A Student’s Perspective

One undergraduate’s “whirlwind” week of involvement in anti-trafficking events at Indiana University

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MONDAY: SWEATSHOP LABOR

Economic advancement, propelled by the payment of a living wage and full healthcare coverage, can transform disenfranchised workers into powerful advocates for change. At 7:00 p.m. on the evening of Monday, October 21st, two textile workers from the Alta Gracia fair trade zone in Villa Altagracia, Dominican Republic, visited Indiana University as part of a nationwide speaking tour. With the help of an interpreter, Yenny Perez and Davi Avelino contrasted their previous inhumane working conditions with the fair and accommodating treatment they now receive in the Alta Gracia fair trade zone. Though voiced in Spanish, the fervent criticisms of the BJ&B textile factory’s barbaric practices resounded with frustration and emotion that spoke to all present in the cozy gathering room of La Casa Latino Cultural Center. Forced labor, a dangerous environment, and both physical and verbal abuse dominated their past employment experiences. But now, as a result of collaboration between American university students and humanitarian business investors, the once-utopian idea of a fair trade factory has become a practical and profitable reality. Amy Harris, a Solidarity Ignite spokeswoman traveling with the Alta Gracia workers, repeatedly stressed the importance of the college apparel company’s five founding principles: a living wage, full healthcare coverage, a democratic voice, transparency, and solidarity. Choosing to respect human dignity, these representatives urged, does not have to be an exclusive practice; Alta Gracia has proved that it is possible to earn a profit and empower people in the process.

TUESDAY: HUMAN TRAFFICKING

According to UN statistics, about 2.4 million people around the globe are presently ensnared in the web of human trafficking. At the call-out meeting for the IU chapter of the International Justice Mission organization on Tuesday, October 22nd, executive members of the emerging student group shared sobering facts and inspiring stories of rescue and rehabilitation. President Megan Nash introduced the basic goals, structure, and meeting dates of the club. Vice President Caitlyn Gladish discussed community-building projects, and Treasurer Hope Moreland and Outreach Advocate Colte Davis shared their ideas for fundraising and campus awareness projects. Secretary Rachel Brown provided valuable input regarding future events, as well. As Prayer Coordinator for the group, I mentioned the possibility of a road trip to Washington, D.C.,
in April for the IJM annual international prayer conference. (As a faith-based anti-trafficking organization, the International Justice Mission identifies prayer as a key component of the battle against human bondage.) Other upcoming events include the 27-hour Stand for Freedom and contacting legislators en masse to encourage anti-trafficking advancements. Although the turnout for this event was meager, members did not find the low attendance too discouraging. Instead, they were grateful that a few dedicated individuals were willing to sacrifice their time to learn more about a burgeoning, insidious industry that is oppressing thousands of people around the world. With knowledge comes awareness, and awareness beckons change.

**WEDNESDAY: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION**

“A girl is simply one more thing the world has thrown away.” So stated one of the opening lines of *Girl Rising*, an award-winning documentary shown at the Indiana Memorial Union on Wednesday, October 27th, at 7:00 p.m. This production, which followed the educational journeys and yearnings of nine girls across the globe, highlighted the importance of investing in women’s education. Globally, there are 66 million school-age girls who do not have access to formal education, a statistic that the narrator directly connected to decreased economic well-being and maternal health of communities. Citing specific examples of success springing from educational opportunities, the film emphasized that literate and academically enlightened females are able to make more informed life decisions and contribute greatly to community stability. Beginning with Sokha, an orphaned trash-picker in Cambodia, the documentary related the heartbreaking stories of girls who have been discarded by society because of their status as “second-class citizens.” Wadley, Senna, Azmera, Suma, Mariama, Ruksana, Yasmin, and Amina brought to life the very real dilemmas and obstacles that females face internationally. Following the screening, several professors and activists formed a panel in order to share their impressions and field questions from the audience. Fair trade microbusiness, Ugandan school construction, human trafficking snares, and the trickle-down and bottom-up theories, among other subjects, were discussed.

Designed as a sentimental, yet challenging, film, “Girl Rising” gave voice to the belief that knowledge is power. The documentary inspired compassion in audience members, and it issued an important question: How can viewers best utilize their lives to solve inequalities and injustices of global proportions?

**THURSDAY: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

The link between sex trafficking and domestic violence is undeniable. Fariba Nawa, an Afghan-American journalist who gave a series of trafficking-related lectures on the IU-Bloomington campus this week, highlighted this connection during her question-and-answer session in Professor Stepanka Korytova’s INTL-I435 class on Thursday, October 24th. She discussed immigrant enclaves in the United States and the startling prevalence of familial abuse within these communities. Nawa’s commentary regarding Muslim feminism and the “excuse” of cultural relativism proved to be especially enlightening, as her religious and ethnic background
provides her with a unique perspective. In the end, Fariba declared, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights trumps all claims of sacred observance and time-honored tradition.

FRIDAY: REAL-WORLD APPLICATION

After absorbing much valuable information regarding human trafficking and related social dilemmas, I spent the afternoon of Friday, October 25th, volunteering with the Middle Way House Protective Order Assistance Program (POAP). Although it can be terrifying at times, the transition from theory to practice in this program provides priceless experience in the realms of legal advocacy and social work. During my shift, I had the unfortunate responsibility of informing a petitioner that her experience with abuse did not meet the legal requirements necessary for obtaining a protective order. This situation seemed particularly difficult, as the incidents that the woman disclosed were undoubtedly scenarios of domination and violence. However, since a blood, marriage, dating, or partner relationship could not be identified, the petitioner was not eligible to file for a protective order under the umbrella of “domestic violence.” Although I was unable to provide legal assistance, I employed empathy and active listening skills to provide some sort of therapeutic service for the petitioner, and I was able to refer her to several local support groups and shelters.

During my service-learning practicum with POAP, I hope to continue to apply the knowledge that I have gleaned from this week’s human trafficking awareness events. As I engage with future petitioners, I will strive to aid, support, and empower survivors of abuse to the best of my ability!