

<http://mashable.com/2016/03/06/discussing-human-trafficking/#mPzgaNG8oOq2>

Speaking out against human trafficking — and learning along the way



Flight attendants are trained to identify individuals who could be victims of trafficking.

IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

BY HEATHER POOLE 2 days ago

Opinion

For years, I only thought about human trafficking on the plane. As a flight attendant, I've been trained to spot trafficking in the air, and it never crossed my mind where these people might end up after they stepped off the aircraft. It wasn't like I could do anything for them once they disembarked ... or so I thought.

It wasn't until I started looking around my southern California neighborhood that I saw the potential for trafficking in my own backyard, so to speak. It's made me take a special interest in the topic, and I was even motivated to [speak to my City Council](#).

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You, like me, might think human trafficking is a topic we would all agree on. Right? Wrong. I recently learned there are a lot of people who disagree.

I also learned what happens when you tweet about trafficking and the Super Bowl.

After [previously writing](#) about what I've learned about human trafficking, last month I tweeted, "The Super Bowl is this weekend. People who will be trafficked this weekend are probably on the move." And that's when all hell broke loose.

The reaction was eye opening.

The attacks were swift, and pretty soon I was "ignorant," "sexist" and a "prude."

The most important thing I've learned is human trafficking isn't easy to talk about for a number of reasons. For one, it's not easy for victims to talk about their experiences. It's hard to reopen those wounds. Second, most people have no clue what is happening — on their aircraft, in their country, in their neighborhood. And third, some sex worker advocates argue we're creating more victims: That when I speak out against human trafficking, that I'm contributing to the mass incarceration of sex workers.

On that last point is where this gets messy.

Human trafficking is a global problem. People who are trafficked are on the move: In other words, on airplanes. Victims literally fly in to the U.S. on commercial airlines, in front of so many sets of eyes. Flight attendants are considered the first line of defense, and that's how I came to learn so much about it.

What are the signs to look for? A person who isn't allowed to speak for themselves. A passenger who avoids eye contact and appears fearful, anxious, tense, depressed, nervous, submissive. Someone who is dressed inappropriately — think t-shirt and jeans in the middle of winter. A passenger who has few possessions, even on a long flight. A passenger who isn't allowed to move independently or someone whose every move is controlled by another passenger. These are the things that might catch my eye. These are the things that might lead me to start a simple conversation in order to investigate the situation further.

But I limited my scouting to the airplane, until I met a woman in my neighborhood who works with a nonprofit organization that fights trafficking. I was sitting next to her at a swimming pool, thinking, "how can it be happening here?" All over Los Angeles, she said.

And so trafficking, in my town of Redondo Beach, has become an off-duty interest for me. On the drive to my son's school, we pass 18 massage parlors — in less than two miles. Every single day I look at these massage parlors, and wonder what might be going on behind those covered up windows surrounded by security cameras. Could it be consensual sex work? It certainly could be. Could it just be a regular massage parlor? Sure. But what if something else is going on? I wonder what could be happening in plain sight, while average people drive by every day.

The average person hasn't had their employer teach them how to stop human trafficking like mine has. The average person doesn't have a daily reminder that trafficking is going on in the world the way I do.

When I tweeted about the Super Bowl, I wanted to remind my followers — most of them travelers — about what's going on in the world. Human trafficking is a global problem, who better to help than those who traverse the globe?

But that didn't sit well with a few people who have a problem with people, like myself, who speak out against trafficking, spreading myths and lies, they say, about the number of people who get trafficked to sporting events. They say that not only does it not happen the way it's reported in the news, but that human trafficking rhetoric is used to arrest women who choose to be sex workers. Despite [that argument](#), people do — [and did](#) — get arrested for trafficking teenage girls.

I'll be the first person to tell you that I'm in no position to argue numbers. I'm not an expert. But here's a number: One. One person trafficked is far too many for me.

Still the message was clear. Shut up. Be quiet. I'm not helping. By speaking out, I'm making things worse. The message I got was that by saving one victim from human trafficking, we're creating hundreds of other victims: sex workers.

One person trafficked is far too many for me.

But what are we supposed to do? Pretend it's not happening? I'm not comfortable with that.

And so I find myself discussing the decriminalization of consensual work. That's what you better be prepared to discuss when you talk human trafficking, and mention sporting events like the Super Bowl. Because unless you speak out about supporting decriminalization, a lot of people will tell you to shut up. To mind your own business.

But if the conversation doesn't take place, how will people be aware of the problems?

"We don't always choose what life will throw at us," a colleague, who was abducted at age 16, told me. "Sometimes we end up in situations where we are treated less than a dirty penny, but our goal is to lift each other up." She was taken at a train station, held against her will and brutally raped. She now speaks out against trafficking with [Airline Ambassadors International](#), a group that trains airline employees how to recognize the signs.

My mistake, I guess, was talking about the Super Bowl in relation to human trafficking. That's why I was accused of supporting the criminalization of sex workers. By tweeting about it, I was accused of supporting mass incarceration. I was told not to talk about it if I want to help, otherwise I'll create more problems by fueling racism by having cops watch people who don't need to be watched.

"You are the problem," one woman wrote. "By keeping up the [pro-criminal] response that will keep the prisons filled with poor black women."

Me. Not the people who take away other people's freedom — the one who might serve you a drink on your next flight, or tweet about the Super Bowl on a day off.

After tweet after tweet called me names and insulted my intelligence, they must've thought they'd silenced me.

“I bet you wish you were tweeting about something other than trafficking now,” another person tweeted at me.

But to that I say: Nope. I think it's important for people to see the conversation. The whole conversation, whether I'm "right" or not.

Heather Poole is a flight attendant for a major U.S. carrier, and the author of the New York Times bestseller [Cruising Attitude: Tales of Crashpads, Crew Drama and Crazy Passengers at 35,000 Feet](#). You can follow her on Twitter at [@Heather_Poole](#).