

Experience Rescuing Teenagers Caught in Sex Trafficking Motivates Student's Research

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BUFFALO, N.Y. -- When University at Buffalo School of Social Work doctoral [candidate Bincy Wilson](#) tried to rescue teenage women from sexual trade slavery working the streets of Goa, India, she was the frequent target of threats made by the pimps -- some of them family members of the women -- whose livelihood relied on keeping these women in sexual servitude.

"Threats, oh yes, they were part of the job," says Wilson, who recently finished two [international](#) conferences in which she presented on the need for trans-cultural holistic interventions for women exiting the sex trade, and the traumatic experiences of women in the trade. "You don't stay put fearing for your own life when there is a need to rescue others. We worked in this field because we were passionate about what we did, and the smile of hope on the emancipated victims' faces is worth the risk taken."

Wilson, 27, has tapped into the experiences of her young life for her study at UB. A native of Bangalore, India, Wilson spent three years in Goa assisting women in finding alternatives to working in the sex trade. More recently as a therapist at "SAGE," an agency with a similar mission in San Francisco, she was able to address the traumatization in this prostitute population -- which has fueled her interest and sense of urgency in her [research](#).

She intends to use the knowledge gained from her research to help organizations develop good interventions and other ways to provide services to victims of sex trafficking.

Essential in Wilson's research is the fact that sex trafficking is both a worldwide and dramatically increasing problem. A 2010 report prepared by the U.S. Department of State Government concluded the [numbers](#) of people -- mostly women -- involved in human trafficking had increased by 59 percent in the past two years. The International Labor [Organization estimates](#) that there are at least 12.3 million adults and children who are trafficked for forced labor, bonded labor and sex trade. And the problem extends across the globe, from developed to developing countries, according to Wilson's research.

"Sex trafficking is a global social justice issue," Wilson said in her [presentation](#), "Developing Interventions for Women Exiting the Sex Trade: Societal Perspectives," that she and Barbara Rittner, [associate](#) dean for external affairs in the UB School of Social Work, delivered at the annual Conference

on Human Trafficking, Prostitution and Sex Work held at the University of Toledo. "Whatever attention it receives is driven by the rapidly increasing numbers of people being trafficked internationally and by (medical and health) concerns about sexually transmitted disease such as HIV/AIDS associated with the trade."

"Working with Bincy created an important shift in my thinking," says Rittner. "Most of my work has been with children in foster care in the states, many of whom had mothers in the sex trade, and many of my female adolescent foster children were runaways recruited into the sex trade from the streets."

"The work Bincy and I are doing has helped me think differently about how women enter the trade, why they stay in the trade and why what works in the West to encourage exit may not be workable in the East or subcontinent India. This is what makes working with international doctoral students so exciting."

Wilson's two academic presentations, including a recent presentation in Atlanta, tapped into her unique mix of scholarly expertise and experiences. They were lessons from the years she and her coworkers intervened in the lives of young women -- many still in their teens -- trying to escape lives of prostitution and exploitation from pimps, who sometimes were their husbands and family members. She was program manager at an Indian organization Arz, which translates to "Life Without Injustice," in the Indian coastal city of Goa where she worked as a counselor rehabilitating young women forced to work in the sex trade for money.

"You see exploitation of these women in every way," says Wilson, who came to Buffalo with her husband who also enrolled in a doctoral program at UB. "Not only is the trauma associated with their experience while in the sex trade, but it is also attached to their past, even before they enter the trade. Most of them are coming from lives of abuse, neglect and abject poverty, situations in which they do not have a square [meal](#) or basic resources."

"The debilitating impact of being in the sex trade is visible not only when they are in the sex trade, but also when they are trying to exit the trade. You find them getting addicted to drugs or alcohol in order to cope with the experience of sexual trauma, their health takes a major toll on them with multiple abuses, abortions, miscarriages, menstrual and gynecological problems. Most of the girls suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex PTSD, dissociation, depression, suicide attempts and severe anxiety. They experience difficulty having a normal relationship because of their traumatic sexual experience. When they are in a relationship with someone they love, it becomes difficult for them to get intimate due to the sexual trauma experienced while in the trade. They are often viewed as mere sexual objects by men, and none care to know who they really are within."

While working for three years as a program manager in Goa, Wilson helped establish an automatic laundry to give the sex trade workers an [alternative](#) for making a living and a chance to be together for support. She and her coworkers saw many success stories, she says, but it's the failed ones that often linger most in her mind.

Three years ago, when she was 24, Wilson was working to rehabilitate women working in the sex trafficking business in the infamous red light district of Goa, a traditional destination for Indians and international jetsetters. Thanks to their close ties to the community, Wilson's colleagues heard about a young girl accompanied by a man who had recently come to town, and the community identified the man as the girl's husband.

A staff member brought the couple into Wilson's office, and the husband told workers how they came from a poor background and were in desperate need of money; that's why the girl was working as a prostitute. Wilson's colleagues offered the cooperative laundromat as an alternative, and at the same time contacted police to prosecute the husband for trafficking his wife.

But there were delays in getting the police involved, Wilson remembers. "The man wanted to leave and not have anything to do with us," she says. "Then he said he wanted to take the girl to the doctor. So I said I wanted to accompany them to the doctor. And he kept insisting on me leaving on the way. But I knew once they left, we would not have any trace of where they were going.

"I started going along with them. And the girl kept insisting I leave because the husband was pressuring her and telling me to leave. All the time, my colleagues were trying to get the magistrate and anti-trafficking unit to come and catch these two."

On the way to the doctor's, the man said he needed to stop at his house because they needed to get something there. So Wilson waited outside and watched while the two went inside. "They exited through the back door of the house," Wilson says. "By the time the anti-trafficking force came, they had already escaped and we had no trace of them."

Wilson never saw either of them again.

"I keep seeing that [picture of the](#) girl's face in my mind," Wilson says. "Even now when I talk about it, I have a very strong [image](#) of that girl looking so helpless and asking me to leave. She had this look of fear, not only for herself but also for me, for something happening to me, because I was traveling alone with them.

"She was very young, obviously a minor, very small build. She had this jazzy lipstick on, trying to make her as attractive and marketable as possible."

There are other stories, some much more successful. Wilson knows her very first rescue victim is doing well. "She's getting married, she has a baby girl," she says. "The last time I was in Goa I saw her. It's really nice to see them leading a better life, one that is not exploitative."

Success or disappointment, what she saw on the streets remains a major motivation in her work at UB.

"Research is a product of my experience and the time working in the field," says Wilson. "Whatever services are provided, something is still missing because I see some women relapsing back into the same life. I am really interested in exploring that missing factor."

The University at Buffalo is a premier research-intensive public university, a flagship institution in the State University of New York system and its largest and most comprehensive campus. UB's more than 28,000 students pursue their academic interests through more than 300 undergraduate, graduate and professional degree programs. Founded in 1846, the University at Buffalo is a member of the Association of American Universities.