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Texting Out an SOS

Messaging apps are helping some women escape human trafficking.

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Sophie Otiende is a late adopter. It was only last summer, she says, that she became obsessed with her smartphone. Even so, she had a better excuse than the rest of us for constantly checking her device. Otiende is a consultant in Nairobi with the nonprofit Awareness Against Human Trafficking. By last spring, 31 women—in a group spread across war-torn Libya and linked via social media—had found her on Facebook through the organization and asked for her help. The first thing she could do, the endangered women told her, was join their group chat on WhatsApp.

Soon, Otiende was using the free messaging app to provide information to each of the women in Libya, who'd met in person or found one another through social media over several weeks and formed a support group. Many said they were afraid for their lives and needed a way out, so Otiende and her colleagues began supplying them with the directions, paperwork, and points of contact needed to flee to Kenya, with assistance from the Kenyan Ministry of Foreign Affairs &

International Trade and the International Organization for Migration. By December 2014, all 31 women had escaped sex slavery and begun building new lives in Kenya, according to Otiende. “They risked everything,” she says. “We were constantly worried about them. But we were able to communicate.”

In some ways, the Internet and social media have fueled the problem of human trafficking around the world. It’s never been easier to buy or sell forced labor. The International Labour Organization says it’s a \$150 billion market victimizing some 21 million people—4.5 million of whom are sexually exploited. At the same time, many victims have access to mobile devices, and increasingly, trafficked women are using messaging services to get help.

“If you’re vulnerable and isolated, the more important that cell phone becomes for you,” says Mark Latonero, a fellow at the Data & Society Research Institute in New York, who’s studied technology and human trafficking. “It’s a lifeline, and an important one.”

Many abused or trafficked girls and young women are given phones as a way for their abusers to keep tabs on them, says Jameela Nishat, founder of the Shaheen Women’s Resource and Welfare Association, a nonprofit shelter in Hyderabad, India. Nishat says 10 of her volunteers use WhatsApp to communicate with about 100 women and girls who wouldn’t be safe trying to meet with a door-to-door caseworker. “It helps them tell us things,” she says. “They can share with us the good and the bad.” Through mobile messaging, Nishat says, the women and girls living in confinement can seek education, medical treatment, and counseling, as well as emotional support. Like Otiende, she’s also used it in more dramatic cases, giving step-by-step guidance for escape or rescue.

“The messages say, ‘We’re here to help you if you need it,’ and it gives a high reliability of actually reaching someone.” —*Gordon Gow, University of Alberta*

The women also use apps such as Line and Telegram, but most often they mention WhatsApp, which had 900 million users as of September. Facebook, which paid \$22 billion for WhatsApp in 2014, didn’t respond to requests for comment for this story. When the company announced the acquisition, Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg said part of WhatsApp’s appeal was that it could be a kind of “911 for the Internet.”

Human-rights advocates say social media services could do more to block traffickers from advertising and soliciting young people on their sites. In 2011, Microsoft offered six grants totaling \$185,000 to researchers focused on the role of technology in trafficking. That same year, Google gave \$11.5 million in grants to 10 antitrafficking and antislavery organizations.

With an eye to trafficking victims who have only disposable “burner” phones and can’t use apps, University of Alberta communications professor Gordon Gow and his students comb classified ads at sites such as Backpage.com for the phone numbers of sex workers, then send them SMS text messages with contact info for the Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation. Gow says about 10 percent of the 5,000-odd messages his team has sent have elicited a response—some a simple “thank you,” others asking for more detailed assistance, such as referrals to police or rehab facilities.

Each blast—typically from 100 to 300 messages—costs the organization \$10 in wireless charges, Gow says. “From our point of view, this is a practical and cost-effective way of directly reaching this population,” he says. “The messages say, ‘We’re here to help you if you need it,’ and it gives a high reliability of actually reaching someone.”

Reaching someone is just the beginning, Otiende says. In Kenya, her organization is helping the Libya escapees find jobs, shelter, and counseling for post-traumatic stress. Migrants, refugees, and other displaced people remain particularly vulnerable to slavers, she says: “The problem is that we always feel two steps behind where the traffickers are.”

The next frontiers, says Otiende, include Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Her group is trying to put as much of its resources online as possible, to help more people in Kenya and elsewhere. “To fight, we need to be able to stay up to date with what’s out there,” she says. “We need to be able to evolve.”

The bottom line: *Trafficked women and the nonprofits trying to help them are turning to messaging apps to share information.*