exodus Road does in this arena and also what are maybe some things just for us to be aware of that people are struggling with in dealing with when they've been rescued.

Preston Goff

Yeah, certainly. Let me start with the the last question first. So I think one thing that is often maybe a misconception about the survivor journey and about the moment of rescue. One thing that's a bit of a

misconception about it is that the moment of rescue and the moment of intervention, we we like to use the term intervention as much as we can, is not always this, like, over joyous and celebratory moment. And the reason for that is because you think about the situation that somebody has walked through and the coercion that they've experienced. In many, many of these cases a victim will be told by his or her exploiter not to go to law enforcement because what they're doing is illegal or what they're being forced to do is illegal. And that's the case in either labor or sex trafficking cases that we see. So there's a great fear of going to law enforcement, and that's a tactic for creating control, for creating coercion. So when you think about, you know, law enforcement showing up to that scene. And them taking an interest or arresting a perpetrator, often somebody who is known personally by the victim. There's many layers there that have to be unwound and that survivor has to go through a bit of a journey to to even sometimes recognize, hey, like what you were experiencing was exploitative and like what you're experiencing is actually human trafficking. So there's a bit of a, yeah, a little bit of a misconception there in many, many cases where, you know, a survivor may be really frustrated in that moment and really upset that law enforcement is engaging on their behalf. And that's why the burden to prove ahead of time that exploitation is taking place is even more important and even higher. So that we really can walk in and say no, like, here's here's this portrait of like what you were experiencing, what was being done to you. And why this is not not good, not right, not legal.

Preston Goff

The other thing to say is that, you know, for the Exodus Road, we because we really got our start in intervention work and we were really laser focused on that for a long time, our approach to aftercare has been a little bit different than some might expect. So when you look at actually even the landscape of the the nonprofits and the entities that are engaged in anti trafficking work the majority of the organizations and even the like financial investment globally is in prevention or aftercare work. And and intervention has been the space that's been significantly kind of kind of less funded or or or less focused on. So for us as an organization, we really came in and said hey like what we want to do is we want to be experts at this moment of intervention using trauma informed strategy and be about the work of collaboration and partnership when it comes to aftercare. At looking at who exists in their local community, whether that is like in India, the Indian government plays a large role in caring for survivors in the in the moment of rescue, and they have certain roles and and standards on like the survivor where the survivor can stay after they've been removed from exploitation, that kind of thing. In other countries it's a little bit more open and there's there's an ability for a survivor to be placed into a private aftercare shelter, and we can really have a larger role in really directing where goes.

Preston Goff

That said, we we really begin to see in Thailand specifically a few years ago, a really large gap in services that were being offered to survivors in that there really was a a need in the community for a home for adult female survivors that often don't have access to aftercare services because most of the aftercare services are directed for minors. But the reality is that many of these adults, women that we serve were, you know, they were exploited at an early age and and in many cases were being exploited all throughout their teens. Maybe we encounter them as an adult and they're they're removed from trafficking. Well, they no longer have access to all the services that they would have had two months earlier when they were a minor, in some situations. So we really came alongside those that we serve and said, hey, we really want to start an aftercare program specifically for female adult survivors. And

and actually what what it became was for, for adult survivors and their children. And so we call that freedom home. Freedom Home is one way that we're really helping survivors to be equipped to be able to navigate the world without those vulnerabilities that led them to exploitation. So it's like an in home year long program that's meant to not only be like a safe place for them to catch their breath, not have to worry about where they're staying, not not have to worry about food as well as like medical care, mental healthcare, kind of the. Yeah. Like it's kind of critical and essential aftercare elements, but it it's also a program for career based training that it really positions them to have a a marketable skill in the local in their local context so that they can walk out and and be marketable for a career in a career in graphic design or as a restaurant owner. Those are two, two examples of current residents and their their career path right now, so that's been just really exciting to to watch take off.

