

Freedom Dialogue: Episode 02

“Boys & Men”: Addressing boys and men in the counter-sex-trafficking sector
w. guests

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Brittany: Welcome to Freedom Dialogues, a podcast-like series meant to share, expand and spur creative thinking to further the dialogue in ending human trafficking and expanding collaborative efforts.

In this episode our guests Alezandra Russell and Carl Jylland-Halverson discuss the master narratives of boys and men, and how to begin shifting the dialogue to a more supportive and educated response.

Alezandra: Hi, I'm Alezandra Russell. I'm the founder and center mom of Urban Light, which is an organization I started about five years ago. We're based out of Chiang-Mai, Thailand. And we work with young boys who are victims of sex-trafficking and child prostitution. We're, as I said, based in Chiang-Mai, Thailand. We're one of the only organizations right now, on the ground, that's addressing the issue of boys who are exploited in the Red Light district. Through Urban Light, what we do is provide various services and support to this at-risk population, and I'm sure we'll get more into that later on in this conversation.

Carl: I'm Carl Jylland-Halverson. I'm a professor at the University of Saint Francis and director of the Clinic of Mental Health Counseling program. I episodically work with the Mayes Ministry in Chicago, which is an urban eco-matical ministry that works with homeless males who participate in prostitution. I've gotten involved with Love 146. We have a task force at our school that works with Love 146. I work with refugees in our community. I really do prefer to focus on involved men and boys.

Brittany: Thank you so much for joining us today. Do you think there is more of a focus on girls than on boys in the counter-trafficking response, and why do you think this is?

Alezandra: Absolutely, really right now, as I mentioned, being the only organization in Chiang-Mai, it's shocking because there's dozens of organizations addressing the needs of young girls and women. It's something that we've noticed as a common trend throughout the world, throughout the globe. Not just cities like Chiang-Mai, but all over the world there tends to be a stigma regarding young boys as being fierce, capable, able to essentially fend for themselves. The idea that they could ever be a vulnerable population is something that kind of goes over our heads. I think we've seen that, we see

it happening here in the States, and we definitely see it happening in Thailand. And yet, I know firsthand working in the field that young boys are just as vulnerable. Not just in the sex-industry, but within labor trafficking, not just young boys, it's also men. How do we change and shift dialogue, and services that are being provided to be able to cater those services not just to women and children but also to men and boys.

Carl: I agree that there is a real focus on females, and part of that is because lots and lots of abuse happens there. But if you look at the data, it's one in three women, by the time they are adult, have been sexually abused in some way, it's one in six guys. So it really is a human problem and we really need to address it. I think it's just easier for people to feel compassion for a girl. There is a yuck factor to a boy being involved in sexual exploitation that we don't want to deal with our own feelings. But the power differentials are the same, the consequences afterwards are very very similar in terms of feeling damaged, blaming yourself, and being socially isolated. In the United States, the media oftentimes has little snide remarks when it talks about when females are the perpetrators, they talk about how lucky the boy was to have that teacher. They refer to the teacher as "the happy hooker". You wouldn't do that if it was a male that was exploiting a little girl. And so there is a discrepancy there, we need to address it. I think organizations like "Male Survivors" and "One In Six" are good groups to work, not separately and not against, but with women's groups. The "One Billion Rising" that we have now every year, one billion women dancing to say no to violence. One of the wonderful things there is that you've got men all over the world dancing with these women, who are making statements that "it has to end" and that's a good sign.

Alezandra: I think to add to that, the discrepancy I think is very much in the global dialogue. How do we really add to that and make it not just a female issue, but a human issue. That's something that us, here, at this conference that we are attending right now regarding this issue, we're really adamant about seeing that shift happen. How do we make it a global dialogue to collaborate, to partner, to really make this not just a one-sided issue, or a one-gender issue. That's one of our biggest hopes, and we hope that people reading the book will have a light bulb go off in their head to really understand more about the issue of boys.

Brittany: How does this shift to talking about boys and men begin to happen?

Alezandra: I think this shift is going to be an uncomfortable shift, it's going to be something that people aren't initially going to feel willing to open their hearts to, but again, I think it's something that one of the frustrations is "Why should someone's heart fall for a girl but not for a boy, or fall for a woman but not for a man?" And so we need to start looking at these very real issues, these very difficult issues but that nevertheless exist. And the stigma that we as global citizens carry with us, and I was one of those individuals, here I was, I often say I'm a college-graduated, educated woman. I studied human trafficking. I poured myself into the research, and I was one of those people that thought, "This doesn't happen to boys". How could boys ever be victims of trafficking and exploitation. And yes the first time I saw it with my own eyes, five years ago, I was floored. I was shocked that I could be so naïve to think that this was such a one-sided

issue. I would go back home and I would be a voice for all of those boys that I saw and I would share the stories with my community. The initial reaction was “Ooh, that’s a little, we don’t want to talk about that, that’s really uncomfortable, why would you do that, why would you work with boys”. Because oftentimes they are seen as trash or disposable, or liars or thieves, or disposable as human beings essentially. The conversation needs to start with a very basic opener. And yes, it’s going to be uncomfortable, but as global citizens, again, it’s our responsibility to address it.