Beth DeVore

What's the most rewarding aspect of your work there?

Preston Goff

Yeah. I mean, it feels like there is no answer to this except for watching people walk out of exploitation, and I'm really intentional about the way I say that too. Like in so many of these situations, it's not like it's not the Exodus Roads roll entirely to remove them from exploitation. Like we, we want to be about calling out the power that lives within every every survivor to to walk forward in their life and and really experience the the hope and the vision that they have for the future. And if we get to walk alongside them as they do that and be one small part of helping to helping to liberate them from the from the exploded circumstance, they've they've been in and that's really wonderful. I think it goes without saying that that's that's a really rewarding thing.

Preston Goff

I think personally there have been several just really critical moments where I've sat with law enforcement, most recently in Brazil few months ago. And just to sit and to see the good of who they are shine and the grit that they have in this work and the resourcefulness that they have in their work, and to know that like the Exodus Road has the distinct honor of getting to call them a partner is just one of the things that I'm most proud of. I was with the law enforcement officer, he's a captain of a group called the BP front, which is basically the Border Patrol, the border police in Brazil. And this specific unit, you know, a few years ago they were, they were tasked with patrolling the border between Argentina and Paraguay and Brazil, which is a a substantial border for guns and and weapons trafficking and drug trafficking. But it's also a substantial border for human trafficking. And you know, as a unit, they were really tasked with, hey, focus on weapons and drugs. And it wasn't that the human trafficking element didn't exist. It's that they didn't know how to recognize it. And so we actually had the the privilege to come in and roll out a training curriculum that was hands on with this specific group. And you know, since since a year and a half ago when they completed it, they have liberated over 80 people from human trafficking in just that year and a half. And what he said to me was, you know, before the Exodus Road came, we were only focused on drugs and weapons. But now we see people. And we see the humans involved in this and the beautiful thing about that is it's all interconnected. Human trafficking is this Nexus crime. And so, you know, as they've investigated cases of exploitation of minors they they rescued a 16 year old girl from Paraguay who her family was looking for her. She had ran away and and gotten snared into a a human trafficking situation. Brought across the border. And they helped

repatriate her back home. In the midst of that, what they've uncovered is, hey, the people trafficking her are also the ones bringing the drugs and weapons in the country. And so it's this beautiful portrait of, like, when you focus on the person, it allows you to disrupt the whole network of criminal activity and also change a life. And that's really it's really amazing to be a part of that.

Shea Houdmann

Preston, thank you for opening our eyes to what's going on in the world and human traffic. I know there's so much more we could talk about, but what are what is the best way for our listeners to learn more about the Exodus Road and what you all are doing?

Preston Goff

Yeah, absolutely. Definitely visit us online, TheExodusRoad.com. We really see our publicity efforts as efforts of of education and of bringing the average person up to speed on this issue. And so if you're curious about learning more about what it looks like, visit [The ExodusRoad.com](http://TheExodusRoad.com). Click on our stories tab at the top and you'll find just tons of articles on this issue. A lot of myth busting and fact based research that that's really helpful. And then also of course, we're on all the socials at the Exodus Road.

Shea Houdmann

Fantastic. At Got Questions may we believers in the the Lord Jesus Christ and fully believe what the Bible says, that every man and woman is created in the image of God, therefore has dignity and value, and that that communicates deeply to the issue of human trafficking, that human slavery is a moral evil. What's being done to people around the world, it's awful and God hates it. And as his followers, we are to be opposed and in an active way. And the Exodus Road is a definite way that people can get involved, can be supporting. Can be praying. Just to fight this evil that is plaguing our world today. So Preston, thank you again for joining us today. Thank you so much for your your passion, your insight, very informative conversation today.

Preston Goff

Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Shea Houdmann

It it's been the Got Questions podcast discussing human trafficking with Preston Goff, [The Exodus Road](http://TheExodusRoad.com). Got questions? The Bible has answers. And we'll help you find them.