Carl: I think it’s difficult for some people to feel compassionate towards guys. They imagine what happened and there’s just a yuck factor. But if you walk alongside these brothers, who are young men or adults, you get a whole different feel. You see a person. A lot of these folks are homeless. One of the major risk factors is homelessness in the United States, being a street child than in the rest of the world. Those children who are homeless and the parents don’t report that they’re missing, are the ones that are the most vulnerable to being sexually exploited. If people can remember that, it’s easier to start feeling compassion for this person. The other part, another risk factor that is really important, is being in foster care. Foster care is one of the areas where a large percentage of children have experienced some type of sexual abuse, and I think when we think about that we realize that foster care is society’s responsibility for caring for a child. Maybe if we focused on that we’d realize that we’re not doing a good job, we’re not meeting our responsibilities. But certainly if we think of it in terms of a Christian responsibility, if we’re Christians we’re supposed to be seeing Christ in the stranger, Christ in our brothers and sisters. That only happens if we stop treating them as stereotypes and start seeing them as our brothers and sisters.

Brittany: Thank you Carl, that’s a great point. Do you think there’s a general misconception about those that engage in sex work with the same sex and homosexuality?

Carl: I guess the first thing is that in the behavioral sciences, we don’t talk about gay or straight, we talk about men who have sex with men. We look at just the behavior, because that’s easy to measure. It’s separate from identity because a lot of the studies, around sixty-nine percent of the men who participate in prostitution do not identify as homosexual. They see themselves as straight or bi, so we need to separate that. But the other part is that we don’t want that to be simply a way of avoiding the difficult question of, “How do we work with out gay brothers and sisters?” And so, even for those who participate and identify as gay, we’re still called to love them, be there with them, walk beside them. That doesn’t mean that we’re politically correct, or that we watered down our theology or any of that, but it does mean that we are called to love.

Alezandra: I think being a Christian working in a Buddhist country, it’s something, for example, Urban Light is non-faith-based. We recognize the fact that many of our boys are Buddhists or animists. Again, it’s not very much a religious factor, it’s a human factor. Again, to say that the boys that are engaging in this lifestyle, the boys that we serve, they don’t identify as gay. They don’t identify in that respect. It is very much a job that they need to do, and commit themselves to at that moment, or for funding for their families.

Many of our boys desire to have families and babies, they don't identify with the LGBTQ community. Therefore it becomes a complex conversation, because I don't look at them as anything other than a human being that deserves every type of empowerment opportunity, every amount of love and support. So for me it is a very difficult question to answer.

Brittany: How do we increase a male-specific response into the greater human-trafficking response?

Alezandra: From my perspective, it's really a collaborative effort. It's really recognizing, acknowledging that women, men, young boys, young girls are victims. And recognizing that not every organization is going to be able to provide similar services, because as I know boys in the population we serve, have very different needs from the LGBTQ community, very different needs from the female community. And recognizing that I can't do it all. So for me, it's very important that we specify the work we do with boys. But that doesn't mean that we can't collaborate, and that doesn't mean that there are not ways to partner and to make noise about this issue collectively. But I think we need to be responsible in how we're doing it. I think it really is a matter of regions combining, communities combining, and starting a basic conversation. We see so many organizations using social media, using fundraising platforms to start a dialogue, which I think is incredible. That's very much a grassroots way of doing it. I think the grassroots community needs to stay strong, we need to invite people like Carl for example, who I consider a huge mentor for me, working in this field. And it's all about those collaborations, and those conversations that we're going to start having. Very much recognizing that I specifically work with boys, and that's what Urban Light is there to do, and as much as we would like to provide services to everyone, that's our niche, that's where our strength is right now.

Carl: If Jared Davis was here right now, he would tell us that we have to talk about human services, human rights, and human problems, not male or female, so we're doing that for Jared. There are different needs for sure, but there are times where you just focus on what do those people need. You're going to be helping both. So right now, in the United States, the people who are most vulnerable are homeless teenagers. They're the ones that are going to most likely, some of them within forty-eight hours, be approached to be exploited. There are minimal beds available in shelters for teenagers. If we increase those beds we would be helping both males and females and transgenders. They have separate needs, transgenders are an extremely vulnerable group. Oftentimes we'll want services just for them because other people don't understand them, and that's legit. But there's common ground and it's really important for us to look for that common ground to start with, I think.

Brittany: Thank you for joining us in this episode on Boys and Men in the anti-sex trafficking sector. And a special thanks to Alezandra and Carl for taking the time to discuss this important issue. They will be standing by to respond to comments on Freedom Collaborative. So be sure to share your own insights and questions that you may have. You can also find more information about this topic and these authors in the book

Stopping the Traffick, A Christian Response to Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking,
edited by Glen Miles and Christa Foster Crawford.

Alezandra: Thank you for having us and for taking this time to raise awareness about this issue. It starts with a dialogue, and what better place to do that than Freedom Dialogue.